

Mao Zedong:

A Lost Pragmatist

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Much of the contemporary debate in the West surrounding Mao Zedong, his life, his actions, and his writings have centered on the atrocities committed during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. While these atrocities were undoubtedly terrible, the intentions behind them often go overlooked. Indeed, many tend to accept the narrative that Mao, the undisputed leader of the People's Republic, purposefully, knowingly, and heartlessly allowed millions to die and face persecution during these periods, drawing frequent comparisons to the likes of Adolf Hitler.¹ These comparisons often ignore the fact, however, that Hitler committed his atrocities in the context of a racist attitude toward the Jewish people with the intention of wiping them off the planet. In Mao's case, similarly evil undertones do not appear to exist. The most that can be said of Mao is he persecuted his political enemies, and certainly in cases such as Liu Shaoqi this appears to be true. If his only goal were to purge enemies to maintain his own power, however, it is difficult to believe he would use such public tactics; indeed, public purges such as the ones Mao used are not politically popular. A more logical conclusion seems to be that throughout his life, Mao sought out the most pragmatic outcomes — namely, ones that would most benefit China — but after gaining power he did not know how to govern a nation

¹ This generalization is based mostly on experience with commentators and the public, but see Nigel Jones, "From Stalin to Hitler, the most murderous regimes in the world," *Daily Mail*, January 28, 2012.

full of people with different ideas which might be in conflict with his own. This lack of knowledge, coupled with a misplaced faith in certain practices, led Mao to commit these terrible atrocities, despite the best of intentions. To be clear, this does not absolve Mao of these sins — indeed, he should have been self-aware enough to recognize the harm he was causing sooner and put an end to it — but I believe this assessment gives Mao the humanity he deserves, rather than stripping him of his humanity and portraying him as a monster with no moral compass whatsoever.

First it is important to examine Mao's early life, which had a profound influence on him. Mao lived a fairly comfortable life for someone from the countryside, but he was certainly not sheltered from the struggles of those around him. He saw peasants struggling for food during a great famine in his youth, and saw the government, landlords, and merchants completely ignore them.² Certainly, there is the chance that accounts such as Edgar Snow's are slightly biased in Mao's favor, but at the same time there is little incentive for Mao to lie about what he witnessed as a child, and given the fact that he witnessed such hunger and pain, it is hard to believe that he did not sympathize with those people. Indeed, these experiences seem to support the idea that Mao really cared about peasants in the countryside and those at the lowest levels Chinese society. This is further supported by the extent to which he was required to do heavy labor, even as a rather young man at the age of thirteen.³ Perhaps most important during this period, however, was his willingness even as a young man to disavow his own principles for the most pragmatic outcomes. In spite of Mao's distaste for the Classics, for example, he "quoted, in exchange,

² Edgar Snow, *Red Star Over China* (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 135-136.

³ *Ibid.*, 133.

passages from the Classics saying that the elder must be kind and affectionate [in response to accusations of being unfilial]”⁴ Even here, Mao is searching for the most pragmatic outcomes - namely, the ones that would lead to the best outcomes for everyone involved, even if it meant violating his principles. These are not the signs of a heartless, immoral creature being bred in Hunan, but rather the signs of a pragmatic idealist.

Even later in his life, especially in many of his early writings, we do not see any signs of Mao possessing an agenda against a certain group of people, but rather a desire to achieve good outcomes. As early as 1937, we see Mao railing against dogmatic ideas in general and the idea that contradiction is somehow inherently bad:

“If, through study, we achieve a real understanding of the essentials explained above, we shall be able to demolish dogmatist ideas which are contrary to the basic principles of Marxism-Leninism and detrimental to our revolutionary cause, and our comrades with practical experience will be able to organize their experience into principles and avoid repeating empiricist errors.”⁵

