

MAO TSE-TUNG AS A CHARISMATIC LEADER

STUART R. SCHRAM

It may or may not be possible to manufacture charisma for any national leader, even though he be entirely lacking in remarkable personal qualities. Surely no one imagines that this has happened in Mao's case. Nonetheless, the cult of the "great leader, great teacher, great supreme commander and great helmsman" has now so far obscured the real Mao that it is perhaps worth emphasizing how strongly marked have been his qualities of leadership from the very beginning. In his early twenties, as a student in Changsha, he displayed this aptitude in diverse ways, from organizing student unions and discussion groups and editing newspapers to spontaneously assuming command of the defense of the school building against marauding soldiers. In a succession of other circumstances—organizing peasant associations in Hunan in 1925, leading his little band of guerrillas to the Ching kangshan in the fall of 1927, abandoning the attack on Changsha in July 1930 and changing the tactics of the Red Army during the Long March—he acted with little or no support from higher Party authorities, or even against their strong opposition, and carried his comrades with him through the sheer force of his personality. And in the years after 1949, those who had the occasion to observe him with his peers of the Party and State leadership found that he stood out among them all, not only by virtue of his official position but because of his intense presence. In a word, the current extravagant and absurd Maoolatry serves to magnify the image of a genuinely remarkable individual, and not to create a personality where none exists.

To the extent that Mao's success in establishing his image as the leader of the Chinese people can be explained by his personal qualities, his appeal appears to lie in the fact that he is at once very close, in origins and mentality, to the peasants who constitute the overwhelming majority of the population, and at the same time strangely remote. As the son of a poor peasant who had improved his lot by hard work and small-scale trading, he occupied an intermediate position in Chinese rural society, being materially better off than many of his neighbors, but feeling himself at the same time in a situation of inferiority as compared to the landlords' sons he met at school, with their fine clothes and social graces. And although he has long since transcended the tradition-bound intellectual universe of his youth, his closeness to the peasantry is still attested by the earthy humor and meta-

phors drawn from Chinese folklore that characterize his speech and writing.

But if Mao is to some extent still a peasant in his manners and patterns of thought, he likewise exhibits the reserved and distant attitude of a person conscious of his own uniqueness and superiority. One of the subtlest and most penetrating accounts of Mao's personality is that of Agnes Smedley, who found him, on their first meeting in 1937, vaguely sinister and repellent. Later they became good friends, but she still sensed in him a certain spiritual isolation. "As Chu Teh was loved," she wrote, "Mao Tse-tung was respected. The few who came to know him best had affection for him, but his spirit dwelt within itself, isolating him."¹

The dual impression thus created by Mao, who appeared to the average Chinese as very like himself and at the same time grand and remote, is obviously an excellent starting-point for establishing a charismatic image. But this natural appeal based on his real personality has been reinforced both by his methods of leadership in general, and by the efforts which were begun more than a quarter of a century ago to create a Mao cult.

Mao's leadership techniques cannot be isolated from his revolutionary model as a whole, and this model proceeds in turn from certain fundamental orientations. First among these is the concern with restoring China's dignity and independence. Mao's nationalism has, of course, found an ideological justification in the Leninist theory of imperialism, but his commitment to China's greatness is a theme which runs through the whole of his conscious life. One of his earliest political impressions was produced by reading a pamphlet which began, "Alas! China will be subjugated." For half a century, he has dedicated himself to reversing the process of political decay and national humiliation which characterized the China of his boyhood.

The manner in which Mao pursues this goal has, of course, varied over the years, but his ideas and policies have been marked throughout by two other traits: a tremendous emphasis on the importance of transforming men's minds as the indispensable condition for transforming society, and a taste for things military.

From the time of the May Fourth Movement, Mao Tse-tung has believed in the necessity of a "cultural revolution" which would eliminate the passive attitudes of submission to natural fatality and hierarchical authority characteristic of traditional Chinese society, and produce "new people," bent on changing both nature and society. At first, under the influence of Western liberalism, Mao saw this revolution primarily as a process of individual emancipation. Since his conversion to Leninist collectivism, he has believed that the individual could change himself only through participation in the struggles of the masses. But from beginning to end he has placed a stronger emphasis on the moral and psychological aspect of revolution than any other major communist leader. This tendency led him, as early as 1929, to institute in his little guerrilla army techniques of indoctrination which

¹ Agnes Smedley, *Battle Hymn of China* (London: Gollancz, 1944), pp. 121-122.

were later to be applied on a wider scale, first to the Chinese Communist Party in the rectification campaign of 1942, and then, following the victory of 1949, to the population of China as a whole.

