

Making Revolutions: Mao Zedong's Philosophy of Revolution and the State, 1927-1949

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Faculty Introduction

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Mr. Ethan Eichhorst's paper examines the rise of the Chinese Communist Party during the 1930s and 40s by focusing on Mao Zedong's theory and praxis of revolutionary change in the countryside. By drawing on an array of primary sources that include Mao Zedong's essays and first-hand accounts of mass movements in the Chinese countryside during the 1930s and 40s, Mr. Eichhorst's article contributes to the historiographical debates by offering new insights on how Mao Zedong's experiences during that period shaped his understanding of the practice of revolution and the role of mass mobilization in fueling social and political change.

Abstract

No source accentuates the role of legitimacy in revolution and governance more so than China's most notorious revolutionary, Mao Zedong. Through a study of the foundations of Chinese Communism in the backdrop of China's May Fourth Movement, this paper will account Mao's writings and their adoption into the revolutionary practice of the CCP between 1927 and 1949. By the establishment of the PRC in 1949, "Mao Zedong thought" considered the CCP's embrace of the powers of the state as a mere means to the end—the abolition of state power and the ushering in of the ideal society so dreamed by the May Fourth radicals in 1919. But the end never came. Continuous revolution was abolished with the death of Mao, whereupon the Chinese state embarked on a new epoch to justify its right to rule.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, China witnessed political and social upheaval as it transitioned from an imperial dynasty to a modern nation-state. In 1911, a revolution overthrew the Qing imperial dynasty, which had reigned in China for nearly a quarter of a millennium. A weak republican government was installed, led by Sun Yat-sen.¹ This regime, however, crumbled only a few years later, ushering in a period when the central government's authority disintegrated and regional warlords fought for political control. In the wake of this monumental change, political and intellectual elites offered competing visions for the country's transformation from an agrarian economy united by familial bonds into an industrialized nation-state. As Sun Yat-sen noted, "Foreign observers say that the Chinese are like a sheet of loose sand. Why? Simply because our people have shown loyalty to family and clan but not to nation."² Sun Yat-sen's observation weighed heavily on the debates concerning China's future during that period.

One person who engaged in this question of China's future was a young man from the Hunan Province named Mao Zedong, one of the founders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In 1927, Mao penned an essay on peasant revolution in the Hunan Province. He attacked the CCP's naive perceptions of revolution in the countryside, writing that "a revolution is not a dinner party."³ The brutal, grassroots revolution Mao witnessed in Hunan would provide the foundation of his evolving revolutionary philosophy of the state, which became the answer to the primary question vital to achieving modern state building in China. His essay appeared at a time when the CCP had joined forces with Sun Yat-sen's Nationalists in a movement called the United Front, which sought to reunify China politically and militarily. Shortly after Mao wrote his essay, the United Front fell apart and Sun Yat-sen's successor, Chiang Kai-shek, purged the Communists from the urban centers. Known as the White Terror, Chiang Kai-shek's attempt to eradicate the CCP forced its members to seek refuge in the countryside,

¹ Andrew Walder, *China Under Mao: A Revolution Derailed* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 3.

² Martin K. Whyte, *Small Groups and Political Rituals in China. Michigan Studies on China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 1.

³ Mao Zedong [Mao Tse-Tung], "Report on an Investigation of Peasant Movement in Hunan." In *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*. Vol 1. (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1975), 28.

during the 1930s and 40s, first in the *Jiangxi* Soviet and then in *Yenan*. Mao Zedong would eventually emerge as the CCP's uncontested leader, with refined views of revolution and state governance that his regime would implement in the country once the Communists defeated the Nationalists in 1949.

Scholars recognize the years between 1927 and 1945 as the formative years of the CCP's revolutionary method. Mark Selden argues that the CCP's mass mobilization in the countryside fueled nationalism and served as a means of uniting the country during this period, also known as the *Yenan* period, which spanned from the mid-1930s until the war against Japan in 1945.⁴ Drawing on Japanese intelligence reports produced during the late 1930s and 40s, Chalmers Johnson expresses a similar view.⁵ Xiaoyuan Liu analyzes the Communist Party's treatment of the country's ethnic minorities during this period, arguing that the CCP embraced Han nationalism and developed the concept of a multi-ethnic Chinese revolutionary state.⁶

In his book *The Origins of Chinese Communism*, Arif Dirlik provides insights into the development of the Communist philosophy and practice in China.⁷ Dirlik initiated his study in the context of the May Fourth Movement in 1919, which yielded a palpable influence of anarchism on the individuals that would establish the Communist Party in 1921, including Mao Zedong. This article analyzes the embrace of peasant movements and the notion of continuous revolution in the context of Dirlik's scholarship of anarchism's influence on Mao Zedong and the founders of the CCP. Though brief, the period between May 4, 1919, and July 23, 1921, is fundamental to understanding the reason a number of radical intellectuals decided to embrace Soviet-inspired communism.⁸ In addition, any research on Mao Zedong would be remiss without taking into consideration Edgar Snow's *Red Star Over*

⁴ Mark Selden, *China in Revolution: Yenan Way Revisited. Socialism and Social Movements* (Armonk: Taylor and Francis, 1995).

⁵ Chalmers Johnson, *Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power: The Emergence of Revolutionary China, 1937-1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962).

⁶ Xiaoyuan Liu, *Frontier Passages: Ethnopolitics and the Rise of Chinese Communism, 1921-1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

⁷ Arif Dirlik, *The Origins of Chinese Communism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

⁸ Dirlik, *The Origins of Chinese Communism*, 273.

China.⁹ Snow's observations of the CCP in *Shaanxi* Province details the party's methods and goals.

