

# HERETICS OF CHINA

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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF MAO AND DENG

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During his years in power, Mao Zedong initiated three policies which could be described as radical departures from Soviet and Chinese Communist practice: the Hundred Flowers of 1956-1957, the Great Leap Forward 1958-1960, and the Cultural Revolution of 1966-1976. Each was a disaster: the first for the intellectuals, the second for the people, the third for the Party, all three for the country.

— RODERICK MACFARQUHAR, *THE SECRET SPEECHES  
OF CHAIRMAN MAO*

In many ways, [Deng Xiaoping's] reputation is underestimated: while Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev oversaw the peaceful end of Soviet communist rule and the dismembering of the Soviet empire, he had wanted to keep the Soviet Union in place and reform it. Instead it fell apart; communism lost power—and Russia endured a decade of instability [...]. Perhaps the most influential political titan of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Deng succeeded in guiding China towards his vision where his fellow communist leaders failed.

— SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE, *TITANS OF HISTORY*



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## INTRODUCTION

Renowned economist Larry Summers argues that we speak of an Industrial *Revolution* because, for the first time in history, the period saw living standards rise by approximately 50% during the lifespan of a single human being. The current growth rates in Asia, Summers contends, indicate that under the same conditions as those that characterized the Industrial Revolution, living standards in the region would have risen by around 10,000% within a single lifespan. Summers goes on to predict that the “rise of Asia and all that follows it will be the dominant story in history books written 300 years from now with the Cold War and the rise of Islam as secondary stories” (Mahbubani 2008, p. 10). At the heart of what Singaporean intellectual Kishore Mahbubani terms *Asia’s march to modernity* lies the story of China’s remarkable rise from being the sick man of the continent at the dawn of the twentieth century to being its economic growth engine and dominant power less than 100 years later.

The chapters of that story are shaped as much by the principal protagonists’ and antagonists’ hopes and fears, dreams and

nightmares, moments of hesitation and occasions of recklessness, as they are by the interplay between historical, social, and geopolitical forces beyond their control. The ceaseless efforts of Chinese intellectuals, warlords, government officials, and revolutionary peasants to reunify their nation, to end decades of foreign interference, to achieve genuine national independence, and to realize the dream of securing both wealth and power culminated in the founding of Communist China in 1949. Aside from the efforts of numerous individuals, it took several small-scale wars with Western powers, the end of over 2,000 years of dynastic rule, invasion and occupation by a foreign aggressor, and a civil war for this change to occur.

Having secured political unity and reasserted national independence, Mao Zedong, the new regime's paramount leader, embarked on an intense search for a distinctively Chinese path to modernization. However, rather than fostering wealth and power for the nation, his experiments precipitated the most severe famine in human history, the destruction of both national treasures and cultural relics, and the poisoning of the very fabric of Chinese society. Hence, Mao's successor, Deng Xiaoping, sought to forge a fundamentally different path to modernity. His policies lifted 400 million Chinese out of dire poverty, underpinned the longest period of sustainable economic growth in human history, and helped to return China to the world stage. Mao's path was paved with ideology, while Deng's was founded on pragmatism. Mao's approach failed spectacularly, while Deng's succeeded remarkably.

Yet, despite their underlying differences, both paths shared one core element—outright heresy toward the prevailing system of political beliefs. Chairman Mao rejected the Soviet orthodoxy, condemned blind faith in the Marxist-Leninist creed, and enjoined his colleagues to work toward a distinctively Chinese strategy for modernization. Mao's personality, leadership style,

and decision-making approach all facilitated the emergence of a new state ideology centered on his vision for the future. Mao's colleagues in the upper echelons of power swore allegiance to this new ideology. The dogma became sacrosanct. Chairman Mao began with heresy concerning the Marxist and Soviet orthodoxy and ended up creating a religion. Deng Xiaoping's heresy was born from the utter failure of the Maoist religion to advance China's quest for modernization. China's new heretic-in-chief ushered in a cognitive revolution intended to emancipate the mind, reject blind faith in ideology, and embrace pragmatic policy making.

This book will investigate these heresies by analyzing the heretics themselves. However, it will not provide a thorough chronology of the historical events that took place during the Mao and Deng eras. It will not elaborate on the social and economic forces at play. Nor will it expand on the Cold War environment in which China found itself embedded. All these factors have previously been documented in several excellent essays. Instead, this book aims to arrive at a better understanding of the principal actors, their motives, and their decision-making processes. For this reason, the questions addressed in this book are wide-ranging. I question why bright and astute decision makers preferred to profess blind faith in a man-made ideology than to rely on their own critical faculties, how this faith was nurtured and nourished *despite* the negative feedback from reality, and how psychological defense mechanisms were put in place to avoid confronting the negative consequences of the enacted policies. Further, I analyze Deng's process of coming to terms with Mao's—as well as his own—failings, accepting responsibility for bad policies, and constructing a new decision-making environment.

This book views the political protagonists and antagonists as the masters of their own destinies. It does not seek to portray

them as mere pawns controlled by the unswerving hand of historical necessity. Nor does it aim to caricature them as hapless slaves to some innate, insatiable hunger for political power. Rather, I hope that a psychological approach can facilitate a more realistic understanding of human behavior in highly complex and dynamic situations.

The investigation begins in **Chapter 1** with a historical overview of China's accelerating decline throughout the nineteenth century. This introductory chapter depicts China's so-called *century of humiliation* (1839–1949). It offers some context as to the repeated failures to achieve national rejuvenation over the decades. The psychological analysis starts in **Chapter 2** with a detailed discussion of Mao's restlessness. I will argue that Mao was locked in a never-ending battle against recurring self-doubts, which left him with a constant need for reassurance—a need that he attempted to satisfy by seeking to overcome ever more formidable political challenges. This, in turn, condemned China to a state of uninterrupted mass political campaigns, which greatly interfered with the nation's attempts at economic and social modernization.

**Chapter 3** analyzes why Mao's colleagues went along with his utopian visions. The discussion here will demonstrate that the decision-making behavior of the Chinese leadership exhibited all the hallmarks of *groupthink*—a modus operandi whereby the yearning to retain the approval of one's leader as well as one's colleagues outweighs the desire to draft effective policies. **Chapter 4** explores how and why Mao's principal goal in life eventually shifted from building socialism in China to preventing an imaginary capitalist restoration—a shift that ultimately paved the way for the disastrous Cultural Revolution. I interpret this shift in Mao's *narrative identity* as a reaction to his repeated failure to advance the quest for modernization.

**Chapter 5** centers on Deng's silent rebellion against Mao's decision-making approach. The discussion here will showcase the power of *self-reflection*—a psychological exercise that subjects one's past behavioral and thought patterns to ruthless scrutiny so as to learn lessons for the future. Having subsequently renounced his faith in Maoism and all other "isms," Deng espoused fact-based and practice-oriented decision making. Yet, this did not turn either him or the decision-making apparatus over which he presided into dispassionate robots. Beliefs and values, as shown in **Chapter 6**, still colored how Deng and his colleagues interpreted complex developments in China. These beliefs and values were shaped by the forces of personality, the power of worldviews, and the subjective manner by which different decision makers processed their past experiences. As a result, the senior leaders greatly differed in terms of their visions for advancing China's quest for modernization.

**Chapter 7** concludes this book with a summary of the most important findings. It also elaborates on the question of how the developed hypotheses can be tested, falsified, and/or validated. Further, this chapter provides an overview of the most pronounced behavioral characteristics of both Mao and Deng.

It is important to note that this book does not put forward any new *historical* findings. Additionally, it should not be regarded as a dual biography of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. Rather, it seeks to explore one simple question from the vantage point of psychology: why did Mao's efforts to forge a distinctively Chinese path to wealth and power fail while Deng's attempts succeeded? My approach here resembles that of a detective, with history serving as the crime scene. I collected evidence, formulated hypotheses regarding behavioral and thought patterns, and then developed my conclusions.

My psychological analysis is conducted within the framework of the *person–system interaction* (PSI) theory. Developed at the Institute of Psychology of Bamberg University in Germany, the PSI theory represents the culmination of a decades-long effort on the part of distinguished psychologist Dietrich Dörner and his group to produce a comprehensive model to explain cognitive, motivational, and emotional processes. The theory has previously been evaluated using an array of rigorous methods (computer simulations, laboratory experiments, and case studies).<sup>1</sup> Any psychologists who read this book will inevitably recognize many familiar concepts. Over the years, different scholars have introduced a variety of terms to describe similar notions. For example, *competence* is closely related to *self-efficacy*, *control*, and *power*. In the interests of maintaining consistency, I will adhere to the terminology associated with the PSI theory.

In covering history and applying psychology, I follow a strict *why* approach—that is, I ask why this historical episode or that psychological concept is relevant to the discussion at hand. This necessitates the omission of certain important historical events, such as the Korean War (1950–1953), the Lin Biao incident of 1971, the normalization of Sino–American relations, the Tiananmen Incident of 1976, the democracy movement of 1979, the Vietnam War of 1979, the development of the “one country, two systems” paradigm, and so on. More generally, this *why* approach dictates a more sparing use of references than is typically the case with scholarly studies. Thanks to digital tools, such as Google Scholar, swamping a book with references is less challenging than one might initially think. However, while doing so might give the impression that the author is extremely well read, it actually reduces the readability of the text.

I hope that this book will prove accessible and informative to anyone interested in understanding what drove two of the most

important leaders in world history to act in the ways they did. I also hope that this book will demonstrate that psychology has a great deal to say about interpreting the motives and actions of state leaders—an area that has hitherto been left primarily to political scientists to investigate.





## HISTORICAL OVERVIEW: A CENTURY OF HUMILIATION

**A**t the dawn of the nineteenth century, the Chinese Empire exhibited all the signs and pretenses of both wealth and power. It encompassed an ancient civilization, which over the course of millennia had enriched the world with works by renowned medical scholars, inventors, philosophers, essayists, poets, and painters (Spence 1999b, p. 9). At the empire's peak, the Chinese language and culture permeated across a territory as large as continental Europe. The imperial will extended to every corner of the empire, which spanned the Mongolian grasslands in the north, the fertile plains in the east, the Himalayan mountain range in the west, and the tropical jungles in the south. It was arguably this territorial vastness that fostered the sinocentric view of China as being the Middle Kingdom—the cultural center of human civilization—as ruled by an omnipotent emperor who was the final arbiter of his nation's moral principles and his subjects' religious beliefs (Fairbank & Goldman 2006, p. 47).

China's political history is unparalleled. Since its unification in

221 BCE under the first emperor, Qin Shi Huang, China was ruled by successive dynasties. Unlike Europe, which disintegrated following the collapse of the Roman Empire, China remained, by and large, committed to the preservation of the imperial system (Fenby 2008). Over the course of the nation's long history, only two invading forces succeeded in establishing their own dynasties on Chinese territory: first, the Mongols under Genghis Khan and his grandson Kublai Khan in the thirteenth century, and then the Manchus in the seventeenth century. Yet, the institutions and the values of the Chinese civilization were so strong and so deeply ingrained that the conquerors were eventually assimilated by the conquered—the Mongols and the Manchus ended up establishing and presiding over two Chinese dynasties, the Yuan and the Qing, respectively (Baum 2010).

Over the centuries, China perfected a bureaucratic machine that was underpinned by a colossal body of statutory laws and regulations, which proved effective in managing the affairs of the state, from defining the rights and duties of citizens to levying taxes and facilitating both agriculture and trade. A competitive and meritocratic examination system ensured that the brightest and the best were recruited into the civil service. For much of that time, the rulers of Japan, India, Europe, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire were struggling to develop bureaucracies as effective as that of China (Spence 1999b, pp. 7-8).

The Middle Kingdom's civilizing influence extended beyond its borders. The cultural and political lives of countries such as Japan, Korea, Burma, and Vietnam exhibited clear Chinese influences. These neighboring nations acknowledged China's supremacy by sending annual tributes to the imperial court. However, despite its might, China showed no interest in estab-

lishing overseas colonies. Nor, as Kissinger (2011, p. 8) observes, did the Middle Kingdom develop any rationale for converting “barbarians” to Confucianism or Buddhism. This was not due to any lack of navigational knowledge. In fact, Chinese mariners had constructed a highly effective trading system that allowed them to sail all around the region. When the Portuguese and the Spanish, and later the British and the Dutch, began venturing into East Asian waters in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, they were only able to do so because of the navigational knowledge developed by the Chinese (Brook 2013).

Content with its self-proclaimed status as the cultural center of the world, and convinced that all other countries were inhabited by barbarians, the imperial court had decided by the middle of the fifteenth century to cut China off from the outside world. China’s isolation continued throughout the next few centuries. At the end of the eighteenth century, the Qianlong emperor summed up the prevailing mentality of both his court and his subjects very aptly: “Our dynasty’s majestic virtue has penetrated unto every country under Heaven, and Kings of nations have offered their costly tribute by land and sea [...] We possess all things. I set no value on objects strange or ingenious” (Cheng et al 1999, p. 105).

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IT WAS with this closed mindset that, in late 1792, the Qianlong emperor received a British delegation headed by Lord George Macartney, who had been dispatched by the British to convince the “Son of Heaven,” as the Emperor of China was then known, to ease restrictions on foreign trade. Back then, Europeans were only allowed to trade with China under cumbersome condi-

tions at a single port in the southern city of Canton (Guangzhou). The emperor was irritated, to say the least, by Lord Macartney's request. In a long "special mandate" to King George III, he explained:

...as the tea, silk and porcelain which the Celestial Empire produces, are absolute necessities to European nations and to yourselves, we have permitted, as a signal mark of favor, that foreign [merchant firms] should be established at Canton, so that your wants might be supplied and your country thus participate in our beneficence. ... Our dynasty, swaying the myriad races of the globe, extends the same benevolence towards all. Your England is not the only nation trading at Canton. If other nations, following your bad example, wrongfully importune my ear with further impossible requests, how will it be possible for me to treat them with easy indulgence? (Cheng et al 1999, p. 106).

After elaborating on the trade traditions of the "Celestial Empire," the emperor concluded his "special mandate" by declaring: "I have accordingly stated the facts to you in detail, and it is your bounden duty reverently to appreciate my feelings and to obey these instructions henceforward for all time, so that you may enjoy the blessings of perpetual peace ... Tremblingly obey and show no negligence!" (Cheng et al 1999, p. 109).

Little did the emperor and his court know that an industrial and scientific revolution was taking place at that time in Europe. Little did they understand how steam power, railways, and mass production had resulted in unprecedented advances in productivity. Little did they appreciate that their precious Middle Kingdom was then rapidly losing its economic supremacy (Kissinger 2011, p. 34). China had been living for

centuries behind a “giant curtain of ignorance” sustained by its self-imposed isolation from the rest of the world (Baum 2010). The Chinese elites earnestly believed that their Celestial Empire was as mighty as ever, that its place at the forefront of civilization remained unchallenged, and that its society continued to be harmonious. In reality, however, the Middle Kingdom was beset by structural problems that had already triggered a process of accelerating decline.

Domestically, the most significant challenge was the unprecedented demographic explosion. While China’s population growth had remained stable for over a millennium, the country’s population had now tripled, from around 100 million in 1685 to 300 million by 1790 (Spence 1999b, p. 79). Several factors—such as a prolonged period of peace, the dissemination of New World crops, enhanced agricultural techniques, and the cultivation of new farmland—conspired to produce this unprecedented growth (Rowe 2009, p. 150). Yet, the population expansion was not matched by a significant increase in agricultural productivity. This meant that China’s farm output became insufficient to sustain the accustomed standard of living. In time, the gap between the rich and the poor widened. The state’s outdated industrial policies exacerbated the situation. An economic contraction followed in the areas of commerce, artisanal manufacturing, mining, and transport (Rowe 2009, p. 151). China’s population challenges unfolded at a time of dynastic decline, the most pronounced features of which were a lack of imperial oversight, deterioration in bureaucratic morale, and widespread corruption and embezzlement (Jones & Kuhn 1978, pp. 107-108).

The Middle Kingdom’s domestic woes could not have come at a worse time. Western powers, especially Britain, were keen on opening up China for free trade. Beginning during the late seventeenth century, Britain’s trade with China increased

steadily, albeit in an unbalanced fashion. British merchants bought luxury Chinese goods, such as silk, porcelain, and tea—a product for which the British developed a ferocious appetite. Indeed, tea imports grew from 200 pounds per year in the late seventeenth century to over 28,000,000 pounds in the early nineteenth century (Rowe 2009, pp. 165-166). As the British merchants had no goods that the Chinese were equally eager to buy, the swelling trade deficit began draining Britain's silver supply. Then, the British discovered that they could sell opium cultivated in British India to Chinese intermediaries in Canton, and in time, China's growing addiction to opium turned Britain's chronic trade deficit into a surplus (Schell & Delury 2013, p. 25).

By the middle of the nineteenth century, approximately 10% of the Chinese population had become addicted to opium. More worryingly, the drug's consumption was highest among the military and the educated class (Rowe 2009, p. 167). The imperial court decided to act swiftly by reaffirming the ban on opium and destroying all the opium stocks in Canton. To that effect, Commissioner Lin Zexu was dispatched by the emperor in 1839. Upon arriving in Canton, the commissioner raided the living quarters of British merchants and confiscated their stockpiles of opium. In a public campaign that lasted several weeks, Lin resorted to moral extortions, appealed to the consciences of opium dealers, reminded them of the drug's disastrous effects, and asked them to stop poisoning his countrymen. The confiscated opium was to be liquidated and then run off into the Canton estuary. Before doing so, Lin composed an "Address to the Spirit of the Sea." "You who wash away all stains and cleanse all impurities," Lin lamented, "alas, poison has been allowed to creep in unchecked, till at last barbarian smoke fills the market" (Waley 1958, pp. 44-45).

Writing to the emperor, Lin described how the foreign

merchants sat in their boats and observed the spectacle that was the liquidation of the confiscated opium. “I should judge from their attitudes that they have the decency to feel heartily ashamed,” remarked Lin (Waley 1958, p. 49). Lin’s naive optimism was certainly misplaced. In fact, he could not have made a graver error of judgment. Far from having convinced the merchants of the soundness of his moral argument, the confiscation and destruction of British goods provided Britain with the *casus belli* for war. The ensuing *First Opium War* (1839–1842) ended in a crushing defeat for China. The *Treaty of Nanjing*, which was signed on August 11, 1842, imposed a back-breaking indemnity of 21 million silver dollars on China, with six million dollars being earmarked as compensation for the confiscated opium chests. Further, China was forced to open five additional ports to Western trade. British citizens residing in China were granted legal immunity. To add insult to injury, China had to surrender its sovereignty over Hong Kong to Britain (Fay 1997, p. 362). The Treaty of Nanjing was only the first in a humiliating series of so-called *unequal treaties* that China was forced to sign during subsequent decades after losing successive military encounters with foreign powers. The treaties were said to be *unequal* because rights and privileges were unilaterally conceded to foreign countries without China gaining the same rights and privileges in return (Wang 2008a, p. 10).

The First Opium War played, and it continues to play, a very important role in the Chinese national consciousness. Chinese history books nurture the narrative of an exploitative, foreign aggressor that conspired to enslave and subjugate the most powerful nation in the world. This narrative constructed around the First Opium War and the Treaty of Nanjing subsequently became—as Julia Lovell put it—one of the “founding myths of Chinese nationalism” as well as the first act in China’s *century of humiliation* (Lovell 2011, p. 9). The First Opium War

was followed by a second such war (1856–1860), which China also lost. Consequently, the *Treaty of Tianjin* obliged the Middle Kingdom to open up eleven more ports to international trade. Over the following decades, a series of unequal treaties were forced down China’s throat by the United States, France, Russia, Germany, and Portugal.

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ON THE DOMESTIC FRONT, China was plagued throughout the nineteenth century by floods, earthquakes, and famines. A Chinese citizen observed at the time that “Year after year the crops are a failure by what appears an act of God.” The farm animals, he added, “are eaten, then there is no seed for new crops, then the small farm is sold and the money soon expended, and the choice comes between begging and stealing, and often not even this choice, as there is but little to steal, and the strong take that” (Fenby 2008, p. 17). The economic misery was exasperated by the growing prevalence of opium addiction. The fact that opium had to be paid for in silver dollars meant that silver was now flowing out of the country. The resultant soaring silver prices had a disastrous effect on farmers because they sold agricultural products for copper coins, but paid their taxes in silver. As a result, local revolts broke out in different parts of the country, the most bloody and vicious of which was arguably the *Taiping Rebellion* (1850–1864).

The inception and subsequent spread of the Taiping Rebellion was closely intertwined with its leader’s religious conversion to Christianity. The former village teacher Hong Xiuquan interpreted Christian scripture in such a way as to convince himself that he was the younger brother of Jesus Christ and that his Holy Father had imbued him with the power to topple the ruling Qing dynasty and create an earthly paradise (Spence



1996, p. xxi). “God’s Chinese Son”—as Jonathan Spence befittingly calls him—fed on the hatred impoverished peasants felt toward corrupt officials and greedy landlords. Consequently, he succeeded in recruiting a huge army of fanatical believers.

On their path to the creation of their *Heavenly Kingdom of Supreme Peace*, the Taiping armies rampaged through provinces and systematically massacred the innocent. At one point, it seemed that they might succeed in toppling the Qing dynasty altogether. Yet, the dynasty endured. The Qing dynasty’s ultimate victory in the civil war owed much to the military prowess of General Zeng Guofan and the intervention of the British, who believed that saving the Qing would best serve their trade interests (Platt 2012, pp. 358-359).

The ultimate human toll of China’s civil war is truly staggering. At least twenty million people lost their lives to warfare, plague, and famine. This makes the fourteen-year long conflict the bloodiest civil war in human history (Platt 2012, p. xxiii). One contemporary observer described the devastation brought about by the years of fighting very vividly:

Smiling fields were turned into desolate wildernesses. [Plains in central China] were strewn with human skeletons; their rivers polluted with floating carcasses; wild beasts descending from their fastnesses in the mountains roamed at large over the land and made their dens in the ruins of deserted towns; the cry of the pheasants usurped the place of the hum of busy populations; no hands were left to till the soil, and noxious weeds covered the ground once tilled with patient industry (Fenby 2008, p. 32).

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KARL MARX LIKENED China to a “mummy carefully preserved in

a hermetically sealed coffin” that was bound to dissolve as soon as “it met the glare of outside light” (Fenby 2008, p. xxxi). However, the doomsayer’s obituary for China proved to be premature. Despite successive military defeats by foreign powers and destabilizing domestic rebellions, the Qing dynasty held China together throughout the nineteenth century. Yet, although domestic woes and Western imperialist intrusion had exposed China’s weaknesses, only a small minority within the bureaucracy recognized the urgent need for a radical modernization program (Bergère 1998, p. 43). Prominent among those who did was the influential scholar-official Wei Yuan, who argued as early as 1826 that the primary goal of China’s political and intellectual elites should be the restoration of the country’s *wealth and power*, a motto that, in the words of Orville Schell and John Delury, has “remained something of a north star for Chinese intellectual and political leaders ever since” (Schell & Delury 2013, p. 15).

Back then, most well-educated Chinese laughed off the idea that they should learn from the “barbarians.” The fact that just 3,000 British soldiers had triumphed over 200,000 Chinese in the First Opium War did nothing to persuade them otherwise (Schell & Delury 2013, p. 32). They believed that their imperial system had been tested and proven by the trials and turmoil of more than 2,000 years (Vogel 2011, p. 10). Yet beginning in 1861, a small number of scholars and officials initiated the so-called *Self-Strengthening Movement*, which aspired to restore China’s wealth and power by adopting Western science and technology. The group did not seek to abandon Chinese traditions and practices, but rather to supplement them. Zhang Zhidong, one of the movement’s pioneers, put it this way: “Chinese learning should remain the essence, but Western learning should be used for practical development” (Spence 1999b, p. 224). Calling upon his countrymen to abandon all pretenses and face up to

the realities of the nineteenth century, the prominent scholar Feng Guifen questioned: “Our territory is eight times that of Russia, ten times the size of America, one hundred times bigger than France, and two hundred times England ... Why is it that they are small and strong, yet we are big and weak?” Feng saw no alternative for China but to “master the secrets of its new adversaries by admitting their superiority and adopting some of their ways, or else perish” (Schell & Delury 2013, p. 47).

Accepting Feng’s verdict did not prove easy for China’s elites. The most formidable impediment was their extraordinary conceit and xenophobic rejection of everything considered “foreign.” Reminiscing about his time in China, a British interpreter observed that the Chinese he dealt with mostly considered Europeans to be “beneath their nation in moral and intellectual cultivation.” He added, “They are always surprised, not to say astonished, to learn that we have surnames, and understand the family distinctions of father, brother, wife, sister, etc.; in short, that we live otherwise than as a herd of cattle” (Fairbank 1964, p. 19).

Yet, the mental rigidity of China’s ruling elites began to soften following Japan’s swift and utterly humiliating victory over China in the *First Sino-Japanese War* of 1894. The war broke out over Japan’s attempt to establish its hegemony over Korea which belonged to China’s sphere of influence. China’s defeat was psychologically devastating, as the Chinese had always regarded their small neighbor as a mere tributary—inferior culturally, politically, and militarily. China’s humiliation was sealed by the *Treaty of Shimonoseki*, in which the imperial court agreed to hand sovereignty over Taiwan to Japan and to pay 230 million silver dollars in war reparations.

Internationally, the First Sino-Japanese War was seen to herald the beginning of a new Asian order. The *North-China Herald*

summed up this sentiment very aptly in its December 28, 1894, edition:

The present war is an object lesson in many ways. The positions of the two greatest Eastern Powers of the present day have, within a few short months, been completely reversed. China, regarded as the Bluebeard of the East, is disclosed as a sheep parading in wolf's clothing; while Japan, who has never been seriously thought of at all, has with one bound suddenly entered the comity of nations and become one of us, whether we will it or not (Paine 2003, p. 247).

Japan owed its decisive victory to neither chance nor luck. Over the previous three decades, the new Meiji government had recognized the dangers posed by Western intrusion into the region. They dispensed with all illusions and admitted their backwardness with regard to military and economic matters. Thus, they embarked on a large-scale modernization program, embracing foreign science and technology and adopting an open-door policy toward the West (Hane & Perez 2009, p. 84). Meanwhile, Japan's erstwhile mentor was—in the words of Richard Baum—descending “from unsurpassed power to unimaginable impotence; from being the mighty Celestial Empire to being the severely crippled ‘sick man of Asia’” (Baum 2010). Economically speaking, China's gross domestic product (GDP) in 1820 accounted for one-third of the global GDP, while just one century later it had declined drastically to only 9% of the global GDP (Naughton 2007, p. 42).

In the twilight of the nineteenth century, and in the wake of China's defeat by Japan, the imperial court made a halfhearted attempt at modernization. Li Hongzhang, one of China's most senior officials, was allowed to undertake a journey to Europe in 1896 to learn more about the West. In Germany, Li met Otto

von Bismarck, the former chancellor. Shaking the Iron Chancellor's hand, Li opened their conversation by stating politely, "Now that I have seen your Serenity's eye, I fully understand your greatness." Coming to what really mattered, Li confessed, "The purpose of my visit is to ask your Serenity's advice [on] how we can best reform China." After initially demurring that he "cannot judge of that from here," Bismarck urged his guest to concentrate his efforts on building a strong and modern army (NYT 1896).

Bismarck's advice echoed the calls of reform-minded Chinese. Influential figures such as Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, and Yan Fu all put forward a powerful case that China should dispense with the illusion of being the center of the civilized world and recognize that it is just one among many nations struggling to survive in a "global system dominated by the West" (Lu 2009, p. xvi). Yan Fu urged his countrymen that when seeking to overcome ignorance, poverty, and weakness, "We have no time to ask whether this knowledge is Chinese or Western, whether it is new or old. If one course leads to ignorance and thus to poverty and weakness ... we must cast it aside. If another course is effective in overcoming ignorance and thus leads to the cure of our poverty and weakness, we must imitate it" (Schwartz 1964, p. 49). Yet, the truth was that during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries modernization attempts remained, as Schell and Delury put it, a "patchwork of isolated and controversial provincial efforts, rather than a cohesive, centrally coordinated national plan to catch up with the West by learning from it" (Schell & Delury 2013, p. 76).

The imperial court's reluctance to embrace Western science and technology mirrored the attitudes of the Chinese public at large. Lu Xun, who was to become one of the most prominent Chinese writers of the twentieth century, remembers his mother's reaction to his decision to study Western science, mathe-

matics, and geography. “She wept,” Lu reminisced, “which was natural enough, because back then a Confucian education was still the route to respectability.” He added that “Only the utterly desperate, society deemed, stooped to studying Western sciences. By following the course I had fixed upon, I would be selling my soul to foreign devils” (Lu 2009, p. 16).

During the early twentieth century, an increasing number of Chinese were attributing their country’s woes to the fact that the ruling house was of foreign ethnic origin. In fact, the Manchus had invaded China in 1644, toppled the then decaying Ming dynasty, and replaced it with their own Qing dynasty. This racist resentment, combined with the growing belief that a republican system would serve China better, spelled disaster for the imperial court. As Spence put it, “Disillusion with the present and a certain nostalgia for the past could combine with a passionate hope for the future to bring the old order crashing down, opening the way for an uncertain passage to the new” (Spence 1999b, p. xxv).



THE EVENTUAL FALL of the Qing dynasty and thus the end of more than 2,000 years of imperial rule occurred in a less dramatic fashion than one might have expected. A local rebellion in Wuhan on October 10, 1911, was the catalyst for a series of uprisings and coups against provincial authorities. Within weeks, it became clear that the imperial court in Beijing had lost the support of the provinces. The six-year-old child emperor Puyi was forced to abdicate on February 12, 1912. Sun Yat-sen, a veteran advocate of revolutionary change, was installed as the interim president of the newly proclaimed *Republic of China*. The then 46-year-old Sun had spent the preceding decades traveling to foreign countries and raising

money to fund a number of insurrections in southern China (Bergère 1998, p. 141). Although he had played no direct role in the dramatic events of late 1911, his revolutionary credentials had earned him sufficient respect for the presidency to be bestowed upon him. However, just six weeks after his inauguration, Sun was forced to hand the presidency over to the powerful General Yuan Shikai, under whom the republican project mutated into a military dictatorship.

Until his death in 1925, Sun remained devoted to the dream of transforming China into a modern, rich, and powerful republic. His most important legacy was arguably the founding of the *Chinese Nationalist Party*, the *Guomindang*, which would—as we will see—play a crucial role under the leadership of his successor, Chiang Kai-shek. Successive generations have bestowed upon Sun Yat-sen the title of *Father of the Nation*. There has remained until the present day a certain aura of mythology around him. Sun’s biographer, Marie-Claire Bergère, argues that a factual account of the Chinese leader’s life reveals a “muddled politician, an opportunist with generous but confused ideas,” a revolutionary who made “little impression on the course of history” (Bergère 1998, p. 4).

Under General Yuan Shikai and his successors, chaos spread across China. Politically, the country was divided by the provincial warlords. Intellectually, China was in turmoil too. The apparent failure of the republican experiment prompted Chinese thinkers to question what was wrong with their country. The most radical members of China’s intellectual and cultural circles held Confucian thought responsible for the country’s decline. These intellectuals regarded all the aspects of Confucianism as harmful and corrupting. Therefore, they demanded their eradication from society (Mitter 2005, p. 18). The pioneers of the so-called *New Cultural Movement* declared war on various expressions of Chinese culture, from the clas-

sical written language to old traditions such as loyalty to superiors and women's chastity (Spence 1999b, p. 233).

It is remarkable to consider just how much the cultural debate changed within a few decades. While the activists of the Self-Strengthening Movement aspired to modernize China by supplementing the traditional cultural essence of the nation with selective borrowing from the West, the cultural warriors of the early twentieth century sought to uproot that cultural essence altogether (Schell & Delury 2013, p. 150). At the same time, all kinds of political theories—liberalism, Marxism, capitalism, social Darwinism, etc.—were fiercely debated. China's intelligentsia was going through what Philip Short terms a “ferment of isms” (Short 2000, p. 82).

Meanwhile, the events surrounding the *Treaty of Versailles* added fuel to the fire. In the spring of 1919, it emerged that the allied forces were planning to pass Germany's concessions in Shandong Province on to Japan. Subsequently, large student demonstrations erupted in Beijing on May 4, which quickly spread to other cities around the country. The outpouring of nationalism that followed in the wake of the *May Fourth Movement* galvanized an ever increasing number of students and intellectuals into taking political action. The single most important organization to develop from this May Fourth Movement was the *Chinese Communist Party* (CCP), which was founded in 1921 (Mitter 2005, p. 18). During the first few years of its existence, the CCP remained a small force that derived its importance from the financial and advisory support provided by the Soviet Union.

In 1924, shortly before his death, Sun Yat-sen succeeded in establishing the United Front, a coalition between the Nationalists and the burgeoning Communist movement. Sun's successor, the



charismatic Chiang Kai-shek, set off in 1926 from his base in southern China with his Soviet-trained army on the so-called *Northern Expedition*. His ambitious aim was to end the era of political fragmentation and reunite the country. By the end of 1928, Chiang had succeeded in bringing the feudal warlords together under the umbrella of a national government. Following this victory, Chiang sought to remedy the fact that the central government had hitherto been only a weak puppet appointed by whichever warlord happened to control Beijing. In fact, between 1916 and 1928, China went through no less than twenty-six prime ministers and nine heads of state (Fenby 2008, p. 145). To signal the fresh start, Chiang decided to relocate the national capital to Nanjing—a city that he aspired to make “awe-inspiring in its grandeur,” a “source of energy for the whole nation,” and “a role model for the whole world.” He envisioned the construction of heroic monuments and grand avenues to rival those of Paris and Washington (Schell & Delury 2013, p. 178).

However, while Chiang was dreaming of building a capital that was “awe-inspiring in its grandeur” so as to heal China’s wounded national pride, the majority of the Chinese people were suffering...



THE RAPID INDUSTRIALIZATION of China’s major cities had profited millions of urban dwellers. Yet, the majority of Chinese workers and peasants still struggled to make ends meet. The average worker toiled for between nine and thirteen hours a day, received a low wage paid in factory notes that could only be used in factory stores, lived in factory-run dormitories, and—if female—was forced to provide sexual favors (Spence 1999b, pp. 375-377). Living conditions were not much better for the

average peasant. One popular song from that time sums up the harsh realities of peasant life:

In winter I weave baskets to hold rice,  
 but the baskets stay empty;  
 I long for the harvest, in spring I have to borrow rice;  
 For every sack I borrow I must return three;  
 At harvest I pay the rent;  
 There's nothing to spare;  
 As I put away my sickle, my stomach is empty;  
 When winter returns I shiver with cold (Williams 1989).

“The fate of the poor was like a date pit: pointed at both ends,” observes the distinguished writer Lao She in his celebrated novel *Rickshaw*. “If you avoid dying of starvation when young, good for you, but it is almost impossible to avoid dying of starvation when old. You can be a real man only during the period in between—when you are young and strong and not afraid of the hard grind to feed your hunger” (Lao 1979, p. 97).

The CCP was ideologically well placed to harness the despair felt by exploited workers and peasants and turn it into political activism. This was especially true since the alliance between the Guomindang and the Communists had ended bloodily in the spring of 1927 freeing the CCP from any obligation to support China's new ruling party. Serious disagreements over social and rural policies spurred Chiang Kai-shek to betray his allies, with his troops killing or arresting thousands of Communists. Driven out of the cities, the vast countryside of the predominantly rural China seemed an ideal place to regroup, reconsolidate, and expand. Yet, following orders from Moscow, the Communist leadership decided to concentrate its efforts on mobilizing workers in urban centers through underground activism. It was, after all, the proletariat that the Marxist-

Leninist worldview predicted would be the standard-bearer for communist revolution. Among those who disagreed with this approach was a junior leader called Mao Zedong.

Mao was born into a peasant family in the village of Shaoshan in Hunan Province in 1893. Determined not to follow in his father's footsteps, the teenage Mao considered different vocational paths before concluding that he was "best suited for teaching" (Snow 1968, p. 145). At the age of 24, Mao entered teacher training school. He graduated five years later in 1918. After graduation, the young Mao secured a position as a library assistant at China's prestigious Peking University at a time when China's capital in general, and Peking University in particular, was buzzing with intellectuals keen to identify a guiding ideology for rescuing China. Three years later, Mao became a founding member of the CCP and a devoted activist. His exceptional organizational skills, charismatic look, and fiery intellect distinguished him from his fellow revolutionaries.

In 1927, the 33-year-old Mao undertook a month-long field trip to investigate the living conditions in one of China's impoverished villages. In doing so, Mao recognized the revolutionary potential of the peasantry, which the CCP had hitherto ignored. Writing in his typical passionate style and employing his familiar stormy imagery, Mao predicted that:

In a very short time, several hundred million peasants in China's central, southern, and northern provinces will rise like a fierce wind or tempest, a force so swift and violent that no power however great will be able to suppress it. They will break through all the trammels that bind them and rush forward along the road to liberation. They will, *in the end*, send all the imperialists, warlords, corrupt officials, local bullies, and bad gentry to their graves (Mao 1994, p. 430).

In the same year, Mao conspired with his fellow revolutionary Zhu De to found the *Red Army* as a guerrilla troop of peasants. Later, Mao succeeded in establishing a new base, the so-called *Jiangxi Soviet*, in the border area between the Jiangxi and Fujian provinces. In time, this would become the largest communist base in China. The Central Committee of the CCP ordered Mao to use his troops to attack major cities such as Wuhan and Changsha. However, Mao's guerrilla forces were not equipped for conventional warfare. Predictably, they suffered heavy losses. The Central Committee's dogmatism and stubborn insistence on inciting revolutionary change in working-class cities led to repeated defeats. Mao, who fundamentally disagreed with the Central Committee, was sidelined. By 1930 it had become apparent that large-scale urban insurrections were doomed to fail (Spence 1999b, p. 392). Successful attacks by the Guomindang forced (future) communist leaders such as Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi, and Deng Xiaoping to join Mao in the Jiangxi Soviet.

Chiang Kai-shek's tenacious "bandit suppression" campaign, which entailed an economic blockade and military encirclement, eventually pushed the Communists to abandon the Jiangxi Soviet (Spence 1999b, p. 397). On October 16, 1934, an 86,000-strong army broke out of their bases in the Jiangxi Soviet and embarked on what would become known as the *Long March*. The journey proved to be long and tortuous. In January 1935, the Communists reached the city of Zunyi in Guizhou Province, where the leadership decided to grant the troops some much needed rest and to conduct a critical analysis of prior mistakes. The leadership concluded that attempting conventional warfare had been a grave error and that Mao's strategy of guerrilla warfare was much more suitable, given the circumstances (Terrill 1999b, p. 154). The Zunyi Conference marked a milestone in Mao's career, for it paved the

way for his ascendance to ultimate power. In the years to come, Mao would become the unchallenged leader of the CCP.

The Communists' tortuous journey across 6,000 miles of enemy territory took its toll. A year later, only 5,000 of the original 86,000 soldiers that had left the Jiangxi Soviet reached the new base in Yan'an, Shaanxi Province (Short 2000, p. 335). Yet, despite the heavy losses, Mao hailed the Long March as a strategic success, declaring it to be "unprecedented in the annals of history." For Mao, the Long March was

...a manifesto, a propaganda team, a seeding machine ... For a period of twelve months we were subject to daily reconnaissance and bombing from the skies by scores of planes, and on the ground to encirclement and pursuit, obstruction and interception, by a huge force of hundreds of thousands. We met with untold difficulties and dangers along the way, yet by using each person's two legs we swept across a distance of more than 20,000 *li*<sup>1</sup> through the length and breadth of eleven provinces ... The Long March [...] has proclaimed to the world that the Red Army is made up of brave heroes, whereas the imperialists and their running dogs, Chiang Kai-shek and his ilk, are utterly useless (Mao 1999, p. 92).

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WHILE CHIANG KAI-SHEK was devoting his attention and energy to his "bandit suppression" campaign, Japan was busy cementing and expanding its presence in China. In 1932, Asia's rising power succeeded in installing the puppet monarchy of Manchukuo in China's northeast. Thereafter, it pushed for the widening of the demilitarized zone already imposed on China and for the creation of new puppet states on Chinese territory.

However, for Chiang, the Japanese intrusion was merely a “disease of the skin,” while the communist threat was a “disease of the heart” (Fenby 2008, pp. 213-214). Understandably, Chiang’s obsession with the Communists was not going down well with Chinese patriots up and down the country.

By the end of 1936, a series of convoluted maneuvers, extortions by allied warlords, and developments on the ground had finally convinced Chiang to change his priorities. A new alliance with the Communists was brokered under the banner of countering the Japanese aggression on the eve of World War II in Asia.

On July 7, 1937, a military skirmish between Chinese and Japanese troops southwest of Beijing escalated quickly into a fully-fledged war. Following the so-called Marco Polo Bridge Incident, the significantly better equipped Japanese army swept through China, crushing all defensive lines. By December 1937, the Imperial Japanese Army was ready to capture the Nationalist capital of Nanjing. While conquering Nanjing, the Japanese committed some of the most despicable atrocities in the history for warfare, including burying prisoners alive, raping pregnant women before killing them, murdering infants, and beheading captured soldiers en masse (Hane & Perez 2009, p. 294). What was to become known as the *Rape of Nanjing* lasted for three months—a period during which Japanese troops massacred tens of thousands, perhaps even up to 300,000, Chinese (Taylor 2009, pp. 151-152).

The German John Rabe—who was at the time the director of the Siemens branch in Nanjing—worked tirelessly with other foreigners in the city to establish a *Nanjing Safety Zone* in which to provide shelter for civilians. Dubbed the *Oskar Schindler of China*, Rabe and his colleagues saved the lives of some 200,000 Chinese. His diary is full of gruesome tales that document the barbarism of the Japanese troops. Touring the

city, Rabe observed that he came across corpses every 100–200 yards. “The bodies of civilians that I examined had bullet holes in their back,” he wrote, “these people had presumably been fleeing and were shot from behind” (Rabe 2000, p. 67). He described one street as being “nothing but a field of corpses” (Rabe 2000, p. 75). In his entry for December 17, Rabe wrote, “Last night up to 1,000 women and girls are said to have been raped, about 100 girls at Ginling Girls College alone. You hear nothing but rape. If husbands or brothers intervene, they’re shot. What you hear and see on all sides is the brutality and bestiality of the Japanese soldiery” (Rabe 2000, p. 77).

Japan ended up occupying a significant part of the Chinese territory. Spence notes that by 1938 a huge area that had been a unified political empire only a few decades earlier was now divided into ten separate political units. Five were controlled by Japan, namely Manchukuo, Inner Mongolia, northeast China, east-central China, and Taiwan. Then there was the Guomindang government—now relocated to Chongqing—as well as the Communist regime in Yan’an. Shanxi Province was ruled by a warlord, while Tibet and Xinjiang asserted their independence (Spence 1999b, pp. 425–426). The Chinese people suffered under the combined plight of Japanese occupation, political instability, endemic corruption, and economic misery that was aggravated by worsening wartime inflation (Schell & Delury 2013, p. 182).

The years of Japanese occupation came to an abrupt end in 1945 when Japan lost World War II, bringing down the curtain on one of the darkest and most humiliating chapters in modern Chinese history. The final toll of the occupation was appalling: more than four million soldiers were dead or wounded, while nine million civilians had been shot or bombed. Tens of millions had become refugees in their own country. Millions of

peasant families had lost their farms. Whole cities had been completely destroyed (Taylor 2009, p. 7).

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UNFORTUNATELY, the end of the Japanese occupation heralded only the conclusion of one chapter of sorrow and misery for China and the commencement of yet another. Boasting an army of around 2.7 million troops, Chiang Kai-shek was determined to destroy the communist movement. Yet, the CCP, which had been almost entirely annihilated only a decade earlier, had succeeded in transforming itself into a formidable force of nearly one million soldiers (Spence 1999b, p. 460). All attempts by the Americans to broker an effective peace deal between the CCP and the Guomindang failed. A new civil war broke out.

Although the Nationalists enjoyed a numerical advantage of three to one over their adversaries, their army was plagued by inefficiency and regionalism (Fenby 2008, p. 334). The widespread corruption among the high-ranking officials left the Guomindang soldiers feeling that they were fighting for an unjust cause. The Communists, however, were united behind the leadership of Mao Zedong. An elaborate propaganda machine instilled a reverence for the leader that was almost religious in its overtones. Surrounded by a fanatically loyal fellowship, Mao set out to implement land reform programs in the areas under communist control. These programs confiscated farmland from rich landlords and redistributed it to impoverished peasants.

The successes of the communist administration stood in sharp contrast to the disastrous failures of the Guomindang's economic policies. Ill-conceived monetary decisions, the scarcity of consumer goods, and the unrestrained printing of



money to finance the civil war effort all fueled hyperinflation that caused immense economic hardship. An example cited by Michael Lynch illustrates the severity of the problem: “In 1940, 100 yuan bought a pig; in 1943, a chicken; in 1945, a fish; in 1946, an egg; and in 1947, one-third of a box of matches” (Lynch 2004, p. 141). Chiang’s efforts to curtail inflation and take back control of the economy failed spectacularly.

On the military front, the situation looked even bleaker. Strategic military mistakes on Chiang’s part, on the one hand, and the superior coordination skills of the Communists, on the other hand, spelled disaster for the Guomindang. The Communists were advancing rapidly, crushing Chiang’s demoralized troops, recruiting new soldiers, and conquering city after city. By 1949, it had become apparent that Mao Zedong and his army of peasants were set to achieve a resounding victory in the Chinese civil war. Spence notes that the Communists moved to consolidate their power with a speed not seen since the Manchus had defeated the Ming dynasty some three centuries earlier (Spence 1999b, p. 486). Eventually, Chiang Kai-shek was forced to retreat with his army to the island of Taiwan. Mao’s victory was sealed.

On September 21, 1949, a victorious Mao addressed the First Plenary Session of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference:

The Chinese have always been a great, courageous and industrious people. It was only in modern times that they have fallen behind, and this was due solely to the oppression and exploitation by foreign imperialism and the domestic reactionary government ... We have united ourselves and defeated both our foreign and domestic oppressors ... Our nation will never again be an insulted nation. We have stood up (Cheek 2002, p. 126).

The *People's Republic of China* was officially proclaimed on October 1, 1949. This ended China's century of humiliation, which had begun with the indignities of the First Opium War and the Treaty of Nanjing (1839–1842). The new communist government moved swiftly on to the Herculean task of building a wealthy and powerful socialist nation...

## STRUGGLING WITH SELF-DOUBTS

Psychological Themes: *Motives, Rationalizations*  
Historical Episode: *The Hundred Flowers Campaign*

**D**uring its first few years, the People's Republic of China experienced unprecedented economic growth, with every sector being rehabilitated, massive investments being made in infrastructure and education, and the groundwork being laid for steady economic and social development (Naughton 2007, p. 68; Yang 2009). A sustained recovery from the devastation caused by decades of war and misrule was well underway. Given all the trials and tribulations that characterized the revolutionary years, a "normal mortal," in the words of Orville Schell and John Delury, "might have felt entitled to enjoy a few moments of fulfillment." Not Mao, though! Something in him revolted against the natural tendency of revolutionary movements to lose their zeal to bureaucratic structures upon gaining power. Something in him prompted an uncompromising determination to condemn China to a state of permanent revolution that rendered all attempts at orderly modernization futile (Schell & Delury 2013, pp. 235, 238). This chapter will analyze Mao's motivational drive as well as how it dictated his behavior.

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ON THE ANNIVERSARY of his 400<sup>th</sup> birthday, the Monkey King was grimly sitting in the Heavenly Cave of the Water Curtain while his loyal subjects rejoiced and celebrated. As it happens, an old gibbon dared to approach the beloved sovereign. With genuine concern in his voice, he asked the Monkey King what was troubling him on such a wonderful day. The king replied bitterly that even though he was only 400 years old, he had already achieved everything that was there to achieve. “So,” he asked in utter despair, “what is there to live for?!”

The loyal subject pondered his king’s retort for a moment. He then replied, “Your Majesty, great as you undoubtedly are, you have still not reached the pinnacle of greatness! Far from it. Remember, there are gods who live in heaven and govern the earth! Immortals who never have to face the agony of death! Buddhas who have learned to break free from the cycle of reincarnation!” As the old gibbon spoke, the Monkey King’s eyes widened with excitement until he could no longer contain himself. “Excellent!” the king exclaimed, “I shall become all three of them!”

With that, the Monkey King set out on a journey to defy both heaven and earth in the pursuit of the seemingly impossible. The adventures he experienced on his journey are immortalized in the sixteenth century epic novel *Journey to the West*.<sup>1</sup> Wu Cheng’en, the novel’s author, assures his readers that the Monkey King eventually succeeded in his ultimate quest to become a Buddha and escape the cycle of reincarnation. However, it seems that there is a good chance the spirit of the Monkey King was inherited by a simple peasant from the poor village of Shaoshan in southern China at a time when the boy’s nation was experiencing the greatest political and social upheaval seen for millennia. It was perhaps this spirit that

pushed the peasant boy to defy the odds, rebel against heaven and earth, and embark on one adventure after another without ever coming to rest...

## 2.1 The Antagonistic Dialogue

*Beijing, early 1957*

*Seven years after the Communists' victory in the civil war*

Mao Zedong, chairman of the CCP and paramount leader of the People's Republic of China, was in a sour mood. Things appeared to be going well, as the recently completed agricultural collectivization campaign had proved to be a dazzling success. Hundreds of millions of peasants had responded to his plea in July 1955 that they speed up the collectivization process in the countryside. Within a year, collective farming had become almost universal in China—some fifteen years ahead of schedule (Fenby 2008, p. 384).<sup>2</sup> In the cities, the socialist wind was sweeping away the remnants of capitalism and all private businesses had now been nationalized—twelve years ahead of schedule (Short 2000, p. 448). Furthermore, the country's economic development had thus far exceeded even the boldest expectations of the Chinese bureaucracy, with almost all the ambitious goals set out in the First Five-Year Plan (1953–1957) having been met one year earlier than scheduled (Spence 1999b, pp. 515–517). Mao acknowledged and applauded all these successes.

However, Mao remained uneasy regarding the Chinese leadership's unquestioning imitation of the Soviet development strategy (Pang & Jin 2013, Chapter 1), which prioritized investment in heavy industry and largely neglected both light industry and agriculture (Hanson 2003). Mao considered that

China, then a decidedly poor country with an abundance of unskilled labor, was not yet ready for the kind of rapid industrialization envisaged as part of the Soviet development model. Nonetheless, China's central planners continued to follow the advice of their Soviet mentors, and they started to pour resources into the construction of huge plants and factories. The burgeoning industrial complex was intended to produce chemicals, metals, and machinery (Naughton 2007, pp. 55-67). Mao justifiably enjoined his colleagues to "learn critically, not blindly." He criticized those who "never take the trouble to analyze" and those who "hold no independent opinion of their own," warning that "it would lead to a mess if every single sentence, even of Marx, were followed" (Mao 1977, pp. 304-305).

Yet, given the circumstances of the time, the eagerness of the Chinese bureaucrats to copy the Soviet model is understandable. China's communist leaders had honed their skills during the two-decade long fight against both Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist forces and the Japanese invaders (Lin et al 2015; Mitter 2014). Following their victory in the civil war, the erstwhile revolutionaries faced the Herculean task of engineering economic and social recovery in a country still devastated by war and foreign invasion. The Soviet Union was, in the eyes of most Chinese leaders at least, a wealthy and powerful socialist country. Thus, the model that the Soviets had followed to reach their enviably high level of development was surely worth imitating!

This behavioral pattern is common among decision makers who are dealing with dynamic and complex systems that they only partially understand (Dörner 1997, p. 171). The logic appears to go something like this: if a certain set of measures proved effective in situation A, then those measures must also work in situation B. The great Prussian strategist Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831) observed a similar tendency among

generals to blindly emulate the battle tactics of commanders that they highly admired, such as Frederick the Great or Napoleon. Indeed, Clausewitz cautioned against the misguided belief in the value of one-size-fits-all blueprints. “War,” Clausewitz (1989, p. 153) explained, “is not like a field of wheat, which, without regard to the individual stalk, may be mown more or less efficiently depending on the quality of the scythe; it is like a stand of mature trees in which the axe has to be used judiciously according to the characteristics and development of each individual trunk.”

Chairman Mao would acknowledge in 1958 that “Since we didn’t understand these things and had absolutely no experience, all we could do in our ignorance was to import foreign methods” (Mao 1974, p. 98). Yet, in 1956, Mao did not have any concrete alternative model in mind. Rather, he proposed that a distinctive Chinese path to wealth and power would organically emerge from a lively debate among the people. To set this debate in motion, during a Politburo meeting held in April 1956, he suggested that they should “let a hundred flowers bloom ... [and] a hundred schools of thought contend” (Mao 1992b, p. 70). In a highly uncharacteristic move, Mao recommended extending an invitation to China’s intellectuals to join the debate. Until that point, Mao had treated intellectuals with great hostility. One reason for his animosity might have been the intellectuals’ natural desire for independent thinking, which clashed with Mao’s determination to make everyone conform to his beliefs. Another reason was perhaps his longstanding irritation with those intellectuals who assumed that their own urban experience qualified them to dictate what was best for the predominantly rural population at large (Mitter 2005, p. 25).

There was also a third reason for Mao’s generally antagonistic attitude in this regard. In fact, his resentment toward intellec-

tuals dated back to 1918, when he worked as a library assistant at the prestigious Peking University (Wang 2008b, pp. 315-320). Two decades later, Mao reminisced about how, back then, “My office was so low that people avoided me. One of my tasks was to register the names of people who came to read newspapers, but to most of them I didn’t exist as a human being [...] I tried to begin conversations with them on political and cultural subjects, but they were very busy men. They had no time to listen to an assistant librarian speaking southern dialect” (Snow 1968, p. 150). Social rejection of this kind hurts. Indeed, the pain experienced in such situations is produced by the same regions of the brain activated by physical pain (Eisenberger et al 2003). One mechanism for coping with such pain is to attribute negative characteristics to the offender and thereby diminish the value of his/her judgment, which is exactly what Mao did. He reciprocated this kind of condescendence on several occasions. For example, he stated that “A great many so-called intellectuals are actually exceedingly unlearned” (Spence 1999a, p. 99), and further, he declared “I always said that intellectuals are the most lacking in intellect” (Mao 1992b, p. 611).

Against this background, Mao’s decision to include the intellectuals in his so-called *Hundred Flowers Campaign* (百花运动) seems highly puzzling. It is true that moderate leaders, such as Premier Zhou Enlai, had succeeded in persuading Mao that the modernization quest would be delayed if the authorities failed to adequately harness the intellectuals’ brainpower (Jin 1998, pp. 1574-1609), but it is important to also take into account the euphoric general mood of 1955–56. The swift completion of the agricultural collectivization and private enterprise nationalization campaigns was interpreted by Mao as evidence of his success in forging a broad coalition in favor of the socialist cause—a coalition that consisted of patriotic Chinese from all



walks of life who worked hand in hand to construct a socialist, wealthy, and powerful China (Schwartz 1989, pp. 24-25). Why should the intellectuals be an exception? After all, they were also part of Chinese society, were they not?! By now, they must have come to appreciate that Mao's wisdom was far superior to their "useless" book-based knowledge!

Still, a final decision regarding the Hundred Flowers Campaign was not yet taken. Doubts and skepticism persisted among China's communist leaders regarding the consequences of loosening their grip on society. They worried that allowing people to engage in a free and uncensored debate concerning policy might generate a wave of public criticism. Such a wave might become strong enough to engulf the Party, endanger its hold on power, and thereby place the hard-won political stability at risk (Terrill 1999b, pp. 284-286). Would China experience its very own Hungarian Revolution?