If Mao attaches so much importance to ideological remoulding, it is because he regards the human factor as decisive in any revolutionary struggle. As early as 1930, he criticized Lin Piao for "over-estimating the importance of objective forces and underestimating the importance of subjective forces."² (Lin Piao has now apparently recovered from this error.) This extreme voluntarism, which has manifested itself in particularly striking forms in recent years, particularly at the time of the "Great Leap Forward," is directly linked to the third trait mentioned above, which I have characterized elsewhere as Mao's "military romanticism."³ For, as Mao himself wrote in 1938, war represents the ultimate in "conscious action." The stage of action upon which military commanders function, he declared, "must be built upon objective conditions, but on this stage, they can direct the performance of many living dramas, full of sound and color, of power and grandeur."⁴ In warfare—especially in guerrilla warfare as Mao practiced it in years past—men may in fact be more important than weapons, and the issue of a combat may depend not on the resources of each side but on the skill and courage with which they are employed. Thus economic and technical rationality, which appears to Mao as a form of servitude unworthy of revolutionaries, is forced to take second place to the human will.

The three traits of nationalism, "military romanticism," and an emphasis on "conscious action" can be directly related to the policies which characterize Mao's rise to power: mobilization of the Chinese against Japanese aggression, guerrilla warfare, and thought reform. Indeed, the correspondence between Mao's personality and his actions, in the picture I have just presented, is so perfect that it may cause misgivings. Was Mao really able to seize the leadership of the Chinese revolution because he possessed a combination of attributes that made him uniquely well fitted for the task? Or do we merely assume that he had the necessary qualities because in fact he did achieve power?

Mao's early writings confirm that he did actually exhibit the basic personality traits I have singled out, even before his conversion to communism. This does not imply, of course, that his ideas and attitudes were not modified in the course of his experience. Thus, for example, his rural background and his taste for martial exploits may have led him to turn more easily than some of his city-bred comrades to guerrilla warfare as the principal form of struggle in China over a long period; but his experience of

² "Letter to Comrade Lin Piao" (now known under the title "A Spark Can Start a Prairie Fire"), *Hsüan-chi*, 1947 edition, supplement, pp. 98-99.

³ See my article, "The 'Military Deviation' of Mao Tse-tung," *Problems of Communism*, No. 1 (1964), pp. 49-56.

⁴ "On Protracted War," in *Selected Works* (Peking), Vol. II, p. 152.

armed combat further developed and strengthened his military-mindedness.

If, throughout most of his career, Mao's ideas were on the whole well attuned to China's needs, the drama of the years since 1958 has been the increasingly flagrant divorce between the belief in human omnipotence born of his guerrilla experience and the objective difficulties of economic development. Mao's belief that political zeal can advantageously replace technical competence has involved him in a conflict not only with reality, but with a majority of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, headed by the "top Party person in authority taking the capitalist road," Liu Shao-ch'i.

The answer of Mao and his supporters to this resistance from men and things has been an attempt, entirely without precedent in the history of the communist movement, to place the leader above the Party as the sole source of authority and the sole source of truth. This is something that even Stalin never ventured to do. However slavishly he may have been praised in his latter years as the greatest genius in every domain, he always claimed to rule as the mandatary of the Party, deriving his authority from the Party and faithfully executing the Party's will.

Mao has, of course, a very good practical reason for abandoning this fiction—namely, that he has lost the support of the majority of the Party. It is perfectly obvious that this is the motive behind the current violent attacks on Liu Shao-ch'i's "slavish" interpretation of democratic centralism, and the affirmation that, on the contrary, higher authorities should be obeyed only when they are right.⁵ But it could also be argued—though one should be wary of reading the present back into the past—that this exaltation of the leader as an individual was implicit from the beginning in Mao Tse-tung's personality and style of leadership.

