

Book Review: Wang Fanxi's 'Mao Zedong Thought'

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What is the relationship of leadership to revolution (and counter-revolution)? How do socialists adequately adjust their tactics to new and changing situations? What is the role of national liberation struggle in the international revolution? Can socialists struggle with classes other than the workers, and still retain their values? What role does armed conflict have in revolutionary upheavals? What comes first, mastery of theory, or mastery of practice, and can they be separated? What is Mao's place in revolutionary history and thought? These questions and more are addressed in "Mao Zedong Thought" (Haymarket Books), written by the late Chinese Trotskyist leader, Wang Fanxi (1907-2002).

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It may seem odd to put Mao last on that list of those questions, especially in a book about the man, but this is a specific choice, for in reality Wang's book is far more about the former questions than it is about Mao's life. Wang's book can be easily read as a light biography on Mao, or a brief history of the CCP, but it can also be read as platform to discuss the gestalt of revolutionary socialist practice.

In the opening chapter (on the concept of the personality cult) Wang states his aim clearly: "So we oppose the cult, not just in the revolution's interests but even, in a sense, in Mao's. My goal in studying Mao, and Mao thought, is mainly to restore the semi-deified Mao to Mao the human being; to recover from the Mao myth real Mao thought, which was sometimes right and sometimes wrong" (p. 65).

In order to do so, Wang Fanxi by necessity needs to confront the Mao myth and Mao thought with an arsenal of Marxist knowledge. In my opinion, I think he accomplished his task.

On "Mao Zedong Thought"

This brief sketch cannot replace the experience of reading the book, but I hope to hit the main points of "Mao Zedong Thought." The book was edited and translated from the original Chinese manuscript by Gregor Benton. Benton provides a useful biography of Wang's life in the introduction, and a brief history of the tragedy of the Chinese Trotskyist movement, which suffered persecutions not only from the reactionary Guomindang government but eventually the victorious Chinese Communist Party.

In Chapter 1, Wang begins with a discussion of Mao's personality cult, and concludes that personality cults are not the necessary product of violent revolutions. He discusses the Russian Revolution (1917) at length, and states that, on the contrary, "Cults represent the betrayal of the revolution, or at least its entry into reactionary crisis" ... "One can therefore uphold the idea of revolution under [...] a group of leaders, violent if necessary, but one must oppose worshipping the leader and all forms of bureaucratization, which are most consistently represented by, and gain theoretical support from, Stalinism" (p. 58-59).

The book is also as much about Stalin as it is about Mao, since Mao received the bulk of his Marxist education from the Stalinist school. I cannot remember a chapter that did not make reference to Stalin's corrosive influence on Mao's politics (and the world revolution). Wang argues that Mao's victorious revolution happened largely *in spite* of his affinity with Stalin, rather than because of it. I think Wang argues convincingly that the eventual deformations of Chinese communism were the price of Mao's bureaucratic and nationalist (as opposed to internationalist) methods.

The next two chapters deal with the groundwork for "Mao Zedong Thought." Wang Fanxi uses these chapters to discuss, first, Mao's educational background, and second, the eventual deification of Mao inside the CCP, revolving around Mao's faction fight with Stalin's Chinese puppet, Wang Ming.

I think it is important here to point out a component of "Wang Fanxi thought." Wang argues consistently throughout the book that one's educational background shapes their thinking and their eventual Marxism, which is the focus of Chapter 2. Using this formula, Wang believes that Mao's Marxism is necessarily colored by Confucianism and Chinese folklore. Wang believes that Mao arrived at Marxism fairly late in life. (Mao became a Marxist at 27; readers can judge for themselves if this is "too late"). Wang doesn't necessarily describe this as a damning flaw, but he references it repeatedly throughout the book as a relevant factor in Mao's overall development as a revolutionary.

