Communist China's Twenty Years:  
A Periodization

By RODERICK MACFARQUHAR

The twentieth anniversary of the Chinese Communist regime, unlike the tenth, is an appropriate time for retrospection and appraisal. A decade ago, the revelation of statistical exaggeration during the Great Leap Forward underlined Mao's inability to discover a sure-fire method of economic development. With Soviet-style methods previously found wanting and mass mobilization now proved inadequate also, it was not clear where China would go next economically. Politically, Mao had just faced the first major challenge to his personal authority since the late 1930s. Would the leadership be able to close ranks or would there be further splits? In foreign policy, China had clearly adopted a more militant line. The crucial question, as Khrushchev flew to Peking for the tenth anniversary celebrations fresh from his meetings with Eisenhower, was how the Chinese leadership would react to their guest's advocacy of peaceful coexistence with the imperialist bloc.

China's second decade has witnessed the working out of these problems, climaxing in three years of cultural revolution. With the destruction of the old party apparatus finalized at the Communist Party's Ninth Congress in this twentieth year, Mao has drawn a line in the ledger. The year 1969 is meant to mark, like 1949, a new beginning after revolution. The future may look no clearer than it did in 1959; but unlike the scholars who commemorated the regime's tenth anniversary in the first issue of this journal, we do at least know where the current leadership in Peking thinks China is at the moment and, roughly, where it thinks China ought to go.

Looking back from so clear a dividing rule, many forms of appraisal are legitimate. One is the approach beloved of Chinese Communist politicians and historians—periodization. So much has occurred during these two turbulent decades, however, that many different periodizations would be possible. One could trace the adoption and abandonment of the Soviet model: the acceptance of the Five Year Plan system in 1953, the Soviet constitutional pattern in 1954, the military style in 1955, and the completion of Soviet-style collectivization in 1955–56; then the discarding of Soviet economic methods in 1958, along with the superseding of collectives by communes, the return to a Yenan military style with the abolition of ranks in 1965, the search for a new political form during the cultural revolution. Another approach would be to examine the rise
and fall of militancy, with the high points during land reform and the
early "campaigns," the struggle against Hu Feng and the renewed drive
against counter-revolutionaries, the Great Leap Forward, and the
Cultural Revolution.

Both these periodizations, while valuable, are descriptive rather than
analytic. I would like to suggest a somewhat different periodization, less
obvious, but perhaps more revealing. It might also have some relevance
to other newly independent, modernizing countries and form the basis
for drawing parallels between them and China. This scheme would
divide the 20 years of Communist rule in China into three periods: the
consolidation of power from 1949–55; a period of economic thrust from
1956 to 1960; and a period characterized by a search for a new vision
from 1961 to 1969.

Although the Communist government was firmly entrenched in power
before 1955, I would date the period of consolidation to coincide with
the victory of collectivization in that year. It has been conventional to
designate the 1949–52 period as the consolidation period. I would not
argue that the period should be lengthened on the ground that it was
not until the autumn of 1954 that the new Chinese state emerged in
constitutional form. That development can legitimately be characterized
as evidence of the consolidation of power rather than as part of the
process. Land reform and the campaign against counter-revolutionaries
in 1951–52 had effectively destroyed the old Kuomin-
tang power structure and enabled the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)
to insert the tendrils of its power in villages throughout the land. The
thought reform of the intellectuals and the Five-Antis Campaign had
established Party dominance over the urban intelligentsia and bour-
goisie by the end of 1952. At that point, too, economic recovery
had been achieved and the regime was prepared to launch its
first Five Year Plan even if it was unwilling to state the Plan's precise
terms for another two and a half years.

But despite these good reasons for taking 1952 as the cut-off
date of the consolidation period, Mao did not see it as such. For Mao,
the significant turning point was the end of 1955 when the victory of collectivization was assured. And because he saw it as a turning point, he acted vigorously to initiate a second period at that time, thus making history fit his view.

It is clear that a large number, probably the majority of Chinese
leaders, did not see the completion of collectivization as a vital part of the consolidation programme. When Mao by-passed the central committee's rural work department, and addressed the provincial Party Secretaries on 31 July 1955 on the possibility and desirability of speeding collectivization, he seems to have been acting independently. But what is import-
ant for this analysis is that Mao’s view won—not simply in that collectivization was speeded up, but because his view of collectivization as a turning point prevailed.

In his collectivization speech, Mao indicated his fears that the CCP might lose its hard-won control of the countryside if the pace were not quickened.

