Mao Tse-tung’s Leadership Style

LUCIAN W. PYE

By all standards, Mao Tse-tung belongs in the company of the few great political men of our century. Born and raised in the obscurity and restrictions of nineteenth-century rural China, he rose to assume the leadership of the Chinese Revolution, rule the largest population in the world with the most pervasive and intense government known in history, and finally has clung to life long enough to become the last of the political heroes of the great generation of World War II. His life spans the emergence of modern China and his character has shaped the manner and style of the Chinese Revolution.

To say that Mao Tse-tung has been the most revered and the most ecstatically worshiped man of the century may seem like paying him a slight compliment in the light of the awesome statistics of China. With some 800 million Chinese presumably holding Mao Tse-tung in absolute reverence as a demigod, what other mortal of our times can claim to be his competitor in popular appeal? Yet, Mao Tse-tung’s appeal has reached far beyond the citizenry of his native land, however large. Few have not been touched by his existence, whether in admiration or hatred, in respect or scorn. His name has become the label for revolutionary extremists throughout the world, “the Maoists,” yet it is Mao Tse-tung with whom leaders throughout the world seek audiences. The pope in one day admits to his presence more people than Mao Tse-tung grants audiences in a year. When Mao last appeared publicly, more than a million people expressed tumultuous joy, and since then the occasions for allowing a select few into his

LUCIEN W. PYE is Ford Professor of Political Science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He is the author of several books on comparative politics, dealing mainly with Asia and China, including the just published Mao Tse-tung: The Man in the Leader (Basic Books), from which this article is adapted.
presence have been newsworthy throughout the world. The announcement that the American secretary of state has had a couple of hours of discussion with the chairman is a signal to all that the secretary has been favored, indeed, honored; and, of course, when a trip to China does not include a visit with the chairman, the universal interpretation is that favor is being withheld.

The extraordinary appeal of Mao Tse-tung is hard to identify. Some may suggest that it lies less in the man and more in the nature of Chinese society, for the Chinese do seem compelled to make all of their leaders into imperial figures. Yet, the fact remains that many non-Chinese, who have no affinity for his rural origins but represent a host of varied social and personal backgrounds, seem to find inspiration for their political lives in his words and his example.

What is the character of the man that lies behind all this greatness? Merely to raise the question is an act of sacrilege for many. For the Chinese and other worshipers of Mao and his thoughts, it is enough to dwell on his public virtues, read only hagiographies, and reject all else as being in bad taste. For his detractors, the whole spectacle is revolting, and Mao the man must be the devil behind the Chinese version of socialist totalitarianism. Yet between these extremes there are those who are honestly curious. These are the people to whom this article is addressed.

The public record reveals a man at home in rural China, a man of the peasantry, who knows the myths and folklore of traditional China. Yet, although he received a Confucian education, Mao was also part of the first full generation of Chinese to explore Western knowledge. From his rural isolation, he moved effectively into the chaotic, competitive world of Chinese student politics and revolutionary scheming. As soldier, ideologist, and planner, he became the symbolic leader of the Chinese Communist guerrilla struggle. As victorious ruler he was a visionary who looked beyond immediate problems of administration to the goals of a new society and to the molding of a new form of man. Chinese to the core, he also has been a principal shaper of our two contemporary international systems: His judgment helped to create the postwar world of two sharply divided blocs, and his decisions contributed to the 1970s concept of a more fluid and complex balance of states. His genius has thus extended from the era of China’s first awakening, through the drama of World War II, the intense bitter struggles of the cold war, to a new era of the future, whose outlines we can barely perceive today.

In recent years, numerous attempts have been made to understand what lies behind the renown of Mao Tse-tung. Students of intellectual history, for example, have tried to suggest ways in which he has enriched Marxism; but while they have shown Mao to have been an astute, indeed shrewd, thinker, they have all had to concede that his ultimate claim to greatness does not lie in his work as a philosopher. Others have suspected that his reputation springs from his successes as a military strategist; but in spite of all their sympathetic effort, it is clear that Mao’s genius lies elsewhere. Still other champions of Mao’s fame have argued that he envisaged entirely novel goals for the economic order which
would render obsolete all conventional ambitions for greater industrial and material well-being; but a careful review of Mao’s policies makes it clear that he appreciates the near universal craving for higher standards of living and greater personal security.

The paradox of Mao Tse-tung is that while his claim to greatness is unassailable, in every specific sphere whether as philosopher, strategist, economic planner, ideologue or even world statesman, his qualities are not the match of his right to greatness.

The secret of his greatness lies elsewhere—in his extraordinary ability to understand, evoke, and direct human emotions and the innumerable ways in which he has used his own persona to command the sentiments and passions of others. In modern China the realm of emotions has been peculiarly problematic: In traditional Confucian China the essence of correct behavior was the complete mastery and indeed repression of passion, and especially aggression; but out of the frustrations of impotence in the modern world the Chinese have been responsive to the appeal for acts of public passion. The need to ritualize emotions as a means of controlling feelings contributed to the traditional Chinese appreciation of drama and theater; and the modern need to find expression for feelings has multiplied the numbers of those who want to be heroic and to find drama in their own lives. Mao Tse-tung as a person has been uniquely capable of responding to this need of the times in China, for he is possessed of a personality that fits the definition of a “dramatizing” character whose skill lies in commanding the “immediate affective response in others.”


