

Political
PROFILES

A portrait of Mao Zedong, the leader of the People's Republic of China. He is wearing a dark green military-style jacket with a red collar and a matching cap with a red star. He is smiling slightly and looking towards the camera. The background is a warm, reddish-brown color.

Mao
ZEDONG

MAURICE MEISNER

Mao Zedong

A Political and
Intellectual Portrait

MAURICE MEISNER

polity

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Preface

Mao Zedong conceived and led the most popular revolution in world history. The numbers of people actively involved in the great revolutionary movement that swept over the vast Chinese countryside in the late 1930s and 1940s are historically unprecedented. And the numbers whose lives were profoundly transformed by the upheaval must be counted in the hundreds of millions. In scope and scale, and in its thoroughgoing character, the Chinese Communist Revolution was probably the greatest of all modern revolutions, overshadowing the French and Russian revolutions with which it is often compared.

While Mao Zedong was a great revolutionary, he became increasingly despotic as a ruler, a not uncommon development in the history of revolutions. He organized the peasants of China to destroy ancient forms of oppression and authority only to replace them with the alien authority of his own deified image. He liberated the Chinese nation from the shackles of foreign imperialism – and “built a country,” as his successor Deng Xiaoping put it – only to shackle the people of the country to the onerous demands of the doctrine of “continuous revolution.” The two sides of Mao – the revolutionary and the tyrant, the social liberator and the political dictator – cannot easily be reconciled. But both must be taken into account in any serious consideration of his long revolutionary career.

Both Mao Zedong’s successes and failures, his achievements and his crimes, enfolded on a grand scale, defining several crucial historical eras. Mao was the political leader of the long Chinese Communist Revolution for nearly two decades as well as its principal theoretician and military strategist. And he reigned over the People’s Republic of China for more than a quarter of a century. The duration of Mao’s political dominance is unprecedented in the history of modern revolutions, providing an unusual political and ideological continuity between the revolutionary and post-revolutionary periods. This study seeks to take advantage of that continuity to explore questions relating to the social nature and limits of the

Chinese Communist Revolution as revealed in Mao Zedong's long political and intellectual life.

As an account of Mao Zedong's revolutionary career, this book is no more than a sketch, primarily addressed to readers who seek a short biographical introduction to the public life of an unfamiliar subject. It cannot be substituted for Philip Short's superb and comprehensive biography *Mao: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000) or Stuart Schram's pioneering study *Mao Tse-tung* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), a volume which retains its vitality and historical insightfulness four decades after its publication.

In tracing Mao's political history, this volume emphasizes his encounters with (and reinterpretation of) the inherited body of Marxist-Leninist theory, and the relationship between his "sinified" version of Marxism and his political practice, both as a revolutionary and a ruler. This emphasis does not derive from any belief that Mao enriched the Marxist tradition. His intellectual and theoretical contributions to Marxism were meager, at best. Rather it was his departures from the basic premises of Marxism that are important for understanding both the positive and negative aspects of his political career, as will be suggested in the pages that follow.

Acknowledgments

The intellectual and political portrait of Mao Zedong that is sketched on the following pages owes much to the work of many scholars who have written on the history of Chinese Communism over the past 60 years. I am especially indebted to Stuart R. Schram and the late Benjamin Schwartz, pioneers in the critical study of Mao Zedong and the Chinese Revolution. My warmest thanks are due to Louise Knight, Editorial Director of Polity Press, who encouraged me to undertake this project several years ago, and to members of the Polity editorial staff in Cambridge and Oxford, especially Ellen McKinlay, Emma Hutchison, and Caroline Richmond, who generously helped along the way. I am enormously grateful to an anonymous outside reader for Polity who provided a lengthy and stimulating commentary on the original manuscript while gently pointing out glaring omissions and errors. I am above all grateful to my wife and partner, Lynn Lubkeman, who read and corrected two drafts of the entire manuscript as well as many bits and pieces along the way. She has contributed to the writing of virtually every sentence. It is to Lynn, and our son Matthew, that this volume is affectionately dedicated.