What still lingers in the countryside is capitalist ownership by the rich peasants and individual peasant ownership—an ocean of it. Everyone has noticed that in recent years there has been a spontaneous and constant growth of capitalist elements in the countryside and that new rich peasants have sprung up everywhere. Many well-to-do middle peasants are striving to become rich ones. Many poor peasants, lacking sufficient means of production, are still not free from the toils of poverty; some are in debt, others selling or renting their land. If this tendency goes unchecked, the separation into two extremes in the countryside will get worse day by day. Peasants who have lost their land and who are still having difficulties will complain that we do nothing to save them when we see they are up against it, nothing to help them overcome difficulties. And the well-to-do middle peasants who tend towards capitalism will also find fault with us, for they will never be satisfied because we have no intention of taking the capitalist path. If that is how circumstances stand, can the worker-peasant alliance stand fast? Obviously not.¹

Outlining his prescription for this problem, Mao went on to say that it could be solved only on a “new basis.”

That basis is, simultaneously, gradually, to bring about, on the one hand, socialist industrialization, the socialist transformation of handicraft industry and capitalist industry and commerce, and, on the other, the socialist transformation of agriculture as a whole through cooperation . . . Only in this way, we hold, can the worker-peasant alliance be consolidated.²

Collectivization was accelerated and as, towards the end of 1955, its completion could be foreseen, the regime started readying businessmen for socialist transformation in the cities.³ By the end of 1955, Mao had seen the writing on the wall, and in his preface to the book Socialist Upsurge in China’s Countryside (dated 27 December 1955, published 12 January 1956) he triumphantly proclaimed the importance of the success of collectivization. “The point is that in the latter half of 1955 the situation in China underwent a fundamental change.”⁴

² Ibid.
³ The change-over to joint state-private industry and commerce took place during the month of January 1956 for the most part. Collectivization, its pace surpassing even Mao’s forecasts, was substantially completed by mid-1956.
⁴ CC, p. 118.
what he thought the victory of collectivization portended. "It tells us that the scale and rate of China's industrialisation, and the scale and rate of the development of science, culture, education, public health, and so on, can no longer be entirely the same as originally intended. All must be appropriately expanded and accelerated."  

At this point China was entering the fourth year of the first Five Year Plan. The Five Year Plan targets had been revealed only six months earlier at the National People's Congress and it might be argued that the period of economic thrust should date at least from then. But it is clear that Mao was as unconcerned about the justifiability of the production targets in the Five Year Plan as he had been earlier about the Five Year Plan's collectivization programme. The People's Daily's New Year's Day editorial for 1956 was entitled: "Strive for the overall fulfillment and overfulfillment of the Five Year Plan ahead of schedule." Already in December 1955, various industrial ministries were announcing their intentions of fulfilling some of their Five Year Plan targets by the end of 1956, a whole year ahead of schedule. The industrial targets of the Five Year Plan were not formally revised, but, commenting on this period in 1958, Liu Shao-ch'i said they should have been.

In agriculture, where Mao presumably felt more self-confident, a 12-year (1956-67) development programme was produced by the Politburo on 23 January. It projected ambitious new targets for crop production among many other provisions for revolutionizing the rural scene. The stage was set for what Liu Shao-ch'i later described as the "leap forward" of 1956.

The period of economic thrust divides into two phases, during which two quite different modes of economic development were used: the Soviet model was followed until towards the end of 1957 when a gradual transition to development by means of mass mobilization began, flowering into the Great Leap Forward of 1958. The "leap" approach, albeit moderated, persisted into 1959. It was defended against the caustic attacks of Peng Teh-huai at the Lushan Plenum, and thereafter experienced a revival despite the revelation of statistical exaggerations in August 1959. The surge on the industrial front lasted into 1960. But the withdrawal of Soviet technicians coupled with a second bad harvest brought the leap officially to a close at the end of that year.

5 Ibid.
6 A number of reports are included in the BBC's Summary of World Broadcasts, Part V, Economic Supplement No. 197.
7 In his speech to the second session of the Eighth Congress. See CC, p. 425.
8 CC, pp. 119-126.
9 Ibid., p. 426.
10 See The Case of Peng Teh-huai (Hong Kong: Union Research Institute, 1968), pp. 1-13.
11 The renewed surge after the plenum was discussed by officials of the Peking Party in 1961. See "A detailed account of the counter-revolutionary incident of the
The contrasts between the methods of economic development employed during the two phases were sharp and hardly need to be elaborated here. But the crucial point for periodization is that the aim in both cases was the achievement of an economic breakthrough. Mao wrote in his 1956 preface:

The problem today . . . affects agricultural production; industrial production . . .; handicraft production; the scale and speed of capital construction in industry, communications and transportation; the coordination of commerce with other branches of the economy; and the coordination of the work in science, culture, education, public health, and so on, with our various economic enterprises. In all these fields there is an underestimation of the situation which must be criticised and corrected if the work in them is to keep pace with the development of the situation as a whole. People’s thinking must adapt itself to the changed conditions.\(^{12}\)

While warning against “wild flights of fancy,” Mao’s main concern was to initiate criticism of the “rightist conservatism” of people who considered as impossible “things which could be done if they exerted themselves.”