Chapter 3 focuses on Mao's faction fight with Wang Ming. The reality of this faction fight is that, due to the influence of the bureaucracy of the Soviet Communist Party, very little in the way of substantive disagreement took place. Effectively, Wang Ming had Stalin's support, as his puppet in China, for Wang Ming was very familiar with Soviet jargon and politics, and studied in Moscow. Mao, on the other hand, represented the domestic faction of Chinese Communists, and was for a long time fighting in the south of China as a guerrilla. This was the substance of the faction fight, for both Wang Ming and Mao followed Stalin politically.

While Wang Ming often attacked Mao, Mao did not dare to attack Wang Ming directly due to his connections with the Kremlin. This faction fight was a major impetus for Mao to closely study Marxism, and stealth-snipe the Wang Ming faction for "dogmatism" (never mentioning his opponents by name), in order to add theoretical achievements to his organizational and military ones, in his bid for power.

On Mao as a revolutionary

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 are important, for they express Wang Fanxi's opinions about Mao more directly. In Chapter 4 Wang is of the opinion that Mao was impeccable when it came to matters of *military strategy* and was also able to adjust frequently when needed using political tactics. "That Mao is well qualified in this respect goes without saying. Mao made revolution for forty years, led it, and gave full play to his policies for more than ten years, from 1935 to 1947" (p. 121). Mao had to do many political maneuvers to compete successfully with Wang Ming and achieve power in the CCP, which meant many tactical decisions in accordance with the zigzags of Stalin (such as in the ultra-left Third Period that began at the end of the 1920s, or with the Popular Front period of the late 1930s).

This meant little in terms of principle, however. In Chapters 5 and 6, Wang Fanxi is far more critical of Mao's *political strategy*. He speaks about the dispute on China between Trotsky and Stalin, and how Mao largely followed Stalin (during and after his defeat of the Wang Ming faction of the CCP in 1940). He points out that both Mao and Stalin "[didn't know] a foreign language, and both were unfamiliar with Western thinking, which they belittled and despised. They were internationalists in name only, and actually nationalists" (p. 138). Mao eschewed the proletarian revolution in favor of the "bourgeois democratic" revolution in China at numerous points (p. 139), and his concepts in "On New Democracy" showed he adopted Stalinist thinking on semi-colonial revolutions, i.e., that the socialist revolution should be postponed in favor of advancing "bourgeois" tasks first.

Wang remarks on how the Chinese experience reinforced the theory of permanent revolution. According to the theory, as put forward by Leon Trotsky, in semi-colonial states with a majority peasant population, a socialist revolution can still be achieved if led by a militant working-class minority. The country at large may be economically underdeveloped, but the masses can be led by the revolutionary workers in the cities. Accomplishing the tasks of a bourgeois revolution can be accomplished simultaneously with socialist tasks.

This is precisely what happened in Russia in 1917, after the Russian Bolsheviks had created a solid base among the working class. (The theory also has implications on the international scale, as poor countries, normally underdeveloped for socialist transformation, are dependent on the support of more developed countries. The revolution must be international. In that sense, Russia suffered from its post-war isolation, and the ascendancy of the bureaucracy was not far behind.)

The same was accomplished by Mao—to a certain extent. China, despite being a majority peasant country, was led to a socialist revolution by a militant minority. According to Wang, "Were Mao a truly great strategist, he would, whether familiar or not with Marx's, Lenin's, and Trotsky's view of permanent revolution and the history of revolutionary thought in Russia, have reflected independently on his practical experience of the Chinese class struggle and, early on, arrived at the theory of permanent revolution" (p. 147). However, Mao instead adopted a stagist theory that relied on the completion of "democratic" tasks before the socialist ones, leading to a supposed unity of exploiters and exploited (i.e., "The Block of Four Classes").

It is notable that this stagist view would be dropped later in massive bureaucratic swings to the left, such as the "Great Leap Forward," or the "Cultural Revolution," and Mao's promotion of "communism in one country." This is a similar story to the degeneration of Russian socialism. Additionally, as Wang notes later on in the book, the *strictly military* nature of Mao's revolution, which treated the city population as a reserve (as opposed to prime mover), had bad implications for the emerging workers' state. Rather than bringing workers' democracy to China, the revolution brought a very anti-democratic state into being, with Mao as cult leader.

