

Maoism—a New Religious Formation in the People's Republic of China

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A few words may first be said of the fate of the established religions in China, when Mao Tse-tung in 1949 from T'ien An Men, Peking, declared the new regime, the People's Republic of China (PRC), which like other Communist regimes, looked upon religion as opium for the people. Karl Marx wrote: "The abolition of religion as illusionary happiness of the people is required for real happiness."¹ Very soon after the take over of power, Chow En-lai called representatives of various religions to Peking as Government guests to discuss the future of these religious organisations and assured them they could go ahead as usual, provided they co-operated with the government.² Mao had stated before 1949 that everyone is free to believe or not to believe in religion, which statement was later on passed as Article 88 of the National Constitution.³ Moreover, Mao's attitude towards religion was declared in his article On New Democracy: "In the field of political action Communists may form an anti-imperialist and anti-feudal front with some idealists and even religious people, but we can never approve of their idealism or religious doctrine."⁴ Working under strict limitations the religious groups, at the outbreak of Cultural Revolution in 1966, had to stop all religious activities, and, as far as I am informed, have not resumed any public activity.

Meanwhile, Maoism clearly has filled the vacuum of religious need in PRC, and thus may be regarded as a religion, if one approves of J. B. Pratt's definition of religion: "Religion is the serious and social attitude of individuals or communities toward the power or powers which they conceive as having ultimate control over their interest and destinies."⁵ Journalists Warren Phillips and Robert Keatly, who more than perhaps any other visitors to the PRC during the last years have had opportunities of meeting high and low in China: students, farm workers, family planning specialists, factory workers, statesmen, and diplomats, in a well documented book published in 1973, have described China's goal to transform human nature to con-

¹ *Contribution*, 42.

² Cf. Lyall, 65. Cf. Bush, 187 ff.

³ Cf. Mao 1965 ff, 3, 263. Cf. Gray, 23.

⁴ Mao 1965 ff, 1, 381.

⁵ Pratt, 2.

form with the selfless "Maoist man" ideal. They cite various evidences that the Chinese people are not yet converted to selfless service. Their presentation of the situation today gives clear evidence that Maoism is China's new religion.⁶

I. *The Doctrine of Maoism*

The name of Mao Tse-tung is highly respected both in official circles and among the masses, just as in China's past history the names of great men have taken their places among the immortals. Other members or comrades in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) are referred to simply and familiarly as Lin-piao, Liu Shao-chi, Chow En-lai, but Mao Tse-tung is virtually always respectfully addressed as *Mao chu-hsi*, "Chairman Mao".⁷ The proper name + *chu-hsi* is not used in today's China of other chairmen but is only used of the Leader with capital L. The predominance of the name of Mao is stressed by Stuart Schram, who emphasizes how the name of Mao is uttered with respect and veneration.⁸ He notes, as an example, the difference between Stalin and Mao in this respect that Mao's name is mentioned 280 times in six pages of *Jen-min Chih-pao* (The People's Daily Paper), while Stalin's name is mentioned only 99 times in the leading Moscow paper on the day of his last National day.⁹ Reading through back issues of *Chinese Literature*, one finds how highly Mao's name is mentioned in prose and verse. For example, here are some verses by Tsui Ching-wen:

"Spread out the map and reckon up the distance
from here to Peking a thousand miles and one;
But to us the distance is nothing,
For our Chairman Mao is here, here at our side.

Whenever we open the Chairman's Works,
A red sun lights up our minds;
Then it seems as if one beloved, our great leader,
Were here, here in our observation post."¹⁰

When a revolutionary system tries to uproot an ancient religious one, a crisis is unavoidable. The indigenous Chinese conceptions and religious customs are several thousands of years old. Buddhism, Christianity and

⁶ Cf. Warren, ch. "New Man, New Religion".

⁷ Lin Piao, 1 ff.

⁸ Cf. Schram, 341 ff.

⁹ Cf. *ib.*

¹⁰ Tsui, 88.