A Note on Chinese Names

Chinese personal and place names in this volume are rendered in the now generally accepted Pinyin system of romanization. There are exceptions, however. The Wade–Giles system has been retained for Chinese names which are most familiar to Western readers in their older form – such as Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kai-shek. It has also been retained for the names of Chinese authors and book titles which were published in Wade–Giles transliteration, usually before 1979. Thus, Mao Zedong appears as “Mao Tse-tung” in citations of the earlier Western-language translations of his writings.

Family background and education

Mao Zedong was the leader of the greatest peasant uprising in world history, the architect of a unique revolutionary strategy by which the rebellious countryside conquered the cities. The revolution that grew over two decades in the vast rural hinterlands of China in the 1930s and 1940s was not a traditional peasant jacquerie. Rather, the Chinese Communist Revolution, paradoxically, was carried out under a Marxist banner, a doctrine that largely excluded peasants from any progressive role in the making of modern history.

Yet however great the incongruity between ideology and social reality, the Maoist revolution was one of the few peasant movements in history to achieve a lasting political success, propelling Mao Zedong to supreme power in the world's most populous land – and propelling China toward that long elusive nationalist goal of “wealth and power” in the modern world.

Mao Zedong could not have claimed to have sprung from the impoverished and hungry peasant masses he was to organize under a Communist banner. The young Mao grew to maturity in relatively comfortable circumstances. Among the 300 or so families who lived in the village of Shaoshan in the southern province of Hunan, the Mao family was one of the most prosperous. His father had fled the chronic conditions of poverty and famine under which most peasants labored by joining the imperial army at the age of 16. By virtue of thrift – and no small measure of luck – he returned to his village after six years with sufficient money to purchase a few acres of land and to marry. By the time Mao Zedong, the first of the family's three sons to survive infancy, was born on December 26, 1893, his enterprising father had transformed himself into a “rich” peasant. He expanded his landholdings, hired two farm laborers, and also became a petty landlord, a moneylender, and a mortgage-holder. He further augmented his income by trading grain. As Mao later recalled, his father

“simply purchased grain from the poor farmers and then transported it to the city merchants, where he got a higher price.”¹

Thus the Mao family was rising at a time when most rural families were falling ever deeper into debt and poverty in the waning years of the Qing dynasty, the last in the long line of China’s imperial regimes. It was a time when hunger chronically stalked the land, with famines ravaging large parts of Hunan province in the 1890s and during the first decade of the new century. But amidst the deepening rural crisis, the Mao family prospered. Mao Zedong grew up in a spacious compound situated in a lovely valley surrounded by hills, ponds, and terraced rice fields. The young Mao had his own bedroom, a rare luxury in rural China.

The father’s financial success permitted his eldest son to acquire a traditional and later a modern Western-type education. Mao Zedong began to work on the family farm at the age of six, but two years later he was enrolled in the local village school where he was taught classical Confucian texts. Mao disliked the Classics, he later recalled, but he learned them well, quoting the ancient texts to his advantage in his often bitter arguments with his father as well as in later political writings and speeches. And the young Mao did acquire a love of reading, a pleasure he pursued with considerable passion throughout his life. What he most enjoyed were the romantic novels telling the tales of peasant rebellions, heroic rebels, and political intrigues. Popular novels such as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, many dating from the Ming dynasty, were beyond the pale of Confucian orthodoxy. Mao recalled: “I used to read [these outlawed books] in school, covering them up with a Classic when the teacher walked past. . . . I believe that perhaps I was much influenced by such books, read at an impressionable age.”²

Mao attended the village school for five years, working part-time on the family farm. He graduated in 1907, at the age of 13, and went to work full-time for his father, combining manual farm labor with the task of keeping the financial records for the various family businesses. In his spare hours, he read traditional novels and histories – and also books that advocated modernization to save China from foreign colonization.