Again, this is not the sign of a man who is going to purge his opponents later in life solely for the purpose of maintaining his own power. This is the sign of a man who wants China to succeed, and is not afraid to go against his own Marxist/Maoist principles in order to achieve that success. In fact, this sort of advocacy *encourages* people to turn against him and overthrow him if they feel he is taking them in the wrong direction, because according to his own teachings, dogmatically following him is a bad thing. Someone only interested in his own power would not do this - he would encourage those around him to accept dogmatic principles, telling people to follow him. Of course, during his years in Yanan, Mao does begin some purges and orders many

⁴ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁵ Zedong Mao "On Contradiction," in *Mao Zedong Reference Archive*, previously published in *Selected Works of Mao Zedong* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1977), accessed December 15, 2013, http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_17.htm.

self-criticisms, and these are undoubtedly things that, on the surface at least, seem indicative of someone looking to hold onto power.⁶ On the contrary, however, I believe this is an effort on the part of Mao to maintain some sense of unity in the face of foes both at home and abroad, the KMT and the Japanese. At this point, the CCP was small and fractured, and couldn't afford to have much in the way of dissent. Even if these small purges seemed harsh, they were important in the face of these dangers, and ultimately they served a pragmatic purpose, particularly in the context of revolution where a lack of unity could lead to death.

These purges were also quite effective because in the context of the Party, members consent into following Mao and are expected to do so, which means people respond well to these incentives and proclamations from him. In the context of a nation-state, this doesn't work because those you are responsible for don't necessarily consent to your rule, and this is likely why Mao failed as a national leader despite his success as a revolutionary. As such, rushing to the conclusion that Mao simply wanted power seems misguided, or at the very least overly cynical from a purely academic perspective. However, given his willingness to accept contradictions and reject dogma at other times, ideas which would contribute to a reduction in his power, it is unlikely he simply wanted to maintain power.

From the start, during his time in Yanan, Mao recognized the importance of learning through practice, not through dogma, as he advocated "Discover[ing] the truth through practice, and again through practice verify[ing] and develop[ing] the truth".⁷ While some might claim that

⁶ Zedong Mao, "The Reactionaries Must Be Punished," speech presented in Yanan, China, August 1, 1939, Mao Zedong Reference Archive, accessed December 15, 2013, http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_16.htm.

⁷ Zedong Mao, "On Practice," speech presented in Yanan, China, July, 1937, Mao Zedong Reference Archive, accessed December 15, 2013, http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_16.htm.

Mao simply wanted to instill fear in the hearts of his people, that seems unlikely given the fact that he wanted his people to try things on their own to discover the truth. Again, a man who simply wants to instill fear would advocate simple dogma and then persecute those who do not follow. We also see this openness to criticism on the part of Mao in the case of the Hundred Flowers Campaign. While that did not last long, it still appears clear that Mao supports openness and criticisms in instances where it would be pragmatically beneficial, and supports dogma in instances where that is pragmatically beneficial. That is hardly the policy of an autocrat who simply wants everyone to listen to him to keep power to himself, who would probably never be okay with *any* sort of free-thinking - indeed, the intentions of his actions need to be taken into account, and his intentions here seem noble. Even in private, Mao seemed to recognize the pragmatic importance of having a slightly more open society:

“In private, Mao was more forthright. The critics had got it wrong, he told a conference of senior party officials later that month. There was not too much freedom, but too little. Writings hostile to Marxism, such as the works of Chiang Kai-shek, should be published openly in China, because ‘if you haven’t read anything written [by him], you won’t be able to do a good job opposing him.’”⁸

Given his willingness to support a more open society even in private, it appears clear that Mao was being honest in his support for this liberalization. Perhaps he later thought it went too far, and given the extent to which China became divided and divisive as a result, he was probably correct to have this concern.⁹

Indeed, in the mid-1950s, China was in a precarious position. This was only a few years after the CCP took over, and the country still had deep divisions and resentments from the

⁸ Philip Short, *Mao: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999), 458.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 467.