Islam have been in China for more than a thousand years. Old symbols, myths and rites had to be replaced with new ones. Chairman Mao in the course of a conversation with Edgar Snow, the late American journalist, has acknowledged that it was not easy for the Chinese people to give up the 3 000-year-old cult of ancestors and emperors.¹¹ Mao Tse-tung at the zenith of his popularity was clever enough to utilize this situation. It is told that when crowds gathered to the first Party Congress at T'ien An Men, soldiers were ordered out to prevent the masses from making *k'ou-t'ou*, "traditional religious adoration."¹² His person is identified with the life giving forces of nature which can be seen in large pictures of Mao which radiate Mao's thought to *p'u-t'ien-hsia*, "Over all the world" and which is also the theme of many poems. In the PRC National Anthem Mao has palpable divine qualifications, as can be seen in the word translated "deliverer". In the original text the word is *chiu-hsing*, "save-star"=saving-star. The first verse runs as follows:

"From the red East rises the sun,
In China appears Mao Tse-tung,
He works for the people's welfare,
He is the people's great deliverer."¹³

Mao is, in this way, made equivalent to the mythical rulers Fu-hsi, Shen-nung and Huang-ti, who are the supposed founders of China's earliest civilisation and the arts of writing, medicine, farming etc. Mao, the hero of today is an authority on anything from the finer arts to the use of manure. Mao's thoughts can enable the incredible to be accomplished: the building of a bridge over the Yangtse-river, uncomparable production in industry and farming, marvelous operations in surgery etc., all of which are described in popular essays and poems.¹⁴

The source material for the teaching of Maoism is *Mao Tse-tung hsüan-chi* (the Four Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung),¹⁵ in which old and new ideas, Western and Chinese are collected, forming to a certain extent a new Chinese philosophy. The diminutive book *Mao chu-hsi chi-lu* (Quotations

¹¹ Cf. Snow, 17.

¹² Cf. Haglund 1974, 100 f.

¹³ Haglund 1972, 160.

¹⁴ Cf. *Chinese* 10, 40.

¹⁵ Mao 1965 ff, 3, 69 ff.

from Chairman Mao Tse-tung), popularly called Mao's little Red Book, became the pocket testament which was carried by all by day and placed by the bedside at night, and was of great importance for the propagation of Maoism.¹⁶

Mao's thoughts possess *shen-pien*, "God changes", a wonder working power, in almost any phase of human life. "By correct use of Mao's thought, human labour can accomplish anything. Given human muscles and minds difficulties can be overcome and the incredible accomplished."¹⁷ Besides the examples of Mao's thought-power given in my thesis, the following report on education for self-understanding in connection with illness illustrates this further: Each patient in Tientsin Psychiatric Hospital studies a particular essay by Mao Tse-tung designed to deal with his/her central problem as diagnosed. Leigh Kagan gives the following example of this infinite power of Mao's thoughts:

"A male teacher had become friendly with a female teacher, but she was not interested in him since she already had a boy friend. The male teacher became sick because of this and thought everyone was against him. He was given traditional treatment by Chinese herbal medicine and acupuncture. He was helped for a time but at other times he was unbalanced. He was then given Mao's essay, 'Where do Correct Ideas Come From?' to study and through repeated study and discussion was helped to realize that his illness arose because his ideas came not from reality, but from his own imagination. Even the teachers joined in the discussions in order to tell him that they had no plots against him. In this way he came to see his own mistaken views and was able to write down his new understanding and even tell his experience to others. Other patients were given Mao's essay 'Serve the People', to teach them the foolishness of working for fame and gain leading to nervous breakdowns. One ought to work in order to serve selflessly—not to be proud and worry about one's own performance. Man's main problem is his own vanity; we work not for ourselves but for the revolution. Education through the study of the works of Mao Tse-tung rectifies the patients' incorrect views of reality."¹⁸

The contents of Mao's Selected Works, according to David N. Stowe, deals with Mao's system of values and the means of achieving its goals. Mao's thought can be divided into two main areas of concern, the one related to values and the other to reality, i.e. the working out of a certain goal of action Happiness which is the first of these values mentioned by Stowe,

¹⁶ Lin Piao, 28 f.

¹⁷ Haglund 1972, 144.