For our purposes it may be helpful to follow briefly Dittmer’s lead and pin down more clearly Mao’s “dramatizing” character by contrasting his style with that of Liu Shao-ch’i who as a “compulsive” personality was a “natural” opponent for Mao in the Cultural Revolution. Lasswell’s description of his two generalized types of political men seem to fit perfectly the differences between Mao and Liu. “The dramatizing character may resort to traces of exhibitionism, flirtatiousness, provocation, indignation; but in any case all devices are pivoted around the task of ‘getting a rise out of’ the other person. . . . The compulsive inclines toward carefully defined limits and the well-worked-out ordering of parts; the dramatizer excels in scope and abundance of loosely classified detail. The hallmark of the former is the imposition of uniformity, while the latter tolerates diversity and excels in nuance. The compulsive desubjectivizes a situation, while the dramatizer remains sensitized to psychological dimensions; the one denies novelty, while the other welcomes it; one squeezes and compresses the dimensions of the human situation which the other complies with and allows to spread. The compulsive monotonizes the presentation of the self to the other, while the latter multiplies the faces and facades which can be presented to other persons.” Harold D. Lasswell, Power and Personality (New York, 1948), p. 62.
Since Mao’s greatness lies so clearly in the realm of emotions, the problem of Mao Tse-tung is a problem in political psychology. To treat Mao merely as an intellectual or as a calculating strategist is to miss the essential dimensions of his historic role. Furthermore, if we are to understand how Mao came to be so successful in mobilizing the feelings of the Chinese, and of others, we must explore his own emotional world and discover the dynamics of his psychic relations with others.

When the story of modern China is systematically related to the activities of Mao, a key element of Mao’s genius is immediately highlighted: his remarkable capacity to perform different, and even quite contradictory, roles at different times. As Mao took on the roles of peasant organizer, military commander, ideological spokesman, political strategist, and ruling statesman, he also vacillated between such contradictory public persona as fiery revolutionary and wise philosopher; dynamic activist and isolated recluse; preacher of the sovereign powers of the human will and patient planner who knows that history cannot be rushed.

The idea that Mao’s greatness lies in the relationship between his own psychological needs and the psychological needs of masses of people is a part of Mao Tse-tung’s political consciousness. When Mao saw Edgar Snow after the Cultural Revolution he confessed that the Chinese people had probably gone too far in attributing magical power to his thoughts, but then he added that there are times when there is a need for a personality cult, and that in human affairs one thing that will always exist is “the desire to be worshiped and the desire to worship.”

With these words Mao identified the essential relationship between leader and follower: The politician serves a psychic function for the crowd just as the crowd performs a function for the politician. Leaders and followers are each dependent upon the other and they need to extract from the other something which fulfills their needs, and yet there is a peculiar singularity but vital difference in what each seeks. The desire “to worship” and the “desire to be worshiped” are symmetrical, but not similar sentiments.

Mao’s insight into the needs of leaders and followers takes us directly to the essence of charismatic leadership. The need to worship taps the basic human need for dependency; the need to be worshiped goes to the core sentiment of narcissism; and, of course, dependency and narcissism have their common roots in infancy. The comforts of dependency and the exhilarations of narcissism are linked in the earliest of human experiences when the self has not been differentiated from others or from the environment, and when there is a confusion of omnipotence and helplessness. At that stage the distance is infinitesimal between the cries of weakness and vulnerability, and the joys of every wish becoming an instant command for attention. Out of this universal experience most people, in varying degrees, can sense that their hero’s joy in being worshiped barely masks his anxieties over being ignored; and most leaders, in even more subtle degrees, can sense that lurking in the dependency of their followers is a
mighty craving for potency, and that a people's sense of justice rests upon the
infantile longing that their own inherent goodness will be rewarded by the
blessing of their own total command of their situation. The followers can see
their leader's psychic vulnerability, but they do not want to see through him
for fear of destroying the memories of the only magic that ever worked in their
lives. The capacity for the leader to tap his own narcissism reminds his follow-
ers that they too have their potential for greater goodness and strength.3

Out of the interplay of narcissism and dependency those who need to be
worshiped and those who need to worship are linked together as each depends
upon the other's vulnerabilities.4 The charm of the great man is that we can
see his capacity for both self-deception and for having fun with the public; the
great man in turn is charmed and exhilarated that his actions can bring such
exaggerated responses from the public. A Franklin D. Roosevelt could never
completely hide his pleasure at being able to manipulate public passions, and
the American public never completely hid their pleasure at being able to see
through the self-satisfaction of their popular president. The great appeal of
John F. Kennedy was based on a very human relationship in which his admirers
appreciated his refusal to take himself too seriously, and he understood their
readiness to be teased and humored. The key to why the sly element of the im-
posture inspires heroism in the viewer rather than disenchantment seems to be
the universal human appreciation of narcissism. People can instinctively under-
stand that the great man enjoys his sense of greatness, and they may respond in
kind by relaxing their inhibitions about their own narcissistic urges and in
their turn aspire to act in ways which rise above their humdrum roles.