Based on an analysis of Mao Zedong's writings and first-hand accounts by Western journalists and observers from this period, this paper builds upon the argument that the CCP's experiences fighting for power led Mao Zedong to devise an understanding of state power based upon the method of continuous revolution in the quest for an ideal society. In the subsequent half-century after the founding of the CCP

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in 1921, the orthodox Marxist activities of class struggle were morphed, adapted, and outright abandoned in the hope of matching present need with revolutionary action. Mao Zedong attempted to reconcile the vision of May

Fourth anarchism with the masses, and thus the ideal society with the meager plight of peasants in the countryside. He would achieve this through what he considered organic, voluntary mass action: a "terrible" revolution. Whether it was Hunan over-taxation, Japanese imperialism, or the fight for the nation, revolution was more than a means to an end, it was the means to the end—the abolition of state power, classes and parties. Whatever the outcome, the end of revolution would mean the end of the CCP.

Section One will cover the years leading up to the formation of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921 and Mao's influence on the party between the years 1927 and 1934. During the latter period, the CCP shed its urban roots and embraced the "agrarian turn," a position defended by Mao in his 1927 essay on the peasant revolution in the Hunan Province. The agrarian turn was pivotal in catapulting Mao to the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, which eventually implemented his ideas of revolution during the *Yenan* period. The first section will also discuss how the CCP, based in the *Jiangxi* period in the early 1930s, began developing a revolutionary method that successfully

⁹ Edgar Snow, *Red Star Over China: The Classic Account of the Birth of Chinese Communism* (New York: Grove Press, 1968).

mobilized the peasant masses. Section Two will cover the *Yenan* period and the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, a period when Mao solidified his control over the CCP and developed his ideas on revolution that would later characterize his regime between 1949 and 1976.

Section One: The New Proletariat

The Communist Party of China was founded by radicals whose loyalties to Bolshevism were conditioned by revolutionary ideals inspired by sources other than Communism.¹⁰

Even quite revolutionary minded people become down hearted as they pictured the events in the countryside in their mind's eye; and they were unable to deny the word 'terrible.' Even quite progressive people said, 'Though terrible, it is inevitable in a revolution.' In short, nobody could altogether deny the word 'terrible.' But, as already mentioned, the fact is that the great masses have risen to fulfil their historic mission and that the force of rural democracy have risen to overthrow the forces of rural feudalism.¹¹

The May Fourth Movement—an anti-imperialist, cultural and political movement that grew out of student protests in Beijing—purported a conversation in every area of Chinese life and challenged China's "traditional culture" based on Confucian ideals. For a few of the founders of the Chinese Communist Party, this sentiment manifested itself in an admiration for anarchistic ideas, grounded on the notions of mutual aid and free association.¹² The anarchist contribution to this national conversation was the belief that "individual liberation was fundamentally a social question."¹³ Many of the early radicals who would establish the Chinese Communist Party regarded revolutionary change as one that must occur in the human soul.¹⁴ This notion proposed a revolution, not only in political and economic institutions, but in basic family structure and gender roles.¹⁵ In contrast, Marxism was driven

¹⁰ Dirlik, *The Origins of Chinese Communism*, 267.

¹¹ Mao Zedong, "Report on an Investigation of Peasant Movement in Hunan," 28.

¹² Dirlik, *Origins of Chinese Communism*, 74, 92.

¹³ Dirlik, *Origins of Chinese Communism*, 75.

¹⁴ Dirlik, *Origins of Chinese Communism*, 115.

¹⁵ Dirlik, *Origins of Chinese Communism*, 75.

by a non-individualistic, economic, material determinism. In other words, Marxism purported a revolution that would occur regardless of the individuals involved, as the individual did not have agency over revolutionary change.¹⁶ As Li Dazhao, a Chinese intellectual who co-founded the Chinese Communist Party in 1921, wrote:

If we seek to transform economic organization without also transforming the human spirit, we will not succeed. We advocate the transformation of both material and mental existence, of both body and soul.¹⁷

While anarchism vested faith in the individual to fundamentally restructure the soul towards a hierarchy-less society, Marxism purported an inevitable path to this same hierarchy-less place, through the economic evolution of society via class struggle. Both visions presented an “ideal society,” where hierarchical forms, like socio-economic class and the state, were abolished.

In experiments of communal life based on the free association of individuals, anarchist societies were established during the latter part of the 1910s. In 1918, Mao Zedong, then a member of the New Citizens Study Society in Hunan (a group composed of radical students), penned a letter calling for the building of “small democratic unions.”¹⁸ But anarchism lacked a method of action. While it highlighted humanity’s bold ability to change individually, anarchism did not readily supply the early Chinese radicals with a means to this end. In contrast, Marxism offered that means through a different understanding of revolutionary change, namely class struggle. Between 1919 and the founding of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921, these early Chinese radicals (Mao, Li Dazhao, and others) began to identify with the Marxist notion of the proletariat, a leading group pushing for revolutionary change. Before this period, the early radicals saw the interests of the working class not as the inevitable deterministic force of history, but merely another self-interest group of society.¹⁹

¹⁶ Dirlik, *Origins of Chinese Communism*, 117.

¹⁷ Dirlik, *Origins of Chinese Communism*, 115.

¹⁸ Dirlik, *Origins of Chinese Communism*, 168.

¹⁹ Dirlik, *Origins of Chinese Communism*, 118.

Largely receiving their education from new-style schools established in response to China's imperial decline and the need for modernization during the second half of the nineteenth century, these future founders of the CCP were introduced to Western political ideologies and developed a distaste for traditional philosophy. As Ming T. Lee notes, "the majority [founders of the CCP] were alienated, affluent intellectuals, whose Western educations insulated them from the main currents of the Chinese society on the one hand, and whose perception of the prospect of personal success rendered them in the state of uncertainty and frustration."²⁰

Mao, receiving his education from the new-style school and coming from the Hunan Province, largely fit the description of the majority of the founders, but he drew his distinction in many areas that provide insight into his later revolutionary career. Mao was considered, as Robert Scalapino noted, a "petit intellectual."²¹ He was influenced by Western political ideologies, but also drew inspiration from the humanist traditions of Kang Youwei (1858-1927), a late political reformer of the Qing Dynasty. Kang wrote about the Great Harmony which fostered Mao's own understanding of the "ideal society," a place he referenced throughout his life, combining the Western political construction with Confucianism.²² Mao represented a group of the founders that came from a lower class, both educationally and socially; he was influenced by Chinese philosophies more than their Western alternatives.²³ Mao's ideological devotion was conditioned by situational factors, an ideology that was proven true by practice. Throughout Mao's career, he would oppose the elitism of Communist intellectuals and advocate that revolutionary knowledge and practice come from experience.²⁴

In July 1921, these relatively young, educated and insulated revolutionaries, founded the Chinese Communist Party in Shanghai. Presiding over the official launch were two international communists

²⁰ Ming T. Lee, "The Founders of the Chinese Communist Party: A Study in Revolutionaries," *Civilisations* 18, no. 1 (1968): 114-117.