Chief among the doubters was Mao himself! This is not really surprising. Pondering major decisions usually entails struggling with nagging doubts regarding their outcomes. Such doubts are expressed through a persistent, questioning voice in one's head. This voice—which can be referred to as the "doubter"—is countered by a second voice—which can be called the "believer." The believer's refutation of the doubter's skepticism encourages the doubter to offer new counterarguments. This in turn prompts the believer to hit back with new arguments. And so on. Dietrich Dörner describes this process as an *antagonistic dialogue* between two "advocates" inside one's head—a dialogue in which each side fervently tries to win the debate by countering the other side's positions (Dörner 2001, pp. 766-772).

Mao's speeches from that period offer more than a glimpse into the inner struggle he was experiencing. Although he was

desperately trying to make the case for launching the Hundred Flowers Campaign, he remained deeply worried about the dangers of political instability. Some of Mao's speeches given during closed-door Party meetings employed an overall negative tone to describe the "unalterable bourgeois nature" of China's intellectuals (Schwartz 1989, p. 28). Countering this pessimistic view on the part of the "doubter" in Mao was the "believer's" notion that all classes of Chinese society were united in their efforts to foster socialism in China. How else was one to interpret the zeal with which the peasants and businessmen alike defied the bureaucracy's cautious calculations and completed the collectivization and nationalization campaigns years ahead of schedule?

Yet, inviting intellectuals and scholars to put forward their ideas without fear of retribution or reprisal would undoubtedly unleash a storm of criticism of the Party, as the "doubter" would argue. But this criticism, according to the "believer", would surely be constructive! Naturally, some "harmful ideas" or "poisonous weeds" might spring up among the "fragrant flowers" of constructive criticism, but the majority of the flowers would be fragrant! A few "wrong ideas" would do no harm, as the "believer" would say while warming up on this theme. On the contrary, they would serve a higher purpose: "Fighting against wrong ideas is like being vaccinated—a man develops greater immunity from disease as a result of vaccination" (Mao 1977, p. 411). But was this really the case?

Mao's private secretary, Tian Jiaying, once observed that "The Chairman doesn't always stand by his words. One day he says one thing, tomorrow another. Nobody can be sure what he thinks" (Li 1994, p. 421). Mao's utterances regarding the Hundred Flowers Campaign followed this pattern. Some scholars might agree with Jonathan Fenby's characterization of this erratic behavior as a calculated, "habitual tactic" intended to leave

Mao's colleagues uncertain as to his true wishes (Fenby 2008, p. 377). However, Mao seemed to genuinely be undecided on the matter. On one occasion, he might dismiss the Party's fears of a free, public debate with the assertion that China had only a few counterrevolutionaries, "only, a very, very few" in fact (Mao 1989, p. 144). On another occasion, however, he might grumble that "We still have the bourgeoisie and still have the landlords, rich peasants, local bullies, and counterrevolutionaries [...] They harbor hatred in their hearts [for us], and many will give vent to it once they have the opportunity. At the time of the emergence of the Hungarian affair, they had [...] hoped possibly to turn China into a mess. That is their class instinct" (Mao 1992b, p. 257).

The impression one gets from reading Mao's speeches is that he truly wanted to believe in the potential of the Hundred Flowers Campaign, although he was held back by doubts. Unfortunately, Mao's colleagues did not help him out. Rather, they felt encouraged by Mao's ambivalent attitude to engage in what psychologists refer to as the *confirmation bias* (Nickerson 1998; Tetlock 2006) or *affirmative perception* (Dörner 2008, pp. 103-104). They mainly focused on those speeches in which Mao expressed his deep doubts regarding the prospects of the Hundred Flowers Campaign, while simultaneously downplaying or ignoring those speeches in which he dismissed his skepticism. Mao, for his part, did not understand how his ambivalence discouraged the Party from wholeheartedly embracing the Hundred Flowers Campaign. Nor did he prove responsive to his comrades' warnings. In fact, Mao did not *discuss* their reservations; rather, he *shrugged them off* as mere examples of the "bureaucracy's obstructionism."

This behavior seems rather odd. In his biography of Communist China's founding father, Maurice Meisner describes Chairman Mao as someone who "conceived and led the most

popular revolution in world history” (Meisner 2007, p. vi). Would you not expect someone with a mental capacity on this scale to deal more rationally with dissenting opinions—namely, by *examining* them? What is the psychological background to Mao’s behavior?

If you analyze Mao’s speeches on the Hundred Flowers Campaign, you can hardly fail to notice that the whole policy was *not* based on a careful analysis. Mao did not present a coherent vision regarding how best to involve the intellectual elite—or the public at large—in the ongoing debate about China’s modernization strategy. Rather, the “believer,” or so it seems, advanced the rosy notion that all Chinese shared the Party’s socialist goals. Thus, allowing the people to criticize the Party would only result in the exposure of—what Mao considered to be—its most obvious flaw: the bureaucracy’s “worship” of the Soviet development model. The problem here is that the “believer” did not recognize these notions for what they truly were: mere hypotheses and unproven assertions, which required careful examination. Rather, “he” regarded them as absolute facts that were beyond any reasonable doubt. Therefore, “he” did not pause to reflect on the possible dynamics that might underpin an unrestrained public campaign of criticism. Sadly, the other “advocate”—the “doubter”—did not offer any reasonable counterarguments either—at least, I failed to identify any in Mao’s speeches and loud musings (Mao 1974, 1989, 1992b). Put simply, the “believer” believed, while the “doubter” doubted. Here, as elsewhere, Mao relied on mere assertions when he proposed major policies and developed grand visions (Lynch 2004, p. 165).

It is possible to clearly identify this pattern in Mao’s half-hearted attempts to push the Hundred Flowers policy forward. He, or perhaps more accurately the “believer,” sometimes resorted to vague notions: “It is good if life is a bit more compli-

cated, otherwise it is too boring” (Mao 1992b, p. 282) or “should there be only peace and no trouble. ... [it] would lead to mental sluggishness” (Mao 1992b, p. 291). At other times, he beseeched his audience using abstract philosophical dialectics: “Things will develop in the opposite direction when they become extreme; the more that bad things are done, [ultimately] the good will emerge” (Mao 1989, p. 179). Now, his comrades’ reservations hit him in a vulnerable spot. They played into the hands of the “doubter” and thus prolonged the recurring antagonistic dialogue. In other words, for Mao, criticism of the Hundred Flowers Campaign constituted an *informational pain stimulus*, and in disregarding it, he was attempting to avoid additional psychological distress. This can be easily achieved by questioning the sincerity of the critic or by attributing an ulterior motive to him/her.

Psychologically speaking, finding an internal justification for disregarding his colleagues’ reservations must have been fairly easy for Mao. After all, it was not the first time that the Party had opposed his unconventional ideas before later coming around to supporting them. During the early years of the revolutionary struggle, Mao’s strategy of surrounding the cities from the countryside (农村包围城市) was unorthodox. His use of guerrilla tactics against the overwhelmingly powerful Nationalist armies were controversial. As a result, Mao had often found himself sidelined and his recommendations ignored (Spence 1999a, p. 82). It was not until the utter failure of direct military confrontations with the enemy that the Party decided to embrace Mao’s approach.

Reflecting on this experience in 1956–57 must have filled Mao with a tantalizing sense of *deja vu*: back in the late 1920s, the Soviet leadership had thought little of his novel military methods, so the CCP, in its mindless obedience to the Comintern, had rejected them. Practical experience, however, had proved

Mao right and the CCP leadership wrong. The radical change of approach that followed catapulted Mao to the forefront of Party politics and the Party to ultimate victory in the civil war (Lin et al 2015). Later, in the 1950s, Mao's colleagues harbored some doubts as to the pace of the agricultural collectivization and private business nationalization campaigns. Yet, both campaigns were actually completed ahead of schedule. Did such episodes not prove that he, the Party's chairman, possessed superior, far-sighted judgment?!

In early 1957, Mao moved beyond dismissing his colleagues' reservations to accusing them of engaging in a massive oppositional effort to bury his Hundred Flowers proposal. He went so far as to assert that 90% of high-ranking cadres disagreed with him in this regard (Mao 1989, pp. 240-241). The Party's alleged resistance caused Mao to push harder (Short 2000, p. 459). In March and April 1957, he undertook a three-week long tour to several provinces, "giving a talk at every stop" and turning himself—in his own words—into a "wandering lobbyist" (Mao 1989, p. 321). Having failed to grasp the role that his ambiguity played in fostering skepticism regarding the proposed campaign, Mao came to view his comrades' reservations as a challenge that he had to overcome.

Mao's bodyguard Li Yinqiao once described the Chairman's eagerness to take on challenges as his "most outstanding trait" (Quan & Li 1992, p. 13) and here it was again: the Hundred Flowers Campaign was mutating from a means to an end into an end in itself—the psychological end of Mao's desire to prove his competence to *himself*. Yet, before Mao could move on to silencing his comrades' misgivings, he first had to mute his own. Dörner's theory outlines two alternative conclusions to the antagonistic dialogue: *meta-redetermination* and *meta-conflict* (Dörner 2001, pp. 766-772). The former approach operates on the meta-level of the decision-making process. It involves

examining one's own problem-solving *modus operandi*, identifying the reasons for the cognitive gridlock, and *redetermining* (or "reprogramming") the decision-making process itself. Following this approach might have alerted Mao to how both "advocates" were misrepresenting unproven assertions regarding the Hundred Flowers Campaign as proven facts. It might have prompted him to critically scrutinize such assertions and to carefully contemplate the possible outcomes of the campaign. A meta-conflict, however, simply shifts the focus of the internal debate from believing and doubting to *questioning* whether one should continue with the whole exercise. A meta-conflict is usually resolved by abruptly terminating the antagonistic dialogue and impulsively deciding either in favor or against the motion at hand.

As the historical record does not show any qualitative changes in Mao's arguments over time, it seems unlikely that a "reprogramming" of his cognitive problem-solving strategy occurred. Rather, at some point, he must have decided to throw caution to the wind, take the bull by the horns, and launch the Hundred Flowers Campaign, come what may. Yet, the Party's collective leadership had still not made a formal decision concerning the campaign. Thus, Chairman Mao's provincial, "wandering lobbyist" tour did not receive the extensive media coverage he had hoped for. Nor did the *People's Daily*, the Party's leading national newspaper, publish one of his major speeches on the issue.<sup>3</sup> In accordance with Mao's "the Party is challenging me" narrative, he interpreted this "censorship" as an act of defiance that needed to be resolutely punished.

Mao decided to make an example of Deng Tuo, the editor-in-chief of the *People's Daily*. On April 10, 1957, the Chairman summoned Deng and several of his colleagues to a meeting in his bedroom. Naturally, Mao's audience was formally dressed. The Chairman, however, decided to display his contempt for

his guests by receiving them wearing a pajama top with only a towel wrapped around his waist. Mao bombarded his audience with a barrage of accusations without giving them a chance to respond and explain themselves properly. The four-hour long bedroom showdown ended in dramatic fashion (Cheek 1997, pp. 180-181):

**Deng:** ...I feel my abilities are insufficient. It is hard to feel adequate for the job. I hope the Chairman will consider relieving me of my duties. Several times I have sincerely and in good faith raised this request...

**Mao [interrupting him again]:** I don't believe that sincerity and good faith of yours! You only know the comings and goings of limousines, you live in luxury. Now, shit or get off the pot!

By attacking Deng Tuo's personal integrity rather than discussing his views, Mao had exposed the limitations of his argumentative arsenal. Daniel Kahneman and Jonathan Renshon refer to this behavioral pattern as *reactive devaluation*: *what* was said is less important than *who* said it (Kahneman & Renshon 2003, p. 37). Deng Tuo was, according to Mao's logic, an out-of-touch elitist. So why should he, the Party's chairman, take him seriously?

A few weeks later, the Politburo met to formally approve Mao's decision to launch the Hundred Flowers Campaign (Pang & Feng 2013). The Party's "massive opposition" proved to be the product of Mao's imagination.<sup>4</sup> The fact was that once Mao had made up his mind, his "pre-eminent authority" was sufficient to override any reservations his comrades might have had (Schwartz 1989, p. 31). In making the unequivocal and final decision to unleash a volley of public criticism, Mao had behaved similarly to Goethe's sorcerer's apprentice, who enchanted a



broom to do his bidding without considering that he might be summoning spirits beyond his control...

## 2.2 Failure and Depression

Before discussing how Mao's campaign unfolded, I will first address an important psychological question: why did Mao go through the agonies of the antagonistic dialogue in the first place? I have already alluded to a preliminary answer to this question in the preceding section: making major decisions sometimes entails struggling with major doubts (Schwarzer 1996). Such doubts can be addressed through a rational appraisal of the pros and cons of different courses of action (Janis 1989). Alternatively, the actor might fail to decide; postpone the moment of decision; brood, ruminate, and ponder; and suffer a state of inertia (Anderson 2003). In this case, the antagonistic dialogue is the internal mechanism through which doubts and self-doubts are expressed and debated.

Doubts stem, of course, from *uncertainty* regarding the outcome of a particular course of action. Since this uncertainty is coupled with possible known and unknown dangers, evolution has programmed the human brain to induce the negative emotions of anxiety, fear, apprehension, and discomfort when faced with uncertainty (Hirsh et al 2012). This means that the brain is wired to avoid uncertain situations. Any success in terms of lifting the fog of uncertainty—whether through a rational appraisal or an abrupt decision following a prolonged antagonistic dialogue—results in positive, gratifying emotions (Dörner 2001, pp. 357-358). Examples of rewarding experiences of this kind are *aha moments* or feelings of relief after having made up one's mind (Kounios & Beeman 2009).

It is important to stress here that certainty and uncertainty are both subjective parameters (Bandura 1982). For example, you

might think that you are developing an accurate understanding of the problem at hand and of the consequences and repercussions of the different available courses of action, whereas—objectively speaking—the exact opposite is true. Or you might begin to imagine all kinds of dangers, whereas—objectively speaking—there are no dangers. Or you might overlook the uncertainties inherent within a complex and dynamically changing environment altogether and engage in what Dörner calls *Rumpelstiltskin planning* (Dörner 1997, pp. 166-168). Ignoring all that could possibly go wrong and planning on the premise that the world would be dancing to his tune, the fairy-tale character Rumpelstiltskin went about singing happily: “Today I bake, tomorrow I brew; the day after that the queen’s child comes in.”

Now back to Mao. As discussed in section 2.1, the Chairman was aware of the uncertainties involved in embracing the Hundred Flowers Campaign. In a nutshell, Mao’s doubts centered on a single question: could “the landlords, rich peasants, local bullies, and counterrevolutionaries” overcome their “class instinct” and serve socialism, or would they, given the chance, “cause trouble” and try to undermine the socialist state? From the Chinese leadership’s perspective, the stakes were incredibly high. The hard-won political stability was at risk. That being the case, an antagonistic dialogue is the worst possible mechanism for arriving at major decisions. The process of oscillating back and forth, hesitating, questioning oneself, and indulging in self-doubts is a demoralizing experience (Rassin 2007). It wears down the actor’s self-confidence. It diminishes his subjective belief in his problem-solving skills. Mao’s final decision to dispense with his doubts and to push ahead with the campaign was not untypical for someone caught up in an agonizing period of indecision. Such abrupt decisions are primarily motivated by the need to escape from

the torments of nerve-racking and self-confidence-tarnishing doubts (Dörner & Güss 2011). Thus, such decisions can seldom be regarded as sound.

The real test for Mao came in April 1956 after the Hundred Flowers Campaign was announced as an official Party policy. It did not take long for the criticism to start pouring in (Hong 2010). Newspaper and magazine articles decried Party officials. People took to the streets in protest against numerous injustices. Students put up posters around campuses that chastised Mao's regime. Some of the criticism was music to the Chairman's ears, as it condemned the privileges the Party elites enjoyed, the economic and social disparities between the cities and the countryside, and the blind imitation of the Soviet Union. Yet, the movement also took on a dynamic that Mao had utterly failed to predict: people began to question the legitimacy of the Communist Party and its right to rule. Even the Chairman did not escape the volley of criticism. One professor, for example, denounced the "arbitrary and reckless" nature of Mao's authority (Lynch 2004, p. 163). In the industrial city of Wuhan, a large student demonstration took place under the slogan, "Welcome to the Nationalists! Welcome to Chiang Kai-shek!" (Terrill 1999b, p. 278). The Communist Party was vilified for its "malevolent tyranny" and its "Auschwitz fascist methods" (Fenby 2008, p. 391). One economics lecturer wrote, "If you [Party members] work satisfactorily, all well and good. If not, the masses may knock you down, kill you and overthrow you" (Short 2000, p. 465).

Mao was, of course, under no circumstance ready to tolerate free speech and freedom of expression in China. Rather, his aim was to weaponize the masses and then deploy them against the Chinese bureaucracy. There is no guarantee that a rational means-ends analysis would have alerted Mao to the folly of this endeavor. As this book will discuss (especially when consid-

ering the essence of strategy in section 4.4), success and failure when dealing with a complex and dynamically changing environment depends on much more than just sound decision making. However, as the pioneering case study conducted by Herek et al (1987) shows, there is a clear link between the quality of the decision making process and the policy outcome. Still, had Mao conducted a rational analysis of the pros and cons, advantages and disadvantages, direct repercussions and side effects, had he discussed contingency plans, had he prepared for the worst-case scenario, and had he only then decided to launch the campaign, he would have been able to cope more effectively with the unfolding events. But no, the storm of harsh criticism caught the Chairman off guard. “Mao was so convinced of the essential correctness of his own thought,” Philip Short writes, “that he could no longer comprehend why, if people had the freedom to think for themselves, they would think what they wanted, not what he wanted” (Short 2000, pp. 470-471).

Mao did not bother to *scrutinize* his convictions, he simply held them to be self-evident. Thus, the harsh reality hit his self-confidence all the harder. Talking to a staff member, the Chairman declared self-defensively: “I told the rightists to criticize us in order to help the Party, I never asked them to oppose the Party or try to seize power from the Party” (Terrill 1999b, p. 279). In other words, it was not his ill-conceived campaign that was wrong. No, he had the right ideas, it was the *implementation* that was flawed! Nonetheless, this feeble explanation could not repair the damage done to his self-confidence. Li Zhisui, the Chairman’s physician, remembers that Mao subsequently developed a severe case of depression and took to his bed (Li 1994, p. 200).

The torments that Mao faced during his depression must have been agonizing. The critical advocate from his antagonistic

dialogue, the “doubter,” must have returned to Mao’s mental stage with a vengeance, torturing him with an orgy of “I told you so” accusations. Fortunately for Mao—and unfortunately for China—the human species excels at developing elaborate psychological defense mechanisms so as to avoid confronting the self with the negative consequences of one’s actions. One such competence proving mechanism involves *redefining* the goal that the actor was actually pursuing (Dörner 1997, p. 17). This is exactly what the Chairman did: he discovered, albeit belatedly, that his goal from the beginning was to “lure the snakes out of their holes” (引蛇出洞)—that is, to trick the enemies of socialism into revealing themselves! When viewed from this vantage point, the Hundred Flowers Campaign was a dazzling success: the counterrevolutionaries were tricked into revealing themselves and trapped; they had exposed themselves! Miraculously, after coming to terms with his “real” intention, Mao’s health quickly revived (Li 1994, p. 203).

Writing in the *People’s Daily*, the Chairman accused his detractors of *not only* hijacking the Hundred Flowers Campaign and plotting to “overthrow the Communist Party and the working class, and to topple the great cause of socialism,” but also of conspiring to “drag history back to a bourgeois dictatorship.” And as if that was not enough, the sinister conspirators further plotted to “resubjugate the Chinese people to the reactionary rule of imperialism and its running dogs” (Mao 1992b, pp. 566-567). Endorsing this sentiment, the *People’s Daily* announced on June 8:

From May 8 to June 7, our newspaper and the entire Party press, upon orders of the Central Committee, almost without exception did not speak out against incorrect views. This was done so that ... the venomous weeds could grow luxuriantly and the people could see this and shudder at the realization

that such things existed in the world. Then the people would destroy such vile things with their own hands (Pantsov & Levine 2012, p. 441).

Was Chairman Mao engaging in deception here? *Self*-deception is more like it. The real tragedy is that many people do not recognize their own self-deception tricks as such. In several experiments conducted over the course of four decades, Dörner and his group examined, among other things, how subjects coped with failure (see, for example, Dörner 1997; Dörner et al 1983). If self-improvement was the ultimate goal, then *self-reflection* should be the ideal coping strategy. It involves conducting a critical evaluation of one's chosen course of action and the reasons why things did not work out as expected. It also takes into account the need to draw lessons from aversive experiences so to avoid repeating the same mistakes in the future.

Unfortunately, for our species, self-reflection is not easily triggered (Dörner 1997), which is understandable. Self-reflection can be a bitter pill to swallow: it reveals a person's shortcomings and tarnishes her self-confidence. Yet, it also improves a person's ability to cope with new problems and challenges in the future. Dörner and his group identify several defense mechanisms that subjects employ to redirect the blame away from the self and to exempt the self from responsibility (see also Baumeister et al 1998; Cramer 2000). Some subjects stood out as conspiracy theorists, conjuring up shadowy forces bent on undermining their efforts. Others assigned culpability to readily available scapegoats who supposedly screwed up the execution of their brilliant ideas. Still others remained obstinately determined to see the glass as being half full, down-playing or even denying any serious problems.

Mao might very well have believed that his real objective all

along was to “expose the counterrevolutionaries.” This would have been certainly more convenient than having to endure torturous self-doubts. As mentioned above, Mao did complain a lot about his comrades’ vocal opposition to the Hundred Flowers Campaign (Mao 1989, pp. 240-241). He ridiculed their fears as being “groundless.” Now that the die was cast, those fears proved—from the Party’s perspective—to be justified. Does that not mean that the Chairman, unlike his colleagues, was incapable of gauging the consequences of a given policy? Was he really suited to leading China along the path of socialist modernization? Perhaps he was a brilliant military leader, but a poor civilian one? Maybe he had already outlived his usefulness for his country? However, who said that the Great Helmsman had failed to predict the unfolding dynamics? Did he not warn of “poisonous weeds” in his earlier speeches? Did he not enjoin his comrades on several occasions to be on the lookout for all sorts of people who conspired to “turn China into a mess” (Mao 1992b, p. 257)? Besides, the campaign did achieve something very valuable! The snakes came out of their holes! The real enemies of socialism were exposed! It was now time to get rid of them! It was not time to dwell on mere technicalities such as any “other” aims the campaign might have had...



THE ERA OF “FLOURISHING FLOWERS” and “contending schools” lasted for only six weeks before mutating into an ugly anti-rightist witch-hunt. Mao was forced to call upon the same Party apparatus he had sought to reform through the Hundred Flowers Campaign to reign in the salvo of public criticism. (One might be reminded of a passage from Goethe’s *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice* here: “I have need of Thee! from the spirits that I called, Sir, deliver me!”) However, instead of admitting that it

was *his* fault for having launched the campaign in the first place, *his* fault for having miscalculated its predictable dynamics, and *his* fault for having ignored his comrades' reservations, Mao chose to make those who believed in his campaign's promise of blossoming flowers and contending schools into scapegoats and to cast them out into the intellectual wilderness. They should go to the countryside and "reform themselves through labor," decreed the Chairman!

It is worth noting here that Mao's China did not have the same elaborate domestic security apparatus that the Soviet Union did (Guo 2012). Instead of condemning those who exhibited "erroneous thinking" tendencies to languish in a Chinese gulag, the CCP granted such sinners a chance to redeem themselves by enduring a form of psychological torture. These thought-criminals were subjected to public sessions of criticism by friends and colleagues—criticism that they were expected to outdo by volunteering sincere self-criticism. The underlying assumption that underpinned this type of autotherapy was that a good Party member would surely desire to voluntarily identify and root out any "unhealthy" political views (Schell & Delury 2013, p. 222). "Our object in exposing errors and criticizing shortcomings is like that of a doctor in curing a disease," Mao once explained, "The entire purpose is to save the person, not cure him to death" (Schell & Delury 2013, p. 223).

By the time of the *Anti-Rightist Campaign* of 1957, the vast majority of the Chinese population did not require any ideological treatment. Li Zhisui spoke for perhaps hundreds of millions of his compatriots when he confessed: "What Mao thought, I thought. It was not that I had contrary opinions that I had to suppress or keep to myself. Mao's opinions were mine. The possibility of differing with the Chairman never crossed my mind" (Li 1994, p. 215).



The roots of this imposed conformity stretch back to the revolutionary period (Gao 2000). After settling down in Yan'an in 1936, the Communists focused on consolidating their forces in the wake of the devastating Long March. Over the following years, the Communists' numbers began to grow very rapidly. Mao deliberately set out to forge his army of peasants into a militarily and ideologically disciplined force. This task seemed all the more urgent as cohorts of intellectuals and writers from metropolitan cities such as Beijing and Shanghai started arriving in Yan'an. Their freethinking tendencies were perceived to be a menace to Party discipline. Further, Chinese Communists who had been trained in Moscow were coming back to China and joining the CCP in Yan'an, thereby posing an ideological threat to Mao's unorthodox and sometimes even arbitrary interpretation of Marxism-Leninism. Thus, the so-called *Rectification Campaign* was launched in 1942.

Under the banner of combatting dogmatism, Mao attacked those comrades who "regarded Marxism-Leninism as a ready-made panacea; once you have it, you can cure all your ills with little effort." The campaign was supposedly intended to cure this "childish blindness" and to "enlighten people" (Schell & Delury 2013, p. 222). Yet, instead of promoting freethinking and encouraging people to critically analyze problems, the campaign only succeeded in substituting Mao's own dogma for the Marxism-Leninism orthodoxy. It is worth stressing here that Mao's military strategies, as well as the brilliance of his mass mobilization techniques, had already ensured his dominance within the collective leadership of the Party well before the launch of the Rectification Campaign (Karl 2010, p. 68). However, the campaign elevated Mao's status even further by fostering a burgeoning cult of personality around him. The word of the now hallowed leader became the final arbiter for distinguishing truth from falsehood. Out of his speeches and

writings, the theoretical apparatus of *Mao Zedong Thought* was created. Liu Shaoqi heralded it as the “only correct theory and policy by which the proletariat and all the toiling people of China can liberate itself” (Schurmann 1968, p. 26).

By the time of the Anti-Rightist Campaign some fifteen years later, the mechanisms for dealing with those who dared to question the wisdom of the Party and its Chairman were well established. The ideological sinners were rounded up in their working units and subjected to so-called *struggle sessions*, in which their comrades confronted them with their alleged crimes. Naturally, the righteous were genuinely outraged by the profane words and actions of the blasphemers. In fact, they needed little urging from their Chairman to rise up against the “counterrevolutionaries.” Paradoxically though, many victims of struggle sessions accepted charges of being rightists, counterrevolutionaries, or bourgeois elements. Prominent journalist Liu Binyan remembers how he felt after being forced to listen to the same accusations over and over again: “I began to lose confidence. Was I without fault? Of course not ... Could I honestly say that I had joined the Party solely for the liberation of the Chinese people with no ulterior motives? Of course not ... Could I honestly say that I never had any eye on publicity and profit? Of course not” (Liu 1990b, p. 85). Orville Schell suggests that the struggle sessions would make even the most stalwart person doubt his own innocence (Schell 1999, p. 264). Thus, to escape the feelings of guilt and to find peace of mind, the “sinners” confessed to “crimes” that they had never committed in the first place.

Unfortunately for China and the Chinese people, the price of preserving Mao’s self-esteem was exorbitant. Maurice Meisner puts the number of those who were punished at half a million Party members—out of a total of thirteen million (Meisner 2007, p. 138). Still worse perhaps was the atmosphere of fear

that spread among cadres and intellectuals alike. The consequence for the remainder of the Mao era was beyond tragic: as the Chairman's visions for the country grew more utopian and more radical in nature, China's brightest minds were already too frightened to speak out in warning against the predictably horrendous policy outcomes (Vogel 2011, p. 41).

### **2.3 Marxism: Religion in Disguise**

The Anti-Rightist Campaign must have left Mao with a dilemma. With the "counterrevolutionaries" having now been exposed, where should he go from there? Should things go back to the way they were before? For Mao, the answer was an unequivocal "no." One reason for this was his practical objections to the Soviet development model, which I touched on in section 2.1. Yet, a second, and for Mao infinitely more important, reason was his mystical belief in the power of mass mobilization and his instinctive disdain for orderly, bureaucratically guided economic construction. It is important to emphasize here that Chairman Mao did not have a clear-cut idea as to how exactly mass mobilization could further economic development. Rather, he hoped that the Hundred Flowers Campaign would help to translate a vague principle into concrete policy ideas.

Mao's belief in the power of the masses was deeply rooted. "In a very short time," he wrote in 1927, "several hundred million peasants in China's central, southern, and northern provinces will rise like a fierce wind or tempest, a force so swift and violent that no power, however great, will be able to suppress it" (Mao 1994, p. 430). The only question, Mao argued, was whether one was to stand in their way or to "march at their head and lead them" (*ibid.*). The 63-year-old Mao believed in this sentiment as fervently as the 33-year-old Mao had: when

millions of people march under the banner of a historically unique leader, nothing is impossible.

Of course, while mobilizing the masses in a military fashion might be reasonable during a civil war, adopting this notion as a guiding principle for policy making during a period of peaceful economic development was a recipe for disaster. Further, considering the masses to be “the motive force of world history”—as the Chairman once put it (Mao 1965, p. 257)—represented a radical departure from the core tenets of Marxism. To elucidate this vital point, I will discuss the general outlook of the Marxist worldview in this subsection as far as it relates to the question at hand. Then, in the following subsection, I will argue that Mao’s departure from Marxism was dictated by his own personality—a personality cursed with an insatiable addiction to seeking and overcoming challenges on an increasingly epic scale.



NOT UNLIKE MAO, Karl Marx lived in revolutionary times. Again, not unlike his future disciple, Marx was fascinated by the wind of revolutionary change that was blowing all around him. However, Marx devoted his life to understanding history rather than to actively trying to shape it. Thus, it occurred to him that fundamental (or *revolutionary*) changes in human history must have followed pre-defined patterns. As a theoretician, Marx set out to develop a comprehensive scientific framework intended to not only identify such patterns, but also to explain the causal mechanisms that govern them.

In studying history, Marx followed a *dialectical approach*—that is, he believed history to advance through conflict among hostile (or *antagonistic*) *classes* of people. He hypothesized that any given societal class throughout history could be identified

according to one criterion and one criterion alone: whether or not its members owned *wealth-generating property*. Tension between those who did own such property and those who did not, he argued, was inevitable. He coined the term *class struggle* to describe this long-term and reoccurring conflict. All class struggles, according to Marx, culminated in the creation of a new elite, which in due time would seize power from the old elite.

Applying this concept to human history, Marx identified five distinct historical stages. He described the early hunter-gatherer tribes that emerged at the dawn of humanity as the first stage in human history—an era that he termed *primitive communism*. Since wealth-generating properties were collectively owned, such societies had no classes; they knew neither hierarchies nor any division of labor. The later introduction of large-scale agriculture resulted in the emergence of a slave-owning, exploiting class as well as a class of exploited slaves. This development launched the historical stage known as *slave society*. With time, a new elite class—the aristocrats—rose to power, thereby ushering history into the *feudalism* stage, with its kings, lords, and noblemen. The forces of economic, scientific, and technological change conspired once more to give birth to the class of capitalists. Their eventual triumph over the aristocrats inaugurated the era of *capitalism*.

Marx devoted the bulk of his writings to analyzing the rise and “inevitable” fall of capitalism. He identified two antagonistic classes within a capitalist society: the capitalists, or the bourgeoisie, who owned the wealth-generating means of production (i.e., factories), and the proletariat (those without property) who toiled on behalf of the capitalists. Marx deemed the historical stage of capitalism to be radically different from all the stages that came before it. This time around, the “gravediggers” of the ruling class were not going to be a new elite, but would instead

be the exploited workers who made up the majority of society. Thus, the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat would culminate in a *socialist*—the word being derived from *society*—revolution that would usher humanity into a new era of rule by the majority rather than by any new elite.

Marx foretold that this socialist revolution would inaugurate the socialist stage of history. Yet, this stage, Marx prophesied, would be only a transitional one, during which the foundations for the end of human history will be laid. Then, at some unspecified point in the future, the historical conditions would be ripe for the arrival of *communism*—a utopian paradise in which

...nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic (Marx & Engels 1998, p. 53).

Further, Marx believed that the entirety of human history, with its episodes of heightened and lowered class struggles, its chapters of war and peace, its years of famine and plenty, was not only advancing the material conditions of society, but more importantly, it was also transforming the very essence of human nature (Marx 2005, p. 160). This transformation would reach its zenith with the arrival of communism. Adopting the guise of a prophet, Marx predicted the emergence of a society of New Men, in which “the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all” (Marx & Engels 1999).

Robert Tucker argues that Marxism actually encompasses all

the essential qualities of a religion (Tucker 2001). It views history as a continuous struggle between the forces of good and evil as they manifest in the exploited and exploiting classes, respectively. It envisions the total self-transformation of human nature during the course of this struggle. It reveals that humanity is currently living in the end times. It asserts the inevitability of the deserved destruction of a morally bankrupt world at the hands of the righteous. It promises salvation as the ultimate destiny of human history—a promise that had “variously been called the Kingdom of God, Paradise, Nirvana, Satori, Salvation; [Marx] called it Communism” (Tucker 2001, p. 5).

Now, if one accepts Howard Gardner’s psychological definition of a *leader* as someone “who, by word and/or personal example, markedly influence[s] the behaviors, thoughts, and/or feelings of a significant number of their fellow human beings” (Gardner 1995, p. 8), then one must admit that Marx was one of the most influential leaders in human history. His writings inspired revolutions around the world, toppled the established order here, and promoted chaos there. Gardner argues that leaders exert influence over others through the narratives they relate and embody, narratives “about themselves and their groups, about where they were coming from and where they were headed, about what was to be feared, struggled against, and dreamed about” (Gardner 1995, p. 13).

The field of narrative psychology explores the stories that humans construct to make sense of events taking place in their own life, in the lives of others, and in the world in general (Bruner 1986; McAdams 1997). A narrative is built around a master theme. For example, someone might reconstruct his own past (or that of his country) around the theme of victimhood. Or he might compose a conspiratorial narrative to explain this or that event as being the work of shadowy forces.

Or he might—as Karl Marx did—reinterpret world history around the theme of *redemption*.

A *redemptive narrative* always starts with a positive state that is later messed up by the protagonist. During the course of the ensuing events, the protagonist experiences a transformation that eventually leads him to a better state than the original one. In Marx's redemptive narrative, humanity begins with the positive state of primitive communism. The introduction of private property represents the original sin that condemns humanity to a millennia-long journey through the valley of sorrow. However, this should not be seen as a bad thing. It is only through difficulty and sorrow that the transformation of human nature can occur. This transformation opens the door to the utopian paradise of *communism proper*—a paradise superior to the initial stage of primitive communism in every respect. In a nutshell, the logic of a redemptive narrative postulates the importance of wasting the first chance as a precondition for getting a second and *better* chance (McAdams 2006).

For those who saw themselves as victims of capitalist exploitation, Marx's redemptive narrative seemed highly relatable. It conveyed a sense of belonging to a group of fellow sufferers, a sense of being part of something bigger than oneself, and a sense of moral self-righteousness. Its appeal was augmented by the fact that it came in different versions. It addresses the “ignorant masses” with the simple and fiery rhetoric of the *Communist Manifesto*, while it offers “sophisticated intellectuals” the much more complicated *Capital*. Psychologically speaking, both the “ignorant masses” and the “sophisticated intellectuals” are drawn to Marxism due to the same psychological need—the need to understand the glue that holds the world together.

Marxism satisfies this need magnificently by fulfilling two conditions. First, it is built around the assumption that the



redemptive narrative of history advances through a single force: class struggle. Dörner coined the term *reductive hypothesis* to describe the human tendency to single one variable out of a network of interconnected variables and treat it as the most crucial one, the one on which all the other variables depend (Dörner 1997, p. 90). People wrongly assume that they merely have to focus their attention and energy on that one variable—whether it be class relations, tax levels, or CO<sub>2</sub> emissions—to not only understand a complex and dynamic system in its entirety, but also to control it. Reductive hypotheses are very popular because they are—cognitively speaking—energy efficient.

The second key characteristic from which Marxism derives its lure is arguably its sense of providential determinism: the eventual destruction of capitalism and the triumph of communism are predestined by the objective laws of *historical materialism* (Perry et al 2012, p. 575)! The belief that one is able to *know* the future represents the ultimate elimination of uncertainty. The redemptive narrative of Marxism, its determinism, and the fact that it provides “an integrated, all-inclusive view of reality, an organization of all significant knowledge in an interconnected whole, a frame of reference within which all possible questions of importance are answered or answerable” also explains, Tucker argues, its appeal “to some modern men in whom the hold of traditional religion has loosened but the craving for an all-inclusive world-view remains alive and strong” (Tucker 2001, p. 22).

However, no matter how complicated some of Karl Marx’s philosophical musings are, no matter how sophisticated and thorough his analysis is, no matter how many bright minds have accepted it as the ultimate truth, the fact remains that Marxism—like all other political ideologies—is a doctrine built around a reductive hypothesis. The combination of *real*—as

opposed to *imagined*—human nature and the complex and dynamic characteristics of a world that defies oversimplification rendered failure the only inevitable historical outcome of any attempt to force Marxism down the throats of societies. Further, the combination of real human nature and the religious character of Marxism made the rise of fanatics, who misused the doctrine to justify committing the cruelest of atrocities in the name of building the fairest of societies, rather predictable (Muravchik 2002).

Yet, is it fair to label such attempts as “misuses” of Marxism? After all, the idea of revolution pervades all of Marx’s writings (Tucker 1970). It is important, however, to understand the term *revolution* in its original Marxist sense. While he interpreted it as a fundamental change in both human nature and the societal order, Marx also envisioned *revolution* as a long-term, historical process in which the changing economic, scientific, and technological conditions favored the slow rise of one class and the decline of another until the ascending class had replaced the decaying one. *Marx did not envision revolution as an act of active struggle* (Holmes 2009, p. 15). Yet, it is in the very nature of the passionate activist to refuse being relegated to the position of passive observer of history.

Julian Rotter introduces the concept of the *locus of control* to measure the extent to which individuals believe themselves to be in the driver’s seat of their life (Rotter 1954; Rotter 1975). The locus of control defines a spectrum with two ends: internal and external. Individuals who score toward the internal end of the spectrum believe and act upon the premise that they can forge their own destiny, while individuals who score toward the external end of the spectrum believe their life to be shaped by forces beyond their control (God, fate, environmental factors, “the powerful,” forces of history, etc.). In other words, actors with a strong internal locus of control would rather light a

candle than curse the dark, while actors with a strong external locus of control prefer to spend their time complaining about the darkness.

Political activism is associated with a strong internal locus of control (Abramowitz 1973). The problem for the Marxist political activist is that his gospel commands him to suppress his strong urge to act. History demonstrates that—at least in some notable cases—faithful Marxists have succumbed to the temptation of the inner serpent. Psychologists use the term *cognitive dissonance* to describe, among other things, the informational pain stimuli experienced when violating one's belief system (Cooper 2007; Festinger 1962). People typically solve the contradiction between what their principles dictate and what they are actually doing by rationalizing their behavior—that is, by explaining the contradiction away or by inventing an excuse or justification.

That is exactly what Vladimir Lenin did. He argued that the proletariat lacked the political consciousness to act—even though the historical conditions were ripe for them to do so. This necessitated, he continued, the establishment of a *vanguard party* to mobilize the workers and guide them to action. Lenin's adaptation of Marxism substituted—in the words of John Gooding—"the party for the missing proletariat and the party elite for the inadequately prepared party masses" (Gooding 2002, p. 249).

From the days of the Russian Revolution onward, this rationalization was accepted by Marxists worldwide. As a token of their deep gratitude and appreciation for Lenin, Marxism became known as Marxism-Leninism. The heresy thus became an integral part of the religion!

## 2.4 The Chairman's Heresy

At the time of the October Revolution, China was undergoing its own share of great trials and suffering. The country was divided among warlords, imperialist powers had established concessions within it, and patriots were debating all sorts of ideologies that might offer a way out of the darkness. The apparent success of Marxism-Leninism in Russia impressed many young Chinese idealists who were keen to save their nation. Subsequent events—especially the Chinese government's spineless response to the Treaty of Versailles, which bestowed Germany's concessions in Shandong Province on Japan—sparked widespread discontent. Nationwide student demonstrations dubbed as the *May Fourth Movement* in 1919 helped to increase the intellectuals' familiarity with Marxism (Liu 2009). Ultimately, when the Chinese Communist Party was founded in 1921, it emerged from the intellectual ferment within scholarly circles.

China's Marxists faced a more fundamental problem than their Russian counterparts did with regard to the Marxist doctrine. Marx postulated that only industrialized countries could embrace socialist revolutions. Agricultural states were, according to Marx, not yet ready for socialism. After all, socialism was supposed to be born out of a class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat (Holmes 2009). China was still a predominantly rural society. However, Lenin's theories proved to be useful here. He argued that imperialism represented the "highest stage of capitalism." As China was plagued by imperialist intrusions, Chinese Marxists reasoned that the Middle Kingdom could also be regarded as a capitalist country (Guo 2013, pp. 99-100).

Demonstrating a severe lack of critical reflection, the Chinese Communists decided to imitate the Russian experience and

rely on city workers as the main source of future revolutionaries. Some comrades within the CCP questioned the wisdom of depending on a weak and small proletariat. They wondered whether it might be strategically more effective to mobilize the millions of peasants in the countryside. They doubted, deliberated, and hesitated, but one man *acted*. One man *led* by example (Perry 2012)—a young peasant from the province of Hunan who was destined due to his “relentless energy and ruthless self-confidence” (Spence 1999a, p. xi) to enter the annals of world history after having “conceived and led the most popular revolution” (Meisner 2007, p. vi) on the face of the earth!



BY ATTRIBUTING the characteristics of “relentless energy” and “ruthless self-confidence” to Mao Zedong, Spence (1999a, p. xi) was describing a defining aspect of the Chairman’s personality. What was the source of Mao’s “relentless energy”? Where did he derive his “ruthless self-confidence” from? What made him believe so fanatically in the inevitability of his eventual triumph over all the odds? What motivated Mao to act in the way that he did? To answer these questions, it is first necessary to introduce the backbone of this psychological study: the PSI theory.<sup>5</sup>

The PSI theory is, in essence, an example of a so-called *drive theory*. It is based on a simple, albeit powerful, premise: humans do what they do so as to satisfy their arising needs. The most basic human needs are physiological, for example, the need to breathe, drink, eat, sleep, avoid psychological and physical pain, etc. Then, there is the need to get along with others and to get ahead in life, the need to belong, the need to love and to be loved, the need to feel safe and secure in the here

and now as well as in the future, the need to engage in sexual intercourse, the need to produce and nurture offspring, the need for social recognition, and the need for power. There is also *the need to feel competently able to satisfy one's arising needs*.

Although both numerous and individually variable, human needs can nonetheless be clustered into five categories: (1) physiological needs, (2) sexual needs, (3) need for certainty, (4) need for competence (or self-efficacy), and (5) need for affiliation (or belongingness) (Dörner 2001).<sup>6</sup> Indeed, all human needs can be traced back to one or sometimes several of the aforementioned categories. For example, the need to love and to be loved touches upon the needs for affiliation, sexuality, competence (“I am worthy of being loved”), and certainty (“I am going to settle down with him/her and start a family”) (Dörner 2001, pp. 576-577). In any given romantic relationship during any given phase, certain needs are more strongly articulated than others—for example, sometimes the need to belong is predominant, while sometimes it is all about sexual intercourse (Sternberg 1998).

The PSI theory portrays the five categories of needs as metaphorical *fuel tanks*. Each fuel tank has a so-called *set point*—that is, a target value. If the actual value is lower than the set point, the actor is motivated to engage in goal-directed behavior geared toward eliminating, or at least decreasing, the deviation between the set point and the actual value. Consider a simple example: you feel hungry, so you decide to eat. But to eat what? A snack, a salad, or a pizza? (You might experience a moment of indecisiveness and enter into an antagonistic dialogue.) You eventually decide to eat a pizza. You choose a restaurant. Now, your mind knows *which* need is to be satisfied (energy intake) and *how* to satisfy it (having a pizza at your favorite restaurant). In psychology, the combination of need plus goal is referred to as *motive*.

Obviously, a few hours after you had your pizza, you feel hungry again, or to use the fuel tank terminology, the actual value in the food fuel tank would have decreased below the set point. This is hardly a revelation. People are *aware* of the fact that their survival depends on a constant supply of air, water, and food. However, they are perhaps less familiar with the notion that their psychological well-being depends to the same extent on their ability to satisfy their need for affiliation, certainty, and competence signals on a regular basis. This notion has far-reaching consequences in terms of understanding human behavior. It means that human behavior is motivated as much by the urge to satisfy informational needs as it is directed toward physiological and sexual wants. The deprivation of affiliation, certainty, and competence signals leads to psychological complications such as anxiety, depression, panic, stress, etc.

How do people come by affiliation, certainty, and competence signals so as to refill the respective fuel tanks? There exists a wide range of experiences that convey the coveted signals. With regard to affiliation signals, the spectrum extends from simple gestures such as a friendly smile from a colleague or a light-hearted slap on the back to emotionally intense, affection-expressing acts such as a tight hug from a loved one. Certainty signals can be brought about by a variety of means, too. Engaging in planning activities is one example of this. You could search your memory for open, future-related questions: what should I do this evening? What is the next stage in my career? How should I save money for the university education of my twelve-year-old child? Or you could conjure up an explanation for your neighbor's strange behavior. Or you could indulge in speculation regarding the validity of the theory of cosmic inflation. Or you could read a novel or watch a movie. In all these cases, it is possible to detect a single governing behav-

ioral pattern: people deliberately seek uncertainty for the sake of overcoming it. As for competence signals, they can be obtained by solving problems, mastering challenges, undergoing trial by fire, etc.

Constant deviations from the fuel tank set points lend vigor to human enterprise. People are constantly on the move, pursuing this or that motive. But why do deviations occur in the first place? One reason is that the fuel in each tank gets burned up during the process of physiological and psychological functioning. A second reason concerns the negative experiences that the mind interprets as anti-affiliation, incompetence, or uncertainty signals. Such signals decrease the current value in the relevant tank. At the same time, they release pain stimuli to induce the organism to avoid the aversive experience that is drying up the fuel in the tank. People encounter such aversive experiences during the course of their interactions with their environment. Sometimes, this happens as a result of inadequate behavioral strategies—for example, going to the beach on a rainy afternoon without having consulted the weather forecast beforehand. Sometimes, things do not work out well despite people's best efforts—for example, looking for a job during an economic recession.

A third reason why deviations occur is related to the fact that humans sometimes *deliberately* seek out negative experiences that bring down the actual value in a fuel tank. Why would someone do that? Well, it is important to keep in mind that the *process* of satisfying any need (eating, drinking, engaging in sexual activities, experiencing affiliation, certainty, and competence signals) produces pleasure stimuli, but for this to happen, the actual value in a tank must be lower than the set point. The lower the actual value, the stronger and more urgent the need. The stronger the need, the more intense the satisfaction experi-



enced when the actor engages in need-satisfying behavior. As the saying goes: no pain, no gain.

If you think about people you know in real life and the characters you encounter in fiction, you have to admit that not everybody is equally driven by all five categories of needs. Obviously, some people have a stronger appetite for food, drink, and sex than others. Equally, some have a stronger need for intimacy than others (McAdams 1980); some have a stronger lust for competence signals, as manifested in a strong desire for achievement (McClelland 1967) or power (Winter 1973), than others; while some have a stronger appetite for certainty signals than others. In cases in which the appetite for a specific need is above average, the fuel in the relevant tank is not only used up with time and dried up by aversive experiences, but the respective tank has a *leak* that allows the fuel to continuously seep out. The size of the leak varies. Actors with large leaks are colloquially described as being *addicts*—whether they are addicted to food, drink, or sex. However, humans can also become addicted to affiliation signals, certainty signals, and competence signals. Why do such variations among people exist? Modern psychology invokes the complex interaction between an actor's genetic endowment and the environment in which she grows up to explain differences in personality among individuals (McAdams 2009).

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AN ACTOR with a leak in the competence tank is cursed with an insatiable desire to seek and master challenges. Now, if you take a closer look at Mao's life, you will notice that he must have had a large leak in his competence tank for he was constantly driven to prove himself. Mao had, in the words of Chen Jian, a "challenge-oriented character" (Chen 1994, p. 27). From his

youth onward, he was motivationally compelled to shape his life according to a principle he had formulated as early as 1917: “What a great joy to struggle against heaven! What a great joy to struggle against earth! What a great joy to struggle against man!” (Hu 2009, p. 326). Extolling the exhilaration, elation, and adrenaline experienced while struggling against heaven and earth, the young Mao described his understanding of an ideal life: “To charge on horseback, amidst the clash of arms, and to be ever victorious; to shake the mountains by one’s cries, and the colors of the sky by one’s roars of anger; to have the strength to uproot mountains [...] and the audacity to pierce the mark” (Mao 1992a, p. 124). Meisner explains that this activist temperament had attracted the young Mao to anarchist ideas prior to his conversion to Marxism—a conversion that, Meisner believes, “came about less because of a burning intellectual attraction to the doctrine than because of the association of Marxism with the politically activist impulses released by the Russian Revolution” (Meisner 2007, pp. 146-147).

The revolutionary years, with their countless battles fought under unfavorable conditions, provided Mao with sufficient challenges to master. When the time came to govern China, he wreaked havoc on both heaven and earth. Although the Hundred Flowers Campaign, the Great Leap Forward (Chapter 3), and the Great Cultural Revolution of the Proletariat (Chapter 4) are generally singled out in historical essays due to their disastrous ramifications, Mao’s years as paramount leader of China were defined by an endless stream of mass campaigns against imagined class enemies and counterrevolutionaries, human diseases, and social ills (i.e., corruption, waste, and bureaucratism). In 1958, he even unleashed a campaign to eradicate flies, mosquitoes, rats, and sparrows—thereby disturbing the ecological balance, which had severe consequences that actually intensified the catastrophe that was the Great Leap

Forward (Shapiro 2004, pp. 86-89). Throughout his life, Mao acted, as Schell and Delury suggest, “Like an addict in search of the next high, he was always looking to the next campaign or movement, each more relentless, brutal, and exhilarating than the last” (Schell & Delury 2013, p. 236).

In his private life, Mao was also always on the lookout for a new challenge among a wide spectrum of activities that ranged from never returning by the same route after a walk to enjoying a vibrant sex life with interchangeable partners. He rebelled against time and adopted various sleep routines. He pushed his physical endurance to the limit by going without sleep for long periods of time (Li 1994, p. 121). Mao’s dislike of routinized protocol and ceremony even prompted him to resign from the presidency of the People’s Republic in 1959. (However, he kept the more powerful position of Chairman of the Party.) If Mao Zedong had *not* had a leak in his competence tank, his time as a political ruler would have been characterized by a sincere desire for stability. He would have supported his comrades’ efforts to forge an orderly path toward economic and social development, rather than constantly criticizing and actively sabotaging their efforts.

What particularly stands out about Mao is not only his restlessness, but also the “relentless energy” and the “ruthless self-confidence” with which he pursued all his endeavors. These two qualities combined to manifest in the fact that once Mao had decided to do something, he did not give up easily—even, or rather *especially*, when faced with difficulties (Quan & Li 1992, p. 13). What was the source of this “relentless energy” and “ruthless self-confidence”?

The word “motive” comes from the Latin word *movere*, which means “to move.” In psychology, it is used to describe the force that moves an individual to engage in goal-directed behavior.

That energizing force, as mentioned earlier, is the *goal* people pursue to satisfy a *need*. Now, at any given moment, there are a number of conceivable motives that an individual can pursue (e.g., ordering a pizza, a salad, or a sandwich to satisfy the need for energy intake; playing “Cut the Rope” on a smartphone to satisfy the need for competence signals; reading Agatha Christie’s *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* to arouse and satisfy the need for certainty signals, etc.). How is the psychological mechanism for deciding what motive to pursue implemented in the brain? Psychological studies indicate that people choose the motive with the highest *strength*. One simple formula for determining the strength of a given motive involves multiplying the *value* of success by the *probability* of success (Dörner 2001, p. 445).

It is necessary to take a closer look at both components, starting with the value of success. What “value” does having a pizza, completing a few levels of “Cut the Rope,” or following the fictional detective Hercule Poirot as he unravels the murder of Roger Ackroyd have for an individual? Obviously, the hungrier someone is, the higher the value of a delicious meal. The same logic applies to all the other motives: the higher the deviation between the actual value and the set point in the respective fuel tank, the higher the value of eliminating that deviation. Naturally, people are not aware on a *conscious* level of how the motive selection mechanism works. If someone asks you why you are playing a video game rather than going to a restaurant, you are unlikely to say something like: “Well, the current value of my competence tank is well below the set point, while my food tank is almost full.”

Moving on to the second component of the formula. Humans are unlikely to engage in goal-oriented behavior unless they—subjectively—believe that their efforts will pay off. An individual’s subjective estimation of the probability of success depends

on his competence level: the more competent an individual feels, the higher he rates the probability of success. It is worth emphasizing here that the *competence* attribute consists of two components: *general competence*, which describes a person's belief in his problem-solving skills in general, and *epistemic competence*, which pertains to a person's skillset in a specific area.

Assume that you have immersed yourself in the smartphone game “Cut the Rope,” meaning that it has become your action-guiding motive. When does another motive take its place? The strength of the current motive represents the so-called *selection threshold*: no other motive will be selected as the behavior-guiding motive until its strength is higher than this threshold. Now, motive strength is a dynamic force. Both components—the value of success and the probability of success—change with time and are affected by actual successes and failures. For example, after the first few levels of “Cut the Rope,” the game starts becoming more and more challenging (i.e., the probability of success declines). At the same time, your need for, say, energy intake increases. At some point, eating becomes a stronger motive ... and so you stop playing.

It's time now to return to Mao Zedong. As described above, once Mao had decided to do something, he seemingly harnessed “endless” psychological energy to expend in its pursuit. This means that the strength of his current, action-guiding motive—whether it be a military campaign, a new policy, or a theoretical essay—was so high that it was psychologically difficult for a new motive to take its place—allowing for temporary exceptions to satisfy physiological and biological needs. Where did this motive strength come from?

Looking at the first component of the motive strength equation, it is easy to conclude that mastering challenges must have had

enormous psychological value for Mao. This can be understood very well in light of the previous discussion about Mao's apparent leak in his competence fuel tank, but it still presents a conundrum: the second component of the equation—the probability of success—depends on the current competence level within the competence tank! In Mao's case, this level was continuously dropping due to the leak. Thus, he needed a constant supply of competence signals to compensate for what had already leaked from his tank. If signs of (partial) success were absent for a prolonged period of time, self-doubt would begin to creep in: *Am I really able to do this? Am I losing?* Giving up would have amounted to an admission of defeat, which would have emptied Mao's competence tank and triggered a depression.

This psychological constellation fostered a palette of behavioral patterns that were all geared toward the artificial creation of signs of success. The combination of an insatiable need for competence signals and the constant fear of failure defined Mao's behavior throughout his life. It caused him to employ big words and to paint rosy pictures of a better future so as to silence his doubts and build his courage. It left him prone to applying reality distortion mechanisms and rationalizations. It prompted him to instinctively downplay negative feedback from reality, to blame mistakes on subordinates, and to interpret outright failures as partial successes. In fact, what historians perceive as "ruthless self-confidence" was really the manifestation of a continuous inner struggle against doubt.<sup>7</sup>

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THE LEAK in Mao's competence tank drove him to seek challenges and to despise the boredom associated with stability. This, however, does not mean that mastering *any* challenge

would have provided him with the competence signals he so desperately craved. Rather, the challenge in question needed to meet an important criterion: the challenge's difficulty level relative to one's skills should neither be too low nor too high (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi 1992). If the problem at hand was too easy and the chances of success were all but guaranteed, it would be a dull and boring challenge. If it was, however, too difficult, it would dry up the actor's reservoir of competence and torture him with incompetence signals without offering any prospect of a rewarding victory. Difficulty levels are, of course, subjective: solving differential equations might be a daunting task for most people, but it is a piece of cake for accomplished math professors.