Mao Tse-tung in a moment of self-revelation once wrote his wife a letter in

3 The theory of narcissism, in grossly oversimplified form, holds that in earliest infancy
when separation of ego and non-ego has not taken place, the ego is extremely weak, and
anything pleasant is considered ego. The baby, if his environment is appropriately supportive,
senses no differentiation between himself and the world, and thus he and his world are one,
his every wish becomes a command, and his sense of his own goodness is the center of his
magical universe. When he cannot relieve every pain by crying and hence commanding his
world, he experiences deep frustrations, anxieties over his own goodness, and possibly the
beginnings of guilt. Thus omnipotence and self-esteem are intimately linked to a longing for
the "oceanic feeling of primary narcissism." Later after the child has developed a sense of his
separate ego and differentiation between ego and non-ego has taken place, it is possible to
revive the fantasy of being incorporated as one in the world, of recapturing the sense of om-
nipotence and inherent goodness that went with primary narcissism. It is this form of "sec-
ondary narcissism" which is the basis of the narcissistic personality, who is constantly in
search of self-esteem (as in Lasswell's theory of the political man) that is the basis of our
theory of the charismatic leader. Narcissism makes possible the focusing of tremendous psy-
chic energies on the ego. For technical details about narcissism see: Sigmund Freud, "On Nar-
(New York, 1945).

4 I am indebted to discussion with Dr. Steve Pieczenik, M.D., for help in arriving at this
concept of the mutual exploitation of vulnerabilities as the basis of the charismatic relation-
ship between leader and followers.
which he tellingly described his own personality as being part "monkey"—impish, quixotic, mercurial, unpredictable, and always quick to provoke, tease, and change—and part "tiger"—the lord and ruler who is fierce and dangerous, respected and feared by all.

This mixture of the monkey and the tiger, which gives an intriguing quality to Mao's behavior, leaves him free to maneuver. As the ideologue of willpower he suggests that his commitments are absolute; yet, his basic ambivalences make it possible for him to alter policies and dramatically change his positions.

There is no better starting point for delineating Mao's operational code than to note his psychological ambivalences which have made him both a romantic revolutionary and a calculating, pragmatic statesman. He sanctioned both the tumultuous Cultural Revolution and China's orderly reentry to world politics which was signaled by his invitation to President Richard Nixon.

CONSISTENCY VERSUS CONTRADICTION

A key question that needs to be asked about the world view of any political leader is whether he tries to be consistent in his statement and policies, and precise and logical in his basic mode of reasoning, or whether he tends to shift his position easily, accept the need to respect the realities of changing circumstances, and in his thinking be highly tolerant of ambiguities and contradictions.

Mao clearly belongs to the school that believes that consistency is the hobgoblin of the small mind. Throughout his career he has found it easy, and often enjoyable, to change his position and to give expression to various ambivalences. Indeed, the zigzags of Chinese policies over two decades seem to reflect in large measure Mao's bemusement with the very concept of contradictions. Some scholars have argued quite convincingly that the most striking characteristic of Mao's political thought is his fascination with the notion of contradictions.5

Of course, as both a Leninist and Marxist, Mao is expected to be flexible in tactics and committed to a dialectical view of history. And in his own philosophical writings Mao has concentrated to a large degree on the question of contradictions. Yet when reviewing Mao's use of the concept of contradictions it does not require any special perceptiveness about personal styles to recognize that Mao's fascination with contradictions has gone beyond that of most Marxists, and that his concept of the dialectic has at times been extraordinarily idiosyncratic, indeed to a point which would make it seem to be non-Marxian. There is nothing, for example, in the history of Marxism that would prepare one for the idea which Mao expounded to party cadres when he said: "Fearing and not fearing, being happy and being unhappy, solving problems and not solving them: this is dialectics. For instance, in waging war, at the beginning

one is quite afraid, but the more he fights, the more courageous he becomes. Without having had several errors in line, we could not be so good today."6

In other statements Mao has revealed this same propensity to treat any pair of opposites—“good and bad,” “hot and cold,” “young and old”—as being in the same class as Marx’s concept of dialectical materialism. Mao’s enthusiasm for any example of the “unity of opposites” suggests that he has a benign view of pairs, more consistent with the traditional Chinese view of the “harmony” of the yin and the yang than with the conflict implicit in the notion of contradictions in Western Marxism.