Mao Zedong’s iron will, which came to characterize his political career, was evident at an early age. In 1909 the 15-year-old Mao was determined to attend a middle school (the Dongshan Higher Primary School) where the Western “new learning” was part of the curriculum. There ensued a prolonged struggle with his father who had arranged to apprentice his son to a rice shop in a nearby commercial town. But in the end, as was usually the case, the younger Mao had his way, and his father grudgingly agreed

to pay his tuition and living expenses. He was to continue to do so for another decade.

At the Higher Primary School, located in a nearby county, Mao Zedong entered the world of China's traditional gentry elite. Less than 1 percent of boys, and virtually no girls, were afforded a middle-school education in early twentieth-century China. As Mao recalled his first impression of the Higher Primary School, the first time he had been away from home: "I had never before seen so many children together. Most of them were sons of landlords, wearing expensive clothes. . . . Many of the richer students despised me because usually I was wearing my ragged coat and trousers."³

Nonetheless, Mao's studies went well over the next two years, especially in ancient Chinese history and classical literature. And he was introduced to politics for the first time:

I made good progress at this school. The teachers liked me, especially those who taught the Classics, because I wrote good essays in the Classical manner. But my mind was not on the Classics. I was reading two books sent to me by my cousin, telling of the [1898] Reform movement of K'ang Yu-wei [Kang Youwei]. One was called *Journal of the New People* and was edited by Liang Ch'i-ch'ao [Liang Qichao]. I read and reread these until I knew them by heart. I worshipped K'ang Yu-wei and Liang Ch'i-ch'ao.⁴

There was nothing particularly radical about Mao's intellectual and political proclivities when he arrived in the provincial capital of Changsha in the spring of 1911 to attend a secondary school. While he had some sympathy for poor peasants at an early age, he opposed the use of illegal or violent means to remedy their plight. Mao later recalled his ambivalent attitude about hungry peasants who forcibly seized rice supplies during a severe food shortage: "My father was a rice merchant and was exporting much grain to the city from our district, despite the shortage. One of his consignments was seized by the poor villagers and his wrath was boundless. I did not sympathize with him. *At the same time I thought the villagers' method was wrong also.*"⁵

During his youth Mao's political inclinations were no more radical than his social attitudes. His boyhood hero was the mid-19th-century Hunanese statesman Zeng Guofan, a conservative Confucian who had rescued the Qing dynasty and the gentry-landlord class by bloodily suppressing the Taiping peasant rebels. He continued to view Zeng as a hero well into his adulthood. On the eve of the republican Revolution of 1911, the young Mao was still a monarchist: "I considered the Emperor as well as most officials to be honest, good and clever men. They only needed the help of

Kang Youwei reforms.”⁶ Among students and young intellectuals in the waning days of the monarchy, Mao’s political views were rather moderate, indeed quite conventional.

Mao Zedong’s political radicalization began with the Revolution of 1911. Those events excited political imaginations, even though the actual battles were far less weighty than they appeared to be at the time – and the end results bitterly disappointing. Mao Zedong, approaching his 18th birthday, withdrew from the secondary school in the provincial capital and enlisted in the army of a Qing dynasty commander who had defected to the revolutionaries. He spent six months as a soldier, largely on uneventful garrison duty in Changsha. When the last Qing emperor abdicated in February 1912, Mao assumed that the revolution had come to a successful conclusion. He resigned from the army and decided to “return to my books.”⁷

Following his demobilization, Mao was uncharacteristically less than fully certain about what he wanted to do. He aimlessly pursued a number of alluring advertisements for the many new “modern” schools that had opened in Changsha, among them a police school, a law school and a soap-making school. He briefly attended a business school, but withdrew on discovering that most of the courses were taught in English. He then embarked on what he called a “period of self-education,” spending most of his time reading Western books (in Chinese translation) in the recently established Hunan Provincial Library. He read the authors who had molded the thought of China’s new Westernized intelligentsia – Adam Smith, Darwin, Mill, Spencer, Rousseau, and Montesquieu. The young Mao was particularly influenced by the Social Darwinism of Spencer, with its enormous emphasis on the inevitability of struggle. In the hands of its influential Chinese translator and annotator, Yen Fu, the notion of “the survival of the fittest” took on a profoundly nationalist meaning – and an implicitly anti-traditionalist one. What Social Darwinist texts conveyed to Mao was the message that the “wealth and power” of the nation was the main value to which all other values must be subordinated, not excluding traditional cultural values, if need be.⁸