Psychologically speaking, the most rewarding challenges are those that leave the actor in what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi terms a *state of flow* (Csikszentmihalyi 1991). This term describes the energizing feeling that one experiences when absorbed in a challenge to the exclusion of everything else. It is a state in which one's thoughts and actions flow naturally like a stream of water. When in a state of flow, one experiences an incessant sequence of *tension building* when obstacles arise and one fears failure, while *tension release* is experienced when those obstacles are overcome (Dörner 1997, p. 62). Each small setback increases the actor's determination to work harder so as to achieve ultimate success, and each small triumph rewards the actor with competence signals. Different individuals experience states of flow in different spheres of life, for example, playing Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*, cooking a traditional Indian recipe, or leading an army into battle.

Mao's elixir of life comprised those daunting challenges associated with the revolutionary years. He derived enormous joy from directing his energy and harnessing his emotions to overcome such challenges. By utilizing his full mental capacities, he

devised unique military strategies and tactics that made him, in the words of Michael Handel, a “truly original student of war” and rendered his military writings “as important and original as any of the classical works [of Sun Zi or Clausewitz]” (Handel 2001, pp. 310, xxiv). That is to say nothing, of course, of the tremendous military and political successes that culminated in the reunification of China.

Yet, by the early 1950s, the formidable mission had been accomplished and Mao’s comrades were engrossed in deliberations concerning the drafting of plans for orderly economic development. It does not seem far-fetched to assume that the Chairman felt acute nostalgia for his revolutionary years (Schell & Delury 2013, p. 236). From Mao’s perspective, the events of the revolutionary years took place within a perfect constellation: he and his comrades lived together, ate together, and bled together; the Communists were guided by great ideals; and the people sacrificed themselves to advance the socialist cause, asking for nothing in return. Now, less than a decade after the Communist victory of 1949, Mao had to witness how the revolution was losing its vitality, how his comrades were turning into bureaucrats, and how many of them were striving for material benefits rather than immaterial ideals (Meisner 2007, p. 141; Spence 1999b, p. 546).

This chapter explained how the Hundred Flowers Campaign represented an attempt to find a distinctively Chinese path to modernization. I discussed in section 2.1 how Mao himself was uncertain of not only the correctness of the policy, but also of what its optimal outcome should be. His decision to launch the campaign seemed to be based on Christoph Lichtenberg’s principle: “Whether things will be better if they are different I do not know, but that they will have to be different if they are to become better, that I do know” (Dörner 1997, p. 50). It is clear from subsequent events, which will be discussed in the



following chapter, that the Great Helmsman was looking for a wild, foaming, roaring sea in which he could indulge himself.

In the absence of what he craved the most, Mao was left desperately seeking any thrill that bore even the slightest resemblance to the real thing. His bodyguard Li Yinqiao remembers Mao being determined to battle not metaphorical, but rather actual waves while a strong windstorm was raging overhead. It is almost possible to feel the thrill that the Chairman experienced upon seeing the huge waves lashing in “from the horizon to the beach at frightening speed, raising an ear-splitting din like the pounding of guns.” You can imagine him “breathing audibly, his chest heaving, his eyes gleaming defiantly like a soldier about to go into action.” A chill likely runs down your spine as you picture a “huge wave, rising like a cliff” rushing toward him and knocking him down. You would probably smile indulgently as he rebelliously stands up, points to the sea, and declares: “That’s what I call a worthy opponent!” Then, you can picture him running toward the sea with a loud battle cry, getting thrown back by the waves, advancing nonetheless, screaming, and holding on until he decided that his endurance had taught the mighty sea a lesson that its ferocious waves would always remember (Quan & Li 1992, pp. 24-28).

Still, such experiences could never have truly satisfied the Chairman’s cravings. He *had* to reignite the revolutionary flame. Mao was by no means a *helpless* addict controlled by an insatiable hunger for flow experiences and the orgy of competence signals that they conveyed. Rather, cognition also came into play to bestow a rationale upon his motivational drive. Otherwise, the actor would suffer from cognitive dissonance as a result of the divergence between what he *is* doing and what he *should* be doing. The perfect justification occurred to Mao gradually, or so it seems, in the aftermath of the Anti-Rightist Campaign. Based on his speeches from the time, it is possible

to distill the essence of that justification as follows: the Communist revolution was the ultimate proof that progress did not depend on the objective laws of history, but rather on the energy that revolutionaries invested in advancing their cause. By relying on human will as the single most important factor, the Chinese revolutionaries achieved what no one else could. Now, imagine what China could accomplish in the era of socialist construction if it was possible to revive the very same revolutionary spirit (Meisner 2007, p. 127)!

Mao believed that the willpower of the masses required stimulation. During the revolutionary years, the people were motivated by the patriotic prospect of ending the century of humiliation and rebuilding their country according to socialist principles. In the era of peace, Mao reasoned, actively pursuing a communist paradise in the here and now—rather than awaiting its arrival in some far and distant future—was the noblest goal conceivable. He further reasoned that during the revolutionary years, the poor and backward—not the intellectuals and not the experts—should be the backbone of the modernization efforts. Mao attributed to the poor an intrinsic desire for change, a desire that energized them, filled them with determination, and led them to mobilize their willpower to the fullest. In which case, no sacrifice was too big, no mission too difficult, and no obstacle too formidable! The culmination of these thoughts found their expression in an article Mao wrote in April 1958:

Apart from their other characteristics, China's 600 million people have two remarkable peculiarities; they are, first of all, poor, and secondly, blank. That may seem like a bad thing, but it is really a good thing. Poor people want to change, want to do things, want revolution. A clean sheet of paper has no blotches, and so the newest and most beautiful words can be

written on it. The newest and most beautiful pictures can be painted on it (Schell & Delury 2013, pp. 233-234).

The Chairman's desire to establish a communist paradise not only well before the historical conditions were ripe, but also by relying on the poor and uneducated masses was—from a Marxist perspective—the ultimate heresy. Indeed, Meisner finds it difficult to “imagine a more profound departure from the premises of Marxist theory” than what Mao had in mind (Meisner 2007, p. 150). It is unlikely that this heresy caused the defiant heretic any cognitive dissonance, as he had always exhibited a fluid understanding of the Marxist doctrine. “Marxism,” the Chairman had once explained, “still develops; Marxism is not [something] that is finished once studied. There is still the need to continue studying, [because] circumstances change. Dogmatism is not Marxism” (Mao 1989, p. 170).

Mao's determination to revive the military revolutionary spirit during a time of peaceful economic modernization, combined with his unshakable conviction that doing so was in China's best interests, did not bode well for the future of the nation. Following the example of his favorite hero, the Monkey King, Chairman Mao set out in late 1957 to defy heaven and earth by pursuing a utopian vision of hitherto unseen magnitude.

## GROUPTHINK IN ZHONGNANHAI

Psychological Themes: *Groupthink, Behavioral Patterns*

Historical Episode: *The Great Leap Forward*

**S**tarting in 1958, China embarked on a massive campaign to increase its agricultural and industrial output on a hitherto unseen scale. Chairman Mao believed that by mobilizing all men, women, and children to assist with the modernization effort, a backward China could be catapulted within just a few years into the league of socially and economically advanced nations. Tragically, it was not wealth and prosperity, but rather death, destruction, and environmental degradation that was the outcome of Mao's so-called Great Leap Forward. In fact, between 15 and 46 million people starved to death during the worst famine in human history (Teiwes & Sun 1999, p. 5).

"Even in my disillusionment," Li Zhisui, Mao's doctor, writes, "I still believe that had he fully understood the truth early in the Great Leap Forward, he would have brought a halt to the disaster long before he did" (Li 1994, p. 296). Why did Mao fail to grasp the calamitous

*consequences of his policy? Why did his colleagues fail to intervene and stop him?*

IN JUNE 1945, Chairman Mao recounted to his audience the old Chinese fable of *The Foolish Man Who Removed the Mountains* (愚公移山). A long time ago, the Chairman began, an elderly man known as the Foolish Old Man lived in a house that stood in front of the two great mountains of Taihang and Wangwu. Irritated by the fact that the mountains blocked the path to his house, he decided to remove them. A fellow villager known as the Wise Old Man came by and ridiculed this seemingly fruitless endeavor. The Foolish Old Man retorted that when he died, his sons would continue the work, and when they died, their children and then their grandchildren would carry on until the mountains had completely disappeared. "High as they are, the mountains cannot grow any higher," Chairman Mao narrated, "and with every bit we dig, they will be that much lower." Having rebuked the Wise Old Man for his "wrong view," the Chairman continued, the Foolish Old Man "went on digging every day, unshaken in his conviction." God was so moved by the man's resolute determination that he commanded two angels to go down to earth and carry the mountains away on their backs.

At the time Mao gave this speech in Yan'an, the two mountains that the Party was struggling against were the Japanese invaders and Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist forces. "Our God," the Chairman declared, "is none other than the masses of the Chinese people. If they stand up and dig together with us, why can't these two mountains be cleared away?" (Mao 1965, p. 322).

Some twelve and a half years later, Mao Zedong called upon the same god to perform one more miracle...

### 3.1 Mindguards Enforce Conformity

Central planning stood for everything that Mao Zedong came to despise about the development model China had borrowed from the Soviet Union, as it promised the boredom of stability that he was so repelled by. By the mid-1950s, the Chairman had become more articulate in his criticism of the Soviet model (Walder 2015, p. 82). However, beyond encouraging his comrades to liberate their minds, to dare to think, and to set out to act, he failed to offer any alternative development strategy. Instead, he sought to inspire the masses through grandiose appeals to “ride on the wind and break through the waves” and to arouse a “new high tide of socialist construction.” On occasion, such beseechments encouraged overzealous Mao loyalists in central and local government agencies to unrealistically increase their production and construction targets.

Some of Mao’s senior colleagues recognized the looming danger associated with allowing production planning to become divorced from economic reality. Premier Zhou Enlai, senior economic planner Chen Yun, Director of the State Economic Commission Bo Yibo, and Finance Minister Li Xiannian took the lead in reining in the excessive production targets. In a speech given in February 1956, Premier Zhou urged the Party cadres to inject a dose of realism into their economic planning, adding, “When a leader’s head becomes too hot, it needs to be splashed with cold water” (Zhou 1984, p. 191). Backing up his words with actions, Premier Zhou initiated a campaign to oppose any *rash advance* or adventurism (反冒进). A dismayed Mao Zedong reacted by accusing the opponents of the rash advance approach of entertaining “right-deviationist thinking” (右倾思想)—a most hideous thoughtcrime at the time (Gu 1996).

It is noteworthy that, back then, the targets of Zhou’s rebukes

and Mao's rages were not members of the highest level of the central leadership. The Chairman did not attack the Premier nor any other senior colleague. The peace among the senior leaders was maintained by a mutual agreement to oppose both right-deviationist conservatism *and* the rash advance approach at the same time. Still, the fact that Mao clearly favored the policy of rash advance gave many central planners and provincial cadres an excuse to set unrealistically high production targets. This harmful trend was best captured by an article published on June 20, 1956, in the *People's Daily*, which was edited by Deng Tuo:

Impetuous emotion has become a serious problem at present, because it exists ... first and foremost among the upper ranks of the leading cadres ... no departments wanted to be accused of right-deviating conservatism, and they vied to assign the most aggressive [production] targets to the lower levels, with each level passing an even heavier burden on to the level below, ultimately resulting in an intolerable situation (Yang 2012, p. 91).<sup>1</sup>

After reading the article, Mao angrily scribbled three characters on his copy of the newspaper: “不看了” [*bu kan le*] (Cheek 1997, p. 171)—which can be translated as “not worth reading.” It was at that point in 1956 that the discussion concerning the launch of the Hundred Flowers Campaign intensified. It seems reasonable to assume that while Chairman Mao hoped for a volley of public criticism to fall on the conservatism of the central planners, Premier Zhou aimed to strengthen the voices of caution and reason by inviting the intellectuals to participate in China's modernization quest (Meisner 1999, pp. 160-162). As discussed above, the campaign did not achieve either end, but instead morphed into an ugly witch-hunt.

Mao convinced himself that he had achieved a sweeping victory against vicious counterrevolutionaries and class enemies, which filled him with a renewed vigor to push ahead with the policy of rash advance. Having now put all nagging doubts stemming from the antagonistic dialogue behind him, Mao did not shy away from attacking his skeptical senior colleagues. Between the fall of 1957 and the following spring, several important meetings took place. It was during these meetings that the policy of rash advance was sanctioned and carried out to new extremes, which would have hitherto unprecedented and dramatic consequences for the entire country in the years to come. It was also the point at which the vocal critics of the rash advance approach turned into its staunchest supporters. The remainder of this subsection is devoted to analyzing one question in particular: why did the opponents of the policy of rash advance end up embracing a political line that they had previously deemed to be extremely dangerous?



THE CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED with economic and social modernization are complex. As I will argue throughout this book, there is no blueprint for success in terms of addressing them. Rather, the right path must be forged dynamically by a vigilant decision-making group. The group's leader plays a vital role here since the group members look to him for guidance (Van Vugt 2006). Of course, the leader's authority always depends on his standing among his colleagues (Judge et al 2009). In the case at hand, the paramount leader was someone for whom his colleagues' respect bordered on worship. Thus, he could define the *norms of debate* as he pleased.

When it comes to the norms of group debates, it is possible to



distinguish between two approaches. The group leader can push her colleagues to examine different alternatives, weigh up their respective pros and cons, analyze their suitability in relation to the current situation, and assess the cost of adopting each one. In this way, she conceals her preferred course of action so as not to encourage the others to put their faith in her supposed superior wisdom. Irving Janis terms this approach *vigilant problem solving* (Janis 1989). The second approach involves the group leader pushing through his favored course of action, intimidating or ridiculing any skeptics, and narrowing the scope of the discussion.

By now, the approach that Chairman Mao followed should come as no surprise. Addressing Party cadres in October 1957, Mao set the tone of the debate regarding the rash advance policies in black-and-white terms:

I once raised this question: are the Central Committee of the Communist Party, the Party committees at all levels, the State Council and the people's councils at all levels [...] are all these committees intrinsically for promoting progress or for promoting [backwardness]? They ought to be committees for promoting progress. To my mind, the [Guomindang] is a committee for promoting [backwardness] and the Communist Party a committee for promoting progress. Can't we now restore those committees for promoting progress which were swept away by last year's gust of wind? If you all speak against their restoration and are bent on organizing committees for promoting [backwardness], then, with so many of you for [backwardness], there is nothing I can do about it (Mao 1977, p. 492).<sup>2</sup>

It must have been a bitter pill to swallow for the veteran Communist revolutionaries to be equated with Chiang Kai-

shek's Nationalists, a party against whose forces they had fought countless fierce battles. It was certainly no less bitter to be accused by their Chairman of promoting backwardness and opposing progress. But Mao did not stop there. He continued to apply similar psychological intimidation patterns during meetings with Party cadres (Teiwes & Sun 1999).<sup>3</sup> Time and again, Mao presented new versions of the same dichotomy: the rash advance approach would “preserve enthusiasm and encourage hard work,” while opposing it would dampen the people’s spirits; rash advance was leftist, while opposition to it was rightist; rash advance was “Marxist,” while opposing it was “non-Marxist” (Pang & Jin 2003a, p. 790).

Dörner describes this reasoning pattern as *categorical thinking*: policies are categorized according to a single attribute, which often carries a moral weight (Dörner 2008, pp. 107-108). “This is socialist! That is anti-socialist!” “This is democratic! That is undemocratic!” “This is environmentally friendly! That is environmentally unfriendly!” Advocating policies by invoking the category they supposedly belong to spares decision makers from the cognitive effort of critically examining the policy itself—or as Dörner puts it: “Argumentation becomes superfluous; the judgment suffices!” (Dörner 2008, p. 108). This renders categorical thinking an excellent remedy for doubt and uncertainty: as the outcome of any policy is generally engulfed in a fog of uncertainty, dwelling on what might or might not happen represents a demanding cognitive process. Categorical thinking saves a lot of cognitive energy by offering a single criterion for policy evaluation.

The fact that Mao was fond of employing categorical thinking makes perfect sense in light of the prior discussion regarding the leak in his competence tank (see section 2.4). A continuously evaporating feeling of competence leads to growing doubts about the correctness of the chosen course of action.

The application of categorical thinking is one cognitive mechanism for countering such doubts. Doesn't the policy of rash advance stand for progress? Yes, it does! Thus, it must be correct!

Another cognitive mechanism in this regard involves emphatically denying that the chosen course of action has any viable alternatives. Throughout his career, Mao excelled at doing this. To his fellow decision makers, he seemed to always be convinced to the very core about the correctness of his thoughts. That the rash advance approach was the one and only correct path for China's modernization to follow seemed, in Mao's eyes, to be a fact beyond reasonable doubt, beyond intelligent doubt, beyond sane doubt. His radiating "ruthless self-confidence" demanded answers to a number of angry questions: Why can't you see what I see?! What's wrong with you?! Are you willfully blind?! But appearances can be deceptive. I believe—as argued in section 2.4—that Mao's practice of stating absolute convictions again and again was directed toward suppressing and silencing his internal doubts. Why else was he so hostile to the idea of conducting critical debates if he was really so sure of the correctness of his own thoughts?

Instead of perceiving Party conferences as platforms for genuine debates, Chairman Mao turned them into humiliating trials for the opponents of the rash advance approach. The interesting question becomes: how did his colleagues react? After all, as Mao himself correctly pointed out, if enough leaders opposed his preferred course of action, there was nothing he could do about it. Among those who spoke at the Party gatherings, it is possible to identify two groups: the group of fanatical loyalists and the group of humiliated critics.

The loyalists not only added oil to the Chairman's fiery criticism, but also joined forces to form a choir of worshipers

singing the praises of the Great Helmsman. Vice-Chairman Liu Shaoqi commenced the divine service by acknowledging—to nods of approval—that “The Chairman is much wiser than we are. In every respect—thinking, perspective, foresight, and method—we are way behind. Our task is to learn from him seriously.” Liu went on to note, “certain aspects of the Chairman, like his breadth of historical knowledge, his revolutionary experiences, and his strong memory, are difficult to surpass” (Chan 2001, p. 48; Jin & Huang 1998, pp. 828-832). Another Party leader proclaimed that “Chairman Mao’s thought does in fact represent an international universal truth” (Pang & Jin 2003a, p. 820). Thus, Tao Zhu, Party Secretary of Guangdong, concluded, “We all should have blind faith” in the Chairman—a call dutifully echoed by Ke Qingshi, Shanghai’s Party Secretary, who demanded that Comrade Mao Zedong be obeyed unquestionably and with “absolute abandon” (Xie 1990, p. 40).

Mao did not seem perturbed by such praise, despite it bordering on worship. He actually seemed to rather welcome it. After all, it conveyed two psychologically pleasant messages. First, that he—the Great Helmsman—*knew* where he was guiding China, while the best his colleagues could manage was to trust in his boundless wisdom. Thus—and this is psychologically perhaps the most important part for someone who regularly struggled with doubts—*there was no need for debates!* Second, the fact that his colleagues appeared desperate for his great insight and leadership was, for him, an invaluable source of competence signals.

What about those senior central and provincial leaders who indulged in this cult of personality? What was their psychological motivation? As discussed at the beginning of Chapter 2, devising a development strategy for China was a daunting, if not Herculean, task. In such situations, the natural need to follow the guidance of a clear and unequivocal compass arises.

Based on the prior discussion of the PSI theory, it is possible to trace this need back to the human desire to live in a certain and predictable environment. In the realm of politics, this need can be satisfied by relying on either a guiding ideology or the leadership of a “wise leader.” During the early years of the People’s Republic, the entire leadership (including Mao) chose to rely on the Soviet economic model. Once Mao’s quest for ever greater challenges compelled him to turn his back on that model, once he started attacking it with persistent vehemence, it became impossible for his colleagues to block the doubt and uncertainty associated with it.

It was perhaps not so much the intellectual weight of Mao’s arguments that persuaded his colleagues to follow him, but rather the *trust* they placed in his alleged wisdom and foresight. It is very difficult to overestimate the lasting psychological impact of the revolutionary years, during which reality had time and again proven Mao to be right and his opponents to be wrong. Of course, Mao’s major decisions during that period were not necessarily always correct from an objective point of view, but the radiating “ruthless self-confidence” that he employed to amplify triumphs and reinterpret disasters as sweeping victories led this myth of infallibility.

Thus, leaders such as Liu Shaoqi—who was, by the way, one of the drafters of Deng Tuo’s “offensive” editorial in 1956—shifted their faith from the Soviet development model to Mao’s policy of rash advance.<sup>4</sup> Having done so, they started sharing Mao’s aversion to debates, which were bound to reopen the painful wounds of doubt and uncertainty. They can be seen to be as unwilling to question the wisdom of Mao’s rash advance policy as he was. Therefore, they were acting as *mindguards*—a term introduced by Irving Janis to describe group members who seek to suppress dissenting opinions by placing social pressure on those who air diverging views (Janis 1982, p. 40). The reli-

gious fervor with which the Mao loyalists pursued their mind-guarding duties by demanding “blind faith” and “absolute abandon” must have been directed against both internal and external doubts.

What about the critics of the rash advance approach? How did they behave? One wishes that one of Mao’s skeptical senior colleagues (such as Zhou Enlai, Chen Yun, Bo Yibo, or Li Xiannian) had stood up and reminded the others of the merits of conducting an open-minded and critical debate regarding the policy. Instead, they bowed to peer pressure and delivered one self-criticism after another at the Party conferences held in Nanning (January 1958) and Chengdu (March 1958). This self-deprecation notwithstanding, the Chairman remained unconvinced of the sinners’ sincerity in seeking redemption. Premier Zhou and others were invited to deliver a final self-criticism in front of a thousand delegates during the Second Session of the Eighth Party Conference (Teiwes & Sun 1999, p. 73).

Zhou’s political secretary, Fan Ruoyi, remembers his articulate master struggling to find the right words, unable to draft his self-criticism speech (Fan 1984, pp. 45-46). Zhou’s dilemma might have been that he was not entirely convinced that he had committed any serious mistakes (Barnouin & Yu 2006, p. 172). If so, then why did he not refuse to apologize? What was the worst that could have happened to the Premier of the People’s Republic of China and the third highest-ranking official after Mao Zedong and Liu Shaoqi? Probably losing his job ... and losing the respect of his colleagues. The first sacrifice he was willing to make: after the Nanning Conference, he handed in his resignation from the premiership (Yang 2012, p. 98), although Mao and his senior colleagues decided that he should remain in the role. However, the price of the second sacrifice was apparently too high to pay.

As discussed in section 2.4, the need to belong to a group is one of the human need categories.<sup>5</sup> Reflecting upon the dawn of humanity explains why evolution favored wiring this need into the human brain: the chances of survival in a hostile environment are higher if an individual is part of a group that offers mutual aid and protection. This need remains an essential part of the human condition, even though it no longer fulfills its original purpose. People yearn for constant validation by groups that matter to them (e.g. family, friends, colleagues, etc.). This validation is conveyed via simple acts of kindness in everyday life (e.g., a clap on the shoulder, a friendly smile, an affectionate gesture, etc.). Such acts communicate an important message: “You are a legitimate member of this group!” Hence, they are referred to as *legitimacy* or *affiliation signals*. Such signals serve to increase the current value in the affiliation tank and also generate feelings of pleasure.

Now, the source of affiliation signals does not have to be *external*. They do not have to be conveyed by other group members. Obeying social norms and conventions, helping others, and being friendly and polite are all examples of *internal* legitimacy signals that “tell” an individual: “I am a good person, husband, citizen, decision maker, etc., ergo I am a legitimate member of the group.” Such signals are termed *internal legitimacy signals*.

The absence of affiliation (or legitimacy) signals for a prolonged period of time impairs a person’s psychological balance (Dörner 2001, p. 332). The psychological impact of hostile signals, such as frowning at someone, looking disapprovingly at someone, or rolling one’s eyes in disbelief—to say nothing of verbal criticism—is even more hurtful: they reduce the current value in the affiliation tank, and thus, produce informational pain stimuli. Hence, they are referred to as *anti-affiliation* or *anti-legitimacy signals*.

By applying this concept to decision-making groups, we can deduce a natural human inclination to favor harmony over quarrels during group debates. After all, a group in which a member's utterance is greeted with sighs of exasperation, laughs of ridicule, and verbal sword-crossing would be a radiating source of painful anti-legitimacy signals. The behavioral imperative to seek pleasure and avoid pain encourages individual group members to strive to preserve the in-group harmony. This is best achieved by abiding by certain unwritten norms of good behavior.

At this point, the paramount role of the group leader comes into play. The way he interacts with his fellow group members *defines* those unwritten norms. He can choose to encourage critical thinking by rewarding constructive criticism via conveying legitimacy signals as simple as attentive listening. At the same time, he can disallow any attempt to stifle the debate. Or he can choose to foster an atmosphere that rewards consensus-seeking tendencies and punishes deviationist thinking. The second approach results in what Irving Janis refers to as *groupthink*: a group discussion mode in which group members become “more concerned with retaining the approval of [their] fellow members ... than with coming up with good solutions to the tasks at hand” (Janis 1982, p. vii). In other words, the desire to maintain the *esprit de corps* overshadows any attempt to conduct a high-quality decision-making process.

Groupthink had clearly prevailed in the “debate” concerning the policy of rash advance. Mao sought to resolutely push through his favored course of action. Many rallied unapologetically behind him, while critical voices were contemptuously mocked. From the outset, Zhou Enlai and other skeptical decision makers felt pressured into accepting the verdict of the majority. Thus, they confessed their grave sins and begged for forgiveness, as all good Party members were expected to do. In



a sweeping self-criticism speech delivered in front of a thousand delegates on May 17, 1958, Premier Zhou said:

The experience of decades of revolution and construction in China proves that Chairman Mao is the embodiment of truth. Departing from his leadership or disobeying his instructions, often leads to a loss in direction and the occurrence of mistakes that harm the interests of the Party and the people. The mistakes I committed time and again are enough to prove this point. On the other hand, whenever things were done correctly, it was always thanks to the correct leadership of Chairman Mao (Li 1999, p. 370).

The other sinners followed suit by delivering equally self-debasing speeches. Over the following months, it appeared that Premier Zhou and his fellow reformed sinners became even more ardent in their support for Mao's ideas than the loyalists. This was perhaps their way of seeking redemption in the eyes of their worshiped Chairman and his fanatically loyal subordinates.

On May 23, 1958, the Second Plenary Session of the Eighth Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party unanimously agreed to endorse the so-called *General Line* for China's modernization, a policy direction summarized by the slogan: "Summon up fully one's enthusiasm, and strive upstream, to build socialism by using more, faster, better, and more economical results" (Chan 2001, p. 49).

One of the most striking features of the leadership's discourse during this period was the frequency with which the exact same words and sentences were uttered time and again in speech after speech in different parts of the country by Mao Zedong, Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping, and other leaders. It was as if the ownership and control over one's crit-

ical faculty had been passed on from the individual to the group. More than any other tangible change introduced in the subsequent months—more than the people’s communes, the backyard furnaces, or even the abolishment of the private sphere—this collectivization of thinking proved to be the true prelude to the *Great Tragedy* of 1958–1961, for it neutralized the most powerful weapon in the arsenal of any authority dealing with the complex challenges of governance: common sense.



TWO DAYS after the resolution concerning the General Line was adopted, Chairman Mao was presented with an editorial from the *People’s Daily* that had been published six months previously. In the editorial, the term *leap forward* was used for the first time. Mao could barely contain his excitement. He forwarded the editorial to cadres from different levels of the hierarchy with this short note (Mao 1992c, p. 254; Yang 2012, pp. 108-109):

Rereading the *People’s Daily* editorial from November 13, 1957, I find it delightful, its theme unequivocal, its tone calm, its analysis correct, and its mission unambiguous [...] After the introduction of the phrase “leap forward,” those who opposed rash advance had nothing more to say. It’s acceptable to oppose “rash advance” (a synonym for left opportunism) and to be plausible and voluble about it. But it’s different with “leap forward”—that’s not easy to oppose. Opposing it places one in an invidious position. When that editorial was published, some of us were in Moscow. It was handled by comrades here in China whose achievement is equal to that of Yu the Great [a legendary hero of ancient China]. If we are to grant any Ph.D.s, I recommend that the first should be

given to the scientist (or scientists) who invented this powerful slogan (that is, “leap forward”).

— MAO ZEDONG, 7:00 A.M., MAY 26

With that, the policy of *rash advance* became known as the *Great Leap Forward* (大跃进)...

### 3.2 Alternative Reality: The Era of Miracles

Although the so-called General Line was not formally adopted until May 1958, the slogan was being used, and its message fervently implemented, long before that. At the same time as the domestication campaign against the opponents of the rash advance approach was taking place, mind-blowing dynamics were unfolding across country—dynamics that were implemented by some of Mao’s most fanatically loyal provincial leaders.

Starting in October 1957, massive irrigation projects were being constructed to supply the impoverished villages in northern China with water, while giant dykes and reservoirs were being built to contain floods in the subtropical south of the country. The propaganda machine told farmers that they would accomplish in mere months what their ancestors had failed to achieve in a thousand years (Dikötter 2011, p. 27). Such mass projects were hastily executed, and they lacked adequate planning. As a result, the constructed reservoirs and dykes were either useless or did not last long. The financial costs were enormous; the suffering of the farmers who were forced to work on such projects day and night with insufficient nourishment was outrageous.

Zhang Zhongliang, Party Secretary of Gansu, was one of Mao’s most fanatically loyal followers. In an effort to bend reality to

suit the General Line, he embarked on a utopian project to irrigate Gansu's arid regions. Zhang promised that his formally dry province would one day become as "lush and green as the Summer Palace in Beijing." His scheme encountered countless hurdles before it was eventually abandoned in 1962. The project cost an estimated 150 million Yuan. The real human cost is much more difficult to pin down: apart from the numerous cases of death and injury on the construction site, a large number of peasants were withdrawn from agricultural work, which contributed to the famine that was to come. What about the size of the irrigated land? Here, a precise figure is available: zero hectares (Dikötter 2011, p. 28).

Still, when the project was launched nobody in the central leadership questioned its practicality. All that mattered was the awe-inspiring gigantism of its vision: turning an arid region into a lush paradise! Wouldn't that be magnificent! Zhang Zhongliang's irrigation scheme is just one example of the numerous colossal projects that sprung up like mushrooms in almost every corner of the Middle Kingdom during the years of the Great Leap Forward. Party cadres in every province began to compete fervently with each other over who could come up with the most daring vision. Dörner refers to political measures that are adopted solely out of the desire to prove one's ability to do something big, something really exciting, without any consideration for their actual impact as *bang bang decisions* (Dörner 2008, p. 107).

During the Great Leap years, bang bang projects were typically initiated by provincial and local leaders, although there was one particular bang bang decision that was taken by the Chairman himself while he was in Moscow attending the celebrations of the 40th anniversary of the October Revolution. After hearing Nikita Khrushchev promise the gathered Communist leaders that the Soviet Union would overtake the

United States in terms of its industrial output within 15 years, Chairman Mao decided spontaneously—and without any prior consultation with experts—that China would overtake Britain in terms of steel production within the same time frame (Lüthi 2008, p. 76). Why steel production? Here, it is possible to detect a second characteristic of the Great Leap’s utopian endeavors, namely *reductionism*. The complexities associated with increasing China’s industrial output were reduced to a single factor—steel—which was *assumed* to be the most important factor.

The obvious advantage of reductionism is that it saves cognitive energy: there is no need to reflect on a web of interconnected variables that influence each other reciprocally. All that policy makers have to do is devote their energy to the one and only crucial variable! Everything else will take care of itself!<sup>6</sup> This reductionist logic was, in fact, applied to assess the progress of the numerous bang bang projects throughout the Great Leap years. China’s industrial output was evaluated by “taking steel as the key link” (i.e., by estimating how much steel was produced), while the agricultural yield was evaluated by “taking grain as the key link” (i.e., by calculating how much grain was produced).

The existence of bang bang projects and the reductionist fashion in which they were assessed switched the modernization quest from a serious endeavor to a game played solely for the pleasure of its chief designer. After having set the rules of the game, Chairman Mao assumed the role of referee, bestowing rewards on outstanding performers and imposing penalties on underachievers. The highest reward was his coveted praise. The most dreaded penalty was his rebuke, for it made its recipient an easy target for ambitious subordinates, who would use the Chairman’s dissatisfaction as an excuse to oust their rebuked boss and assume his position. In Henan

Province, for example, provincial Party leaders Pan Fusheng, Yang Jue, and Wang Tingdong were accused of forming a “right-deviating anti-Party clique.” They were ousted and replaced by their accuser, Wu Zhipu, and his supporters (Yang 2012, p. 68). On the provincial level alone, similar “anti-Party” conspiracies were “uncovered” in Gansu, Shandong, Fujian, Qinghai, Zhejiang, and Anhui (Yang 2012, p. 112).

Such a constellation did not bode well for the country because of the built-in escalation mechanisms. Cadres from all levels were feeling the pressure to achieve ever higher scores in the game. Otherwise, they risked being accused of “rightism” by ambitious subordinates or anxious superiors who were, in their turn, fearful of their superiors. Compulsory comparisons sealed the deal. As early as January 1958, Chairman Mao decreed that “provinces [should be] compared with provinces [and] counties with counties” (MacFarquhar 1989, p. 379). Setting a new record for agricultural or industrial production was labeled “launching a Sputnik”—in honor of the first Soviet satellite to orbit the Earth, which was launched in October 1957 (Becker 1996, p. 80).

The question of how these Sputniks were affecting the livelihoods of the people in the name of increasing their welfare was never raised. In fact, local cadres imposed a tyrannical regime of round-the-clock work on the peasants.

The then prevalent degree of collectivization meant that a few hundred households were required to join their farmland together to form a collective. The Chairman and his cohort of loyalists were still dissatisfied. Thus, the provincial and local leaders embarked on a creative experimentation process intended to devise a new, more effective social organization paradigm for the countryside. In accordance with the gigantism of the zeitgeist, the victorious trend involved merging thou-

sands of rural households into a single societal entity, which was baptized a *commune*. The organization of this new entity had a distinctly military flavor: a commune consisted of *production brigades*, while a production brigade consisted of *production teams*. The first commune was inaugurated in April 1958 in Chayashan in Henan Province. Its initial name was the *Sputnik Commune*, which was then changed to the *People's Commune* (Chan 2001, p. 70).

The concept of people's communes spread like wildfire throughout the countryside once it had won the enthusiastic endorsement of Chairman Mao. In a matter of months, rural China was divided into 52,781 communes, 690,000 brigades, and 4,810,000 production teams (Yang 2012, p. 168). The average people's commune consisted of 5,000 households. Each people's commune had its own hierarchy of Party officials. Each level of the hierarchy expected its subordinates to deliver ever higher production numbers so as to outshine the competition. Just as the Hundred Flowers Campaign was based on the notion of letting a hundred schools of thought contend, so the Great Leap Forward was built around the idea of calling upon tens of thousands of people's communes to compete in their revolutionary zeal to outdo each other.

The central leadership in Beijing expected the people's communes to deliver miracles by unleashing the full potential of the peasantry in two ways. First, the new organizational paradigm was presumed to yield tangible increases in the overall productivity. The underlying assumption was that collectivization would reduce the total number of hours required to discharge family responsibilities. Why should the women in every household cook, do the laundry, and take care of the children? Let a few women perform those duties for the commune as a whole! The rest would then be "free" to take on more meaningful tasks, such as farming and teaching. Second,

communal life—the energizing feeling of togetherness and the awareness that every individual is part of a larger machinery working toward a noble aim—was expected to unleash massive willpower, release spontaneous creativity, and increase overall productivity. The *esprit de corps* was to be further heightened through revolutionary songs, propaganda posters, and motivational speeches.

It was anticipated that the increase in the workforce as well as the jump in productivity would improve living standards in each and every commune. The Party leaders expected that the new system would even lead to a labor surplus. Those farmers who were not needed on the farm would receive rudimentary medical training and become doctors. They would build new schools, become teachers, and eradicate illiteracy. They would support construction workers in finishing off gigantic projects even faster.

In the people's communes, each and every person was called upon to devote every ounce of his/her energy to the gigantic collective effort of catapulting China over Marx's historical stages of capitalism and socialism and right into communism. Material incentives were ridiculed as weak motivators for human behavior. Instead, immaterial incentives were introduced, such as earning the recognition of one's workmates and being singled out as a role model for the entire commune. Wages were abolished, as they would have paved the way for income inequality (Leung & Nann 1995, p. 25). Besides, following the inauguration of free communal kitchens, free communal dormitories, and free communal nurseries, who needed money anyway?!

Psychologically speaking, the whole concept of the people's communes—and all that accompanied it—was a collection of bold, yet unproven, hypotheses. For example, the hypothesis



that daily tasks would be handled more efficiently if they were collectivized, or that abolishing the private sphere would have a positive impact on morale, or that immaterial incentives were stronger motivators than material ones, and so on. However, the decision makers did not regard such assumptions as hypotheses that needed testing. Rather, they were viewed as facts. Dörner coined the term *ballistic behavior in constructing hypotheses* to describe this decision-making approach (Dörner 1997, pp. 178-179). The trajectory of a cannonball is ballistic: once fired, its course cannot be altered. Likewise, once a ballistic hypothesis has been constructed, it is assumed that it does not require any adjustments.

Ballistic hypotheses also formed the foundation of the so-called *agricultural innovations*. One such “innovation” was *close cropping*, which stipulated that seeds be planted in a dense manner. The assumption was that, as Mao explained, “with company they grow easily; when they all grow together, they will be comfortable; a lone tree doesn’t grow” (MacFarquhar 1989, p. 450). Farmers tried to spell out the absurdity of such notions to Party cadres: “You plant the seedlings too closely, there is not enough breathing space between them, and then you add ten tons of fertilizer per field. It will suffocate them to death.” One cadre’s reply to such a warning spoke volumes about the prevalent decision-making mindset at the time: “It’s a new technique, you don’t understand!” (Dikötter 2011, p. 40). Another “innovation” was to plant seeds up to two meters deep into the earth so as to allow them to grow stronger roots and taller stalks.

Another ballistic hypothesis was that the balance of nature could be altered in a positive way by eradicating flies, mosquitoes, rats, and sparrows (i.e., because they eat grain seeds). Again, this hypothesis was regarded as a fact despite the lack of empirical testing. Therefore, a national campaign was

launched to implement its premise. Every child, adult, and senior citizen was called upon to drive the “four pests” to extinction. School classes were cancelled so that children could devote their time and energy to the campaign. An overexcited Mao Zedong declared to his audience that “For 4,000 years nobody—not even Confucius—made it their ambition to exterminate the four pests!” (Mao 1974, p. 91). (A true bang bang principle!)

The combined result of all these ill-conceived endeavors was a disastrous fall in agricultural production. However, the atmosphere of fierce competition among production teams, production brigades, people’s communes, and work units in the cities compelled the Party cadres to report the opposite: namely, that a miraculous increase in grain and steel production was taking place! Doubting the production figures would have been outright dangerous. One Party official in Sichuan, for example, had the temerity to question whether a local people’s commune really did produce 5,000 kg of rice per *mu*.<sup>7</sup> His superior accused him of not being a true Party member: “Where has your Party spirit gone?” The skeptic was then sentenced to hard labor (Shapiro 2004, p. 79).

The only way for cadres to survive in such an environment was to apply Orwellian *doublethink*—that is, to accept two contradictory standpoints at the same time without admitting the inherent act of self-deception (Orwell 1983, pp. 190-191). *Grain yields are falling dramatically, there is an unprecedented rise in grain yields!* Indulging in this kind of self-deception required the invention of an alternative reality in which the laws of physics did not apply. Local propaganda began “educating” the masses about this alternative reality. “The more you desire, the corn grows higher,” it was proclaimed. Illiteracy could be eliminated in seven days, it was promised. “For every *mu*, 1 million kilos of fertilizer, 90 kilos of seed, and 200,000 kilos of grain produced,”

one county official demanded (Yang 2012, p. 119). A poem celebrated the notion that those working toward great and noble goals would not require sleep at all! Bragging about the long hours the peasants put in, the poem challenged the sun, saying: “Sun, sun, I ask you / Do you dare to compete with us?” (King 2011, p. 55).

It was not only the laws of physics that were different in this alternative reality. Its divine Messiah could also perform miracles! After Chairman Mao honored a commune in Sichuan Province with his benevolent presence, it was said to have rained. The local team leader interpreted this heavenly sign as a genuine case of “flowers blooming where the dragon has trod,” explaining that “spring rain is as precious as oil; the Chairman came to us in the afternoon, and that evening our Hongguang Collective had rain, ensuring increased production for us this year” (Yang 2012, p. 198).

Inflating production numbers placed a region in the national spotlight. Newspapers reported extensively about it, leaders flocked to it, and local cadres from other regions sought to learn from it. However, the longer a region stood in the spotlight, the higher the pressure was for it to live up to its reputation. Henan is a case in point. The province had invented the first people’s commune, pioneered “agricultural innovations,” and pushed through gigantic irrigation schemes. Although its real grain output in 1958 was 14.05 billion kilos, it reported an output of 35.1 billion kilos. The next year, the province suffered a severe drought and its grain yield fell to 10.88 billion kilos. In a textbook case of doublethink, the local leadership declared: “Big drought, big harvest!” Accordingly, Henan announced an *increased* grain output of 22.5 billion kilos—more than double the actual figure (Yang 2012, p. 76). Anyone who doubted the numbers was immediately denounced as a rightist. Statisticians were derided as “capitalist fortunetellers” trying to predict the

future by using “data.” “But one can never predict the strength of the revolutionary masses, armed with the weapon of Mao Zedong Thought, to move the mountains and fill the seas, and to create miracles that astonish the heavens and move the earth,” retorted a *Yunnan Daily* op-ed (Shapiro 2004, p. 123).

But what about the central leadership? How could responsible decision makers go along with this madness? The breathtaking dynamics were exceeding anything that even Mao had dreamed of when he started to push ahead with the policy of rash advance—as he himself had acknowledged (Mao 1989, p. 430). Something must have affected the information-processing mechanisms of experienced leaders such as Mao Zedong, Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping, and others. Otherwise, they would not have taken fiery slogans at face value and turned off all reality checks.

A euphoric atmosphere does indeed affect decision making in at least two respects (Dörner 2008). First, it increases the so-called *arousal level*—that is, the readiness to take action. Second, it lowers the so-called *resolution level*—that is, the cognitive complexity with which the mind processes data.<sup>8</sup> As a result, a blind eye is turned to the realities on the ground and to their negative consequences. Risks are examined in black-and-white terms—often by applying categorical thinking: *This is progress! Everything else is backwardness!* Pros are overestimated, while cons are downplayed. Planning, in its essence, involves sequencing actions on the blackboard of imagination. The higher the eagerness to act and the fuzzier the resolution, the less likely it is that the “ifs” and “buts” will constrain the flight of imagination.

The euphoria observed among senior leaders was closely related to the prevalence of groupthink. Under the spell of groupthink, group members enjoy the delicious fruits of

harmony. There is no scent of the poisonous air of disagreement, no need to hold grudges against colleagues, no need for hard feelings whatsoever. There are only cheerful laughter, nods of approval, and mutual complements. Further, under the spell of groupthink, uncertainty is all but eliminated: a group member's hypotheses are accepted immediately as proven facts despite the absence of any evidence. The intangible euphoria generated by this ceaseless stream of affiliation and certainty signals is delivered for free—save for the initial price of surrendering one's critical faculty.

Janis distinguishes between deliberate conformity, where some group members “withhold their objections out of fear of political or economic reprisals,” and groupthink, where group members are unaware of the “extent to which they are conforming to the group's norm” (Janis 1982, p. 169). While deliberate conformity certainly occurred at the lower levels during the Great Leap Forward, senior decision makers seem to have been under the spell of groupthink.

The leaders' expectations of the present paled in comparison with what they believed the future to have in store. In late April 1958, Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai, and others were taking the train to participate in a Party conference in the southern city of Guangzhou. They spent the journey indulging in utopian daydreams. Lu Dingyi, head of the Central Propaganda Department, remembers how they imagined that soon, very soon indeed, every *commune*—not every provincial capital, not every major city, but every commune...

...will have its own agriculture, industry, universities, middle schools and primary schools, its own hospitals and scientific research institutes, its own shops and service industries, transportation, nurseries and communal kitchens, and its own clubs and police for maintaining public order. Several

rural communes encircling a city can form an even larger Communist commune. The dream of utopia of our predecessors will come to fruition and will be surpassed (Yang 2012, p. 165).

This utopian phantasy was typical of the Great Leap era. Tan Zhenlin, the man in charge of agriculture, believed that every county was soon going to have its own airport, while Chen Yi, the foreign minister, wondered why the peasants were spending so much time farming rather than building modern villas for themselves (Dikötter 2011, p. 42). Who could blame them for these grand ideas? Sputniks were being launched in every conceivable domain and in every corner of the vast country. The Chinese press debated what to do with the grain surplus (Becker 1996, p. 79).

Chairman Mao worried about this, too. On August 4, 1958, during an inspection tour of Xushui County in Hebei, Mao had this telling conversation with Party Secretary Zhang Guozhong (Dikötter 2011, p. 38):

**Mao:** How are you going to eat so much grain? What are you going to do with the surplus?

**Zhang** [*after pausing to think*]: We can exchange it for machinery...

**Mao:** But you are not the only one to have a surplus, others too have too much grain! Nobody will want your grain! [...] With so much grain, in future you should plant less, work half time and spend the rest of your time on culture and leisurely pursuits, open schools and a university, don't you think? . . . You should eat more. Even five meals a day is fine!

### 3.3 Crushing In-Group Dissent

One way to conceptualize the environment with which decision makers interact is to describe it as a system that consists of a large number of variables, which influence each other reciprocally. The *workforce* variable, for example, influences the *production level* variable. All things being equal, the larger the workforce, the higher the production output. This implies *positive feedback* between the two variables: an increase in variable *A* (workforce) triggers an increase in variable *B* (production level), while a decrease in variable *A* causes a decrease in variable *B*. The positive feedback in this context only holds true up to a certain point though. After that point, any subsequent increase in the workforce variable causes a *decrease* in the production level variable. One reason for this is that surplus workers would inevitably get in the way of others.

Consider a different feedback loop. It is safe to assume that the more farmers who work on, say, an irrigation scheme, the less farmers there are available for agriculture. This causal relationship is termed *negative feedback*: an *increase* in variable *A* triggers a *decrease* in variable *B*—and vice versa. This seems logical, and to some extent, even trivial. Not so during the Great Leap Forward! The single-mindedness with which projects were pursued had the cognitive equivalence of putting blinkers on a horse: side-effects—even obvious ones—were not even considered. One tragic side-effect was that half the autumn harvest remained in the fields because so many farmers were busy working on construction projects (Yang 2012, p. 78).

The system that decision makers were playing with resembled a network of interrelated variables. It was *complex* because it consisted of a huge number of interdependent variables. Most political measures had not one effect, but several direct and indirect, short-, medium-, and long-term effects, unanticipated

consequences, and repercussions. These effects did not all manifest at once, but rather at different times. This means that the system was not only complex, but also *dynamic*: it continued to develop without interruption. In dynamic and complex systems, changes occur, accumulate, and amplify each other (Dörner 1997, pp. 38-40).

During the Great Leap Forward, two dangerous developments were taking place simultaneously. First, there was the interplay between the accumulated side-effects of the bang bang projects. These side-effects conspired to produce an extremely dangerous avalanche of consequences:

The steel campaign caused deforestation, leading in turn to soil erosion and water loss. Grandiose irrigation schemes further disturbed the ecological balance, worsening the impact of inundations and droughts, both of which were drivers of locusts: drought eliminated all competition, while the heavy rains that followed allowed locusts to hatch more quickly than other insects and take over a mauled landscape. Because sparrows had vanished and pesticides had been misused, the insects descended unopposed on whatever meagre crop the farmers had managed to grow (Dikötter 2011, p. 188).

Second, it is possible to identify a number of disturbing *emergent patterns*. The term “emergence” comes from chaos theory (Johnson 2002). It describes a pattern that occurs at the macro level despite the fact that actors at the micro level are *not* following a conscious plan to produce such a pattern. The flocking behavior of birds, the swarm behavior of fish and insects, and the herd behavior of land animals are all good examples of emergence: each individual animal reacts autonomously to local conditions in their radius of sight; yet,



seen from above, it is possible to recognize a pattern. Although none of the flocking birds has the intention of producing the complex motions of flocking, flocking behavior emerges all the same.

One emergent pattern during the Great Leap era pertains to the way in which the communal kitchens were run. Believing that the grain supply was endless during the so-called *Era of Miracles*, people wasted food on a large scale. Certainly, people knew how their *local* cadres lied, exaggerated, and produced fake statistics, but as for the general situation of the country ... now *that* was excellent! Had Chairman Mao himself not proposed launching a Sputnik by eating five meals a day?! Accordingly, in some communal kitchens “leftover rice was poured down the toilet by the bucketload,” while in others, children were forced to eat until they were reduced to tears. Dikötter estimates that “food that would have fed a village for half a week vanished in a day” (Dikötter 2011, pp. 54-55). The emergent pattern was a criminal waste of food.

Another disastrous emergent pattern concerns the inflation of the grain yield figures. Each commune, each county, and each province inflated the output numbers in accordance with the hysterical atmosphere of the time. The emergent result on the national level was catastrophic. China’s aggregated grain yield for 1958 was 200 million tons. Yet, the reported (inflated) figure was almost twice as high (Walder 2015, pp. 163-164). There is a key reason why this discrepancy was disastrous: the state procured a certain proportion of the grain output to distribute to the cities, to exchange for foreign goods (such as machinery), or to donate to African countries. The amount of procured grain depended on the *reported* output. Thus, although agricultural production was actually declining, the state increased its procurement. Local granaries were left with insufficient grain stocks to feed the rural population.

The combined impact of all these developments pointed in just one direction: famine!

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THOMAS SCHELLING once observed that “Unlike the movies, real life provides no musical background to tip us off to the climax” (Kam 2004, p. xiv). It would perhaps be more accurate to suggest that the musical background is there, but that decision makers often choose not to hear it. During the course of 1958, warning signs began to surface as the dangerous dynamics described above were burgeoning. However, with the resolution level significantly reduced, it was easy for the Chinese leaders to overlook them.

Mao himself appeared to harbor serious doubts about the soundness of the mind-boggling developments that were taking place across the country. For example, to increase China’s steel production, backyard furnaces were installed in the people’s communes. The Chairman told his physician of his skepticism regarding the quality of the steel produced. “If these small backyard furnaces can really produce so much steel,” he wondered, “why do foreigners build such gigantic steel mills? Are foreigners really so stupid?” (Li 1994, p. 276). The steel that came out of the backyard furnaces was, in fact, useless. Further, the peasants were forced to throw all the metal objects they possessed—from cooking utensils to door knobs—into the fires of the backyard furnaces. What came out was scrap. Thus, Mao did ask the right question, although he failed to pursue it any further. It was not the first, nor the last, time that Mao failed to develop a successful cognitive approach for dealing with his doubts.

At this point, Mao should have searched for new information, asked for critical and unbiased evaluations, and pushed his

subordinates to tell him harsh and inconvenient facts. All of this, however, would have required freeing everyone—including himself—from the binding spell of groupthink and thereby admitting—to himself and to others—that the crucible he had unleashed just a few months earlier was, in essence, much ado about nothing. Thus, Mao chose to suppress rather than to address his doubts. This might help to explain what Spence perceives as Mao's contradictory attitude toward the Great Leap Forward: on the one hand, he seemed to be deeply skeptical of the entire endeavor, while on the other hand, he would not tolerate any criticism of it (Spence 1999a, p. 143).

Taking ballistic actions is another cognitive mechanism for coping with inconvenient feedback signals from reality. When Premier Zhou found out the truth about the quality of the steel produced in the backyard furnaces, he dispatched 23,000 chemistry students to the countryside to help the farmers produce higher-quality steel (Barnouin & Yu 2006, p. 180). Even putting aside the basic fact that the concept of the backyard furnaces itself was hopelessly flawed, how could 23,000 students be effectively distributed among 4,810,000 communal production teams?! But then, Zhou's remedy was not directed at solving the problem as much as it was at relieving any temporary pangs of conscience he might have experienced. It was, in fact, a textbook example of a ballistic measure: action taken, problem solved!

As the summer of 1958 progressed, more and more warning signs began reaching the central leadership. For example, it became clear that several provinces would be unable to deliver the grain yields they had previously promised. Therefore, the smell of statistical fraud and widespread exaggerations was getting stronger. Then, there were reports of large-scale food waste in the communal canteens, the misallocation of labor in the countryside, useless construction schemes that did more

harm than good, cadre abuse, harassment of peasants, and so on. What more “background music” does a decision maker need?! But again, Mao failed miserably to work out the systematic causes of the issues at hand. The starting point for his problem-solving strategy was a ballistic assumption that he simply accepted as a proven fact: the Great Leap Forward is sound; however, its implementation can, in some isolated cases, be flawed! Or, as he was fond of assuring his colleagues, the problems associated with the Great Leap policy amounted only to “one finger out of ten” (Teiwes & Sun 1999, p. 142). Thus, the behavioral steps he took were bound to address the symptoms rather than the systematic cause of the trouble.

Mao was not the only one working hard to suppress his doubts regarding the overall correctness of the Great Leap Forward. His colleagues were doing their part, too. A group of senior economic planners, for example, asserted in a joint report that: “When it comes to grain, cotton and edible oils, output has increased hugely compared to last year as a result of a Great Leap Forward in agricultural production, and we only need to carry out our work and earnestly resolve any problems that may arise in order to get ahead” (Dikötter 2011, p. 71). It was particularly easy to dismiss the warning signals as mere background noise amidst the rumbling roars of the countless Sputniks that were being launched across the country.

In November 1958, the Chairman convened important conferences in the cities of Zhengzhou and Wuchang to discuss the accumulating problems associated with the Great Leap Forward. Mao urged his colleagues to base their output projections on facts and to pay more attention to the actual local conditions. As the winter of 1958 gave way to 1959, the “musical background” was becoming increasingly tense. Reports of food shortages in several provinces had made their way to the central leadership. Mao was becoming ever more worried. The

more negative “localized incidents” that arose, the harder it was to maintain belief in the overall correctness of the General Line of “going all out, aiming high, and building Socialism with greater, faster, better, and more economical results.”

Was it possible for Mao and his colleagues to accept the evidence of reality and abandon the Great Leap Forward? Perhaps they could keep the name, perhaps even retain the fiery slogans, but paddle away from the demonstrably disastrous policy! Chairman Mao decided that it was time for a grand summit. His colleagues agreed. Back then, no one had any inkling of the impact that the planned conference would have on millions upon millions of Chinese. For years to come, the mere mention of the place where the conference was to be convened was sufficient to trigger dark memories that stood in stark contrast to the majestic beauty of its mountainous scenery. I speak, of course, of Lushan Mountain in Jiangxi Province.



IN HIS OPENING remarks to the Lushan Conference, Chairman Mao invited the participants to engage in free and open discussions.<sup>9</sup> The participants were divided geographically into six groups. The central and provincial leaders conducted long and sometimes heated debates. As time moved on, some decision makers grew bolder with regard to their criticism. Zhou Xiaozhou, Party Secretary of Hunan, Mao’s home province, criticized the prevailing zeitgeist for facilitating the emergence of exaggerated grain-yield and steel-output figures. He noted that Hunan’s overall situation was relatively better than that of other provinces because there “we don’t eat all we can” (Li 2001, p. 28). Zhang Wentian, vice foreign minister, even dared to direct blame toward Mao himself. He questioned whether the

Chairman was perhaps becoming as arbitrary as “Stalin in his final years” (Li 2001, p. 101).