²¹ Robert Scalapino, "The Evolution of a Young Revolutionary—Mao Zedong in 1919-1921," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 42, no. 1 (1982), 30.

²² Mao Zedong, "On the People's Democratic Dictatorship," In *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, Vol 4, (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1978), 414.

²³ Lee, *Founders of the Chinese Communist Party*, 126.

²⁴ Hung-yok Ip, *Intellectuals in Revolutionary China, 1921-1949: Leaders, Heroes and Sophisticates: Chinese Worlds* (London: Routledge, 2005), 67.

(Comintern) advisors, among them was the Dutch communist Henk Sneevliet (also known as Maring).²⁵ The Comintern had a considerable influence on the CCP until 1927, largely echoing the interests of the Soviet Union. The Comintern advisors regarded themselves as experts on Marxist philosophy and amassed substantial power in the CCP, even

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surpassing the influence of the party's leader, Chen Duxiu.²⁶ Under pressure from the Comintern, the CCP allied with Sun Yat-sen's Nationalist Party in the creation of the United

Front alliance in 1923,²⁷ which would prove catastrophic a few years later. In line with the Comintern, the Chinese Communists during this period focused on urban class struggle, molding China's revolutionary activity from the Soviet framework.²⁸ However, in central China in the mid-1920s, revolution was taking place outside the auspices of the Communists or the Nationalists.

Peasant movements in China were outside the CCP's interest for much of the 1920s, especially after the alliance with the Nationalists in 1923.²⁹ Under the Comintern's guidance, the CCP leadership dismissed peasant movements as a motive force of revolution in fear of putting the United Front at risk.³⁰ From a strictly ideological point of view, Karl Marx regarded the peasantry as a group that would be consumed by the technological advance of society;³¹ leftist Nationalists and Communists were hesitant to advocate for land distribution and other economic reforms that catered to the peasantry.³² However, individual revolutionaries like Wei Baquan (1894-1932), and eventually Mao

²⁵ Dirlik, *Origins of Chinese Communism*, 156.

²⁶ Dirlik, *Origins of Chinese Communism*, 266.

²⁷ Harold R. Isaacs and Albert Treint, "Documents on the Comintern and the Chinese Revolution," *The China Quarterly*, no. 45 (1971): 101.

²⁸ Ip, *Intellectuals in Revolutionary China*, 63.

²⁹ Ip, *Intellectuals in Revolutionary China*, 63.

³⁰ Walder, *China Under Mao*, 42.

³¹ Baohui Zhang, *Revolutions as Organizational Change: The Communist Party and Peasant Communities in South China, 1926-1934* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2015), 1.

³² Zhang, *Revolutions as Organization Change*, 21.

Zedong in 1925, did organize peasant movements in the countryside.³³ The peasant movement in Hunan, Mao's birthplace, did not come to fruition from a group of young intellectuals. Rather, it stemmed from what seemed to be a mass uprising. In the early 1920s, the warlord Zhao Hengti levied heavy taxes on the Hunan peasants as he battled against neighboring rivals, a common practice during China's warlord period following the fall of the central government's authority in the first decade of the Republican period (1912-1949).³⁴ Mao participated in the organization of the Hunan peasant movement during the 1920s, and through it, realized the peasants' ability to promote revolution.³⁵ Governing and advocacy bodies known as peasant associations gained popularity in the 1920s. By January 1927, after the United Front took control over the region, peasant associations reached a membership of 2 million.³⁶

Mao's Hunan report sheds light on the peasant associations, and insight into his evolving philosophy of revolution and the state. After spending thirty-two days and documenting the situation of five counties in Hunan Province in 1927, Mao produced a report that distanced himself from the Comintern-influenced, CCP leadership. Mao's report came in response to criticism leveled against a peasant revolution by Chen Duxiu and other members of the Communist Party, who labeled the peasants as "right opportunists." A portion of these Soviet-influenced Communists feared the unrestrained brutality of the peasant revolution taking place. Mao's report directly attacked those fears, calling them naïve, creeping toward counter-revolutionary sentiment.

Mao considered the peasant revolutions "terrible," part of the historical mission of society, and in keeping with a philosophical notion of a revolution.³⁷ Mao had a deeper, ideological vision of the future, with a goal to go beyond merely establishing a Chinese nation-state. Throughout the revolutionary years that led up to 1949, the context of his historical mission changed, but the goal remained—to bring about the Great Harmony. In Mao's view, only through this "terrible"

³³ Of the two, Wei Baquan came to peasant movements much earlier. While labeled a "communist" by the Nationalists, he did not officially join the party until 1929.

³⁴ Zhang, *Revolutions as Organizational Change*, 13.

³⁵ Ip, *Intellectuals in Revolutionary China*, 63.

³⁶ Zhang, *Revolutions as Organizational Change*, 15.

³⁷ Mao Zedong, "Report on an Investigation of the peasant movement in Hunan," 26-27.

process could the masses voluntarily rise against and easily recognize their enemies. Though characterized as historical, the mission takes on an ahistorical reality as an ideological, transcendent notion of the ultimate goal. The philosophical elites of the CCP likely considered the revolutionary capacity of the peasantry unscientific, given that, as Marx considered it, the peasantry was a group that would be abolished with the technological advance of history.³⁸ Therefore, the peasant movement, in the Chinese elites' and Marx's view, was not a proletarian force leading the revolution.