¹⁸ Kagan, 38 f.

is an old Chinese desire which included such qualities as in the West of pleasure, joy, self-realization, contentment, wealth, but also above all in China the gift of sons. In the PRC the emphasis is on the happiness of life under Mao after 1949 in contrast to the old bitterness of the past. Happiness in the PRC stands for stability and security, i.e. security in the job one does, ability to give the children an education, the certainty of medical care for the family and a guaranteed pension on retirement. According to the Communists none of these things were possible for a man of the masses before 1949. Happiness thus means security for a decent life which is provided for all. The days of deprivation, exploitation and neglect are at an end.¹⁹

In China today we find art, theatre, drama groups, musical and groups of athletes travel throughout the country; not so much art for the sake of art but rather, art for the making of propaganda for the thoughts and aims of Maoism. Scientific, technical and educational advancement are emphasised as instruments for the development of the country and the increase of power of the Chinese people.

Western fashions, cosmetics and culture are to be avoided; plainness of dress, a similarity of the masses is to be striven after. The Communist government protects and looks after the ancient heritage of Chinese art as something of value for the exaltation of the genius of the Chinese people. As is well known, Mao is a recognized poet, his writing follows the pattern of T'ang. It would seem as though true beauty is to be found in all that is useful for the building up of society rather than in aesthetic qualities. Art is represented in fields of golden grain, in irrigation and flood control, in tractor assembly lines, in pictures of the Yangtse river bridge, in the marching of crowds with coloured banners etc., all of which show the life and vitality of the Chinese people.²⁰

The central world problem today is that of production, and it is also a crucial concern in China. The basic need of the Chinese people can be met now. There was the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950's, and there have been other campaigns to produce more steel and other basic products so that the needs of all might be met. The people have been urged to sparseness in living, to save, to work hard and continuously in order that the country might grow strong and that the basic necessities of life such as food,

¹⁹ Cf. Stowe, 20.

²⁰ Cf. *Chinese* 6, 131 f.

housing, jobs, education, health-care, and even a bicycle might be met and made available to all. Famine must be wiped out and disease eliminated. These are the vital values that must be met. The piling up of luxury goods is not to be thought of.²¹

The physical resources of a country are its natural resources which are available for development such as water, minerals and others. Capital may be produced in the process of development of industry, agriculture, education, technical skills, scientific skills, investments and foreign aid. It has also its human resources such as man-power, labour, technical skills, skills of management, enterprise, innovation and so on. Mao takes the natural resources of his country and makes use of them, they belong to the Chinese inheritance. He also knows how to make use of the human resources. But of greater importance is the element of faith, and necessity in human effort to do work. There are no limits to what a people can do if rightly organized and rightly motivated. All varieties and types of human skills are included. Mao does not separate or classify human capacities—factory workers, peasants, handcraftsmen, intellectuals, military—all are labourers practising in the walk of life they are fitted for. All constantly must learn from the masses. Learning, as long as it is only theoretical, is of little value until it is put into practice and developed.²²

According to David N. Stowe, “the mystical power of Mao’s presence among his people, in person and in his writings, is understood much as the power of the Holy Spirit is envisaged by Christians—opening minds, correcting errors, motivating and inspiring action”.²³ It is practise leading to involvement. From practise come the essential skills leading to development. Within a commune each member is responsible for a task. He is encouraged to give his best work for the good of all, since everything depends on the moral quality of the individual. Although the Mao system is materialistic, it is the spiritual resources which predominate. There is a spiritual ethical element which overcomes obstacles and determines China’s role in world history.²⁴

²¹ Cf. Stowe, 20 ff.

²² Cf. *ib.*

²³ *Ib.*

²⁴ Cf. *ib.*, 38 f.

II. *The Ethic of Maoism*

China's "Four olds" (olds ideas, old culture, old customs, old habits), are to be destroyed, not because they are old but because they were used by the bourgeoisie to corrupt the mind of man and conquer his heart in a bid to attain the goal of restoring their rule.

Religion in all its forms, by current Chinese definition, was included in the four olds. The meaning of life today is expressed in the "Four News" (new ideas, culture, customs, habits) and aims at serving the workers, farmers and soldiers. To serve the people in a correct way, one must first discover one's faults, correct them and thus become the new ideal man who applies the virtues of Maoism: patience, diligence, simplicity, unselfishness, and readiness to serve others.

