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# PROBLEMS

(formerly: Problems Of Capitalism & Socialism,  
Problems Of Communism)

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## New Series, Number 24

### China 1949: Fixing a Broken Society

by Gwydion M. Williams

The West's false understanding of 'Normal Politics'.

How the Kuomintang failed to develop anything much during their period of rule. How they failed to confront Global Imperialism, and then were very slow to resist Japan's expansion into Chinese territory.

An interesting account of the first years after 1949, by a Christian missionary who stayed in China when most Westerners left or were expelled.

How Edgar Snow was well aware of the crisis after the Great Leap Forward, but noted the unusual weather and did not class it as a famine.

How Chinese life expectancy increased greatly under Mao, despite the Three Bad Years following the Great Leap Forward.

How the Cultural Revolution coincided with 1960s radicalism in the West and with the attempt at remoulding European Leninism in Czechoslovakia. How a very different future might have emerged.

How there was a Maoist element in the 1989 Tiananmen protests. And how the protesters came close to achieving the same sort of peaceful overthrow of Leninism as actually happened in Middle-Europe later on in 1989.

Printed and Published by Problems Of Communism Committee  
33 Athol Street, Belfast BT12 4GX



# China 1949: Fixing a Broken Society

by Gwydion M. Williams

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## **The New Right's False Idea of 'The Normal'**

People who know how to work a system mostly have no idea of how that system works. They just follow a 'sense of the normal', which mostly works out OK.

From modern astronomy, we know that 'normal' on Earth is exceptional in terms of the whole universe. Most places would be a dark and endless night, if you could somehow safely visit them in a spacesuit that would save you from the vacuum. A few would be full of glaring light, sometimes enough to kill you. In any case, most of it is unhelpful to life. (But do not say *hostile*, since there is no motivation.)

History tells us how unfamiliar human social values used to be. Slavery was the norm everywhere before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the US South seceded because they felt the Federal Government was no longer supportive of slavery, which they intended to keep for ever. France only gave women the vote after World War Two. The decriminalisation of homosexuality only started in the 1960s. Economic orthodoxy in the West was enthusiastic for a state-dominated Mixed Economy from the 1940s to the 1970s, swung well away from it for the next three decades and is now swinging back again.

In *Problems* 22, I explained in detail how hard it was for China's Blue Republic to establish anything resembling Western notions of normality between the initial revolt in 1911 and its replacement by the People's Republic in 1949. A dose of Leninism proved essential: the Kuomintang only got as far as they did because they got a lot of material aid and a vast amount of political training and guidance from the Soviet Union. But Chiang Kaishek

decided in 1927 that being a serious Chinese Nationalist was too dangerous. When Shanghai was captured by ordinary Chinese led by Zhou Enlai, he used his allies in the Shanghai underworld to massacre left-wingers and restore 'business as usual'. He got himself accepted as a just-about-tolerable replacement for the warlords whom Global Imperialism had been using to avoid the expense of direct imperialism.

The lie is often told that the Communists tried to take over in 1927. In fact they were following the common Marxist assumption that China was unready for socialism and needed a long period of capitalism and 'bourgeois nationalism' under the Kuomintang. But it turned out that 'bourgeois nationalism' in China was very weak and largely found in places under strong foreign influence, most notably Shanghai. That it was never going to be strong enough to rule unless the West suddenly decided to help it. (Which did later happen elsewhere in Asia, but only during the Cold War when the West feared that the whole of Asia might go over to their foes.)

The Kuomintang also didn't do anything much to develop capitalism. There was a gigantic landlord class that had become wholly parasitic. It had once had a function, in that it produced the scholar-gentry who ran the state. It now did nothing useful, and was assuredly not interested in agricultural improvements. So what resulted was a feeble parody of a modern state under the warlords, and something not much better under Chiang.

Chiang also had to be held at gunpoint before he'd agree to stand up to Japan, which had taken slice after slice of Chinese territory after discovering that Chiang was not willing to

seriously fight them.

Officially the Kuomintang-Communist Civil War resumed in 1946 after failures to get a political compromise following Japan's defeat. In real terms, the compromise that followed the Xian Incident was part of a single intermittent civil war that had been waged since 1927, when Chiang and the bulk of the Kuomintang refused to confront global imperialism. Chiang also tried to stall after being released from captivity in Xian – but the Japanese acted with foolish bad-temper, launching a full-scale invasion and showing every intention of wiping out the Kuomintang as well as the Communists. The Kuomintang armies did then fight, and fight quite well, suggesting that if China had fought back earlier they might have persuaded to Japan to limit its ambitions.

If Chiang's China had fought an all-out war against the Japan's 1931 invasion of Manchuria, China would probably still have lost Manchuria. But they would also have mauled the Japanese Army enough to make them doubt if further expansion was wise. Hitler might have continued the pattern of right-wing Germans helping the Kuomintang. By 1937 it was too late: Hitler had made a firm alliance with Japan and Japan was committed to expansion.

Like the modern New Right, Chiang knew how to work the system, but had no idea of how the system worked. No idea of how to reform China and no idea how to keep the respect of the USA. Americans who came to help China saw that the Kuomintang war effort slackened off after Pearl Harbour, because it was assumed that the USA would win the war for them.

Despite which, the USA did give the Kuomintang enormous amounts of military aid, and also air-lifted their troops into Manchuria. And awarded them the island of Taiwan, even though it had been separated from the rest of China since 1895 and might have preferred to go its own way. And the intermittent Chinese Civil War started again.

Mao confident from early on that he would win. Most of the CP was not. The relatively quick and decisive victory for the People's Liberation Army greatly increased Mao's authority within the party.

### **China's 1949 Normalisation**

Neither critics nor admirers ever try to see Maoism as normal politics. Fail to see it as the Chinese instance of something that usually

happens when a traditional state modernises and democratises itself. Most 'experts' hang on to fashionable fixed ideas of how modernisation *ought* to happen, ignoring how it actually does happen.

Britain defined the shape of modern life for the rest of the world. Defined it while ruled by a series of monarchs who were more or less committed to modernisation, from Henry 7<sup>th</sup> through Henry 8<sup>th</sup>, Oliver Cromwell, George 3<sup>rd</sup> and finally George 4<sup>th</sup>. 345 years in which the modernising was broadly controlled by a single man (or occasionally women) who was Sovereign and entitled to subvert existing customs. This process gets whitewashed in Anglo histories, but it was one broad policy with intermittent quarrels among the elite.

With the ineffective William 4<sup>th</sup> and then the teenage Queen Victoria, the monarch was quietly deposed as the leading individual in Britain's March of Progress, while kept as a valuable figurehead. An oligarchy could do the job just as well, and also persuade others to vote them into power. It could also usually frustrate their unwelcome wishes.

The USA was an 1770s spin-off from this process, with the local oligarchy empowered early, having been driven to rebellion by the short-sighted bullying of the superior home-island oligarchs based in London. George 3<sup>rd</sup> gets personally blamed and was indeed part of it: but he had solid support from the majority in a highly undemocratic House of Commons.

Without the useful presence of a modernising monarchy with solid legitimacy, it is much tougher for an ancient society to modernise. But when it suits the British oligarchy, they can denounce other countries for not doing what Britain itself never tried to do: make the changes fast, but without repressing those who prefer old ways.

Asking a population unused to politics to suddenly decide everything for itself does not work: almost no one likes the outcome. A population unused to politics is best served when it generates within itself an authoritarian elite that can run the changing society efficiently, so long as it is not distracted by the complications of competitive party politics. Electoral politics mostly produce weakness, and very often generate civil war as well.

I am not making any blanked condemnation of Parliamentary Democracy. It's an excellent system when a broad progressive consensus already exists. I am pointing out that it is a game that can only be played once a great many shared values have been stamped into

the people who then govern themselves. Getting them to this stage took centuries in Britain.

All over the world, the process of nation-building almost always includes at least one charismatic leader, mostly associated with a period of ideological fervour. Something of the sort was always highly likely to happen, if China's ancient and static civilisation was to be pulled into the modern world. The only other way would have been a period of complete occupation and colonial rule, of the sort that India went through and also Hong Kong.

The grand exception was Japan, which modernised within traditional forms. In Japan, the *actual* monarchs for several centuries had been the Shoguns. The 'Emperor' – Mikado – was a powerless Sacred King when the USA threatened Japan with warships to force it to abandon isolation. What then emerged was an authoritarian conspiracy by minor members of the ruling elite: not hugely different in background to radical modernisers found elsewhere. But rather than play risky games with Revolutionary Democracy, they could present themselves as *restoring* the legitimate ruler, the Mikado whose ancestors had once been real rulers. (And some of the intermediate emperors had tried to really rule, though they always lost out to someone cleverer who became the founder of a new dynasty of Shoguns.) But the 'Meiji Restoration' did not really restore the Emperor to power: he was never much more than a figurehead. Still, it was a highly successful system.

The tragedy is, the modern system the Japanese copied was Late Imperialism, with its popular militarism and deep racism. Japan successfully imposed its modernised forms on Korea and Taiwan, and to a lesser extent on Manchuria, but always treated those peoples as inferiors.

Foreign rulers can create a framework that allow the ruled to copy them and replace them, as happened in the Republic of India, but notably failed to happen in many other places. With US help and quite a lot of Cold-War fear, something similar happened in Thailand and Morocco, though in Thailand it may fall apart when the current monarch dies.

In China, there was briefly a chance of something similar, with the Reform Emperor. I explained why it failed in *Problems 21 & 22*.

Modernising monarchs mostly succeeded in Europe, where the ideas of progress were already widespread and monarchs could

easily balance moderate radicalism against various varieties of conservatism and reaction. Outside Europe it was much tougher and most of them failed – notably Ethiopia and Cambodia. In China, there was the unsuccessful Blue Republic. Only under Mao did something like a normal development get going.

If there's anyone out there who thinks that China's ancient and static civilisation should have been left just as it was, that's a legitimate viewpoint, but the blame belongs to the British Empire and its Opium Wars. Others would say that modernisation might have been better done more gradually: this too might be valid. But I've explained already how that possibility had already ended long before Mao had any significant power. By his own account, Mao as a teenager still supported the idea of a Constitutional Monarchy at the time the actual Monarchy fell.

Both Yuan Shikai and Chiang Kai-shek had a go at being charismatic leaders. Yuan was never plausible: he had never defended China against its enemies and had no intention of doing so. Chiang was better placed, if he had been willing to carry on with the National Revolution once he got to Shanghai. A stronger man would not have feared the Communists, but would have used them to balance the reactionary elements.

I've not seen Chiang compared to Mussolini, but I find a similarity. Mussolini was originally a serious left-wing politician, but opted for nationalism when Italy joined World War One. To come to power he made a deal with the existing powers, using radical slogans but crack down on real radicalism. Mussolini appeared strong for many years, but when his 'New Order' was tested in World War Two, it turned out that Italy was almost as badly organised as it had been under the Classical-Liberal government that fought World War One.<sup>1</sup> Yet Mussolini had inherited a unified and partly modernised state, a state recognised as a mid-ranking European power and sometimes sought as an ally. You could argue that he did enough to ensure that Italy could develop coherently after World War Two, or alternatively that he distorted a process that was happening anyway. Whereas in China, it's hard to imagine a way in which normal politics could ever have been established in the fragmented politics of the 1920s and 1930s, without the Communist

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<sup>1</sup> Bosworth, R J B. *Mussolini's Italy: Life Under the Dictatorship, 1915-1945*. Penguin 2006

Party coming to power and being decisively radical.

I say 'normal politics', and expect to be disbelieved. Disbelieved because 'normal' is commonly confused with 'peaceful', even by historians and political scientists. A peaceful norm is fine when it's achievable, but very often it is not. A lot of the time, 'normal politics' does not mean '*politics that is moderate, mild, courteous, restrained*' and all the other stuff that most commentators in rich and peaceful lands take to be *normal*. Such things are only seen as normal by those who have a secure position of power and don't want much to change.

The mild and nice variety of 'normality' certainly did not apply when Britain raised itself from being a poor offshore island and turned itself into the richest and strongest state in the world. It didn't apply to the USA either, which consolidated itself only after an amazingly vicious Civil War in the 1860s. It then healed the wounds by allowing five generations of racial oppression and officially-tolerated law-breaking in the US South. Organisations like the Klu Klux Klan were only concerned with holding down those below them in the racial hierarchy: they made no serious challenge to the dominance of the North. Had the former Confederacy gone on struggling as the Poles did or the Irish did, they might have eventually got independence. But once slavery was abolished, the remaining issues were not substantial enough for a split. The North supported a better-camouflaged version of White Racism up until the 1960s. A large minority have never truly abandoned it.

Good-tempered politics are fine once the basics are established and the issues between the electable political parties are nothing that anyone would think of dying for. It's different when power is insecure or when drastic change is a necessity. For China, Edgar Snow saw it clearly back in 1937:

"You know in one sense you can think of the whole history of the Communist movement on China as a grand propaganda tour, and the defence, not so much of the absolute right of certain ideas, perhaps, as of their right to exist. I'm not sure that it may not prove to have been the most permanent service of the Reds, even if they are in the end defeated and broken...

"However badly they have erred at times, however tragic have been their excesses, however exaggerated has been the emphasis here or the stress there, it has been their sincere and sharply felt propaganda aim to shake, to arouse, the millions of rural China to their responsibilities in society; to awaken them to a belief in human rights, to combat

the timidity, passiveness and static faiths of Taoism and Confucianism, to educate, to persuade and, I have no doubt, at times to beleague and coerce them to fight for 'the reign of the people' – a new vision in rural China – to fight for a life of justice, equality, freedom and human dignity, as the Communists see it. Far more than all the pious but meaningless resolutions passed at Nanking [the Kuomintang capital], this growing pressure now from a peasantry gradually standing erect in a state of consciousness, after two millenniums of sleep, may force the realisation of a vast mutation over the land."<sup>2</sup>

Methods were drastic, certainly. Life was often tough for those Western-educated intellectuals who got left behind when the West was thrown out of a newly democratised and self-assertive China. But life was also improved much more drastically for the bulk of the society, for workers and peasants and also for women who wanted to move beyond traditional female roles.

(By 'democratised', I mean a social levelling that had failed to happen in China before that. It is not at all the same as a system of parliaments and multi-party governments, which existed in Britain for some 200 years before a majority of adult males got the vote.<sup>3</sup> The formalities of such a Representative Democracy existed in the Blue Republic and exist in a modified form in the People's Republic, but have yet to make any important decisions.)