Two years later, the language was much headier. In the keynote speech for the leap at the second session of the Eighth Congress in May 1958, Liu Shao-ch’i quoted Mao’s slogan “battle hard for three years to bring about a basic change in the features of most areas” and asked rhetorically: “Karl Marx prophesied that the proletarian revolution would usher us into a great epoch when ‘twenty years are concentrated in a day.’ If in past revolutionary struggles we experienced such great times, then is not our present socialist construction another great time again?”\(^{13}\) But the greater euphoria in the language should not be allowed to disguise the similarities in intention (which Liu himself pointed out)\(^ {14}\) and results between the two “leaps.” The magnitude of the advances of 1958 is still obscure since many non-Chinese analysts reject even the revised Chinese figures as too high. But one Western
specialist has estimated that the rate of growth of China's gross domestic product doubled in 1956 as compared with the three previous Five Year Plan years, with that of 1958 somewhat greater. These two years stand out by comparison with preceding and succeeding ones.15

The first "leap" was shorter than the second, as well as less dramatic, perhaps because Mao felt less self-confident about over-ruuling his planners and their Soviet advisers when they reported imbalance and bottlenecks. After all, China was still operating within the framework of a Soviet development model whose dynamics he may not have fully comprehended; in 1958, Mao was employing far more familiar techniques. More relevant perhaps was the fact that in 1956 the harvest was bad, whereas in 1958 it was excellent. The important point is that, by the end of 1960, Mao had tried two radically different methods of economic development and while both had achieved significant short-term results, neither had been able to bring about a breakthrough.

The third period, which I date from 1961 to the Ninth Congress in April this year, has been characterized by a search for a new vision. The old certainties of the Soviet model—"the Soviet Union's today is our tomorrow"—were abandoned in 1958. But they were given up, not in despair, but in the confident expectation that new certainties were being substituted—a Chinese model of significance for the rest of the underdeveloped world. A striking example of this attitude is contained in the opening words of the Central Committee resolution of December 1958 on the communes. Passed at a time when the first euphoria had faded, it nevertheless affirmed: "In 1958 a new social organization appeared, fresh as the morning sun, above the broad horizon of East Asia." 14 Faith in the communes, which were essential elements in the leap strategy, seems to have ebbed only with the winding-up of the leap itself. One specialist suggests that the retreat from the commune system as originally conceived began in real earnest towards the end of 1960.17

Thus, by 1961, China had abandoned the old model without yet establishing a new one. To be sure, a new economic policy emerged from the Central Committee Plenum of January 1961: greater stress on agriculture than industry. But this was hardly sufficient to dispel the demoralization that seems to have permeated the Communist Party during the "bitter years" of economic setbacks. Mao's personal authority was threatened again; his policies were attacked by innuendo in the Party press. A move to get P'eng-Teh-huai rehabilitated got

16 CC, p. 490.
under way, and P'eng himself was apparently emboldened to draw up a massive new critique of the way the economy had been handled.

Uncertainty was deepened by the rift with the Soviet Union over policy towards the West. During 1960, starting with K'ang Sheng's speech to the Warsaw Pact conference in February, through the Lenin anniversary polemics in April, up to the 81-Communist Party conference in November, the Chinese leadership attempted to deflect Krushchev from his softer line towards the United States. Both sides signed the statement that issued from the Moscow conference, but it soon became clear that each would interpret it to justify going his own way.¹⁸ The hallowed model for the anti-imperialist struggle—two antagonistic blocs locked in struggle—had been shattered. China was now adrift, not merely domestically, but also in the international arena.