Heroes or bodhisattvas such as Lei Feng, Wang Chieh and others who lived their lives according to the thoughts of Mao, are written about and serve as examples to be followed. Lei Feng was a driver in a PLA unit stationed at Shenyang. All his life he studied and applied Mao's thoughts in a living way, and served the people wholeheartedly. He died in the course of duty on August 15, 1962. Chairman Mao called on the people of the whole country to "learn from Comrade Lei Feng".²⁵ One verse from a poem by Yang Chin-fan called "In praise of Lei Fang" reads:

"Red as the fighting banner
Evergreen as Cypress and Pine
Lei Fang you are always by our side,
Under the banner of Mao Tse-tung thought
All our life we fight."²⁶

This illustrates the old Chinese conception that the dead still partake in the life of their living family; here the conception is carried into the life of society as a whole and not limited to the immediate family.²⁷

Self-discipline is a quality regarded highly. The Spartan code of Communist ethics is boosted in films, fiction, theatre plays all of which show the values of sexual repression, selflessness, and the importance of hard work. It is the happiness of others that counts in the building up of society. If one achieves the condition of happiness it is because one has put one's

²⁵ *Chinese* 6, 84.

²⁶ *Ib.*

²⁷ Cf. Soothill, 196 ff.

neighbour first. Individual, personal freedom is not a value to be sought, but rather a willingness to work for the aims of the leader and what he regards as right for the welfare of society. The moral value of selflessness is expressed in the sentence: "Serve the People." All those who are socially constructive and who strive to build up the country put the welfare of others first. One should constantly criticise oneself and struggle to cultivate selflessness. Groups also gather to criticise one another. Especially in winter is there time for this when no work can be done in the fields. Time, then, should also be spent in study; Mao's standard of righteousness in word and action must be met with: no selfishness, laziness in work, corruption, no striving after leadership or for the first place, but rather the striving with wholehearted devotion for the good of society.²⁸

At the same time as individual moral goals have to be striven after, so have social goals for the society in order that society should be selfless and just, and the country in its relations with other countries should seek justice selflessly. Mao seeks to win a position of self-respect for the China he is building up, and a position of dignity among the nations. This feeling Mao expressed when he said: "Today China has stood up."²⁹ China wishes to resume its position as the Middle Kingdom. Maoism is a movement of national revival, becoming a social revolution for other countries to copy if they can.

At the heart and centre of all is labour. The propaganda literature which comes from China bears this out with its stories of heroes, men who are humble, selfless, putting others first, daring themselves to tackle the impossible and master the situation with the help of Mao's thoughts. Stories such as that of the old man who removed mountains illustrate this.³⁰ So we find human labour leading to special skills aided by the thoughts of Mao and faith in Mao lending strength to the accomplishment of tasks however difficult.

Another aspect in the ethic of Maoism is *cheng-feng*, "rectification of thought". It has been said that "Rectification campaigns are powerful, magic weapons."³¹ Mao stressed the importance of such campaigns in Yen-an as early as 1945. In order to reach ideological parity and revolu-

²⁸ Cf. Haglund 1972, 130.

²⁹ Han, Suyin, 542.

³⁰ Mao 1965 ff, 3, 117.

³¹ K'ung, 124.

tionary discipline one must learn of earlier mistakes and thus avoid new mistakes.³² Outside of China this is commonly known as brain-washing. This process of rectification and regeneration can be divided into three stages: 1) The large togetherness: group identification. 2) Ringing in of environment: the emotional period of conflict and opposition. 3) Surrender or subjection and regeneration.³³ Mao says: "What is correct invariably develops in the course of struggle to what is wrong. The true, the good and the beautiful always exist by contrast with the false, the evil and ugly, and grow in struggle with the latter."³⁴ This sounds like the teaching of Lao Tsu. What in fact has to be confessed and washed away are social, academic, and personal incorrectness. The personal deals with a person's egoism, selfishness, pride, arrogance, extravagances and sensitiveness. The confession of these leads to a perfect state of heart surrender to socialism and the CCP. When this process reaches its completion, the experiences that follow will be of great emotional release, a sign of being born again and as such becoming a member of the new society.³⁵