In contrast, Mao lauded peasant associations as legitimate organizations. As Mao recounts, villagers that at one time considered membership worthless and unnecessary would beg for admission into the peasant associations. He wrote: "In short, what was looked upon four months ago as a 'gang of peasants' has now become a most honorable institution."³⁹ The evolution from "gang" to "institution" symbolizes the organic growth of the masses who once acted autonomously and without cohesive direction against the enemy. As Mao discovered, the legitimization and power of a revolution came from the voluntary action of the masses. His subsequent revolutionary career would cater to their genuine sentiment, which was unconstrained by Marxism. Thirty-five years later, Mao quoted his Hunan report in the Little Red Book:

Several hundred million peasants will rise like a mighty storm, like a hurricane, a force so swift and violent that no power, however great, will be able to hold it back. . . . There are three alternatives. To march at their head and lead them? To trail behind them, gesticulating and criticizing? Or to stand in their way and oppose them? Every Chinese is free to choose, but events will force you to make the choice quickly.⁴⁰

Mao praised the unrestrained nature of peasant governance, providing a window into what he regarded as the type of power necessary for the state authority to reach the "ideal society." He declared, "the peasants are clear-sighted. Who is bad and who is not."⁴¹ The report accounts the horrors taking place as the peasant associations gain power, including the parading

³⁸ Zhang, *Revolutions as Organizational Change*, 1.

³⁹ Mao Zedong, "Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan," 26.

⁴⁰ Mao Zedong, "Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan," 23.

⁴¹ Mao Zedong, "Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan," 28.

around of landlords in paper hats through the streets, committing executions of those they deemed as exploiting the peasantry.⁴² Mao came to the conclusion that “it is necessary to create terror for a while in every rural area, or otherwise it would be impossible to suppress the activity of the counter-revolutionaries in the countryside or overthrow the authority of the gentry.”⁴³ Similar to the peasant associations, the unrestrained state power of the CCP nation-state emerging after 1949, was in Mao’s view justified in using brutal methods to reach the ideal society; thus, concepts like the abolition of state power were advocated by a regime that wielded enormous state power as will be discussed further in Section Two.

In March 1927, the same month Mao published his Hunan report, the Hunan peasant associations defied the direction of the United Front and started land distributions. Defying the revolutionary parties, the Hunan peasants confiscated and redistributed the property of the landlords. The CCP, which had largely been uninvolved in Hunan’s peasant revolution, denounced the “unorganized way” and “excess actions” of the peasant associations.⁴⁴ These actions, which by proxy violated the position of the CCP leadership and Comintern influence, heavily impacted Mao, who was a native of Hunan and relatively less influenced by Western ideology than the rest of the founding members of the CCP.

While conflicts about the peasantry plagued the Communist half of the United Front throughout this period, the Nationalists underwent changes in leadership. With the death of Sun Yat-sen in 1925, Chiang Kai-shek began to solidify his grip on power, culminating in the April 1927 purge of the communists from the cities.⁴⁵ The White Terror, as it came to be known, decimated the urban communists and Comintern project in China. The United Front collapsed. Party membership dropped from nearly 60,000 in April 1927 to a meager 10,000 in August of the same year.⁴⁶ Regardless, Chen Duxiu, leader of the CCP, kept a cautionary distance from peasant revolution, largely under the influence

⁴² Mao Zedong, “Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan,” 37.

⁴³ Mao Zedong, “Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan,” 29.

⁴⁴ Zhang, *Revolutions as Organizational Change*, 21.

⁴⁵ Walder, *China Under Mao*, 15.

⁴⁶ Walder, *China Under Mao*, 15.

of the Comintern.⁴⁷ By August of the same year, Duxiu was deposed by the CCP's Central Committee, and a new era in Chinese Communism began under the leadership of Li Li-san from 1927 to 1931, Wang Ming from 1931 to 1935, and Mao Zedong in 1936.⁴⁸

In the midst of civil war with the Nationalists, and as a member and not yet the leader of the CCP, Mao helped establish the *Jiangxi* Soviet in 1929.⁴⁹ Through this subsequent Chinese Soviet Republic in central China, he attempted to employ the very form of peasant revolution that took place in the neighboring Hunan Province. The CCP's rural policies in the *Jiangxi* Soviet, unlike the 1920s, were radical. The Red Army orchestrated rural uprisings in Nationalist territories.⁵⁰ The lessons learned in Hunan fueled Mao's advocacy for rural revolution, but conflicted with the new party leader Li Li-san, who advocated for urban class warfare rather than rural revolution. As Andrew Walder notes, "the party mobilized the village poor in public meetings to accuse, confront, humiliate and expropriate the property of village elites."⁵¹ Unlike Hunan, the hegemonic power of the CCP's control dominated the lives of the *Jiangxi* peasants, nullifying their own revolutionary capacity. As a party document read from that period, "the masses do not believe in their own strength."⁵² Mao addressed this issue in his 1934 speech to Party cadres:

Our central task at present is to mobilize the broad masses to take part in the revolutionary war, overthrow imperialism and the Kuomintang by means of such war, spread the revolution throughout the country, and drive imperialism out of China. Anyone who does not attach enough importance to this central task is not a good revolutionary cadre.... For the revolutionary war is a war of the masses; it can be waged only by mobilizing the masses and relying on them.⁵³

Between 1927 and 1934, Mao refined his experience in peasant revolution and forcibly induced his leadership of the Communist Party.

⁴⁷ Snow, *Red Star Over China*, 163-164.

⁴⁸ Lee, *The Founders of the Chinese Communist Party*, 126.

⁴⁹ now, *Red Star Over China*, 23.

⁵⁰ Zhang, *Revolutions as Organizational Change*, 23.

