

Why Mao? Why Now? A Brief Essay on Pedagogy and Possibility

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For the past decade or more, I confront students on the first day of my Fall semester undergraduate lecture-seminar on Mao and the Chinese Revolution with the following question: how can we make three modal terms—Chinese, Revolutionary, Marxist—reflect upon one another when we discuss Mao Zedong in a historical register? That is, if we take each of the terms both as a settled proposition and an open question, how do we structure an inquiry that is as historically-driven and contextually-embedded as it is philosophically complex?¹

I begin with a statement: Mao Zedong was a twentieth-century Chinese Marxist revolutionary. I write it on the black/white board. I invite students to contemplate it.

Mao is Chinese. But what kind of Chinese is he? What were the possibilities from within the provoked social, political, and cultural crises of the late-nineteenth- and twentieth centuries in China and the world, such that the activist commitments defined by and through the newly-problematized designation “Chinese” needed to be specified and re-specified continuously through the century? Where does Mao fit in these specifications and how did he contribute to delineating some of their contours?

Mao is a revolutionary. What kinds of revolutionary were possible and likely in twentieth-century China and the world? How did these possibilities change through the century? And how did being revolutionary define, shape, and condition Mao’s being Chinese? How did being Chinese shape Mao’s revolutionary perspective? And how did the Chinese revolutionary movement that Mao helped animate and define inform the revolutionary twentieth century globally?

Mao is a Marxist. What kind of Marxist is Mao? How is his Marxism inflected by his being Chinese and revolutionary in the twentieth-century world? How is Mao’s being Chinese and revolutionary in the twentieth-century world inflected by his being Marxist? What happens to Marxism when we consider Mao’s revolutionary Chinese articulation of the theory and practice?

How and why did Mao become Mao?

Why Mao, and why now?

We begin then with a lot of questions.

This line of questioning immediately plunges students into the complex terrain of a philosophical historical inquiry that situates China in the twentieth-century world of possibility and constraint, while also situating the world in intimate dialogic connection to China. Neither the world nor China will emerge unscathed from this necessary embrace. Hopefully, neither will the students. In this pedagogical model, Mao serves as the conduit into the uneven geographies and temporalities of the twentieth century because of the boldness of the historical struggles his theory and practice animated, as well as the spectacular mode in which those struggles both succeeded and failed. This is of course not the only way to link these issues

historically. It is, however, the proposed challenge of and to the class I teach. The propositional questions hence are intended to disorganize students’ settled thinking from the very outset. Evidently, it will not be enough to narrate Mao’s biographical data, nor simply to chronicle Chinese events by placing Mao in them. It also will not be sufficient to praise and blame in a retrospective faux-objective light. Rather, the task will be to think Mao in his historical and dialectical becoming; it will be to connect the modal terms in historical time and relational rigor to the man and, more important, to the phenomenon we now call Mao. This will require close attention to textual analysis; a patient and slow accretion of the conceptual and political languages and historical contexts necessary for understanding; and strict pedagogical rules discouraging the mobilization of so-called common wisdom from the putatively correct perspective of the present. Nothing will be clarified quickly.

As a general pedagogical goal, students hopefully come to understand that historical and philosophical inquiries are time-consuming, painstaking endeavors. This will be the major take-away. As a more specific historical goal, hopefully students come to appreciate that Mao was not born Mao but became him, and it is in this process of becoming that one critical vantage on modern China history can be excavated. Students will learn that Mao requires deciphering rather than mere judgement; that modern Chinese history requires a deep dive into world history; and that history as a type of inquiry is a practical form of critical engagement with our contemporary moment. All historical inquiry is at the same time inquiry into the present. This is why Mao is relevant now.

And so we begin. Again. Primary sources primarily: the best of Mao, Mao’s top twenty or so hits. Paired with my book, written for the purpose of teaching this class. We begin with Physical Education followed by Miss Zhao’s suicide. These are chronologically correct, of course, because they are entirely of the May Fourth moment (1917-1925) in which Mao comes to public political consciousness and commentary. But how do bodies and women relate to Mao’s thinking? In this early stage, we examine why everyday life became a source of political analysis—a vital form of politics, a form that was later to inform and also doom the Maoist project because of its uncompromising and unrelenting demands. For now, we consider how the individualized social routines of squatting, marriage, or female suicide, for example, become a way to read a world, the world, as a totality. We learn some of Mao’s early textual strategies that persist through much of his writing thereafter. We read these as texts that produce a form of historical understanding, rather than as texts that only reflect a context. We open here questions of general methodology at the same time as we open questions of specific history. I ask students to write about how the everyday can produce historical-philosophical insight; I ask them to think about this through the example of Mao’s early essays. Most of them have

no idea what I want. No matter. Learning is a process. I encourage them to stick with it and with me. Most do.