### **Fear of China**

Why could China not get far with modernisation before Mao took over? Right up to 1949, the most widely believed explanation was a cultural or racist one. Chinese were seen as incapable of doing anything right, and there were certainly enough examples of bad organisation to encourage this view. After 1949, it was supposed that the Russians had taken over, or else that things had got worse, or maybe both. The 'Three Bitter Years' of 1950 to 1961 were seen at the time as the final collapse. But then China bounced back much stronger, and the fashion shifted to presenting the country as full of menacing 'Blue Ants', a reaction to the egalitarian dress-style of the time.

Today's crop of Western commentators prefer not to say much about the typical Western view of China at the time. But the idea of Chinese as 'Blue Ants' was expressed

<sup>2</sup> Snow, Edgar. *Red Star Over China*, Victor Gollancz 1937. Part 3, chapter 5, page 120

<sup>3</sup> <http://gwydionwilliams.com/40-britain/665-2/>

in the following books, all mainstream and respectable at the time:

- *The Blue Ants: 600 million Chinese under the Red Flag* by Robert Guillain, 1957.
- *The Blue Ants. The first authentic account of the Russian-Chinese War of 1970* by Bernard Newman
- *Mao Tse-Tung, Emperor of the Blue Ants* by George Palocz-Horvath.

This last work was mentioned in a scholarly article published in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, without any suggestion that it was not nice to compare fellow-humans to ants.<sup>4</sup> The surface niceness of Western politics has a way of vanishing when vital Western interests face a serious challenge.

After their military victory in the 1940s, the Chinese Communists still had to show that they could change the society. This meant first breaking the power of the landlords: dispossessing and humbling them, which involved authorising their ordinary peasant neighbours to deal out such punishments as seemed suitable. Those who were executed were generally guilty of serious crimes, usually murders remembered from the days when landlords could safely murder poor people over minor disputes or to enforce their authority.

The campaign against landlordism also destroyed the upper stratum of Chinese gentry-warlords whose roots went back into China's remote past. It swept aside a ruling elite that had failed to modernise China during its decades of dominance, despite a general agreement that something needed to be done. The gentry-warlords had successfully suppressed their own people in the shape of the Taiping Rebellion, and yet remained scared of them. Most of the warlords preferred to be local tyrants pushed around by foreign powers, but with a privileged position over other Chinese. Most of the lesser gentry accepted arbitrary warlord power on the assumption that they would remain privileged over the peasantry, which was indeed the norm. They might want modernisation in the abstract: but the price of modernisation was that they should abolish themselves, give up gentry privileges and unite with the common people. Naturally this was too much for most members of this class. The rest either joined Communism or were part of various brave but ineffective attempts at creating a Third Force.

The Blue Republic was two generations of

lost opportunities. There was limited modernisation in the coastal cities, but this was balanced by a general decay of China's rural economy. The economy as a whole failed to grow significantly. Only after 1949 did real modernisation occur throughout the whole country.

In China, there was no hope of the landlords doing anything on their own. No hope of them being anything other than a burden on society. I've seen critics of land-reform methods complain that they were not many large landlords, which is true, but which misses the point. In parts of Western Europe, both large and small landlords were a dynamic element and did a great deal to improve agriculture. Most of Britain's 18<sup>th</sup> century gentry and aristocracy were very radical about the economy, shaking up a traditional order and introducing scientific methods to agriculture. In Britain, they also pretty much abolished Britain's peasantry, reducing the countryside to a system of tenant-farmers and landless labourers. This was an economic success, whatever you think about it socially.

(So complete was this success that the very term for those in charge of rural production became 'farmer', a term which originally meant "one who undertakes the collection of taxes, revenues, etc., paying a fixed sum for the proceeds."<sup>5</sup> That dates to the 14<sup>th</sup> century: the connection with cultivating the land is not known before 1599 and seems not to have become the normal term before the 19<sup>th</sup> century.)

Britain in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was a very odd society, pushed into an unusual mode of development by the failure of England to settle its own social or religious identity in its 17<sup>th</sup> century civil wars. (Scotland did create coherence in the shape of a Presbyterian state-church, but could not impose it on Britain as a whole.)

England's 18<sup>th</sup> century rural gentry were the most radical rural ruling class that has ever existed. If they argued with urban interests, it was mostly about details and not the general need to change. Whereas in China, the rural ruling class were solidly against all change, looking back to traditions thousands of years old and which they saw as the main reason for existence.

China after 1949 also had to move quickly. China faced a very real possibility of invasion, first by the USA and also from the Soviet

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.jstor.org/pss/2050149>

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<sup>5</sup> Oxford English Dictionary definition

Union from the mid-1960s. The USA after 1949 could have accepted that the Kuomintang regime had been hopeless. Instead it chose to punish all of US experts who had dared tell them the truth, much as Blair and Bush Junior punished those who told them that invading Iraq was stupid. But the US campaign against those who'd dared tell the truth about China was very much worse and lasted much longer. The purge and hysteria is remembered now as 'McCarthyism' – or perhaps McCarthyism itself is not known to recent generations, though it was once infamous. But the process was actually much wider than the vicious rantings of Senator Joe McCarthy. It involved the Kennedy brothers, the future President John F. Kennedy and also Robert Kennedy. Robert Kennedy was an anti-communist hysteric in the early 1950s and was making a strange evolution into some kind of left-wing radical when he was assassinated in 1968. A major role in the anti-Communist campaign was played by J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI. Senator Joe McCarthy was a front for such people, and conveniently given the entire blame when the nation's mood change.

But why was the USA so upset about what happened in China? Because for several decades, they had been assuming that China was going to follow their lead and be an asset in the rise of the USA as the old European empires decayed and broke up.

To the USA, China was supposed to be pro-Western and subordinate, Tonto to the USA's Lone Ranger. China asserting its own identity was no part of the script – but the script was always foolish. 'Tonto' was a white fantasy: most Native American helpers thought in tribal terms and did not expect to be swept away once their tribal enemies were gone. In the original radio version of the *Lone Ranger*, the supposed Native American Tonto was played by English actor John Todd.<sup>6</sup>

The USA never has been good at understanding foreigners, not even its own minorities. The US public almost always prefers fantasy to reality, especially on the matter of the Wild West. When a film called *Heavens Gate* showed something of the squalid reality, it was bad-mouthed and ended up as a financial disaster. SF writer Isaac Asimov summed it up nicely when he said

“Anti-intellectualism has been a constant thread winding its way through our political and cultural life, nurtured by the false notion that democracy means that 'my ignorance is just as good as your

knowledge.”<sup>7</sup>

The USA might have made the same sort of deal with Mao in the mid-1950s that they actually made in the early 1970s. Had this happened, Mao regime might have taken a much milder attitude to those with Western education or contacts.

Remarkable, I've not seen any of the numerous Western-educated Chinese who've written books full of complaints from the 1980s onwards pay any attention to this possibility. A Westerner in such a position would probably feel themselves the victim of two contending rivals, and blame both equally. But whatever else Western-educated Chinese may have picked up from their teachers, *they have not become authentically Western in their social or political outlook*. The bulk of them blame their fellow Chinese for everything and remained uncritical admirers of the West.

A quick delve in the archives would also reveal how much extremism and nonsense there was on the Western side. A degree of hostility that would cause any sensible government to be wary when it came from a nuclear-armed superpower with a vast fleet near China's Pacific coast. Felix Greene's *A Curtain of Ignorance* gives an account of the position up to 1965, with plenty of specific sources that can be checked by anyone who disbelieves him.

Both Felix Greene and Edgar Snow get criticised now for supposedly not noticing famine under Mao. Actually they both say quite a lot about the 'Three Bitter Years', 1959 to 1961. They both agree it was a major error, but also put the crisis in context. Green says:

"With the establishment of the new government in Peking in 1949, two things happened.

"First, starvation – death by hunger – ceased in China. Food shortages, and severe ones, there have been, but no starvation. This is a fact fully documented by Western observers...

"How many Americans, for instance, would believe a report like this?

"The truth is that that the sufferings of the ordinary Chinese peasant from war, disorder and famine have been immeasurably less in the last decade than in any other decade in the century.' (*The Times*, London, April 18, 1962.)...

"In May 1962 an unusually large number of Chinese refugees flocked to Hong Kong... official British government statements attest to the fact that

<sup>6</sup> [<http://www.lonerangerfanclub.com/tonto.html>]

<sup>7</sup> [<http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/84250-anti-intellectualism-has-been-a-constant-thread-winding-its-way-through>]



the refugees were not suffering from malnutrition, nor did any of them seek political asylum or claim that they were fleeing Communism as such... Food shortages and the general discomfort of life in this period were undoubtedly some of the causes for this exodus, but not starvation."<sup>8</sup>

This is followed by quotes from US newspapers, named and dated, in which the US was told of famine year on year, even during the bumper harvest of 1957. Anyone who doubts Felix Greene's honesty can go check those sources and note the rubbish that mainstream US media were talking at the time. (I've not done so myself, but that's because I've been able to check his judgements on other areas and found him always honest and accurate, though sometimes naive.)

The widely-publicised calculations of tens of millions of deaths works as follows:

- You start from the great fall in the death-rate that was achieved during the first years of Mao's rule. But **you don't tell your readers about it**. You definitely do not credit it as an achievement by Mao.
- Then you note the increased death rate for the Three Bad Years. You don't say that the worst year was 25 per thousand, lower than many other poor countries at the time.
- You deny that there was bad weather, even though foreign observers noted the Yellow River drying up. Nor that abnormally heavy rain was recorded in Hong Kong.
- You don't explain that this was the backwash of an El Nino event, or that the weather-warping El Nino phenomenon was not known at the time.
- From this you can blame Mao for 30 million deaths or so.

Condemns are based on comparing Mao to Mao in order to condemn Mao. Drastic methods from 1949 to 1958 had been highly successful, with food production increasing greatly. The death rate had fallen and the birth rate had risen. The sudden worsening from 1959 was not outside the previous experience of most Chinese. Probably it hit well-off people who had been shielded before, when there was no rationing and the comfortably off stayed comfortable while the poor starved. But for most of the population it was a brief return of the Bad Old Days.

The Chinese Communist government had universal rationing during the crisis, so it's unlikely that anyone actually died of hunger.

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<sup>8</sup> Greene, Felix. *A Curtain of Ignorance*, chapter 6, pages 93-94

What did happen was a lot of stress and extra deaths during the hard times. Everyone got less food than they wanted and the death rate doubled. This is profoundly different from 'murdered' or 'died of starvation', which is the popular impression in the West.

During the Three Bitter Years there were 30 million excess deaths in a population of 600 million, if you believe the post-Mao statistics. Vastly more would have died if things had been as bad as US authorities were claiming at the time. Also the survivors would hardly have showed the enthusiasm for Mao that was actually shown in the Cultural Revolution from 1966 onwards.

It's also worth asking how reliable the post-Mao statistics actually are. No one has been able to come up with any solid evidence that Deng Xiaoping or Liu Shaoqi were against the Great Leap Forward at the time. Quite a few commentators assert that they were all for it at the beginning. But Liu and Deng did conclude during the Three Bitter Years that it was better in future to rely on material incentives and never again to try to mobilise the mass of the Chinese people in an unplanned way. This remained a major point of contention through the years of the Cultural Revolution. Was a political battleground after Mao's death in 1976 and Deng's emergence as the new leader by 1978. Deng as the new Top Boss had good reasons to exaggerate problems and downplay successes for the years when Mao was as his most radical.

Whether the 'Three Bitter Years' count as a famine or a food shortage is a matter of semantics. 'Famine' normally implies deaths by starvation, but can arguably mean just a severe shortage. Felix Greene and Edgar Snow are both clear on the point: they take famine to mean visible starvation. They had seen it or learned about it in pre-Communist China, and also in the Republic of India and many other places at the time. But not in China under Mao.

### The Final Liberation

What's also overlooked is that the crisis of 1959-1961 established with certainty that China did not take orders from Moscow. The Revolution of 1949 was widely seen by outsiders as a Russian take-over. If you rely on the current crop of Western books about China you are unlikely to learn about this: yet it was so. You could find this if you went to the trouble of finding Western books from the period, when the West's idea of Unchanging Truths was not quite the same as *Unchanging*

*Truths (Vintage 2015)*. Or you could find it embodied in popular works of Science Fiction, which typically remain available long after their authors are dead. Three examples that I recall are:

- Robert E. Heinlein, *The Puppet Masters*, 1951.
- Fred Hoyle, *Fifth Planet*, 1963.
- Mack Reynolds, *The Earth War*, 1963.

In addition, Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* has aliens appearing over a lot of the world's capitals, including Tokyo and Canberra, but not Peking (Beijing). He too may have believed China had become part of Moscow's empire.

Go looking among books and magazine articles from the 1950s and 1960s and I'm sure you could find many more. I remember some ridiculous 'factual' stuff written about China in the 1960s and some from the 1950s, but I've not got anything to hand.

1949 did bring to power a party that was theoretically subordinate to the global Communist movement centred in Moscow. This happened at much the same time as pro-Moscow elements took control in those parts of Europe that the Red Army had occupied in World War Two. It was easy to see China as another such case, and it generally was seen so at the time. But the reality was always different.

The Soviet Union had briefly occupied Manchuria, but had otherwise had little effect on the Chinese Civil War, which was won using Chinese resources. This was a point that Stalin understood but which Khrushchev evidently failed to grasp. Khrushchev chose to increase China's difficulties by withdrawing Soviet technicians in 1960, causing great disruption to joint projects that they had been working on. Edgar Snow describes what happened:

"During his opening speech Khrushchev attacked Albania for refusing to abide by the decisions of the Twentieth Congress (de-Stalinization) program. Unexpectedly, he demanded expulsion of its leadership and read it out of the bloc....

"Khrushchev's action was clearly a warning that if China continued intransigent he would also read Mao out of the party. The gravity of the threat was already manifest in the economic sanctions Khrushchev had applied against China ever since the trade-unions conference in Peking in June, 1960... Shortly afterwards Khrushchev had withdrawn nearly all Soviet technical experts from China, leaving some major projects in an unfinished state. Chinese engineers might eventually complete them but their task was viciously complicated by the withdrawal also

of many blueprints and specifications as well as by the withholding of vital parts... Contracts were not cancelled; operations merely paused to give Peking time to think it over. Trade slackened off. Rather gratuitously, the Russians openly announced the suspension of certain shipments because of China's negative barter balance. These sanctions coincided with the worst harvests China had known this century, when far greater than normal cooperation was needed from the Soviet Union.