On occasion, Mao has said explicitly that traditional Chinese thought is consistent with Marxism because it contained the notions of both the harmony of opposites and the dynamics of imbalance that are to him the essence of Marx’s theory of contradictions and dialectics. “It is always so that people do not think alike. Imbalance is the law of universal progress. Mencius said: ‘All things are not alike, and all things complement each other.’ People do not think alike and yet it is possible to reach accord. Progress is made in a zig-zag spiral pattern.”7

It would be wrong, however, to believe that Mao’s concept of contradictions is merely a revival of traditional Chinese concepts. Mao has made his own modifications. For example, the classical Chinese pairs of opposites were vivid and immutable, poles of enduring differences. Mao, on the other hand, holds that little endures for anything can change into its opposite.

Hard battle and rest and consolidation are the unity of opposites. This is the law. They also are mutually transformable. There isn’t anything that is not mutually transformable. High speed turns into low speed, and low speed turns into high speed. Labor turns into rest, and rest turns into labor. Rest and consolidation, and hard battle are also like this. Labor and rest, and high speed and low speed also have identity. Getting out of bed and going to bed are also the unity of opposites. An old saying goes: “He who has slept for a long time thinks of getting up.” . . . Sleeping transforms into getting up, and getting up transforms into sleeping. Opening a meeting transforms into closing a meeting. Once a meeting is opened, it immediately embraces the factor of closing the meeting.8

But Mao’s attachment to the concept of contradictions becomes psychologically interesting when he uses it as a way of neutralizing subjects that we know are highly emotional to him, such as the relationship of sons and fathers, and husbands and wives. In one rambling recounting of the concept of dialectical contradictions, Mao revealingly suggested that it was possible to dismiss the inherent tensions of both generations and sexes by simply holding that the differences do not really exist: “Sons transform into fathers, and fathers trans-

6 “Talk at the Hangchow conference of the Shanghai Bureau” (April 1957), Miscellany of Mao Tse-tung Thought, Part I, p. 65.
7 Ibid., p. 80.
form into sons. Females transform into males and males transform into females. Direct transformation is not possible. But after marriage when sons and daughters are begotten, is that not transformation?9 By thus blurring distinctions, Mao wards off problems of a deeply personal nature. He has gone even further than just the matters of generations and sex, and has used the concept of contradictions as a comforting shield against the disturbing fact of the inevitability of death. At a party Congress Mao once spoke of how the Chinese people had a national affinity for Communism because of their instinctive appreciation of the “unity” of weddings and funerals, and by jesting about both, he stripped them of their customary emotional dimensions:

There are red and white happy events. . . . The Chinese people consider weddings as red happy events and funerals white happy events. . . . The Chinese know dialectics. Weddings will produce children. A child is split out of the body of the mother. It is a sudden change, a happy event. One individual is split into two or three, or even 10, like planes off an aircraft carrier. [The Chinese word for aircraft carrier is “aviation mother-ship.”] The common people find the occurrences, changes, and deaths of new matters happy events. When a person dies, a memorial meeting is held. While the bereaved weep in mourning, they feel it is also a happy event. Actually, it is. Just imagine if Confucius were still living and here at this meeting in Huai-jen Hall. He would be over 2,000 years old, and it wouldn’t be so good.10

Beyond jesting, however, we have examples of Mao essentially denying the reality of death by his use of his version of the dialectic, which he seems to know to be different from the Soviet version of the dialectics. For example, he has written: “life and death are mutually transformable. Life transforms into death, and lifeless things transform into living things. . . . It is a natural law. . . . The Soviet Union’s ‘Concise Dictionary of Philosophy’ takes upon itself to differ with me. It says that the transformation of life and death is metaphysical and that the transformation of war and peace is erroneous. Who is right after all?”11

Mao thus makes use of the concept of contradiction in numerous ways: At one moment he can be impish and cute as he plays with differences that are sobering to most people; at the next moment he can startle by suggesting that what others accept as normal differences are profound matters. By playing with contradictions he shocks others and, as the clever “monkey,” he tears down distinctions and suggests that what is good is bad, and what is bad can be good.

One can see this spirit as he tells how,

I once asked some comrades around me whether we lived in heaven or on earth. They all shook their heads and said that we lived on earth. I said no, we live in heaven. When we look at the stars from the earth, they are in heaven. But if there are people in the stars, when they look at us, wouldn’t they think that we are in

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9 Ibid., p. 204.
11 “Examples of Dialectics (Abstracted Compilation),” p. 204.
heaven? Therefore, I say that we live in heaven while also on earth at the same time. The Chinese like the gods. I asked them whether we were gods. They answered no. I said wrong. The gods live in heaven. We live on earth, but also in heaven; so, why shouldn't we be considered gods also? If there were people in the stars, wouldn't they also consider us as gods? My third question was whether the Chinese were also foreigners? They said no, only the foreigners were foreigners. I said wrong, the Chinese were also foreigners, because when we consider the people of foreign countries as foreigners, wouldn't they also consider us as foreigners? It explains the superstitious ideas on this point.12

Yet at other times Mao has become sober and even threatening as he has talked about contradictions. That was clearly his mood when he mentioned that he himself has contradictions and that, "the world is full of contradictions. There is no place without contradictions."13 Nor did he believe that contradictions were a laughing matter when he warned a conference of cadres that "Exposing contradictions may lead to settlement of problems; they should not be suppressed. But if we tolerate contradictions, we shall be vanquished."14

Mao's use of contradictions thus covers a wide range of his style in making decisions. He is quick to identify issues and he conveys an awareness of his own boldness in fearlessly bringing into the open conflicts and contradictions. He also uses the concept of contradictions to tame problems and make them benign. And he uses contradictions both to tease and to threaten.