Despite the courageous efforts by some leaders to awaken their comrades to the harsh realities, most attendees chose to tread carefully and to avoid questioning the validity of the group’s consensus—that the direction of the Great Leap Forward was correct; any problems, no matter how numerous or grave, did not amount to more than one finger out of ten. The best way to describe the majority’s attitude is to borrow the Newspeak word *crimestop*. Orwell defines *crimestop* as “The faculty of stopping short, as though by instinct, at the threshold of any dangerous thought” (Orwell 1983, p. 188). Psychologically, *crimestop* directly harkens back to groupthink.

Janis chose the title *Victims of Groupthink* for the first edition of his ground-breaking study.<sup>10</sup> However, the word *victim* might actually have been a poor choice. As Janis’s study ably demonstrates, groupthink is a highly rewarding psychological experience. It eliminates uncertainty by offering a simplistic, black-and-white worldview capable of explaining everything. It provides a set of simple rules as a guide for action, and it nurtures a strong bond of comradeship. A victim decries his fate; a groupthink adherent welcomes it. A believer in the group’s consensus develops certain cognitive reasoning patterns such as *crimestop*, which includes, in Orwell’s superb wording, “the power of not grasping analogies, of failing to perceive logical errors, of misunderstanding the simplest arguments if they are inimical to [the Party’s worldview], and of being bored or repelled by any train of thought which is capable of leading in a heretical direction” (Orwell 1983, p. 188).

Unfortunately, at the Lushan Conference, only a handful of senior leaders dared to challenge the Party’s consensus. The most prominent among them was Defense Minister Peng

Dehuai. Like Mao, Peng toured the countryside. However, while the Chairman refused to accept that negative cases were connected in any way to intrinsic flaws within the General Line itself, Peng recognized the causal link. As the Lushan Conference was—according to the original schedule—drawing to a close without any major adjustments having been adopted, Peng decided to write a letter to Mao. In that letter, he began by praising the Great Leap Forward and the enthusiasm it had fostered among the masses. Generally, he judged, the endeavor resembled a “story of losses and gains” (note that he put *losses* before *gains*). He attributed its shortcomings to a common lack of experience in socialist construction. This, Peng argued, had led to the rise of “petit bourgeois fanaticism”—a harsh accusation in the communist jargon. The history of the Communist Party shows, Peng concluded, that, sadly, it was much easier to counter rightist tendencies than to tackle extreme leftism (Peng 1981, pp. 281-287).

It is worth noting that Mao chose not to attend the sessions of the Lushan Conference despite being in Lushan for the duration. Rather, he read the minutes of the group discussions and asked those who came to see him what others were saying. Peng’s critical letter added oil to the burning fire of Mao’s growing dismay. The vulnerability of Mao’s self-confidence (i.e., the leak in his competence tank; see section 2.4) left him particularly sensitive to negative feedback. Such sensitivity fosters a tendency to dwell on words and actions that seem designed to challenge one’s competence. It also instills an eagerness to fight tooth and nail to reinterpret such anti-competence signals. Mao’s actions during the days and weeks that followed the conference conform to both patterns. First, it is possible to observe an almost compulsive obsession with Zhang Wentian’s comparison of Mao to Stalin in his final years, with Zhou Xiaozhou’s claim that Hunan fared better due to being less

enthusiastic about the General Line, and with Peng Dehuai's deliberate phrasing of *losses and gains* (instead of *gains and losses*) (Mao 1974, p. 138) as well as his accusation of "petit bourgeois fanaticism" (Mao 1974, p. 134).

As for neutralizing the damning content of such anti-competence signals, the tragedy that followed speaks for itself. Two days after he received the letter, Mao decided to ignore the confidential nature of the private missive and distribute it to the conference participants—seemingly hoping for his colleagues to contradict Peng's accusations. *They* did not disappoint him. Those most loyal to the group consensus—that is, the mindguards (see section 3.1)—fervently strived to root out the heresy. Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Wentian refused to be intimidated. In a three-hour long speech to his discussion group, he criticized the atmosphere of conformity and the lack of critical debate (Li 2001, pp. 124-129). A short while later, Ke Qingshi and Li Jingquan, Party Secretaries of Shanghai and Sichuan respectively, appealed to the Chairman to intervene.

On July 23, Chairman Mao finally decided to enter the battle himself and to deliver a speech to all the cadres present at Lushan. Mao began his speech with an aggressive note: "Now that you have said so much, let me say something, will you? I have taken sleeping-pills three times, but I can't get to sleep." In the speech, Mao admitted that grave mistakes had been allowed to happen, but the bulk of it was devoted to developing rationalization patterns intended to mend his wounded self-esteem. One rationalization ran along the lines of *to err is human*. Here, the Chairman reminded his audience that even great leaders such as Confucius, Marx, and Lenin had made mistakes. So what's all the fuss about? Another competence strengthening mechanism was to wish problems away—that is, to assume that problems will disappear if they are simply ignored. Mao tried to justify this approach once by appealing to



Party unity and once by elaborating on the disastrous impact of dwelling on the “depressing side” of things. If every piece of bad news is printed in the press, the Chairman warned, then the government would fall. A third rationalization pattern was to implicate others in the failures. Whenever Mao accepted the central responsibility for a mistake, he reminded his audience that “the rest of you here were also involved” in the decision making—which was perfectly true. Thus, “Comrades,” the Chairman concluded, “you must all analyze your own responsibility. If you have to shit, shit! If you have to fart, fart! You will feel much better for it” (Mao 1974, pp. 131-146).

In the meantime, the mindguards argued that Peng Dehuai’s criticism was not in the least justified. After all, was it not a fact that the general situation was great and that all the problems had already been adequately addressed? (A ballistic hypothesis accepted at face value.) Further, *past* mistakes did serve a useful educational purpose: they were, according to the Chairman, “tuition fees” that one paid in exchange for necessary lessons in socialist construction (Li 2001, p. 59). (Redemptive logic: a necessary evil gave birth to a greater good.) But this was not enough. The heresy had to be suppressed and the heretics crushed!

Mao’s speech actually contained a declaration of war. “When I was in middle school,” the Chairman warned, “I used to get all steamed up whenever I heard unpleasant things [about myself].”<sup>11</sup> He added, “If people don’t attack me, I won’t attack them. If people attack me, I will certainly attack them” (Mao 1974, p. 137). There was no way that the fanatically loyal mindguards could allow their worshiped Chairman to go into battle. Without being asked, they gladly volunteered to lead the first wave of attacks. Domestication efforts were deemed futile. What hope of salvation was there for those who dared to compare the Great Helmsman to Stalin in his final years?!

Accordingly, the focus of the work groups shifted from discussing the Great Leap Forward to the infinitely more important task of criticizing Peng Dehuai and his fellow conspirators. Slowly, a very disturbing image was beginning to emerge: a vicious anti-Party clique was conspiring behind the scenes to sabotage the Great Harvest, the people's communes, and the steel production efforts! Zhou Enlai ventured to suggest that a shadowy foreign hand was behind the conspiracy. The more they thought about it, the clearer the foreign element of the conspiracy became: was it, for example, a mere coincidence that after Peng Dehuai met with Nikita Khrushchev in Albania, the Soviet leader criticized the people's communes?! Granted, there was almost a three-month gap between the two events, but still! Foreign connections were, of course, nothing new to the treacherous defense minister. "What was it," asked Premier Zhou malevolently, "that Stalin told you at the door back then when we met him in Moscow?" (Li 2001, p. 189).

The Peng conspiracy did not come as much of a surprise considering his long history of disobedience to the Party and to the Chairman. Marshal He Long reminded his colleagues of Peng's refusal back in 1937 to follow Comrade Mao's guerrilla strategy, while Liu Shaoqi grilled his former comrade-in-arms ruthlessly about events that had occurred long ago during the Long March, but that were for some reason beyond simple understanding still relevant to the discussions at Lushan (Li 2001, pp. 153, 189). The idea of Peng Dehuai conspiring against the Party seemed all the more plausible given his questionable character. Senior Party leader Marshal Lin Biao wasted no time in reminding his colleagues of Peng's arrogant and ambitious goal of replacing Chairman Mao as China's hero—a goal that Peng has masterfully managed to conceal from everyone, save for the watchful eyes of Lin Biao. But, as Lin faithfully intoned,

“China can only have one great hero and that is Chairman Mao!” (Li 2001, p. 189).

The gathered leaders searched their memories to recall any examples of a “wrong attitude” on the part of Peng in the past, any subtle signs of familiarity between him and foreign leaders, any casual remark that might help to reveal the true magnitude of his shameless conspiracy. The Chairman himself suddenly remembered that his defense minister—for no apparent reason—had always disliked him. No, it was not mere dislike ... In fact, Peng *loathed* him! Yes ... yes... that’s it: Peng loathed the Chairman! He could not even stand talking to him. “In the ten years since we moved to Beijing,” Mao accused, “you gave me only nine telephone calls, less than a call per year” (Li 2001, p. 194).

Reading the minutes of the Lushan Conference is truly a hair-raising experience. Peng Dehuai was, after Mao Zedong and Marshal Zhu De, the third most distinguished leader of the Red Army during the revolution (Meisner 2007, p. 152). He spent his entire life from the age of 16 onwards in the service of the country he loved. He did not hesitate to put his life on the line for the revolutionary cause. The enthusiasm with which senior leaders rushed to defame their former brother-in-arms results in nagging questions regarding the psychological mechanisms that were at work. Were Peng’s accusers perhaps afraid of being attacked themselves if they failed to join in with the attack against Peng? Did they act due to a self-preservation instinct? But how could that be possible? How could “men who had fearlessly faced hails of bullets on the battlefield and had refused to surrender under the torture of the enemy [become] as submissive as lambs, while others willingly [serve] as the falcons and hounds of evil” (Yang 2012, p. 367)?

In order to answer these questions, I must start by distinguishing between three subgroups. First, there were the self-

appointed mindguards (i.e., Yang's "falcons and hounds of evil"). Second, there were Peng and his allies (i.e., the dissidents who challenged the group's consensus). Then, there was the silent majority (i.e., Yang's "submissive lambs"). Above the three subgroups stood the paramount leader, who enjoyed absolute authority to set and enforce the norms of debate as he wished.

The self-appointed mindguards faced a dilemma: there was no way to argue with Peng and his fellow dissidents without challenging the group's consensus. Thus, the only weapon left in their argumentative arsenal was to attack the personal integrity of the critics and to question their motives. Here, an interesting psychological dynamic unfolded: whenever a mindguard denigrated the dissidents, the rest of the mindguards—and, most importantly, the paramount leader—rewarded the attacker with affiliation signals—whether they be looks of admiration, words of encouragement, or a round of approving applause. In this way, a new competition was set in motion: each mindguard felt compelled to outdo his colleagues in terms of the viciousness of his attacks. A good group leader would have stopped this orgy of accusation rather than encouraged it.

As for the "submissive lambs," the motivational drive behind their behavior was the desire to remain in the in-group and avoid being alienated, ridiculed, and verbally attacked by their colleagues. Thus, a "submissive lamb" exhibited a concurrence-seeking tendency that was maintained by a powerful inner justification. This justification was perhaps best captured by one participant who, a short while later, would also fall victim to mindguard attacks. "Nobody had the courage to oppose Mao Zedong," Li Rui remembers, "He was considered absolutely correct. He stood high and looked far. People thought they were not up to Mao's level. Even if someone wanted to make a comment, he would not dare say anything or reveal his own feelings" (Williams 1994). Did the infallible Mao not oppose

Peng? Did he not assure his followers that the Great Leap Forward was sound and correct overall? How could Chairman Mao be wrong?!

On the micro level, nearly every group member acted upon the assumption of Mao's infallibility. This facilitated the emergence of a very reassuring pattern on the macro level: Chairman Mao and almost every decision maker believed that the Great Leap Forward was heading in the right direction. Was this not proof enough that the General Line was correct, that Peng was a traitor, and that he and his fellow conspirators deserved every conceivable condemnation?! The illusion of unanimity was mutually reinforced.

Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale *The Emperor's New Clothes* is just that: a fairy tale. Real life could not be more different. In reality, the brave individual who decries the illusions of her fellow group members is fated to experience ridicule, mockery, humiliation, defamation, and expulsion from the group.

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IN THE END, the Lushan Conference did achieve its stated aim: it identified the main reason for all the problems that the Great Leap Forward was encountering. It was unanimously decided that a "right-deviationist opportunistic anti-Party clique led by Comrade Peng Dehuai" had conspired to thwart the General Line at a time when it had almost succeeded:

The success of the Party's General Line, the Great Leap Forward, and the People's Commune Movement clearly dealt a fatal blow to the capitalist and individual economy. Under these conditions, [an anti-Party clique] led by Peng Dehuai, along with various and sundry other right-deviating opportunists, were pressed to take what they considered an

“advantageous” opportunity to stir up trouble, and came out in opposition to the Party’s General Line, the Great Leap Forward, and the people’s communes, and to the leadership of the Party Central Committee and Comrade Mao Zedong (Yang 2009, pp. 388-389).

Following the close of the conference, Comrades Peng Dehuai, Zhang Wentian, Zhou Xiaozhou, and others were dismissed from their positions and replaced by zealous Mao loyalists. Mao’s self-confidence was restored. That is, for the moment, at least. The Great Leap Forward’s problems were not attributed to inherent flaws within the policy, but rather to acts of malicious sabotage by vicious rightists. The grain procurement crisis had occurred simply because Peng Dehuai’s fellow conspirators in the countryside were withholding grain! Now that their conspiracy had been uncovered, a reckoning would be upon them sooner than they thought!

### 3.4 The Question of Mao’s Historical Responsibility

Estimates of the number of people who lost their lives during the years of famine (1958–62) vary between 15 and 46 million people (Teiwes & Sun 1999, p. 5). Yang Jisheng arrives at an estimate of 36 million hunger victims (Yang 2012, p. 13), while Frank Dikötter’s research indicates that at least 45 million people starved to death during that period (Dikötter 2011, p. 325). No matter which number comes closer to the true figure, the catastrophe was certainly of a magnitude never before seen. The majority of the hunger victims died in the six months that followed the Lushan Conference.

Starvation is perhaps the slowest means of transport to what Hamlet referred to as “the undiscovered country, from whose bourn no traveller returns.” The passenger pays the compul-

sory fee for this torturous journey by sacrificing his human dignity on the altar of the survival instinct. So it happened that people resorted to eating whatever they could lay their hands on after the food supplies were exhausted. Dead insects and filthy rats were eagerly devoured. Bird droppings became a coveted meal to fill an aching stomach. Even human flesh and bones were cooked and feasted on by starving peasants. Ordinary human feelings of love, joy, and friendship were gradually eroded. Eventually, humans were transformed into hollow ghosts that roamed the streets in search of the flesh of the deceased so as to prolong their miserable existence by a mere week, a day, or even an hour.

Whose fault was it that previously good neighbors were forced to devour each other? Whose fault was it that such unimaginable suffering was inflicted upon the innocent? Whose fault was it that peasants perished in their millions? Reading morally outrageous stories about what happened at the time, or looking at the aggregated numbers alone, does not help to explain the dynamics that produced such outcomes. Although the dynamics varied locally, the underlying behavioral patterns shared certain commonalities. In the first volume of his superb and meticulously researched two-volume masterwork *Tombstone*, Yang Jisheng provides a detailed account of the local dynamics that led to mass starvation (Yang 2009). The excellent English-language edition of his book focuses on the four provinces of Henan, Gansu, Sichuan, and Anhui (Yang 2012). Based on Yang's essay, I will use the prefecture of Xinyang in Henan Province as an example for exploring the answers to the aforementioned questions.

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AS SOON AS the provincial leaders returned home following the

Lushan Conference, they wasted no time in starting a campaign against the false reporting of figures and the private withholding of grain. The various people's commune officials were to procure additional grain, enough to fill the gap between the fake figures that had been reported and the actual deliveries. Otherwise, they risked being accused of supporting Peng Dehuai's anti-Party clique—and then being punished and humiliated accordingly. The political pressure was passed down the hierarchal ladder: from the communal to the brigade to the production team level. "The Great Harvest," one people commune's leader declared, "is an objective reality—it's a fact that cannot be denied." If the promised grain could not be found, it was only because malicious rightists were concealing it "in every available place, from heaven to earth and from mountain to stream, inside and outside the villages, and that is the main reason why grain supplies are so tight." What was really going on, the official continued, was nothing short of a "fight to the death" between the two competing paths of socialism and capitalism (Yang 2012, p. 35). That was all well and good, except for the fact that the grain hoarding theory had no basis in reality! So how could the production team members find something that did not exist?

In an astonishing feat of mental athleticism, the commune leaders hurdled over reality whenever it threatened to contradict their dearly held beliefs. Production team officials up and down the country were sacrificed as scapegoats—just as "witches" were burned at the stake during the period of religious tyranny in Europe. In *Tombstone*, Yang details acts of unimaginable cruelty that were committed against production team leaders who failed in their doomed quest to triumph over the laws of physics and to magically conjure up tons upon tons of nonexistent grain. Although brutal death was their common destiny, such officials arrived at it by being dragged down



different roads of hideous torture. Helpless officials were bound, suspended in mid-air, and beaten with unspeakable religious fanaticism. On occasion, even their corpses did not escape torture. One production brigade official used “tongs to insert rice and soya beans into the deceased’s anus while shouting, ‘Now you can grow grain out of your corpse!’” The children of those murdered were left to starve (Yang 2012, pp. 29-30).<sup>12</sup>

Sometimes, production team cadres seized whatever grain the communal kitchens held. Homes were regularly searched and any grain found was confiscated. However, not all production brigade officials were living in Mao’s alternative reality. Some tried to talk sense into their superiors. One official, for example, complained to the Party Secretary of his people’s commune that there was no grain left to extract and that the people were actually starving. His boss, however, interrupted him abruptly: “That’s right-deviationist thinking—You’re viewing the problem in an overly simplistic manner!” (Yang 2012, p. 32).

Meanwhile, people were dying on the streets. No words can describe the agony of orphaned children, of the sick, and of the weak. Starvation brought out the worst in human nature. New research documents horrific acts of cannibalism. For example, a teenage girl who drowned her baby cousin and devoured him, an older sister who ate her younger brother, and a father who strangled his mortally ill daughter before cooking her. That to say nothing of those who feasted on the flesh of the deceased, which laid in abundance on the streets (Becker 1996; Dikötter 2011; Yang 2012; Zhou 2012).

In the face of such horror, many would find it hard to disagree with Jung Chang and Jon Halliday’s (2007) depiction of Mao Zedong—the ultimate culprit—as the most brutal mass murderer in human history—worse even than Hitler and Stalin combined.<sup>13</sup> Was he not the one who unleashed the mass orgy

of production target exaggerations in the first place? Was he not the one who prevented the madness of the Great Leap from being halted despite being fully aware of the magnitude of the catastrophe? Would it not be fair to claim that “Mao knowingly starved and worked these tens of millions of people to death”? (Chang & Halliday 2007, p. 534). What, if not presiding over the horrors of mass starvation, cruel murder, and ruthless torture, does it take to earn a person the suspicion—if not the conviction—of being a devilish incarnation of pure evil?

But then, how should evil be defined? Social psychologist Philip Zimbardo offers a simple, yet powerful, psychological definition: “Evil consists in *intentionally* behaving in ways that harm, abuse, demean, dehumanize, or destroy innocent others—or using one’s authority and systemic power to encourage or permit others to do so on your behalf” (Zimbardo 2007, p. 5). During the years of famine, China’s peasants suffered evils on an unimaginable scale—evils that cannot be excused or denied in any way. Maurice Meisner argues, however, that attributing these horrific acts to Mao’s “evil nature” poses the risk of overlooking his intentions:

Mao did not launch the Great Leap Forward with the aim of killing off a portion of the peasantry, as Stalin ordered his henchmen to “liquidate the kulaks as a class” or Hitler devised and implemented “the final solution.” There is a critical moral distinction between the unintended consequences of political actions and willful genocide (Meisner 2007, p. 159).

Like Mao, Stalin had presided over an episode of mass starvation in the 1930s. How did he and his colleagues react to the famine that was triggered by collectivization? The Soviet leaders’ first reaction was denial, then detached cynicism. When

mass starvation could no longer be denied, it was regarded as a necessary evil in the service of achieving a higher goal. Senior Soviet leader Grigory I. Petrovsky explained: “We know millions are dying. That is unfortunate but the glorious future of the Soviet Union will justify it.” The Soviet regime declared war on the peasantry in order to “break their back.” Stalin went so far as to order the shooting of any starving peasant who dared to steal “even husks of grain” (Montefiore 2004, pp. 87, 2, 94).

Mao, however, displayed a conflicted—and psychologically more interesting—attitude. The Chairman’s initial euphoria following the Lushan Conference quite quickly began to evaporate. His efforts to stifle his doubts regarding the correctness of the Great Leap Forward did not pay off in the long term. This might explain why his writings from that period mainly involved polemics against Khrushchev (Spence 1999a, p. 150). This is a common behavioral pattern. When the difficulty level of the problem at hand is higher than the actor’s perceived abilities, he often decides to escape from the torment of incompetence signals by seeking a new challenge in a different realm. This flight can either be *vertical* (escapism), whereby the actor flees from reality altogether and spends his time daydreaming, or it can be *horizontal*, whereby the actor shifts gears so as to devote his energy to a new project (Dörner 2001, pp. 422-428). The higher the importance that one attaches to the new project, the easier it is to justify devoting one’s entire energy to it. Therefore, the new project fulfills its psychological purpose: it occupies the mind, diverts attention from one’s failures, and keeps feelings of guilt at bay. Thus, Nikita Khrushchev’s alleged “revisionist line” became a welcome distraction for Mao and his colleagues.

It should also be noted that provincial leaders tried their best to hide the true magnitude of the unfolding tragedy between the

summer of 1959 and the spring of 1960. Yet, when the catastrophe's true dimensions began to surface, Mao became, according to his physician, "so depressed that he took again to his bed. He seemed psychologically incapable of confronting the effects of the famine" (Li 1994, p. 339). He reportedly ate very little at this time (Quan & Li 1992, pp. 55-56). Perhaps the real tragedy of the Great Leap Forward is that it was genuinely intended to accelerate the realization of the Chinese dream of wealth and power. But instead of creating paradise, it produced hell. The road to that hell, as Karl Marx commented in a different context, was "paved with good intentions" (Marx 1990, p. 298). Friedrich Nietzsche, a contemporary of Marx, questioned whether well-intending fools or foolhardy villains inflicted more harm throughout human history.

So, was Mao a well-intending fool? Harrison Salisbury seems to suggest such an assessment in his biography of Mao: "People around Mao gave him optimistic reports, and he accepted them. He had no background in science. ... He possessed no independent capacity to evaluate reports and evidence from a scientific point of view" (Salisbury 1993, p. 147). However, recognizing the innate dangers of the dynamics of the Great Leap did not require any special scientific training. Indeed, Zhou Enlai and other opponents of the rash advance approach did just that before they subjected themselves to the spell of group-think. Besides, accusing Mao Zedong—the great strategist, who managed to turn the Red Army from a small and fragmented military force into a gigantic machine that eventually conquered and reunified China—of naiveté is to ignore his record of monumental feats.

Then, was the Chairman perhaps "misinformed," as Salisbury hypothesizes in the first part of his argument? Li Zhisui admits, "Even in my disillusionment, I still believe that had he fully understood the truth early in the Great Leap Forward, he

would have brought a halt to the disaster long before he did” (Li 1994, p. 296). It must be remembered that central planners, provincial Party secretaries, people’s commune leaders, and cadres from every level of the hierarchy exaggerated figures, whitewashed bad news, and told outright lies to the Chairman. During the crucial six months that followed the Lushan Conference, no provincial leader dared to report the harsh truth to the central leadership. They might not even dare to admit it to themselves. Starving peasants tried to petition the central government and the Chairman to send aid, to put an end to the terror of local cadres, or to stop the confiscation of what little grain they had left. They were convinced that if Chairman Mao only knew, he would have stopped the starvation immediately! But the author of any letter that disclosed the famine to the world outside his province or locality was hunted down and imprisoned. Public security officials ensured that no letter describing the atrocities reached its destination. It is estimated that in Xinyang prefecture alone, more than 12,000 letters were confiscated (Yang 2012, p. 49).

Mao knew that he was being deceived. He seemed to have been deeply grieved by this fact. He knew that undertaking inspection tours to determine what was going on in the countryside was of no use. During the time of his depression, Mao was seen by one of his bodyguards lying in bed and crying. “I’m worried,” the Chairman confessed tearfully, “they have told me many lies. They’re always prepared for my visits” (Quan & Li 1992, p. 56). When commenting as such, he might have been thinking of 1958. As documented by Xiao (1993), Mao spent ten months of that year touring the countryside in an effort to discover the truth about the Great Leap Forward.

A major problem broached in several historical works concerning the Mao era is that the Chairman’s investigative tours were planned meticulously in advance by his aids in

cooperation with local officials. In fact, Mao's inspection tours were nothing more than stage-managed shows. Naturally, local leaders were anxious to please the Chairman. However, Mao *himself* was ultimately responsible for the emergence of such destructive deceptions. Whenever he was confronted with opinions that contradicted his own, he reacted by scolding his counterpart rather than weighing up the value of his arguments. Whenever negative news reached his ears, he attributed its occurrence to a lack of will on the part of the actors involved. He simply refused to imagine any impediment that could not be overcome through earnest efforts. Why? Psychologically speaking, Mao's stubborn attitude fits perfectly into the picture constructed thus far: the leak in Mao's competence tank provoked an oversensitivity to negative feedback. Mao interpreted any indication that his chosen course of action might be flawed as a sign of imminent psychological danger. The ghost of the critical mental "advocate" could always be resurrected. A new antagonistic dialogue could be reignited, with all the accompanying pain and self-doubt, indecisiveness, and endless internal debates. It is far easier to blame difficulties, impediments, and failures on the inadequate implementation of policies by subordinates.

For example, Mao toured the countryside during the collectivization drive of a few years earlier. When Deng Zihui, the collectivization tsar, began elaborating on the innate complexities of the process, the Chairman rebuked him furiously, "Your mind needs to be shelled with artillery!" (Short 2000, p. 446). When Zhou Xiaozhou, the Party Secretary of Hunan, refused to give in to the hysteria of late 1958, the Chairman reacted by humiliating and ridiculing him in front of his colleagues (Li 1994, p. 226). Another case in point concerns a group discussion involving senior leaders in March 1959—less than four months before the ominous Lushan Conference. As previously

discussed, at that time, warning signs were accumulating. Finance Minister Li Xiannian tried to discuss some of those signs with his Chairman (Zhou 2012, p. 23):

**Li:** ... The amount of agricultural products procured over the past few months has been rather disappointing.

**Mao:** It's more than just disappointing. In some aspects it's terrible. In some areas the problem is very serious.

**Li:** Throughout the country, the grain procurement quotas have not been uniformly accomplished.

**Mao:** Let's publish the results showing who have fulfilled their quotas and who have not! We have got to be relentless! This will mean being precise and accurate; it can't be seen as being vicious.

**Li:** Many parts of the country have failed to allocate and transfer [agricultural products] effectively.

**Mao:** Announce their names and shame them!

**Li:** ... Many major oil production areas have failed to achieve their procurement quotas.

**Mao:** Which are these areas? How come their names are not listed here? Afraid of losing votes?!

A more appropriate reaction on Mao's part would have been to develop an understanding of the causalities behind the emerging problems. Instead of throwing around false accusations, Mao should have posed a few critical questions: why was there a gap between the projected targets and the actual procurements? Why did some areas manage to meet their procurement targets? What did they do right and how can lessons be learned from their experiences? How reliable are the yield figures anyway? Shaming local officials could not fill the output gap. It is not as though they could have willed more grain, oil, and steel into existence! The art of seeing into the core of a dynamic and complex process is an essential part of

what Dörner refers to as *strategic* or *operative intelligence* (Dörner 1986). Strategic intelligence operates on the assumption that one's own mental reality model is probably flawed, incomplete, or even entirely wrong. Thus, one needs not only to welcome critical feedback signals from reality, but also to actively seek them out. In doing so, one strives to update, correct, or even recompose one's reality model by posing analytical questions, searching for new information, and verifying old data.

This also means that doubts are something to be *addressed* rather than *suppressed*. As has been made clear, Mao lacked an effective cognitive strategy for dealing with his own doubts, let alone those of others. Time and again, he failed to engage in *constructive* critical self-reflection so as to redesign the way both mental advocates presented their arguments in any given antagonistic dialogue. Take the Lushan Conference as an example. In his speech to the gathered officials, Mao trashed his own abilities as an economic modernizer before seeking excuses for his failures. The lack of strategic intelligence that Mao exhibited as a political leader heralded the ultimate doom of the majority of endeavors he embarked on.

The ten months that Mao spent outside Beijing in 1958 might be seen as a genuine attempt on the Chairman's part to discover the truth about what was going on in the countryside. They can, however, also be interpreted as an attempt to silence his increasing doubts. *See, the Great Harvest is a reality! All is working exactly as it should! ... But how can you be so sure? Maybe if you go somewhere else, things will turn out to be quite different! You know that everyone is lying to you!* Should this hypothesis prove true, then what emerges is an ambivalent Mao who was simultaneously trying to uncover and suppress the truth. Perhaps a more accurate depiction would be of a Mao who was actively trying to reshape the truth so as to fit it to his preconceptions. The



resulting behavior of fury with non-conformists and a readiness to shoot the messenger rather than to ponder his message nurtured the emergence of deceptions among Party cadres in general.

The low level of strategic intelligence that Mao exhibited during the Great Leap Forward was also evident in his tendency to regard the incidents of production target exaggerations, beatings, and torture that came to his attention as “isolated incidents.” Instead, he should have recognized them for what they were: mere symptoms of a defective system—a system in which the complex challenges of modernization were transformed into a multiplayer game that compelled team leaders to outscore their rivals, whatever the cost.

However, now that the Great Leap Forward had turned into the Great Famine, how long could Mao continue to deny the recklessness of his Great Leap policies?



THE TRUTH COULD NOT BE CONTAINED FOREVER. In early 1960, initial reports were reaching the Central Committee of mass starvation in the countryside. The Central Committee dispatched investigators to determine what was going on. A group sent to Xinyang Prefecture was greeted by the nightmarish sight of dead people lying on the streets with no one to bury them. Meanwhile, massive irrigation schemes were still being constructed by undernourished peasants who had lost family members to the famine. On their journey, they found that each county in Xinyang had a horrific death toll to report. The inspection team ended its journey in Zhengzhou, capital of Henan. At that time, Chairman Mao was coincidentally also in Zhengzhou. The inspection team’s leader remembers, “I

wanted to report [our findings] to Chairman Mao, but after thinking it over, I didn't go" (Yang 2012, pp. 58-59).<sup>14</sup>

Throughout 1960, several inspection teams were sent to different parts of the country. However, their reports were not always forwarded on to the Central Committee or the State Council (China's cabinet). Slowly, very slowly, the central leadership began to see and accept reality. Large relief grain deliveries were sent to the affected areas. Further, high-ranking cadres embarked on inspection tours themselves.

How did Mao react to their revelations? Surely, there was now no way of denying that the Great Leap Forward was a disaster! With the real magnitude of the catastrophe being revealed in different parts of the country, the systematic flaws within the movement must ultimately be recognized! After all, it was no accident that exaggerations, unrealistic expectations, and outright denials of reality were the rule rather than the exception. It was no accident that people were victimized, beaten, tortured, and executed independently in different parts of the country. It was no accident that lower-ranking cadres committed similar acts of extreme cruelty all across China. There were no central directives demanding that local cadres behave in the way that they did, but due to the characteristics of the system that enveloped them, such behavior was bound to *emerge* sooner or later. However, recognizing the systematic causes of the behavior would have had far-reaching and psychologically devastating implications. It would have equaled an admission of guilt concerning the premature deaths of millions upon millions of those who put their faith in a sagacious Messiah and his prophecy of the imminent arrival of a utopian paradise. Thus, revelations regarding the real outcomes of the Great Leap were more likely to *strengthen* than to weaken Mao's inclination to identify scapegoats for his failures.

Accordingly, Chairman Mao can be seen to meet the expectations of the present psychological analysis. After having absorbed the initial shock of the news, he swiftly moved on to identifying the real culprits: “Who would have thought that the countryside harbored so many counter-revolutionaries? We did not expect that the counter-revolution would usurp power at the village level and carry out cruel acts of class revenge” (Dikötter 2011, p. 118). The Central Committee hurried to parrot the judgment of its Chairman: “The large amount of information revealed in Xinyang and other regions bears out Chairman Mao Zedong’s directive. The nature of the Xinyang problem is class enemies usurping power and carrying out frenzied class retaliation ... wearing the cloak of the Communist Party to carry out the work of the [Guomindang]” (Yang 2012, p. 64).

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MAO ZEDONG MUST ULTIMATELY BE HELD responsible for the Great Famine (Teiwes & Sun 1999, p. 111); however, he should not be seen as a mad, vicious mass murderer who was indifferent to the fate of millions of his subjects, but rather as the chief architect of a dynamic and complex environment whose characteristics were bound to bring about the worst of outcomes. By rewarding the yes-men and punishing skeptics, by promoting the behavioral patterns of categorical thinking, bang bang decisions, reductionism, and ballistic hypotheses, and by downplaying the warning signs, reinterpreting inconvenient facts, and whitewashing negative news, Mao unwittingly sowed the vicious seeds from which the fruits of death eventually sprang. The present psychological explanation of Mao’s behavior should in no way be misconstrued as a justification for his actions. While human behavior is always driven by the urge to satisfy motivational needs, humans also have the free will to reflect upon and change unsound behavioral

patterns. Not doing so is sufficient to prove the guilt of an actor.

In acknowledging this, one should not exempt the rest of the leadership from responsibility. It was, after all, Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping, Chen Yun, Li Xiannian, Bo Yibo, Tan Zhenlin, and others who allowed the atmosphere of group-think to take hold by switching off all their reality checks. It was *them* who endorsed, rectified, and adopted the General Line of “going all out, aiming high, and building Socialism with greater, faster, better, and more economical results.” It was *them* who accepted—even welcomed—the norm of forced conformity that gave birth to an alternative reality. Finally, it was *them* who vilified, ridiculed, and fought those honest and brave leaders, such as Peng Dehuai, Zhang Wentian, Zhou Xiaozhou, and Huang Kecheng, who dared to challenge the concurrence-seeking tendencies of the majority of their fellow decision makers.

The great doom of a leader is to be cursed with a fellowship that serves him with fanatical loyalty, taking each utterance of his as a holy gospel, engaging in self-censorship so as not to question the judgment of his ubiquitous wisdom, believing in his historic uniqueness, being unable to even imagine that *they*—ordinary and flawed as they are—could come up with an idea that had not already crossed his mind, attributing each failure not to him—God forbid!—but to the lousy implementation of careless subordinates.

But here again, the leader must bear the paramount responsibility for nurturing such behavior. Chairman Mao not only accepted the mantle of divinity, but actually ordered it to be tailored. “What is wrong with worship?” he asked defiantly during those crucial months in early 1958 when the policy of rash advance was still being debated, adding “the truth is in our

hands, why should we not worship it?” Then, to drive the message home, he declared: “Each group must worship its leader, it cannot but worship its leader! This is the correct cult of personality!” (Dikötter 2011, p. 19). Accepting fanatical loyalty, whenever the circumstances permitted, appears to be natural and ordinary throughout human history. Uniqueness and true greatness come from a leader not only realizing in a general philosophical sort of way that every human makes mistakes and that every leader is only a human, but also *acting* upon that realization by fighting any illusions others might harbor regarding his infallibility.

## THE TURNING POINT IN THE CHAIRMAN'S LIFE NARRATIVE

Psychological Theme: *Narrative Identity*

Historical Episode: *The Cultural Revolution*

Chairman Mao envisioned the so-called Great Cultural Revolution of the Proletariat to be “the greatest revolutionary transformation of society, unprecedented in the history of mankind” (Schoenhals 2015, p. 3). To achieve this epic transformation, Mao and his lieutenants called upon young people to expose, denounce, and topple “those people in positions of authority within the Party who take the capitalist road” (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals 2008, p. 13). They agitated the faithful against the so-called Four Olds—old ideology, old culture, old customs, and old habits (Lu 2004, p. 61). Further, they mobilized the angry masses to “Bombard the Headquarters” of the Communist Party itself (Cheek 2002, pp. 170-171). The ensuing chaos threatened to tear the country apart, and thus, to undo Mao’s greatest life-time achievement, namely the reunification of China. In the 1960s, Mao’s ultimate goal in life mutated from building a wealthy and powerful socialist nation to preventing an imaginary capitalist restoration. The present chapter is devoted to exploring this psychological transformation and its tragic consequences.

. . .

ON A BEAUTIFUL SUNNY day in late May 1965, Chairman Mao was relaxing in a wicker chair, taking in the awe-inspiring scenery of the Jinggangshan Mountains (Pang & Jin 2003b, p. 1391). Four and a half years had passed since the Central Committee had initially blamed the atrocities associated with the Great Leap Forward on vindictive “class enemies” and their wicked acts of class revenge. Much had changed in that time. The zeitgeist of the Great Leap Forward was dead and buried, the exuberance it had generated over and done with, and Chairman Mao had decided to “retire to the second line.”

The place where the Chairman was spending that sunny day was no ordinary one. Jinggangshan was, in fact, the cradle of the Chinese Communist revolution. It was in those vast and majestic mountains that he, almost four decades earlier, began to conceive of the guerrilla warfare strategies that would one day culminate in the Communist victory. This was the first time Mao had returned to Jinggangshan since he had been a young revolutionary leader. Sitting silently in his chair, the Chairman seemed to be lost in nostalgic memories. One might wonder what he was thinking about. Was he reflecting on the events of the last five years? Or was he perhaps longing for his revolutionary days, when he still had his whole life ahead of him and countless dreams were waiting to be fulfilled? Or was he delving even further into the past and thinking about how he came to be the man he had eventually become? Perhaps the Chairman was contemplating something else entirely, or even nothing in particular. But when seeking to develop an explanation for the cataclysmic events that were to unfold soon after, it is essential to first discuss certain episodes of the Chairman's past.

#### 4.1 Mao's Narrative Identity

Mao Zedong's own description of his adolescence and early adulthood years documents his struggle to find meaning and purpose in life. In his oral autobiography—which he recounted to the American journalist Edgar Snow more than two decades later—Mao recalled frantically searching the newspapers on a daily basis for vocational school advertisements. Mao's autobiography (Snow 1968), as well as his private letters and writings from that period (Mao 1992a), show how this search was guided by one principal concern—that is, to find a career path that offered the prospect of contributing to the collective national effort to revive China. Mao's concern for national revival was typical for the time. Even a soap-making “school,” Mao reminisced, advertised itself by celebrating “the great social benefits of soap making, how it would enrich the country and enrich the people.” The soap school's arguments convinced Mao to pay the registration fee. However, “fate intervened” time and again, and Mao found himself paying the registration fees for a variety of schools before eventually deciding that he was “best suited for teaching.” Thus, aged 19, Mao enrolled in the teacher training course at Hunan Provincial First Normal School, from which he graduated five years later (Snow 1968, pp. 143-145).

After graduating in 1918, the 24-year-old Mao traveled to Beijing for the first time in his life to participate in the organizational efforts of a student society dedicated to assisting young people who planned on attending university in France. Back then, many young Chinese sought to acquire advanced knowledge abroad so as to help move forward the modernization quest at home. Thus, many student societies sprang into existence across the country to help further such ambitions.

Upon arrival in the capital, Mao met up with his former teacher and future father-in-law, Yang Changji, who arranged



for him to work as a library assistant at the prestigious Peking University. At that time, Beijing in general, and Peking University in particular, did indeed resemble what Philip Short terms a “ferment of ‘isms” (Short 2000, p. 82)—an Athenian *agora* where all sorts of ideologies were being passionately debated in the search for a blueprint to rescue China from foreign meddling and internal political fragmentation. The most influential output of that “ferment of ‘isms” was arguably the *May Fourth Movement*, which was, in the words of one of its principal activists, Chow Tse-Tsung, a “combined intellectual and sociopolitical movement to achieve national independence, the emancipation of the individual, and a just society by the modernization of China” (Chow 1960, p. 358).

Mao's expectation of Beijing being something “like a crucible in which one cannot but be transformed” proved to be prophetic (Mao 1992a, p. 83). In Beijing, he fell in love with, and in 1920 married, Yang Kaihui. (Just ten years later, she would suffer the unspeakable pains of hideous torture and choose execution by the Guomindang in front of her small children over denouncing her husband.) Intellectually speaking, Mao's transformation was even more profound. Before coming to Beijing, Mao's mind resembled, as he put it, “a curious mixture of ideas of liberalism, democratic reformism, and Utopian socialism” (Snow 1968, pp. 148-149). Through adhering to a rigorous program of self-study, the teenage Mao had already familiarized himself with Western philosophy, ethics, world history, and geography. However, as his writings from the pre-Beijing period attest, his intellectual allegiance changed several times (Mao 1992a). The eight months that he spent in Beijing set a dynamic in motion that prompted him, within three years, to commit himself to Marxism-Leninism—a commitment from which he “did not afterwards waver” (Snow 1968, p. 155).

The very same dynamic also had a significant transformative

impact on Mao's ultimate goal in life. Prior to his trip to Beijing, Mao envisioned his future as a primary school teacher dedicated to nurturing the impressionable minds of his young pupils. He also wanted to occasionally contribute to the intellectual debate concerning China's rejuvenation as a freelance writer. The realization of the Chinese dream of wealth and power must be left, Mao believed, to a hero whose identity would be revealed with time. This belief in the special role of the hero in shaping history stood out in Mao's writings from an early age (Mao 1992a, p. xxii). Throughout his adolescence and young adulthood, Mao admired—or “worshiped,” as he put it (Snow 1968, p. 137)—the likes of Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, and Sun Yat-sen. Time and again, his high hopes that this or that revolutionary would be China's hero were dashed. One can only speculate as to when he began wondering if perhaps *he* was the hero that China so desperately needed. It is plausible to assume that this notion began taking shape in his mind following the successful commencement of his political activism in 1919 (when aged 25). His time at Peking University might also have convinced him that those intellectuals whose writings he had admired so much in the past were in no way superior to him. If that was the case, then why should he expect China's hero to emerge from their midst—arrogant and condescending as they were?!

So it came about that by 1920–1921 Mao had finally overcome what psychologist Erik Erikson describes as an identity crisis (Erikson 1994, p. 111). By embarking down the revolutionary road, armed with the torch of Marxism-Leninism, and with his loving wife by his side, Mao had found a career path, defined his belief and value system, and made his relationship choice. Once a person has settled his mind on the question of who he is, he moves on to explain to himself *how* he came to be. In doing so, he mentally authors a personal story ... a story that

coherently ties past events together ... a story that describes how one's own past has given birth to the present. Psychologists refer to this story as a person's *narrative identity* (Singer 2004).

The key characteristic of someone's narrative identity is its subjectivity: a person cherry-picks those past events that could be (re-)interpreted as having foreshadowed the present. In his autobiography, the revolutionary Mao recalls how he, as a child, had come to appreciate open rebellion against unjust authority (as manifested in his father's strictness). He reminisced about how he had often wondered why the classical works of Chinese literature only celebrated the heroic acts of warriors, officials, and scholars, and why "there was never a peasant hero." He prided himself on having spent his teenage years engaged in self-directed study, thereby absorbing knowledge that would prove crucial during his future quest to lead China along the path of national rejuvenation. He boasted about how influential role models had imbued him and his fellow students with "the desire to become just, moral, virtuous men, useful in society" (Snow 1968, pp. 133-149).

Jefferson Singer describes such life experiences as *self-defining memories*: they form the foundation upon which the current version of the self is constructed (Singer 1995). Now, had Mao's life taken a different trajectory—for example, had he ended up as a primary school teacher—his narrative identity would have highlighted a different set of self-defining memories. For instance, he would probably have attributed more significance to those scenes that underscored his teaching skills than to those that featured him reflecting upon the strengths and weaknesses of historical rebels. Dan McAdams explains how people do not author their life stories, or their narrative identities, in the same way that a secretary writes down the minutes of a meeting. Life stories are not drafted to provide an accurate account of what has happened. Rather, they are "less about

facts and more about meanings.” Their primary psychological function is to imbue life with a sense of purpose and continuity. They fulfill that function by integrating a person’s *reconstructed past*, *perceived present*, and *anticipated future* into a coherent story (McAdams 2009, p. 390). A person usually works on the first draft of his narrative identity during his late adolescence. That draft is then continually expanded, revised, and amended as his life progresses. In other words, people are constantly integrating everything that is happening in their life into their own personal narrative.

As for Mao Zedong, the historical record indicates that his subjective belief in his perceived historical uniqueness only grew with time. Central to this belief was his self-assigned, sacred mission to realize the Chinese dream of wealth and power. Four decades later, Mao’s motivational drive—that is, the leak in his competence tank—prompted him to advocate a distinctive path for China’s development, the extreme manifestation of which was the Great Leap Forward. As the outcome of that endeavor proved to be an unmitigated disaster, the coherence of Mao’s narrative identity was at stake.



THE INITIAL REVELATIONS concerning the mass starvation in the countryside persuaded neither Mao nor his senior colleagues to view the Great Leap Forward as an unmitigated disaster. Far from it. The collective psychological defense system they had put in place was more than capable of absorbing the initial shock. As discussed in section 3.4, the ballistic hypothesis was formulated that “class enemies” had seized power in the countryside and committed evil acts of class revenge. Then, the Party leaders discovered that extreme weather conditions and natural disasters (such as severe droughts and devastating

floods) could just as easily be held responsible for sabotaging the Great Harvest.<sup>1</sup>

As long as the decision makers continued to mutually reinforce their illusions by only talking to each other, the harsh verdict of reality stood no chance of penetrating the collective defense mechanisms of groupthink. However, as more and more reports of mass starvation reached the central leadership, the senior leaders decided to embark on individual inspection tours of the countryside in order to study the real dimensions of the catastrophe with their own eyes. Talking to famine survivors and having them elaborate on their experiences *gradually* sowed the seeds of doubt in the minds of several leaders. One prominent inspection tour was carried out by Vice Chairman Liu Shaoqi himself. In early 1961, Liu traveled around his home province of Hunan for one month (Zhang 1998). The scope of the malnutrition that he witnessed there shook him deeply. He gradually realized that the famine could not have been orchestrated by shadowy class enemies. Rather, it must have been the inevitable outcome of an ill-conceived policy.

During the course of 1961 and 1962, the central and provincial leaders came together on several occasions to discuss their findings and to try to understand what had gone wrong. The debate reached a climax during the so-called *Seven Thousand Cadres Conference*, which was held in Beijing in January 1962. In his three-hour speech to the assembled officials, Liu declared:

On the economic front we face rather significant difficulties; the people have inadequate food, clothing, and other necessities. Why are these inadequate? Because during the three years of 1959, 1960, and 1961, our agricultural production drastically decreased. Industrial output also decreased, by at least 40 percent ... We originally believed that in these few

years we would have a Great Leap Forward in agriculture and industry. We didn't leap forward, however, but actually fell significantly backward, resulting in a big saddle shape (Yang 2012, pp. 501-502).

Liu went even further. He judged that 30% of the responsibility for the occurrence of mass starvation could be attributed to natural calamities, while 70% of the responsibility had to be attributed to human errors (Fenby 2008, p. 420). Several senior leaders agreed with his assessment. The change in Liu's attitude supports the present interpretation that he and others did *not* back Mao before, during, and after the Lushan Conference out of a "political self-preservation instinct." Otherwise, Liu would never have dared to speak of "human errors." Rather, Liu and his colleagues must have truly been convinced of the correctness of the Great Leap Forward. Once they had reclaimed ownership of their critical faculty though, they were again able to see unfiltered reality.

In an episode of self-pity, Mao complained in 1959 that even "[Liu] Shaoqi doesn't dare to speak to me frankly" (Teiwes 1996, p. 184). That was, of course, during a time when Liu himself refused to perceive, let alone accept, the truth. How did the Chairman react now that his deputy was describing things as they really were? "He's not addressing the question of whether we are going the capitalist road or the socialist road," Mao complained to his physician, "he talks about natural disasters versus man-made disasters. This kind of talk is a disaster in itself!" (Li 1994, p. 386). Yet, despite his apparent displeasure with the direction the conference was taking, the Chairman did not try to enforce his version of reality upon his colleagues. It seems as though the waves of negative feedback signals from reality had finally succeeded in breaking down his psychological defense mechanisms. The blow they dealt to his compe-

tence must have been so severe that he could not venture any counterattack.

During the conference, Mao delivered a self-criticism speech in which he bitterly admitted that “the person primarily responsible [for any mistakes the Center has made] should be me” (Mao 1974, p. 167). Unfortunately though, the Chairman failed to elaborate on the nature of his mistakes. Research concerning decision making demonstrates that in the aftermath of major policy fiascos, a sensible leader is well advised to conduct a thorough analysis of *why* the fiasco occurred in the first place. Based on that analysis, the leader should introduce procedural changes to her decision-making process so as to avoid similar mistakes in the future (Janis 1989). Some of the most important lessons for Mao to learn would arguably have been to refrain from narrowing future policy debates to the black-and-white dichotomy of progress versus backwardness, to abstain from revealing—let alone *enforcing*—his favored policy course, to counter any concurrence-seeking tendencies among his colleagues, and to welcome critical voices. His senior colleagues would have reached the conclusion that their Chairman’s wisdom was by no means boundless. Thus, there was almost nothing worse they could do than to obey Chairman Mao unquestionably and with “absolute abandon.”

Alas, none of this happened. Not only did Mao devote the lion’s share of his speech to trivializing the few mistakes he admitted, but several senior colleagues remained opposed to even partially blaming the Chairman for what had happened. Li Fuchun, Chairman of the State Planning Commission, declared that “Chairman Mao’s directives are entirely correct, but we, including the central organs, have made mistakes in executing them.” Defense Minister Lin Biao—who took over from Peng Dehuai after the Lushan Conference—intoned that “The thoughts of Chairman Mao are always correct ... I feel very

deeply that when in the past our work was done well, it was precisely when we thoroughly implemented and did not interfere with Chairman Mao's thought. Every time Chairman Mao's ideas were not sufficiently respected or suffered interference, there have been problems" (Dikötter 2011, pp. 122, 336). Others disagreed, although even those who thought that the Chairman deserved his share of the blame did not question Mao's historical uniqueness. This sentiment was perhaps best expressed by Peng Zhen, then mayor of Beijing. "The prestige of Chairman Mao," he declared, "is comparable to Mount Everest and Mount Tai: even after you take away tons of soil, it remains as high! It is like the East China Sea: even after you pull cartloads of water, it is still as huge!" (Bo 2008, p. 1026).

How could the Chinese decision makers reconcile Mao's apparent failures with their belief in his near-infallibility? Jerome Bruner argues that it is necessary to distinguish between two modes of thought: the *paradigmatic mode*, which is scientific in nature, draws on rational observations and logical conclusions, and relies on evidence when seeking the truth; and the *narrative mode* of thinking, which interprets life experiences as part of the ongoing personal narrative (Bruner 1986). As in fiction, personal narratives do *not* have to match reality. They are full of stereotypes and biases, unproven assumptions and imagined motives, attempts to mentally reconstruct other people's thought processes, and exaggerations—or sometimes even illusions—regarding one's own (as well as others') abilities, moral values, virtues, and vices. People face a particular challenge whenever evidence from reality clashes with the logic of their personal narrative (e.g., if someone who believes himself to be irresistible is turned down by the women he desires; if the hero—be it a real person, a fictional one, or even the country one identifies with—commits an act of villainy). In such cases, tension arises between the need to narrate events in



a narrative-coherent manner and the knowledge that such a narration does not *correspond* to reality (Conway et al 2004). This tension can be resolved by developing a rationalization—for example, “Chairman Mao’s directives are entirely correct, but we ... have made mistakes in executing them.” Or, the Chairman’s mistakes are nothing compared to his achievements.

In any case, Chairman Mao decided to “retire to the second line.” The Herculean task of reviving the Chinese economy was entrusted to Vice Chairman Liu Shaoqi and the CCP’s General Secretary Deng Xiaoping. Together, they steered the economy away from the hysterical zeitgeist of the Great Leap Forward and back to an orderly scheme of central planning.



THE GENERAL ECONOMIC situation in the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward posed a serious threat to Mao Zedong’s narrative identity. Section 3.4 introduced Dörner’s concept of *horizontal flight*. Briefly put, it describes the actor’s search for a new challenge so as to escape feelings of incompetence in relation to handling the current one. Mao’s “retreat to the second line” was just that. In the second line, the Chairman’s previous occupation with the “revisionist line” of Nikita Khrushchev developed into an obsession (Chen 2001, pp. 82-84). His main ideological grievance against his Soviet counterpart was that the latter had altered—or *revised*—the Leninist worldview on two fronts. On the one hand, Khrushchev advocated the principle of “peaceful coexistence” between capitalist and socialist countries, thereby denying the “inevitability” of military conflict between the two camps. On the other hand, the Soviet leader negated the idea that capitalist countries could only be transformed into socialist ones through revolutionary means. The rest of the

Chinese leadership, to say nothing of the Chinese press, dutifully parroted the Chairman's accusations. Moscow retaliated by publishing their own anti-CCP polemics. The inevitable escalation in the verbal hostilities tore open a Sino-Soviet rift that lasted until Deng Xiaoping and Mikhail Gorbachev restored diplomatic relations in 1989. Lorenz Lüthi argues that although the Soviet side tried to bridge the increasing wide gap between the two countries, Mao seemed committed to widening it (Lüthi 2008, p. 219).<sup>2</sup>

Now, Mao's "old challenge" was not one that he could walk away from easily. After all, his entire narrative identity was constructed around his mystical belief in his historic mission to realize the Chinese dream of wealth and power by devising a distinctively Chinese path to socialism. The fact that Liu and Deng were steering China away from the distinctive path he aspired to forge was, in itself, painful. But what must really have been a thorn in Mao's side was the accumulating evidence that the bureaucratic order was proving economically more successful than *his* approach to socialist modernization. Change was moving too fast and too far for Mao's taste. The competitive spirit of the Great Leap years had been stifled. Production target plans had been dramatically curtailed. The communal kitchens were shut down. The average size of the people's communes was drastically reduced. Across China, Soviet-style central planning was being reinstated (Naughton 2007, pp. 72-74). As Liu, Deng, and other pragmatic leaders saw it, the issue was not a Maoist versus Soviet road to development, but rather a relatively successful versus less successful approach. This sentiment was perhaps best captured by Deng's famous adage: "It doesn't matter whether a cat is black or white, so long as it catches mice" (Goodman 1994, p. 68).

The retreat from Mao's distinctive path continued. In 1962, individual farming began to take hold in the countryside in the

form of the *household responsibility system*. Within just a few months, it accounted for 20% of all farming (Short 2000, p. 513). Its apparent success encouraged Liu and Deng to endorse it. Mao, who had invested a great deal of his personal prestige in championing the allegedly superior scheme of collective farming, was not happy with this development. Surely, the masses must be on his side, mustn't they?! The advantages of collective farming were obvious for everyone to see, were they not?!

To answer these questions, in March 1962 Mao dispatched his personal secretary, Tian Jiaying, to his home province of Hunan on a fact-finding mission. Three months later, Tian and his team returned to report that the peasants did *favor* individual farming. Shocked by these revelations, the Chairman asserted that there were occasions—such as this one—when “we cannot entirely follow the masses” (Pang 1996, pp. 87-91). In justifying this verdict, Mao sought refuge in the ideological world of categorical thinking. After condemning individual farming as a form of capitalism, he demanded that his colleagues choose between the socialist road and the capitalist road (Bo 2008, p. 1087). As you would expect, the Chinese leadership ended up affirming the superiority of collective farming.