Although Mao was to remain emotionally attached to many aspects of the Chinese cultural heritage, traditional values were now subordinated to the higher goal of the preservation and regeneration of China as a nation-state in a world of competing nation-states. He also derived from Social Darwinism a belief in the necessity and value of struggle *per se*, which, along with powerful nationalist impulses, were to remain enduring features of his thought.

Pressed by his father to pursue a career, and threatened with the loss of financial support if he did not do so, Mao eventually decided to become a teacher. He enrolled in the Hunan Provincial Fourth Normal School in Changsha, a teacher training college, in the spring of 1913. He remained a student for five years, graduating in 1918 with the equivalent of a college degree. During this period, he later recalled, “my political ideas began to take shape” and “I acquired my first experiences in social action.”⁹

Yet there are few hints of Mao’s future radicalism in the political ideas he expressed during these years, at least as they appear in his surviving school essays and classroom notes. His great hero remained the conservative Confucian Zeng Guofan. Quotations from Zeng’s writings appear frequently in Mao’s early essays, as do passages from the texts of Confucius and Mencius. Among the great sages of world history, he listed Confucius together with Jesus and Socrates.¹⁰ And among contemporary political figures, he sometimes favored those who enforced “order,” including the brutal governor of Hunan province (1913–16), Tang Xiangming, who slaughtered the followers of Sun Yat-sen.

The New Culture movement

The crucial era in the radicalization of Mao Zedong, as for many young students and intellectuals, was the period of intellectual Westernization and cultural iconoclasm known as the “New Culture movement,” 1915–19. The first phase in the broader May Fourth movement, the New Culture movement followed in the wake of the Revolution of 1911 – or, more precisely, it followed from its failure to achieve what Mao would later call its “bourgeois-democratic” tasks. Power in the new Republic was usurped by the militarist Yuan Shikai, who drove Sun Yat-sen into exile and established a military dictatorship. The abortive democratic promise of the Revolution was accompanied by failures on all other fronts. The new state was repressive but weak; incapable of bringing about genuine national unification, it prepared the way for the chaotic age of warlordism, and provided no impetus for modern economic development. Nor did the 1911 Revolution do anything to alleviate the foreign economic and political impingements that had turned China into a semi-colony and “the sick man of Asia.”

While China’s emerging “Westernized” intelligentsia were disappointed with the failure of the Revolution of 1911, they were outraged when contemporary politicians cynically manipulated old Confucian traditions for reactionary political ends. Most prominent among such

scoundrels was the militarist “President” of the Republic himself, Yuan Shikai, who resurrected ancient imperial traditions and rituals to legitimate his dictatorial rule, proclaimed Confucianism the state religion, and eventually staged an ill-fated effort to reestablish the monarchy with himself as the first emperor of the Xin (or “New”) dynasty. Yuan’s imperial ambitions verged on parody. But it was this contemporary association of tradition with political reaction that contributed to giving the New Culture movement its virulently iconoclastic thrust.

The New Culture movement began when China’s most influential Westernizing intellectual (and later the first leader of the Chinese Communist Party), Chen Duxiu, returned from exile in Japan. In the autumn of 1915 Chen founded the periodical *New Youth* which attracted to its editorial board China’s leading Western-oriented intellectuals and molded the consciousness of an entire generation of Chinese students.

The message the *New Youth* conveyed to Mao’s generation of students was that traditional Confucian values were not only ill-suited to China’s survival in the modern world, but morally inferior to Western values as well. The persistence of old Chinese traditions was not only responsible for the plight of China, but inimical to the freedom and happiness of the individual. Thus the urgent task confronting the Chinese intelligentsia was first to uproot the oppressive old Chinese culture and then replace it with the dynamic and liberating values of Western science and democracy. “Destruction before Construction” was the motto of the New Youth group long before it became a Maoist injunction.