⁵¹ Walder, *China Under Mao*, 45.

⁵² Zhang, *Revolutions as Organizational Change*, 27

⁵³ Mao Zedong, "Be Concerned with the Well Being of the Masses," in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, Vol 1, (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1975), 147.

He drew attention to the dangers of “ultra-democracy,” addressing the desires of some to democratize the higher echelons of the Red Army.⁵⁴ “Ultra-democracy,” he wrote, “completely undermines the Party’s fighting capacity, rendering the Party incapable of fulfilling its fighting tasks and thereby causing the defeat of the revolution.”⁵⁵ Mao also took issue with the demand for absolute equality, irrespective of merit: “In the hauling of rice, the demand was made that all should carry the same load on their backs, irrespective of age or physical condition.”⁵⁶ Mao attacked the willingness of some within the party to let their idealism get in the way of their revolutionary

duty. “It even went so far,” Mao continued, “that when there were two wounded men but only one stretcher, neither could be carried away

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because each refused to yield priority to the other.”⁵⁷ These notions were “products of a handicraft and small peasant economy,” Mao claimed.⁵⁸ He believed, the strength of the CCP’s hierarchical structure was justified by what said structure existed to do, namely, revolution.

Though “terrible,” the peasant associations represented a group of freely-associating individuals committed to revolution; without the peasant revolution, the Communist Party would, in Mao’s view, fail. Mao’s new proletariat did not fit the definition as such; obviously, the peasantry was not urban and not strictly wage-earning. Regardless, Mao’s proletariat led the revolution analogous to Marx’s original conception. The peasantry was China’s redemption. The establishment of the People’s Republic of China under Commander Mao’s leadership in 1949 would further develop the primacy of the masses as the motive force of revolution, making the priorities of orthodox Marxism of less importance.

Section Two: Continuous Revolution

When a man reaches old age, he will die; the same is true of a party. When

⁵⁴ Mao Zedong, “On Correcting Mistaken Ideas in the Party,” in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, Vol 1, (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1975), 108.

⁵⁵ Mao Zedong, “On Correcting Mistaken Ideas in the Party,” 108.

⁵⁶ Mao Zedong, “On Correcting Mistaken Ideas in the Party,” 110.

⁵⁷ Mao Zedong, “On Correcting Mistaken Ideas in the Party,” 111.

⁵⁸ Mao Zedong, “On Correcting Mistaken Ideas in the Party,” 111.

classes disappear, all instruments of class struggle — parties and the state machinery — will lose their function, cease to be necessary, therefore gradually wither away and end their historical mission; and human society will move to a higher stage. We are the opposite of the political parties of the bourgeoisie. They are afraid to speak of the extinction of classes, state power and parties. We, on the contrary, declare openly that we are striving hard to create the very conditions that will bring about their extinction.

-Mao Zedong

The early years of the Chinese Communist Party established Mao Zedong and the CCP's recognition of the peasantry as the motive proletariat force in China's revolutionary history. This section will depict the abstract ideas that developed into the committed *modus operandi* of the Communist Party, and how events such as the Long March, Sino-Japanese War, and *Yenan* Rectification Campaign motivated Mao to enact revolution with enemies of a foreign and domestic nature, and not merely the Marxist notion of the bourgeoisie, in order to appeal to Chinese nationalism.

In the years of the *Jiangxi* Soviet (between 1931-1934), the Nationalists leveled five campaigns against the Communists. On their fifth campaign, 86,000 Communists were forced to flee their homes to escape the Nationalists' rule. Their trek came to be known as the Long March, an 8,000-mile hike through the mountains, rivers, and snow of eleven provinces. It was a long, dangerous, deadly trek where the Communists encountered many military conflicts, setbacks, and loss of life. On the journey, 40,000 CCP soldiers died in a battle with the Nationalists at *Xiang* River. By the time they arrived at the *Shaanxi* Province in October 1935, no more than 10,000 people remained.⁵⁹

By 1936, a new player entered the contest for China. Imperial Japan controlled Northeastern China and pushed their boundaries into North China.⁶⁰ Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of the Nationalist Party, and his representatives were prepared to negotiate with the Japanese; however, he was more committed to the destruction of the Communists.⁶¹ Amongst

⁵⁹ Enhua Zhang, "The Long March," in *Words and Their Stories: Essays on the Language of the Chinese Revolution*, ed. Ban Wang (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill Publishers, 2011), 33.

⁶⁰ Walder, *China Under Mao*, 19.

⁶¹ Walder, *China Under Mao*, 19.

the Chinese public, “Chinese must not fight Chinese” became a rallying call against the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo and Chiang Kai-Shek’s restless assaults against the Chinese Communists.⁶² This call for a Second United Front from the Chinese public created an opportunity for the Chinese Communists.

Though still wounded, and keenly aware of the Nationalist Party’s desire to destroy Communism, Mao supported the call for unity in China and shifted to a national strategy, advocating a second alliance with the Nationalist Party against the Japanese. Two months after the Communists had arrived in *Shaanxi*, Mao issued new instructions for moderating the terror of peasant revolution in order to appease the Nationalists. As Mark Selden notes, “With the memory of [the] *Jiangxi* [loss] still fresh, Mao sought a land policy which would elicit broad peasant support with a minimum dislocation in the primitive rural economy.”⁶³ By 1936, the name of the CCP government changed from the “Chinese Workers and Peasants Soviet Republic” to the more United Front sounding, “Chinese People’s Soviet Republic,” of which Mao Zedong was officially the chairman.⁶⁴

Despite Mao’s efforts, Chiang Kai-shek was against an alliance with the Communists. The same year, supplied with two million soldiers and 314 warplanes, Kai-Shek assembled a final assault on the Communists at their new base in *Shaanxi* Province. Before the Nationalists could exterminate “the menace of communism,” Kai-shek was taken into custody by two of his own Nationalist generals.⁶⁵ They demanded an alliance with the Communists against the Japanese. The assault never took place, and the Nationalists joined forces with the Communists in the Second United Front. In the subsequent Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), Mao and the Communists largely avoided direct combat with Japanese forces. With the Nationalists bearing the bulk of the war with the Japanese, the Communists were left in base areas between the Japanese and Nationalist lines, poised to conduct revolution.⁶⁶

⁶² Snow, *Red Star Over China*, 50.