Apart from this rare intervention in policy making, Mao remained by and large in the second line, feeling disgruntled as to the general direction China was taking. As he saw it, some of the excesses of the last few years warranted certain readjustments, perhaps even a serious reevaluation of certain aspects of his approach to modernization, but not the abandonment of it. Perhaps what disturbed Mao the most was the fact that the “wind of gloom”—as he referred to the general pessimistic evaluation of his approach to economic development (Bo 2008, p. 1074)—was sweeping away the anchors of his legacy as a socialist modernizer. Interestingly though, he did not try to turn the tide. Perhaps his mind was too occupied with coming

to terms with the combined evidence of his own failures *and* the apparent successes of his colleagues' endeavors.

Negative experiences induce psychological pain. Thus, in the wake of a negative experience, a person's brain works frantically to process that experience (Taylor 1991). Hence, the person might go through a long internal trial during which the negative experience is debated, sometimes in excruciating detail, so as to understand why it occurred, what it says about the self, and how it affects the person's sense of self-worth. The internal debate is not necessarily a fact-driven analysis. Rather, it is mostly directed toward finding a "happy ending" to a disturbing episode. The actor could blame the debacle on scapegoats—for example, fate, environmental factors, or other people. Or he could delude himself with the notion that he was undergoing a divine trial—that is, *God is testing me*. Or he could explain the negative experience along the lines of the phoenix metaphor—for example, *I'm burning up right now, only to emerge stronger than ever before*. The list goes on.

Sometimes, however, a negative episode is too unsettling to be resolved by applying a simple psychological defense mechanism. Sometimes, one needs to find a new vantage point from which events can be reinterpreted. Sometimes, one needs to develop a new outlook, a new perspective, a new worldview, so as to come to terms with a shattering experience. Then it is possible to say that a particular experience transformed the actor by imbuing him with a new sense of self and a new understanding of his place in the world (McAdams et al 2001). For Mao Zedong, the events of the early 1960s represented this kind of negative episode.

In retrospect, it seems that Mao found his new vantage point during his preoccupation with Nikita Khrushchev's "revisionism." Gradually, he developed the three keystones of his new

outlook. First, while it is true that a socialist revolution had toppled the exploitative capitalist elite in a given country, it is also true that the “overthrown reactionary ruling class has not resigned itself to its demise; they’re still scheming for a restoration to power” (Yang 2012, p. 512). Second, as the example of the Soviet Union clearly demonstrates, such a counterrevolution does not have to come from outside the Communist Party. It is possible for the Party of Marxism-Leninism itself to “turn into a Party of revisionism, of fascism” (Short 2000, p. 517). Third, a permanent class struggle has to be waged to prevent a “capitalist restoration” from taking place in a socialist country (Meisner 2007, p. 163).

The implications of Mao’s updated worldview could hardly have been more dramatic. From now on, his prime concern was not to *forge* a Chinese path to wealth and power, but to *prevent* an imaginary capitalist restoration from taking place. Seen from this vantage point, the focus on the part of Liu and Deng on economic development rather than class struggle was something to fret about rather than to celebrate. Could Liu, his chosen successor, and General Secretary Deng be China’s Khrushchevs, biding their time until they usurped power entirely? Weren’t they—and their underlings—already shamelessly conspiring to sideline the Chairman? Mao had been gathering evidence in support of this theory for some time now. For example, during a train ride in 1961, he accidentally learned that every word he uttered in any compartment in which he stayed—be it on the train, in a guesthouse in a remote province, or in his own living quarters in Beijing—was being taped by secretly installed recording devices. The recordings were not limited to discussions of serious state matters, but included light-hearted conversations and even his flirtations with attractive young women, whose company he came to crave more and more. This discovery left the Chairman seething. “So they’re

already compiling a black report against me, like Khrushchev [did to Stalin]?” he thundered (Li 1994, p. 368).<sup>3</sup>

But the Party leadership was not content with simply “compiling a black report” for use in the future! No, they were already, as the Chairman grumbled, sidelining him, ignoring him, and not even listening to him (Short 2000, p. 525). “From 1959 up to the present time,” the Chairman complained, “Deng has ... kept away from me, treating me like a dead ancestor” (Yang 1998, p. 150). Even that was not enough for the likes of Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping. They were actively trying to *silence* him! Did not Deng—who was, by the way, running the Party Secretariat as a kind of “independent kingdom” (Shambaugh 1993, p. 467)—dare to ask him to refrain from attending a Politburo meeting in January 1965, feigning concern for the Chairman’s poor health at the time? Did not Liu interrupt one of the Chairman’s speeches several times to interject some foolish remarks? No, Mao had had it with them! Enraged, he stormed into the same meeting that Deng tried to “prevent” him from attending with a copy of the country’s constitution in one hand and the Party’s constitution in the other. “One person,” he accused, “told me not to come to the meeting... and one didn’t want me to speak... Why am I being stripped of the rights to which I’m entitled under the Party constitution and the [country’s] constitution?” (Yang 2012, p. 517).

Of course, Mao’s interpretations of such incidents were really closer to hallucinations than to objective reality. Understanding how he could have believed that his senior colleagues were conspiring against him requires the elaboration of another aspect of narrative thinking. When trying to explain why someone you know did what she did, you can only rely on your previous interactions with that person. After all, you have no direct access to the inner workings of her mind. Previous interactions, therefore, serve as a guideline for interpreting that

person's traits, behavioral tendencies, and motives. People unconsciously develop *personality profiles* for friends, colleagues, family members, and other people in their lives. The word *unconsciously* means, in this context, that people are not aware of doing it; they just do it. Personality profiles are subjective; they are based on one's own interpretation of other people's behavior.

In terms of narrating life, the brain not only further develops the plot, but also the portrayal of the characters involved. Someone whom you perceived to be a hero might turn out to be a villain (e.g., *he was just using me for his own ends*). A supporting actor could become a leading protagonist (e.g., *it turned out that she was the true love of my life*). An old revolutionary comrade might turn into a counterrevolutionary. "The mind," John Milton explains in *Paradise Lost*, "is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven" (Milton 2008, p. 11).

For every incriminating incident that Mao believed his colleagues to be involved in, there was a simpler and less venomous explanation. For example, the "bugging incident" was not aimed at "compiling a black record," but rather at preserving the Chairman's precious words for posterity (Li 1994, p. 368). Such positive interpretations were not consistent with the logic of Mao's *new* narrative. Thus, they were simply disregarded. The events of the following months and even years strongly indicate that Mao's colleagues—including Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping—still considered the Chairman's prestige to be as high as Mount Everest and as vast as the East China Sea. For them, he was still the Great Helmsman: more than a man, less than a god, and in any case, absolutely indispensable.

The transformative power of the turning point in Mao's narrative identity was profound. It did not only determine how he

(re)interpreted certain episodes from the past or in the present, but also how he imagined the future. This is nowhere more evident than in his speeches and writings. While they have been dominated until recently by his utopian visions for China's modernization, they now became pessimistically haunted by fears of a capitalist restoration (Meisner 2007, p. 161). But, was he, Mao Zedong, to abandon his country after all the years he had spent its service? Was he, China's Hero, to allow the evils of capitalism to inflict insufferable pain on his nation? Was he—on whose shoulders the future of that ancient realm rested—to give up without a rebellion, without a revolution?! Certainly not!

In January 1965, as the struggle against an imaginary capitalist restoration became the focal point of Mao's narrative, he declared the enemy to be "those people in positions of authority within the Party who take the capitalist road" (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals 2008, p. 13). Objectively, Mao was the Chairman of the Party, meaning that he enjoyed unlimited powers. Objectively, he could have dismissed any leader he wished to. However, this is not how the narrating mind works. Mao not only convinced himself of the danger of a non-existent capitalist restoration, but also that he was being sidelined. Thus, the only method that the old rebel could come up with was, as he put it, to "create great disorder under heaven" so as to bring about a new "great order under heaven" (Barnouin & Yu 1993, p. 77).

Mao Zedong and China were traveling together on a historic journey, which meant that any profound change in the former's life story was bound to twist the very fabric of the latter's history. The turning point in Mao's personal narrative changed his ultimate goal for the remaining years of his life from building socialism to preventing capitalism. Yet, little did the Chairman know that from the chaos and turmoil he was about



to unleash on China, a truly distinctive path to wealth and power would emerge after his death.

#### **4.2 Mao the Hero**

“Anything essential,” Defense Minister Lin Biao contended in a speech given on May 18, 1966, “will always express itself by way of phenomena.”<sup>4</sup> Elaborating on this insight, he went on to say:

Recently a number of weird things and weird signs have drawn our attention to the possibility of a counterrevolutionary coup, one in which people will be killed, political power will be usurped, capitalism will be restored, and the whole of socialism will be done away with. [We have] plenty of signs, plenty of material [to prove it], and I won't go into detail here... (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals 2008, p. 38).

The “weird things” that Lin was referring to were, in fact, fabricated into existence by Chairman Mao's imagination. The avalanche of events began in November 1965 with what seemed at the time to be a minor incident. A polemic was published in local Shanghai newspapers condemning a five-year-old theater play for being a “poisonous weed.” The play being criticized was *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*. Its plot revolves around a sixteenth-century official who was dismissed by the emperor for speaking out on behalf of the oppressed. Some argued that the play's author was alluding to Mao's dismissal of Peng Dehuai during the Lushan Conference.

The play's author was renowned historian Wu Han—who was also Beijing's vice mayor. Understandably, Wu's mentor, Beijing's then mayor and senior Party leader Peng Zhen, ordered the national press to refrain from reprinting the

polemic (Barnouin & Yu 1993, pp. 51-54). However, unknown to most at the time, the damning rebuke was actually written under the auspices of no other than Chairman Mao himself. When Zhou Enlai learned sometime later of the Chairman's personal involvement in drafting the article, he hurried to inform Peng Zhen. As you would expect, the polemic was widely reprinted the very next day (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals 2008, p. 18).

The affair did not end there though. Rather, it was the beginning of protracted guerrilla warfare during which the Chairman aspired to conquer what he described as the “independent kingdoms”—that is, local and central Party organizations that had become, according to his narrative, fortresses of revisionism (Dikötter 2016, p. 102). Wu Han's theatrical work was discussed exhaustively in the press. The Party's senior leadership, however, deemed it appropriate to confine the debate to the realm of academia. Mao, determined to wreak havoc, thought differently, although he refrained from saying anything. In accordance with the leadership's consensus, Peng Zhen, who also oversaw the cultural sphere, blocked the publication of two polemics in which it was argued that Wu Han's mistakes were not merely academic in nature, but mainly political (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals 2008, p. 28).

Things began to move fast. The *People's Liberation Army* (PLA), under Lin Biao's leadership, held a cultural forum during which the dire state of Chinese culture was bemoaned. The forum concluded that since the People's Republic was founded, “we have been under the dictatorship of a black anti-Party, anti-socialist line which is diametrically opposed to Chairman Mao's thought” (Barnouin & Yu 1993, p. 60). Mao himself denounced the cultural authorities as being the “palace of the King of Hell” (Short 2000, p. 531). They were, in Mao's view,

“suppressing leftists” and “shielding bad people [such as Wu Han]” (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals 2008, p. 32).

Peng Zhen's eventual fate was sealed in May during a meeting of the Standing Committee of the Politburo. The pattern by which it came about should be a familiar one by now: once the thunder of the Chairman's rage struck someone, it did not take long for the volley of his colleagues' accusations to follow. With breathtaking speed, Peng's case was catapulted into the category of the struggle against revisionism in China. Then, all his meritorious prior services were nullified, his motives vilified, and his alleged crimes magnified. The comrades with whom he had shared precious memories since his youth began meticulously vetting his long record similar to how a general would examine the enemy's defense system to identify its weakest spots. In the process, nothing—not even the smallest heresy—escaped the appraising eyes of the inquisitors. Peng's fellow sinner Lu Dingyi, head of the Central Committee's Propaganda Department, learned that the hard way. “So you say that it was Mao Zedong Thought that taught you to win at table tennis,” accused one of his colleagues, “How are you going to explain losing?” (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals 2008, p. 34).

Eventually, Peng Zhen, Lu Dingyi, and two other senior officials (Luo Ruiqing and Yang Shangkun) were condemned as the chief conspirators in a malevolent anti-Party clique. In time, the incident proved to be a tsunami; its wind blew through the bureaucracy, generating waves of denunciations and purges that also struck down less prominent victims. Furthermore, to eradicate the roots of revisionism in China, a more momentous movement was deemed by the Chairman to be necessary. Accordingly, Mao proclaimed—and his colleagues dutifully echoed—the need for a *Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution* (无产阶级文化大革命) as a nationwide campaign to combat revisionism. “Far from being a minor issue,” the Central

Committee announced, “the struggle against this revisionist line is an issue of prime importance having a vital bearing on the destiny and future of our Party and state ... and on the world revolution” (CC 1967, p. 9). It did not matter whether Mao’s colleagues discerned any revisionist threats themselves. What mattered was that *he* saw revisionists lurking somewhere within the Party’s central organs, indulging themselves in the illusion that their “position of authority” constituted an impenetrable cloak of invisibility—a cloak under which their sinister, ugly conspiracy could be well hidden until conditions were ripe for usurping power from the masses, for undoing the socialist order, and for turning the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat into a dictatorship of the bourgeoisie!

This is another example of how the leaders’ failure to reflect on the outcomes of previous major mass campaigns, as well as their failure to draw lessons from such experiences, came back to haunt them. From the standpoint of high-quality decision making, Mao’s colleagues should have asked what *exactly*—not just vaguely—revisionism meant; what concrete changes in China’s economic, political, and social order would amount to a “reversal of socialism;” and what signs there were that such changes were taking place. Then, they should have asked several critical questions so as to better understand what *exactly* a Cultural Revolution would entail, the ways in which it might develop, the likelihood of it disturbing China’s economic recovery, and why such a disturbance was justified. Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals argue that the members of Politburo’s Standing Committee could have united to stop the early purges and thereby stop the flame of the impending Cultural Revolution from being ignited, but they did not do so (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals 2008, p. 26).

Was this failure to act perhaps, in Philip Short’s words, due to a “mixture of cowardice and self-interest” (Short 2000, p. 534)?

*Cowardice* implies a failure to act despite knowing that one should do so. The historical record clearly suggests that several senior leaders (including Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai, and Deng Xiaoping) were genuinely perplexed by the ongoing events. However, they did not doubt that the Chairman had his reasons for initiating them. Hence, they can be seen as bending over backwards to construct a convincing rationale for the Chairman's actions rather than questioning them. When a plausible rationalization evades one's creative imagination, one can always seek refuge in the vague world of esoteric explanations. Digesting the purges of Long March veterans (such as Peng Zhen) is a case in point. "It is a class issue that you cannot explain by focusing on the individual," one Party member said, "it has a class impetus that is independent of man's will." The same sentiment was echoed by Liu Shaoqi: "Seen as individuals, they would have been capable of not acting. But from a class struggle point of view, their action appears normal, not strange. Class struggle is independent of man's will. Why they should act the way they did is because their class made them do it" (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals 2008, pp. 46-47). Does the reader understand this "explanation"? I certainly do not.

Why go to such great lengths to bestow a rationale on Mao's whims? Did the failure of previous mass campaigns not provide his colleagues with sufficient evidence of the fact that even someone as "exceptional" as their revered Chairman could make serious errors of judgment? Earlier discussions touched upon the "total abandon" with which Chairman Mao was followed, without elaborating on the underlying psychological structure. The submissive attitude exhibited by Mao's colleagues can be traced back to the interaction of cultural and psychological factors. Culturally, obedience to authority is a cornerstone of Confucian values, which have been deeply ingrained into the DNA of the Chinese for thousands of years.

Those who were born prior to the demise of the imperial system in 1912 felt an innate sense of duty to obey the emperor. It is true that Mao's generation fought to establish a radically different political system, although the instinct—or, rather, the psychological need—to obey the highest authority remained intact (Zheng 2010). It is perhaps with this in mind that John King Fairbank refers to Mao as an “updated emperor,” arguing that “Only if we regard [the Chairman] as a monarch in succession to scores of emperors can we imagine why the leadership of the CCP went along with his piecemeal assault and destruction of them” (Fairbank 1987, p. 318).

Why is obedience to authority a psychological need? As discussed in section 3.1, abiding by cultural values, social norms, and organizational conventions is an *internal legitimacy signal*. Doing so provides proof to oneself that one is a responsible citizen, loyal husband, selfless mother, etc. As is the case with competence and certainty signals, experiencing an internal legitimacy signal is pleasurable. That is to say, it activates the emotional pathways of the brain and creates a feeling of well-being. Conversely, violating a cherished value constitutes an *internal anti-legitimacy signal*: a mental “red flag” signaling a discrepancy between the *ideal self* (i.e., how one is supposed to act) and the *actual self* (i.e., how one is acting) (Higgins 1987). The awareness of such discrepancies creates negative emotions and generates a feeling of ill-being—an experience that people colloquially refer to as “suffering a pang of conscience.” Now, a “guilty conscience” challenges the mind to explain away bad behavior. Sometimes, an explanation for such behavior is readily found after some “soul-searching.” Sometimes though, rationalizing the discrepancy is not easy, which could lead to a psychological crisis.

The human brain “encourages” living by accepted behavioral norms and “discourages” deviations from such norms through

the mechanisms of internal legitimacy and anti-legitimacy signals (Dörner 2001, pp. 318-350). Obviously, certain norms and values are considered more sacred than others. There is, for example, a stronger psychological inhibition against killing other human beings than against breaking the speed limit. Further, some norms and values are universal, while others are culturally dependent (Triandis 2004). As McAdams explains, "Evolution has designed human beings to meet certain universal challenges, and human beings the world over must meet them, regardless of their particular customs, mores, and beliefs." At the same time, McAdams continues, "Evolution designed the human mind in such a way as to afford awesome diversity in the ways whereby human beings meet their challenges and live their lives" (McAdams 2009, pp. 90-91).

It might still be difficult to comprehend the degree to which Mao's colleagues were constrained from disobeying him by internal inhibitions. Think of your own core values and code of conduct. Try to imagine yourself violating them: can you see yourself wearing jogging pants and a T-shirt to a funeral, mistreating an elderly lady who can barely walk, or spitting in the face of your child without feeling revulsion? As elsewhere in this book, my aim is always to understand, *not to sympathize* with the actors involved. The point of this argument is to illustrate an important psychological insight: core values are part of one's identity; hence, one cannot break a core value without experiencing some degree of psychological pain (Dörner 2001, pp. 334-336). Unfortunately, the role of values and the importance of maintaining a positive self-image through upholding them are lost on many political scientists, who accept the *rational actor hypothesis*. They interpret Mao's interactions with his colleagues through the often misleading lens of the "politics as but a power game" metaphor. As a result, they arrive at a reductionist formula: actor X did this or that because he

wanted to stay in power—an idea that will be investigated further in Chapter 7.

The Confucian value of obedience to authority is not the only reason why following Chairman Mao with “total abandon” was considered a sacred obligation, a core value, and a virtue that defined what it meant to be a “good Communist.” Rather, it was the foundation upon which an ever growing Mao cult had been being built since the launch of the so-called *Yan’an Rectification Movement* (1942–1944) (Gao 2000). The Mao cult was fortified by the way in which the CCP’s military and political successes were attributed to the Party’s Chairman. Such accomplishments were, in some cases, formidable in their own right. However, the propaganda machine seized upon them and turned them into miraculous feats, unprecedented throughout history. Mao’s charisma, which others perceived as his “relentless energy and ruthless self-confidence,” his assertive personality, and his uncompromising decisiveness also played an important role in enforcing obedience among Party cadres. Mao’s leadership style—especially the way he coped with criticism—as well as emerging group dynamics similar to those discussed in Chapter 3 solidified the conditioning process: whenever a person found the Chairman’s actions to be incomprehensible, he would question his own judgment rather than the Chairman’s. Should he eventually fail to bestow a rationale on the Chairman’s actions, he could always resort to the familiar logic of religious devotees: “God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform!” Equally, all good Communists should, as Lin Biao put it, “Carry out Chairman Mao’s instructions, whether you understand them or not” (Schell & Delury 2013, p. 245).

As pointed out in section 3.4, humans are capable of recognizing and adjusting faulty behavioral patterns—regardless of the motivational, emotional, and cognitive factors that underlie



them. Neither culture nor upbringing should be taken as excuses for immoral behavior or low-quality decision making.

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MOVING on from *why* the Chinese leaders rationalized Mao's whims to *how* they did so. The explanations that the Chinese leaders conjured up to account for Mao's behavior were dictated by their personal narratives. As attested by their speeches and actions, the *dramatis personae* of Mao Zedong was interwoven into the very fabric of his colleagues' personal narratives as China's Hero, its national savior, on whose mighty shoulders history had placed a special destiny and whom heaven had blessed with unique abilities. The common perception of Mao was that of a Great Helmsman whose primary goal in life was to steer the national ship through the turbulent waters of modernization challenges and toward the harbor of socialism. Thus, the underlying assumption behind any attempt to explain a Maoist policy was that it was contributing in some way to the advance of socialism in China. Here, the burgeoning Cultural Revolution presented Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping, and others with a unique mental challenge.

In the midst of the political storm that was the shake-up of the Beijing Party Committee, the national press came under the control of radicals who were unwaveringly committed to upholding the banner of class struggle. The *People's Daily* declared a preemptive war against imaginary foes who ventured to eclipse the "red sun in our hearts,"—that is, Chairman Mao—whose thought was "the source of our life" and whose works were "more precious than gold." The newspaper assured its readers that such revisionists "shall be hunted down and obliterated" (Short 2000, p. 536). On May 25, 1966, a

group of students attending Peking University entered the battle by putting up a poster that attacked the university's "revisionist" leadership. Without any reflection on the merit of the accusation or the guilt of the accused, an excited Mao commanded the nationwide publication of this "revolutionary" text, adding: "Now the smashing of the reactionary stronghold that is Peking University can begin!" (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals 2008, p. 58).

In accordance with the Chairman's directives, the central leadership agreed, on June 13, to a nationwide suspension of school and university classes so that students could devote their time to the ill-defined task of carrying out "class struggle" and exposing revisionists. As a result, millions of young people were free to wreak havoc across the land (Kwong 1988b). Students were at liberty to decry professors, administrative staff members, and even fellow students as counterrevolutionaries, revisionists, and capitalist roaders. The orgy of denunciation, the rebellion against authority, and the reversal of the regular social order spread like wildfire to governmental departments, newspapers, hospitals, workplaces, and other areas of life. The growing insanity was aptly summed up by the absurd slogan: "World in great disorder, excellent situation!" (Schell & Delury 2013, p. 246).

Chairman Mao was following news of the escalating chaos with agitated excitement from outside the capital—which he had left back in November, shortly before the beginning of the Wu Han affair. Despite his absence, he received detailed and timely reports on what was happening (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals 2008, p. 78). For his colleagues back in Beijing, the increasing mayhem was highly worrying, as it threatened the country's hard-won economic recovery. In the years that followed the Great Leap Forward, the budget deficit had been replaced by a surplus of nearly 1 billion yuan, agricultural production had

been restored to pre-Great Leap levels, and the industrial output had surged remarkably (Spence 1999b, p. 564). As most of Mao's senior colleagues had failed to recognize the plot twist in his personal narrative, they were genuinely baffled by the Chairman's encouragement of those people who were spreading disorder. In fact, on June 30, Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping hurried to report to the Chairman that the Cultural Revolution was posing a serious threat to China's economic recovery and that the Five-Year Plan was far behind schedule (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals 2008, p. 76)! Philip Short finds it "hard to understand" how "Liu and Deng could have misjudged so fundamentally Mao's intentions" (Short 2000, p. 538). Of course, narrative thinking explains how: both leaders genuinely believed that socialist modernization was still Mao's top priority.

Excellent chronicles of the Cultural Revolution—such as the work by Barnouin and Yu (1993) and MacFarquhar and Schoenhals (2008)—document the extent to which the Chinese leaders' failure to fathom the purpose of the movement troubled them and how they remained hopelessly desperate for the Chairman's leadership, constantly begging him to give them instructions. Whenever the Chairman withheld his precious advice, his colleagues did their best to divine the inner workings of his mind and to do what they thought he would have done. It was not easy. As Liu Shaoqi confessed to his family, "I have no experience of running a movement in this fashion under socialism; nor have I ever in the past come across our Party using this form of rectification" (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals 2008, p. 63). Liu considered the fault to lie with him, for *he* did not understand how to run the Cultural Revolution. The movement itself was doubtless correct; would Chairman Mao otherwise have initiated it?! But what if ... what if Mao Zedong was *wrong*? As long as Mao's colleagues believed him to be in

possession of a knowledge the profundities of which went beyond the limited cognitive abilities of their ordinary minds, they were unlikely to entertain—let alone to express—such heretical thoughts. One of the few positive legacies of the Cultural Revolution was that it dragged Mao Zedong down from the realm of infallible gods and into the sphere of errant mortals—as will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

Not all the Party officials were as perplexed as Liu and Deng. Some excelled at discerning the direction the Chairman wished the Cultural Revolution to take. For example, people such as Chen Boda; people whose personal narratives, it seems, never revolved around promoting modernization. They were the people who had, in the past, reveled in waging ferocious literary battles among themselves over the presumably crucial differences between near-synonyms such as “bourgeois rights” and “rights of bourgeois kind” or “class societies” and “societies containing classes” (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals 2008, p. 40). The fame of hitherto unknown radical intellectuals—such as Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, and Wang Hongwen—skyrocketed during the Cultural Revolution. They found a perfect ally in Mao’s neglected wife, Jiang Qing; she found, in exposing the supposedly counterrevolutionary and reactionary nature of movies and operas, a new meaning in her, until then, quite miserable life (Terrill 1999a). Together, these people became the actual initiators and grand provocateurs of mayhem.

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Now, back to mid-1966. In the absence of concrete instructions from the Chairman, the central leadership took measures to restore order. First, it was decided that no street demonstrations were to be allowed, no interruption of work permitted, and no

disruption to public safety tolerated any longer. Next, something had to be done to get a grip on the escalating aggressiveness with which the crusade against alleged counterrevolutionaries was being carried out on educational campuses. At schools and universities up and down the country, young revolutionaries accused their teachers of forming so-called *Black Gangs*, harassed them, splashed their faces with black ink, hit them with clubs, imprisoned them, and starved them (Dikötter 2016).

To contain such acts of “hooliganism,” the leadership dispatched *work teams*—that is, groups of experienced officials—to the campuses. The work teams were unprepared for the hostility with which they were met. Nonetheless, they executed their mission, calling off struggle sessions and encouraging students to resume classes. The burgeoning Cultural Revolution was about to be scotched. At that very moment, Mao decided to return to the capital, to recall the work teams, and to re-grant the “young revolutionaries” the freedom to rebel to their hearts’ content. Upon his arrival in Beijing, the Chairman severely criticized Liu Shaoqi for “suppressing” the revolutionary activities of the students. Until then, Liu and Deng had been opposed to withdrawing the work teams from campuses, but once the Chairman had declared that they should be withdrawn, both leaders duly fell in line (Barnouin & Yu 1993, pp. 77-78).

On July 29, Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai, and Deng Xiaoping received more than 10,000 students in the Great Hall of the People to *apologize* for suppressing their “revolutionary activities”! Unknown to everyone, Chairman Mao was sitting backstage and eavesdropping on proceedings. When Liu apologetically told his audience that he and his colleagues were “old revolutionaries facing new problems,” the Chairman sneered, “What old revolutionaries? Old counterrevolution-

aries is more like it!” This comment spoke volumes as to the profound change that had occurred in Mao’s personal narrative. Li Zhisui remembers that as soon as the leaders finished their talk, the curtains at the back of the stage were opened. Then, “suddenly, unexpectedly, like magic, Chairman Mao stepped through the opening and onto the stage.” The students let out roars of “Long Live Chairman Mao!” They jumped up and down hysterically as the Chairman walked across the stage, waving his hand in a dignified manner (Li 1994, p. 470).

Within days, the Party’s leadership met to discuss how the Cultural Revolution was being “mishandled” by Liu and his colleagues. Mao criticized the “suppression and terror” of the work teams. When Liu assumed personal responsibility for authorizing their dispatch, Mao replied viciously: “You were exercising dictatorship in Beijing. You did a fine job!” (Barnouin & Yu 1993, pp. 78-80). The meteoric fall of Liu Shaoqi—Vice Chairman of the Communist Party of China and Mao’s chosen successor—was guaranteed at this point. In a matter of days, Lin Biao took over his position. Among the senior leaders, Lin’s devout attitude toward Mao was hard to surpass. On one occasion, he declared: “We must believe in the Chairman’s innate genius, in his wisdom, and in his intelligence, always ask him for instructions and then act accordingly, never interfering in big matters or bothering him with trifles” (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals 2008, p. 98).

On August 5, 1966, while the plenum was still in session, Mao wrote a short essay—attacking his own Party! Under the militant title of “Bombard the Headquarters,” the Chairman condemned anonymous “leading comrades” who by...

...adopting the reactionary stand of the bourgeoisie, they have enforced a bourgeois dictatorship and struck down the surging movement of the Great Cultural Revolution of the

Proletariat. They have stood facts on their head and juggled black and white, encircled and suppressed revolutionaries, stifled opinions differing from their own, imposed a white terror, and felt very pleased with themselves. They have puffed up the arrogance of the bourgeoisie and deflated the morale of the proletariat. How vicious they are! (Cheek 2002, pp. 170-171).

Three days later, on August 8, the “Decision of the Central Committee of the CCP Concerning the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” was unanimously adopted. In it, the Cultural Revolution was defined as a “struggle against ... those persons in authority who are taking the capitalist road.” The resolution encouraged the Party to “trust the masses, rely on them and respect their initiative,” to “cast out fear,” and especially, to not be “afraid of disturbances” (CC 1966). Class struggle had now officially replaced economic development as the primary goal of the CCP.

### **4.3 Raging Mayhem**

In the late summer of 1966, Nien Cheng, a special advisor for Shell in Shanghai, was visited by an uninvited group of 30–40 teenagers. The youngsters all wore military uniforms. Their red armbands identified them as members of a growing movement of high school and university students who called themselves *Red Guards* (红卫兵). “We are the Red Guards,” the group’s leader announced unnecessarily, “We have come to take revolutionary action against you!” Nien fetched a copy of China’s constitution. “It’s against the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China to enter a private house without a search warrant,” she pointed out. An outraged teenager snatched the document and threw it contemptuously to the floor. “The Constitution is abolished,” he declared, “It was a document

written by the revisionists within the Communist Party. We recognize only the teachings of our Great Leader Chairman Mao.” Nien tried to reason with the intruders, but it was to no avail.

The young revolutionaries then set about searching her house. In the process, they smashed priceless mirrors, vases, and ivory figures, tore up invaluable old paintings, and confiscated expensive objects. Soon, Nien’s meticulously decorated home was ransacked beyond all recognition. Seeing that one of the youngsters was about to destroy the last of four historically unique porcelain wine cups, the unfortunate lady could contain herself no longer. “This wine cup is nearly three hundred years old,” she pleaded with an aching heart. “No one in this world can make another wine cup like this one again. This is a part of our cultural heritage. Every Chinese should be proud of it!” This line of argument provoked outright indignation among the fanatics. “You shut up!” one of them shouted, “These things belong to the old culture. They are useless toys of the feudal emperors and the modern capitalist class and have no significance to us, the proletarian class ... Our Great Leader Chairman Mao taught us, ‘If we do not destroy, we cannot establish.’ The old culture must be destroyed to make way for the new socialist culture” (Nien 1988, pp. 70-74).

Sadly, Nien Cheng’s experience was not uncommon during the two most violent years of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1968). Millions of youngsters across China followed Lin Biao’s call to demolish the Four Olds—that is, old ideology, old culture, old customs, and old habits—laying waste to temples, museums, and libraries as they did so (Lu 2004, p. 61). The *People’s Daily* proclaimed that “We ... use our magic to turn the old world upside down, smash it to pieces, pulverize it, create chaos, and make a tremendous mess, the bigger the better” (Schell & Delury 2013, p. 246). Countless historically valuable objects



were ruined in the process. It was not only material objects that suffered. After all, the Cultural Revolution was first and foremost a mass movement intended to combat revisionism ... and revisionists. Seemingly endless legions of teenage hooligans—or Red Guards—set out to smash the “bourgeois reactionary line,” to prosecute counterrevolutionaries, and to obliterate capitalist roaders.

But what did labels such as *revisionist*, *counterrevolutionary*, or *capitalist roader* actually mean? No one really knew, and apparently, no one really cared to find out. The rebels were at liberty to accuse anyone of committing any political crime they could dream up ... and to then punish people accordingly. The poorest workers were accused of being vicious members of the bourgeoisie, while veterans of the revolution were stigmatized as counterrevolutionary renegades. During the Cultural Revolution, language lost all meaning (Mitter 2005, p. 209). Political accusations were thrown about right, left, and center, with disastrous consequences for the accused. Party cadres, intellectuals, and even ordinary citizens—whose “crimes” could be as trivial as owning a foreign book—were harassed and tortured at the whim of Red Guards. The more prominent among them were subjected to *struggle sessions* in which they had to confess to imaginary crimes in front of huge angry crowds. Distinguished scholars were assigned to perform humiliating labor (such as cleaning the toilets), and many were sent to the countryside so that they could replace their “useless” and “reactionary” book-based knowledge with the revolutionary wisdom of the peasants.

As if the chaos propagated by *local* Red Guard groups was not enough, young revolutionaries from around the country were called upon to embark on pilgrimages to other places so as to intensify the Cultural Revolution. The nation's entire transportation network was realigned to facilitate the so-called *great*

*exchange of revolutionary experiences* (革命大串联). Red Guards could travel wherever they wanted, free of charge (Lu 2004, pp. 135-137).

Rae Yang, then a 15-year-old student, was one of those who participated in the great exchange of revolutionary experiences. She remembers traveling from Beijing in the north to Guangzhou in the far south with a group of fellow Red Guards. The young revolutionaries saw themselves as being on a mission to spread the seeds of fire, to topple the old order, to create a new China, and to liberate humankind. The forty-hour train ride was a long and exhausting journey. On Chinese trains, some passengers stay in sleeping cars equipped with beds, while others have to be content with uncomfortably hard seats. This seat distribution system, it soon dawned on the young revolutionaries, was extremely unjust, for it did not take the passengers' class backgrounds into account! Workers and poor peasants could well be spending the journey on hard seats! The traveling Red Guards—who were themselves staying in sleeping cars—decided to “make revolution” and rectify the situation. Some of their fellow travelers were not impressed. “If you say giving up beds to workers and poor peasants is a revolutionary act ... why don't you do it yourselves?” one fellow passenger challenged. The revolutionaries reacted furiously. Those who refused to give up their beds were immediately denounced as “class enemies,” beaten, and driven off the train at the next stop. Who were these “class enemies”? They were old men and women, weak and vulnerable. Yang remembers that...

...as they walked past our window on the platform, one old women especially caught my attention ... Her hair was completely white. From her head blood poured down like a stream. It fell on her white shirt. The shirt was a mess.

Although she looked ready to drop to the ground at any moment, a female Red Guard about my age was still thrashing her on the head with an iron-buckled army belt (Yang 1997, pp. 130-133).

The outpouring of violence seen during the Cultural Revolution, Jonathan Spence argues, revealed the depths of frustration at the heart of Chinese society. "The youth," he suggests, "needed little urging from Mao to rise up against their parents, teachers, Party cadres, and the elderly, and to perform countless acts of calculated sadism." Rather, they enthusiastically seized the opportunity to throw off what they perceived as their chains of repression (Spence 1999b, p. 576). The political language employed by Mao and other leaders of the Cultural Revolution might prove empty upon closer inspection, but it did bestow a sense of meaningful purpose on the persecution fury and destruction orgy engaged in by the radicalized youth. The 15-year-old Rae Yang describes how she and her fellow revolutionaries felt at the time:

From now on, we no longer need envy our parents for their heroic deeds in revolutionary wars and feel sorry because we were born too late. Like the forerunners we admired, now we are going to places where forces of darkness still reign and dangers lurk. We will enlighten and organize the masses, dig out hidden enemies, shed our blood, and sacrifice our lives for the final victory of the Cultural Revolution (Yang 1997, p. 131).

Most, albeit by no means all, acts of violence witnessed during the Cultural Revolution were committed at the whim of the "revolutionary masses." The radical leaders of the Cultural Revolution, such as Kang Sheng and Jiang Qing, mainly got involved when it came to persecuting senior Party officials. One

prominent example here is the ordeal experienced by Peng Dehuai. The former defense minister was dragged time and again to large sports stadiums packed with people who spared no effort in humiliating the once revered hero of the Chinese Revolution. Forced to wear a white paper hat on his head and a wooden board with filthy insults written on it around his neck, he was paraded about in chains. Then, he was returned to prison. In his cell, he was not allowed to stand, drink water, or even go to the toilet for several days. In the newspapers, he was accused of promoting a “capitalist military line” in the army, whatever that meant (Domes 1985, pp. 120-121).

Liu Shaoqi—the man who oversaw China’s economic recovery—became the “satanic figure of Cultural Revolution demonology” (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals 2008, p. 273). Decried as “China’s Khrushchev” and the “number one person in authority taking the capitalist road,” the former president was cursed and condemned in posters and newspaper articles around the country on a daily basis. The same level of public hatred was aroused against the Party’s ousted General Secretary Deng Xiaoping, who became known as the “number two person in authority taking the capitalist road.”

Despite these orchestrated attacks against eminent Party leaders, the lion’s share of the violence was uncoordinated and arbitrarily executed by local groups of rebels against perceived class enemies (Lee 1978). The number of victims was in the millions. Some were killed. Others committed suicide. The majority carried psychological and/or physical scars for the rest of their lives. Further, the fact that “revisionist” Party cadres up and down the hierarchy were toppled meant not only immense suffering for the hundreds of thousands of affected bureaucrats, but also for the local people whose livelihoods depended on functional government services. I am talking here not only about public transportation and the post office, but also about

factories, hospitals, schools, and food-processing plants. As the economic system was based on public ownership, every work unit was managed by a Party bureaucrat. The increasing number of “power seizures” performed by both Red Guards and workers resulted in an unwelcome disruption to economic activities.

In 1967, the scale of the violence reached a new level as the Red Guards divided themselves into factions. Infighting erupted as each faction claimed unwavering loyalty to Chairman Mao and the revolutionary cause and accused the other factions of betrayal (Walder 2012). In fact, the violence became so widespread that a few years later, Mao himself would describe China as having been in a state of “all-round civil war” (Chen 2001, p. 256). The warring factions in the southwestern city of Chongqing, for example, waged ferocious battles in which they employed ammunition looted from local weapons factories. It is estimated that in one battle alone almost 10,000 combatants were involved, all sorts of weapons were used, nearly 1,000 people were killed or injured, and a vast amount of state property was destroyed (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals 2008, p. 217). In many cases, the combatants were, as one later reminisced, “proud to have risked their lives and would be willing to risk death again. They believed they were dying for Chairman Mao” (Thurston 1991, p. 229).

Was this level of public devotion to Mao Zedong only a few years after the disastrous events of the Great Leap Forward not a strange phenomenon? One would think that the Chairman's prestige among the people would have been tarnished. Yet, the prevailing belief in the famine-affected areas was that the calamities were localized incidents caused by the cruelty and indifference of local cadres. The true magnitude of the Great Leap catastrophe was never discussed in the press. One peasant, interviewed years after the Chairman's death, said:

I know about the mistakes in [Chairman Mao's] last years. But they weren't his mistakes. Sitting there in his dragon palace, he couldn't possibly have known what was happening to us peasants. It was the people under him who were bad. They kept him in the dark and did all sorts of terrible things in his name. Chairman Mao had wealth and greatness written all over his face. He had the look of a real emperor, but he was better than an emperor. No emperor ever saved the poor. Chairman Mao was the savior of the poor from the moment he was born. If he hadn't been, would we be missing him now? (Sang & Zhang 1987, p. 117).

Further, by the time of the Cultural Revolution, Mao's personality cult had already developed into outright worship. For example, a new daily ritual spontaneously developed in one factory. It went something like this. Each morning the workers would turn to the Chairman's portrait and "ask for instructions" so as to "see and think clearly and gain a sense of direction." During the day, they would strive to achieve a "mighty increase in working enthusiasm" by studying the sacred words of the Chairman. When changing shifts, they would exchange Mao quotations "as a way of showing concern and offering help." The ritual quickly spread to other factories across the country (Leese 2011, p. 198). In the villages, peasants performed daily services to Chairman Mao, read aloud a few of his words, and bowed to his portrait. In a southern Chinese village, for example, the farmers recited the following prayer before every meal: "We respectfully wish a long life to the reddest red sun in our hearts, the great leader Chairman Mao. And to Vice Chairman Lin Biao's health: May he forever be healthy. Having been liberated by the land reform we will never forget the Communist Party, and in revolution we will forever follow Chairman Mao!" (Chan et al 2009, p. 170).

On one occasion, the Beijing Textile Factory was sent a precious gift from the Chairman himself: a mango! Li Zhisui, who worked and lived in the factory at the time, remembers the workers organizing a huge ceremony to welcome the arrival of the precious fruit. The mango was sealed in wax so as to preserve it for posterity. The waxed fruit was then placed on an altar and workers filed past it every day, formally bowing as they went by (Li 1994, pp. 502-503).

Superstition was rife. George Urban compiled a compendium of devotional literature that he appropriately titled *The Miracles of Chairman Mao*. In it, one can read anecdotes about how the Chairman's writings taught the chronically ill to "fight cancer with revolutionary optimism," how a medical team succeeded in treating the deaf by "relying on the invincible thought" of the great leader, and even how a dead person was revived by following the Chairman's teachings. In this latter instance, the story tells of a worker who was struck by an electric shock that rendered him "clinically dead." At the hospital, the doctor remembered that "according to a foreign medical journal, it was impossible for a patient to revive after the heart had stopped beating for six minutes." However, the medical team wisely chose to rely on the Chairman's sagacious instruction: "Surmount every difficulty to win victory." Hence, the doctor broke with "foreign bourgeois conventions and old medical 'text books'" and revived the "deceased" by injecting adrenalin (Urban 1971, pp. 24-26)!

Massive rallies were held in Tiananmen Square, to which millions of Red Guards flocked from across the country. As the Chairman appeared at the rostrum to review his "revolutionary successors," the crowds worked themselves up to a maddening frenzy of hysterical shouts of "Long Live Chairman Mao!," jumping up and down, and crying their eyes out in an act of deep religious devotion (Spence 1999a, p. 165).

One wonders, if the idealistic young man that Mao once was had been told of the China he would end up creating, how would he have reacted? Would he have welcomed the mindless recitation of his words by millions upon millions of non-thinking dummies? Would he have admired his aging self as he conspired to bring down those comrades-in-arms who spent their entire lives by his side serving the same revolutionary cause he so passionately believed in? Would he have applauded the strategic ingenuity that his future self would employ in denouncing the very same comrades who not only braved hideous torture and murderous bullets themselves, but who also put the lives of their loved ones on the line in the service of the revolution? Would he have been proud of how he would go on to misuse his boundless and historically almost unparalleled authority to sabotage all serious efforts to realize the dream of a wealthy and powerful China?

As 1967 turned into 1968, and as all hopes that a “great order under heaven” would emerge from the chaos were dashed, Mao finally decided to put an end to the Red Guard movement. The army was dispatched to restore order where there now was none. In August 1968, the Chairman decreed that the Red Guards—who he previously referred to as his “revolutionary successors”—should go to the countryside and undergo “reeducation” by the poor peasants. As a result, 17 million young Chinese were robbed of the chance to finish their education. They constituted the so-called “lost generation” (Bonnin 2013).

Officially, the Cultural Revolution was concluded during the 9th Party Congress in April 1969; however, its rhetoric persisted. The atmosphere of fear concerning being denounced as a rightist, a revisionist, or a counterrevolutionary element lingered. The primacy of class struggle over economic development endured. Meanwhile, the physical state of the aging Chairman was rapidly worsening. Mao was 75 at the time of the



9th Party Congress. Yet, his fragile health did not prevent him from upsetting the political order time and again. Lin Biao—who had recently been hailed as the Chairman's "closest comrade-in-arms"—was condemned in 1971 for being a vicious traitor (Teiwes, & Sun 1996). Former "revisionists" and "capitalist roaders" were rehabilitated. The most prominent exception to this was Liu Shaoqi, who died in prison in 1969 because his captors refused him medical treatment.

Internationally, China executed a surprising U-turn by normalizing diplomatic relations with an increasing number of capitalist nations. Richard Nixon—who spearheaded the so-called "American imperialism"—was welcomed to Beijing in 1972 by Chairman Mao himself (MacMillan 2008). Domestically, the launch of a national campaign in 1973 criticizing Confucius—the very same sage that Mao had once revered—was yet another example of how abstruse the targets of mass political campaigns had become (Teiwes & Sun 2007, pp. 146-178). As time went by, more and more senior leaders were becoming increasingly aware of the need for China to seek a new distinctive path to wealth and power...

#### **4.4 The Essence of Strategy**

Throughout this book, I have elaborated on Mao Zedong's epic failure to forge a distinctive Chinese path to wealth and power. While the tragic consequences of the Hundred Flowers Campaign, the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution were unique to the Mao era, the phenomenon of a leader guiding his nation, army, or organization toward disaster is all too common in human history. Indeed, there are many excellent historical essays that chronicle this phenomenon. For example, in *1812: Napoleon's Fatal March on Moscow* Adam Zamoyski (2004) skillfully describes how the Emperor of the

French descended from being the master of Europe in 1810 to being a hapless shadow of his formerly glorious self by embarking on a disastrous series of ill-fated decisions, while in *Return of a King: The Battle for Afghanistan, 1839-42* William Dalrymple (2013) explores the folly and hubris behind one of Great Britain's greatest military disasters. In *The Guns of August* Barbara Tuchman (1994) vividly elucidates the fatal miscalculations, ill-considered actions, and outrageous wishful thinking that eventually led to the bloodshed of World War I. Anne Applebaum (2012) reconstructs in *Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe* the chasm between the bubble in which East European Communists lived and the socio-economic realities of the countries they governed. I could go on and on, expanding on a wide spectrum of topics that range from the West's unsound aid strategy in relation to Africa (Moyo 2010) to the financial crisis of 2008 (Barofsky 2013).

In fact, human history appears to be full of fiascos that could have been averted—or, at least, managed more effectively—if decision makers had acted more wisely. All too often, renowned strategists, skillful politicians, and accomplished leaders have embarked happily on the road to disaster. In retrospect, the mistakes they committed seem so obvious that one cannot help wondering how the protagonists and antagonists of the countless tragedies of world history could have been so stupid as to contemplate, let alone execute, them. What else but sheer stupidity could have prompted Napoleon to invade the vast territory of Russia; the European leaders to conclude in earnest that World War I would be over, at the latest, by Christmas of 1914; or state regulators to lose sight of the hazardous financial transactions that culminated, in 2008, in the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression? Yet, while the principal actors involved in such situations sometimes seem to lack a wide variety of virtues, a structural deficit in

their reasoning capacities does not appear to be one of them. Is there then something unique about wars, international crises, economic challenges, and social modernization efforts that lure decision makers into straying from the path of rationality?

One of the most brilliant thinkers to have used their formidable cognitive abilities to address this question was the Prussian general Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831). Although his life's work was dedicated to studying war, his ingenious insights can also be applied to other areas. Clausewitz first sought to come up with an abstract definition of war that would account for its countless concrete manifestations throughout history. Would it be accurate, Clausewitz pondered, to describe war as a “duel on a larger scale” and the armies involved as a “pair of wrestlers” each trying “through physical force to compel the other to do his will” (Clausewitz 1989, p. 75)? Or would it perhaps be more realistic to depict war as a chaotic process in which the “interplay of possibilities, probabilities, good luck and bad [...] weaves its way throughout the length and breadth of the tapestry” (Clausewitz 1989, p. 86)? Or would the most precise portrayal of war consider it “merely the continuation of policy by other means” (Clausewitz 1989, p. 87)?

Decades of thoughtful reflection and personal experience caused Clausewitz to realize that in wars, all three dimensions manifest: war is permeated by “violence, hatred, and enmity;” its course is strongly influenced by the “play of chance and probability;” and it is more often than not an “instrument of policy” (Clausewitz 1989, p. 89). However, the relationships among these three dimensions are not fixed. For example, in some wars (most notably, civil wars) the aspect of violence is so dominant that the entire process seems to represent nothing more than a vicious outpouring of mutual hatred. Meanwhile, other wars (such as the Falklands War) are fought to achieve a strictly defined political purpose.

Clausewitz concluded that war was like “a true chameleon that [...] adapts its characteristics to the given case” (Clausewitz 1989, p. 89). Thus, rather than seeking to construct a static one-size-fits-all definition, he borrowed a simple scientific tool so as to develop one of the most original and dynamic concepts of war. Clausewitz asked his readers to imagine war as a pendulum swinging among the three poles of (1) violence, (2) the probabilistic process of fighting, and (3) political calculus. Sometimes, the pendulum remains under the strong magnetic influence of one pole (such as violence in the case of a civil war). Sometimes, it dynamically changes as the war goes on (Beyerchen 1992).

This Clausewitzian understanding of war has far-reaching consequences for the conduct of war (Herberg-Rothe 2007; Heuser 2002; Paret 2007). The main conclusion that Clausewitz drew from this concept was that each war is unique in terms of its starting conditions, its dynamic development, and its outcome. Thus, Clausewitz argues, *before* committing one’s nation to fighting a war, “the first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish [...] the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature” (Clausewitz 1989, p. 88). As Michael Handel explains, determining the kind of war one is embarking upon requires the consideration of some challenging questions:

Will the war be short or prolonged? Will it be a war of decision or maneuver, or a war of attrition? Will it be a conventional war, a guerrilla war, or a combination of both? Will it be a high-tech, low-tech, or no-tech war? Will new weapons technologies favor the offense over the defense or vice-versa and at which phase of the war? How determined

will the populations on both sides be? Will the war be fought for limited or unlimited goals, and by whom? What alliances will be formed and how will they endure under pressure? (Handel 2001, p. 94).

Now, striving to answer these questions invites decision makers to analyze a complex array of interconnected social, economic, and technological forces in their own country as well as in the country (or entity) they are considering going to war with. Further, as Clausewitz never gets tired of pointing out, it requires taking the distinctive personalities of the major antagonists into account in order to understand their current, and anticipate their future, actions. The “great drama,” Clausewitz argues, is shaped not only by the objective power of bullets and canons, but also by “envy and generosity, pride and humility, wrath and compassion” (Clausewitz 1989, p. 139).

The concept of a dynamically swinging pendulum highlights the fact that the leadership’s analysis should never be regarded as final. Rather, sensible decision makers would consider their analysis to comprise a set of *hypotheses* that have to be examined and reexamined as the facts on the ground change. Unfortunately, decision makers often treat their own hypotheses as if they were facts—and they would rather fight tooth and nail than revise their incorrect beliefs (Cohen & Gooch 2006). (As readers will remember from the earlier discussion, Dörner refers to this behavioral pattern as acting based on *ballistic hypotheses*).

The United States’ involvement in Vietnam is a case in point. From the onset, American politicians uncritically accepted the so-called *domino theory*. Communism was, according to this ballistic hypothesis, akin to a contagious disease: if one country catches it, then its neighbors will inevitably become infected, too. Communism was, according to President Dwight D. Eisen-

hower, the author of the hypothesis, like a “row of dominoes [...] you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly” (Smith 2012, p. 611). Was the domino theory based on evidence? Hardly. Its single most important asset was that it simplified a complex issue in such a way that made sense to decision makers.

During the Vietnam War, the United States—leader of the free world and defender of its liberties—saw itself on a sacred mission to rescue the peoples of Southeast Asia and beyond from the profoundly immoral and infinitely wicked malady of communism ... and if tens and even hundreds of thousands of people were killed in the process, so be it! Consequently, the problem of America’s increasing involvement in Vietnam was passed from Eisenhower to Kennedy and then to Johnson, who presided over the ultimate escalation in the war. Although the decision-making group headed by President Lyndon B. Johnson regularly met to discuss Vietnam, the scope of their discussion was limited from the outset. “Withdrawal,” former defense secretary Robert McNamara recalled, “seemed unacceptable because of the domino effect” (McNamara & Van De Mark 1996, p. 113). The result of limiting the scope of deliberations was that the decision-making group constrained its deliberations to the pros and cons of short-term military measures without ever having formulated a clear-cut political aim or having pondered how a military campaign would achieve America’s objectives in Vietnam. Thus, the United States became, with each step, more deeply committed to a military escalation process, which had disastrous consequences for all parties involved.<sup>5</sup>

The escalation process was permeated by incidents of selfless heroism and determined perseverance, of silent sacrifices and stoic endurance, and of Vietnamese resistance and increasing American weariness. Edward Luttwak argues, albeit in a

different context, that such a process inevitably transforms a “locality that was perhaps once quite obscure or just another name on the map [...] into a weighty symbol, into which the reputation of military or political leaders may become inflexibly invested” (Luttwak 2001, p. 47). In the case of Vietnam, this observation truly hits the nail on the head. As the hopelessness of the military endeavor became ever clearer to Americans, President Johnson conceded in a private conversation in 1966 that “I know we oughtn’t to be there, but I can’t get out. *I just can’t be the architect of surrender* [emphasis added]” (Johnson 1966).

The Vietnam War is just one example of a political leadership having deviated from the path of rationality by substituting a complex and dynamic analysis of a complex and dynamic issue with simplistic and unproven hypotheses. *Watch your thoughts, they become your words; watch your words, they become your actions.* Actions in the dynamic and complex environment of war have the potential to produce self-reinforcing loops: great efforts and sacrifices lead to ever greater efforts and sacrifices so as to justify the already committed efforts and sacrifices... As one finally recognizes that the castles of supposedly superior geostrategic analyses and sound national security evaluations—to borrow a line from Coldplay’s popular song *Viva La Vida*—stand “upon pillars of salt and pillars of sand,” one also realizes bitterly that it is too late to quit, that one “just can’t be the architect of surrender.” Thus, one finds oneself having no choice but to be carried down into the abyss.

It is important to emphasize here that neither Lyndon Johnson nor Robert McNamara nor Dean Rusk nor any other senior decision maker was an “idiot.” In fact, the very same policy makers who failed miserably in relation to Vietnam did an excellent job when managing the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 (Allison & Zelikow 1999). During that defining moment of Cold

War history, President Kennedy persuaded his colleagues to abandon black-and-white dichotomies, unproven hypotheses, and simplistic evaluations (May & Zelikow 2002). If strategy really is the art of asking questions (Oetinger 2006), then Kennedy rose on that occasion to become a masterful strategist by questioning every core assumption that the decision-making group held and refusing to accept any hypothesis at face value. What is really striking about, say, McNamara's memoirs, is the frequency with which assertions such as *the President believed that* or *we were convinced of* occur (McNamara & VanDeMark 1996). Sometimes, one wishes one had been there to bang one's fist on the table and ask the gathered officials: But, gentlemen, what *evidence* is there to support this belief or that conviction?

The present analysis is, of course, interested in unraveling a puzzle larger than the Vietnam War: why do decision makers often fail to successfully cope with challenges such as wars, national and international crises, and domestic modernization programs? The Vietnam example should serve as an illustration of an important observation. Behavioral patterns, such as affirmative perception or ballistic hypotheses, might seem harmless in everyday life, but applying them when dealing with a complex and dynamically changing environment has the potential to spell disaster. Now, it is important to elaborate on this theme a bit further. To do so, I will move from the *grand strategy* level—where political deliberations intertwine with military considerations to shape the vital decisions of war and peace—to the *operational* (or battlefield) level.

On the operational level, the process of conducting war requires a commander to confront a unique set of challenges. The dynamics of battle are permeated by the omnipresent danger of being injured, killed, or captured. They necessitate excessive physical exertion that pushes human endurance to the limits. They are further complicated by the fact that, as



Clausewitz argues, “three quarters of the factors on which action in war is based are wrapped in a fog of ... uncertainty.” Additionally, they are accompanied by unforeseen and random factors, such as mechanical breakdowns, communication errors, and unfavorable weather conditions (Clausewitz 1989, pp. 113-119). These four elements—danger, physical exertion, uncertainty, and chance—are, in Clausewitz’s words, the source of “countless minor incidents—the kind you can never really foresee—[that] combine to lower the general level of performance, so that one always falls far short of the intended goal” (Clausewitz 1989, p. 119). The Prussian general introduced the term *friction* to describe the “minor incidents” that disturb—and, in some cases, even ruin—a commander’s battle strategy (Clausewitz 1989, pp. 119-121).