APPROACHES TO RISK-TAKING AND REASON

Another important aspect of any leader's operational code is his approach to risk and his use of reason. How does he use reason as he faces the uncertainty of risk? Does he adopt the posture of judicious reasonableness to justify low-risk choices or does he modify the shock of high-risk decisions by enveloping them in a cloak of reasonableness? Or does he deny the importance of reason as he faces the uncertainty of risks and suggest that he has powers that exceed the limits of mere reason?

In recent years it has been customary to say that the Chinese Communists tend to be extreme in their rhetoric but cautious in action, particularly in the area of foreign affairs. Some have observed that in contrast to the Chinese caution in foreign policy, Peking, under Mao's direction, has vacillated from revolutionary experimentation to periods of consolidation.15

Readily available evidence suggests, however, that Mao's vacillations and

13 "Talk on Methods of Solidarity" (August 1964), Miscellany of Mao Tse-tung Thought, Part II, p. 405.
14 "Interjections at Conference of Provincial and Municipal Committee Secretaries (Collected)" (January 1957), Miscellany of Mao Tse-tung Thought, Part I, p. 47. Italics added.
contradictions have not generally taken this form. Mao’s own rhetoric, for example, has not been extreme, and to the extent that he has been inclined to use aggressive language, it has generally been directed against immediate foes, often people in his audience whom he has singled out for caustic and sarcastic attack. It would be very hard to find any occasion when Mao Tse-tung dressed up a cautious decision in inflammatory rhetoric. On the contrary, if there is a consistent element in the zigzags of Mao’s decision-making style, it is that he has almost invariably chosen bold options, but presented them as eminently reasonable decisions.

From the time of his first decisions as a political leader in the Kiangsi Soviet period and then during the Long March, Mao has consistently been bold and novel in his choices. One has the impression that, unlike most decision makers with great responsibilities, Mao more frequently than not passes over possibilities to hedge against failure, and decides instead on unpredictable courses of action. Whereas most statesmen live with a vivid dread of the penalties for failure, Mao has been attracted to the potentially great payoffs that can come from success against long odds. While most executives crave certainty and only “reasonable” risks, Mao has taken great gambles as though it were only reasonable to do so.

Mao’s willingness to take risks seemingly is associated with a sense of omnipotence that leads him to expect that nothing is final—there will always be another chance. Consequently, while he may have had doubts about the present, he has always had to look with optimism to the future, where he can expect to capture (or recapture) what is missing in the present. Thus, talk about catching up with Great Britain in fifteen years, or catching up with America “before I go to see Marx” was not idle boasting, but a genuine expectation that the infinite promise of the future could become reality (as fantasy once seemed to do in the past).

The full documentation of Mao’s propensity for bold choices would require a complete history of the Chinese Communist movement, and therefore, we need here provide only a few typical examples. After the gamble of the Long March, in the Yenan, Mao acted with great boldness not only in pushing guerrilla warfare but also in risking a major ideological rectification campaign at the height of the Japanese War. Then, in his maneuvering with the Nationalists prior to the actual civil war, Mao at each turn in the negotiations refused settlements that a more cautious leader might have seen as providing reasonable security for later political struggles. Finally, he risked all in a gamble for total military and political victory. As soon as victory came, Mao again made the bold choice of “leaning to one side” and went to Moscow for prolonged negotiations with Stalin. A more cautious leader would have sent lesser officials to test the negotiating climate. In domestic policies Mao, time after time, overruled the preferences for prudence among his colleagues and insisted on uncertain alternatives: It was Mao who personally pushed to speed up the tempo of land reform in 1950, who finally insisted on speeding up collectivization.
in 1955, and pushed for communization in 1958. From the Hundred Flowers Campaign of 1956 through the Great Leap of 1958 to the Cultural Revolution in 1966, Mao repeatedly took tremendous risks. In foreign policy the record of Mao’s bold decisions extends from his choice to enter the Korean War to his decision to invite President Nixon to Peking and to deal with a government that for twenty years he had been indoctrinating his people to regard as the ultimate evil.

Mao’s propensity for making startling decisions distinguished him from political leaders in general, and more specifically, from most other Chinese Communist high officials. One of the reasons why China has a debilitating succession problem today is that the political system has over the years overwhelmingly favored cautious actors who were able to survive because of skill in defensive maneuvering and in protecting their domains, and who did not have to aggressively build empires. Those who came to power with Mao in 1949 have generally cautiously sought to hold their own gains and not seek more. There has not been a great deal of mobility within Chinese officialdom and survival has gone with competence and not with success in climbing ahead of others. Although Mao has frequently spoken out about the need for cadres to take initiatives, to be constantly active, and not to slavishly adhere to dogma, his rhetoric has not altered the realities of power relationships or changed the fact that it has been Mao alone who has been free to practice high-risk decision making.