To regenerate China, the New Youth intellectuals advocated a “cultural revolution,” for they believed that transforming the consciousness of the people was the essential precondition for meaningful social and political change. The effort was to be directed mainly to the youth of China, for young people were relatively uncorrupted by the traditions of the past and thus more amenable than their elders to undergoing a fundamental change of consciousness. Young people were seen as the bearers of a new culture and a new society – and thus Chen Duxiu iconoclastically entitled his journal *New Youth* in a land where age was traditionally venerated.

The intelligentsia’s overwhelming concern with deficiencies in Chinese culture and morality led them, at first, to seemingly ignore the threat of foreign imperialism. They believed that the fundamental problems of China resided within, in grave defects in Chinese culture and society. Until there was an internal “cultural revolution,” there was little hope of effectively responding to the foreign threat. For much the same reason, the *New Youth* intellectuals initially rejected active political participation.

For if the crisis of China was deeply rooted in basic defects in the culture and psychology of the Chinese people, then political activity in so diseased a society offered little hope of getting to the root of the malady. What China required was a “cultural revolution,” and this was the first and essential precondition for meaningful political action.

Neither the rather strained effort to appear unconcerned with the immediate threat of imperialism nor the distrust of politics could long survive. The dramatic events surrounding the incident of May 4, 1919, recast the New Youth intellectuals as the forerunners of the nationalism and political activism of the much celebrated May Fourth movement. But many of the other beliefs prominent in the writings of the New Youth group – especially the iconoclastic assault on tradition, the emphasis on consciousness as the decisive factor in history, the concept of cultural revolution, and the faith in youth – survived to mold the intellectual and political history of the modern Chinese intelligentsia.

Few were more profoundly influenced by these beliefs than the young Mao Zedong. Commenting on the various activist student groups that began to emerge around 1917, Mao recalled:

Most of these societies were organized more or less under the influence of *New Youth*, the famous magazine of the Literary Renaissance, edited by Chen Duxiu. I began to read this magazine while I was a student in the normal college and admired the articles of Hu Shi and Chen Duxiu very much. They became for a while my models, replacing Liang Qichao and Kang Youwei, whom I had already discarded.”¹¹

Many of the “culturally revolutionary” ideas Mao derived from the *New Youth* magazine were to influence his reception and reinterpretation of Marxism in the 1920s.

Mao Zedong’s first published article – an essay on the virtues of physical exercise – appeared in the April 1917 issue of *New Youth*.¹² There is little in his unpublished writings before 1917 – school essays, classroom notes, and personal letters – to suggest that he would be attracted to the radical cultural iconoclasm of Chen Duxiu and the New Youth group. In these early writings he frequently quoted Confucius, Mencius, and other traditional sages. He continued to express admiration for the conservative Confucian statesman Zeng Guofan, as well as for Confucian reformers such as Kang Youwei.¹³ The contrast with Chen Duxiu and other New Youth intellectuals – who believed Confucianism was the source of China’s social evils and national weakness – is striking.

Mao’s esteem for the Confucian tradition was accompanied by an authoritarian preference for “law and order.” In a school essay written in

1912, the earliest of his surviving writings, he contrasted the ignorance of the common people with the “good laws” of Shang Yang, or Lord Shang, a Legalist statesman of the 4th century BC whose anti-feudal reforms are credited with providing autocratic efficiency to the state of Qin. “Laws and regulations are instruments for procuring happiness,” the young Mao wrote, but “at the beginning of anything out of the ordinary, the mass of the people [*limin*] always dislike it.”¹⁴ This hardly foreshadows Mao’s celebrated populist “faith in the people.”

Mao’s early authoritarian preferences were not confined to ancient history. He had a surprisingly favorable opinion of the Military Governor of Hunan province, Tang Xiangming (1886–1975), who was known as “Tang the Butcher,” and even for the dictator Yuan Shikai (who had appointed Tang Military Governor), on the grounds that they had maintained a degree of order in a chaotic age.