Having to act in a friction-rich environment subjects the mind to a “relentless struggle with the unforeseen” (Clausewitz 1989, p. 102). Further, war is a chaotic system—that is, the consequences of any given friction are not necessarily proportionate to its size. Seemingly unimportant events can have serious repercussions. “Consequences,” Connie Willis writes, “multiply and cascade, and anything—a missed telephone call, a match struck during a blackout, a dropped piece of paper, a single moment—can have empire-tottering effects” (Willis 1998, p. 119). Thus, even without simplistic evaluations and ballistic hypotheses, one-sided measures and overlooked side effects, an obsession with isolated symptoms instead of an analysis of their systematic causes, the best-laid plans can be thwarted by frictions. Indeed, Luttwak suggests that frictions have accounted for many defeats throughout military history (Luttwak 2001, p. 12).

Clausewitz also points out that “War is not an exercise of the will directed at inanimate matter, as is the case with the mechanical arts ... In war, the will is directed at an animate

object that *reacts*” (Clausewitz 1989, p. 149). Given that human behavior is individually variable depending on the circumstances in question as well as the unique personalities of the actors involved, Clausewitz concludes that “The effect that any measure will have on the enemy is the most singular factor among all the particulars of action” (Clausewitz 1989, p. 139). In other words, the decision-makers’ ability to empathize with their adversary—that is, to put themselves in their adversary’s shoes and to see the situation from his perspective—is crucial in terms of devising a successful strategy.

The importance of understanding the reciprocal nature of war has not proved self-evident for many theoreticians. Sun Zi’s famous manual *The Art of War* is full of stratagems that presume fixed enemy reactions: “feign disorder and strike [the enemy],” “pretend inferiority and encourage his arrogance,” and “attack where he is unprepared; sally out when he does not expect you” (Sun 1971, pp. 66, 67, 69). Such adages are portrayed as shortcuts to achieving a cheap victory. However, Clausewitz would argue that the applicability of such stratagems depends on the situation at hand (Alsabah 2010). Today, it appears that there is no shortage of authors who believe themselves to have distilled the golden rules of success from the ancient wisdom of Sun Zi and his disciples (Gao 1991; McNeilly 1996; Senger 2006).



SOME 150 YEARS after Clausewitz was writing, the German psychologist Dietrich Dörner introduced the term *dynamic complex situations* to describe areas that pose unique cognitive and emotional challenges to human problem solving (Dörner 1997). The term “complex” points to a large number of *interconnected* variables—that is, factors that influence each other reciprocally. The term “dynamic” means that those factors

continuously develop, whether decision makers act or not. Chess, for example, is a complex board game: the variables (here, the chess pieces) are interconnected in the sense that moving any given piece can affect the permissible moves of other pieces. Yet, chess is not a dynamic game: the pieces do not move themselves as they please, nor is one player allowed to move pieces while it is the other player's turn. Unemployment, however, is a complex as well as a dynamic problem. Tackling it requires the consideration of a wide range of variables (such as consumer demand, public and private investments, the tax system, average wages in different branches, the role of labor unions, migration, etc.). Such variables are interconnected. For example, increasing taxes might under certain circumstances affect not one, but several areas. Due to the system's inner dynamics, it is possible to see the unemployment rate going up and down—even without the decision makers adopting any measures.

Dörner and his group extended their research to studying human behavior in dynamic and complex environments. The dawn of the era of personal computers (PCs) offered new venues for psychological research, which Dörner and his colleagues were eager to exploit. The German researchers spent months discussing, drafting, and implementing *computer simulations* of dynamic and complex situations. The fire service simulation is one example of their work in this regard. Here, the study participant—that is, the individual who “plays” the simulation—is presented with a two-dimensional map of a large forest featuring isolated housing complexes. Occasionally, a fire breaks out here and there. The participant's task is to use the fire service units at her disposal to extinguish the blaze. In more difficult simulations, the participant takes on the role of mayor of a small virtual city. The “mayor” has a mandate to increase the citizenry's general level of happiness. Therefore,

he pursues a wide range of goals, from expanding the area dedicated to green parks to improving the health-care system. In another simulation, the participant is entrusted with directing a large-scale aid project in an impoverished African country.

Over the course of three decades, a large number of subjects have participated in Dörner's research. The research group's ground-breaking study findings have been documented in several excellent publications (e.g., Dörner 1997; Dörner & Wearing 1995; Dörner et al 1983). Perhaps one of the most revealing findings concerns the recurrence of certain behavioral patterns across demographic and occupational boundaries. These behavioral patterns pertain to the ways in which the participants set about defining goals, searching for information, planning actions, executing plans, coping with success, and more frequently, coping with failure. I have already discussed some of these behavioral patterns, such as reducing the complex causes of a complex problem to a single simple cause (reductionism), substituting the unbiased search for data with self-generated ballistic hypotheses, focusing on positive news and downplaying negative news (affirmative perception), ignoring side effects and long-term repercussions, assigning blame to scapegoats rather than assuming responsibility for one's failures, and inventing conspiracy theories to incriminate shadowy forces in everything that has gone wrong. Independently, several American social scientists conducted case studies on decision making under various American administrations. They all note that these kinds of inadequate behavioral patterns are very common, even among senior public officials (e.g., George 1980; Janis 1982, 1989; Neustadt & May 1988).

Throughout this book, I have highlighted the behavioral traps that decision makers encounter in dynamic and complex envi-

ronments. However, Dörner's research clearly demonstrates that people are capable of mastering the art of solving dynamic and complex problems. Surprisingly, the decision makers who prove most apt at doing so are not necessarily those with the highest IQ. In fact, several studies had found only a weak link between a person's IQ and his prowess in dealing with dynamic and complex situations (Kluwe et al 1991; Leutner 2002; Süß 1999).<sup>6</sup> This is largely due to the fact that many crucial cognitive and emotional challenges posed by dynamic and complex problems are not captured by traditional IQ tests (Alsabah 2009). In dynamic and complex environments, intelligence expresses itself through an actor's ability to collect and integrate information, to set and revise goals, to make prognoses regarding future developments, and to decide, plan, and act in the face of grave dangers and frustrating uncertainties (Dörner 1986). Further, intelligence involves admitting mistakes and changing the course of action that one has staked one's reputation on. It also involves self-reflecting critically on one's cognitive approach to working out solutions as well as on one's leadership style. The painful self-doubts experienced as a result of this process must be endured stoically, as it is a price worth paying for improving one's decision-making skills.

As most crucial policy decisions are the product of group deliberations, it is important that the group's chairman master the art of promoting a collegiate and cohesive atmosphere while avoiding groupthink (Janis 1982, p. 140). This requires him to refrain from revealing his preferred course of action so as not to pressure his colleagues to place their faith in his supposed wisdom. Instead, he should encourage genuine debates and stifle unproductive ones. He should accept criticism of not only the group's emerging consensus, but also of his own views. He should, as Clausewitz put it, project a "measure of self-confi-

dence,” and at the same time, foster a healthy “degree of skepticism” (Clausewitz 1989, p. 108).

Dörner explains that the ideal decision-making process is characterized by situation-appropriate behavioral patterns:

[In dealing with dynamic and complex situations,] sometimes we must perform detailed analyses; at other times it is better simply to size up a situation. Sometimes we need a comprehensive but rough outline of a situation; at other times we may have to give close attention to details. Sometimes we need to define our goals very clearly and analyze carefully, before we act, exactly what it is we want to achieve; at other times it is better simply to go to work and muddle through. Sometimes we need to think more “holistically,” more in pictures, at other times more analytically. Sometimes we need to sit back and see what develops; at other times we have to move very quickly (Dörner 1997, p. 192).

Clausewitz was right to insist that there is no sacred manual, no ancient rules of success, and no eternal laws of victory. A theory—however comprehensive it might be—cannot “equip the mind with formulas for solving problems, nor can it mark the narrow path on which the sole solution is supposed to lie by planting a hedge of principles on either side” (Clausewitz 1989, p. 578). Every economic challenge, every modernization effort, every international crisis, and every war...

...is rich in unique episodes. Each is an uncharted sea, full of reefs. The commander may suspect the reefs’ existence without ever having seen them; now he has to steer past them in the dark. If a contrary wind springs up, if some major mischance appears, he will need the greatest skill and personal exertion, and the utmost presence of mind, though

from a distance everything may seem to be proceeding automatically (Clausewitz 1989, p. 120).

“Strategy,” as Clausewitz’s pupil Helmuth von Moltke succinctly puts it, “is the art of acting under the pressure of the most difficult conditions” (Moltke 1993, p. 124). This art is best mastered by embracing a cognitive and behavioral approach that fosters devising effective policies.

## CONQUERING THE COGNITIVE NO-GO ZONE

Psychological Theme: *Self-Reflection*

Historical Episode: *Dawn of the Deng Era*

**M**aoism was not China's state ideology. It was its official religion. Even after he died in 1976, the ghost of Mao haunted his successors. It was certainly not inevitable that the new leadership would deviate from his legacy and espouse a pragmatic decision-making approach. There was a certain openness among China's political elite as well as among the populace at large to start anew. Yet, there was also formidable opposition to doing so.

The eventual victory of the reformist faction owes much to Deng Xiaoping's leadership. Rather than advocating a clean break with Mao, Deng declared that the essence of Maoism was to "seek truth from facts," not from ideological tenets. Over the last 20 years, Deng continued, Chairman Mao had violated his own guiding principle. Thus, he concluded, the Party should re-embrace true Maoism by adopting a pragmatic, result-oriented approach to policy making. Thereby, Deng marketed his grand heresy as a restoration.



“WHEN HEAVEN IS ABOUT to confer a great office on any man,” the Confucian scholar Mencius foretold, “it first exercises his mind with suffering, and his sinews and bones with toil. It exposes his body to hunger, and subjects him to extreme poverty. It confounds his undertakings. By all these methods it stimulates his mind, hardens his nature, and supplies his incompetencies” (Schell & Delury 2013, p. 268). So it was that during the Cultural Revolution an old man’s mettle was tested ... an old man who was destined to transform China from a backward, impoverished, and closed country into a modern, rich, and outwardly open nation ... an old man who brought China closer to realizing the dream of wealth and power than Li Hongzhang, Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek, or even Mao Zedong ever did. This is his story...

### **5.1 The Power of Self-Reflection**

By 1969, the Great Cultural Revolution of the Proletariat had finally passed through its frenzied phase. The Red Guards had been sent to the countryside to acquire wisdom by observing the ways of the peasantry. The small civil wars that had erupted in different parts of the country among fanatic, self-organized militias in the name of upholding the purity of Mao Zedong Thought had been pacified. The orgies of denunciations against suspected counterrevolutionaries, revisionists, and reactionary elements were brought to a close. Yet, the rhetoric of the Cultural Revolution that extolled the virtues of class struggle and decried the vices of revisionism continued. The condemnation of alleged capitalist roaders endured.

One particular capitalist roader and his wife were exiled to Xinjian County in Jiangxi Province in the far south. A decade earlier, Chairman Mao had said, “A cow is not born tilling the land or giving us milk. An untrained horse can’t be ridden.

Cows and horses have to be domesticated in order to benefit man. A counterrevolutionary—or, for that matter, a spy—must have some sort of special talent. If not, how could he become a counterrevolutionary or a spy or a rightist? So why can't we reform them and make use of their talent?" (Li 1994, p. 203). This capitalist roader certainly did have talent. Indeed, even the Chairman—who was known for being stingy with complements—described him on one occasion as a "rare talent," capable of dealing with "difficult problems with responsibility," an ability for which he was known "in both military and civilian circles" (Salisbury 1993, p. 328). How gracious the Chairman was and how benevolent the Central Committee was in giving this unrepentant revisionist and his wife a chance to redeem themselves through labor! True, it cannot be said that the same generosity of spirit was extended to all senior capitalist roaders within the Party ... but, after all, the Chairman does work in mysterious ways, does he not?!

In Xinjian County, the old couple were transferred to the local tractor factory, which specialized in repairing and maintaining agricultural machinery. However, finding a suitable job for the capitalist roader was not easy. At 65, he was too old and too frail to perform physically demanding tasks. Even washing spare parts with gasoline proved to be more than the old man could handle. His hands shook uncontrollably as he held the spare parts. His back ached as he tried to bend down. Eventually, a suitable job was found for him. He was assigned to work as a mechanical fitter—a job he proved to be very good at (Maomao 2002, p. 127).

Doing this mundane job must have triggered flashbacks to memories buried deep in his past. Half a century earlier, the old man had been an idealistic young lad preoccupied with the dream of a wealthy and powerful China as well as with the aspiration to play a part in realizing that dream. Like Mao

Zedong's father, the young boy's father was a fairly well-to-do landlord in his obscure home village. But unlike the Chairman's father, his father did not want his offspring to follow in his footsteps. Rather, he supported his son's education and harbored high hopes that someday the boy would make something of himself (Yang 1993, p. 445). At school, the young boy excelled at learning and did, in fact, outshine his classmates.

Echoing the consensus among the educated elite, the young boy felt that China's education system was desperately outdated. Thus, he applied to an arduous work-study scheme in France. At the tender age of 15, he became the youngest of 84 students from Sichuan Province deemed eligible to participate in the scheme (Vogel 2011, p. 8). Unfortunately, the young boy's educational aspirations were crushed soon after he arrived in Paris in October 1920 (Wang 1982). This was not only due to the language barrier, which proved to be more formidable than he had anticipated, but also because the scholarship program for Chinese students was suddenly cancelled. Giving up and returning home was not an option for the young boy. Instead, he and his friends decided to take on exhausting jobs in French factories. Toiling there was a harsh experience. The working conditions were almost cruel, especially for foreign workers. In Paris, the young boy witnessed firsthand the huge income inequality that existed in French society: the rich reveled in their affluence, while the poor struggled to make ends meet.

At that time, an astonishingly simple and yet flawlessly logical narrative advanced by a wise German philosopher and his faithful disciple was doing the rounds among the Chinese diaspora. It explained how the treacherous bourgeois beast had placed chains of slavery around the neck of the proletarian giant, how the former was tyrannizing the latter into ceaseless labor so as to power the mill of capitalist production, and how this unjust situation was destined to collapse. Lenin's recent

revolution in Russia demonstrated that a vanguard elite could guide the proletarian giant to throw off his shackles. This Marxist-Leninist narrative not only made sense of the exploitation that Chinese workers witnessed in France, but also provided them with an explanatory framework for understanding the dire situation of China itself. The bourgeoisie were sucking the blood of the proletariat to finance their luxurious and decadent lifestyle in the same way that imperialism—which was, according to Lenin, the highest stage of capitalism—was exploiting poorer countries such as China.

News reached the Chinese diaspora in Europe and elsewhere that the CCP had been founded in July 1921. The most vigorous among them decided to establish the Communist Youth League (CYL) as an overseas organization of the CCP (Yang 1998, p. 40). The young boy did not hesitate to join the CYL. In time, he became increasingly involved in its propaganda activities. In doing so, he had the chance to meet and work closely with other young idealists who would go on to become famous revolutionaries, such as the future marshals Nie Rongzhen and Chen Yi, the future Communist leader Li Lisan, and most importantly, the future premier Zhou Enlai.

In 1926, the young boy left France after five formative years and went on to spend a year in Moscow, during which he mingled with other Chinese revolutionaries under the auspices of the Comintern. Then, in early 1927, he returned to his motherland as a revolutionary who—despite his young age of 22—had already been tested by adversity and hardship. In China, he joined the Communist fight against the Nationalists and the Japanese invaders. His formidable organizational talents and leadership skills won him the admiration of his superiors. Then, in December 1937, nearly 11 years after his return to China, the 33-year-old revolutionary was promoted by the Party's emerging leader, Mao Zedong, to head the political

commissary of the 129th division of the Eighth Route Army. Communist military units were led by a military commander and a political commissar.

The civil war between the Communists and the Nationalists re-erupted after Japan's withdrawal from China following its crushing defeat in World War II. By then, the political commissar had already proven himself to be one of the most capable revolutionary leaders. In fact, he emerged as one of Mao's most trusted Party officials in the battle against Chiang Kai-shek (Schell & Delury 2013, p. 265). An important milestone in his career came in 1948 when Chairman Mao appointed the then 44-year-old commissar to be secretary of the five-man *Huaihai Committee*.<sup>1</sup> This committee acted as a kind of general staff, coordinating and directing the activities of 550,000 Communist soldiers. Some of the battles fought during the Huaihai campaign were among the bloodiest in human history. Eventually, the Huaihai campaign succeeded in paving the way for the ultimate Communist victory in the civil war (Lew 2011).

A few years after the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, the political commissar was summoned to Beijing by his mentor, Mao Zedong, to assume a leading role in the central leadership. By 1956, the Chairman had made sure that his protégé had become a member of China's highest decision-making body, the six-man strong Standing Committee of the Politburo.<sup>2</sup> In time, he became the fourth most powerful man in China—after Mao Zedong, Liu Shaoqi, and Zhou Enlai (Zhong 2013). During the anti-Rightist witch-hunt, the Chairman's protégé served as the inquisitor-in-chief (Chung 2011). Later, he enthusiastically supported the utopian vision of the Great Leap Forward (Teiwes & Sun 1999). While its epic failure prompted him to work closely with Vice Chairman Liu Shaoqi to introduce pragmatic policies intended to revive the economy, his belief in the Chairman never wavered. Even as the fire of

the Cultural Revolution was burning the fruits of the hard-won economic recovery, he did not doubt the Chairman's wisdom ... until he himself became a victim of it, was placed under house arrest for two years, and was then sent to work in a tractor factory in Jiangxi Province.

Fate is not without irony. Half a century earlier, the old man had crossed the seas in search of knowledge beneficial to advancing the Chinese dream of wealth and power. In France, he acquired the skillset of a mechanical fitter and developed expertise as a revolutionary organizer. Who would have thought that five decades on, his country's leadership would decide that it was his rudimentary mechanical skills that his nation needed the most?



LIFE IN XINJIAN COUNTY was relaxed. The old man and his wife spent only three and a half hours per day laboring in the tractor factory. They spent the rest of their time gardening, cooking, washing the floor, reading books, and listening to the radio. In time, their five children were allowed to join them after they too were exiled to the countryside. The family was, in the old man's own words, "quite happy" (Maomao 2002, p. 130).

As he and his wife had been under house arrest before they were sent to Xinjian County, they knew little about the horrific calamities associated with the Cultural Revolution. Upon arrival, their children filled them in on some of the appalling things that had happened. The old man became aware of the tragic fates of some of his old friends and colleagues, who had been toppled, publicly denounced, and humiliated in mass criticism sessions, and in some cases, even tortured and imprisoned by zealous Cultural Revolutionary activists. The cruelty of their fates had driven some parents to commit suicide, leaving

their children with no one to care for them (Maomao 2002, pp. 144-149). The old man must have realized how lucky he and his family were to have been spared such agonies.

Yet, his household did experience its own share of tragedy. Back in 1968, the old man's firstborn child, Pufang, was a bright physics student at Peking University, China's most prestigious academic institution. When his father was decried for being a senior capitalist roader, Pufang was detained and tortured by a group of fanatical Red Guards until he could take it no more. "I felt that my life didn't matter anymore," Pufang explained decades later during an interview, "I thought it would be better if I just ended it. So I deliberately jumped from the top of the building where I was being held" (Short 2007). However, it was not death that fate had in store for him.

The severely injured 24-year-old Pufang was admitted to a hospital where the staff's behavior only reaffirmed the ugly nature of the "Great Cultural Revolution of the Proletariat" in all its savagery and barbarism. They refused to treat his broken spine—which resulted in lifelong paralysis from the chest down. Moreover, they decided to *discharge* him despite his dire condition. His two sisters were livid. They moved heaven and earth to get in touch with any person in a position of authority within the Party who might help them. But who would be willing to risk bringing the wrath of the Cultural Revolutionary fanatics down upon him and his family by aiding the son of a capitalist roader? Abandoned by everybody, the two girls (then aged just 22 and 18) stood alone and helpless on the street (Maomao 2002, pp. 88-89).

Eventually, Pufang was kept in hospital. As no nurse was assigned to him, his two sisters, despite having no nursing experience, had to take care of him. The youngest, Maomao, remembers that her older brother's "urinary tract became

infected, and he ran a fever of over 40 degrees Celsius, often accompanied by chills and spasms. Because his chest vertebra was fractured, he couldn't move, or even sit up. We had to keep helping him roll over a bit to prevent the development of bedsores, which would slow his recovery" (Maomao 2002, p. 90). The old man's children appeared to be traveling down a dark tunnel; any light at the end of it was merely a hope, not a reality.

Eight months later, the oldest daughter was given permission to visit her parents, who were at the time under house arrest in the capital. It was only then that they learned of their oldest son's cruel fate. Upon hearing the heartbreaking story, the mother cried for three days. The father fell silent, smoking one cigarette after another (Maomao 2002, p. 103).

In time, Pufang's situation improved. He was admitted to a better hospital after his father wrote a letter to Chairman Mao informing him of his son's unjust and cruel treatment. Then, three years later, Pufang was released from hospital and allowed to move in with his parents—who were then living in Xinjian County.

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IN HIS FAMILY'S house in Xinjian, Pufang spent his time lying in bed with nothing to do. His father felt for his son, who must have been bored to death. Thus, he decided to ask his supervisor at the factory whether they had any defective radios that his son—who had a talent for repairing electronic devices—could fix. The supervisor's response disappointed him; the factory had none. "And at home?" the old man inquired. "To tell the truth," his supervisor explained, "my family's income is only 40 or 50 yuan a month and I have four kids. The oldest is only primary school age ... Our life is very hard. Where would



we get the money to buy a radio?" Again, the old man fell silent (Maomao 2002, pp. 180-181). What meaning did it have for millions upon millions of Chinese to sing daily of "marching forward on the socialist path of happiness," thereby "building a new world" and "pushing forth the wheels of history," if an ordinary family could not even afford a radio after 20 years of socialism?! The radio episode tallied with his children's experiences among the peasants as well as the levels of dire poverty and backwardness they witnessed in the countryside.

It would have been only natural for the old man to experience strong feelings of anger and indignation. He could have channeled such feelings toward the immediate culprits, the Red Guards, who had abused his son, tortured his friends, split families apart, and driven decent people to commit suicide. Or he could have spent his time cursing and abusing the preachers of hatred and violence, the leaders of the Cultural Revolution, whose rhetoric had bewitched students, workers, and peasants, and galvanized them into wreaking havoc. Or he could have condemned Chairman Mao, on whose watch the evils of the Cultural Revolution and the disruption of China's quest for modernization were unfolding.

Dörner's research demonstrates that one of the crucial differences between good and bad decision makers pertains to how they react to aversive experiences. A hallmark of unsuccessful decision makers is the resigned helplessness that they tend to exhibit in the face of adversity. Depending on the situation, they may express feelings of moral outrage, profound bewilderment, or heartfelt sympathy with victims. And that is that! Successful decision makers, however, are more interested in understanding *why* a negative episode had taken place (Dörner 1997; Dörner et al 1983). Instead of wasting their time cursing the darkness, they strive to identify the systematic defects that

triggered the blackout so as to remedy them and avoid similar problems in the future.

The existence of such a behavioral difference is confirmed by Irving Janis in his case study of the *Bay of Pigs* fiasco. President Kennedy's initial reaction was not to divert the blame to his foreign-policy and national-security advisers, but to harshly ask how he could have been so stupid as to approve the flawed invasion plan in the first place. Here, he did not dwell for too long on what might or might not have been. Instead, he elaborated on the much more important question of "what can we do to avoid being so stupid again" (Janis 1982, p. 139). Kennedy's deliberations induced him to adopt a more skeptical and more vigilant approach to decision making. One and a half years later, the president masterfully applied the lessons he learned from the Bay of Pigs episode when dealing with the Cuban Missile Crisis (May & Zelikow 2002). In contrast, the deteriorating situation in Vietnam never prompted President Johnson to examine his decision-making approach.

In this respect, the old man was more a Kennedy than a Johnson. Absorbed in his thoughts, he took solitary walks every day after dinner. According to his youngest daughter, the most important question on her father's mind was why the promise of successful modernization had been a hollow one. "Bathed in the golden haze of the setting sun," she writes, "he walked around, day after day, year after year," thinking, pondering, questioning, [and] reflecting (Maomao 2002, p. 179).

A decade later, the old man shared his thoughts in a remarkably candid interview with the Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci. In that interview, he stated very bluntly that the person primarily responsible for the epic failure of the Communist Party in terms of guiding China's quest for modernization was the same man who must be credited with

the Party's extraordinary success in ending decades of war and turmoil, reuniting the nation, and introducing a stable and effective government: Chairman Mao Zedong. But if that was the case, how did the uniquely gifted engineer of numerous military successes become the wretched architect of political failure? "Victory," the old man reasoned, had made the Chairman "less prudent," thereby infecting his decision-making approach with "unsound features." Instead of relying on his own proven principal of "seeking the truth from facts," the Chairman began devising policies based on an "erroneous assessment of China's actual situation." Feedback signals from reality were ignored, differing opinions were silenced, and lessons were not learned from failed mass campaigns.

However, the old man was under no illusions. The debacles and disasters of the Mao era could not be blamed on the Chairman alone. Rather, "other revolutionaries of the older generation, *including me [emphasis added]*, should also be held responsible," the old man admitted in that interview. Chairman Mao's "patriarchal ways" and the omnipresent "glorification of the individual" fostered an atmosphere of coerced conformity among China's leaders. The path forward, he concluded, required a single-minded focus on China's modernization quest. This necessitated doing away with empty talk, mass campaigns, and ill-defined goals. The only criterion for judging the effectiveness of a policy should be its success or failure in the real world, not *who* had initiated it or what the *ideological justification* behind it was (Fallaci 1980a, 1980b, 1999).

In the early 1970s, the old man had no way of knowing whether he would ever get the chance to apply the lessons he had learned from Chairman Mao's—as well as his own—failures. He might spend the rest of his days toiling away at the fitter's bench in the factory, washing the floor of his house, and

working in the garden. “I will prepare and some day my chance will come,” Abraham Lincoln once said.

The attempted defection of Chairman Mao’s chosen successor, Lin Biao, in September 1971 was the chance that the old man had been waiting for. Lin was, in the words of Schell and Delury, the “high priest of Mao’s cult and the creator of the Little Red Book” (Schell & Delury 2013, p. 270). The old man sensed that the mercurial Chairman might now be open to changing the political order that the Cultural Revolution had produced. Thus, he wrote a self-deprecating letter to Mao. In it, he expressed the “shock and anger” he felt upon learning of Lin Biao’s “despicable crimes,” adding that “Had it not been for the brilliant leadership of the Chairman and the Central Committee,” Lin’s plot to usurp power would surely have succeeded. Nearing the end, he added casually, “I have no requests for myself, only that some day I may be able to do a little work for the Party” (Maomao 2002, pp. 184-186).

The old man’s instinct was correct. After Lin’s downfall, Mao lamented that a great number of good and honest Communist leaders up and down the country had been overthrown. Staying true to his character though, he shifted the blame to unspecified “prejudiced allegations” advanced by Lin Biao. It was Lin, it emerged, who deceived the Chairman and took advantage of his gullible kindheartedness! Were there any lessons learned from this episode that the Chairman wished to share with his colleagues? Yes, there were: “It is bad to hear only one side of the story, comrades” (Maomao 2002, pp. 191-192). Once more, the Chairman decided to turn the political tide. He unleashed a wave of rehabilitations and returned to power people whose disgraceful ousting he had sanctioned.

Yet, the old man’s case was a delicate one: until recently he had been decried as being the “second person in authority taking

the capitalist road” and condemned as “China’s Khrushchev No. 2”—the dubious honor of being “China’s Khrushchev No. 1” fell to the by then deceased Liu Shaoqi. Thus, the old man’s rehabilitation had to be gradual.

Fourteen months after receiving his letter, the Chairman invited the old man back to the capital. News of his imminent departure reached the Xinjian County Tractor Factory in February 1973. Upon hearing the news, the old man’s co-workers gathered outside his house to bid him and his family farewell.

“[Comrade] Deng [Xiaoping],” the workers’ supervisor addressed the old man, “we hear you’re leaving. We’ve come to see you off!” (Maomao 2002, p. 238).

## **5.2 Deng: A Changed Man**

One of Deng’s aids noted that Mao never truly understood the full magnitude of the profound transformation Deng had undergone during his time in exile (Vogel 2011, p. 51). It seems that this transformation comprised three aspects. First, Deng accepted the fact that Mao Zedong must be held ultimately responsible for the calamities that occurred during his reign. Thus, Mao’s words and deeds should no longer be viewed as irrefutable facts and adhered to with religious zeal. Second, Deng acknowledged his own culpability for not speaking out against the atmosphere of conformity. He once confessed to his daughter that one of his biggest regrets in life was that he did not oppose the Chairman’s erroneous policies (Vogel 2011, p. 41). Third, and most importantly, he concluded that for China’s modernization quest to succeed, a new decision-making philosophy and a fresh problem-solving approach were needed.

Deng concluded that Mao’s disastrous policies were the natural

outcome of a deep-rooted cause: a flawed decision-making environment. Left unchanged, it was only a matter of time before new Great Leap Forwards and new Cultural Revolutions would emerge. As long as decision makers based their policies on wishful thinking and unproven hypotheses, as long as they bent over backwards to twist facts and distort reality, as long as they employed blame-shifting techniques to avoid taking responsibility for their own actions, China would never forge a successful path to modernization. Before elaborating on this vital point, it is important to examine the psychology of self-reflection, the engine that drove Deng Xiaoping's fundamental change of heart—or mind.

Simply put, self-reflection is a cognitive process during which the actor subjects his own thinking, decision making, and behavior to a *critical* examination. This greatly differentiates self-reflection from other widespread psychological mechanisms for processing past experiences, which employ a wide range of self-deceiving tricks to maintain a positive view of the self. In fact, the aim of self-reflection is to actively *expose* cognitive and behavioral shortcomings. This is not done out of a sadistic desire to subject the self to the torment and agony of negative thoughts, but rather out of a sincere desire for self-improvement.

Why did Deng Xiaoping engage in self-reflection while Mao Zedong failed to? From the outset, there was a crucial difference between the Chairman and his protégé: unlike Mao, Deng demonstrated throughout his career an admirable inclination to “seek truth from facts” and a laudable aversion to white-washing unpleasant realities. This quintessential Dengist characteristic is captured in his lifelong reputation as a *pragmatist* (Yang 1993). The *New Oxford American Dictionary* defines pragmatism as “an approach that assesses the truth of meaning of theories or beliefs in terms of the success of their practical

application.” Mao—as has been discussed throughout this book—expected reality to conform to theory. Or more accurately, Mao endeavored to force *his* theory, *his* worldview, and *his* approach onto reality. If things did not play out as expected, he resorted to employing cognitive devices of reality distortion and psychological techniques of blame shifting in order to avoid admitting his own responsibility for negative outcomes. Mao’s hypersensitivity to admitting his failures is closely related to the leak in his competence tank.

In the aftermath of the Hundred Flowers Campaign and during the disastrous Great Leap Forward, Deng shut down his critical faculties and almost blindly followed his Chairman. As discussed in Chapter 4, he did not protest the early purges of the Cultural Revolution. He—along with his colleagues—was still living in the Maoist bubble. However, after having been cast out of that bubble and banished from the capital, he began to see things more clearly. The destructive wind of the Cultural Revolution not only swept away the hard-won momentum of economic recovery (which Deng had helped engineer), not only ruined close colleagues and their families, not only wreaked havoc in people’s lives, but also cleared the smoke-screen that had been concealing the most obvious fact of the last decade: that Mao Zedong, Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party and paramount leader of the state, had failed beyond practical doubt, beyond reasonable doubt, beyond sane doubt, in devising a path for China’s modernization.

It was a simple, but powerful realization. The ensuing Deng era (1978–1992) and China’s breath-taking rise from being a poor country to being the world’s second largest economy started with it. It led Deng on a self-critical journey during which he subjected the decision-making approach he had previously been content with to ruthless scrutiny. Deng, as Barry Naughton accurately observes, had operated during the pre-

Cultural Revolution period mainly as an effective *implementer* of policies, but after returning from exile, he began introducing policies that carried his own distinctive stamp (Naughton 1993, p. 498).

The tragedies of the Mao era that culminated in the Cultural Revolution not only had an eye-opening impact on Deng, but also on large segments of Chinese society. The published memories of ordinary people document how the exhilarating mood they experienced and the high expectations they harbored during the early stages of the Cultural Revolution ultimately resulted in a sense of complete disillusionment. In time, this disillusionment translated into an eager readiness to embark on a new path (Karl 2010, p. 119).

Seen from the vantage point of history, Schumpeter's concept of *creative destruction* (or *Schöpferische Zerstörung* in German) seems best suited to describing the long-term effects of the great upheaval. Schell and Delury explain that "By force-marching Chinese society away from its old ways of doing things, Mao presented Deng with a vast new construction site on which the demolition of old structures and strictures had already largely been completed, making it shovel-ready for Deng's own 'great enterprise' of reform and opening up" (Schell & Delury 2013, p. 391). Deng himself admitted as much during an interview in 1986. "In the final analysis," the Chinese leader judged, the Cultural Revolution was a "good thing" because it did set people's thinking free. "It is because," he continued, "we reviewed our experience and drew lessons of the 'Cultural Revolution' that in the late 1970s and early 1980s we were able to formulate the policies that are now in force" (Deng 1994, pp. 174-175).

Unfortunately, man-made calamities do not necessarily prompt the political elite to tread the path of self-reflection. Dreadful



tragedies do not always facilitate a critical examination of the decision-making environment that produced them. In fact, a common human practice is to demonize the (deceased) supreme leader and to blame everything bad on his evil nature.

The personification of evil has its psychological advantages (Zimbardo 2007). On the one hand, it exempts actors from responsibility, while on the other hand, it has the cognitive advantage of simplifying complex events and making them easier to understand. Khrushchev's celebrated "secret speech" of 1956 is a case in point. In it, the new Soviet leader blamed the "grave abuse of power," the "mass arrests and deportation of thousands and thousands of people," the "execution without trial or normal investigation," and the false confessions obtained by "physical methods of pressure [and] torture" on the "willfulness of one man" (Taubman 2004, pp. 271-272). While it is without doubt that Stalin must bear the lion's share of the blame for the atrocities that occurred during his blood-soaked era, the policy-making machine and the decision-making environment over which he presided should certainly not be ignored.

Deng understood this point very well. In 1980, he warned his colleagues against giving the impression that "only one person made mistakes while everybody else was correct, because such an appraisal does not tally with facts" (Deng 1983, p. 17). Mao's central culpability notwithstanding, Deng emphasized that the senior leadership team, himself included, was collectively complicit in producing the calamities that characterized the Mao era.

The question of whether to blame the system or a single individual is a crucially important one. It is more than a matter of mere historical accuracy. Rather, blaming one (now deceased) individual assumes that everything that was wrong with the

decision-making environment died with him. Blaming the system, however, necessitates reforming it. Deng Xiaoping made his first attempt to reform the system in 1973—shortly after his return to power.

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DENG WAS GRADUALLY REHABILITATED and his responsibilities were steadily increased. By 1975, he was put in charge of running the day-to-day affairs of the Party and the government, as both Chairman Mao and Premier Zhou were gravely ill. The seriousness of the mess that the Cultural Revolution had created was staggering. The Chinese economy was stagnant. The planning apparatus was dysfunctional. The agricultural sector did not produce enough to feed the population. The transportation system suffered from numerous maladies that hindered the allocation of both goods and resources (Vogel 2011, p. 95). Workers were frequently either on strike or engaged in verbal, factional battles (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals 2008, p. 386).

One might expect governmental departments to tackle such problems, but they were also caught up in factional infighting that exacerbated the general atmosphere of chaos and paralysis. Factionalism bred high levels of tension and distrust in the workplace—be it a governmental agency or a factory. It made officials weary of exploring new ideas and exchanging information, as doing so might prompt an attack by a rival faction on ludicrous ideological grounds (Oksenberg & Bush 1999, p. 11).

Mao's preferred approach to tackling unhealthy developments was to launch a mass campaign in which the wrongdoers were subjected to "struggle sessions"—a public exercise in which the perceived sinner was forced to listen with humility to the masses' criticism and was then expected to outdo them by

offering more damning confessions as to her own failings. Mao never understood how systematic causes foster behavioral patterns and produce unwelcome outcomes. Social institutions are governed by the Darwinian law of the survival of the fittest: those who abide by a social institution's unwritten norms of behavior prosper, while those who do not perish.

For example, the single-minded obsession seen during the Great Leap era with numbers, figures, and targets catapulted those cadres who excelled at the art of exaggeration, wishful thinking, and affirmative perception into positions of fame and power. Those who challenged the utopian fantasy were ridiculed, humiliated, and purged. Now, during the twilight years of the Cultural Revolution, the parameters of the system encouraged factionalism, triggered chaos, and caused economic and political paralysis. These maladies were directly attributable to the primacy of the ill-defined task of class struggle. For example, the fact that one-third of all enterprises were running a deficit was partly the result of the widespread fear of being accused of "putting profits in command" (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals 2008, p. 382).

This was another point that Deng—who had undergone countless trials *in absentia* by the revolutionary masses for his alleged revisionist, rightist, and counterrevolutionary crimes—understood very well. He was keen to break with the Maoist tradition of launching a new mass campaign to transform the *status quo*. Instead, he set out to change the parameters of the system itself. But how could he go about doing this? After all, the "system" is an abstraction. It consists of hundreds of thousands of work units in areas as diverse as agriculture, coal mining, education, steel production, etc. He would have to begin somewhere, but where?

Dörner's research shows that decision makers often address

problem areas without any underlying methodology. Their criteria for selecting a problem area vary. Sometimes, it is because the policy maker has expertise in a particular sector (e.g., hospitals, schools, theater). Sometimes, it is because of the “obviousness” of the problem. For example, one or two highly publicized crimes have the power to absorb the full attention and energy of politicians. In both cases, the problem-solving approach can be termed *repair service behavior* (Dörner 1997, pp. 58-64). Another popular *modus operandi* is to act according to ideological tenets. For example, if the actor’s worldview extols the benefits of low taxes, she would be inclined toward lowering taxes for both corporations and individuals. Neither problem-solving approach, that is, repair service behavior nor worldview-driven policy making, are necessarily adequate.

Deng’s approach was different. He began by posing a rhetorical question: “How can we give a boost to the economy?” before explaining that his “analysis shows that the weak link at the moment is the railways” (Cheng & Xia 2004, p. 62; Vogel 2011, p. 105). Deng’s usage of the term *weak link* here is interesting. Probably without even knowing it, the former soldier was echoing the Clausewitzian principle that one should determine the enemy’s *center of gravity* (or *Schwerpunkt* in German) and then direct all vital resources and energies toward conquering it (Clausewitz 1989, pp. 485-486).

Equally interesting is the fact that Deng’s assertion was not based on a ballistic hypothesis, but rather on a sound analysis. One of the major problems faced by factories that were failing to meet their production quotas was the lack of adequate supplies of materials. Back then, China did not have a modern highway system, which meant that commodities had to be transported by rail (Vogel 2011, p. 103). Still, simultaneously tackling the railway-related problems of the entire country would have been an overambitious and ill-defined goal. Deng

knew this, too. Following the *Schwerpunkt* principle, he decided to concentrate at first on Xuzhou, an important city in Jiangsu Province. Xuzhou was not arbitrarily chosen either. Rather, it was selected due to being a railway junction for the major east-west and north-south railways (Vogel 2011, p. 103).

The key problem in Xuzhou—as elsewhere—was that workers were wasting their time engaging in factional infighting. Deng decided to appoint a new leadership team committed to introducing and enforcing new norms of behavior, which emphasized work and panelized factionalism. The new guidelines were explained in meetings with workers. It is remarkable that in Xuzhou, as was later the case elsewhere, Deng was determined to put capable leaders in key positions—officials who were known *not* for engaging in empty rhetoric, but for getting things done (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals 2008, pp. 385-386). The atmosphere of the Cultural Revolution had ensured that such officials were either purged or sidelined, but this did not stop Deng. He pushed through with speedy rehabilitations of competent officials.

Delegation was one of the defining features of Deng's problem-solving approach. Dörner's research demonstrates that decision makers run the risk of becoming too involved in micro-managing a task, project, or policy (Dörner 1997, pp. 61-62). Deng, however, never lost sight of the big picture. He sought out and trusted able leaders who worked out sensible policies for achieving the declared goals and enforcing suitable norms of behavior among their subordinates.

Deng was aware that old habits die hard and that some of those entrenched in factionalism would not change their behavior. In such cases, he had no qualms about acting tough. (Mao once said that Deng was a “man of softness melded with toughness,” just like “a needle wrapped in cotton” [Yang 1998, p. 178].) When

factional infighting persisted in some quarters despite repeated warnings, Deng ordered those involved to be punished by being transferred to a different work unit in a different city. In a speech given to a State Council forum in May 1975, he explained:

If people transferred out because of factionalism form factions again, they will be transferred again. If necessary we will transfer them 360 days a year ... If necessary, we will transfer you to Urumqi [in the far west, where most officials dreaded being sent]. If the wife threatens divorce, maybe then he will listen (Cheng & Xia 2004, pp. 81-82; Vogel 2011, p. 112).

At a conference of provincial Party secretaries held in early 1975, Deng reiterated his dissatisfaction with the *status quo* of the railway system. He even refused to shake hands with the gathered officials, stating that he would not do so until things had improved (Teiwes & Sun 2007, p. 265). Overall, Deng's approach in Xuzhou proved to be very successful. Within weeks, the daily number of loaded railcars had doubled (Cheng & Xia 2004, pp. 70-71; Vogel 2011, p. 108). Yet, Deng had no time for self-congratulatory celebrations. Rather, he swiftly moved on to the next step. He applied the Xuzhou problem-solving model to a number of selected railway centers across the country as well as to other sectors, such as coal mining and steel production. Deng's goal was always to change the parameters of the system in such a way that rewarded productive work and punished idle apathy. Under Deng's stewardship, not only was order restored to China's railway system, but the grim general economic outlook also began to improve (Teiwes & Sun 2007, p. 265). In fact, China's GDP growth rose from 2.3% in 1974 to 8.7% in 1975 (Schell & Delury 2013, p. 448).

Of course, the paramount goals of the Cultural Revolution to

uphold class struggle and fight revisionism had not been abandoned by Mao. Thus, Deng needed to disguise his laser-sharp focus on the promotion of economic growth. His initiatives had to be wrapped in a revolutionary mantle and justified by quoting the Chairman's teachings. In May 1975, Deng presented what he dubbed the "Three Instructions" of Chairman Mao: first, to combat revisionism; second, to achieve stability and unity; and third, to boost the national economy (Deng 1984, p. 23; Deng 2004, p. 50). These "instructions" were never issued by Mao in this form as an organic whole. Rather, they were taken from separate speeches that Mao had given at various points in the past. Although Deng's words emphasized all three, his actions only adhered to the second and third "instructions."

While Deng's main concern was getting China's stagnant economy moving again, he was also thinking about other deep-seated problems. In an effort to work out long-term strategies for modernizing the agriculture, industry, defense, and science and technology sectors, Deng established his own think tank (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals 2008, p. 400). In time, as Deng set about championing reforms in the areas of science, education, as well as arts and culture, the resistance from the radical leaders of the Cultural Revolution, who were dubbed the *Gang of Four*, increased.<sup>3</sup> Deng's pragmatism was indirectly attacked in the press under the pretext of opposing "empiricism." However, so long as Chairman Mao supported Deng, the radicals did not dare to denounce him publicly. Instead, they made life harder for cadres lower down the hierarchy by accusing them of neglecting class struggle—which was a cardinal sin at the time.

Luckily for the radicals, the ailing Chairman began to harbor his own doubts about Deng's suitability to inherit his revolutionary mantle. Due to various illnesses, Mao could not attend Politburo meetings. His ability to speak had also greatly dimin-

ished. In late October 1975, Mao appointed his nephew, 34-year-old Mao Yuanxin, as his liaison. The younger Mao carried messages from his uncle to other leaders, attended Politburo meetings, and informed the Chairman of what had been discussed. This “access to heaven,” as officials put it, allowed Mao Yuanxin to play a role in Chinese politics that was heavily disproportionate to his junior position (Teiwes & Sun 2007, pp. 11-12). Unfortunately for Deng, the younger Mao was a radical leftist, sympathetic to the views of the Gang of Four, and critical of Deng’s handling of government and Party affairs. The combination of Mao’s increasing unease regarding Deng’s commitment to revolutionary ideals and Mao Yuanxin’s venomous reports on Deng’s activities created tension between the Chairman and his chosen successor.

In a meeting with his uncle, Mao Yuanxin accused Deng of concentrating on improving the economy, and as a result, neglecting class struggle. “I’ve been paying close attention to the speeches of Comrade Xiaoping,” the younger Mao told his uncle, “I sense a question. He rarely mentions the accomplishments of the Cultural Revolution ... This year I haven’t once heard him talk about how to study theory” (Maomao 2002, p. 353). In time, the question of Deng’s unequivocal support for the Cultural Revolution and its legacy became dominant. The radical faction behind the Cultural Revolution welcomed the opportunity granted by Mao to criticize Deng during high-level Party meetings. In fact, starting in November 1975, the Politburo meetings—which were chaired by Deng, ironically enough—were turned into criticism sessions. Deng tried to obtain a private audience with Mao, but his request was denied. Still, Deng stood his ground and refused to endorse the radical line of the Cultural Revolution (Vogel 2011, p. 148-149).

At that time, the radical faction was a minority that owed its powerful position in Chinese politics to Mao’s physical pres-



ence. Deng's effective approach to revitalizing the economy in 1975 had won him the admiration of officials up and down the country. It was to him that they looked up. It was in him that they saw Chairman Mao's natural successor. Deng was a charismatic, experienced, decisive, and accomplished leader who had proved himself capable of overcoming the most formidable of challenges since the years of the civil war and the struggle against Japan. He seemed to be the perfect helmsman to turn the ship away from the dangerous course it had followed for the past two decades.

The year 1976 began ominously with the death of Premier Zhou Enlai on January 8. The widely held assumption was that Deng Xiaoping, who was still the highest ranking vice premier, would assume Zhou's position. Yet, the cunning and scheming of the radicals as well as Deng's unwaveringly critical stance concerning the Cultural Revolution persuaded Mao *not* to award him the premiership.

In early April 1976, hundreds of thousands of Chinese descended on Tiananmen Square in a rare public outburst of anger against the radical faction behind the Cultural Revolution (Garside 1981). The radicals managed to falsely blame the incident on Deng Xiaoping. As a result, Mao decided to strip Deng of all his positions within the Party and the government. However, he decreed that Deng should be allowed to keep his Party membership. Mao also made it very clear that neither Deng nor his family were to be harmed in any way. It seemed that even then the dying Chairman did not completely give up hope that his protégé—whom he had once described as a “rare talent”—would reform himself. It was perhaps this attribute that made Deng so remarkable. Mao had purged some of his oldest and most faithful comrades and allowed their enemies to humiliate, denigrate, and torment them (Liu Shaoqi, who had pioneered the concept of Mao Zedong Thought in the

1940s, is a case in point), but Deng continued to inspire amicable feelings in Mao's heart.

Mao appointed Hua Guofeng, a relatively little known 55-year-old official, as premier and his chosen successor (Weatherley 2010). In one of the few meetings Mao held with Hua, he scribbled the words: "With you in charge, my heart is at ease" (Baum 1996, p. 38). Before being promoted by Mao to work in Beijing in the 1970s, Hua was a regional Party leader in Hunan Province. He did not belong to the radical faction associated with the Cultural Revolution. He proved himself to be pragmatic within the limits set by Mao. However, he did not seem to possess the will or the courage to think outside those limits.

Throughout 1976, Mao's health deteriorated rapidly. Hua was put in charge of the medical effort to save Mao's life. The Chairman's doctor remembers Hua's genuine loyalty and deep concern for Mao's health, and the fact that he conscientiously strove to understand the doctors' explanations. "When we recommended new, and sometimes uncomfortable, medical procedures, like running a tube through Mao's nose and into his stomach for feeding, Hua Guofeng alone among the leaders had been willing to try the new procedures first on himself," Li Zhisui writes (Li 1994, p. 4).

Traditional Chinese superstition has it that heaven heralds its intention to deprive the emperor of its mandate by instigating a natural catastrophe. On July 28, 1976, a devastating earthquake razed the city of Tangshan in Hebei Province to the ground. Within a few minutes, the disaster had claimed the lives of around 650,000 victims (Palmer 2012, p. 236). Nowhere was the absurdity of political life in China more pronounced than in the newspapers' call to "vigorously study Chairman Mao's important directives' concerning the necessity of 'taking class struggle as the key link' in times of national emergency."

National press coverage hit rock bottom with the *People's Daily's* ridiculous assertion that succeeding with earthquake relief efforts required taking “the criticism of Deng Xiaoping’s counterrevolutionary line ... as the motive force” (Baum 1996, p. 39).

On September 9, 1976, six weeks after the Tangshan earthquake, Mao Zedong died at the age of 82. His chosen successor, Hua Guofeng, moved quickly to arrest and denounce the radical leaders of the Cultural Revolution. The worst excesses of the last decade were blamed on them. (They were tried in 1981; the severity of their sentences varied from lengthy prison sentences to life imprisonment.) Following the arrests, there was a certain fear among Chinese leaders of an armed insurgency in support of the radicals—which did not materialize. The nation was hungry for stability and for the chance to embark on a promising path to wealth and power. Hua Guofeng, the CCP’s new chairman, seemed determined to advance economic development. Yet, his biggest weakness was his unwavering loyalty to Mao Zedong...

### 5.3 Setting Sail for New Shores

The list of the CCP’s early achievements under the leadership of Mao Zedong is truly impressive. It starts with the reunification of China and the achievement of national independence, and it extends to the restoration of social order following decades of war and infighting and the establishment of an effective administrative system throughout the country. It includes the extension of primary education to remote villages and a sharp reduction in nationwide illiteracy. It concludes with a spectacular improvement in life expectancy due to the introduction of nationwide basic health services (Meisner 1996, p. 27; Naughton 2007, p. 82).

However, this solid foundation was squandered following deci-

sions to embark on catastrophic adventures that led China to stray from the path of modernization. During the twilight of the Mao era, Taiwan's GDP per capita was six times higher than that of mainland China (Spence 1999b, p. 632). The British colony of Hong Kong's exports were as high as the entire Chinese mainland's exports (Naughton 2007, p. 382). Industrial development, when measured as a share of the GDP, was higher in even Communist North Korea than it was in China (Vogel 2011, p. 280). Today, historians and specialists on China conclude that Mao's successors had no choice but to embark on a path of rapid economic growth so as to relegitimize their rule (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals 2008, p. 2).

Mao's chosen successor, Hua Guofeng, started his reign by pledging to "to support *whatever* policy decisions were made by Chairman Mao" and to "unswervingly follow *whatever* instructions were given by Chairman Mao [*emphasis added*]" (Meisner 1996, p. 69). Despite this pledge, Hua and his associates sought to rebalance the Party's emphasis from its single-minded occupation with class struggle to a sharpened focus on the economy (Teiwes & Sun 2011). Without conducting a careful analysis, the new leader invested his political prestige in promoting an economic program intended to speed up industrial production, increase imports of modern technology, and substantially improve living standards within ten years. Hua sought to legitimize his Ten-Year Plan by aligning its individual policies with appropriate quotations from Chairman Mao's distant past. Sadly though, this was not always easy. Despite the late Chairman's erratic nature, Hua was hard pressed to find a Maoist slogan justifying, for example, allowing enterprises to generate profits. In the end it did not matter, as Hua's vision collapsed under its own weight and its inherent contradictions (Meisner 1996, pp. 76-80).

Meanwhile, Hua's decision to arrest the Gang of Four shortly

after Mao's death paved the way for them to be blamed for the atrocities of the Cultural Revolution. Following this feat of mental athleticism, Chairman Mao was not only exempted from responsibility, but himself became a gullible victim of the gang's intrigues. This bizarre logic facilitated a welcome wave of rehabilitations, with the calls to rehabilitate Deng Xiaoping, the gang's most prominent victim, becoming ever louder. The decision to do so was agreed upon in the spring of 1977 and announced in the July of that same year. Deng was officially reinstated in his former positions as Vice Premier, Vice Chairman of the Party, and Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission.

The unshakable resolve of the 73-year-old Deng to chart a fundamentally different path to wealth and power was clear from the outset. Deng ridiculed calls to follow whatever Chairman Mao had previously instructed. China's leaders, Deng demanded, should adhere to the most important principle of the late Chairman—that is, to “seek truth from facts.” Mao, the military strategist, abided by this principle and succeeded. Mao, the political leader, abandoned this principle and failed. “Reproducing” the Chairman's words “mechanically” and “parroting” Marx's teachings, Deng argued, was a recipe for disaster (Deng 1984, p. 128).

Deng regarded the maxim of seeking truth from facts as the surest safeguard against the then prevalent tendency to formulate ballistic policies. For him, “seeking truth from facts” was an invaluable policy evaluation procedure: decision makers would review the actual results of enacted policies and then make adjustments accordingly. Deng's allies elaborated on this theme further. In a highly controversial newspaper article, they declared that “Practice [not ideology] is the sole criterion of truth.” The article was severely attacked from more conservative quarters for its “vicious, vicious” nature, for denying the

“universal truth of Marxism,” and for pretending that Marxist teachings and Maoist instructions must first “be proven true ... by practice” (Ruan 1994, pp. 30-32). A debate between the adherents of whatever Chairman Mao instructed and the advocates of pragmatic decision making rapidly ensued. Party cadres from across the country came out in support of Deng’s pragmatic approach. Hua Guofeng and his allies ended up being outnumbered (Baum 1996, pp. 59-60).

Officially, Hua was the CCP chairman and the nation’s paramount leader. In theory, he should have been able to purge Deng, or at least, some of his most ardent supporters. In reality, the new chairman was unable to fill his predecessor’s shoes. Lacking a vision or even a blueprint, he was left struggling to satisfy demands to speed up economic development. He endorsed ill-conceived construction projects, technology import schemes, and state investment programs. He endeavored to compensate for his lack of charisma and leadership attributes by imitating Chairman Mao’s appearance—even down to his hairstyle (Meisner 1996, p. 64). The propaganda apparatus was hard at work building a new cult of personality around Hua. Giant portraits of the new helmsman were produced. Devotional literature, poems, and songs were composed in his honor. Exaggerated stories about Hua’s revolutionary past were conjured up and widely distributed. However, none of this could hide the fact that Hua was a weak and indecisive leader.

The same could certainly not be said about Deng. In addition to his *bona fide* revolutionary credentials and decades-long experience at the center of power, Deng enjoyed two unique advantages. First, over the years and due to the nature of his work, Deng had built an unmatched network of committed supporters in the three branches of power: the Party, the government, and the army. In the CPP’s history, only two other

leaders had enjoyed this advantage—and they were both now dead: Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai. Second, his diminutive height of 1.50 m notwithstanding, Deng was a very charismatic leader who had a commanding presence. In fact, it was noted that once Deng entered a room “it was as if the electricity in the room flowed to him” (Vogel 2011, p. 4). In contrast, Maurice Meisner finds Hua to have “inspired neither love nor hate; indeed, he was totally uninspirational” (Meisner 1996, p. 64).

Deng knew that the political wind was blowing in his favor. He was determined to keep striking while the iron was hot. China’s emerging leader called upon his colleagues to embark on *study tours* to advanced countries so as to see with their own eyes how far China had fallen behind the rest of the world. One of the most important early study tours was led by Vice Premier Gu Mu.