A friend of mine, Kentaro Shiozuki, visited China in August 1973 as a representative of among other groups the Y.M.C.A. He found that the spirit of the cultural revolution was alive at all levels. Among those he met, old and young, farmers, workers and intellectuals, no one was ignorant of the changes that were taking place in the society or of the active part each and all were expected to give in the form of selfless service. Men and women seemed excited about the future and confident that they were helping to build a better China. Christians claimed that the process of self-transformation was Biblical and selfless service both Biblical and one of the cornerstones of Maoism.³⁶

'People with problems, wives and husbands who don't get along, women with bad tempers, men who disregard their neighbours' interests are helped by their local neighbourhood committees to reform. Using the methods of criticism, struggle and self-criticism, neighbourhood units work with persons in difficulty, pointing out to them the relevant passages in Mao's thoughts, and giving them support and aid in changing their behaviour in a

³² Cf. Bull, 245.

³³ Cf. Lifton, 371, 379.

³⁴ Mao 1965 ff, 3, 117.

³⁵ Cf. Houn, 33 f.

³⁶ Cf. Shiozuki, 1 f.

fashion somewhat reminiscent of group therapy. Only in rare cases when this treatment fails are the services of a divorce court, or the administrators of justice brought into play."³⁷

III. *The Cult of Maoism*

All religions have certain symbols and solemn cults which effect the social, ethical, aesthetic, emotional and spiritual lives of the people. To gauge the impact of Mao Tse-tung in a religious way requires the examination of several factors. In Maoism, without pressing the concept of religion too far, there are the following features of interest to observe: Mao's thoughts have a wonder-working power (see above), the confessions of the people and adoration, pilgrimages and sacred meals, the development of the cult with visible signs such as, badges, statues, and pictures is taking place.³⁸ Pre-Communist China had a long history and tradition of religious pilgrimage with pilgrims travelling to various Buddhist and Taoist sacred places. The motivation for such journeys was that they expressed thanksgiving for some blessing received. Following the ascension of Mao to power, pilgrimages to Buddhist and Taoist strong-holds have been supplimented or replaced by travels to, amongst other places, Mao's birth-place in Shao-shan, to the place where the Long March started or its terminal point at Yennan, and to the famous Peking Imperial City Gate, the T'ien An Men where in 1949 Mao declared The People's Republic of China. The motivation for these pilgrimages differs from those of the past: "The pilgrimages are not undertaken in the old traditional way, but rather in the manner of a visit to a museum where young and old go to look and learn. They come to see a place that is eventful in the history of Chinese Communism and study the thoughts of Chairman Mao."³⁹ During the Cultural Revolution, such pilgrimages were given new energy as millions of Chinese Red Guards travelled all over the country to the historical landmarks of Chinese Communism. These places serve as an inspirational function, when "instructions are sought from a spiritually present Mao".⁴⁰

Maoism has led to a new unity and is one of the reasons for certain liturgical developments. For the new generation that has grown to maturity

³⁷ Bacon, Margaret, 35.

³⁸ Cf. Haglund 1972, 153 ff.

³⁹ *Ib.*, 166.

⁴⁰ MacInnis, 29.

in revolutionary China, liberation has become a heritage. The bitterness of the past and the happiness of the present must not be forgotten, but must be taught to the children growing up, and be passed on from generation to generation.

Ceremonies include standing before a portrait of Mao each morning asking instruction for the day, reading portions of the works of Mao before meals with gratitude, also reporting from the work of the day at night.⁴¹ As prayer is at the core of all religions as well as meditation it would seem that this is practised in China today.

The cult of Mao seems to reach its climax in what is commonly called *i-k'u fan* "Bitterness meal".⁴² Basically this meal consists of eating wild herbs and vegetables as a method of recalling the days before liberation when such food was all the poor starving people had to eat, and serves as a reminder of past bitterness and present sweetness.

The Chinese people of today, like the Chinese of yesterday, are a religious people. Judging by relevant sources, some religious forms appear even when traditional religions have ceased to exist.⁴³

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⁴¹ Cf. *ib.*, 31.

⁴² Cf. Haglund 1972, 154 ff.

⁴³ Cf. Nottingham, 1.

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