decades previous. It seems as if Mao wanted the sort of constructive criticism that might move the country forward, but he recognized that given the context¹⁰, it was not a good idea to allow such ideas to flourish. Perhaps this was harsh and undemocratic, and indeed it probably was, but that does not mean Mao was a heartless autocrat. The motivation here seems to be a desire to maintain some sort of stability in China. It is easy to claim that he used the Hundred Flowers Campaign to bring dissenters to the surface, but someone as desperate for power as many claim Mao was would not allow that criticism to come to light at all. While the tactics he used in the aftermath of the Hundred Flowers Campaign were almost certainly a bit harsh, his intentions were not that sadistic, and as such it is still far less problematic than most contemporary commentators like to claim.

With that in mind, one must ask: why did Mao choose to use such harsh, unpopular tactics in an effort to maintain stability and enforce unity? Why not quietly silence some people while putting out massive amounts of propaganda? The answer seems to be that Mao did not know how to run a nation well. Indeed, the tactics he used were more acceptable in Yanan, where everyone consented to his authority and were happy to listen to him. This is not true when it comes to China as a whole, however, where there are far more divergent opinions and ideologies at play. In this context, those obedient to him were not nearly as willing to simply accept what he said, as he discovered in the Hundred Flowers Campaign.¹¹ Based on the evidence, though, it appears as if Mao truly believed opening things up would help the CCP and China as a whole move forward effectively, as he seemed to believe criticism was important -

¹⁰ That is, less than 10 years after the CCP took over and in a time where China was ideologically divided.

¹¹ Xiaoping Deng, "On the Communist Party and the Young Communist League," 1957, in *The Search for Modern China: A Documentary Collection*, ed. Janet Chen, et al., 3rd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2014), 408.

and he appeared prepared to accept criticisms of himself personally. He didn't pull back on the Hundred Flowers Campaign until the very foundation of Chinese stability was threatened; namely, when people called for an end to CCP rule and took to the streets in a sometimes violent fashion.¹² While he fell back on harsh tactics, it does not appear as if he was simply an autocrat; he also had some far more benevolent motivations.

These other motivations become even clearer in the case of Mao's handling of the Great Leap Forward. Indeed, this is the event for which Mao tends to draw the most criticism, as it probably led to the most deaths during his time in charge.¹³ Many of Mao's critics, especially historians such as Jasper Becker, criticize Mao for the failed efforts to duplicate the sort of industrialization that occurred in places like the USSR under Stalin.¹⁴ Indeed, given the devastation these practices caused, it is very easy to cast blame and criticism on Mao for what happened during this period. That being said, given the extent to which industrialization was pervading the world at this point, it's hard to blame Mao for a desire to industrialize. Indeed, a purely agricultural economy likely could not have thrived in the latter part of the 20th century. Moreover, it is important to note that Mao did not have many resources to utilize when it came to rapid industrialization. The Soviet policies when it came to industrialization were the only resources he really had at this point, and while he wanted to adopt them to fit China's situation, as a starting point he did not really have anywhere else to turn.¹⁵ Of course, it didn't help that

¹² Philip Short, *Mao: A Life*, 467.

¹³ Nigel Jones, "From Stalin to Hitler".

¹⁴ Jasper Becker, *Hungry Ghosts: Mao's Secret Famine* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998), 63-64.

¹⁵ Zedong Mao, "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People," in *Mao Zedong and China's Revolution: A Brief History With Documents*, ed. Timothy Cheek (New York: Bedford-St. Martin's, 2002), 159, previously published in *People's Daily* (Beijing), June 1957.

just a few years into this process, all of his Soviet advisers picked up their things and left the country, with nowhere to turn.¹⁶ This is not to say that Mao was competent in his handling of this program; indeed, the extent to which he insisted on continuing the policies he implemented certainly caused much suffering¹⁷, and that much is hard to deny. Firstly, however, it is hard to blame him given the fact that he had no experience when it comes to industrialization, and the departure of his Soviet advisers likely did have a catastrophic impact as a result. Moreover, he did end this program by 1961, which seems to show some concern on his part for preventing human suffering.