"In 1961 it seemed that Peking had to throw in its hand or call Khrushchev's card. But could he actually play it? ... Representatives of Western parties endorsed Khrushchev's leadership by attacking Albania... But *all* the Asian parties, with the single exception of tiny Ceylon, totally abstained from any criticism of Albania...

"If Khrushchev, personifying the current Soviet party majority, thought to bluff Mao Tse-tung by these various means, he had misjudged the man, the nation, and the Chinese revolution."<sup>9</sup>

I'd have thought that Khrushchev would have been aiming at a change of leadership in China. China then was in a tough situation, with the USA still a bitter foe that insisted on viewing the exiled Kuomintang as the lawful government of China. Khrushchev's action was an attempt to bully China, and it failed. He maybe didn't understand the enormous strength of Mao's position within the party. Or the fact that Chinese Communist leaders, unlike the earlier warlords, were never willing to side with outsiders against their own people.

When Mao became the *de facto* leader during the Long March, it was because most of the party leadership were convinced that their Soviet advisors had blundered and that Mao's unorthodox military methods were correct. Later they accepted him as the man who adapted Leninism to Chinese conditions. Neither Deng Xiaoping nor Liu Shaoqi were inclined to back down in the face of Soviet threats: they were solidly for Mao against Khrushchev, even though they wanted different internal Chinese politics. I doubt if either man felt any sympathy for de-Stalinisation, which was an incoherent rejection of politics which had worked well in China.

With the benefit of hindsight, the Sino-Soviet split looks like part of the general rise of East Asia: its equalisation with the West. Khrushchev was taking an out-of-date view, supposing that world politics was still controlled by Europe and its colonial offshoots.

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<sup>9</sup> Snow, Edgar. *The Other Side of the River*, Victor Gollancz 1963, chapter 83, page 665-6.

Believing that when Greater Europe decided, Asia would have to obey.

Asia as a whole thought otherwise, and proved it in the coming decades. The Soviet Union never fully recovered from the disruption caused by Khrushchev.

This Asian dimension meant that the Dalai Lama was in potentially in a very strong position. Buddhist opinion tended towards neutrality in the Cold War, and the Dalai Lama was useful in this. He had been made deputy chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress in 1954 and he had been allowed to keep his traditional theocratic power in Western Tibet. He should have realised that Eastern Tibet would not under any circumstances be allowed much autonomy. He could have limited his concerns to West Tibet, the Tibetan Autonomous Region, and perhaps preserved a lot more of the traditional Buddhist culture than actually survived. Sadly, he threw it away and became an oppositionist rather than an alternative. He has ended up as a pet of the West, offering Westerners a do-nothing spirituality that they can cite to persuade themselves that their lives are not entirely empty.

The West criticised Mao for applying normal methods of modernisation in the whole of China, including autonomous West Tibet. But Mao had given the Dalai Lama several years to do something on his own account, and the Dalai Lama did very little. He made no proposals for popular government, nor for even a gradual phasing-out of slavery and serfdom. It's moot how long you could have had a left-wing Peoples Republic with slavery and serfdom still existing in one of its backward regions. As it happened, the Dalai Lama chose to get caught up in a futile revolt in 1959 and then flee. With the aristocracy gone, slavery and serfdom were abolished by the new Tibetan authorities.

Most critics assume that there was some easy path to bring Tibet's very alien society into line with the modernist values shared by the West and Leninism. They fail to realise that there are alternative social systems that differ from both the West and Leninism much more radically than the West and Leninism differ from each other. This is true of Islamism, which was always there under the surface and has profited greatly by the West's ignorant belief after 1991 that the Muslim World's thin network of liberals would win out if authoritarian regimes were struck down.

In the case of Tibet, they seem to think that people who'd lived for generations as masters

of serfs and owners of slaves would have been easily persuaded to give it all up. The USA had to fight a costly four-year civil war to break its own slave-owners, but People's China is blamed for having done it quickly and with little loss of life.

The West did not build itself by mild methods. England was hammered into shape by centuries of brutality under warlike monarchs, with failed bids to conquer Scotland and France, but a successful conquest of Wales. (Not to mention a conquest of Ireland that could never quite be completed.)

Modern Britain emerged from a fifty-year run of 'British Wars', beginning with the 'Bishops War' waged unsuccessfully against the Scots in 1639-40 and concluding with a Dutch invasion by William of Orange in 1688, not made secure until the Battle of the Boyne crushed Catholic Ireland in 1690. Britain was not a democracy until the 1880s, at the earliest – reforms in that decade extended the vote to 60% of adult males in the British Isles. Britain's white settlements had their own parliaments and democracy, but non-white colonies generally did not.

Before he became Britain's charismatic leader in World War Two, Churchill's chief contribution had been to sabotage the sensible proposal by Britain's Tory government to grant a form of self-government to India. Giving India Dominion Status would have put them on a level with Australia, Canada etc. and might have saved the Empire as a genuinely multi-racial entity. But to Churchill and many other Britons, white dominance and legal superiority was not negotiable.

The major Asian alternatives to Chinese Communism have been states built on foundations laid by either the British Empire, the Dutch Empire, the French Empire or the Japanese Empire. The Kuomintang success in Taiwan was mostly built on Japanese foundations. The Kuomintang in Taiwan were also willing and able to carry through a proper Land Reform, under US urging, and with a lot of US money for 'sweeteners'. It must have helped that Taiwanese landowners had flourished under Japanese rule and had few connections with the exiled Kuomintang. Land Reform was also made easier by a general awareness that global Communism was the most obvious alternative.

### **One Who Remained**

Mainland China was meantime carrying through a much more drastic change. There's an interesting book called *I Stayed in China* by

a British teacher called William Sewell, a committed Christian who had spent many years in China and decided to stay after 1949. He did this after having been influenced by some of the young people who'd decided that the Kuomintang were hopeless and moved towards the Communists. He knew a group that called itself the *Birds of Spring*, one of many unofficial groups of young people that had sprung up at what had been a university created to educate and Christianise young Chinese. They looked to him as a mentor:

"Treat us just like your own sons and daughters... We need your advice and we shall be obedient.' One explanation of the groups was plain. The enduring strength of Chinese society has for generations lain with their countless decentralized patriarchal families. In them the Chinese people have learned not only the art of living, but the subordination of the individual in relation to other people. Every Chinese has felt himself or herself to be not primarily an isolated personality but a link in an endless chain, stretching back into the past and reaching out into the future. The regulation of life followed the decisions of the elders, even on such personal matters as marriage. Those who were strong and successful accepted their responsibilities towards all in the group, while those who were weak or ill were cared for as their right.

"Through the corroding acids of modern living (especially industrial changes and the education of women, so that a girl would put her husband before her mother-in-law) the disintegration of the old Chinese families began. The security of these tightly knit groups and the fellowship of like-minded kinfolk were fast being lost. However, in these new student groups young people were seeking and in some measure finding a substitute for the old large family. There was in the group a sense of intense loyalty and mutual support. To emphasize their close relationship the members called each other brother and sister, and as in the family itself numbered themselves Big, Second, Third or Fourth brother or sister down to the baby who had just joined."<sup>10</sup>

It's interesting to find that such feelings persisted among many modernised Chinese. Mao chose to complete the disruption of the extended patriarchal family, in order to modernise China. But as a Communist, he was naturally interested in the possibility of preserving the positive elements of China's traditions of group existence and mutual aid. Deng from 1978 chose instead the simpler option of letting commerce cut all existing bonds and hope that it would all knit together

again later on, after China had become an industrialised society. This made Deng the orthodox Marxist and Mao the experimenter: a point that mostly gets overlooked.

All of that came later. In the first enthusiasm after the 1949 Liberation, there was full agreement as to how China needed to be put in order. This was done at first by mild methods. Very mild considering how the Kuomintang had ruled: the way in which they had murdered the relatives of leading Communists and anyone else they thought might be an oppositionist.

Sewell tells how some of those he knew had suffered. He was in Sichuan, a part of mainland China where Chiang Kaishek considered making a last stand before fleeing to Taiwan:

"Chiang, before leaving, had ordered all the political prisoners in the prisons to be killed; nearly three hundred were shot or buried alive... Would the same sort of thing happen at our Duliang prison, we wondered...

"They have dug up the bodies – not so many, perhaps twenty in all. They were gagged and blindfolded, their arms tied behind them. Some were stabbed in the back. Others had no wounds, but there was blood from nose and ears. They were buried alive!" (Ibid, page 62)

In some ways the Kuomintang behaved worse than the Nazis, who mostly shot their victims before burying them. But because the Kuomintang only murdered their own people and were highly respectful of Europeans and Americans in China, it gets forgotten and forgiven by the West.

Today's writers of long diatribes about Chinese Communism fail to mention how the Kuomintang behaved. Mao's first wife was a victim of this sort of judicial murder, and there were plenty of other cases. Considering what they had to been through, how many of their friends and relatives had died, the Communists ruled moderately in their first years.

There is also wilful misunderstanding of the term 'liquidated'. In English, this was originally a commercial term for the winding up of a bankrupt company. It is still used in just this sense in Western commerce. In my four decades as a computer analyst, I've experienced two liquidations and am none the worse for it, though I did need a new job when the old organisation was liquidated.

When the Bolsheviks in Russia spoke about liquidating opposition, it *sometimes* also meant that some of those targeted had been killed,

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<sup>10</sup> Sewell, William G. *I Stayed in China*, Allen & Unwin 1966. Page 19-20. This work is long out of print: it would be well worth someone reprinting.

but quite often not. The same applied in China, as Sewell explains:

"Pockets of bandits, the remnants of the Kuomintang armies, were rounded up and 'liquidated'. The Chinese term was translated in the western press as 'killed', but its real meaning was 'disposed of, rendered of no account'. I myself, along with other western colleagues, had long since been liquidated, but am still alive. Very few of the liquidated bandits were killed, most of them were given money and sent home, those who so wished were trained for the new army." (Ibid, page 86)

Like most Westerners at the time, Sewell had seen the Chinese Communists as a simple extension of the power of the Soviet Union. He was surprised to find no Russians present when the People's Army arrived:

"We had expected to see Russian guns and tanks, and Russian advisers; but they were not there. Some of the guns were certainly German, won from Japan, but nearly all the equipment, guns, jeeps, rifles and tanks, were from the United States of America, either won fairly in battle, or else bought from Kuomintang leaders who valued cash for personal reasons rather than the weapons they had no will to handle." (Ibid, page 66)

Sewell soon found that this was a very new sort of government:

"It soon became obvious that a puritan revolution was taking place. New moral standards were being adopted. There was a vigorous reaction against romantic love. Hollywood films, which had been flooding the market, were no longer shown. The sexual morals, the drinking habits, the scenes of violence which might be suitable for a western democracy were quite out of place in the People's Republic...

"From the streets the beggars had gone; and their absence made the place cleaner. These wretched men and women had always haunted the streets... Slowly by simple education those who were not mentally already beyond redemption were fitted for a more productive life." (Ibid, page 86-87).

Note that those Hollywood films would have been from the 1930s and 1940s, stuff that's very mild by modern standards. Many other observers noticed that begging had gone, along with prostitution and drug addiction. All of these have unfortunately returned to post-Mao China, though in a much less degraded form.

The view of Tibet as part of China (Zhongguo) was normal in the Han core, and Sewell shared it. Tibetans were 'part of the family', and treated tolerantly so long as they accepted that:

"A new sight was seen on the streets: Tibetan friends,

whom a few years earlier we should have called barbarians or wild men. Tibet, however, had been liberated and these people shared with us, belonging to our family, to our land.

"Tibet, as seen from China, had always seemed a different place from the Tibet viewed from Britain, often through Indian eyes. Ever since I went to Duliang we had always thought of it as part of China, but lawless and temporarily separated, taking advantage of China's troubles. For many decades there had been fighting along the border; pacification armies, which the Kuomintang maintained, failed to bring peace. Chinese traders, mostly living in border towns, exchanged silks, brick tea and simple machine-made hardware for furs and for dried herbs to be used as medicines. These venturesome men sometimes risked their lives to enter the high fastness; some luckless ones were stoned in the passes. There were tales of others left to die, impaled on iron hooks outside powerful lamaseries. There were traders who got back to Szechwan [Sichuan] half-fearing that their Tibetan women had given them slow-acting poison, from which they would eventually die; so at all costs they sought to return to the mountains to receive the antidote before it was too late.

"Every winter many Tibetan families came down to the plains, some to Duliang. The Kuomintang had regulations governing the influx of these *man-dze*. Each barbarian had to carry a large wooden label, and was given a number and registered. They dug out wells and did other odd jobs until the melting snows made it possible for them to return to their homes again. Now they were free. We tried to learn the names of our Tibetan friends, so that they might no longer be merely numbers, and to make them welcome among us.

"The liberation of Tibet had occasioned little stir in Duliang... Only when George Kew had bravely suggested that the Chinese invasion of the country was even more an act of aggression than the American presence in Taiwan was there a flurry of excitement. Every group Jen Dah [the university at Duliang] studied this urgent problem, and thousands of words appeared on the blackboards proving that these two cases were different: one was the 'invasion' of Chinese soil by a foreign power, and the other the Chinese putting their own land in order.

"There was no doubt, as far as could be seen, that a better day had come for those who had been downtrodden in Tibet, the victims of the ruthless overlords and lamas, who lived in security, supported and fed by the unending toil of the peasants, who were mostly serfs, denied even the minimum of education, medical and social care, which every one of us takes as his right. There were no sentimental feelings about holy monks, rather a horror of their unholy treatment of their less fortunate fellows. It was the latter who came to Szechwan, while, we believed,

the former, the privileged class, found their way into India...

"Schools were being opened in Tibet, hospitals build and roads made. Even from Duliang there were teachers, nurses and engineers going westward, over the snow-clad mountains which, from time to time, we could see...

"The Tibetans, who found their way down from the mountains to Duliang, were entering a world that was new. Special hostels were opened, so that they might live as they were accustomed and enjoy their own food; doctors and nurses were set apart to look after them; their children were given clothes and taken to school.