To a considerable degree, Mao has been able to mask his propensity for high-risk decisions by describing his choices as being self-evidently reasonable. There is little bravado or glorification of danger in Mao’s statements of policy. Drama has been used to stimulate greater support for policies; but generally Mao defends his decisions with such reasonable language that he trivializes the very concept of risk.

Mao’s style in the face of failure has been to withdraw, often with an accompanying complaint about illness, or to ignore the losses and proceed as much as possible, as though nothing had happened, or, if finally cornered, he will either shift the blame to others or vigorously defend his actions in highly personal terms.

At times, however, Mao has not been able to ignore failure, as when his own colleagues have questioned the wisdom of his initial decisions. On these occasions he has combined hurt withdrawal with aggressive and highly personal defenses of his actions. His mood can be that of the misunderstood and mistreated leader who has done his best and is not appreciated, and in the traditional Chinese style, then declare that they can be rid of him, but then, in a more un-Chinese manner, he may add a threat to withdraw and fight back. Possibly, the classic example of this aspect of Mao’s style was the “three sleeping pills” speech at the Lushan Conference on July 23, 1959, when he was under severe attack for the failure of the Great Leap and of the commune movement. Mao came into the hall and took the stage late in the evening and declared, “You
have spoken so much; permit me to talk some now, won’t you? I have taken three sleeping pills. Still I can’t sleep.” In a sense he was saying that he had tried to “withdraw” but could not so now he would have to fight back. And fight back he did, declaring that, “Nobody can be without shortcomings, even Confucius had his mistakes.” I have seen Lenin’s own drafts that have been corrected pellmell. If there were no errors, why should he correct them?” As Mao rambled on he made it clear that he was ready to draw the line and force the issue, but in a mood of self-pity, “You have said what you want to say. . . . If you have caught me in the wrong, you can punish me. Don’t be afraid of wearing tight shoes. . . . The fact is that you have all refuted me though not by name perhaps.” Finally, Mao came to his not so veiled threat: “When I was young and in the prime of life, I would also be irritated whenever I heard some bad remarks. My attitude was that if others do not provoke me I won’t provoke them; if they provoke me, I will also provoke them; whoever provokes me first, I will provoke him later. I have not abandoned this principle even now.” Mao coupled his threat with explicit allusions to how he was personally in the same class as Marx and Lenin. Then he ended on a note designed to shock: “Comrades, you should analyze your own responsibilities and your stomach will feel much more comfortable if you move your bowels and break wind” [that is, make a clean slate of it].

On another occasion Mao’s aggressive response to failure and criticism took the form of declaring to the Central Committee that, if they wished, they could take his wife and he would go to the hills again to raise another Red Army to oppose them.

CLOSE CONTROL OR THE DELEGATION OF AUTHORITY

A third consideration useful in arriving at a general understanding of the operational codes of public men is their basic style in administration. Do they act as chief executives who maintain day-to-day control over all possible operations, or are they inclined to delegate responsibilities? If they do delegate responsibilities, how do they assert their own authority?

The boldness of Mao’s decisions in many cases was enhanced by his practice of not acting as a chief executive concerned with the day-to-day management of decisions. Mao’s style, especially since 1949, has been to withdraw for periods, observe the process of government, reflect on what should be done, and then suddenly to intervene with his own ideas. Mao thus vacillates be-

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16 This is only one of innumerable references by Mao to Confucius which have become extremely embarrassing to the Chinese Communist party since the initiation in 1973 of the Anti-Confucius Campaign.


tween reigning and ruling, which has the effect of exaggerating the novelty of his decisions, since they generally do not follow directly upon the sequence of decisions that would normally flow from executive administration of policies.

In many respects, Mao’s style is reminiscent of the traditional role of Chinese emperors. For example, during periods of withdrawal Mao has quietly gone about the countryside inspecting at first hand the performances of lower officials, a practice similar to that of numerous emperors who sought first-hand facts by employing disguises when away from court. At other times Mao’s orders have taken the form of marginal comments on documents that he has been given to read, which, again, was a normal way for emperors to give commands.

This style of withdrawal and intervention has clearly exaggerated the fluctuations of Chinese politics for if, as Michel Oksenberg suspects, “every important policy initiative over the past twenty years has been prompted by Mao,”19 then every intervention by him has, in some degree, interrupted the previous flow of routine administrative decisions. Because Mao plays many roles in government, when he returns from a phase of withdrawal, it is never certain at what point in the total process his new initiatives will be interjected.