Out of this uncertainty there gradually emerged two views. One, Mao's, was first indicated at the Tenth Plenum of the Central Committee in October 1962 when the Chairman warned of the danger of revolutionary degeneration.¹⁹ In May of the following year he drew up the "former ten points" to launch the Socialist Education Campaign,²⁰ his first big effort to prevent the Soviet Union's today from becoming China's tomorrow. In the ninth of the great polemics of 1963–64 against the Soviet Union (directly attributed to Mao by Wang Jen-chung in 1966), Mao outlined his prescription for the prevention of "capitalist restoration" in a Communist state, laying great stress upon the rearing of revolutionary successors.²¹ By this time he had already made it clear that he was not satisfied with the efforts of the Party and in particular of its propaganda officials to cope with the immense task of revitalizing the nation in the aftermath of the Great Leap. In February 1964, the "learn from the People's Liberation Army" campaign started.²² It turned out to be an augury of things to come.

The other view was probably more inchoate and its adherents far less organized than the polemics of the Cultural Revolution have suggested. But it does seem that in the dark days of the early 1960s a number of top Chinese leaders may have come to the conclusion that economic growth must be China's first priority.²³ (This probably explains why Mao made

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²³ Take for instance Teng Hsiao-p'ing's alleged comment on economic methods: "So long as cats, black or white, can catch mice, they are good cats," quoted in "Never
no move until the autumn of 1962, by which time economic recovery had begun.) By the middle 1960s, when recovery was well advanced and a third Five Year Plan could be envisaged, Mao's colleagues were perhaps readier to entertain his ideas of moral regeneration. But apparently they were unwilling or unable to mastermind the kind of cultural revolution Mao envisioned. At some time during the period 1964–65, I believe, Mao concluded that it would be necessary to purge a large number of his colleagues if he were to shape a Communist Party capable of carrying out the duties he had in mind for it.

During that purge—the Cultural Revolution—he has attempted both to set the country alight and to introduce new institutions (a new-style Party, revolutionary committees, Red Guards) through which militancy can be more effectively maintained. But at this stage it can only be said that China has been given a new vision. The attempt to implement it really only began when the destructive phase of the Cultural Revolution ended with the Ninth Congress.

Looking back over China's three periods, what characteristics appear instructive for comparative purposes? The consolidation phase reveals a leadership firmly united in common endeavour and against easily definable enemies. Dissension occurs where there is doubt as to whether or not consolidation has been achieved, but the nature of the task is such, and the carry-over of revolutionary solidarity sufficient, that the dissension can be kept within bounds. It is significant that the only major purge during the consolidation of power in China resulted, not from disagreement over issues, but from the attempt of Kao Kang and his clique to consolidate their personal power within the emerging regime.*4

During the period of economic thrust, the effort is made to achieve a developmental breakthrough. The economic tasks are clearly enormous, the time needed for their completion must inevitably be long. The temptation for a still vigorous and self-confident regime to attempt at least an initial breakthrough is evidently irresistible. But the tasks turn out to be too great even for that, and with this realization dissension breaks out anew. Not surprisingly, China's big purge during the period of economic thrust was provoked by violent disagreement over economic development strategy.

During the search for a new vision, the country is for a time rudderless. In the depths of economic depression, there is a tendency to blame

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*4 I base this conclusion partly on the fact that the Chinese documents (normally quite revealing in this kind of context) on this purge described Kao Kang's struggle as "unprincipled" and partly on the exhaustive study of the Kao Kang affair made by Frederick Teiwes for his Ph.D. dissertation on rectification and purges in China.

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everything on the follies of the supreme leader. Some perhaps look to
his old opponent, P’eng Teh-huai, at least as a standard-bearer for
some new direction for the country. But it turns out that while many are
dissatisfied and disheartened, only Mao has the self-confidence to formu-
late a new vision broad enough to guide China through the political, eco-
nomic and international problems of what is now clearly a very, very long
march to wealth, power and a Communist world. He then has to struggle
to ensure that his vision is accepted by the Party and the country. Dur-
ing this period, the big purge naturally enough is occasioned by disagree-
ment over the right of that vision. Now that the vision has been
enshrined and Mao’s official apostles consecrated by the Ninth Congress,
a fourth period begins: the construction of a new order.

The prospects for the new order are difficult to determine, but two
apparent features of it are already emerging. Firstly, the new leadership
does not wish to pin its success on an ability to engineer economic break-
throughs. Of course, credit will be taken for all progress in economic
development. But the disappointments of the period of economic
thrust have taught a lesson, and it seems unlikely that Mao will endanger
his whole vision by launching a new great leap.

Second, the military may be expected to play a far more prominent
role than hitherto. As a result of the struggle over the new vision, the
civilian establishment has been severely weakened and only the military
can fill the gap. The open question is: will Mao remain in effective con-
trol long enough to rebuild the Party and reassert civilian predominance?