"For these people from the high mountains, where everything had to be carried by man or beast, the wheel was largely unknown, and indeed was useless before the new roads were made. One of the lighter and happier touches of welcome was the provision of bicycles on open spaces, outside the city walls, where they could be taught to ride. The crowds gathered daily to watch. Groans, 'Ah-ah', would rise as they feared some burly Tibetan, supported on each side by slender Chinese, would fall from his machine; loud clapping when he stayed on." (Ibid, page 143-145)

All of this seems to be about Eastern Tibet. Sichuan was right next to the traditional Tibetan province of Kham, part of which was included in the province of Xikang (Sikang) under the Chinese Republic. Under the People's Republic, Xikang was divided again, with its eastern half being added to Sichuan in 1955 and the west being included in the Tibetan Autonomous Region in 1965. Sewell seems unaware of the differences between Khampas and the peoples of Western Tibet: Khampas were typically bigger than Han, which most other Tibetans were not. It was also the Khampas – or perhaps just their ruling class – who offered the main armed resistance to the People's Republic. They were the main participants in the uprising in Lhasa in 1959.

The fact that almost all of the Tibetan rebels fled and were never able to form something comparable to the resistance in Afghanistan suggests that what Sewell saw was typical. Ordinary Tibetans had been won over by 1959. They would have supported the new government against their former masters if it had come to a serious fight.

China under Mao was run as a single gigantic enterprise or a single gigantic family. People previously ignored or neglected were fitted in and looked after. Of course it was rough if you refused to fit in, or got suspected during some period of crisis. But this applied to a small minority, mostly intellectuals who have been in a position to make a lot of noise about it afterwards. Most people had no such problem and saw Mao's rule as a time when things suddenly got a whole lot better.

Liberation was also tough for landlords, but there were rules. Sewell saw some of it for himself:

"It was true, we knew from our papers, that in some parts of China, where Land Reform had already taken place, there had been angry scenes, and landlords had been beaten to death by the people or had killed themselves in their fear. The Government realized that they had greatly underestimated the passions of the people when they were

aroused; but now the cadres were wiser and were present to see that matters did not get out of control. Round Duliang they had seen no trouble like this. After the people had spoken the landlords were either handed over to the police for trial, or allowed to remain free according to circumstances. **Only those who were proved to have been responsible for the death of a tenant combined with rape, or for several deaths, were legally liable to the death penalty; from the others, who were sent for trial, compensation was usually demanded...** 'The day of the landlord is over. They are liquidated at last, but at least half will be working on the land, side by side with the people whom they exploited. (Ibid, page 183. Emphasis added.)

"It is impossible to estimate how many of the landlord class were either executed after trial, killed by angry peasant or committed suicide. The numbers, great though they may have been, were much fewer, I am convinced, than those published by some critics, who quite wrongly translate *hsiao-mieh* (=liquidate, to render of no account) as meaning killed." (Ibid, footnote to page 183)

The Chinese government should give some reputable Western documentary-maker the chance to look into land reform while some of the participants are still alive. If it were shown that the party cadres were mainly a restraining force on popular anger, that would change the view you get in the West. Even if this turned out to be an exaggeration, it would still be useful to have a long list of the things that the various landlords had done.

### China Remoulded

Freed from a parasitic landlord class that wanted nothing much to change, the rural economy stopped decaying and started expanding. Naturally there was a general change of mood. Sewell summed up China's changes as follows:

"It was only partly true to talk of political studies and political awareness; this was an overwhelming religious revival that was sweeping the land. A religion that demanded his all from every man.

"It was as though Marxism-Leninism had been the key to open the sluice-gate, and the Spirit of China, from down the centuries of her great past, had come flooding in. It was washing away the humiliation and shame of the more recent decades, which had brought the invasion of crude foreign ways; it was destroying that which was not adaptable for Chinese use, and cleansing that which was welcomed so that it ceased to be foreign and became Chinese. China, after this unhappy interlude, was herself once again." (Ibid, page 194)

Sewell was also wise enough to leave during the 1950s, realising that he could never truly be part of it. Maoism as a quasi-religious movement swept on and culminated in the Cultural Revolution. It then partly self-destructed: but most Western writers overlook that the first retreat was made by Mao himself in his last years. After winding down the more extreme aspects of the Cultural Revolution, Mao then astonished everyone by suddenly making peace with the USA, inviting Nixon to visit China and accepting a functional alliance with the USA against the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Union in the early 1970s was still very powerful and menacing and an invasion of China was always a serious possibility. I'd reckon that Mao always had a much more flexible and realistic view than his devoted followers.

Western commentators are fond of saying that only Nixon could go to China. Only a man with a strong anti-Communist reputation dating back to the 1950s could make such a compromise without worrying about enemies to the right of him. That's probably true, but it is also very likely that only Mao could have received him. Had Mao died early, it would have been very hard for any other Chinese leader to wind down the hostility. Only he could readily revise the creed, having largely made and popularised it through his writings.

Modernisation and strong faith are often seen as enemies. They can be: but an effective moderniser will always find ways to capture strong faith and make it part of the process. There have been few effective modernisers who have managed to operate without some strong faith to justify it all.

Modern industry in Europe emerged at a time of religious intensity among ordinary people, even though the ruling class and intellectuals had become skeptical. Many of the pioneers were devoutly religious, in both Britain and the USA. In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the first telegraph message sent in the USA was *'What Hath God Wrought'*, a verse from the King James version of the Old Testament.<sup>11</sup>

While Mao was transforming China, the creation of the Republic of India was rooted in the revived Hinduism of Mahatma Gandhi. And by contrast, Iran's 'sensible' modernisation under the Shah fell apart due to a lack of serious believers: power passed to hard-line Shia Islam after rival Marxist and Islamic-Marxist activists were defeated.

Modernism based on creeds that the West calls extremism is **modernism that actually works**. It is modernism similar to what the West did to itself when establishing its own new norms. Attempted modernisations of traditional societies based on the current European view of common-sense have proved to be modernisations built upon sands. Africa mostly did what the West advised, and Africa is a total mess outside of South Africa, where the ANC retains a lot of what it learnt as an organisation for fellow-travellers of the South African Communist Party.

(Interestingly, at least one other notable success also involved fellow-travellers of the local Communist Party – Lee Kwan Yew and his People's Action Party in Singapore. But that's a complex topic in itself: suitable for a future article.)

In 1949, Global Imperialism was far from dead. White Racism was still very strong and the US model of Hegemony or Indirect Imperialism was on the rise. China probably had no choice except to remake itself with a movement of the same

intensity that Westerners associate with religion. Edgar Snow saw the process in more secular terms, but also noted the dramatic change:

"The Communists became in effect a mobile, armed, ubiquitous propaganda crusade spreading their message across hundreds of thousands of square miles of Asia. To millions of peasants they brought the first contacts with the modern world. To youths and women – for the Reds courted them first and last – they opened up unheard-of vistas of new personal freedom and importance... *Kung-ch'an-tang* [the Chinese name of the Communist Party] may be translated as 'Share-production-party'.<sup>12</sup>

Of course Modernism has made almost everyone part of some sort of 'share-production' system. For centuries and millennia, peasants farmed their own land or else were used as living tools by a landowner. In either case, the village was a largely self-sufficient system, an 'island entire unto itself'. Craftsmen used local materials and had little connection to the outside world. Life became something very different when everyone came to depend on millions of others and could not exist without them. That's the reality underlying the supposed global antagonism between Socialism and Capitalism. Socialism mostly desires such an end: Capitalism has no functional morality but tends in practice to enmesh everyone in a global share-production system.

Theorists of capitalism, beginning with Adam Smith, promised that the new economy would run smoothly thanks to impersonal market forces. Claimed that markets were self-regulating. In practice this has not been true, with even right-wing governments finding it necessary to step in and stop markets self-destructing. The Chinese Communist Party remains true to its own name in its own language: 'share production'. Production remains a social matter and property rights are not put above human needs.

Having seen the Chinese Communists as a small enclave in the 1930s, Snow re-visited China in the 1960s and made all sorts of interesting observations. A Chinese doctor, head of an institute specialising in skin diseases and VD, told him

"By 1957 our national and provincial teams had covered the whole country except for Tibet. The Dalai Lama opposed examination and treatment there on religious grounds, he claimed there wasn't any V.D. in Tibet. Last year for the first time our people started working there. They've found syphilis widespread." (Ibid, page 277-8)

Another bit of 'Cultural Genocide? Perhaps endemic venereal disease was part of Tibet's old stable well-established culture which some Westerners enthuse over? Note also that Tibet's strong attachment to religiousness was quite compatible with sexual promiscuity. Monks are supposed to be celibate, but lapses were frequent.

Snow also points out that any effective Chinese leader would have viewed Tibet as part of China and would have asserted much the same border

<sup>11</sup> Wikipedia article on Telegraphy. The phrase is from the *Book of Numbers*, 23:23

<sup>12</sup> Snow, Edgar. *The Other Side of the River*, page 71

with India

"The 1960 China Year Book published in Taipei [the capital of Taiwan] showed a border even farther south in India than Peking claims. Chiang also expected to Sinicize Inner Mongolia, to 'recover' Outer Mongolia (whose independence he refused to recognise in the U.N. in 1961), and to reassert China's ancient close ties with Burma, Vietnam and Korea." (Ibid, page 121)

While scornful of Chiang, Snow remained conditional in his support for Mao. Snow had been in the Soviet Union and had disliked it. Snow did not think Marxism applicable to the USA or Europe:

"There is evidence that Mao has understood his own country better than any national leader in modern times, but his grasp of the Western world is a schematic one based on methods of Marxist analysis of classes as they exist in backward countries like the one he grew up in. He lacks sufficient understanding of the subtle changes brought about in those classes in advanced 'welfare states' by two hundred years of the kind of transformation China is only now entering; just as many well-fed American congressmen consistently fail to understand that starving have-not majorities of poor nations will not wait two hundred years to see their children fed and educated." (Ibid, page 146)

Note that Snow, like most Western writers at the time, does not class the West as capitalist. The West in the 1960s defined itself as quintessentially free, despite continuing limits to the freedom of women and non-whites. Tory leader Edward Heath in the 1970s denounced some modest examples of financial wheeler-dealing as 'the unacceptable face of capitalism' – much stronger rhetoric than you'd get from any mainstream British politician nowadays. Heath wanted to establish a form of corporatism with the British trade unions as major partners. It was only the utter folly of most of the Hard Left that derailed that scheme. Their all-or-nothing attitudes paved the way for right-wingers to revive the idea of capitalism as a virtue. To win power on that basis under Thatcher and Reagan – though the reality remains corporatist.

To get back to 1960s China, Snow appreciated how China had changed, but felt that some of the changes were incomplete. Visiting a prison, he noticed that more than half the women prisoners were in for 'fraud'. He found this odd, and was given the following explanation by an official:

"An adventurous woman pretends to be in love', he said, 'with several different men at the same time. She does it solely to get money. She goes from one man to another, deceiving him, but she won't marry any of them.'

"That sounds like a very ancient profession. Isn't prostitution the word?"

"No, no, it isn't prostitution,' he insisted stiffly. 'It is just fraud. There is not necessarily any sex involved. These women are very clever at it. They are put in prison only after repeated offences'.

"I should have liked to pursue the matter in a personal interview with one of the defrauders. Mr. Wang said the women would be embarrassed and besides it was their noon rest period (quite true), so I can offer no further particulars, except that they get light sentences, one to three years." (Ibid, page 368-9)

To me, what Snow saw sounds like a woman being a 'good-time girl' – a pattern that shades into regular romance and dating at one end and classic prostitution at the other. All a matter of definitions.

The Chinese Communists had done a lot to clean up the society in the early 1950s, treating both prostitutes and drug addicts as victims and helping them to change. Not that any of the women could have got away with saying that they had been happy as they were: but for most it must have been a rescue. And the degree to which it succeeded was remarkable.

There's a novel called *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* that is meant as a satire on the Cultural Revolution. The tale follows two educated urban youths who get sent to a remote rural area. Part of the background is that this was once an area riddled with opium production and opium abuse, but they all seem to have been reformed into dedicated hard-working Maoists. The author *treats this as routine* and has little concern beyond the fact that it was tough for privileged youths like himself. It's also left ambiguous how the seamstress lady ends up after emigrating to Hong Kong: it definitely could be some branch of the sex trade.

Relaxing Maoist discipline under Deng has led to a return of overt prostitution, and also drug addiction. And also to a freer attitude towards sex based on actual love, with sex before marriage becoming almost as normalised as it now is in Europe and the USA. In 2010, China was due to stage its own 'Mr Gay China',<sup>13</sup> freely reported in China's own English-language media – though probably not the much more widely watched Chinese-language media. This got scrapped at the last minute, maybe a casualty of the ill-feeling generated by Google's blustering threat to withdraw if China didn't adapt to US standards. But on matters of sex and encouraging marriage, Maoism actually achieved for a time the sort of blandness and hegemony for 'married love' that the New Right claim to be promoting. That they have singularly failed to actually save from decline (assuming that this was every a sincere intention).

Mao also established basic welfare, including support for the childless elderly. Edgar Snow met one such group:

"Like it? Who doesn't like a rest after a hard life? Who would feed and shelter old men with no children in former times? Nothing to worry about! Simply unheard of! We'd all be dead.'

"I did not disturb these tranquil elders by telling them that they had been herded into camps and separated from their children, or so I had read abroad. Even the childless old ones were not forced into this home. Two individualists ('too old to change') here in Willow Grove lived in their caves alone, and wanted nothing to do with any 'home' as

<sup>13</sup> [<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/jan/10/china-gay-pageant>] and [<http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90776/90882/6865323.html>]



long as they got food."<sup>14</sup>

Western commentators very seldom mention the absurd stuff that was said about China back in the 1950s and 1960s in the USA, and even sometimes in Britain. In the early 1960s, as a British schoolkid, I found that some of my fellow pupils seriously believing that the Kuomintang might soon be making a triumphant return to the Mainland. I think that particular Western notion perished during the Cultural Revolution, when it became clear that Mao could throw the whole society into turmoil without a single movement appearing that wished to be viewed as anti-Mao. The nearest was an outbreak in Wuhan, but even this expressed itself in Mao's language and claimed loyalty even while it opposed Mao's actual policies.

Mao was central to Chinese identity at that time, because China had changed utterly from what it had been. Snow noted the alterations:

"Facts, facts, facts! In other times you couldn't get an exactitude from any peasant: his children were 'several', the next town was 'not ten *li* distant,' the size of his farm was '*shang hsia*' – more or less. Now, whether it's the party secretary, a nurse, a cook or a student, he talks percentages, number of pigs and piglets, years and increases, high yields and averages... These people know their taxes to a decimal; they know their 'four fixed' and their 'three guarantees,' and where their labour and money go."<sup>15</sup>

Modern analytical thinking originated in Western Europe. Initially in Italy, though the Counter-Reformation caused it to regress within Italy at the same time as it was carried further elsewhere. It was not something that traditional China could easily assimilate. 'Yellow China' had just the right balance of tradition, superstition and analytical thinking to maintain a high and stable level of pre-industrial civilisation and culture. The success of this ancient home-grown system caused a natural reluctance to change or learn from the West, which was eager to upset that balance and mostly saw nothing good in the old way of life.