The style of reigning and ruling also contributes to the tendency of the entire governmental system to react dramatically to even the most casual intervention by Mao. Since he is not a part of the day-to-day process, any intervention becomes a major event which tends to stimulate widespread response throughout the ranks of the cadres. Sometimes the marginal comment Mao has made on a memorandum will be enough to stir massive bureaucratic reaction. At other times it is sufficient for him to issue cryptic slogans such as, “Agriculture is the base and industry the leading sector,” or “Dig the tunnels deeper; store the grain everywhere; and don’t seek hegemony.” Mao himself claims that the exaggerated enthusiasm in spreading the communes in the summer of 1958 stemmed from a single word he gave to a reporter: “A reporter asked me: ‘Is the commune good?’ I said, ‘Good,’ and he immediately published it in the newspaper.”20 Certainly the decision was much more complicated than this, but Mao was probably also right that the report of his one word sent out the signal to cadres throughout the land that they should step up the pace of communization.

Mao’s style suggests a broad vision, concern for grand matters, preference for the abstractions of policy over concrete details, curiosity for particular details but not for the welter of facts basic to administration. His manner also reflects a man who trusts the world enough to feel that he does not have to dominate to have his way, and who is confident enough in his own judgment to feel he can safely override the decisions of those who are closer to the facts.

Yet, some qualifications are in order, for his vacillation between reigning and ruling also reflects Mao’s apparent ambivalences about being alone: at one moment he seems to need privacy and to seek regal isolation, and at the next he

20 Quoted in ibid., p. 90.
tends to complain that others have isolated him and ignored his wishes. During the phases of Mao's withdrawals others must manage affairs, and as they concentrate on the tasks at hand, Mao sometimes seems to feel left out and complains that others are not speaking to him. For example, in October 1966 Mao protested, "On many things I was never even consulted. . . . Teng Hsiao-p'ing never paid me a visit."\(^{21}\) He further noted that after 1958 Liu Shao-ch'i and Teng Hsiao-p'ing, who were then managing the party, "treated me like their parents whose funeral was taking place," that is, showing formal deference but not speaking to him. Mao also once complained about being unable to be heard in the Peking area because the then mayor, P'eng Chen, controlled matters so completely that "no needle could penetrate, no drop of water could enter."\(^{22}\)

**TRUSTING PERSONAL OR IMPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS**

Another closely related theme that helps to provide first approximations of leaders' operational codes is their preference for dealing with either formal and impersonal institutions or individuals with whom they have some personal ties. Some leaders feel most confident that their decisions will be properly executed if they are able to manage and orchestrate all the formal offices and departments executing policy. Other leaders feel comfortable only in dealing with an inner group of personally loyal followers. Mao Tse-tung clearly distrusts the impersonal relationships inherent in bureaucracies and seems to have a strong need to deal personally with those following his instructions. Mao's dislike of bureaucratism is too well known to need further comment, except to note that his hostility toward the impersonality of bureaucracies stems not just from the ways officials relate to the lower echelons of government but also from his frustrations at the top over commanding an impersonal structure. Mao constantly wants officials to be responsive not just to the people but also to himself. Consequently, even though he is not a line administrator and has not been a part of continuous day-to-day developments, he has often intervened to learn the names of lower officials, comment on their conduct, and thus convey the impression that he was personally informed about personnel.\(^{23}\) In fact, his knowledge of lower functionaries must be quite spotty and based more on a review of names and performance records than on actual administrative experience.

Mao's dislike of impersonal relationships has also surfaced in the way he has impeded the institutionalization of much of the Chinese governing system, especially at the top level. In part, the problem arises from the fact that Mao wears many hats, and thus he understandably does not make in his own mind sharp distinctions among the various organs of decision making. On the other hand, Mao's erratic dealings with the cluster of formal committees, bureaus,

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and offices in the capital has tended to blur the lines of responsibility among them. The paradox of Mao’s behavior in personalizing these official relationships has produced a vague, formless, and almost mystical concept of ultimate authority that is signified by the term “the Center.”

All kinds of matters in China, from economic management to political control, are said to involve decisions of the “Center,” but the Chinese never make clear what or who the “Center” is. Sometimes it seems that it is nothing more than the appropriate ministry in Peking, while at other times it appears to be the Politburo or its Standing Committee, but at still other times the “Center” can be the Central Committee itself. Lower-level officials speak always of the “Center” when referring to Peking, but they seem to have no concrete sense of precisely whom it is they are talking about.

**Popular versus Elite Style**

Another distinction in operational codes is the preferences of leaders for either open or closed decision making, in the sense of either welcoming broader participation or preferring to involve only a select few. Although, on the surface, the differences might seem to be those between a popular or democratic and an elite approach, such a simple classification is not possible. A leader may be inclined toward broad participation because it dilutes the influence of competitors and enhances his own importance, while the apparently elitist approach can be consistent with decisions favoring broad interests.

Indeed, in Mao’s style the vacillations between involvement and isolation, and between action and seclusion seem to be a part of his ambivalences over faith in the views of the masses and a decided preference for secrecy associated with elite councils.