Wang follows this up in Chapter 7 with a discussion on Mao's theory and practice, and specifically discusses Mao's landmark philosophical works, "On Practice," and "On Contradiction." He uses these to discuss both the Marxist theory of knowledge and the close relationship between theory and practice. In particular, Wang asks important questions about what matters more, knowing first then doing, or doing first then knowing?

For Wang, Mao did first and then "knew," and was far more inclined to empiricism than theory. Mao had many writings, and (so argues Wang) a lot of insightful things to say about the military struggle (p. 241), but his theoretical works were the result of his faction fight with Wang Ming, and in certain aspects demonstrate Mao's opportunism, a tactical opportunism that might have been a strength in times of war and political maneuvering but was a weakness in respect to political strategy and building socialism.

Culture and Economy

Wang Fanxi, having a literary background, naturally has a whole chapter dedicated to literature and art, and the problems for socialists. In Chapter 8 he makes reference to Lenin's and Trotsky's ideas on the relationship between artistic expression and the party, and counter-poses these ideas to their warped application in bureaucratized workers' states. The domains of artistic expression and revolutionary policy are effectively different domains, and artists only have to declare for or against the revolution. In China, the policy of having "party" art and literature, particularly with the bureaucracy, only hampered artistic and scientific development, when under a true democratic workers' state, people would have the freedom to develop art and science without bureaucratic hobbling. It is a nuanced and informative chapter. I think Wang makes a particularly jarring stretch with regard to Mao's poetry. Without citing or quoting any of Mao's poetry, Wang suggests that Mao's poetry betrays an imperial, rather than a revolutionary, attitude. Suffice it to say, I found this section of the chapter on literature to be fairly weak.

Chapter 9 is on economy and self-reliance in one country. Wang discusses the development of Mao's economic ideas. Mao's ideas were informed by the experience of the long civil war and problems of scarcity, which led Mao and others in the leadership to resort to various methods of collectivization under Kuomintang blockade, and inside a peasant economy. Wang argues that this led, by the time of the CCP victory, to an attitude that prioritized subjective initiative over objective conditions.

Mao and the communist guerrillas were able to survive the civil war via various democratic and collectivist methods (and no small amount of stealing and ransom), but ultimately this made them confident, too confident, that the plans of communists can override the actual economic conditions on the ground, when in reality, communists should prioritize an understanding of the objective conditions. Combined with Mao's Chinese nationalism, this led to a policy of "communism in one country" which is basically just Stalin's "socialism in one country" repackaged for China. After taking power and especially after the Sino-Soviet split, Mao would more-or-less abandon any commitment to internationalism (except in circumstances relating directly to China's national security, i.e., the Korean war). In truth, this meant an abandonment of the world socialist revolution.

Additionally, Wang relays official government accounts of Mao's "investigative" trips into the country to see the outcome of CCP policies, only to encounter loads of brown-nosing. It's all the funnier due to Mao's own (seeming) obliviousness to this. Wang argues that the engine of the bureaucracy hampered the relay of information, making more difficult correct policy and more likely disastrous episodes and zigzags, such as the "Great Leap Forward."

Wang and Trotskyism

Wang would later make several writings in exile that were added to the book as appendixes. One of these was his reflections on the reasons for the victory of the CCP and the failure of the Chinese Trotskyists to anticipate the victory or adapt to it, once it occurred. Wang says of himself that he initially believed "the Soviet Union had turned into a bureaucratic collectivist state" (p. 278) and he applied the same reasoning to the CCP, arguing that the Chinese experience was in no way a proletarian revolution.

Later, however, he abandoned the flawed perspective of bureaucratic collectivism and returned to Trotsky's analysis that the Soviet Union under Stalin, while establishing socialized property, was ruled by a counter-revolutionary caste that sought a defense of its own privileges and was not for proletarian revolution. Stalinist states like the USSR and China, in their compromises with

capitalism and their desire to chain revolutions to their own nationalist foreign policy goals, ultimately threatened the existence of socialism. Thus were required further political revolutions by the workers, to install genuine socialist democracy.