China was not given enough time to transform without breaking the existing culture. The Western-style Republic that existed from 1912 to 1949 mostly broke things and regenerated little. A real transformation needed Chinese Communist strength, ruthlessness and willingness to take risks.

A willingness to take risks includes a high probability of accidents. I mentioned in *Problems 17-18 (China's Maoist Foundations)* that UN official figures confirmed that life expectancy rose very fast during the Mao era, faster than for comparable countries like India, Indonesia and the Philippines.<sup>16</sup> This gets ignored by most current Western commentators, who highlight the

undoubted errors of 1959-61 while ignoring the general context of fast progress.

A more moderate and careful government would never have tried something like Mao's Great Leap Forward, and so might have avoided the crisis of 1959-61. But such a government would also have been unlikely to improve China as fast as was actually done. And it is also moot if moderate Asian governments would have done as well as they did if the USA had not been keen to support them and pump money into them as an alternative to the menace of Communism, Red China in particular. It is noticeable how the West's helpful and tolerant attitude was sharply reversed in the 1980s, when the ruling elite decided that Communism was no longer likely to spread to the world's poor peasants. And how these same people started knocking down non-Communist authoritarian regimes after the fall of the Soviet Union: a campaign that culminated in the disastrous wars against Iraq, Libya and Syria.

Mao's rule was a grand success for China. Any reputation can be rubbished if you only look at the failures, and don't set it in the context of what was achieved. This is in fact one of the advantages of private business: it's OK to mess up a few times if you can show that the overall result was above average. If the 'bottom line' indicates profit, many things are forgiven. A bureaucratic system is more likely to punish those with high achievements mixed with visible failures and to reward the safely mediocre. For entire states and societies, the measures are more complex. But Mao was definitely right a lot more often than he was wrong. Many times, he turned out to be correct in the fact of doubts and in defiance of conventional wisdom.

Snow had quite a lot to say about the 'Three Bitter Years'. He called it the '*Great Leap Backwards*' and made it clear that there were food shortages. But not *starvation*, so he did not count it has a famine, having seen authentic death from hunger in pre-1949 China. He mentions the case of an influx of Chinese peasants into Hong Kong after China removed its normal controls, the same matter Felix Green had noted:

"Reginald Maudling, British Colonial Secretary, on May 22 [1962] reported official intelligence from Hongkong to the House of Commons. He stated that 'there was little evidence that the Chinese refugees attempting to enter Hongkong were suffering from malnutrition... A long and detailed eye-witness report by Richard Hughes appeared in the *New York Times* in June 'After the initial shock of the mass influx, the next surprise was that the great majority of the refugees was not starving or even seriously undernourished'... Except for occasional signs of vitamin deficiency those refugees seen by Mr. Hughes indicated to him that 'food rationing – to cope with three years of failing agricultural production and bungled corrective methods – has obviously served to ward off mass starvation..."

"'Personally and symbolically, Mao Tse-tung still dominates the China scene' and is 'revered as a great national leader and patriot'. 'One Hong Kong interrogator summed it up succinctly, 'these folk are seeking jobs and security; they aren't escaping communism' There was 'no

<sup>14</sup> *The Other Side of the River*, page 482

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, page 483. A *li* is a traditional measure of distance, now standardised at 500 metres but quite variable in traditional usage.

<sup>16</sup> <http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?d=PopDiv&f=variableID%3A65#PopDiv> as at August 2011

interest in Chiang Kai-shek' and it was 'a singular fact that there is no record of any refugees having asked to be permitted to go to Taiwan'...

"For many, it is simply a tradition that some 'mouths' should emigrate...

"By no means all peasants have lost their superstition. (I met a peasant woman who thought the trouble started with the 'year of the pig', 1959; bad luck always followed the pig year.) The gods had repeatedly failed them, but many also enjoyed ridiculing the earnest, bungling young cadres. The emigrants and would-be emigrants were not starving but they feared that famine might come."<sup>17</sup>

"When I got back to Europe some of the British press was convinced that there was mass famine in China, and I had many queries about it. I replied what most foreign residents in China knew: the food shortage was severe; staple foods were closely rationed and well below Western standards of good nourishment; there was no visible starvation and the population was in good health and working condition." (Ibid, page 615)

"Throughout 1959-62 many Western press editorials continued to refer to 'mass starvation' in China and continued to cite no supporting facts. As far as I know, no report by any non-Communist visitor to China provides an authentic instance of starvation during this period. Here I am not speaking of food shortages, or lack of surfeit, to which I have made frequent reference, but of people dying of hunger, which is what 'famine' connotes to most of us, and what I saw in the past." (Ibid, page 619)

This is consistent with the post-Mao position – a doubling of the death-rate, which added up to many millions of extra deaths in a land as vast as China. Numbers depend on what you take as the norm. The peak death-rate was 25 per thousand, not high by mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century Asian standards. No higher than the typical death-rate in the last years of Kuomintang rule. But there are also claims nowadays that the weather was normal, and that is ridiculous.

If Chinese officials nowadays say the weather was normal, it proves only that they are just as willing to back the official line nowadays as they were when Mao was ruling. The weather was definitely *not* normal. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica Yearbooks* from 1958 to 1962 report abnormal weather, including droughts and floods. This included 30 inches (760 mm) of rain in Hong Kong across five days in June 1959, part of a pattern that hit all of Southern China. Foreigners in China noted that the Yellow River – one of the biggest rivers in the world – had for a time dried up. That's not normal at all.

We now know that China was hit by the backwash of an 'El Nino' event, a vast global shift in the climate that was not recognised or even suspected until meteorologists discovered it many years later<sup>18</sup> Typically it causes floods in South

China and drought in North China.

People did notice odd weather at the time, as Snow details:

"Were the 1960 calamities actually as severe as reported in Peking – 'the worst series of disasters since the 19<sup>th</sup> century,' as Chou En-lai told me? Weather was not the only cause of the disappointing harvest but it was undoubtedly a major cause. With good weather the crops would have been ample; without it, other adverse factors I have cited – some discontent in the communes, bureaucracy, transportation bottlenecks. The impact on Chinese peasant psychology of three years of bad weather in *combination* with commune innovations was recognised by the policy changes in 1961-62 which, as we have seen abandoned ultra-advanced socialist aims and restored many incentives to individual enterprise.

"Merely from personal observations in 1960 I know that there was no rain in large areas of northern China for 200 to 300 days. I have mentioned unprecedented floods in central Manchuria, where I was marooned in Shenyang for a week... While Northeast China was struck by eleven typhoons – the largest number in fifty years – I saw the Yellow River reduced to a small stream." (Ibid, page 621)

Snow also mentions the replacement of Peng Dehuai, P'eng Te-Huai in the older Wade-Giles Romanization that was standard when Snow wrote. This is nowadays almost always interpreted as a result of his criticisms of the Great Leap. These were certainly a factor, but there were many issues involved. Snow sees it wholly in terms of the strained relationship with the Soviet Union:

"P'eng favoured continued long-term close technological reliance on the Soviet Union in order to lighten the burden of an independent all-weapons industry which China is now pursuing... After Liu Shao-ch'i took over chairmanship of the government P'eng found himself increasingly ranged with the 'rightist' minority in the Politburo. In 1959 he and his staff were replaced by Lin Piao, a more compliant and less colorful figure... support of Mao's military doctrine and ideological challenge to Khrushchev... P'eng still holds his seat in the Politburo and may again assume an important role if warmer weather prevails between Russia and China." (Ibid, page 642)

At the time, I don't think anyone outside of the Chinese leadership knew about the internal debate in which Mao said that Peng had gone too far in criticising the Great Leap and demanded his removal as Defence Minister. Nor were there any indication at the time that Lin Biao would be the important hard-line leftist he later became. Meantime Mao assigned Peng to building up the 'Third Front', an industrial complex in south-west China that was intended as a fall-back in case of an invasion by either the USA or the Soviet Union.

Peng became a target for Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution, being blamed by them for a lot of things, including heavy Chinese casualties in the later stages of the Korean War, where he was commander. The accusations led on to him being beaten and publicly humiliated. This is commonly

<sup>17</sup> *The Other Side of the River*, page 498-9. Snow uses the older form 'Hongkong' instead of the official Hong Kong, except when quoting someone else's words.

<sup>18</sup> Noted as a Peruvian oddity from the 1890s, but not generally recognised as a global event till the 1980s.

See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/El\\_Ni%C3%B1o#Cultural\\_history\\_and\\_prehistoric\\_information](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/El_Ni%C3%B1o#Cultural_history_and_prehistoric_information) for more on this.

given as the cause of his death: yet he lasted till 1974, three years after the flight and mysterious death of Lin Biao. He was born in 1898, which means he got more than the standard 'three score and ten'. The immediate cause of death was cancer. Had he outlived Mao, Zhou Enlai and Zhu De – all of whom died in 1976 – he might have re-emerged as a major leader of the retreat from leftism, with unguessable consequences.

### Neighbours

The border troubles between India and China began when some Indian journalists learned from a Chinese magazine that China had built a road from Xinjiang to Tibet through a stony desert called the Aksai Chin. India claimed this area as part of Kashmir, itself disputed with Pakistan, which had no interest in a useless desert and later officially accepted that the Aksai Chin was part of China. India took a different view, choosing to get confrontational about the other disputed area, what was then the North-East Frontier Agency. (It was claimed by China as South Tibet, and is now the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh.) Most outside observers reckon that China would have been happy to drop this claim in return for India dropping its claim to the Aksai Chin.

The Republic of India's claim to the North-East Frontier Agency was rather shaky. British India had tried to secure this area in the Simla Agreement, the same agreement that would have limited China's rights in Western Tibet to mere 'suzerainty'. When the central Chinese government rejected Simla, British India left the border where it was. The future Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh was not shown as part of British India on most maps, including a map in a book by Nehru, a point that China drew attention to during the dispute. But Indian nationalists had successfully made political links with the people of this territory and incorporated it as the North-East Frontier Agency.

The immediate trouble was about the exact position of the McMahon Line, the line drawn by a British civil servant to define what the British wanted as the border under the Simla Agreement.

After decisively defeating the Indian Army and pushing them back to the line that China defined as the border, China withdrew and gave back almost all of the disputed territory. Sensibly, they made no attempt to hang onto a region where the population regarded itself as Indian.

The curious coincidence of the border war with the Cuban Missile Crisis is unlikely to be anything except a pure fluke. Mao could have had no way of knowing when the USA would discover the Soviet missiles in Cuba (even supposing that he knew about it). The strike against India on the 20th October must have been prepared a few weeks before. The crisis only really began on the 16th. On the 20th October, Kennedy hadn't yet told the US people about the missiles.<sup>19</sup> Mao would have

needed to be a magician to have known what might happen next: it might well have been resolved behind the scenes.

### Maoist Iconoclasm

The most fascinating thing about China's 4000-year history is that events there often parallel events in Europe, but then end up differently.<sup>20</sup> The Qin Reunification and then the Han Dynasty overlapped the Hellenistic empires of the heirs of Alexander the Great and then the Roman Empire. It was comparable in power and wealth, but was quite different from either. The territories of the fallen Roman Empire never re-unified – it was actually the Ottoman Empire that came closest, a point overlooked by Anglos because we are heirs of its Western and Latin-speaking half. But the Sui and Tang did re-unify China and made it a permanent entity. Later the Sung Dynasty China had its own renaissance well before that in Italy, but this interesting cultural development ended with the conquest of first North China and then South China by the Mongols. China under the Ming had a vast sea-expansion a few decades before the Spanish and Portuguese grabbed control of all the world's oceans, but they found it unprofitable. And I explained in *Problems 21* how the Taiping rebels partly mirrored the 1848 revolutions in Europe, something that Marx almost noticed but failed to see clearly.

Another overlooked connection is between Mao's Cultural Revolution and the separate but simultaneous wave of radicalism in both the West and the Soviet Bloc. In the period 1965 to 1968, Alexander Dubcek<sup>21</sup> and his supporters quietly took power in Czechoslovakia. At the same time as Mao was throwing China into turmoil by supporting the Red Guards, a variety of sexual, political and musical radicals were waxing stronger in the West's great 'Cultural Metamorphosis' of the Swinging Sixties.

Each of these offered a way forward from the fairly successful Corporatism of the 1950s, an era in which many had supposed that East and West were converging and would in the end settle down as a bland and contented Unified Corporatism. What actually happened was that sexual, political and musical radicals were incorporated in a new variety of Corporatism under the New Right – but heavily camouflaged in order to keep the votes of authentic conservatives and the ever-hopeful and

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Chronology of the crisis at the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum.

<sup>20</sup> I say 4000, because the Oracle Bones show evidence of a well-developed Chinese state and writing system at least 3200 years ago. It also used to be the standard. China, Korea and Japan have all advanced their claims to 5000 years, on the basis of no solid evidence.

<sup>21</sup> The 'c' should have an accent – but I've found from bitter experience that the internet mangles such things. Created by Anglos for Anglos and imperfectly extended.

See <https://www.flickr.com/photos/45909111@N00/23039928756/in/album-72157649792061378/> for an example.

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<sup>19</sup> [[http://www.jfklibrary.org/jfk/cmc/cmc\\_october20.html](http://www.jfklibrary.org/jfk/cmc/cmc_october20.html)],

ever-deceived ranks of small producers. Meantime the Soviet Union imposed a dysfunctional conservatism under Brezhnev, while post-Mao China made something like what the Soviet Reformers might have produced if they'd won out.

The 1960s changed the world's direction, and the main beneficiaries now like to deny it. For 2008, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 1968, I saw a whole raft of former radicals declare that the 1960s had been mostly a sham. The one exception were male homosexuals: these are mostly part of the 'Coolheart' consensus that emerged in the 1980s, but presumably they could not ignore the fact that they were treated as criminals in Britain until 1967 and as social outcasts for many years after that. They must know that only the successful conquest of mainstream culture by 1960s radicals allowed them to exist as 'virtually normal'. But the rest of the ex-radicals who now have nice establishment positions minimise it, as do most Establishment homosexuals on all matters other than their own status. No one wants to let the 'plebs' realise that the privileged status of commercialised ex-radicals is an accident of history.