From May 2 to June 6, 1978, Gu and his colleagues toured Western European countries, where they visited farms, electric power plants, and automated factories. Time and again, the Chinese delegation was stunned. Instead of worker exploitation, they witnessed high living standards in their host capitalist countries. During the Mao era, the Chinese were encouraged to nurture psychological mechanisms of reality distortion. Deng, the emerging leader, enjoined his countrymen not only to turn this cognitive self-censorship off and to acknowledge the West’s success, but also to think critically and to learn appropriate lessons for China’s modernization quest. “We ought,” Deng told Gu before his departure for Europe, “to study the successful experiences of capitalist countries and bring them back to China” (Vogel 2011, pp. 221-222). Deng’s determination to learn from the West ran contrary to the deep-rooted Chinese aversion to studying foreign experiences (Schell & Delury 2013, p. 281).

Deng himself undertook a study tour to Japan in October 1978. Although China and Japan had enjoyed contact for more than two millennia, Deng was the first Chinese leader to ever set foot on the island. During a banquet held in his honor, Deng touched upon the story of Xu Fu, a sorcerer at the court of China's first emperor, Qin Shi Huang (260–210 BC). Obsessed with his desire for immortality, the emperor dispatched his magician on a journey to find the elixir of life. His doomed quest brought Xu Fu to the shores of Japan, from which he never returned. Deng explained that just like Xu before him, he had also come to Japan in search of something—the secret to modernization. Similar to the officials on study tours elsewhere, Deng stopped by modern factories, inspected automated manufacturing lines, and viewed technologically advanced products. Deng's trip to Japan left him all the more determined to shift the Party's focus from empty rhetoric to material development. In the years to come, Japanese firms would play a vital role in transferring modern technology and introducing management techniques to China (Vogel 2011, pp. 298-308).

Then, in January 1979, Deng embarked on another historic trip, this time to the United States, to cement the recently agreed upon normalization of diplomatic relations. What Christian Caryl describes as the “most surreal moment” of the visit occurred during the White House state dinner. Seated at Deng's table was the famous actress Shirley MacLaine. Her passionate advocacy of leftist causes had inspired MacLaine to visit China during the Cultural Revolution. Gushing to Deng about her trip, she related to him the story of a professor she met in a rural commune. The professor, she told Deng enthusiastically, was very grateful for having been sent to the countryside so that he could learn from the peasant masses. Looking at her scornfully, Deng replied bluntly: “He was lying.” Professors



ought to be teaching university classes, not planting crops (Caryl 2013, pp. 170-171). In the United States, Deng toured the modern factories belonging to Coca Cola, Boeing, and Ford, inspected oil refineries, and experienced the space shuttle flight simulator at the Houston Space Center. In fact, according to a news report, Deng was so fascinated by the flight simulator that it took some effort to get him off it (Kissinger 2011, pp. 361-362).

During Deng's foreign trips, his discussions with foreign dignitaries, and his investigation tours, it is possible to detect time and again an inquisitive mind at work. One can observe Deng's keen interest in understanding the causal relations behind success and failure as well as his unwavering commitment to seek those causal relations not in fixed theories or rigid ideologies, but in the real world. In terms of his problem-solving behavior, Deng sought information, listened to conflicting viewpoints, and pressed aids and colleagues for details (Shambaugh 1993, p. 480). Despite his admiration for the West's material successes, Deng was adamant that the "mechanical application of foreign experience and copying of foreign models will get us nowhere" (Deng 1994, p. 14). Rather, he saw China's quest for modernization as an "experiment":

For us, this is something new, and we have to feel our way. Since it is something new, we are bound to make mistakes. Our method is to review our experience from time to time and correct mistakes whenever we discover them, so that minor mistakes will not grow into major ones (Deng 1994, p. 176).

Deng's fellow modernizer, the Singaporean premier Lee Kuan Yew, regarded him as the "most impressive leader" he ever met: someone who "thought things through, and, when something went wrong, was ready to admit the mistake and set out to solve

it” (Vogel 2011, p. 290). Unlike Mao, Deng viewed negative feedback signals from reality not as a ticking psychological bomb that had to be diffused using blame-shifting techniques, but rather as an intellectual challenge that had to be mastered analytically.

Previously, I elaborated on how the leak in Mao’s competence tank rendered the Chairman especially reluctant to admit mistakes and change course. Mao’s loneliness aggravated this vulnerability; the lack of a loving family had deprived the Chairman of the strongest source of competence signals and self-worth. His colleagues’ religious reverence made him more, rather than less, averse to negative feedback. After all, their reverence depended on the myth of his infallibility.

One should not be surprised to learn that the behavioral differences between Mao and Deng also manifested in the ways they cultivated affiliation signals. Unlike Mao, Deng genuinely enjoyed family life. He regularly spent time with his numerous grandchildren. Whenever he went on an inspection tour throughout China, he took one of them with him (Goodman 1994, p. 116). His daughter fondly remembers him watching and enjoying the animated series *Tom and Jerry* with his grandchildren (Deng 1995, p. 242). This is a far cry from the behavior of Mao, who rarely saw his two daughters, ate alone, lived separately from his wife, and slept with young, attractive girls whom he regarded as mere sex objects (Li 1994).

Again unlike Mao, Deng enjoyed amicable relationships with his colleagues. This fact was perhaps best captured by the way in which not only his fellow policy makers, but also the general public referred to him. For his countrymen, Deng was simply *Comrade Xiaoping*. Mao, in contrast, was always addressed reverently as *Chairman Mao* or *Comrade Mao Zedong*; no one was on a first-name basis with the late Chairman. Anecdotes about

Deng's friendly relationships with his colleagues abound. For example, during a short stop off in Paris on the way back from New York in 1974, he bought 200 croissants and some cheese, which he then divided up among those who had been with him in Paris during the 1920s (Vogel 2011, p. 86). Additionally, he was fond of playing bridge with his friends. In fact, he used to host bridge sessions twice a week (Baum 1996, p. 21).

Further unlike Mao, Deng was adamant in his rejection of personality cults. He not only banned the propaganda department from constructing statues and producing giant oil paintings of him, but also refused to be treated differently. For example, while visiting the gorgeous Mount Emei in Sichuan Province in 1980, he turned down his aids' offer to close the scenic area to the general public. He also refused the offer of a private performance of a Sichuan opera, explaining that he preferred to attend the regular performance with everybody else (Goodman 1994, p. 97). Deng's aversion to personality cults stemmed not only from his collegial outlook, but also from the lessons he had learned from his experiences at Mao's court. He had witnessed firsthand how constructive criticism was always withheld whenever decision makers regarded their leader as inerrant.

Of course, enjoying a sound psychological foundation with "undamaged" competence and affiliation tanks does not necessitate adopting a sound problem-solving approach. Thus, it is important to mention Deng's high level of operative intelligence. As discussed in section 4.4, a person with a high level of operative intelligence demonstrates remarkable skill in seeking and integrating relevant information, making prognoses regarding future developments, setting goals, and adjusting those goals when changing circumstances render doing so necessary (Dörner 1986). In this way, the actor embraces what Irving Janis terms *vigilant problem solving* (Janis 1989).

Conversely, a person with a low level of operative intelligence exhibits behavioral patterns characterized by assuming that his reality model is flawless, making reductive assumptions, producing ballistic hypotheses, setting and pursuing arbitrary goals, dealing with symptoms rather than the causes of problems, magnifying successes, and overlooking failures. (The careful reader of Chapters 2 to 4 must have noticed that Mao did not lack *intelligence* as such. In fact, one of Mao's major psychological challenges concerned the fact that he was smart enough to recognize warning signals from reality, but also too weak to admit that he should reverse course. The result was a constant struggle with internal doubts.)

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THE RISE of Deng Xiaoping was, to a certain extent, unavoidable. His character and charisma, his personal connections within the three branches of power (the Party, the government, and the military), and the general mood of the country rendered it so. Hua Guofeng lacked not only the authority, but also, it seems, the ruthlessness to purge, punish, and silence those who disagreed with him. In fact, Hua's actions point to a consensus-seeking nature. He simply accepted and went along with the changes that were taking place all around him.

Two years after Mao's death, Deng's approach to modernization was endorsed at the *Central Party Work Conference*, which took place from November 10 to December 15, 1978. At the conference, one leader after another spoke in support of pragmatism and in opposition to dogmatism. Then, on December 13, Deng himself took to the stage. In his speech, Deng attacked the "ideological taboos" and "forbidden zones" that had, over the last few decades, "confined people's minds within the framework of [a] phony Marxism." Anyone, he added, who went beyond the

allowed limits was “tracked down, stigmatized and attacked politically. In this situation, some people found it safer to stop using their heads and thinking questions over.” Such “unwritten laws” left people “reluctant to use their brains” (Deng 1984, pp. 152-153). Elaborating on this theme, Deng continued:

Once people’s thinking becomes rigid, book worship, divorced from reality, becomes a grave malady. Those who suffer from it dare not say a word or take a step that isn’t mentioned in books, documents or the speeches of leaders: everything has to be copied. Thus responsibility to the higher authorities is set in opposition to responsibility to the people (Deng 1984, p. 153).

Deng reminded his audience that it was impossible under such circumstances “for a Party or a nation to make progress.” Thus, he enjoined his colleagues to embark on a “New Long March” to modernize the country. In doing so, he did not promise to institute new, rigid five-year or ten-year plans to achieve this aim. Instead, Deng told the gathered officials that China needed cohorts of “path-breakers who dare to think, explore new ways and generate new ideas” (Deng 1984, pp. 154-155). This inevitably meant that power had to be devolved to lower levels “without hesitation but in a planned way” (Deng 1984, p. 156). Deng argued that devolving powers and fueling a competitive spirit not only among the provinces, but also among mines, factories, and enterprises was key to improving China’s economic outlook.

In his speech, Deng offered a passionate argument in favor of introducing competition and taking advantage of local initiatives:

Once a production team has been empowered to make decisions regarding its own operations, its members and cadres will lie awake at night so long as a single piece of land is left unplanted or a single pond unused for aquatic production, and they will find ways to remedy the situation. Just imagine the additional wealth that could be created if all the people in China's hundreds of thousands of enterprises and millions of production teams put their minds to work (Deng 1984, p. 157).

Deng understood that conditions varied locally and that some regions—due to their geographic locations and their differing endowments in terms of natural resources—would be able to develop faster than others. Abandoning the Party's egalitarian principles, Deng announced that “We should allow some regions and enterprises and some workers and peasants to earn more and enjoy more benefits sooner than others, in accordance with their hard work and greater contributions to society” (Deng 1984, p. 163).

Ezra Vogel, who has written an outstanding biography of Deng, notes that “Many ideas expressed in Deng's speech seem to a Western business manager like common sense ... But for those leading China in 1978, Deng's ideas represented a fundamental departure from the Mao era” (Vogel 2011, p. 245). In a way, such ideas represented the distinctive features of the Deng era. As will be discussed in the next chapter, Deng's reforms focused on creating material incentives and devolving authority to lower levels so as to motivate individual effort (Naughton 1993, p. 491). Along the way, more and more economic freedoms were granted, thereby increasing the role of the market and decreasing that of the state (Naughton 1996).

In his speech, the architect of China's reforms—as he would later be known—did not offer a development “strategy” in the

classical sense of the word. The *New Oxford American Dictionary* defines the word *strategy* as “A plan of action or policy designed to achieve a major or overall aim.” For Deng Xiaoping, strategy was the art of “crossing the river by feeling for the stones.” It was the art of constant, vigilant interaction with a highly complex and dynamically changing environment. His incremental approach proved to be far more successful than the transition “strategy” implemented by Russia and much of Eastern Europe during the 1990s.

On December 22, 1978, the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party officially sanctioned Deng’s pragmatic approach to modernization and irrevocably shifted the emphasis of the Party’s work from class struggle to economic modernization (CC 1978). Thereby, the era of *reform and opening-up* (改革开饭) was inaugurated. It was a historic day for China that was to pave the way for one of the most breathtaking development trajectories in human history. According to calculations by the World Bank, under Deng’s leadership China succeeded in freeing 400 million people from dire poverty—the fastest decrease in poverty ever seen (Ravalion & Chen 2007). In the three and a half decades since, China has changed beyond recognition.

Vogel describes Deng’s ascent to paramount leadership as a “Succession without Coronation,” adding that “In the annals of world political history, it would be difficult to find another case where a person became top leader of a major nation without formal public recognition of the succession” (Vogel 2011, p. 247). The Third Plenum did not bestow any new titles on Deng. Nor was there any official announcement about Deng becoming the paramount leader. After the Third Plenum, Deng officially remained what he had been before the Third Plenum: Vice Premier and Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission. Unlike so many other politicians, Deng did not derive his

sense of achievement from formal honors, but rather from actual accomplishments.

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IT WOULD BE wrong to attribute China's rise alone to Deng's leadership. However, political leaders play a role that should never be underestimated. Yes, in the aftermath of Mao's death China was eager for a new start. Yes, the historical forces were overwhelmingly in favor of such a new start. Yes, preventing a new start would perhaps have been as difficult as preventing a new dawn. It is conceivable that China would have embraced a policy of reform and opening-up under Hua Guofeng (Teiwes & Sun 2011). In fact, Hua had proven his readiness to shift the Party's focus from class struggle to economic modernization. Yet, he did not seem to possess the audacity to sufficiently depart from Mao's legacy or the courage to overcome domestic resistance to reform, and that is to say nothing of the disastrous effects his burgeoning personality cult would have had in time.

Following the Third Plenum, Hua Guofeng was not purged. No mass campaign was launched to criticize him. Nor was there any orchestrated public outpouring of venom against him (Shambaugh 1993, p. 481). Instead, he was quietly and gradually stripped of his titles. Within three years, he had been demoted to a normal member of the Central Committee—a position that he held until his death in 2008.



## COPING WITH DYNAMIC AND COMPLEX SITUATIONS

Psychological Theme: *Subjectivity of Worldviews*

Historical Episode: *The Reform Era 1978–1992*

**T**he Deng era covers fourteen tumultuous years during which every aspect of Chinese society, politics, and culture was radically transformed. Unfortunately, important milestones of the Deng era are still considered politically sensitive in China. Thus, the publicly available materials do not allow for a detailed psychological analysis.

*This chapter sketches an outline of the reform era under Deng, analyzes his decision-making approach, and contrasts Deng's modus operandi with that of Gorbachev.*

WRITING FROM PERSONAL EXPERIENCE, the Prussian field marshal Helmuth von Moltke noted that “No plan of operations extends with certainty beyond the first encounter with the enemy’s main strength.” It is only the layman, Moltke added, who sees “in the course of a campaign a consistent execution of a precon-

ceived and highly detailed original concept pursued consistently to the end.” While the commander-in-chief will certainly have a goal in mind, he cannot establish the path to that goal in advance. Throughout the campaign, decisions must be made “on the basis of situations that cannot be foreseen” (Moltke 1993, p. 92). Moltke’s words very eloquently sum up the mindset that Deng adopted when forging a distinctively Chinese path to wealth and power. Without a predetermined plan or blueprint, Deng sought to gradually transform the economic and political system he inherited, step by step.

### **6.1 Strategy without a Blueprint**

Broadly speaking, the economic systems of socialist countries are characterized by two defining features: the state ownership of the means of production and central planning (Kornai 1992). The former implies the absence of a private sector, while the latter means that a bureaucratic government agency is in charge of developing a binding masterplan for the economy. This plan specifies how capital and human resources are to be allocated, which investments are to be made, what the production quotas for state-owned enterprises are, and what the procurement quotas for agricultural yields are. The absence of a noteworthy private sector condemns the planned economy to rigidity. The lack of competition deprives its actors of all incentives for ensuring efficiency. The discouragement of personal initiative strips it of dynamism (Dembinski & Cook 1991).

The apparent success of free market economies and the undeniable failure of central planning prompted most socialist countries to transform their economic systems during the last two decades of the twentieth century. Such transformations were, of course, facilitated by dramatic domestic and geopolitical earthquakes in the Eastern Bloc. In moving away from

socialism, Russia and Eastern Europe followed the so-called *big bang strategy*, which entailed dismantling existing economic structures and institutions, abandoning five-year plans, legitimizing private enterprises, deregulating prices, and so on (Aghion & Blanchard 1994). The hasty overnight transition from one economic system to another triggered high inflation rates, a sharp decline in output, an increase in unemployment, and a substantial fall in living standards (Gros & Steinherr 1995). The result was a decade of economic and political instability.

Under Deng Xiaoping's leadership, China followed a unique transition pattern (Ang 2016; Nee et al 1989). Deng and his fellow decision makers traveled to developed countries. They invited foreign politicians, scholars, economists, and business-people to China. They listened attentively to how things were done in more successful economies. However, China's paramount leader refused to use the Japanese, Western European, or American economic systems as a model or blueprint. Instead, he declared that the river of modernization challenges should be crossed by groping for stones; that is, with care and caution (Lin et al 2003, pp. 177-182). Unlike East European and Russian politicians, Deng and his colleagues did not judge individual reforms and political initiatives on the basis of their contribution to the transition process as such. Rather, the guiding principle when evaluating policies was their success (or failure) in terms of advancing economic growth (Naughton 2007, p. 86). In other words, under Deng's leadership China followed a less ideological and a more pragmatic approach.

Throughout the Deng era (1978–1992), the Chinese leadership did not abolish central planning, as doing so in the absence of established free market structures would have destabilized the country's economy. They did not privatize state-owned enterprises (SOEs), as doing so would have placed the jobs of millions of underperforming and underemployed workers at

risk. They did not deregulate prices, as doing so suddenly would have triggered high inflation rates that would have drained the purchasing power of ordinary people. Instead, economic freedoms were granted gradually. Incremental reform measures allowed more and more Chinese to operate outside the scope of the planned economy (Naughton 1996).

Ordinary farmers up and down the country seized new opportunities to produce and sell outside the confines of the planned economy. They teamed up to create small enterprises. They manufactured primitive items such as baskets, buttons, badges, footwear, medals, plastic flowers, sign boards, and zippers (Koo & Yeh 1999, p. 326). City dwellers opened small restaurants and barbershops, offered repair services, and resold items purchased from distant rural areas. SOEs were allowed to exceed their assigned production quotas and to keep the profits they made by doing so. Foreign firms were permitted to operate in designated special economic zones, which brought in not only foreign currency, but also modern technology and management practices.

As the average income of ordinary households increased, new and more sophisticated demands emerged. Novel desires were awakened. A consumer society was in the making. The average family now strived not only to own a bicycle, a watch, and a radio, but also a color television, a refrigerator, a camera, a suite of furniture, a motorcycle, and even a washing machine and an electric fan (Spence 1999b, p. 693). Here again, entrepreneurial individuals proved eager to jump in and meet the demand that the public sector could not satisfy. Of course, early entrants to the market enjoyed a monopoly. With time, however, more entrepreneurs entered the market, thereby creating an environment of intensified competition (Kroeber 2016).

Private sector transactions of this kind were not incorporated

into the government's economic plan. Instead, the government followed a so-called *dual-track system* for managing the economy: one track encompassed the commodities produced, purchased, and sold under the plan, while the other track incorporated free market activities. In 1984, the Chinese leadership decided to freeze the overall size of the state plan. As a result, the balance between the frozen state plan and the still exponentially growing private economy shifted irrevocably in favor of the latter. Gradually, and without all the pain inflicted as a result of the big bang strategy, the Chinese economy "grew out of the plan" by 1993, and thus, the plan was eventually abandoned altogether (Naughton 1996).

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THE PROCESS of transforming the Chinese economy began with Deng Xiaoping's call to "emancipate the mind" and come up with original, creative ways to advance the modernization quest. In analyzing his general approach to reform, it is possible to identify an important, defining feature: the courage to allow and learn from local experiments (Heilmann 2008). Path-breaking ideas for reform were originated at the local level by people who dared to think and act outside the box of conventional political wisdom. People's commune cadres who decided to test the *a priori* presumption regarding the inferiority of individual farming. Peasant households who set up small enterprises to produce shoelaces. Factory workers who ran barbershops in the evening. Deng adopted a wait-and-see posture. Rather than immediately endorsing or condemning this or that development, he kept an open mind until he had sufficient information to make an informed decision. Further, Deng and his fellow reformers derived guidelines for national reform policies based on successful local experiments.

Before diving into the psychological aspects of the decision-making process, I would like to sketch out the four distinctive developments that defined the economic reforms seen during the Deng era.

First, *agricultural reforms*. Deng's highest priority was to alleviate the dire poverty being suffered by millions of impoverished farmers who were struggling to make ends meet. Therefore, two immediate measures were adopted in 1978. Initially, the procurement quotas were reduced. Then, the procurement prices were increased. More importantly, the people's communes were given permission to experiment with different models of agricultural organization and to seek out the most profitable and effective ones. Anhui Province pioneered a radical solution that amounted to the abolition of collective farming. Each household signed a contract with the state. The contract specified the procurement quota that had to be paid to the government in exchange for renting the farmland. In this way, decision-making power was transferred from the collective to individual families. Each household was free to farm and sell any agricultural products of their choosing, to make profits, and to invest in machinery—so long as they fulfilled their quota obligations to the state. This scheme became known as the *household responsibility system* (Shirk 1993, p. 34). By 1984, just five years into the reform era, household farming had swept away Mao's people's communes throughout China for good. Within the same time frame, the average income of farmers more than doubled as a result of both decollectivization and higher procurement prices. Additionally, by 1984 the total grain output had reached the—for China—historically unprecedented level of 407 million tons (Zweig 1997, pp. 75-76).

Second, *township and village enterprises* (TVEs). Individual farming motivated the peasants to become more efficient by

generating a higher agricultural output through less labor input. It also incentivized them to identify new ways of using the time not spent on the farm to create additional sources of income. Throughout the countryside, so-called *township and village enterprises* came into being (Byrd & Lin 1990). These rural start-ups produced simple commodities ranging from buttons and zippers to footwear and baskets. Some regions were more successful than others in promoting the TVEs. The Wenzhou region revived its centuries-long tradition of craftsmanship and trade, while the southern Jiangsu region benefited from its extensive railway connections. The Pearl River Delta region proved ideal for Hong Kong investors who were eager to relocate their manufacturing facilities to cheaper places (Koo & Yeh 1999, pp. 325-332; Xu & Zhang 2009).

Local officials were instrumental in creating the right conditions for the TVEs to thrive. They acted as facilitators and guarantors for the loans that the burgeoning rural enterprises needed. They levied low taxes on the profits the TVEs made. More importantly, they offered political protection at a time when private economic activities were still frowned upon in China (Naughton 2007, pp. 278-279). Within two decades, China's rural industry would become the fastest growing economic sector worldwide (Oi 1999).

Looking back from the vantage point of 1987, Deng celebrated the emergence of TVEs as "our greatest success in the rural reform," although he admitted that "It is one [development] we had by no means anticipated." Instead, it was like "a new force that just came into being spontaneously" (Deng 1994, p. 236). The winners in this development came from the poorest segments of Chinese society (Schell & Delury 2013, p. 292). It must be emphasized here that TVEs did not universally flourish. In remote regions with underdeveloped infrastructure, TVEs had no chance of succeeding. Thus, a widening income

disparity among rural areas represented one side effect of the emergence of the TVEs. Another side effect was large-scale migration. Over the years, millions of peasants from poorer regions left their hometowns in search for new sources of income in more prosperous areas (Hare 1999).

Third, *special economic zones* (SEZs). One of Deng's highest priorities was to encourage foreign firms to invest in China. Deng hoped that their advanced technology and state-of-the-art management practices would have a spillover effect on China's then backward industries. But how could the right conditions be created for capitalist companies to operate in a predominantly socialist economic environment? How could the rest of the economy be protected from being infected with—from the CCP's perspective—undesired capitalist practices? In the 1960s and 1970s, Taiwan, South Korea, and Malaysia established so-called *export-processing zones* (EPZs). Amirahmadi and Wu define an EPZ as an “industrial enclave that engages in export manufacturing with the assistance of foreign investment and enjoys preferential treatment that is not generally available in the rest of the country” (Amirahmadi & Wu 1995). As the commodities manufactured in an EPZ are exported (almost) in their entirety, the rest of the economy remains insulated from such activities. This model served as the inspiration for a groundbreaking development in China.

In 1979, the leaders of Guangdong Province approached Deng with the idea of setting up similar economic zones next to the border with Hong Kong. Deng approved enthusiastically, adding “During the war, wasn't Yan'an a special zone?” (Baum 1996, p. 67). Initially, four *special economic zones* were inaugurated in the coastal provinces of Guangdong and Fujian. Their locations were strategically chosen so as to be adjacent to the British colony of Hong Kong, the Portuguese colony of Macau,



and Taiwan (Harding 1987, p. 165). Fourteen additional SEZs were opened in 1984.

The timing could not have been better. Throughout the 1980s, a restructuring process was taking place in many East Asian economies. The average education level was rising in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and elsewhere in the region. This coincided with an increased demand for highly skilled workers. Thus, the number of those willing to toil in factories sharply declined. Deng's reform and opening-up policies encouraged factory owners to move labor-intensive manufacturing to mainland China's newly established SEZs, where cheap labor was abundant and land rent was affordable (Naughton 2007, p. 416). Within the next three decades, China's SEZs were transformed beyond all recognition from sleepy rural villages to modern cities with skyscrapers, sophisticated infrastructure, and state-of-the-art factories. The SEZs spread across the coastal provinces and became an important part of China's *coastal development strategy*. However, this development did have the side effect of widening the wealth gap between the now richer coastal areas and the poorer inland regions (Brun et al 2002).

Fourth, *state-owned enterprise reforms*. The SOE reforms centered on introducing material incentives for managers and workers alike to increase both productivity and profitability. The SOEs no longer had to turn their entire revenues over to the state. Instead, they signed contracts with the state that obliged them to pay a pre-defined proportion of their revenues in taxes. Any income beyond this level was treated as profit that the SOEs were allowed to keep. This new arrangement encouraged SOEs to harness advanced managerial practices so as to optimize efficiency and reduce costs (Wu 2005, pp. 139-176).

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WHY DID the reform process proceed in such a gradual manner? Why did Deng Xiaoping not simply scrap public ownership and central planning and introduce free market mechanisms? Why did he resist the temptation to copy a foreign, but truly successful economic system? This latter question is based on a fundamentally flawed assumption—namely, that Deng was *tempted* to follow the big bang strategy. In fact, he was not. From the outset, neither Deng nor any of his senior colleagues contemplated abolishing—what they still perceived as—the bedrock of socialism in order to introduce—what they then regarded as—the defining feature of capitalism. Instead, as Naughton explains, the Chinese reformers agreed that “individuals and organizations should be allowed to satisfy unmet needs and earn some additional income, and if, in the process, this new activity tended to erode the command economy and had to be exempted from some of its rules, so be it.” Gradually then, the government opened up sectors of the economy to foreign and domestic private economic transactions until, one and a half decades later, the Chinese economy was fundamentally transformed and central planning ceased to exist (Naughton 2007, p. 87).

Worldviews and ideological commitments rarely change overnight. Deng and his colleagues had been taught to accept without question the superiority of the socialist economic order, but was the ultimate failure of that system not apparent at the outset of the reform era? Maybe it was to that mythical “objective observer” who exists only in political science theories! In the real world, however, objective facts are invariably interpreted by subjective minds. One can always explain away the discrepancy between belief and reality by asserting that an otherwise perfectly sound system was hampered by poor implementation, external events, or deliberate sabotage. In the case of China, Mao’s constant tampering with the process of

economic and social modernization offered his successors a justifiable excuse to redeem the planned economy.

Senior members of Deng's leadership team were unanimously in favor of making adjustments, introducing new policies, and allowing *limited* free market activity, although they differed with regard to the question of *how much* economic freedom should be allowed within the constraints of the planned economy. Chen Yun—who was the chief architect of the highly praised First Five-Year Plan (1953–1957) and whose prestige within the Party was almost equal to that of Deng—argued that a careful balance must be struck between granting economic freedoms and maintaining a functioning planning apparatus (Vogel 2005). When elaborating on this point, Chen employed the metaphor of the bird in the cage:

One cannot hold a bird tightly in one's hand without killing it. It must be allowed to fly, but only within its cage. Without a cage, it would fly away and become lost. Of course, the cage must be of appropriate dimensions; it must have the necessary room ... That is to say, one may readjust the size of the cage ... regulation of economic activity by the market must not entail the abandonment of the orientation provided by the plan (Baum 1996, p. 152).

Other leaders, such as Hu Yaobang, Zhao Ziyang, and Wan Li, were more open-minded. Hu had made his career in the *Communist Youth League* and was, until the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution, the First Secretary of that influential organization (Man 2005). Wan had a brief, albeit highly successful, tenure in Anhui Province, where he oversaw the implementation of the household responsibility system. Zhao was an accomplished provincial leader who served during the Mao era as a Party Secretary, first of Guangdong and then of Sichuan

Province (Shambaugh 1984). All three were committed reformers who had been handpicked by Deng for senior leadership positions. During much of the 1980s, Hu Yaobang was the General Secretary of the CCP, Zhao Ziyang was the premier with overall responsibility for economic reform, and Wan Li was the first-ranking vice premier.

Deng's own thinking evolved over time. In 1980, Deng stated that the most important task ahead was learning how to develop a competitive "planned socialist economy" (Deng 1984, p. 255). Two years later, as the role of the market continued to expand successfully, he used the phrase "socialism with Chinese characteristics" to counter any suggestion that the country might be turning its back on socialism (Deng 1994, p. 14). It was not until 1992 that Deng declared clearly and unequivocally that China's goal was to become a "socialist market economy," explaining:

The proportion of planning to market forces is not the essential difference between socialism and capitalism. A planned economy is not equivalent to socialism, because there is planning under capitalism too; a market economy is not capitalism, because there are markets under socialism too. Planning and market forces are both means of controlling economic activity. The essence of socialism is liberation and development of the productive forces, elimination of exploitation and polarization, and the ultimate achievement of prosperity for all (Deng 1994, p. 361).

As for Party cadres up and down the hierarchy, one could say that their thinking also evolved, albeit to varying degrees. Some experienced a radical transformation. Others underwent a gradual evolution. Still others remained relatively resistant to a fundamental change in their worldview. The result was contin-

uous clashes between those who favored the faster opening of the economy to private sector activities and those who were horrified by the very prospect (Baum 1996; Shirk 1993). “Views about how successful policies had been and what might work in the future,” Ezra Vogel argues, “were colored by the varying lenses of different officials, some more conservative and others more liberal and cosmopolitan” (Vogel 2011, p. 393). Why were some leaders more conservative and others more liberal? One would expect that rational human beings would reach the same conclusion, so long as they were presented with the same set of facts (Allison & Zelikow 1999, p. 4). Unfortunately, this is not the case. The human mind is not a universal and objective deduction machine that, given a certain set of data, invariably reaches the same rational conclusion. Far from it.

To understand how the mind works, it is necessary to elaborate on the concept of *frames* (Minsky 1977) or *schemata* (Rumelhart 1980). Starting at early age and then moving on through life, one acquires knowledge about one’s world. This knowledge is stored in neural circuits in one’s brain, which cognitive scientists refer to as frames or schemata. Simply by living through everyday life and interacting with one’s social environment, the brain constructs schemata for desks and chairs, dogs and cats, plants and trees, and so on. Later on, one learns to make sense of abstract concepts such as freedom and tyranny. One learns about theories such as evolution and thermodynamics. One internalizes moral concepts and ethics. Schemata represent the building blocks of the mind.

David Houghton likens schemata to mental boxes that consist of “default values.” To illustrate what he means by this, he asks readers to consider a simple puzzle: “I’m thinking of ‘a thing.’ This thing has fur. It has a tail. It has paws. You take it for walks.” The “thing” Houghton is thinking of is clearly a dog. The mind reaches this conclusion by using the information

presented in the puzzle to locate a mental box that includes the necessary default values: furry pet, has a tail and paws, and you take it for a walk. In other words, the mind relies on schemata to *categorize* and *infer* (Houghton 2014, p. 136). Default values are often subjective. They are based on one's own experiences in the world as well as on the social and cultural environment in which one grew up. Thus, two people might have two different schemata for "capitalism." One might associate it with "hard work," while the other might link it to "exploitation."

Schemata form the basis for the more complex mental structures of *narratives*. As explained in Chapter 4, narrative thinking allows people to understand stories about protagonists striving to achieve their goals, antagonists standing in their way, innocent victims falling prey to the schemes of evil-doers, and so on. As one, from childhood onward, hears and reads real and fictional stories time and again, the brain learns to interpret not only works of fiction, but also complex life events as stories. One sees people, groups, and even nations playing out the roles one assigns them in the stories composed in one's mind.

To understand the domestic opposition to Deng's reforms, it is necessary to elaborate on the powerful narrative that underlies the Chinese interpretation of China's modern history. I refer to it as the *narrative of the exploitative foreign imperialist*. The story begins with China being one of the most vibrant centers of human civilization. Its economy was the world's largest. Its nation was among the world's richest. Its art and literature were among the world's finest. The imperialist powers who were enjoying the fruits of their technological advances as well as exploiting the resources obtained from their growing colonial empires conspired to subjugate and plunder China. From the First Opium War in 1839 to the Japanese invasion during the 1930s, foreign imperialists violated China's territorial integrity,

forced unequal treaties down her throat, and inflicted harm and suffering upon the Chinese people. The *objective* historical record is, of course, more nuanced (see Chapter 1). However, for many Chinese, the content of this narrative constitutes *common sense facts*. For instance, it is a fact that imperialists are keen—now, as they were in the past—on swindling China! Capitalists cannot be trusted!

It is often not the story's message that yields intense emotional responses. *Romeo and Juliet's* premise that great love overcomes death barely moves anyone to tears. Nor does its Wikipedia description as a "tragedy [...] about two young star-crossed lovers whose deaths ultimately unite their feuding families." Rather, it is the drama that unfolds over time that captivates the mind. Chinese schoolbooks and propaganda materials enrich the narrative of the exploitative foreign imperialist with smaller stories about the pain and suffering of ordinary people during the century of humiliation. They arouse moral indignation regarding the villainy of imperialist powers. More importantly, they foster a conspiratorial worldview that cautions the mind to always be on the lookout for hidden agendas and sinister motives whenever Western countries are concerned.

China's century of humiliation forms the background against which the drama of Deng's reform and opening-up strategy played out. Vogel emphasizes that it mattered little whether the Chinese officials personally remembered the time of foreign meddling in China or if they only had learned about it from history books. Many were skeptical about the intentions of foreign capitalists. Many asked, "Why should China, after three decades free from foreign imperialism, now invite back the imperialists?" (Vogel 2011, p. 400). Deng's answer to this question was as simple as it was pragmatic: "the door is being opened because the Four Modernizations require it" (Tzeng 1991, p. 270).<sup>1</sup>

Chen Yun and many others remained unconvinced. On one occasion, Chen cautioned against pinning China's hopes on "foreign capitalists," because "foreigners were only interested in maximizing their own profits" (Baum 1996, p. 337). "I felt," Premier Zhao remarked bitterly in his memoirs, "that Chen Yun's thoughts were stuck in the theoretical expressions of 'finance-capital' found in Lenin's *On Imperialism* ... He once told me that Lenin's characterization remained valid, and that we were still in the era of imperialism" (Zhao 2009, pp. 102-103).

Chen's distress was shared by a number of officials. For example, one senior official remarked after visiting Shenzhen—the most prominent special economic zone—that "Apart from the five-starred red flag, everything in Shenzhen has turned capitalist". Another official burst into tears and vowed that he "would never have joined the communist revolution had he known that Shenzhen would be the result" (Harding 1987, p. 168). Zhao explains that "Some people felt ashamed about the idea of importing." In rebuking them, he asks rhetorically: "What was there to feel ashamed about? It wasn't begging! It was a mutual exchange, which was also a form of self-reliance." Further, he admits that this "close-minded mentality" had regrettably "caused us to make many costly mistakes" (Zhao 2009, p. 107).

Now, while Deng Xiaoping, Zhao Ziyang, and many others were willing to question, reexamine, and revise the narrative of the exploitative foreign imperialist, others were not. Why? The relevant psychological trait is known as *openness to new experiences* (McCrae & Sutin 2009). McAdams defines it as the "tendency to explore new thoughts, values, feelings, and experiences, to be intellectually adventurous and expansive in one's consciousness, to question convention and seek out complexity" (McAdams 2011, p. 39). People who exhibit a high degree of openness perceive their own willingness to adapt



their convictions to changing circumstances to be pragmatic flexibility, while people who exhibit a low degree of openness regard clinging to their beliefs as principled high-mindedness. People who are high in openness tend to attribute a dogmatic, narrow-minded, and unsophisticated mentality to people they perceive to be low in openness. People who are low in openness tend to see the behavior of those they perceive to be high in openness as being muddle-headed, opportunistic, and displaying a disgraceful lack of conviction (McAdams 2011, p. 40).

The complexity of China's ongoing transformation allowed for different interpretations. Each faction sought to vindicate its beliefs by highlighting, exaggerating, or downplaying this or that development. The conservatives interpreted widely publicized cases of corruption, bribery, prostitution, drug consumption, and criminality—especially in the coastal provinces with SEZs—as evidence that their worst fears had come true. The reemergence of such social vices was seen as a shocking indicator of a great moral decline directly triggered by overambitious economic reforms. Sometimes, conservative leaders went so far as to accuse such reforms with “promoting corruption” (Fewsmith 1994, p. 177). The reformers, however, regarded such cases as unavoidable side effects of an otherwise successful economic course. Deng himself argued that “When windows were opened, with the fresh air some flies and mosquitoes were bound to fly in, but they could be dealt with” (Lee 2000, p. 646).

How did Deng handle the dissent among his senior colleagues? Unlike Chairman Mao, he did take the views and reservations of senior leaders seriously. As a supreme leader, he did not act like a dictator: he did not seek to coerce his senior colleagues into submission. Rather, he was inclined to consider the practicality and political feasibility of controversial reform measures. Sometimes, he was forced to make compromises, to drop

projects he would have liked to pursue, or to water down reform packages.

Zhao Ziyang recalls his mentor's attitude toward a severe retrenchment package in 1980. "Even though Deng Xiaoping agreed to it at the Politburo Standing Committee meeting and gave a speech to that effect at the Central Committee Work Meeting," Premier Zhao notes, "it was not what he really wanted. He was not happy to have to pull the plug on major import projects and put equipment into storage. He agreed with Chen Yun and Li Xiannian's views only to show his support for Chen Yun" (Zhao 2009, p. 96). However, once Deng had judged the time of austerity to have come to an end, he pushed for a new round of reforms with an emphasis on increasing GDP growth. In forging political consensus, he chose to "lead from behind the scenes," rather than to launch a frontal attack on those who disagreed with him (Pye 1993). "The result was," Spence concludes, "a series of swerves, retreats, and sudden jumps in policy rather than any simple linear progression toward a 'modernized' China" (Spence 1999b, p. 662).

Yet, despite those "swerves, retreats, and sudden jumps," China did accomplish the fundamental transformation of its economy. China also achieved a greater degree of openness to the outside world. Nowhere is this more evident than in the fact that over the last three decades, Chinese exports had multiplied over 100 times, meaning that they now exceeded one trillion US dollars (Vogel 2011, p. 406).

In time, private enterprises and joint ventures replaced SOEs in most sectors. The Shanghai Stock Exchange became one of the ten largest stock markets by market capitalization worldwide. At the outset of the reform era, neither Deng nor any of his colleagues would have contemplated the possibility of any of

these massive developments taking place. The fact that all of this did occur was in no small part due to the dynamics set in motion by central, and more often, local actors. One adjustment here and one modification there, one new policy in this area and one exception for that sector, contracting farmland to households in this region and one or two SEZs in that province, and before too long an unstoppable dynamic had been unleashed. The entire system was transformed. However, Deng does deserve the lion's share of the credit for keeping an open mind throughout his time at the helm, and as a result, ensuring that policies beneficial to the people's *material well-being* were implemented.

## 6.2 Subjective Beliefs

Deng Xiaoping saw China's *march to modernity* as a quest to improve the material well-being of the people.<sup>2</sup> Yet, many Chinese living in urban centers, especially among the intellectual elite, vehemently disagreed with this view. During the Deng era, calls for the democratization of the political system were expressed in three major democracy movements in 1979 (Garside 1981), 1986 (Kwong 1988a), and 1989 (Brook 1998). Deng was so opposed to changing the Leninist fundamentals of China's political system that he ultimately did not hesitate to use military force against unarmed civilians. The so-called Tiananmen Square incident of 1989 left hundreds dead and thousands injured. It also resulted in a huge stain on Deng's reputation as an open-minded modernizer.

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THE FIRST DEMOCRACY movement started in late 1978 on the eve of the historic Third Plenum, which sealed Deng's victory against Hua Guofeng (see section 5.3). An increasing number of

citizens began putting up posters on a long wall in Beijing's Xidan area, which is not far from Tiananmen Square. At first, the handwritten posters were supportive of Deng's approach and critical of the Cultural Revolution. Soon though, calls for political emancipation started to emerge. Over time, such calls became more articulate in their demands and more critical of the CCP. By the spring of 1979, the movement had spread from Beijing to other cities. Demonstrations and protest marches occurred regularly, and violence was reported on occasion (Baum 1996, p. 78).

The most prominent advocate of democracy associated with this movement was an electrician employed at the Beijing Zoo called Wei Jingsheng. Alluding to Deng's declared aim of achieving the Four Modernizations (that is, modernizing agriculture, industry, defense, and science and technology), he dubbed democracy the *Fifth Modernization* that Deng needed to embrace. "If we want to modernize our economy and science and defense and the like," Wei argued, "we must first modernize our social system" (Wei 1998, p. 206). To those Party leaders who feared that democracy would unleash chaos, he had this to say: "We want to be the masters of our own destiny. We need no gods or emperors and we don't believe in saviors of any kind. We want to be masters of our universe; we do not want to serve as mere tools of dictators with personal ambitions for carrying out modernization" (Wei 1998, pp. 208-209).

As the scope and scale of the protests widened, Deng decided in late March 1979 to crack down on the movement. All posters on the so-called *Democracy Wall* were taken down. Putting up new ones was prohibited. Vocal activists were arrested, detained, and subjected to trials and prison sentences.

The second major democracy movement kicked off during the

winter of 1986, this time on university campuses. Tens of thousands of students gathered at more than 150 colleges and universities in 17 major cities to demand radical political reforms (Baum 1996, p. 203). The students carried banners proclaiming that “No Democratization, No Modernization;” “Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death!” and “Government of the People, by the People, and for the People” (Schell 1989, p. 213). This movement’s most vocal advocate of democracy was the renowned astrophysicist Fang Lizhi, who toured campuses around the country and encouraged students to rise up and demand their democratic rights. “I am here to tell you that the socialist movement, from Marx and Lenin to Stalin and Mao Zedong, has been a failure,” Fang declared in November 1986, “I think that complete Westernization is the only way to modernize” (Baum 1996, p. 189).

By the late 1980s, the majority of Chinese intellectuals had come to share Fang’s belief in “no democracy, no economic development” (Zhao 2001, p. 60). Of course, the Chinese leadership saw things differently. Although substantial differences existed among senior Party leaders with regard to the scope and pace of economic reforms, they were united in their staunch opposition to changing the fundamentals of the political system (Zhao 2009, p. 262). This time around, however, there was no need for a government crackdown to suppress the democracy movement. A few weeks after its launch, the movement lost momentum, and by January 1987, it was over (Baum 1996, pp. 203-204).

Many activists cared passionately about the importance of democracy for its own sake. Many agreed with Fang Lizhi that democracy was a birthright and that citizens should be the ones to bestow political legitimacy on their governments (Fenby 2008, p. 573). Yet, the democracy activists also drew wide support from the public well of discontent, which was

becoming ever deeper thanks to the negative side effects of Deng's reforms.

Side effects and long-term repercussions are a constant occurrence when interacting with dynamic and complex systems. Take the much-acclaimed agricultural reforms, for example. The majority of peasants approved of the elimination of the people's communes and also welcomed the freedom to farm their land as they saw fit. However, a sizable proportion of the peasantry still regarded the communes as one of the principal achievements of the Communist revolution, an achievement that they were less than enthusiastic about squandering (Spence 1991, p. 712). Further, despite all their flaws and shortcomings, the people's communes had provided free health care and education for the peasants. The availability of both services declined following the dismantling of the communes (Naughton 2007, p. 243).

Those who did not prosper in the new rural environment migrated to the cities to try their luck as low-paid workers, street vendors, or even prostitutes. At one point, Beijing alone was home to more than 1.1 million migrant workers. A dramatic rise in not only street crime, but also in organized crime testified to the strains placed on the capacities of urban centers to support job-seeking residents and migrant workers alike. Reports of hijacked buses and trains, stolen cargos, and robbed passengers increased (Baum 1996, pp. 229-231).

Further, due to the continuously changing economic and social landscape, millions of young people found themselves confronted with increasing uncertainties. Unprecedented new freedoms in the realm of culture and the arts allowed them to express their anxieties and worries in literary works, theater plays, movies, paintings, poems, and song lyrics (Browne et al 1994; Spence 1999b, p. 678). The students had many reasons to

feel resentful, from poor food and unhealthy living conditions in dirty dormitories to low stipends and the rising cost of living (Baum 1996, p. 190). Yet, it was not only material miseries that caused great distress during the reform era. “To my mind the most serious problem is the widespread spiritual malaise among people from all walks of life,” lamented the renowned journalist Liu Binyan, “a growing mood of depression, even despair, a loss of hope, for the future and of any sense of social responsibility, as if China were no longer their country. I haven’t seen this sort of attitude before, at least not in the past forty years” (Liu 1990a, p. 22).

Corruption was another major source of disgruntlement. One of the most notorious corruption scandals from the Deng era was perhaps the Hainan car import scandal. In the months between January 1984 and March 1985, officials in Hainan secured foreign currency amounting to more than half a billion US dollars and then used that money to import 89,000 cars, 122,000 motorcycles, 2.86 million TV sets, and 252,000 VHRs. The imported goods were sold elsewhere in China for prices that were up to four times higher than the purchase prices (Pepper 1988, p. 14). In a society that had until very recently celebrated the virtues of egalitarianism, such corruption scandals and stories of profiteering made people’s blood boil (Shirk 1994, p. 50).

The dual-track system, which was designed to safeguard the planned economy, was also becoming a major avenue for profiteering. One entrepreneur described how he developed a highly successful scheme for buying and reselling beer. Under the dual-track structure, beer produced by the Beijing Brewery had to be sold at a fixed price in Beijing, but not elsewhere. Beer produced, in say Qingdao, could be sold at market prices—which were twice as high—in Beijing and elsewhere, but not in Qingdao. The same general principle applied to other

commodities: the prices of locally produced products were set by the municipal commerce bureau, while products imported from other localities were subject to market prices. “There was an opening for me here,” the above-mentioned entrepreneur explained, “If I got hold of all the Beijing beer and sold it out of town and introduced out-of-town beer to Beijing, I’d be able to make a killing at both ends.” Thus, he joined forces with other merchants to ensure that his scheme worked. “The consumer had no choice,” he concluded triumphantly, “if you don’t like the stuff or reckon it’s too expensive, then fuck off!” (Sang 2006, pp. 22-23).

Deng’s famous maxim that “to get rich is glorious” was certainly working for this entrepreneur ... and for countless others. Yet, adapting to the rapidly changing economic landscape was, for million upon millions of Chinese, not so easy. At the outset of the Deng era China was one of the most equal societies in the world (Naughton 2007, pp. 217-218). Back then, all Chinese were equally poor. But now that more and more Chinese were becoming richer, the widening income gap was fueling social tensions. “It’s not enough to say you are feeling for the stones as you cross the river,” workers from the Beijing Worker’s Autonomous Federation proclaimed in a direct jibe at Deng Xiaoping, “what about those of us who fall in and drown? We’ve had 10 years of reform and we don’t know where we are going. The bureaucratic cats get fat, while the people starve” (Walder & Xiaoxia 1993).

In a reaction to the increasing public anger, in the spring of 1988, Deng urged his government to work out a decisive price reform package, adding that “A quick sharp pain is better than prolonged pain” (Zhao 2009, p. 129). One idea was to abolish the dual-track system altogether. Deng decided to ignore the cautionary advice of his colleagues and to push ahead with radical price liberalization. This, Vogel believes, was perhaps



the costliest error of Deng's career (Vogel 2011, p. 470). Rumors that the lifting of price controls would trigger astronomical inflation rates caused panic among the public. People rushed to the banks to withdraw their savings and then indulged in spending sprees. With hindsight, Zhao Ziyang admits that "Psychological anticipation was an issue that we did not understand at that time" (Zhao 2009, pp. 130-131).

It is to Deng's credit that—unlike Mao—he quickly came to accept the verdict of reality. All plans for price deregulation were hastily withdrawn, but the damage was already done: to curb the high inflation rates that Deng's price deregulation scheme had triggered, the government decided to scale back investments, tighten price controls, and suspend local payments to TVEs. The combined effect of the government's austerity program was a dramatic fall in the GDP growth rate from 11% in 1988 to 4% in 1989 (Vogel 2011, pp. 472-473). The well of discontent had just become deeper...



AFTER THE DEMONSTRATIONS of December 1986 had subsided, the politically liberal CCP General Secretary Hu Yaobang was quietly removed from office and replaced by then Premier Zhao Ziyang. However, Hu was allowed to retain his seat on the Politburo.

On April 15, 1989, Hu unexpectedly died following a heart attack. Students, who had regarded the deceased leader as a staunch opponent of corruption and a principled proponent for political freedoms, gathered in Tiananmen Square in a spontaneous outpouring of sympathy. The mourners called for an honest reevaluation of Hu's legacy, which they believed had been defamed by his conservative opponents within the Chinese leadership. The scope of students' demands soon

widened to include things as diverse as increasing the education budget, cracking down on corruption, and introducing far-reaching political reforms (Meisner 1996, p. 406). Yet, by the end of April, the number of demonstrators began to dwindle as passions cooled down (Baum 1996, p. 255).

As fate would have it, these events coincided with the long-scheduled visit by Mikhail Gorbachev to Beijing in mid-May 1989 in an effort to heal the decades-long Sino-Soviet rift. The students' leaders correctly concluded that the eyes of the world would be on their nation's capital during the visit. They saw it as a golden opportunity to attract the world's attention to their movement. Thus, to reignite the cooling passions, hundreds of students began a widely publicized hunger strike (Zhao 2001, p. 176). Events then began unfolding rapidly. More and more students and non-students from Beijing and elsewhere were joining the demonstrations by the day. A State Security Ministry report put the number of protestors on the eve of Gorbachev's visit at 1.2 million (Zhang 2002, p. 194).

How did the demonstrators find the courage to defy the authority of the Communist Party on this unprecedented level? Why did they believe that they could get away with banners proclaiming "Down with the Dictatorship!" (Schell 1995, p. 47)? What prompted them to be so audacious as to reject a compromise proposal made by Zhao Ziyang (Baum 1996, p. 255; Fenby 2008, p. 604)? Dörner argues that demonstrations are a psychologically rewarding experience, as they arouse feelings of elation and togetherness (Dörner 2001, p. 326). Such euphoric feelings lower the *resolution level*—that is, the complexity of cognitive processes (Dörner 2008). Thus, Janis asserts, participants exhibit an unwillingness to conduct a critical assessment of the situation and the dangers involved in their chosen track. While they know, Janis continues, that they do not have a "superman" in their midst, they feel that they, as a group, are a

kind of “supergroup,” which can overcome all odds and conquer all obstacles. Underlying this collective thinking pattern is an illusion of invulnerability (Janis 1982, p. 36).

This is exactly the kind of atmosphere that was prevalent in Tiananmen Square at the time, as one participant recalls:

We were almost drunk with success. We had spent our lives heeding authority, and our parents were always warning us that insubordination would spell disaster. Then we found ourselves protesting against the government in the middle of Tiananmen Square [...] as if we owned the place.... and were able to get away with it, everything seemed suddenly so different that it was hard to imagine ever becoming so obedient again (Schell 1995, p. 47).

Salisbury remembers that the students were “talking about democracy as if it were a new religion” (Salisbury 1993, p. 431). The fact that a huge audience, both domestically and abroad, was following the events live on their TV screens heightened the protestors’ sense of drama (Schell & Delury 2013, p. 309). International reporters ignored the historic Sino-Soviet summit that they were originally invited to cover and instead focused their attention on the protests. “What a place, what a time, what a story!” CBS News’s Dan Rather told his viewers, “It’s the people’s square, all right. More than a million Chinese demanding democracy and freedom, and proclaiming the new revolution” (Fenby 2008, p. 606).

According to leaked documents, Liu Huaqing, one of the nation’s highest-ranking military commanders, likened the scene in Beijing to “waves in the ocean that are gradually building strength,” lamenting that “now the waves have spread to nearly every major city in the country.” “Transportation is basically paralyzed in many parts of Beijing,” he continued,

“Some workers have taken to the streets. The price of groceries has increased, periodicals and mail are not delivered on time, and garbage has begun to pile up.” Liu was in no doubt as to what had to be done: “Beijing is already in severe anarchy; there’s no order to speak of. We have to restore order in Beijing, and let Beijing then be a model for the whole country” (Zhang 2002, p. 210).

However, at that time, Deng was not yet ready to dispel the demonstrations using military force. Rather, speakers in Tiananmen Square appealed to the students’ patriotism and urged them to refrain from embarrassing their country on the eve of the historic summit with the Soviet leader. Deng proved himself to be a bad psychologist here, as he clearly expected his appeals to be heeded. The protestors’ strong belief in the righteousness of their cause was reinforced by the euphoric atmosphere in Tiananmen Square.

The demonstrators’ refusal to back down left Deng “uncharacteristically tense” during his meeting with the Soviet reformer. China’s paramount leader had recently welcomed East Germany’s Eric Honecker with a “bear hug,” but he greeted Gorbachev with only a formal handshake. In fact, during the official banquet held for Gorbachev, TV cameras caught Deng while his hands were shaking so badly that he let a dumpling drop from his chopsticks (Vogel 2011, p. 614; Fenby 2008, p. 606).

For Deng personally, and for the Chinese leadership in general, the restoration of Sino-Soviet relations was one of the most important foreign policy achievements of the reform era. It had been years in the making. The grand welcome ceremony that was to have been held in Tiananmen Square in Gorbachev’s honor was cancelled. To add insult to injury, the Soviet leader had to use a side door to enter the Great Hall of the People—which is located at Tiananmen Square’s western edge—for his

meeting with Deng. The loss of face was enormous. Vogel argues that Gorbachev's visit represented a turning point in Deng's attitude toward the demonstrations (Vogel 2011, p. 615). Senior official Bo Yibo thought that the students' behavior had "not an ounce of human decency in it." The events were, so Bo said, "something we didn't even see during the big Red Guard demonstrations in the Cultural Revolution! These people are reverting to anarchy, flouting the nation's laws, and churning up furious social tumult" (Zhang 2002, p. 178).

In an effort to suppress this "social tumult," martial law was imposed on May 20. However, thanks to the construction of barricades across the streets by Beijing citizens, military convoys could not reach the city center, let alone Tiananmen Square. By that time, the square had become "a state within a state," with a fully-fledged communication center, security structure, and sanitation facilities (Baum 1996, p. 266). The students celebrated their victory over martial law by playing Schiller's *Ode to Joy* to the tune of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* over the loudspeakers in the square (Schell 1995, p. 127). In the meantime, the scope of the protests had widened to include factories, state media outlets, official think tanks, hotels, public security bureaus, and even government departments (Baum 1996, p. 266). The climax of the democracy movement was the unveiling a 37-foot-tall statue made from foam and plaster, which was dubbed the *Goddess of Democracy*, to enthusiastic cheers and shouts from the crowd. The Goddess of Democracy bore a striking resemblance to the Statue of Liberty—a fact that was not lost on American audiences who were following the drama live on their TV screens (Schell 1995, pp. 129-131).