⁶³ Selden, *China in Revolution*, 80.

⁶⁴ Snow, *Red Star Over China*, 89.

⁶⁵ Walder, *China Under Mao*, 19.

⁶⁶ Walder, *China Under Mao*, 20.

Under the guise of a Marxist revolution, Mao and the Chinese Communists focused their energy on gaining a base of peasant support against the Japanese; however, his intent was to use this support against the Nationalists when the civil war resumed. During this period, the traditional Marxist, economic categories of the proletariat and the bourgeois were broadened to present the Communist option as the path to an uncompromised Chinese nation-state. In these broad categories, the previous strict association of the enemy with wealth and the people with peasantry was relaxed. The enemy of the masses was not merely the landlord class, as it was in the peasant countryside of Hunan. The enemy was Japan and the Nationalists. Drawing on Marxist philosophy, Mao narrowed class struggle to a dualistic revolution, the masses and the enemies of the masses. Nationalist forces focused on the Japanese, while the Chinese Communist Party's revolutions in the base areas garnered the broad nationalistic support fundamental to their victory over all their enemies in 1949.

Not unlike the peasant revolution in Hunan over a decade earlier, revolution in daily life manifested itself through constant meetings and

Drawing on Marxist philosophy, Mao narrowed class struggle to a dualistic revolution, the masses and the enemies of the masses.

sessions. These meetings became the nature of Communist revolution in China. Cadres at these public, country-side meetings presented an

accused individual to the masses and encouraged the masses to act against the accused. William Hinton paints a vivid portrayal of the Communist Party's everyday revolutions.⁶⁷ A self-proclaimed American Marxist, Hinton provides a first-hand account of the Chinese Communist Party's implementation of land reform in the village of *Zhangzhuangcun* (referred to as the village of Long Bow in his book), in the *Shaanxi* province during the 1940s. His first-hand experience provides a window into life in Communist-controlled China toward the end of the *Yenan* Rectification Campaign. In Hinton's account, a Catholic priest known as Father Sun publicly denounced the Communist Eighth Route Army and the use of "anti-traitor campaign" to root out enemies.⁶⁸ When

⁶⁷ William Hinton, *Fanshen: A Documentary of Revolution in a Chinese Village* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008).

⁶⁸ Hinton, *Fanshen*, 121.

dealing with Father Sun, the Communist cadres seemed to follow Mao's method nearly line by line. Hinton wrote:

All the cadres of the village office then began to mobilize the people against him [Father Sun]. They went among the Catholics and found several who were already disillusioned with the religion and were eager to attack the Church. Among them was one potential leader, a former hired laborer named Kuo Cheng-k'uan. He had worked many years for the Catholic landlord Fan Pu-tzu, and later had hired out as a mule driver to the Cathedral in Changchih. All his life he had suffered nothing but abuse from the Church.⁶⁹

Over the course of the meeting, the Catholics levied over sixty charges against Father Sun.⁷⁰ The cadres drew activists from the Catholics to create, as Mao called it, a nucleus of leadership, linking the cadres close with the masses. When this doesn't happen, Mao wrote, "their leadership [the cadres] becomes bureaucratic and divorced from the masses."⁷¹ The cadres found Chen-k'uan amongst the Catholics, and designated him as a man who had suffered abuses by the church as a laborer. He emerged as the leader of the larger meeting to take place with the entire village.⁷² The cadres had found an individual to lead the larger meeting outside of the governing Communist Party organization.

The Catholics provided the base support from which the cadres fostered a mass mobilization against Father Sun. A meeting with the entire village was convened. The continual interaction between the smaller and larger groups of the villagers steeped the cadres' revolutionary intentions into the masses, ensuring that action originated from them. District Leader Liang spoke about Father Sun's exploitations. Rallied by his speech, a man named Wang Kuei-Ching stood up to make the first accusation. With that, the voice of the masses came flooding in. "When he had finished, many others volunteered," Hinton wrote, "saying to one another, 'If you will speak out, I will follow. If you're not afraid of

⁶⁹ Hinton, *Fanshen*, 120-121.

⁷⁰ Hinton, *Fanshen*, 121.

⁷¹ Mao Zedong, "Some Questions Concerning Methods of Leadership," in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, Vol 3 (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1967), 119.

⁷² Hinton, *Fanshen*, 121.

God, then neither am I.”⁷³ This was the process of mass mobilization against the enemy of the masses. The process, as Mao wrote, must be “from the masses, to the masses.”⁷⁴ To stoke the flames and keep the anger rising, the local leader of the meeting, Chen-K’uan, intermittently spoke accusations against Father Sun to the masses. Villagers shouted in Father Sun’s face; one villager waved his fist in front of the supposed traitor.

The CCP encouraged individuals to speak up. After the meeting ended, the villagers who demonstrated the most revolutionary rage received a greater share of Father Sun’s property than those who remained silent.⁷⁵ The session served as a means of implicating the entire village in the struggle, seemingly eliminating the presence of the party authority altogether. And most importantly, the lack of cadre participation eliminated the notion that the villagers’ actions were motivated by threat of force. This method of inciting the masses to the point of action, simulated the abolition of state power. Devised by Mao in “Some Questions on the Methods of Leadership” in 1943, he wrote:

Take the ideas of the masses (scattered and unsystematic ideas) and concentrate them (through study turn them into concentrated and systematic ideas), then go to the masses and propagate and explain these ideas until the masses embrace them as their own, hold fast to them and translate them into action, and test the correctness of these ideas in such action. Then once again concentrate ideas from the masses and once again go to the masses so that the ideas are persevered in and carried through. And so on, over and over again in an endless spiral.⁷⁶

Throughout the process, the cadres served as facilitators or, at most, instigators of the revolution the villagers otherwise conducted as a whole. This judgement by the masses provided villagers a way of stating loyalty to the Communists, but for the cadres, it was the nature of revolution.