The 1960s in Britain and the USA broke down the comfortable consensus that had emerged after World War Two. In Britain in the 1970s, the power of the trade unions was very great and there was a widespread wish to translate it into some form of Industrial Democracy, rights of workers to elect their own people to the top level of management, similar to but more radical than what already existed in West Germany. The *Bullock Commission* produced a report in 1977 that could have become law if the trade unions had been for it. But many of the same people who nowadays say that socialism has failed made sure that this highly practical form of socialism failed in Britain in the late 1970s. Some of them – mostly Trotskyists – thought that if moderate reforms were prevented there would be a proper revolution. Since no Trotskyist group has ever got past the stage of being an 'armed nuisance' in all of the years since the Trotskyists split from mainstream Leninism, this cannot be taken seriously. Much more important and damaging were the centre-left majority who thought things could carry on as before, with managers managing and militant workers protesting.

Expecting 1950s Corporatism to carry on with just small safe improvements was unrealistic. Societies never stand still: *'All good water must flow'*.<sup>22</sup> The power of the trade unions was too great for the old system, and the Labour Party back then wanted to expand it into real power, power with responsibility. When this was rejected, the way was open for a reassertion of old-style capitalism by Thatcher and Reagan. Had Britain set a different example back then, a lot of other countries might have followed. The USA was at a

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<sup>22</sup> This sound like a piece of ancient folk-wisdom, but I've not been able to find a source for it. If anyone knows more, please let me know.

low ebb, having been kicked out of South Vietnam in 1975. It needed Britain and the USA moving in the same direction under Thatcher and Reagan to change the direction of world politics.

Except that the Western version of 1960s radicalism hadn't failed. The revived right-wing economics was combined with a dropping of serious support for respectable middle-class values. People were left largely free to do what they wanted, provided they could pay for it. The position of women and non-whites advanced considerably, an on-going process down to the present day. And while this was happening, the Soviet Union successfully crushed its own internal radicalism and for a time looked very strong. But a system that refuses to change must either get total control or else be undermined. The Soviet system after 1968 had increasingly few True Believers and was on the path to its final collapse.

Meantime Mao had effectively dissolved the Chinese state. But then put it together again, when no new system evolved out of the Red Guard radicalism. Unlike the Great Leap Forward, there was no loss of control and no major economic setback. You'll see from the graph on the next page that between 1965 and 1975, the economy grew quite well.<sup>23</sup> Whatever it may have done to education, the decade now defined as the Cultural Revolution Era was definitely not a 'lost decade' economically. There was a slight decline in 1967 and 1968, but then steady growth from 1969 to 1975 – I assume the fall in 1976 was due to the massive earthquake that year, which was also the year Mao died. The overall result contrasts strongly with 1930-37, the best years of the Western-style Republic, which never managed more than a marginal improvement.

You should also note that the worst of Mao, the Three Bad Years of 1959-61, was well above the best years of Kuomintang rule. And Mao was operating under the double burden of relative isolation from the world economy and an ever-present threat of invasion. A solo mountain climber or a solo round-the-world yachtsman is rated far higher than someone who does it as part of a team. Likewise the achievements of the post-Mao leaders are less impressive, because Europe, Japan and the USA were helping them a great deal up until 1989, being under the impression that Deng was going to deliver an entirely Westernised China. For all the loud rhetoric about 'democracy', the West has never objected to authoritarian systems that seemed to be advancing Western interests.

Of course it could have happened that China would have ended its isolation without giving up a lot of its socialist achievements. Suppose the Soviet empire had followed the Dubcek path rather

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<sup>23</sup> The chart uses figures from Angus Maddison's *The World Economy: Historical Statistics*, OECD 2003. He has no figures for China for 1939 to 1949 – which is understandable, given the Japanese invasion and then the Civil War

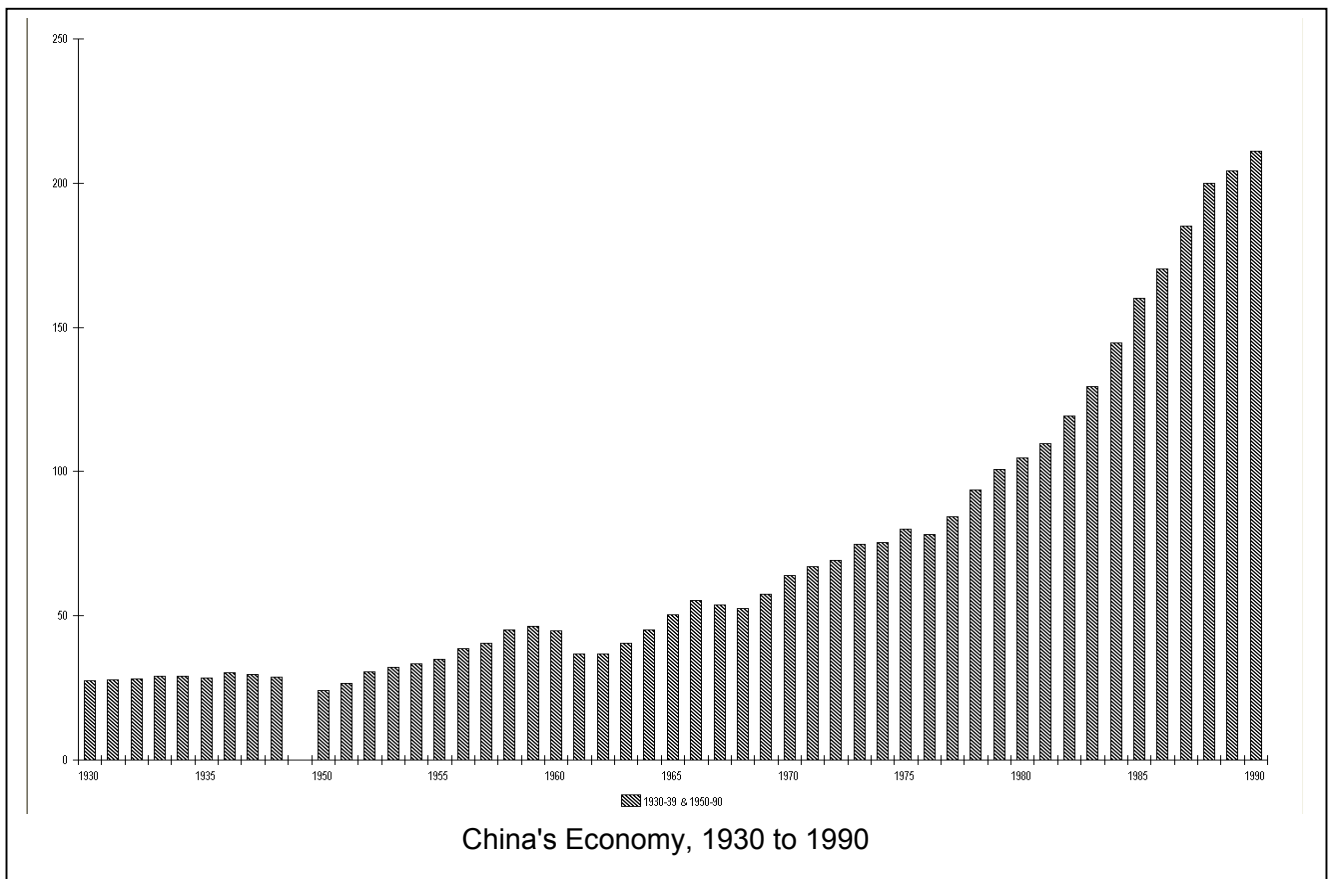
than that of Leonid Brezhnev? Suppose Europe had transmuted working-class militancy into Workers Control rather than wasting the opportunity and being taken over by the New Right? Then China might have opened up to a different sort of wider world and stuck with a lot more of the Maoist model of the economy. Since the New Right 'reforms' have improved nothing except the share of wealth taken by the extremely rich, China in such an alternative world might have done just as well economically.

What Mao did in China in the Cultural Revolution was in many ways the high point of Modernism and the European Enlightenment. The French philosopher Voltaire fantasised about a world without religion: Mao in the Cultural Revolution was seriously working to create one, and had the bulk of the young people on his side. Even in Tibet, it was young Tibetans who did a lot of the destructions of the various Buddhist idols that have since made a limited come-back.

suppressed in 529 was actually a revived academy, the original having perished during the general conquest of Greece by the Roman general Sulla,<sup>24</sup> but it was also the end of a grand tradition and part of a general pattern of suppression while the new Christian civilisation was being created. Trashing of the artwork of paganism was a regular part of the spread of Christianity.

Another example: the glories of Islamic civilisation followed on from a massive destruction of pre-Islamic worship. Muhammad's return to Mecca included the mass cleansing of the Kabala and destruction of the idols therein. Similar things happened with the expansion of Islam, including the almost complete elimination of Zoroastrianism. All very normal. Historians who fail to fit the Maoist era into a global pattern of progressive politics are showing a false understanding of the sweep of world history.

Mao in the Cultural Revolution made an attempt to go beyond the successful political-economic



Smashing the symbols of the old is *perfectly normal* during a period of drastic change. We Britons did a lot of it in our Reformation, with Oliver Cromwell going as far as to ban Christmas, which contained a lot of old paganism in a Christian garb. Renaissance Italy had several mass destructions of luxury items, most notably Savonarola's 'Bonfire of the Vanities'. Christianity in Europe had smashed a lot of the idols of the older faith, and also abolished the schools of pagan philosophy. Plato's academy was suppressed in 529 by Justinian the Great, villain of Robert Graves's *Count Belisarius* but Plato was also considered a saint amongst Eastern Orthodox Christians. The academy

model built by Stalin in the 1930s in the Soviet Union. That model had worked, making the Soviet Union strong enough to stop and push back a Nazi Empire that had successfully absorbed most of the rest of Europe. Without Stalin's ruthless drive to industrialise, it is very hard to see how Nazism could have been defeated. Two-thirds of the fighting was done on the Eastern Front and the bulk of Germany's troops were there.

Mao didn't blindly reject Stalin's system. He didn't indulge in the sort of bitter empty criticism of

<sup>24</sup> Wikipedia entry for [Platonic Academy]

Stalin that came from the great non-achievers of global Trotskyism. (The rise of Trotskyism in Western Europe coincides very nicely with the loss of status of socialism as a whole: a loss we are only now recovering from, after the New Right have visibly messed up their world-mission to Westernise the Arabs.) Nor did either Mao or Deng engage in the confused and dishonest rhetoric we got from a post-Stalin leadership that squandered the enormously strong position that the Soviet Union had achieved at Stalin's death in 1953. (Curiously, it was 36 years from the October Revolution to the death of Stalin, and another 36 years from then to the collapse of the Soviet Union as a superpower when they lost Middle-Europe in the 'velvet revolutions' of 1989.) Mao avoided such follies, recognising that his own achievements would probably not have been possible without Stalin's earlier work. But Mao was also not like Kim Il-Sung in North Korea; sticking with the old model without regard for a changing world. There was a time when North Korea was doing well: it was richer than South Korea in the 1960s and also had a brief success in the wider world with a rather good football team that got to the quarter-finals in the 1966 World Cup. But North Korea failed to move on and is now a dead end. Without the Cultural Revolution, it is quite possible that Liu Shaochi or someone similar would have led China to a similar dead end.

*'Those who can't be foolish, never will be wise.'* That's an old Chinese saying, and I'd count it as more useful than most of them. Protests against bureaucracy and against rule by elites have always been part of civilised life. The New Right tapped into such feelings, but failed to deliver anything very much. Some of the functions of the Welfare State have been transferred from public bodies under political control to private bodies under the control of the rich – the role of small shareholders has remained trivial. Elites are stronger than ever, and they also own and control a much bigger slice of the world's wealth than they did in 1980. Independent small production is even rarer now than it was then, while private corporations are even larger and more remote. That has been the substance of the New Right: a swindle on those seeking liberty or nostalgic for an older way of life.

Mao in the Cultural Revolution tried for something better, and was by no means the failure that most commentators now claim. As I said earlier, the years 1966 to 1976 were years of continuing economic progress for China. It gets classed as a failure nowadays because he left behind an unstable political legacy and hardly anyone still defends it.

Commenting long after the event – commenting in 1987, after a round of protests that foreshadowed what happened in 1989 – I said:

"Twenty years ago, China tried to break the mould of world politics, and failed. Mao made a serious attempt to build a society without the profit motive and without major inequalities... The result was chaos. Red guards fought each other in a mad factionalism that defies any simple

explanation... After Mao's death, Deng Xiaoping rose to supreme power, and duly took the 'capitalist road' that Mao had always been warning against.

"One constant in all this struggle was the power of the Communist Party. Mao attacked the actually-existing party in the name of an idealised party. His opponents defended what actually existed. All factions agreed that those who had 'correct ideas' had a perfect right to suppress those whose ideas were wrong. They just disputed which set of ideas were correct."<sup>25</sup>

After the Tiananmen crackdown itself, I said:

"The Western media insist on seeing politics in Leninist and ex-Leninist states as a struggle between nice moderates and nasty hard-liners. This view of the matter requires some sudden shifts—Deng Xiaoping changed overnight from 'nice' to 'nasty' when the present round of demonstrations began. But it is the best model they have. They see the juxtaposition of a portrait of Mao and a copy of the American Statue of Liberty as absurd. But the student protesters did not see it so.

"The current repression is being compared to the Cultural Revolution. This ignores one very basic fact—the Cultural Revolution was a popular mass movement. When Mao carried through purges and waves of repression, he had the unquestioning support of the majority of the population.

"What is happening now is repression by a state apparatus that has no popular support at all.

"The student protester's attitude to Mao is an awkward point for the standard western model of events. A few of the protesters are anti-Mao; most notably those who threw paint on his portrait in Tiananmen Square on May 23. But most of them were outraged by this action, and a large number of them carried pictures of Mao. These never seemed to be visible in filmed reports from China. But plenty of Western correspondents mentioned them, and for a couple of days the *Evening Standard* and *The Independent* included them in a few of their photos. But they don't fit the standard model of events. And journalists nowadays have a depressing habit of leaving out anything that does not fit their preconceptions.

"When the demonstrators were allowed to speak for themselves, one sometimes got a different and more complex view of the matter. For instance, during an interview with two student protesters in Shanghai, one said "I have a very strong resentment against Mao for what he did in the Cultural Revolution," but the other said "Personally I feel Mao was a very successful politician and poet. The breadth of his imagination was remarkable" (*The Independent*, June 12). I suspect that a high proportion of the other protesters would have insisted on giving the 'wrong' answer when questioned about Mao, and that such opinions were mostly filtered out...