We dwell for a time in class analysis and friend/enemy binaries so we can hit the "Report on the Hunan Peasant Movement" (1927) with a running start. Conceptual vocabularies are built and historico-analytical problems are defined. We ask: how does the initially rigid analysis of class come to define the revolutionary project and how does the revolutionary project start to get articulated in and alter the rigidity of class terms? Are we eating dinner at a party or are we violently overturning structures of authority and oppression? As we think through the analytical problem of class and the historical problem of the Chinese revolution(s), we start to think about Maoism. That is, we start to elaborate what is distinctive about Mao as an "ism," even if this "ism" is not exclusively a product of Mao himself and nor is it a Chinese locution, as I am careful to note: in China it is "Mao Zedong Thought"—the product of a collectivity—not *Maozhuyi* [Maoism]—the result of a singular genius. I persist with Maoism anyway.

While Mao is not the first Chinese revolutionary or Chinese Marxist to think in terms of the peasantry, he is one of the first to start narrating in a revolutionary idiom Chinese history in terms of the peasant subject of history; he is one of the first to start narrating the revolutionary project in terms of the necessary centrality of social relations to any intent to overturn settled social hierarchies and structures. These become essential perspectival and practical building blocks of "Maoism" *as such*, where the *as such* pertains to Mao's personal struggles with and in the Party to enforce his distinctive worldview over dissenters and others. We discover this through a reading of Mao's denunciation of "bookism" and dogmatism. At this point in the class, students are asked to write about what it means to (re)narrate history through a new subject-position: the peasantry rather than emperors, dynasties, great men, etc.. The best among them now are beginning to understand the project and the challenge of our class, of how to simultaneously question and elaborate Mao as a Chinese, revolutionary and Marxist.

We proceed through the early base periods and into the extended Yan'an moment (1927-1940s), where students now are confronted with the philosophical edifice of Mao's thinking, of Mao Zedong Thought as an "ism" that is as abstract as it is intended to be concrete. This middle section of the class is always the most difficult: not only must I, the instructor, simultaneously teach about the rudiments of a Marxist theory the students know nothing of, but I must also teach them how Mao re-articulates that Marxist theory for the revolutionary project of China-in-the-twentieth-century world. What does it mean to re-read China through Marxist philosophical categories, and Marxist categories through the Chinese historical predicament – through a China that is semi-colonial

and semi-feudal, neither sovereign nor not-sovereign, neither capitalist nor not-capitalist? And then there's the historical fact of the War and Japan, which scrambles all domestic Marxist categorical class certainties and revolutionary partisanship in the effort to unite Chinese from across most social spectra against the predatory occupation.

I ask students to write about the bite into the pear as a problem of epistemology and an historical problem of concrete practice. One time I taught the class, a student submitted a psychedelically-colored painting of a bitten pear instead of an essay. I gave her an "A" and her painting a prime spot on my office wall.

As we move into the post-1949 period, the contradictions between how to implement abstract philosophy in concrete historical terms are now multiplying and metastasizing. The creep of hypocrisy into socialist construction becomes impossible to keep at arm's length. How do we think the anti-bureaucratic position of Mao and of Maoism with the hyper-bureaucratic state and Party institutions that come to dominate over Chinese society? How do we think the genuine pursuit of ruralized socialism with the equally genuine pursuit of urban industrial modernization? How do we think the disasters that unfold? Students' newly-won certainty about Mao/ism gets derailed. They are cast about, and they cast out for ways of grasping how the twentieth century could have gone so wrong. Many students by this point wish to retain the belief that some of the idealist aspirations remain perhaps worth salvaging. We consider the democratic dictatorship; the unevenness of socialist economics; internationalism and third worldist autarky; US war, Soviet belligerence, and China's military necessity; state feminism and family life; cultural revolutionary movements from the Yan'an talks to the Cultural Revolution proper; intellectuals, education, and radical social equality. Among others. Each theme and topic introduces another set of abstract principles and theories along with observable historical conundrums and contradictions. Students are asked to write on one of the contradictory sets. They do so with care and precision, having learned now that that is the only way.

And then we arrive at Mao's death and soon thereafter the death of Maoism. In Fall 2018, that meant addressing Xi Jinping's China dream. I had hoped that the vacuity of the latter would help underscore by comparison the conceptual depth of the former; yet, the slick ideological appeal of Xi demonstrated how eminently forgettable, how vestigial Mao/ism is. Xi Jinping's hyper-nationalism appears to have vindicated Mao's project, not as a socialist endeavor but as a nationalist one alone. Students are confused, but are persuaded that that was all there was to it, after all. Mao becomes Mao in his erasure. I have failed, again. And yet, it is against this erasure that I continue to teach Mao for now.

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