Possibly no major leader in modern times has a more rightful claim to populist sentiments, for glorifying the masses and seeing in them wisdom and strength. At the same time, no other major leader in the world has practiced governance in such seclusion. As a decision maker Mao has suggested that he can simultaneously be a spokesman for the masses and an isolated oracle. He professes belief in the value for policy makers of constant, day-to-day interactions with common people, yet his life style since coming to power has been one of mainly mixing with the powerful. Thus, he combines sympathy for the weak with personal identification with power.

In more concrete terms Mao’s populism takes the form of favoring rural people and distrusting city life. Thus, the “people” are not in his mind an educated, knowledgeable population full of curiosity and diverse views, but rather, simple, rustic, hardworking, conforming peasants who are anxious to improve themselves through their own exertions. Mao’s glorification of rural life and attitudes is consistent with his well-known faith in the superiority of human effort over technology and his distrust of formal learning. Mao has long at-
tacked formal schooling and "book learning" for others while surrounding himself with books.

Mao's ambivalences about populist involvement and elitist seclusion have been translated into his dual political approach of championing the "mass line"—that is, the principle of learning from the people what they need and want and then bringing back to them whatever is possible—and the principles of a Leninist elite party that has been carried to the ultimate extreme of making the entire Chinese decision-making process one of the most secret in the world. Even supposedly open events, such as meetings of party Congresses, are generally held in secrecy in response to surprise decisions of Mao and his few associates.

This feature of Mao's manner of decision making must again have roots in his personality, for his ambivalence seems to be extraordinarily complex. When he speaks of himself as being "alone with the masses" he seems to be clinging to his desire for isolation while identifying with a depersonalized public. Only by looking into his personality will it be possible to find explanations for his ability to idealize the people while protecting his own privacy.

CRITICISM AND CONFLICT

A final dimension of any leader's style is his reactions to the conflicts inherent in politics and the ways in which he responds to attack and criticism. Some leaders are so self-confident that they rejoice in controversy and are impervious to personal attack. Others strive to rise above conflict and expect to be so respected that they will be spared direct criticism. Although great men tend to have large egos, there can be great diversity between those who value conflict or shy away from it, between those with thick and those with thin skins.

As with most dimensions of Mao's operational code, his style as decision maker appears to be based on ambivalence, for he has at one moment glorified conflict and welcomed clashes and confusion, while at the next moment displayed delicate sensitivities even to hints of criticism. Richard H. Solomon has documented extensively Mao's extraordinary readiness to take on fights, to rise above the traditional Chinese craving for harmony, and to accept fearlessly conflict and confusion.24 Whereas most Chinese are anxious for order and dread disorder or luan, Mao seems to enjoy disruption and struggle.

Yet, at the same time, there is extensive evidence that Mao is hypersensitive to attack and senses even the most subtle hint of criticism. Instead of being a bruising fighter, he seems to be almost too thin-skinned for political life. Thus, Mao sometimes proclaims the value of having enemies, dismissing in an off-hand manner the record of years of animosity, while at other times he bristles at even the most indirect suggestion of attack.

As early as 1939 Mao elaborated his view about the virtues of having foes in

his short essay, “To Be Attacked by the Enemy is not a Bad Thing but a Good Thing.” In 1964 Mao recounted how a Japanese visitor sought to apologize for Japan’s attack on China, but he had to interrupt to explain that without the war China never would have become an effective nation. “That is why I said to him (pause and smile) ‘Should I not thank you instead?’” On the other hand, the first sentence in Mao’s Selected Works reads, “Who are our enemies, and who are our friends?” In these opening words Mao echoes Lenin’s proposition that the essential question for the party must always be: “Who will dominate whom?”—the “Who-Whom” issue which was at the heart of Lenin’s view of the world. With Mao, as with Lenin, the issue of friend and foe has always bulked large whether he was analyzing political relations within the larger society or his most personal relations with others.

Mao’s well-known hypersensitivity to criticism has revived the old Chinese cryptic style of using esoteric historical allusions for critical comment. Chinese politics was traditionally rich in the use of allegory and indirect forms of criticism and attack. Historically, Chinese ministers, hoping not to offend or provoke anger, frequently used subtle references to past examples as a way of communicating to their emperors. Under Chairman Mao, however, the use of historic allegory has reached previously unknown heights.

These principal features of Mao’s leadership style reflect both cultural and personal considerations. The style of Mao the public man has been that of both rebel and the provider of security. His extraordinary capacity to understand the emotions of others has made him appreciate the linkage between leadership and dependency. Mao’s ability to mix the character of the “monkey” and the “tiger” and to play out in public his various ambivalences and psychological contradictions has been possible because he has not allowed his own emotions to become involved so as to “commit” himself to any particular objects, politics, or persons.

Our understanding of modern China can thus be greatly enriched by exploring Mao’s personality, his particular set of defense mechanisms, and the ways in which he learned to handle his own emotions during his process of maturing. By examining his personality we also discover how his unique creative abilities have operated to make it so difficult for him to solve his final great political problem, the planning of his own succession.

26 One version of this event is reported in Solomon, Mao’s Revolution, p. 205.