⁷³ Hinton, *Fanshen*, 122.

⁷⁴ Mao Zedong [Mao Tse-Tung], “Some Questions on the Method of Leadership,” 119.

⁷⁵ Hinton, *Fanshen*, 124.

⁷⁶ Mao Zedong, “Some Questions on the Method of Leadership,” 119.

While Hinton praised the Anti-Traitor Campaign, he also offered criticism. Hinton, a Communist in his own right, specifically drew attention to whether these public accusatory meetings administered proper justice. He noticed that the accused individuals were punished in the same manner, no matter their level of collaboration with the Japanese or measure of loyalty to the Nationalist Party. Hinton wrote:

By striking them all down as if they were equally to blame, the village cadres and the active peasants took shadow for substance, confused puppet with master, and punished the poor as heavily as they did the rich who were considered to be the real source and backbone of the collaboration.⁷⁷

The *Yenan* Rectification Campaign also brought a revolution in social life. The *Yenan* revolutionary culture, as Selden points out, was “exemplified by the local activist who not only introduced and propagated new values and methods in his own village or factory but played a key role in the guerrilla resistance and struggled to educate himself and others in his ‘spare time.’”⁷⁸ The new revolutionary culture did not merely attack one government over another, but the very aspects of the state itself.

State power and class distinction, in this new revolutionary culture, were not abstract notions but manifested in attacks against a bureaucratic

The new revolutionary culture did not merely attack one government over another, but the very aspects of the state itself.

environment. From the cadres to the urban worker and the peasant in Hunan, the revolutionary culture praised the individual that drew wisdom from the masses. As Selden put it; “The gulf which separated leaders from those whom they led as well as mental from manual labor was thus appreciably narrowed.”⁷⁹ When, in 1936, Edgar Snow traveled behind Communist lines, he found that Communist cadres were often unable to tell their personal stories. Snow wrote:

As I began collecting biographies I found repeatedly that the communist would be able to tell everything that had happened

⁷⁷ Hinton, *Fanshen*, 125.

⁷⁸ Selden, *China in Revolution*, 213.

⁷⁹ Selden, *China in Revolution*, 213.

in his early youth, but once he had become identified with the Red Army he lost himself somewhere, and without repeated questioning one could hear no more stories about him, but only stories of the army, or the Soviets, or the Party-capitalized.⁸⁰

The Chinese Communists in *Yenan* did not construct an ideal Marxist society; their chief concern focused on the support of the masses. In Snow's travels through *Shensi* Province in 1936, he found that the peasants largely supported the communists, often referring to the Red Army and CCP as "our government."⁸¹ While the CCP distributed peasant land, cut taxes, and focused on arousing the peasants to action, the unspoken goal was not, as Edgar Snow also noted, "to try out communism in China."⁸² The CCP was primarily concerned with creating a deep military and societal base of support.

However, this revolution still lay within an ideological framework. In a speech given in June 1945, Mao recited a version of an ancient Chinese fable referred to as "The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains."⁸³ The old man's house was on a mountain, facing south, with two mountains blocking his way. With his sons, the old man started to dig up the colossal peaks. Someone who is described as a wise old man confronted him: "How silly of you to do this," he said. "It is quite impossible for you few to dig up these two huge mountains."⁸⁴ The foolish old man replied:

When I die, my sons will carry on: when they die, there will be my grandsons, and then their sons and grandsons, and so on to infinity. High as they are, the mountains cannot grow any higher and with every bit we dig they will be that much lower. Why can't we clear them away?⁸⁵

"God was moved by this," Mao wrote. "He sent down two angels,

⁸⁰ Snow, *Red Star Over China*, 130.

⁸¹ Snow, *Red Star Over China*, 222.

⁸² Snow, *Red Star Over China*, 220-226.

⁸³ Mao Zedong, "The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains," in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung* Vol 3. (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1967), 272.

⁸⁴ Mao Zedong, "The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains," 272.

⁸⁵ Mao Zedong, "The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains," 272.

who carried the mountains away on their backs.”⁸⁶ Mao explains the symbolism: the two peaks were imperialism and feudalism, an equal status to foreign and domestic enemies. God was the masses. While the old man and his family started the dig, God’s angels moved the mountains away, just as the cadres incite and the masses finish. The reason the old man cares about this endeavor is to move the obstacle which is “obstructing the way.”⁸⁷ The use of the word “way” rather than “sight” or “beauty,” implies a journey that will take place, in real terms, to the idealized place known to Mao as the “Great Harmony,” the same place so imagined by the early revolutionaries following the May Fourth Movement in the beginning of the century.

Conclusion

While the nature of revolution in China often catered to the interests of the masses and strayed from the Marxist ideological foundations of the founders of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921, the revolution was nevertheless conducted in an ideological framework that would eventually be described as “Mao Zedong thought.” While other justifications of state power may look to the divine right of kings, the social contract, or the protection of human rights, continuous revolution in acquisition of the ideal society offered the philosophical justification of CCP state power. Within the ideological vision, revolution was merely continuous because the society in which classes and state power was abolished had not yet been created. In reality, whether in the hope of a true ideal society or not, continuous revolution justified CCP state power in Mao’s view.

In a speech in 1949, on the eve of the Communist victory over the Nationalists, Mao laid out his revolutionary philosophy of the state’s acquisition of the “ideal society” he dreamed of as a young man. Referring to the dictatorial rule of the Communists over the reactionaries and the democracy for the people, Mao asked himself, “Don’t you want to abolish state power?”⁸⁸ He replied, “Yes, we do; but not right now.”⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Mao Zedong, “The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains,” 272.