The emergence of a veritable Mao cult began in 1942, at the time of the "rectification campaign," and reached its first climax at the Seventh Party Congress in April 1945. Ironically enough, it was Liu Shao-ch'i who then took it upon himself to praise Mao Tse-tung's thought as "the greatest achievement and glory of our Party and the Chinese people," and "the highest theoretical attainment of the Chinese people."⁶ Although the Party was mentioned, Liu's speech dealt primarily with the direct relationship between Mao, who was depicted as the greatest figure in Chinese history, and the nation it was his mission to lead.

Throughout the first sixteen years of the Chinese People's Republic, and especially after 1958, the Mao cult was carried to a higher and higher level, but until the autumn of 1966 this cult continued to be focused on his thought rather than on his person. The Red Guard rallies, beginning in August 1966, saw the emergence of a completely new type of communion

⁵ See, for example, *Peking Review* No. 16 (April 14, 1967), pp. 12–15.

⁶ Liu Shao-ch'i, *On the Party*, Peking, Foreign Languages Press, 1950, pp. 29–37 *passim*.

between the leader and the masses. They were also marked by a singular phenomenon directly related to the problem of charismatic leadership, namely the conferring of a sacred character not only on Mao's words, but on the object—the famous little red book of quotations—containing the leader's words, which the Red Guards carried with them day and night, and kept by their side as they slept. Physical contact with the leader was also invested with a significance which is not unfamiliar, thanks to other examples of recent memory. Thus, for example, a Red Guard who had shaken the leader's hand did not wash until hundreds of his comrades had been able to touch the hand that had been in contact with Mao's.

It is impossible here to attempt even a brief analysis of recent political developments in China as a whole.⁷ I can only focus on the single issue of the role of Mao's personality. In this respect, one is struck by the current systematic attacks on virtually the whole of the Chinese Communist leadership with the exception of Mao's most loyal supporters. These can be explained, in the case of the "Khrushchev-type poisonous snake Liu Shao-ch'i," and also of the Secretary General of the Party, Teng Hsiao-p'ing, by the fact that Mao is engaged in a desperate struggle for power with these men. But why is it necessary to denounce Mao's oldest comrade-in-arms, Chu Teh, as an "old-style militarist from Yünnan," a "big rascal," and a "madly ambitious character" who must be thoroughly overthrown and trampled upon?⁸

Senile vanity and jealousy of any possible rival for the people's affection obviously plays a role in this behavior, as does Stalinist paranoia (Chu Teh, too, is accused of participation in an anti-Mao' "coup d'Etat"). There are also clear echoes of traditional emperor-worship in the current image of Mao as the mediator between the Chinese people and its historic destiny. But quite apart from these recent pathological tendencies, it is doubtful whether Mao, who has always been exceedingly conscious of the importance of organization as an *instrument* of political action, ever completely accepted, or even understood, the Leninist concept which entrusts the destinies of the revolution to the Party as a collective body. His own loyalties have always gone rather to men—from the ultra-conservative Tseng Kuo-fan who was one of his idols as an adolescent, to Lenin and Stalin. Similarly, he finds it normal that the Chinese people should follow Chairman Mao, the "red sun in the hearts of the peoples of the world," and not the

⁷ For my view of the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" down to January 1967, see the conclusion to the American edition of my biography of Mao Tse-tung, published in May by Simon and Schuster. I have dealt briefly with more recent developments in an article in the (London) *Sunday Times* of March 5, 1967.

⁸ See the article "Pa ta chün-fa ta yeh-hsin-chia Chu Te hei szu-ling ch'ü-ch'u-lai," ("Drag forth the big militarist and madly ambitious character Chu Teh, the black commander"), *Hsin Pei-ta* No. 29 (January 23, 1967), p. 3. Mao himself wrote the masthead for this organ of the students of Peking University in his own calligraphy last autumn, and the contents may certainly be taken as reflecting his views.

faceless party bureaucracy. A few years ago he was reported to have justified the cult of his own personality with the argument that the Chinese people at their present stage of development still required such a semi-divine figure to reassure them. Events in the near future will probably shed considerable light on the degree of justification which attaches to this view. In any case, it is obvious that there is one person in China who takes the keenest delight in the image of Mao Tse-tung as a great charismatic leader, namely Mao himself.