Perhaps Mao made the choice to end the Great Leap Forward too late, and indeed it is impossible to deny he did, but at the same time it was probably reasonable for him to think that some sort of suffering was necessary in order to achieve pragmatic outcomes, and he certainly seemed to believe so:

“In the past during the revolution numerous people died without asking anything in return. Why can't it be like that now? If we can eat without paying for it, this would be a tremendous change. Probably in about ten years our production will be very bountiful and the people's morality will be very noble: then we can practice communism in eating, clothing, and housing.”¹⁸

A nation trying to move quickly from an agrarian economy to an industrial one is likely to endure some hardships, and Mao's decision to stay the course, while in retrospect foolish, at the time was at the very least reasonable. Again, this seems to be an instance in which Mao wanted to achieve pragmatic outcomes - and industrializing quickly would have been a great outcome -

¹⁶ Joseph Ball, "Did Mao Really Kill Millions in the Great Leap Forward?," *Monthly Review*, September 21, 2006.

¹⁷ Philip Short, *Mao: A Life*, 505.

¹⁸ Zedong Mao, "Talks at the Beidaihe Conference," speech presented at Beidaihe Conference, Beidaihe District, China, August 1958, in *Mao Zedong and China's Revolutions: A Brief History With Documents*, ed. Timothy Cheek (New York: Bedford-St. Martin's, 2002), 163.

but simply did not know how to implement such policies effectively. While one can certainly make the case that such a prioritization of pragmatics over life is immoral on its own, two things are worth noting: 1. The case for utilitarianism is at least a fair case to make, and doesn't make Mao immoral on its own, and 2. Had Mao been successful, he likely could have saved far more lives in the long run¹⁹, which is probably better even from a rights-based moral framework. Philosophical arguments aside, the gist of this point is that Mao's desire to industrialize quickly was reasonable, and that his willingness to sacrifice some lives in the short run was equally reasonable. While Mao may have made a mistake in waiting so long to end the Great Leap Forward, and while that failure likely does make him culpable for literally millions of deaths in China during that period, it does not put him even in the same ballpark as men like Hitler, who consciously and purposefully killed millions for no purpose other than pure racism.

Of course, Mao's greatest sin during his time in power was probably the Cultural Revolution and its associated purges, self-criticisms, etc. Indeed, this was a low point in China's history where Mao often used the Cultural Revolution to secure his own power in the People's Republic. While that claim is somewhat debatable, it becomes extremely clear from the documents we have from the period, where the Party advocates "Mao Zedong Thought" above all else:

"In the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, it is imperative to hold aloft the great red banner of Mao Zedong Thought and put proletarian politics in command. The movement for the creative study and application of Chairman Mao Zedong's works should be carried forward among the masses of the workers, peasants and soldiers, the cadres and the intellectuals, and Mao Zedong Thought

¹⁹ See Ball for analysis on how he may have *actually* achieved this in terms of both long-term economic productivity and improvements to things like health care.

should be taken as the guide to action in the Cultural Revolution.”²⁰

Indeed, this is a clear indication that one of Mao’s primary goals here was to solidify his own power in the PRC structure. The problem, however, is this does not necessarily make Mao a terrible, despotic ruler. For one, it is worth noting that most leaders have some desire for power, and as such is not enough to demonstrate why Mao was uniquely bad. More importantly, however, it is reasonable to conclude here that Mao also had some very pragmatic, and useful, aims. Indeed, during this period, China was splintered and its leadership had a hard time taking a coherent position, especially with much of the infighting, which can be found throughout Li Zhisui’s book *The Private Life of Chairman Mao*.²¹ What does this mean from a pragmatic perspective for governing a state? For one, it is important for a one-party state to have a clear, coherent position on issues in order for the state to remain stable. When there are large disagreements among the party leadership, not only does that look bad for the state, but it also encourages a certain discontent that one-party states are not well-equipped to handle.