⁸⁷ Mao Zedong, “The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains,” 272.

⁸⁸ Mao Zedong, “On the People’s Democratic Dictatorship,” in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, Vol 4 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1978), 418.

⁸⁹ Mao Zedong, “On the People’s Democratic Dictatorship,” 418.

That single ideological statement held Mao's China together. If the state ceased revolution, unity would dissolve, and along with it, the Chinese nation-state. According to Mao, only by commencing revolution and seeking the ideal society could China survive. As Mao makes himself even clearer, "When classes disappear, all instruments of class struggle—parties and the state machinery—will lose their function."⁹⁰ Mao believed continuous revolution was a means to an end, but that end was the abolition of state power, a quasi-heaven.

The *Yenan* Rectification Campaign also attempted to answer one of the central questions that plagued Mao in his school days and the original revolutionaries in the early twentieth century. How could you unite a country that had no bonds of patriotism and that had lived under the rule of the Qing Dynasty for nearly a quarter of a millennium? Mao's answer: continuous revolution. When Mao looked at the previous half century of his life, like the rest of the Chinese people, he saw two things: one governing authority after another, and the two mountains—feudalism and imperialism. The "way" referenced in the Chinese fable represented not merely the path to a Chinese nation-state but the way to a complete "extinction of classes, state power and parties" through continuous revolution.⁹¹ Based on Mao's philosophy, the product of the state was its own abolition. Seemingly unrealistic, the abolition of state power functioned more like a transcendent ultimate destination than a recognizable historical place. Therefore, the conflict never ends, the unity never ends, and the state survives.

For Mao, musings of abandoning the revolution were an attack on the survival of China itself. The early Chinese radicals' first love with an ideal society fueled a desire to abolish state power and classes; the materialistic

For Mao, musings of abandoning the revolution was an attack on the survival of China itself.

nature of Marxism met that need. This ideal society was first conceived as an immediate option, to be carried out through

an individual by individual change of the soul, yet the early attempts at this failed. In Marxism, the idealized future was offered through a materialistic evolution making the ideal society a deterministic

⁹⁰ Mao Zedong, "On the People's Democratic Dictatorship," 411.

⁹¹ Mao Zedong, "On the People's Democratic Dictatorship," 411.

destination. However, the process of continuous revolution in practice was fleshed out into categories beyond a mere Marxist origin. Mao's principal contribution to the Communist revolutionary movement in China was an unwillingness to let the materialistic forces of history lead him to utopia. Before and after the creation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Mao insisted that only through comprehensive, deliberate, and continuous revolution would the masses be led to China's promised land. A failure to even attempt that mission would lead to collapse.

This understanding of continuous revolution as a revolutionary philosophy of the state presents a number of interesting applications for the period after the establishment of the People's Republic of China. Mass collectivization movements became the mode of revolution in the 1950s, culminating with the disastrous Great Leap Forward starting in 1958, during which, as Frank Dikotter put it, "China descended into hell."⁹² Due to the lack of public records, a conservative estimate put the Leap's death toll at 30 million lives lost by the effort's end in 1962.⁹³ After the famine, a growing conversation became prevalent within the Communist Party that China should abandon revolution altogether. In the late 1960s, Mao expressed the revolutionary culture developed in *Yenan* to a new generation of the Chinese people through the Little Red Book, in which university and high school students formed militias, roaming through the streets with machine guns strapped to their backs, holding the status as one of Mao's "Red Guards." A whole generation of Chinese now approaching their senior years engaged in Mao's last revolution, turning on family members, teachers, and the CCP state itself in the name of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Following Mao Zedong's death in 1976, the Cultural Revolution died with him. Shortly thereafter, the leadership of Deng Xiaoping would abandon continuous revolution and implement economic reforms that initiated China's enormous economic and political growth in the second half of the 20th century.

Short of Chinese President Xi Jinping's best impression of Mao's cult of personality, the current CCP state is marked by its wholesale

⁹² Frank Dikotter, *Mao's Great Famine* (New York: Walker Publishing Company, 2010), Preface.

⁹³ Dikotter, *Mao's Great Famine*, 324.

abandonment of Communist economic policy and Mao's continuous revolution. The CCP state has focused on the suppression of popular efforts for change, seeing in them the same chaotic work of the masses found during Mao's Cultural Revolution. Mao was a revolutionary before he was ever a head of state; his only means of doing the latter job was to mimic the first. Continuous revolution was the Chinese nation's first justification of state power, by its nature guaranteeing its own abolition. For the past four decades since Mao's death, the CCP state has been duly committed to the maintenance of state power, willing to shut out any voice of reform that could remotely threaten the stability of the Chinese state. As scholars such as Yuchao Zhu have noted, China's new justification of state power has been a "performance legitimacy," supporting domestic harmony through social, economic, and territorial advancement, or simply "good governance."⁹⁴ While taking its place as the second largest economy in the world, China has suffered an economic slowdown since the mid-2000s, bringing attention to the deterioration of performance legitimacy as a justification of state power.⁹⁵ ■

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⁹⁴ Yuchao Zhu, "'Performance Legitimacy' and China's Political Adaptation Strategy," *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 16 (2): 123.

⁹⁵ Andrew Wright, "This is how China's economy has changed in the last 10 years," weforum.org, the World Economic Forum, 22 June 2016.

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Student Biography

Ethan David Eichhorst is a senior majoring in History at Sam Houston State University. In Fall 2018, under the mentorship of Dr. Eric Vanden Bussche, Ethan began research on the revolutionary movement in China during the first half of the twentieth century. This initial inquiry narrowed into an examination of the writings of Mao Zedong, specifically, the revolutionary leader's understanding of a Chinese nation-state supported by continuous revolution. Dr. Vanden Bussche provided his experience in the field for Ethan's reference, from weekly office visits to numerous internet meetings when Dr. Vanden Bussche relocated to East Asia. Ethan D. Eichhorst plans to pursue a Master of Arts degree in East Asian studies.