"I wish I could say that the present regime can't last long. But I've a nasty feeling that it could. Especially since the western powers look likely to resume trade and economic aid as soon as public opinion will allow."<sup>26</sup>

I'd stick to a lot of what I said then. Three

<sup>25</sup> *China: From Red Guard To Old Guard. Labour & Trade Union Review*, April 1987.

<sup>26</sup> *For Mao & Liberty, Labour & Trade Union Review*

important modifications – the Cultural Revolution did less damage than I then supposed, China had actually kept a lot more socialism than I then realised, and with hindsight I'm certain that the protestors would have created chaos and weakness rather than a improved new order.

I also went on to predict or hope that the 'Red Mandarinate' had no hope of survival in the long run. This too I no longer believe. Events since 1989 show that the sudden introduction of multi-party democracy can produce results very different from the democratic wishes of those who vote in such a system. The Ukraine has continuing chaos and failure, while Russia suffered a disastrous shrinkage under Yeltsin's democratically elected government. Also the Chinese Communist Party seems to have recovered a lot of its vigour, and also easily coped with the Internet Revolution. (I've explain elsewhere<sup>27</sup> why any dissident using electronic media is being foolish and acting on criminally bad Western advice. They might as well stick a sign in their window saying 'covert political dissident lives here'.)

The world moves on, and the West's relative power is diminishing, having been frittered away on foolish consumption and unjust and ill-managed foreign wars. Once again the future is open to almost anything.

When the core of Taiping power was destroyed with the fall of Nanking in 1864, or when the last strong Taiping Army was destroyed at the Dadu River in 1871, it would have seemed as if peasant collectivism in China had been decisively defeated. Three or four generations on, it was not just back but triumphant. So who knows what comes next?

### **The Fate of the Middle Ground**

When I described the Blue Republic<sup>28</sup>, I mentioned various individuals who sought some middle ground between the Kuomintang and Communists. Of those still alive after 1945, the most notable were Madam Sun (Soong Ching-ling) and General Feng, the famous Christian General who had been a rival to Chiang Kai-shek.

General Feng had broken with the Kuomintang after 1945 and was close to the Communists. In 1948, he was making his way back to China via Russia, when he died in a suspicious fire on a Russian ship on the Black Sea. His biographer comments that he can see no reason why the Communists should have wished him dead at that time.<sup>29</sup> I'm not so sure: his death occurred in September 1948, at a time when the Red Army was getting the upper hand in North China, but before they had captured Beijing or forced the surrender of most of the northern warlords. Warlords who were members like Feng of the

Beiyang or 'North Ocean' faction. It's conceivable that Feng could have persuaded them to accept his leadership in what would have been a genuinely equal coalition with the Communists: he was the only one with the stature and patriotic record to make it plausible. And it's conceivable that Mao was worried by this and asked Moscow to eliminate Feng, or that someone else in the Chinese Communist leadership requested it independently of Mao. What's more likely is that the Soviet Union saw him as a bad influence, someone who'd lend weight to those Chinese Communists who took a more independent and potentially anti-Moscow line. Or it might indeed have been a genuine and coincidental accident. Regardless, he remains honoured in China as someone who tried to do the right thing.

Madam Sun had a much more interesting fate. She had returned to Shanghai after the defeat of Japan. The new People's Republic included her as part of the new government as a Vice-President. She agreed with most of what was being done, and presumably understood that she had to keep silent about the rest. This was a properly revolutionary regime, intent on changing all of the things that the Kuomintang had failed to alter much. It was also not going to tolerate open criticism. She supported the various policies of the Great Leap to the extent of having one of the 'backyard blast furnaces' built in her own garden, which she need not have done if she hadn't agreed with the idea. She maybe shared the run-away enthusiasm of the time. Chang and Halliday, who at that time confidently classified her as a heroine rather than a sinister Soviet agent, refuse to believe that she could possibly have supported a policy which turned out to be a mistake, even though it was not obviously a mistake unless you knew a lot about metallurgy. They say:

"But Ching-ling must have had her reservations. Indeed, she wrote a letter (not for publication) correcting a boastful account of China's welfare work for a magazine – a rare event at the time."<sup>30</sup>

Welfare work was Soong Ching-ling's area of expertise: it's not surprising she'd spot an error there. And the Great Leap Forward's general idea of dispersing industry was valid. Not only did it continue under Mao, it also flourished under Deng's economic opening-up. There's an interesting account of this in *Model Rebels: The Rise and Fall of China's Richest Village*. Though the author is conventionally scornful of Mao, but the actual facts he records indicate great continuity between the Great Leap, the Cultural Revolution and the success of the Township and Village Enterprises under Deng in the 1980s and early 1990s.

"After a brief rural industrial boom in the late 1950s caused by Mao's promotion of village steel production, farmers had been forced back to the fields to ensure that grain supplies remained ample. Throughout the 1960s, communes were

<sup>27</sup> <http://gwydionwilliams.com/46-globalisation/the-web-is-always-insecure/>

<sup>28</sup> Problems 22

<sup>29</sup> Sheridan, James E. *Chinese Warlord: The Career of Feng Yu-hsiang*. Stanford University 1966. Page 281.

<sup>30</sup> Chang, Jung and Halliday, Jon, *Mme Sun Yat-sen (Soong Ching-ling)*, Penguin Books 1986, page 114

prohibited from devoting more than 15 percent of their labour to so-called sideline activities, a stricture that forced village leaders to devise ever more ingenious ways to disguise the legion of peasants engaged at repair shops and brick kilns, hauling goods on wooden carts, or fashioning simple textile products at home....

"But the loosening political atmosphere in the last days of the Cultural Revolution, coupled with a green revolution in the countryside and the neglect of rural industrial needs by state factories, prompted many rural leaders to set up factories...

"By 1978, the country's 1.5 million rural enterprises employed twenty-eight million workers, or 10 percent of the rural workforce."<sup>31</sup>

The 'Township and Village Enterprises' have more in common with the Communes and the Great Leap than is generally realised. Less egalitarian, certainly, but they could still be called Communes or Cooperatives, except that the new name makes them more attractive and reassuring to foreign investors.

This particular Township and Village Enterprise specialised in the very thing that is always cited as the height of folly in the Great Leap, the relocation of metal-working to rural areas.

Foreign observers pay most attention to places where entrepreneurs from Taiwan or Hong Kong have been the main driving force. Particularly the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone, which is virtually an extension of Hong Kong. (Yet Hong Kong itself was a foreign enclave conveniently near the ancient city of Guangzhou ('Canton'), capital of Guangdong Province.) It's rather as if a Chinese visitor were to take a close and accurate look at the down-market holiday-resort city of Blackpool and then supposed that they understood the basics of Britain.

Both Special Economic Zones and Township and Village Enterprises were just small parts of China's industrial rise. A rise that concealed a lot of socialism under names that sound reassuring to foreign investors:

"Different parts of rural China were adopting different systems to replace communes at this time. Many southern and coastal places – with more savings and arguably more individualist urges – were replacing the communes with household-based farming and privately owned as well as collectively owned rural enterprises as well as collectively owned rural enterprises. But elsewhere, especially in the north, many villages chose to stick together by maintaining almost total collective control over economic activities. It was not so much decollectivization as the replacement of one kind of collective with another. Socialism had finally come to Daqui.

"The village collective was in many ways a family-based collective too. Certain leading families... held many of the top positions in both administration and business... Peasants in China had always organised themselves

according to family-based clans, and once the intrusive state withdrew from rural life it was natural for them to step back in." (Ibid, page 42)

That ignores the key change – peasants before Mao were helpless victims trapped in a decaying rural economy. Villagers dominated by a class of landlords who drained wealth and gave nothing back. Inequalities returned after Mao, but China does not have India's rural problems of oppressive landlords and large numbers of landless labourers. Land remains public property, and migrant workers who lose their jobs in the cities get given a bit of land to farm until things pick up.

To return to Soong Ching-ling, she carried on as an important figure and in fact outlasted Mao, who was a few months younger than she. By Western reckoning they were born in the same year, 1893, though by the Chinese system she was born in year of the Water Dragon and he in the year of the Water Snake.<sup>32</sup> Someone could do a nice double-biography, following two lives that span China's massive 20th century changes.

Madam Sun lived till 1981, and at the very end of her life became Honorary President of the People's Republic of China and was also admitted to the Chinese Communist Party, something she had supposedly wished for earlier but been refused at the time. (I'm not convinced this is true.)

How she might have summed up her life is unknown. But she could reasonably have claimed that she had helped carry through Sun Yat-sen's original program. Used the authoritarian and populist radicalism of the Chinese Communists to get a stagnant society modernised and dynamic, when there was no other force with anything like the power or coherence to do it.

### After Mao

Post-Mao developments would need an entire book, which I plan to write eventually, with a provisional title of *Deng: Herding the Capitalist Cats*. In this and previous articles (*Problems 17-18, 21, 22 and 23*) I've been talking about why Mao or someone like him was a necessity for China. But this cannot be done sensibly without talking about what came next.

China emerged from the Mao Era as a society able and willing to absorb any and all Western ideas, which it hadn't been before 1949. Under the Western-style Republic of 1911-1949, China was passively open to the outside world but unable to make much of it. People copied the style but not the substance. It was called 'Open Door', but 'Open Legs' would have been a better name for it. It produced small enclaves of modernism in the coastal cities, but at the same time the rural economy decayed. It was a complete mess, an example of what's later been called a Failed State.

Mao as leader of the Chinese Communist Party

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<sup>31</sup> Gilley, Bruce. *Model Rebels: The Rise and Fall of China's Richest Village*. University of California Press, pages 14-15

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<sup>32</sup> [http://www.astrologizeme.com/your\\_chinese\\_sign.shtml](http://www.astrologizeme.com/your_chinese_sign.shtml)



successfully led the country through years of isolation in which the basics of a modern society were established.

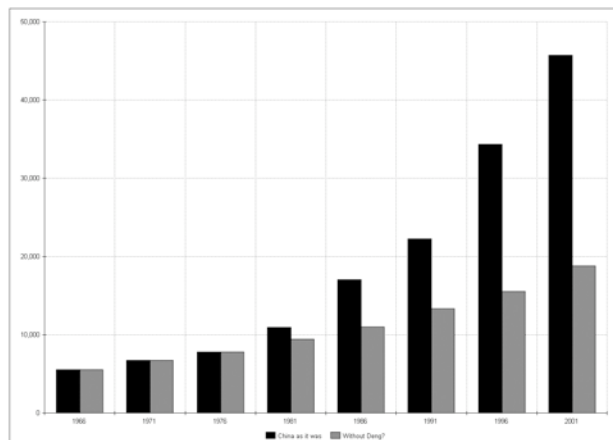
From the late 1980s and especially from the 1990s, Western commentators have been writing off the Mao Era as a pointless delay before the West generously shared the benefits of globalisation with China. The question of why there was stagnation, weakness and misery in the pre-Mao era is not addressed, probably because this would not have been possible if current New Right ideas were correct. New Right ideas have a hegemony over most Western thinkers, even those who overtly reject them and still hang onto elements of leftism. But the test of ideas is whether they match reality. And New Right doctrines do not.

If you know the economic theories of Friedrich List – and it seems that Chinese experts do, though most Westerners do not – you would see the cycle of Blue Republic / Mao's China / Deng's China as entirely normal. List (who has no connection with musician Franz Liszt) was an early 19<sup>th</sup> century German who took issue with the ideas of Adam Smith. Smith claimed that Britain had had its industrial revolution *despite* strict protectionism in the critical years and *despite* a large role for the state. But List looked back at history and noted that England had in mediaeval times been drawn into European commerce by Continental Europe. And that England – expanded as Great Britain – had then had closed up and built itself up as an industrial power behind tariff walls. He recommended the same methods for the USA and for Germany. Something of the sort was indeed done under Bismarck, with great success.

Of course List was assuming a single definite end, a commercial society with the broad cultural values of north-west Europe. It is not obligatory to end that way, and China did have other options. Supposing the post-Mao power-struggle had gone differently? Hua Guofeng does a deal with the 'Gang of Four' after arresting them: they become loyal followers and he gives them a reduced but important role. Things go on much as before, as we assume a 41% growth in the economy per decade, which was achieved between 1966 and 1976, what are now labelled the Cultural Revolution years.<sup>33</sup>

In such an alternate world, China grows more slowly but still does grow fairly fast. By 2001, the Republic of India has just about overtaking China, assuming India does as well in this alternate world as it does in the real world. How the West would be doing is anyone's guess: without cheap manufactures from China it might be worse off, and without China buying huge amounts of US debt the crisis of 2008 might have happened much sooner. Maybe a weaker USA does not invade Iraq, who

knows? Meantime the manufacturing jobs that have gone to China would have mostly stayed wherever they were in 1976. A rather less wealthy China might also have been happier, without the current huge differences in wealth, with the social solidarity of the Mao Era left in place and with basic health and education still provided free. Such an alternative China would certainly be producing much less pollution.



Deng chose otherwise. He was very impressed by the success of Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan and South Korea. He saw the winning formula as being a limited opening to the world, with a Mixed Economy under a strong government. Singapore has always had multi-party elections, but a single ruling party has dominated from the start and remains totally in control. Japan was also dominated by a single party during its best period of economic success, and suffered an economic-political crisis when it was pushed into opening up more. South Korea grew strong under authoritarian rule but now manages fine without it, while Hong Kong was ruled by Governors appointed by Britain until they decided to introduce a multi-party system late in the day in the hope of making trouble for China. It didn't in fact make much trouble at the time: some of the young people have since tried their own little version of the Arab Spring, showing a crass ignorance of the likely outcome of such behaviour

Deng sensibly copied the systems that actually worked for a fast-developing country – state-controlled economics and politics dominated by a single party. And he presumably remained broadly Leninist, in some ways still a Maoist, willing to treat even the Cultural Revolution as a *mistake* rather than a *crime*. He re-affirmed his Maoist alignment during private debates during the crisis, if you believe what's said in the *Tiananmen Papers*. He saw himself as carrying on the work of the 'first generation' of leadership, which he defined as Mao, Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai and Zhu De. He also said

"When we were in Jiangxi in the 1930s, everyone spoke of me as part of the Mao faction. But that was never the case; there was never any Mao faction. It's crucial to be able to tolerate and unite with people on all sides of issues".<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> I start from Maddison's figures a GDP level of 553,676 in 1966 and 793,092 in 1976, which I make 41.4% growth per decade. This I simply extrapolate

<sup>34</sup> Zhang Liang (Compiler), *The Tiananmen Papers*, Little, Brown and Company, 2001, page 328

As I mentioned earlier, I felt in 1989 that the overthrow of Deng would have been a good thing, and I later realised that I had been completely wrong. Even in 1991 I was still very unclear and wasn't taking much notice of China: the spectacular Soviet collapse was more significant. Another commentator saw it much more clearly:

"The collapse of the Soviet Union entails the collapse of the category of Soviet citizenship as the principal element of the political identity of the individual. Over two hundred million individuals are going to have their secondary, ethnic-national, identity (Russian, Uzbek, Lithuanian, etc.) worked up as their primary identity. This is not going to happen of its own accord. It is going to be developed actively, by emerging political forces. And it is going to involve placing many millions of individuals in difficult if not impossible positions. What is to be done with ethnic Lithuanians or Georgians or whatever who have lived in Leningrad or Moscow for years on a legal par, as Soviet citizens, with their Russian neighbours? What is to be done with the millions of Russians scattered all over the non-Russian republics? Each of these republics is going to be governed, if it survives at all, by a form of politics which will be heavily nationalist and heavily populist. Populist nationalisms are invariably the least able to allow for minorities in their midst. There is going to be conflict all the over the place, and there is absolutely no reason to suppose that democracy will last long in the circumstances.