Mao’s rather benign views of autocratic rulers – from Shang Yang to Yuan Shikai – hardly accorded with the new intelligentsia’s celebration of “Mr Democracy.” And his propensity to easily draw on the Confucian tradition was incongruous with the iconoclastic condemnations of Confucianism that filled the pages of the *New Youth* magazine. But on one crucial issue, the belief that the fundamental problem of China’s plight in the modern world resided within, in deficiencies in the psychology and thought of the Chinese people, the young Mao seemed predisposed to the New Culture movement diagnosis. Like the New Youth intellectuals, Mao had a profoundly nationalist concern with the foreign impingement on China. But he also believed that the cultural and moral renovation of the Chinese people was the first and essential task.

This view found expression in his essay on physical education, where Mao deplored the weakness of China but attributed that condition not to foreign imperialism but rather to the deterioration of “the physical condition of our people.”¹⁵ He repeated a theme common in nationalist ideologies by suggesting that the strengthening of the bodies of individual citizens would eventually yield national strength. As models to emulate, he looked to the two most successful cases of late “conservative modernization” – Germany and Japan. “Among the civilized nations of today,” he wrote during World War I, “it is in Germany that [physical education] most flourishes. Fencing has spread to all corners of the country. Japan, for its part, has *bushido*.”¹⁶

Mao was unwilling to rely solely on foreign examples of national self-strengthening. He suggested that there was much to learn about physical education from “the writings of the ancients,” and he thus quoted liberally

from Confucius and praised the practices of his childhood hero, Zeng Guofan, to support his prescriptions for building strong bodies that “contain knowledge and house virtue.”

A striking feature of Mao’s essay is his emphasis on the efficacy of the human will. As if announcing one of the central features of the doctrine that was to be known as “Maoism,” he wrote: “Physical education not only harmonizes the emotions, it also strengthens the will. . . . the principal aim of physical education is military heroism. Such objects of military heroism as courage, dauntlessness, audacity, and perseverance are all matters of will.”¹⁷

Yet there was little that was radical about Mao’s first published essay. “A Study of Physical Education” is a rather conservative nationalist message on “the effectiveness of exercise in strengthening a country.”¹⁸ There is only one faintly iconoclastic note. In an implicit criticism of the Confucian literati’s traditional disdain for physical activity – symbolized by the scholar’s gown and long fingernails – he wrote:

Our country has always stressed literary accomplishment. People blush to wear short clothes. Hence there is the common saying: ‘A good man does not become a soldier.’ . . . Students feel that exercise is shameful. . . . Flowing garments, a slow gait, a grave calm gaze – these constitute a fine deportment, respected by society. Why should one suddenly extend an arm or expose a leg, stretch and bend down?”¹⁹

The text of Mao’s essay provides few clues to its author’s intellectual and political future. But it must have been enormously exciting for the 23-year-old Mao – still a student at a provincial normal college who had yet to travel beyond his native province of Hunan – to have an article published in so prestigious a journal as *New Youth*. Now based in Beijing, the *New Youth* magazine had become the principal organ of China’s radical and iconoclastic intellectuals. Its editors and contributors were the most prominent members of China’s Westernizing intelligentsia, many of them now on the faculty of Beijing University.

It was under the influence of the iconoclastic writings published in *New Youth* that Mao Zedong was gradually radicalized. While Mao’s essay on physical education was cast in mostly traditionalist terms, by the summer of 1917 he was becoming increasingly critical of “our country’s ancient learning,” which was the reason, he concluded, “why we have not made any progress, even in several millennia.” Very much in the *New Youth* spirit, he compared Chinese learning with Western methods and recommended the latter: “Today anyone who is resolved to pursue learning, and yet does not follow [Western] principles, will not be able to attain

excellence.”²⁰ And in a letter to a former teacher, written in August 1917, Mao complained that “my countrymen have accumulated many undesirable customs, their mentality is too antiquated, and their morality is extremely bad.”²¹