Chinese officials today argue that the failure of martial law to restore order without bloodshed left Deng with no choice but to use military force to keep the nation united (Vogel 2011, p. 638). Eventually, Deng ordered the military to clear Tiananmen

Square, whatever the cost might be. On the evening of June 3—seven weeks after the demonstrations started—an emergency announcement was run in a ceaseless loop over the radio, on television, and over loudspeakers in Tiananmen Square: “Beginning immediately, Beijing citizens must be on high alert. Please stay off the streets and away from Tiananmen Square. All workers should remain at their posts and all citizens should stay at home to safeguard their lives” (Zhang 2002, p. 371). When military vehicles started entering the capital, several thousand citizens tried to block their way. After warning shots were ignored, the military threw stun grenades at the crowds. Some people fled, while others stood their ground. Then, to the citizenry’s disbelief and outright horror, the soldiers started discharging their AK-47s into the crowds (Baum 1996, pp. 282-283). In some areas, the barricades succeeded in blocking the oncoming convoys and angry citizens set fire to the immobilized tanks.

The bloodiest battles occurred west of Tiananmen Square, where workers and ordinary citizens lost their lives in a vain attempt to stop the advancing trucks of the People’s Liberation Army (Meisner 1996, p. 457). Between 2:00 and 3:00 a.m. on June 4, 1989, Tiananmen Square was sealed off. By then, only a few thousand students remained. After some heated debates among the students, the pro-evacuation group prevailed. Two hours later, a calm and orderly evacuation was swiftly carried out (Baum 1996, pp. 282-283).

The most reliable estimates place the number of casualties stemming from the night’s tragedy between 300 and 2,600 deaths and several thousand injuries (Vogel 2011, p. 631). A period of political persecution followed the military crackdown, with democracy activists being arrested and imprisoned.

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IT IS SAID that for the rest of his life Deng remained utterly convinced of the moral correctness of his decision to use military force against the demonstrators (Vogel 2011, p. 626). Why? The answer to this question is two-fold. On one level, Deng believed in the efficiency of the one-party system. For instance, during a meeting with Yugoslav delegates, he explained that

The greatest advantage of the socialist system [over liberal democracy] is that when the central leadership makes a decision it is promptly implemented without interference from any other quarters ... we don't have to go through a lot of repetitive discussion and consultation, with one branch of the government holding up another and decisions being made but not carried out. From this point of view our system is very efficient (Goodman 1994, p. 101).

This does not mean, however, that Deng rejected the notion of political reforms outright. On the contrary, the paramount leader talked often about the need for political reforms. Yet, as Zhao Ziyang explains, his mentor never intended to democratize the political system. Rather, he sought to promote well-educated leaders, to imbue decision making with pragmatism, to streamline the bureaucracy, and to reduce government waste (Zhao 2009, p. 249).

Deng believed that trained experts, rather than arbitrarily elected politicians, should be entrusted with the fate of the country. Meisner notes that Deng preferred to appoint trained engineers to leading positions. In fact, by the mid-1980s, 45% of government ministers held engineering degrees (Meisner 1996, p. 168). This preference for engineers proved to be one of Deng's enduring political legacies. His successor, Jiang Zemin, holds a university degree in engineering (Gilley 1998). As does Jiang's successor, Hu Jintao (Brown 2012). As does Hu's successor,

China's current president, Xi Jinping (Brown 2016). The fact that Deng clearly trusted the practical mindset of engineers says much about his problem-solving philosophy: analyze the problem, figure out how to solve it, and then just do it! Deng was, so Schell and Delury say, a "results-driven leader." Democracy was, for him, an instrument the suitability of which had to be judged by a single criterion: whether it would facilitate or hinder China's quest for wealth and power. Unlike Fang Lizhi, he did not regard democracy as a birthright.

On another level, Deng believed that without stability there could be no economic modernization. "I've said over and over again," he emphasized during the Tiananmen Square protests, "that we need stability if we're going to develop" (Zhang 2002, p. 148). In February 1989—that is, before the Tiananmen Square tragedy—he told President George Bush: "There are so many Chinese people, and each has his own viewpoint. If there's a demonstration by this one today, and that one tomorrow, there'd be a demonstration every day, 365 days a year. In that case, economic construction would be entirely out of the question" (Naughton 1993, p. 502). To Deng's mind, a weak government was prone to instability. This view had been shaped by the decades of chaos and turmoil that Deng and his colleagues had witnessed during the first half of their lives.

What Deng regarded as a lesson from history was again reinforced during the decade-long Cultural Revolution. His daughter recalls how Red Guards had invaded their home in August 1967 and dragged her parents out into the garden. Surrounded by angry, fanatical rebels, Deng and his wife were verbally abused. "Mama's eyeglasses had been removed," Deng's daughter remembers, "With her head down, she tried to steal a glance at Papa, but she couldn't see clearly." Deng had hearing problems. Forced to bend at the waist, he could barely understand the barrage of accusations that were thrown at him.



Whenever he tried to speak, he was rudely interrupted (Maomao 2002, pp. 45-46). In section 5.1, I elaborated on the personal tragedy that Deng's oldest son suffered around this time. Thus, to Deng's mind, mass movements equaled chaos and instability. Following the winter demonstrations of 1986, Deng put this viewpoint in unequivocal terms. During the days of the Cultural Revolution, he said, the leadership thought that "rousing the masses to headlong action was democracy and that it would solve all problems ... the result was civil war" (Deng 1994, p. 200).

Perhaps ironically, Deng's *subjective* sense of responsibility toward China is the key to understanding his readiness to take whatever actions he deemed necessary to ensure political stability. But what kind of sense of responsibility is it that seduces a leader to use military force against his own people? Here, it is important to again stress the subjectivity of right and wrong. Morality is not universal. I mean this in the sense that different people differ in terms of what they *subjectively* consider to be a moral action (Lakoff 2002). Throughout history, humans have committed some of the most hideous of crimes in the name of upholding what they regarded to be moral beliefs and convictions. Deng believed that the political stability the Communist Party provided would guarantee an increase in the material well-being of his countrymen. "If we collapse," Deng warned in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square incident, "China's history will regress for several tens of years, even a hundred years" (Yahuda 1993, p. 564).

When embarking on the dangerous path of political reform, Mikhail Gorbachev, as his biographer Archie Brown puts it, "sacrificed the boundless authority, the unquestioning obedience, the orchestrated public adulation, and the growing power over time which each General Secretary could rely on securing as he placed more and more of his people in key positions."

“For what?,” he asks rhetorically before answering, “For the creation of a better society and system than that which he inherited” (Brown 2007, p. 330). Unlike Gorbachev, rather than sacrificing his position of power, Deng sacrificed the lives of hundreds of innocent civilians. He must have *subjectively* believed that he did so “for the creation of a better society and system than that which he inherited.”

I cannot stress enough here that this attempted explanation of Deng’s actions should never be misconstrued as a justification. I am only seeking to reconstruct Deng’s own justification for crushing the democracy movement. There is, of course, no evidence concerning the objective correctness of Deng’s belief that giving in to the protestors’ demands would have triggered chaos and instability, or that doing so would have hindered China’s search for wealth and power. But such is the human condition: people act upon subjective beliefs that are shaped by the forces of their personality, the power of their worldview, and the subjective manner in which they interpret their past experiences.

### 6.3 Unfinished Reforms

In the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square tragedy, Deng’s colleagues blamed the rise of the democracy movement on the “spiritual pollution” brought about by his reform and opening-up policy. As a result, an economic retrenchment program was implemented. All talk of further reforms was suspended. Conservative forces set the tone for the debate regarding economic policy. “If we fail to wage a resolute struggle against ... capitalistic reform and opening up,” one senior cadre warned in the *People’s Daily*, “our socialist cause will be ruined” (Baum 1996, p. 334). At that time, Deng’s attempt to forge a

distinctive path to wealth and power appeared to have failed spectacularly.

In seeking to modernize the Soviet Union, the Kremlin's heretic chose to prioritize political reform (Shirk 1993), and in 1989, his approach appeared to have been dazzlingly successful. Gorbachev was being celebrated—chiefly abroad—for having ended the Cold War, eliminated the threat of nuclear annihilation, and introduced unprecedented freedoms into his formally totalitarian state. “The events of the last few days suggest,” an article in the *Chicago Tribune* concluded immediately following the military crackdown in Beijing, “that he, not Deng, was right and that he is likely to gain even more vigor in his pursuit of reform—to the applause of many of his countrymen” (Schodolski 1989). Gorbachev seemed to agree. On his way home from Beijing, he told the TASS news agency, not without personal gratification, that the Chinese leadership had lost control of their country (Schmidt & Sieren 2007, p. 67).

Of course, Gorbachev's self-congratulatory posture proved to be premature. Within two and a half years, the Berlin Wall fell, Eastern Europe rid itself of Russian hegemony, and the Soviet Union disintegrated. The triumphalist zeitgeist of the post-Cold War era soon gave birth to an almost divine sense of determinism. “What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history,” Francis Fukuyama prophesied, “but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government” (Fukuyama 1989). As democracies do not wage war against each other—at least, not according to the theory of democratic peace—Immanuel Kant's dream of perpetual peace seemed to have been realized at last. Now, all episodes of suffering and injustice were, or soon would be, to borrow a few words from the Scorpions' hit song

*Wind of Change*, “distant memories ... buried in the past, forever.”

The collapse of the Eastern Bloc provided the Western commentariat with a new explanatory framework for conjuring up dire predictions regarding China’s future. Self-proclaimed experts dreamed up different horrific scenarios for the Middle Kingdom: from riots, domestic upheaval, and military coups, to political fragmentation and a return to the era of rule by warlords. This unsavory fate would be the step, a regrettable albeit unavoidable one, that would ultimately bring China closer to its destiny ... that is, Western democracy! Yet, what almost no expert had anticipated was that the CCP would endure and that the fruits of Deng’s economic reforms would usher China into a period of unprecedented economic growth (Spence 1999b, p. 708).

It is true that the Soviet Union, its allies in the Warsaw Pact, and the People’s Republic of China were all Communist countries, but beyond that they were fundamentally different. Pundits might have benefited here from heeding the Clausewitzian warning against viewing dynamic and complex systems as “a field of wheat, which, without regard to the individual stalk, may be mown more or less efficiently depending on the quality of the scythe” (Clausewitz 1989, p. 153). The events of 1989 in China might have appeared to suggest that the CCP was about to lose power; however, any moment in a dynamic and complex system is but a snapshot produced by the interaction of thousands upon thousands of variables over the course of time. Gorbachev’s reforms set different dynamics in motion than Deng’s reforms did. The combined power of social, economic, and historical forces seemed to have almost destined the revolution of the Kremlin’s heretic to fail and that of China’s heretic to succeed.

“THE SOVIET UNION was a power which deliberately inflicted economic backwardness on itself for political and ideological reasons,” wrote Margaret Thatcher condescendingly, “but compensated for this by concentrating resources on its military sector and by using the power this gave it to obtain further resources by force or the threat of force” (Thatcher 1995, p. 9). Starting in the 1970s, the Soviet economy exhibited a dramatically deteriorating performance, as captured by declining GDP growth rates (Kotz & Weir 2007, p. 33). Brezhnev’s senile successors, Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko, had failed to reverse the course of the decline. In 1985, the 54-year-old Mikhail Gorbachev—then the youngest member of both the Politburo and the Central Committee Secretariat—was elected as the new leader of the USSR. The new General Secretary was determined to reinvigorate the system he had inherited by embracing reforms or *perestroika*. Brown defines *perestroika* as a “momentous effort by a small minority in the leadership of the Communist Party, backed by a larger minority within the political elite of the country, initially to reform the Soviet system and, subsequently, to transform it” (Brown 2007, p. 17).

It is important to emphasize here that the Soviet Union’s need for radical reforms was not self-evident. Gorbachev could have looked on the bright side: full employment, political stability, loyal military, low foreign debt, and an outstanding credit rating (Kotkin 2001, p. 173). But similar to Deng, Gorbachev, on the one hand, possessed a strong sense of responsibility for his country, and on the other hand, was blessed with an open mind that was not afraid to question deeply held beliefs.

During his trips to Western Europe prior to obtaining the highest scepter of power, Gorbachev was impressed by the civility of the political culture and the high level of living stan-

dards in the West. He admitted that upon seeing this, his “a priori faith in the advantages of socialist over bourgeois democracy was shaken” (Brown 2007, pp. 230-232). Mentally, he attributed the West’s economic prosperity to the democratic nature of its political system—a system with a built-in mechanism of public accountability, which ensured that the public interest, and not special interests, was served, at least in theory. As perestroika progressed, Gorbachev and his inner circle *gradually* came around to believe that democratizing the political system would bring out the long-suppressed potential of Soviet society (Kotz & Weir 2007, p. 57).

Within a relatively short period of time, competitive multi-candidate elections were introduced, greater press and personal freedoms were granted, and a hitherto unseen level of transparency was forced upon the reluctant Party apparatus. However, this rapid political liberalization had a number of unanticipated side effects. Sanctioning a free and uncensored public discourse, while morally laudable, made it practically impossible for Gorbachev to “cross the river by feeling for the stones.” Alexander Kabakov put it most aptly:

For decades we have been the most silent majority in the world. Really interesting points were discussed only in kitchens, with the closest friends, in the compartments of trains, and with unknown people who do not know your name and address and, therefore, are safe. Today we are probably the most vocal nation. Everything left unsaid accumulated over a long time, and it is impossible to talk about all points at the same time (Brown 2007, p. 119).

Soviet citizens were not only talking, but also demanding actions be taken to address a wide range of grievances. In no time, Gorbachev found himself having to cope with multiple

sources of criticism: from radicals for whom the pace of democratization was too slow, from conservatives who feared the total erosion of the Soviet system, from national elites who sought greater political autonomy, and from ordinary citizens who were upset by the continuing decline in their living standards due to economic woes (Brown 2007, p. 20). The introduction of competitive elections ensured that populist candidates were elected. Unanticipated side effects and long-term repercussions combined to produce an avalanche that eventually led to the “sudden” disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (Plokhy 2014). The Soviet collapse was followed by a number of civil wars—in Chechnya, Karabakh, Abkhazia, Ingushetia, Adjaria, Ossetia, Tajikistan, and Moldova—resulting in thousands of casualties, millions of refugees, political instability, and economic stagnation (Kotkin 2001, p. 4).



“MY FATHER,” Deng Xiaoping’s son Zhifang confided to an American friend, “thinks Gorbachev is an idiot” (Vogel 2011, p. 423). The Soviet reformer had sought to transform the political system without realizing that by doing so, he would undermine political stability. Looking at their decision-making behavior, it is possible to identify three major differences between Deng and Gorbachev.

First, Deng had no blueprint for his reforms, which prompted him to allow spontaneous developments—such as the dismantlement of the people’s communes, the emergence of township and village enterprises, and the introduction of urban private ventures—to take place. Deng’s wait-and-see attitude was the source of major complaints from Chinese intellectuals at the time. They criticized their government for lacking a theoretical basis for the reform project and they admired Gorbachev for

having one (Zhao 2001, pp. 60-61). Yet, in retrospect, Deng's approach proved to be more successful: policy initiatives had to pass the test of reality and not that of theory.

Second, Deng was more successful in choosing and appointing capable decision makers than Gorbachev ever was. In fact, while some important milestones of the reform era resulted from spontaneous local developments, others were more or less well-thought-out policies. Deng himself admitted in 1984 that he was "a layman in the field of economics" and that he knew "very little indeed" (Deng 1994, p. 84). So how did he make the final decision with regard to economic matters? Aside from the advice he received from government think tanks and his own sound judgment, Deng had a well-earned reputation for putting "the right people in the right place" (Schell & Delury 2013, p. 264). One of the best appointments Deng ever made was assigning Zhao Ziyang with the overall responsibility for the economy. The former German chancellor Helmut Schmidt considered Zhao to be a genius with an intuitive understanding of the working mechanisms of market economies (Schmidt & Sieren 2007, p. 59).

This stands in sharp contrast to Gorbachev, who placed his trust in quick solutions proposed by trained economists, only to then be disappointed by their failure to deliver (Naughton 1993, p. 504). In 1990, Gorbachev appointed the excessively optimistic Nikolay Petrakov as his chief economist adviser. Petrakov produced an overambitious 500-Day Plan for the transition from a command to a market economy. The plan won Gorbachev's enthusiastic support, but it collapsed under its own weight soon after (Brown 2007, p. 182).

Third, Gorbachev's decision-making circle exhibited clear signs of conformity and concurrence-seeking behavior. In fact, all the major reform policies were decided upon by Gorbachev and a



small number of like-minded allies and advisers during weekend meetings held outside Moscow (Brown 2007, pp. 188-189). These policy initiatives were then presented to the Politburo for rectification. Brown explains how entrenched habits of the mind prompted the Politburo members to suppress their doubts and to go along with policy measures that ran contrary to their own convictions, simply because they were proposed by the General Secretary himself (Brown 2007, p. 254). Deng, however, took the arguments advanced by the conservative faction seriously (see section 6.1). Chen Yun might have been closed-minded in many ways, but his interventions sometimes provided a much-needed balance to Deng Xiaoping's eagerness to speed up the process of economic reform (Vogel 2011, p. 434).



Now, I have suggested that the social and economic forces unleashed by Deng predestined his reforms to move in only one direction: forward. But why?

First, there was broad public support for Deng's modernization program. Despite the discontent expressed during the democracy movement, millions upon millions of Chinese had profited from the economic boom years. Rising living standards changed attitudes. Society was becoming increasingly materialistic. The main aspiration of young people was no longer to wage class struggle against closet counterrevolutionaries, but rather to own a comfortable home, have a good job, get married, and raise children (Hessler 2007). The fact that many of the economic innovations had come from the bottom rather than from the top meant that they could not be taken away easily: farmers, workers, and entrepreneurs had become accustomed to their newly won economic and social freedoms (Lin et al 2003, p. 178).

Second, there was general support among officials for Deng's reforms. This was in no small part due to one of Deng's most important contributions to the transformation of China's political system. From the outset of the reform era, Deng had continuously emphasized the importance of selecting, training, and promoting the next generation of leaders at all levels of the hierarchy. Unlike the prevalent conditions during the Mao era, the selection criteria for promotion included neither class background nor revolutionary zeal, but rather the educational level of cadres and their previous performance in solving real-life problems. The rejuvenation of the echelons of leadership diminished conservative opposition to Deng's reforms over time. In fact, by 1987 some 42% of Central Committee members were first-timers and 70% had college degrees (Baum 1996, p. 217).

Thus, the potential for revitalizing and deepening the reform and opening-up policy was there, although it still had to be brought out. Deng again felt that his country needed him. Despite suffering from various age-related illnesses, China's 87-year-old paramount leader ventured south in early 1992 in the middle of winter on an "inspection tour" that would enter the annals of Chinese history (Wong & Zheng 2001). During stops in the special economic zones of Shenzhen and Zhuhai, Deng gave several important talks intended to reignite the flame of economic reform.

During his speeches, Deng turned the argument of his conservative opponents on its head. He contended that it was precisely because of the achievements of the reform and opening-up policy that China was able to weather the storm of the Tiananmen Square protests. Therefore, Deng continued, the Party leadership should safeguard reform policies, rather than trying to reverse them (Deng 1994, p. 359). "The essence of Marxism is seeking truth from facts," Deng argued, "That's

what we should advocate, not book worship.” The material successes of the reform and opening-up era did not come about by adhering to books and theories, but by relying on practice. “I haven’t read too many books,” Deng admitted, “but there is one thing I believe in: Chairman Mao’s principle of seeking truth from facts. That is the principle we relied on when we were fighting wars, and we continue to rely on it in construction and reform” (Deng 1994, pp. 369-370).

Initially, the official state media did not report on Deng’s southern inspection tour. However, thanks to Hong Kong journalists, excerpts from Deng’s talks were leaked to the local press and from there to the rest of mainland China (Schell 1995, p. 358). Soon after, a wave of pro-reform articles started to appear in newspaper after newspaper. The momentum thus generated was too strong to be ignored. In October 1992, the 14th Party Congress adopted Deng’s goal of building a “socialist market economy.” Then, the smooth transition of power from Deng Xiaoping and his team to a new generation, under Jiang Zemin’s leadership, took place. A limit of two terms (of five years each) was placed on senior leadership positions. Contrary to all the ominous predictions by foreign experts and China watchers, Jiang did not tamper with the constitutional term limit. In 2002, a new generation of Party leaders was inaugurated under Hu Jintao. In 2012, the fifth generation of Chinese Communist rulers took office under Xi Jinping’s leadership.

Deng spent the last years of his life in the care of his family. On February 19, 1997, the great reformer passed away, aged 92. In accordance with his wishes, his internal organs were donated to medical research, while the ashes of his cremated body were spread over the sea (Vogel 2011, p. 690). Schell and Delury observe that while giant tombs were built to house the remains of ancient emperors and a magnificent mausoleum was constructed for the embalmed body of Chairman Mao, no such

pomposity was awarded to (or requested by) Deng: “His monument was China’s restoration to wealth and power” (Schell & Delury 2013, p. 323).

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KISHORE MAHBUBANI ARGUES that the real value of economic and social modernization is not solely material. Far from it. It is the uplifting of the human spirit that liberates the mind. This mental liberation empowers millions upon millions of people to take charge of their destinies (Mahbubani 2008, p. 18). Lee Kuan Yew remembers a visit he made to Peking University shortly before Mao’s death. “I asked students what they would do after they graduated,” he writes, “The answers came pat, ‘Whatever the Party decides, how I can best serve the people’” (Lee 2000, p. 589). Today, it is highly unlikely that one would be met with such an answer at any of China’s academic institutions.

China is wealthier today than it ever has been in the past (Osnos 2014). China is also more powerful now than it ever was. In fact, the global reach of the emerging superpower extends from mines and oil fields in Africa to agricultural ventures in Latin America (Economy & Levi 2014; Shambaugh 2014). Yet, over time the reform era also produced a number of serious side effects and long-term repercussions.

In today’s China, some areas still suffer from extreme poverty. Mass migration from rural to urban centers is placing increasing strains on the capacity and resources of the cities. Different regions provide different health-care, education, and pension schemes, each facing a wide array of challenges. Corruption and the flawed implementation of the country’s laws continue to fuel public anger. Human rights violations still regularly occur. The suppression of dissent continues to be a

cardinal principle behind CCP policy. Then there is the severe environmental degradation, the overexploitation of forests, water shortages, and air pollution. Further, separatist movements in Xinjiang and Tibet threaten the very fabric of national unity. In terms of its foreign relations, China has to face a number of unresolved territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas, as well as with India. The issue of Taiwan remains a troublesome one. The list of challenges that face China both domestically and internationally goes on...

Deng's reforms constitute an unfinished project. The dilemmas of modernization can never be completely solved. As policy makers tackle one set of problems, a new set arises. The trajectory of China's development is now determined by the decision making of hundreds of millions of entrepreneurs, peasants, migrant workers, coal miners, students, merchants, factory owners, handset producers, innovators, online retailers, street vendors, and so on. To suppose that orders issued in Beijing are tremblingly obeyed in all of China's 3.8 million villages and hamlets is a total fantasy.<sup>3</sup> One of Deng's enduring political legacies is the fact that today's leaders largely measure their performance by their actual success and failure in terms of promoting economic growth (Oksenberg & Bush 1999, p. 8). Mao's Communist ideals and slogans had long lost their broad appeal. While *The Internationale* is still played during Party Congresses, the anthem's lyrics have ceased to reflect the aspirations of Chinese officials, let alone those of Chinese people.

Mao was right back in the 1950s when he called upon his colleagues to forge a distinctively Chinese path to modernization rather than copying the experience of other countries. Yet, he rebelled against Soviet economic orthodoxy only to replace it with his own dogma. He rejected blind faith in the words of Marx, only to instill a superstitious belief in his own infallibility. He unleashed heresy and ended up creating a religion.

Deng's genius lay in understanding that the Chinese leadership needed to not only abandon this and that specific Maoist policy, but more importantly, it needed to devise a new philosophy of dynamic and complex problem solving—the most formidable barrier to which was the religious devotion and “total abandon” Chinese leaders applied in following the paramount leader's orders. Questioning the Chairman's “ubiquitous wisdom” and “endless farsightedness” was a cognitive no-go zone fenced off by a rigorous system of self-censorship that instantly detected and remorselessly stifled any heretical thoughts. Having abolished this cognitive no-go zone, Deng and his successors were free to embrace the power of pragmatism.

## SUMMARY: EVALUATING THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS

In this book, I have applied the PSI theory to explain the behavior of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping as China's paramount leaders. In a nutshell, the PSI theory *conceptualizes* human beings as self-regulating systems programmed by evolution to maintain set points for a number of internal fuel tanks. These tanks are: (1) the tank of physiological needs; (2) the tank of sexual needs; (3) the certainty tank; (4) the competence tank; and (5) the affiliation (or belongingness) tank. As explained in section 1.4, the fuel in these tanks is used up over time for various reasons. Thus, humans frequently engage in goal-directed behavior to reduce the gap between the actual value and the set point in a given tank.

Humans use their cognitive abilities to make plans, develop strategies, and reflect on the best way to satisfy a given need at a given time. Through the interaction between motivational and cognitive processes, certain patterns emerge, which are referred to as *emotions*. For example, imagine someone walking home alone late at night in a crime-prone city. Being aware of this fact prompts the brain to reduce the certainty level, increase the

frequency of background checks, and raise the arousal level—that is, the readiness to take action. The combination of high uncertainty, frequent background checks, and high arousal is labeled as *fear*. The complex interactions between motivational and cognitive factors in a dynamic and complex world give rise to a complex array of human emotions.

The notion of internal fuel tanks lies at the heart of the PSI theory. Of course, this is not to imply that actual fuel tanks exist within the brain. Rather, the PSI theory employs the metaphor of fuel tanks so as to render the psychological concept of needs and motives more accessible.

Richard Dawkins courted a number of controversies when he coined the term *selfish gene* (Dawkins 1976). A gene is not a reasoning entity, so how can it be selfish?! In one of his lectures, the renowned British biologist elaborated on the use of metaphors in science. The British chemist Peter Atkins, Dawkins began, constructed a simple analogy to explain the phenomenon of *refraction*. Imagine that you are a lifeguard at a beach. Diagonally, you see someone drowning. What is the fastest way to get to him? Following a beeline is not a good idea because you can run faster than you can swim. The optimal solution is to run at a certain angle in order to maximize your time on the beach and minimize your time in the water. Similarly, photons “work hard” to minimize the time required to travel between one medium and another—a phenomenon that physicists refer to as refraction.

Nobel Prize laureate Jacques Monod once said that in reflecting on chemistry problems, he often ponders the question, “What would I do if I were an electron?” W.D. Hamilton made important contributions to evolutionary genetics by asking himself, “What would I do if I were a gene trying to maximize my survival through many generations?” Dawkins concludes that



the intelligent electron metaphor, as well as the intelligent gene metaphor, facilitate the conceptualization of new scientific theories. “It’s impossible for a reasonable person to think,” Dawkins argues, “that we really mean that genes [or photons or electrons] have intelligent motives” (Dawkins 2014). Equally, I hope that the fuel tank metaphor will not be misconstrued.

Now, humans are not machines manufactured according to a single, well-defined set of specifications. Rather, each person’s genetic endowment impacts not only her mental and athletic abilities, but also her dispositional traits (Loehlin et al 1998; Plomin et al 1990). Further, each person is greatly influenced by the interplay between the socioeconomic conditions and historical events that take place during different stages of her life (Stewart & Healy 1989). Each person is affected by the cultural values of her environment (Gjerde 2004; Shweder & Sullivan 1993). And that is to say nothing of the significant influence that early childhood upbringing, one’s peers and role models have on that person’s personality development (Bowlby 1988; Carlson & Egeland 2004; Moos 1973). Thus, the interaction between nature and nurture produces unique human beings with distinctive personalities (Krueger & Johnson 2008).



IN CHAPTERS 2 to 4 of this book, I developed the argument that one of Mao’s distinctive characteristics was the leak in his competence tank. That leak defined his personality in more ways than one. First, *it left him addicted to competence signals*. Mao was “pre-programmed” to seek challenges in all the conceivable domains of life—from swimming to governing. If he had to reshape his ideology to fit his motivational drive, then so be it. But a challenge had to be truly *challenging*—that is, its difficulty level had to match Mao’s self-perceived abilities. As

his subjective belief in his own abilities grew over time, new challenges had to be more and more demanding. The trajectory of Mao's appetite for ever more daunting challenges pointed in a dangerous direction. His rebellion against the Soviet development model prompted him to endorse a utopian vision, which brought about catastrophic consequences for his country.

Second, *his continuously leaking competence tank left him chronically doubtful as to the correctness of his own actions*. To keep his doubts at bay, Mao needed a ceaseless stream of competence signals in order to assure himself that he was on the right track. He used to employ big words, historical analogies, and categorical thinking to suppress his own, as well as his colleagues', doubts. Mao's behavior was ambivalent at times. He would support a policy today, reject it tomorrow, only to embrace it again on the day after that. This pattern points to reoccurring internal struggles—a phenomenon that was examined by drawing on the metaphor of the antagonistic dialogue. There is no evidence to suggest that Mao ever succeeded in developing an effective cognitive strategy to address his doubts.

Third, *the leak in Mao's competence tank left him oversensitive to negative feedback signals from reality and from others*. This clearly manifested in his general unwillingness to admit unequivocally, without qualification, and without implicating his colleagues that he was wrong. Instead, he applied different competence-boosting mechanisms. Examples include ballistic behavior in constructing hypotheses (e.g., “problems in the Great Leap Forward amounted only to one finger out of ten”), external attribution (e.g., identifying scapegoats and inventing conspiracy theories), goal inversion (e.g., turning the Hundred Flowers Campaign into an anti-rightist witch-hunt), attacking the personal integrity of critics, and invoking the redemptive

logic (e.g., “the flaws of the Great Leap offer valuable lessons in socialist construction”).

Fourth, *the leak in Mao’s competence tank made him extremely stubborn in terms of accomplishing what he had put his mind to*. This, of course, is related to the third point: the fact that Mao frequently put a positive spin on negative feedback meant that he seldom acknowledged serious flaws in his decisions or his chosen course of action. But it also goes beyond that. Even when Mao accepted that things were not going according to plan, he did not easily make the decision to change course. As he once said, “Some people don’t give up their convictions until they see the Yellow River and have no other place to retreat. I don’t give up my convictions even when I see the Yellow River” (Li 1994, p. 377). Admitting defeat is especially painful for someone with low self-confidence.

Fifth, *when failure could no longer be denied, Mao used to change his mind without reflection on how and why he had been wrong*. This could be seen during the Hundred Flowers Campaign: the policy was successful, but it must be abandoned immediately! Engaging in self-reflection exposes one’s shortcomings. Thus, it reduces one’s competence level in the short term. In the long term, it improves the quality of one’s decision making, and hence, increases the probability of success.

IN CHAPTER 5, I elaborated on the behavior of Deng Xiaoping. The two defining characteristics of Deng’s motivational profile were his “undamaged” competence tank and his strong need for affiliation. Deng’s intact competence tank influenced his behavior in a number of ways. First, *Deng exhibited a remarkable willingness to engage in self-reflection*. I argued that the cruel fate Deng suffered during the Cultural Revolution prompted him to subject his own decision-making approach, while under Mao’s

leadership, to ruthless scrutiny. The result of this was that he abandoned his *a priori* faith in the correctness of Chairman Mao's actions. This might initially seem trivial, but one can compare Deng's transformation to that of a devout religious believer who lived his life according to scripture and then decided to become an atheist. Depending on the tenets of that person's former religion, the resultant behavioral changes could be immense. In the case of Deng, it is possible to detect an eagerness throughout the reform era to evaluate feedback from reality, to espouse pragmatic policies, and to shun theory.

Deng once summed up his own attitude very eloquently during a meeting with American scholars. "I have never attended a university," he admitted, "but I have always considered that since the day I was born, I have been in the university of life. There is no graduation date except when I go to meet God" (Vogel 2011, p. 14). However, from the early years of the People's Republic through to the Cultural Revolution, this pragmatic mentality was, at least partially, shut down.

Second, *Deng was prepared to turn his back on unsuccessful policies*. I touched on an important example of this behavioral tendency in section 6.2. The paramount leader agreed to reverse a price deregulation plan—which he had been very strongly in favor of—as soon as its adverse consequences became evident.

Third, *Deng was content to not claim authorship of reform policies*. He showed, as Naughton put it, "a surprising tolerance for not deciding things" (Naughton 1993, p. 507). As discussed earlier, the most innovative reforms came from farmers who dismantled the people's communes and adopted the household responsibility system, rural entrepreneurs who promoted the concept of township and village enterprises, and small businesses in urban areas that flourished by providing simple,

everyday commodities. Deng himself admitted that many good reform ideas did not come from him, but rather “from people at the grass roots” (Deng 1994, p. 370).

In Chapter 5, I also discussed some examples of Deng’s need for affiliation. This need manifested in his warm relationship with his family, his considerate attitude toward his colleagues, and his strong sense of responsibility. Deng enjoyed family life. He cared for his children and he used to watch cartoons with his grandchildren. He regularly consulted with his senior colleagues and made policy concessions to accommodate more conservative leaders, such as Chen Yun and Li Xiannian. His relationships with his family and his colleagues satisfied his need for external legitimacy signals. His deep sense of responsibility toward his country and the behavioral consequences that followed satisfied his need for internal legitimacy signals.

Now, how can the many hypotheses formulated throughout this book regarding Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping be tested?

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THE SCHOLARLY INVESTIGATIONS relied on in this book succeed in painting a complex and realistic picture of the Mao and Deng eras. Yet, they often ignore the psychological mechanisms underlying the leaders’ behavioral patterns. Upon reading historical narratives, one cannot help wondering, for example, how the same brilliant revolutionary leader who “conceived and led the most popular revolution in world history” (Meisner 2007, p. vi) ended up devising policies that cost tens of millions of his countrymen their lives. One is also puzzled as to why his colleagues in the Chinese leadership became either “as submissive as lambs” or as aggressive as “falcons and hounds” in attacking those who refused to share their Chairman’s utopian visions. One cannot but feel profoundly baffled by the unshak-

able conviction of the Chinese leadership concerning the correctness of policies that had been proven to be disastrous. Equally, one feels puzzled by the complete U-turn performed by Deng Xiaoping in terms of China's economic policy. One is also left perplexed by the fact that the apparently open-minded reformer resorted to military suppression to prevent the democratization of China.

Historians are not necessarily trained in the empirical science of human behavior—that is, psychology. Sometimes, historians, although more often political scientists, venture into the realm of psychological explanation. On such occasions, they tend to attribute palace intrigues, policy initiatives, and the inadequate handling of missteps to a politician's desire to either retain or expand his power. Such a depiction is understandable given that mainstream political science theories are based either explicitly or implicitly on the so-called *rational actor model* (RAM; Allison & Zelikow 1999, p. 4). In a nutshell, the RAM conceptualizes decision makers as cold-blooded and calculating machines that weigh the pros and cons of proposed policies in order to maximize their own personal power (or that of their state). Therefore, *power* is portrayed as a mysterious force that prompts politicians to sacrifice almost everything in its pursuit.

Perhaps one of the best literary descriptions of the irresistible appeal of power was offered by George Orwell in 1984. After introducing the reader to a bleak world in which citizens are surveilled around the clock, *thoughtcrimes* are punished by the *Thought Police*, and dissidents are hideously tortured in the dungeons of the *Ministry of Love*, Orwell attributes the inception of such cruel societal structures to the Party's obsession with absolute power. "The Party," Winston Smith's torturer O'Brien explains, "seeks power entirely for its own sake. We are not interested in the good of others; we are interested solely in

power. Not wealth or luxury or long life or happiness: only power, pure power” (Orwell 1983, p. 234).

The pervasiveness of the RAM is perhaps attributable to the most powerful weapon in its arsenal: it makes sense. What else if not power would greedy politicians yearn for?! Over the last four decades, tremendous advances have been made in those fields that follow an empirical—and thus, *scientific*—approach when studying human behavior, such as psychology, neuroscience, and linguistics. The RAM has been scrutinized and refuted in several studies (Gigerenzer 2000; Kahneman & Tversky 2000; Lakoff & Johnson 1999), and more complex and realistic theories of human behavior—such as the PSI theory—have been put forward.

Now, the fact that I have based this study on a scientifically sound theory does not necessarily mean that my findings are correct. While political science is a theoretical field that often adopts, to put it mildly, a liberal attitude toward empirical evidence, psychology is not. Thus, it is important to develop a way to evaluate the present findings.



AS IN OTHER areas of science, my approach in this study involved three steps. First, I started by diving into the historical record, thereby making unsystematic observations concerning the decision-making behavior of Mao Zedong and his colleagues. Examples of my early findings include (1) Mao’s tendency to use big words to promote major policy initiatives, (2) signs of subtle skepticism, (3) a tendency to rebuke those who did not agree with him, and (4) the heavy application of competence-boosting mechanisms whenever difficulties arose. Further, the historians whose works I consulted sometimes made intriguing observations regarding Mao’s behavior. For

example, reflecting on the Chairman's decision to accelerate the pace of collectivization during the early 1950s, Maurice Meisner notes that "Mao's impatience with history did not allow him to sit back and wait until the industrial foundations for socialism were laid" (Meisner 2007, p. 127). This caused me to wonder what the motivational mechanism behind Mao's "impatience with history" was.

Then, I moved on to the second step and began formulating hypotheses. One early hypothesis was that Mao did, in fact, possess what Jonathan Spence describes as "ruthless self-confidence" (Spence 1999a, p. xi). Philip Short has made a similar argument: "By the mid-1950s, Mao was so convinced of the essential correctness of his own thought that he could no longer comprehend why, if people had the freedom to think for themselves, they would think what they wanted, not what he wanted" (Short 2000, pp. 470-471). Both arguments made sense. After all, it is important not to forget who Mao was: a peasant born in a poor village during a time of tumultuous social and political upheaval, a patriot who shared the dream of countless other patriots to restore China to wealth and power, and a revolutionary who conquered his country's vast territory with an army of peasants. Was it not then logical to assume that someone with a life trajectory as improbable as Mao's would develop unshakable self-confidence? Spence's and Short's characterizations did seem to fit at least some of the facts.

My next step was to evaluate the developed hypothesis. Karl Popper argues that scientific hypotheses must be falsifiable (Popper 2002). If I were to propose that Mao was merely a puppet possessed by an ancient spirit that controlled his actions, doing so would violate Popper's criterion of falsifiability. How could anyone disprove this hypothesis?! Spence's and Short's claims, however, are falsifiable. If Mao really did boast a "ruthless self-confidence," then he would not have been so



sensitive to negative feedback signals from reality. If Mao really was “so convinced of the essential correctness of his own thought,” he would not have reacted so angrily whenever someone disagreed with him. Rather than attacking his critics, he would have listened to criticism and argued back rationally. Spence’s and Short’s hypotheses, therefore, did not seem to be correct. Thus, back to stage two: I needed a new hypothesis.

I asked, what if Mao’s radiating self-confidence did not spring from a deep conviction concerning the correctness of his thoughts, but rather resulted from an attempt to suppress his growing doubts? What if his irritability was not an expression of being exasperated with his colleagues’ closed-mindedness, but rather an indication of internal insecurity? Further, could these two characteristics somehow be linked? What if they were both symptoms of the same cause? If so, what could that cause be? It is important here to remember the premise of the PSI theory: humans do what they do so as to satisfy arising needs. What need did the Chairman seek to satisfy here? Physiological? Sexual? Affiliative? No, it was definitely the need for competence signals. Why was Mao’s competence level so unstable? Could his metaphorical competence tank have had a metaphorical leak?

This hypothesis could easily be falsified if I was to find that Mao was not driven by an insatiable hunger for ever more formidable challenges. In other words, the hypothesis would be falsified if I was to discover that the Chairman sought to embrace political stability. Hence, I moved on to evaluate my hypothesis. I looked at Mao’s life. I examined its episodes, from his youth onward—episodes that took place long before the events of Chapter 2. I worked through his early writings as collected in Stuart Schram’s voluminous *Mao’s Road to Power 1912-1949*. I found little to disprove my hypothesis. On the contrary, it seemed that the leak in Mao’s competence tank

drove him to follow the path of revolution. It induced in him feelings of “great joy” that he was struggling against heaven, earth, and man—as he put it in the famous line I quoted in section 2.4. It made him rejoice in the face of challenges. It prompted him to persevere when confronted with adversity. It permeated his writings with “upbeat allusions to storms, upheavals, tornados, tempests, tides, and waves” (Schell & Delury 2013, p. 214). Then, in his later years, his thirst for ever greater challenges brought about his “impatience with history.” This is why he did not share his comrades’ yearning for a peaceful and stable life following the success of the revolution. As his motivational drive clashed with reality, he grew ever more intolerant of criticism.

What about the behavioral patterns that I have identified throughout this book, such as affirmative perception, ballistic behavior, categorical thinking, and self-reflection? How did I evaluate my diagnoses? First, I had to ensure that the conditions in the historical record were in agreement with the “symptoms” identified in the empirical research. Affirmative perception is diagnosed when someone pays a disproportionate amount of attention to information that supports his views and ignores information that contradicts them. Ballistic behavior is identified when decision makers take action without scrutinizing the impact of that action, thereby assuming that the action was successful. Categorical thinking is detected whenever someone justifies adopting a certain measure by invoking the category to which that measure supposedly belongs rather than discussing the pros and cons of the measure itself. Self-reflection is discerned when an actor strives to expose his behavioral shortcomings and elaborate on ways to remedy them.

Diagnosing behavioral patterns in a certain situational context was not sufficient. I had to make sure that it was not an isolated

incident. For example, in section 3.4 I discussed how Mao scolded Deng Zihua for elaborating on the difficulties of the collectivization process: “Your mind needs to be shelled with artillery!” (Short 2000, p. 446). Now, was this incident typical of Mao’s leadership style or was it an exception? Perhaps the Chairman disliked Deng Zihui for some reason? Or perhaps he was just having a bad day? Or perhaps he did not sleep well the night before thanks to his often recurring insomnia? To consider this incident an example of Mao’s leadership style, I had to find other examples of the Chairman’s irritability when it came to negative feedback. (By now, the reader should bear witness to the fact that such an attitude was typical of Mao Zedong.) By doing this, I was striving to satisfy another attribute of scientific research, namely to ensure the *coherence* of my findings.

In the Chinese leadership’s mishandling of the Great Leap Forward, I diagnosed groupthink. The defining feature of groupthink is that decision makers become more concerned with retaining the approval of their leader and their colleagues than with drafting good policies. According to Janis, groupthink has three major symptoms: (1) the overestimation of what is possible; (2) closed-mindedness; and (3) the application of collective pressure to dissenting colleagues. Groupthink leads to defective decision-making behavior, which manifests in an inadequate search for information, the failure to examine the pros and cons of policy measures, and affirmative perception in terms of evaluating policies (Janis 1982, p. 244). In Chapter 3, I demonstrated how all these symptoms were present within the Chinese leadership’s decision-making behavior during the Great Leap Forward.

The central question that guided my analysis of the Cultural Revolution was formulated by MacFarquhar and Schoenhals: “Why did China’s supreme leader decide to tear down what he

had done so much to create?” (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals 2008, p. 3). Mainstream interpretations start with Mao’s obsession with Khrushchev, which is commonly regarded as a “necessary prerequisite” for unleashing the Cultural Revolution—a project the Chairman had been secretly planning for years (Lüthi 2008, p. 301). By popularizing the idea of Khrushchev as a revisionist, Mao laid the groundwork for the attack on China’s own Khrushchevs: Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping. Mao’s main reason for attacking Liu and Deng was power—pure and simple. The pair’s ever growing power bases appeared to threaten Mao’s. Yet, the often overlooked fact is this: Mao did not lack power at any time throughout his reign. In Chapter 4, I sought to demonstrate this fact by elaborating on relevant historical episodes. If Mao was only interested in reasserting his power, if he was only targeting Liu and Deng, then he could have just dismissed Liu, Deng, and others without launching a campaign that threatened to tear not only the Communist Party, but the entire country apart.

In fact, on August 12, 1966, when the 74 full members of the Central Committee cast their votes to elect the 11 members of the Politburo Standing Committee, Mao single-handedly decided to disregard the outcome of the election and demote both Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping—even though the latter had received the unanimous support of the Central Committee (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals 2008, p. 94). Detailed accounts of the decade of the Cultural Revolution heavily suggest that the Chairman actually believed that he had to prevent a capitalist restoration from taking place and that his aim was larger than merely removing Liu, Deng, and their allies from power. Thus, the real mystery, the central question, becomes this: why did Mao’s goal in life change from building socialism to preventing capitalism? The explanation I offered in Chapter 4 traces the transformation of Mao’s narrative identity.

My study of the highly complex Deng era centers on the psychological conversion that China's second heretic experienced during his years in exile. I sought to demonstrate the power of self-reflection, which drove Deng to examine, scrutinize, and eventually redesign his decision-making approach. It was important to show that the behavioral consequences of Deng's self-reflection were apparent while Mao was still alive. Otherwise, one could attribute the pragmatic policies he espoused after Mao's death solely to the fact that Deng was now free to reveal his true colors. Thus, in section 5.2 I discussed his efforts to introduce a dose of pragmatism to economic decision making during the twilight years of the ailing Chairman. Then, whenever appropriate, I tried to contrast Deng's leadership style and behavioral patterns with Mao's.

In Chapters 5 and 6, I also elaborated on the subjectivity of worldviews and how they dictate human interpretation of complex events. Depending on their ideological adherence, some policy makers welcomed the economic benefits associated with Deng's policies, while others focused on the negative side effects. My explanation of Deng's actions in the run-up to the Tiananmen Square tragedy might prove to be controversial: Deng believed that he was acting in the best interests of his country. The reader might come to endorse this interpretation, if she agrees with my central premise: humans act upon subjective beliefs shaped by the forces of their personality, the power of their respective worldviews, and the subjective manner in which they interpret past experiences.

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PSYCHOLOGISTS EMPLOY two empirical methods to test their hypotheses. So-called *correlational studies* examine whether a

change in variable *A* affects variable *B*. As correlation does not necessarily imply causation, psychologists also rely on lab-based experiments and computer simulations when seeking to determine the possible causal relationships between variables (Goodwin 2010). Case studies are not very popular among psychologists due to the perceived difficulties of evaluating and validating formulated hypotheses. Yet, during the short history of psychology, case studies have been used very successfully to broaden our understanding of human behavior (Barenbaum & Winter 2003; Elms 1994; Runyan 1984). Thus, Barlow and Nock (2009) call for the increased application of case studies in psychology.

In some notable instances, case studies had inspired some of the most important developments seen in relation to psychological theories. Many aspects of Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development are based on reflections on the behavior of his three children. Some of Sigmund Freud's most influential insights stemmed from studying his own behavior as well as that of his patients and colleagues (McAdams 2009, p. 13).

Case studies have also widened psychologists' understanding of already known phenomena. Irving Janis describes how he became preoccupied with this powerful question after reading the chapter on the Bay of Pigs invasion in Arthur Schlesinger's *A Thousand Days*: how could a group of otherwise smart decision makers act so stupidly as to accept an obviously flawed invasion plan? He began to wonder whether the same behavioral pattern of social conformity that psychologists had thus far studied in small groups could also be detected in the Kennedy administration's deliberations. Janis embarked on a fact-finding mission. He detected concurrence-seeking patterns with which he was familiar from his empirical work. Then, he moved on to study other foreign policy fiascos, such as Pearl Harbor and the Korean War, so as to highlight the role group-

think played in other important historical episodes (Janis 1982, p. vii).

In his excellent psychological profile of George W. Bush, renowned personality psychology expert Dan McAdams relied on publicly available data to conclude that the former president achieved a high score on the extraversion scale and a low score on the openness to new experiences scale (McAdams 2011). (Usually, psychologists use questionnaires to determine personality traits.) Dean Simonton conducted a study concerning the probable IQ scores of American presidents, from George Washington through to George W. Bush, despite the fact that none of his “subjects” had taken an actual IQ test (Simonton 2006). In this book, I quoted Dietrich Dörner’s outstanding paper on Hitler’s decision-making behavior in relation to military matters a few times (Dörner 2005; Dörner & Güss 2011).

In all the above-mentioned instances, the psychologists had to rely on secondary sources. This, Janis argues, should not deter researchers from conducting case studies. Rather, the hypotheses produced in this manner should be accepted as long as the evidence found in historical essays constitutes a consistent psychological pattern (Janis 1982, p. viii). Of course, the psychological interpretations that I develop in this book are not definitive. Other explanations are possible. Some of my arguments could be amended, contradicted, or disproved. Psychology is not an exact science like mathematics or physics. Unfortunately, many psychologists seem to struggle with this simple fact. As a result, there is a regrettable tendency among psychologists to mathematize and to invoke the supposedly irrefutable authority of statistics, regardless of its suitability for addressing the question at hand.





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# NOTES

## Introduction

1. In addition to several journal publications, there have been two major books on the PSI theory—both by Dörner (2001, 2002)—both of which are in German. English-language publications in this regard include the work by Bach (2009).

## 1. Historical Overview: A Century of Humiliation

1. A *li* is a Chinese unit of distance equivalent to half a kilometer.

## 2. Struggling with Self-Doubts

1. There are two major English translations of this work, that by William J. F. Jenner (Wu 1993) and that by Anthony C. Yu (Wu 2012), both of which were published in four-volume sets. The birthday celebration scene featured in this brief opening is inspired by the work of Shepard (2008).
2. Substantial social pressure and physical violence were applied to “persuade” unwilling peasants to accept collectivization (Huang 1992). Frank Dikötter (2013) estimates that, by the end of 1952, up to two million Chinese had been killed as a result of the collectivization campaign.
3. Mao’s speech “On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People” (关于正确处理人民内部矛盾的问题) was delivered on February 27, 1957.
4. On the basis of more recent research, Philip Short dismisses Roderick MacFarquhar’s (1974) suggestion of a leadership split in 1957 over the Hundred Flowers Campaign (Short 2000, p. 741).
5. The following discussion of the PSI theory is mainly based on the work of Dörner (2001, 2002).
6. An earlier, similar concept to this aspect of the PSI theory is Abraham Maslow’s *hierarchy of needs* (Maslow 1987). As I will explain in subsequent chapters, humans are capable of reprogramming their priorities. Thus, the term “hierarchy” seems to be misplaced in this context.
7. In a pioneering psychological case study, Dörner developed the argument that Hitler’s seemingly endless self-confidence stemmed from his internal struggle with self-doubt (Dörner 2005; Dörner & Güss 2011).

### 3. Groupthink in Zhongnanhai

1. As readers will remember, it was Deng Tuo whom Mao humiliated during the “bedroom showdown” just a year later on April 10, 1957; see section 2.1.
2. The official translation uses the word retrogression; I have changed it to backwardness.
3. Most notable in this context are the Enlarged Third Plenum of the Eighth CCP Central Committee (October 9) and the conferences of Hangzhou (January 3–4), Nanning (January 11–22), and Chengdu (March 8–26). The number of attendees varied. A handful of senior leaders participated in private meetings, while up to hundreds of delegates from the provincial and central levels attended the conferences.
4. Another example in this context was the concept of collectivization, which was proposed by Gao Gang in 1950 and to which Liu Shaoqi had strongly objected (Bo 2008, pp. 137–143). Once the policy had been endorsed by the Chairman, Liu began supporting it vehemently.
5. The following discussion of legitimacy and anti-legitimacy signals is based on the work of Dörner (2001, pp. 318–350).
6. Reductionism is not solely the preserve of a long extinct dictatorship. Sadly, it permeates today’s social and political debates: early childhood education is the most decisive factor that will determine our country’s future! The dramatic increase in greenhouse gas emissions is the single most dangerous hazard confronting humanity! The erosion of traditional values is to blame for senseless acts of violence in society!
7. A *mu* is a Chinese unit of measurement, which is approximately 666 m<sup>2</sup>.
8. See also Suedfeld et al (1992) on the concept of integrative complexity.
9. One of the main sources for the following discussion is Li Rui’s excellent book on the Lushan Conference (Li 2001), which is based on his diary. Li was, at the time, one of Mao Zedong’s political secretaries.
10. The second edition is simply titled *Groupthink*.
11. This is an interesting choice of words when you consider the leak in his competence tank!
12. Yang based this account on an unpublished manuscript by Qiao Peihua.
13. Although Chang and Halliday’s biography of the Chinese leader enjoyed a very positive reception among the general public, it was heavily criticized by sinologists and historians for its distortion of historical facts and occasional misrepresentation of political motives. The work by Benton and Lin (2010) features 14 reviews by renowned academics in which several inaccuracies in Chang and Halliday’s book are discussed. Gao Mobo went so far as to describe the book as an “intellectual scandal” (Gao 2008, pp. 65–80).
14. Following investigations, it was estimated that there had been one

million deaths in Xinyang alone—a prefecture that was originally home to 8.5 million people (Zhang 2004).

#### 4. The Turning Point in the Chairman’s Life Narrative

1. As previously discussed, the occurrence of natural calamities was closely related to the disastrous disruption to the natural balance seen during the Great Leap years (see section 3.3).
2. The Sino-Soviet conflict has a long history. It certainly cannot be reduced to a single factor. Nikita Khrushchev claims in his memoirs that he was convinced as early as 1954 that such a conflict was “inevitable” (Khrushchev 2007, p. 399). However, the burgeoning hostilities did not reach the point of no return until the 1960s.
3. Unfortunately, the tapes were subsequently destroyed and the recording devices removed.
4. In discussing the Cultural Revolution, I rely heavily on the work of MacFarquhar and Schoenhals (2008) and Barnouin and Yu (1993), as both books offer important archival materials.
5. Colin Powell reprimands America’s political leadership for ignoring one of Clausewitz’s central tenets: “No one starts a war—or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so—without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it” (Clausewitz 1989, p. 579). Not having done so was, according to Powell, “mistake number one in Vietnam” (Powell 1996, p. 180). Interestingly enough, it was the same Colin Powell who, as secretary of state, participated in the low-quality decision-making process prior to the Iraq War.
6. Dean Keith Simonton presents, in a peer-reviewed paper, his IQ estimates for 42 American presidents (Simonton 2006). According to his analysis, George W. Bush would have scored between 111.1 and 138.5 IQ points, placing him in the upper 10% of the IQ distribution for American adults. This high performance stands in stark contrast to his poor record in terms of handling foreign policy, embarking on ill-fated military endeavors, and initially misjudging the nature of the 2008 financial crisis.

#### 5. Conquering the Cognitive No-Go Zone

1. The four other members of the committee were marshals Liu Bocheng and Chen Yi, general Su Yu, and political commissar Tan Zhenlin.
2. The five other members at the time were Mao Zedong, Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai, Zhu De, and Chen Yun.

3. The Gang of Four consisted of Mao's wife Jiang Qing, Wang Hongwen, Zhang Chunqiao, and Yao Wenyuan.

## 6. Coping with Dynamic and Complex Situations

1. The Four Modernizations concept was developed in the 1970s. It encompasses modernizing agriculture, industry, defense, as well as science and technology.
2. For an excellent elaboration on the term *march to modernity*, see Mahbubani (2008).
3. For the number of villages, see Naughton (2007, p. 231).



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Nabil Alsabah holds a master's degree in computer science from the Karlsruhe University of Applied Sciences and a PhD in psychology from the University of Bamberg.

Back in 2007, Nabil was working on his PhD thesis on artificial intelligence in the beautiful Bavarian city of Würzburg. Through an improbable chain of events, he ended up attending a spring school focusing on the rise of China, and this experience changed his life forever. Nabil decided to switch fields from computer science to psychology, move to Beijing, and write his dissertation on the founding fathers of modern China.

After spending four years at mainland-Chinese, Taiwanese, and Singaporean universities researching Mao and Deng, Nabil moved back to Germany to work at the *Mercator Institute for China Studies* in Berlin, which is one of the largest European think tanks dedicated to China studies.

Overall, Nabil spent 10 years researching China. Then, he returned to the IT sector, and he is now Head of Artificial Intelligence at Germany's digital association.

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