At best this is a solid criticism of the Chinese one-party state system as a whole, but at the very least it makes Mao’s desire to purge those who disagree with him somewhat reasonable. More importantly, though, Mao was not an experienced head of state. In the context of a revolutionary Party, it is *definitely* important to have a coherent stance on issues, as the opponent can easily exploit contradictions in that stance. If Mao was not an experienced head of state, he was certainly an experienced revolutionary, and probably felt compelled to fall back on those tactics to maintain a coherent position - and in the process maintain stability - in China. Perhaps

²⁰ Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, *Decision Concerning the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution* (Beijing: Communist Party of China, 1968).

²¹ Zhisui Li, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao* (New York: Random House, 1994), 441.

these tactics were unfair, harsh, and cruel. Indeed, they almost certainly were. But to say that Mao was simply a despotic ruler with no motivations other than his desire to maintain power is, put simply, unfair. Mao even seems very aware of the necessity of maintaining order by ensuring the Party has a coherent position on the issues: “‘Every day I read documents and other materials with great interest,’ Mao wrote to her from our retreat in Wuhan. ‘Great chaos will lead to great order. The cycle appears every seven or eight years. The demons and monsters will come out by themselves. Their class character dictates it.’”²² Indeed, Mao seems concerned here that the different opinions from rightists appearing “every seven or eight years” leads to great chaos, and thus it is important to ensure that order emerges from it by using that chaos to identify the rightists. Mao is *very* aware of the chaos that results when leaders of the Party start to espouse different positions. This seems to be a very reasonable pragmatic reason for the Cultural Revolution, at least in some capacity. Did Mao lose control of the Cultural Revolution? Maybe. Did he know how to maintain order and a coherent position in the context of a nation-state, and not a revolutionary Party? Certainly not, and these failures definitely led to some tragic consequences. However, it is still not at all clear that Mao’s motivations here were solely to terrorize the people to maintain power. Plus, it is important to remember that if this were his only goal, it is unclear why we would see things such as the Hundred Flowers Campaign. If Mao’s only goal was to terrorize dissenters, why not implement the Cultural Revolution much earlier? Given the fact that he did not, it seems much more plausible that he did so for the pragmatic reason of maintaining order in China in a time where order was not at all easy to come by.

²² Zhisui Li, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao*, 461.

The extent to which Mao Zedong, his policies, and his ideology have been politicized by those both in support and against him makes it very difficult to draw conclusions about his intentions and motivations during his time as Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party. Nonetheless, despite many of the contradictions, inconsistencies, and seemingly heartless actions taken by Mao, it seems unfair to make the blanket assertion that he was an immoral tyrant hell-bent on maintaining power, caring about nothing else in his crusade against all enemies at home. Indeed, given the extent to which Mao throughout his life valued pragmatic outcomes and welcomed contradictions if it meant achieving those pragmatic outcomes, and given the pragmatic reasons for taking the actions he did (even in the case of atrocities such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution), Mao seems like more of a lost pragmatist than a brutal tyrant. To be sure, Mao used some brutal tactics which may not have been necessary, but this seems more a result of his lack of ability to run a state rather than a result of his immorality. Did Mao make some bad choices in an effort to get the pragmatic outcomes he desired? Absolutely, and he deserves plenty of blame for that. But painting him as someone as bad as Hitler, who mercilessly and needlessly exterminated millions, is unjustified. Even if Mao wanted to maintain power, all leaders have that desire. Mao also wanted what was best for China from an economic and political perspective, though, and even if he made bad choices to achieve those goals, and even if he used some unfortunate tactics to achieve them, they still set him apart from others. While Mao will forever remain a controversial figure, exaggerations and *ad hominem* attacks do not advance that discourse, and it is my hope that moving forward, commentators will be more willing to examine these events with a level head.

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