Although Mao was increasingly influenced by the iconoclastic New Youth group, he felt a need to balance his rejection of traditional Chinese values with a critical stance toward the West. This led him to fall back on one of the most banal themes in modern Chinese (and Western) intellectual history – the notion of combining the best of both “the East” and “the West.” Thus, the 23-year-old Mao wrote in late 1917: “I have long thought about setting up a private school, which would combine the strengths of classical education and modern schools.”²² And in reporting on the progress of an evening school he and other students at the Changsha Normal School had established to provide educational opportunities for workers who could not afford an education (and where Mao taught history), he approvingly noted that “all the students lined up and bowed three times to the national flag and the portrait of Confucius.”²³

Mao’s continuing attachment to aspects of the Chinese tradition, and his efforts to combine what he deemed of value in the Chinese cultural heritage with “Western learning,” stands in striking contrast to the views of the more iconoclastic New Youth intellectuals. Hu Shi, for example, found little of value in the Chinese tradition and thus advocated “all-out Westernization.” Even more striking is the contrast between Mao and Chen Duxiu, soon to be the first leader of the Chinese Communist Party. In 1915 Chen addressed an issue that had preoccupied Chinese intellectuals for more than a decade – the desirability of blending the “spiritualism” of the East with the “materialism” of the West. It was an appealing – and easy – formula for intellectuals attracted to the values associated with Western economic and military power but unwilling to surrender their own cultural heritage. Chen, however, found nothing to recommend the notion. He contrasted the inertia and decadence of “the East” with the dynamism and youthful spirit of “the West” – and he found the two incompatible. Not only were Western values imperative for China’s survival in the modern world, they were morally superior to old Chinese values as well. And it was fruitless to attempt to merge two such starkly opposite cultures. While the West was young and vibrant, China was old and decaying – and its moribund culture had nothing to contribute to modern civilization. The only solution, he emphasized time and again, was to completely destroy the diseased old culture and replace it with the democratic and scientific values of the West.²⁴

While Chen's condemnation of the Chinese cultural tradition may seem extreme, his iconoclastic views were shared by most members of the New Youth group. Mao Zedong, by contrast, held a far less uncompromising view of the relevance of the Chinese tradition to modern times. While he was hardly a traditionalist – indeed, his basic intellectual values were to be increasingly drawn from the West – he had a relatively sympathetic attitude toward the traditional cultural heritage. And he wished to preserve as much of tradition as seemed salvageable for modern nationalist ends.

The contrast between Chen's and Mao's attitudes toward traditional culture foreshadows the differences in their reception of Marxism at the close of the decade. Chen, the uncompromising anti-traditionalist and Westernizer, was to receive Marxism as the most advanced expression of modern scientific thought – and he was to embrace it as a universally valid doctrine whose dictates applied to China as they did elsewhere. But Mao Zedong's inclination to salvage what he could of the traditional cultural heritage suggested a greater sensitivity to the particular conditions of China. And that foreshadowed a greater willingness to revise the inherited body of Marxist theory to suit those conditions.

The influence of Western ideas

During his final year at the Normal School in Changsha (1917–18), Mao Zedong was more intensively exposed to the Western intellectual tradition than ever before. Although he never mastered a foreign language, by 1917 Chinese translations of Western writings were readily available and Mao read widely in Western philosophy and social theory – Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hobbes, Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Spencer, among others.

Mao's intensive study of Western writings during the 1917–18 academic year was guided by his influential ethics teacher Yang Changji, who had spent a decade studying Western philosophy in Japan, England, and Germany. A disciple of Kant, Yang hoped to combine Western philosophy with a revitalized Chinese culture rather than replace the tradition with Western ideas in wholesale fashion, a stance that Mao found congenial. Although his aim was to reform Chinese culture, not discard it, Yang, nonetheless, was an ardent supporter of the iconoclastic *New Youth* magazine. It was Yang who had introduced Mao to that most influential of periodicals – and later to leading members of the New Youth group. Yang's ideas had inspired Mao's essay on "physical education" – and Yang