"There is no democratic tradition in Russia. The pre-Leninist traditions of the proletariat had been wiped out by the mid-1920s, and the Leninist tradition has now collapsed in ignominy. The traditions of the peasantry were subjected to enormous disruption by the Bolsheviks and it is not clear that one can speak today of any political tradition of the peasantry in the present tense. The traditions of the aristocracy are dead. This leaves the traditions of the intelligentsia, which are those of bureaucracy on the one hand and, on the other hand, a self-righteous, moralistic, utopian, abstract populism which seizes on the masses as cannon-fodder. And cannon-fodder is precisely what the masses must expect to be."<sup>35</sup>

At the time, I had unrealistic hopes for post-Soviet Russia. I didn't suppose that there was going to be some sudden restoration of 'true Leninism'. And several years earlier, I'd done a study of the curious fact that the *Communist Manifesto* fails to deal with political democracy and concluded that Marx and Engels left it out because they had something very much like Leninism in mind during the brief period it seemed that a revolution might succeed in Germany.<sup>36</sup> But the events of the 1990s forced me to doubt on the usefulness of multi-party democracy in a society where there is no settled and agreed way of life.

What happened in post-Soviet Russia was that the economy nose-dived and the death rate shot up. Home-grown liberalism withered and there was a brief possibility of either the Russian Communists being re-elected to power or else a right-wing

populism under Vladimir Zhirinovsky. Yeltsin went from hero to zero, but did at least save something. He raised Putin from obscurity to power, leaving behind an effective authoritarian state that can win multi-party elections and is supported by a majority of the population.

By 2001, when *The Tiananmen Papers* appeared, I had learned from events and I had clarified my position on China. The mess in former Yugoslavia and the dramatic decline of all of the former Warsaw Bloc countries taught a horrible lesson that Western forms could not be transplanted without risk of chaos, indeed a likelihood of chaos. I retained a clear memory that the Tiananmen Square protests *had* been an attempted revolution, similar to those that succeeded in Middle Europe later on in the year. I was scornful of Martin Jacques' presentation of the matter in his recent book, *When China Rules The World*:

"Jacques treats the Tiananmen Protests as marginal, speaking just of "a massive student demonstrations in Tiananmen Square that was brutally suppressed by the army."<sup>37</sup> The regime was fighting for its survival, and survival usually is a brutal matter. States that can't suppress open challenges to their authority don't last long, but they also need to be sure enough of their own virtue that they can see brutality as morally justified.

"The men who built first the British state and then the British Empire always saw their own acts of brutality as morally justified – and their own women mostly cheered them on. Maybe we need a book called something like *A Brief History of British State Brutality*, just to keep things in perspective. A logical starting-point would be the Norman invasion of 1066, with whole villages and later whole counties 'laid waste' in order to suppress resistance. And continuing right through to the suppression of the Mau Mau Uprising in Kenya between 1952 and 1960, with mass detention, torture and mutilation used to defend some 30,000 British settlers from the Kikuyu whose land they had taken. (No one has ever been punished, though legal moves are continuing.)

"States survive by doing whatever is necessary for their survival. During the 1991 coup that briefly overthrew Gorbachev and which was the last gasp of the dying Soviet Union, I watched a British news broadcast, BBC2's *Newsnight* if I remember correctly. The Western pundits were talking about a brutal crackdown, but the program showed pictures of Soviet troops in armoured vehicles being harassed by some increasingly confident demonstrators. I felt then the whole thing was collapsing, as indeed it did over the next few days. Boris Yeltsin showed sound instincts by briefly banning the Communist Party, but thereafter he dithered and proved to be a hopeless leader for the new Russia.

"With hindsight, it looks as if Chinese Communism came close to collapse in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Which would probably have meant a general collapse, because China has no strong tradition of respecting elections, and none at all of successful multi-party government. The

<sup>35</sup> *Russian Roulette*. Labour & Trade Union Review 1991

<sup>36</sup> *Democracy & The Communist Manifesto*. Labour & Trade Union Review

<sup>37</sup> Jacques, Martin. *When China Rules the World*, Allen Lane 2009, page 154

Revolution of 1911 led to Western electoral forms being copied, but it's not the same thing as introducing a marketing franchise like Kentucky Fried Chicken or McDonald's, both of which China now has. But fast food thrives because some people like it, and its vendors need not worry if others or even a majority avoid them or despise them. A business can flourish by meeting the needs or desires of part of the society, and need not worry about the welfare of the society as a whole. But large prosperous and diverse societies are not at all natural, they get built up slowly over many centuries and are always at risk. Any society beyond the simple tribal level needs a state and a government to defend it, or sometimes to force changes on it.

"A functional government has to be able to contain or strike down all possible challenges, while still being respected by the mass of the population. After the fall of the Imperial system, no one apart from the Chinese Communists have been able to manage it across China's huge and highly diverse territory. It seems very unlikely that the mixed bag of protestors in Tiananmen in 1989 could have managed it...

"The Chinese Communists were able to take over smoothly in 1949 because they'd been running their own state structures since the late 1920s. It was simply a question of expanding existing forms to include the whole nation. What wasn't feasible was to share power – there was no one else fit to share it with, after the main body of the Kuomintang rejected the idea of a coalition government just after World War Two. Mao in the Cultural Revolution was trying to curb the power of the administrative machine that he'd played a large part in building. But it turned out that young enthusiasts released from party discipline could create only chaos. Mao largely restored the same administrative machine, though with reservations. After his death, Deng and others rejected the very idea that it should ever be challenged again. But he also allowed for more flexibility, the possibility of the system improving itself without losing its essential nature.

"According to *The Tiananmen Papers*, Deng took a clear line. "Of course we want to build socialist democracy, but we can't possibly do it in a hurry, and still less do we want that Western-style stuff. If our one billion people jumped into multiparty elections, we'd get chaos like the 'all-out civil war' we saw during the Cultural Revolution. You don't have to have guns and cannon to have a civil war, fists and clubs will do just fine... Our adversaries are not in fact those students but people with ulterior motives... their goal is to set up a bourgeois republic on the Western model."<sup>38</sup>

"Had Zhao Ziyang won during the power-struggle of May-June 1989 – it's been widely suggested that he used and encouraged the protests as a way of throwing off Deng Xiaoping's paramount leadership – could he actually have made a coherent new China? I've read his book *Prisoner of the State*,<sup>39</sup> and the most worrying possibility is that the man was indeed telling the truth as he saw it. Did he really not see it as a prospective overthrow of Communist Party, of the sort that happened in Middle-Europe later on that

same year, and then in the Soviet Union itself in 1991? You don't even need hindsight to see it so: I recall the BBC discussing the Tiananmen crisis in just those terms during the days before the violent dispersal of the protests.

"Of course Gorbachev didn't see it either, and still does not. Having once been a world leader, he has shrunk to a marginal figure occasionally given a platform by the Western media and despised by his own people.

"Could such a thing have happened in China? The key figure in 1989 was a man called Wan Li, an ally of the Western-minded Zhao Ziyang. He had made his name as a pioneer of Deng's encouragement of household-based agriculture – not exactly private, even today all land is state land, but he promoted a system in which families ran their own farms and the Communes ceased to matter much. In 1989 he was Chairman of the National People's Congress – effectively the chief man in China's Parliament, though the National People's Congress was a weak body and his post was rated below that of the State Presidency. But he might theoretically have called together the Congress and changed the nature of the state, as did happen later on in the Leninist states of Middle-Europe. I don't have a written source, but I'm definite I heard a BBC analysis that was expecting just that.

"Wan Li was on an official visit to the United State during the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, and made speeches sympathetic to the student movement. Some of the protestors planned a demonstration to welcome him back to Beijing in late May. (*The Tiananmen Papers*, page 289). But instead he returned to Shanghai, having been told to go there by the senior party leaders. (Ibid, p 263.) There he was met by Jiang Zemin and others who tried to persuade him to oppose the protests. It's been suggested that he was temporarily put under house arrest: if he was then he was soon won over by Jiang, who at that time was boss of Shanghai and had handled student protests in Shanghai with some cleverness and without violence. We don't know what was discussed between those senior leaders. What we do know is that Wan Li expressed conditional support for the leadership on May 27th, suggesting that a tiny minority of the protestors were conspiring to overthrow the government. (Ibid, p 305.) He kept his position until he retired in 1993, one of many reformers who stayed lukewarm at a critical time.

"The system might have collapsed then – but what would have followed it? Unlike Middle-Europe, there was no older tradition of Western-style democracy to revive. In 1914, most of Middle-Europe was split between the German, Austro-Hungarian and Tsarist Russian Empires. Each of these had systems of multi-party elections, though parliaments had to share power with the hereditary monarch. Had World War One not happened, or had it been ended in early 1915 on the basis that neither side had won, it is reasonable to suppose that the Empires could have evolved into peaceful Federations and that a lot of human misery and death could have been avoided.

"The USA's blundering policies after 1989 include a lot of misunderstandings, including a notion that they brought democracy to most of Europe, when it actually existed almost everywhere when they stepped into Europe's war in 1917. That's one of a whole raft of misunderstandings that ensured that their brief period as the world's only Superpower has translated into very little they can boast about.

<sup>38</sup> *The Tiananmen Papers*, page 187-188

<sup>39</sup> Zhao Ziyang, *Prisoner of the State, the Secret Journal of Zhao Ziyang*, Translated and Edited by Bao Pu, Renee Chiang and Adi Ignatius. Simon Schuster 2009

"Jacques blames Bush Junior for the decline of the USA's global role.<sup>40</sup> But Bush inherited a mess."<sup>41</sup>

I later realised that the *Britannica Yearbook* for 1990 would be likely to include the standard Western view that existed just after the events of 1989: how the West had won over Middle-Europe ("Eastern Europe") and how they nearly got China too. This was indeed just what was said at the time by what was at the time the best English-language reference work:

"In the spring of 1989, a crisis that had been brewing in China for more than two years erupted in a widespread popular movement for political change that shook the foundations of Communist rule. Unlike Communist rulers in Eastern Europe who made unprecedented concessions in the face of similar challenges, the senior leaders of the Communist Party of China (CPC), after weeks of indecisive high-level political infighting, ordered a military crackdown on the student-led democracy movement...

"As a tidal wave of democratization rolled across the European part of the Communist world, the meaning of the Chinese model became dramatically altered. The earlier view of China as a positive example of enlightened transformation worthy of emulation did not survive the military crackdown. In the rapidly changing Communist world, as well as in the West, the 'Chinese solution' became a new code name for political repression, and the actions of China's elderly, hard-line rulers a grim reminder of the totalitarian reflexes of Leninist-style political systems...

"For the next month, tens of thousands of students, who were fundamentally loyal to a regime that they merely wished to see purified of its corrupt elements, continued to occupy the centre of Beijing...

"In the protracted inner-party debate over how to handle the crisis, CPC General Secretary Zhao Ziyang (Chao Tzu-yang), who favoured making concessions, was first isolated within, then removed from, the ruling Political Bureau Standing Committee...

"By occupying both the top party and military positions, Jiang [Zemin] leapfrogged over his potential rival for power, Li Peng, whose unpopularity had become evident during the spring. Yet Jiang's political longevity was uncertain at best...

"The collapse of hard-line Communist regimes in Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, and Romania and the self-emancipation of Hungary and Poland were ill omens for China's leaders.

"The political turmoil in China and the uncertain future of the new leadership so disturbed international financial groups that they withheld offers of new loans and investments. China no longer seemed to be a modernising, politically stable country." (1990 *Britannica Book of the Year*, article by Steven I. Levine, pages 438 & 440)

Since China already had large currency

reserves, the opinions of international financial groups could be safely ignored. Given the chaos and poverty created in other countries that were pushed around by international financial groups, it seems likely that China only remained a modernising and politically stable country because it was able to ignore such advice.

George Soros predicted dire consequences for China in 1989, having had his meddling through well-funded foundations curbed by the Chinese government a little earlier. But Soros knows nothing about the actual creation of wealth: his skill is all about understanding and manipulating existing systems for his own profit. Globalised productive industries still needed China, so they stayed there and expanded.

Predictions that Jiang Zemin would not last long were standard at the time. In fact he served as President from 1993 to 2003 and handed over smoothly to Hu Jintao. The initial expectations that Jiang would fail have been written out of history by almost all Western commentators, who seem to be looking just for reasons to sneer at China and belittle Chinese achievements. We've now had a third smooth hand-over to Xi Jinping, who has actually begun the sort of massive crack-down on corruption that had long been needed. Naturally this too is bitched about by journalists who are determined to be negative whatever China does. I suspect that the core belief is that China should not be rising at the expense of Western power. But I think also that the Western public have lost faith in the efforts of Western government

China today is in much less danger of collapse than the Republic of India. In less danger of stagnation and political deadlock than the United States of America. As I said earlier, the future is open to almost anything

Issue 24, 4th Quarter 2015.  
December 2015

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<sup>40</sup> *When China Rules the World*, page 5

<sup>41</sup> *China Has No Wish To Rule, OK*. Labour and Trade Union Review 202, Nov. 2009. Available at <http://gwydionwilliams.com/42-china/42-1-chinese-politics/reviewing-martin-jacques-when-china-rules-the-world/>