Wang Fanxi seemed assured that “impelled by events [on a world scale], a genuine and powerful left wing may come into being within the CCP [...] in the direction of a new anti-bureaucratic revolution. Such a revolution would aim to establish a real government of workers and peasants and to ally with the world proletariat to speed the advance to socialism” (p.292).

Wang had believed that the Chinese Trotskyists (and world Trotskyism) were correct in establishing the Fourth International. He also believed that the Chinese Trotskyists had (from the pre-1949 perspective) good reasons for doubting the efficacy of the CCP. However, Wang argues that he and his comrades initially were slow to account for the victory and missed some vital aspects of the movement that could have clued them in on the CCP’s capacity to overthrow Chinese capitalism. Wang does not mention the many faction fights that split Chinese Trotskyism and only discusses the Trotskyists’ seeming inability to adapt to Mao’s victory. Gregor Benton provides that context in the introduction.

In light of the victory, Wang saw many comrades turn to Stalinism, and he argued against them, saying, “First, while it is true that Stalinist parties are [not] reconciled to capitalism [...] there is still no reason to believe they can adopt a strategy and tactics necessary for socialist [i.e., international —C.B.] revolution. Second, even if Stalinist parties can under certain circumstances fight capitalism and carry out revolution, we should not neglect the equally fundamental question of how they do so, and what sort of regimes they form” (p. 286).

It seemed clear to Wang that bureaucratized workers’ states (such as in China) could establish socialized forms of property, but not actually work toward the goal of socialism. For Wang, Mao and the CCP were an obstacle to socialism, not a bridge. Wang was thus critical of the slow and mechanical way some of his comrades on the mainland applied Marxist principles, but held steadfast to the Trotskyist critique of Stalinism and the corrosive effect that bureaucracy has on the struggle for socialism. He did not close his eyes to the victory of Mao and the CCP, but saw in that victory the seeds of the potential destruction of Chinese socialism.

Conclusion

Comrade Wang’s contribution to both the Trotskyist critique of the Maoist revolution, and to socialist thought in general, is well worth the read, both to students of the Chinese revolution and to modern socialists seeking to reflect on their own practice.

Wang’s book helps to put Mao in perspective. He was a man with many skills and powerful leadership qualities, as anyone must be to lead a revolution to victory, especially in the fire of brutal civil war. His experiences gave him some insights. In the final proper chapter, Wang concludes that Mao is perhaps the greatest of all *Chinese* leaders, if judged from the standpoint of *Chinese national history*; however, Mao is *not comparable to Marx or Lenin*, if we judge him with a *truly socialist lens*. In that regard, Mao’s positive qualities are overcast with his bureaucratic methods, opportunism, and narrow Chinese nationalism.

Wang’s work is particularly important in the modern era, when the world movement is confronted by a modern China that appeals to socialism in words but is capitalist in deeds. As we have pointed out previously, modern China is no longer a deformed workers’ state. Today, the CCP bureaucracy is not just enriching capitalists in China, but has Chinese capitalists among the party leadership—people

who have gotten rich by exploiting the labor-power of Chinese workers. China is, furthermore, imperialist in the Leninist sense of the term, exporting capital to other countries that cannot be used profitably in the homeland, resulting in global exploitation of labor, just like the United States, France, Germany, and other imperialist countries do.

Wang's perspective on the corrosive effects of bureaucracy, and his wisdom in approaching the problems confronting socialist revolution, is badly needed now. The *genuine* gains to the Chinese working class, which were accomplished by the 1949 victory of the CCP, are in jeopardy, and this is largely because China did not achieve workers' democracy—and today has no democracy.

Mao can rightly be credited with many positive progressive gains, but the 21st century restoration of capitalism is also, now, a part of his legacy. "Mao Zedong Thought" can help us understand why. It was released in July 2021, and is available at Haymarket Books.

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