In crossing twenty-four rivers and eighteen mountain ranges, in tropical heat and freezing hail and snow, over the 6,000 desperate miles of the Long March, Mao Zedong’s actions and those of the Communist Red Army were the expression of his thought and philosophy. Mao arrived in Yenan in northwestern China with only ten percent of the troops who had begun the journey with him one year earlier, but along the way he experienced what he had been piecing together in his mind for many years. Mao had studied the teachings of classical China and modern Western philosophy. Throughout the Long March, Mao never lost sight of his revolutionary mission. He had his army confiscate the property of landlords and militarists and redistribute it among the people, hold mass meetings, write slogans, hand out copies of the Soviet constitution, and teach peasants to read and write. Yet, over the course of that year, only one book made it the whole way in Mao’s pack, *The Story of the Marshes*, an ancient Chinese novel about the exploits of a group of quasi-revolutionary bandits roaming the hills. Mao and the Red Army were confronted every step of the way by the modern forces of Chiang Kai-shek’s Kuomintang, yet the war that Mao fought was the flowing war of Sun Tzu. Mao had seen Taoist paintings showing gigantic, jagged mountains and raging rivers with tiny, insignificant men dwarfed by nature, but Mao’s band of tiny men conquered those mountains and rivers and became a force of nature.

The power of Mao’s philosophies to inspire and motivate came from this ability to combine the East with the West, the old with the new, nature with
man, and the individual with the masses. Within Mao’s philosophies, several main factors stand out as vital to understanding his thinking and his ability to draw from different sources. The influence of classical Chinese ideas and a stress on education can be found in Mao’s thought from very early in his life. The ideas of Will and man’s power to overcome played a large role along with the concepts of contradiction, action, and the use of guerrilla warfare. Finally, Mao’s nationalism was a major factor in bringing all of these together and combining them into a force that was strong enough to bring Mao and the Communists to power and to unify China.

**Classical Influences**

As a small child, Mao was raised and educated in the traditional Chinese way. Children were expected to learn by memorizing what they were given and not to question the authority of their elders. The subjects for their memorization were the five Confucian classics that formed the basis of Chinese primary education at the time. Mao would have had to study these constantly between the ages of eight and thirteen. As Ross Terrill writes in his biography of Mao, Mao’s school “was indeed a traditional one in which no non-Chinese breeze blew. The ‘five books’ of Classics ruled as the Bible rules in a Protestant Sunday school.” This “cult of obedience” turned Mao against blindly following the traditional ways at an early age. As he would say later in life, “I hated Confucius from the age of eight.”

This hatred of Confucius and blind obedience, however, did not turn Mao against learning all together. Mao rounded out his education by reading orthodox historical chronicles and works of Chinese philosophers, mainly from the 17th century. Mao also studied Taoist works of philosophy and later in his life often used Taoist images in his writings. This early influence of the classical
writings can be seen in Mao’s first public writing at the age of 23 for an issue of *New Youth*, the magazine of the New Culture movement which questioned the old ways and began to look to the West for the solutions to China’s problems.\(^9\) Stuart Schram mentions in his book, *The Thought of Mao Tse-tung*, that in this article, “A Study of Physical Education,”

Of the twenty-odd textual quotations, or explicit allusions to particular passages from classical writings contained in the article, there are a dozen [quotes or allusions] to the Confucian canon; one to the Confucian ‘realist’ Hsün-tzu, a precursor of the Legalists, and two to the Sung idealist interpreter of Confucianism, Chu Hsi…There are also three references to Mao’s favourite Taoist classic, the *Chuang-tzu*. The range of his knowledge at this time was clearly very wide, for he refers in passing to obscure biographical details regarding a number of minor writers of various periods.\(^{10}\)

In addition to the Confucian and Taoist classics and works of history and philosophy, there were a few other writings from China’s past that had a strong affect on the young, impressionable Mao. These were vernacular novels and historical romances that were banned from his traditional school. However, Mao and his boyhood friends found and read them anyway, such as *The Story of the Marshes* (also known as *Water Margin* or *All Men Are Brothers*), *Monkey*, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and *Dream of the Red Chamber*. These sharpened Mao’s ideas of “military values, theories of dynastic change, the stereotyping of characters into villainous and heroic roles, even a certain populism.”\(^{11}\)

Through all his schooling and reading, Mao was introduced to the ideas of the traditional Chinese worldview. Several important factors defined this way of understanding the world. The forces of nature, including *ch'i*, a life force
that permeates all things, appear in Taoism and much of Confucianism, always behind the scenes, guiding the world according to Heaven’s way. From his reading of history, philosophy, and Confucianism, Mao learned of a past Golden Age, the period of Great Harmony, in which men lived in peace with each other. He also saw in Confucian teachings and his novels the theories of dynastic change in which a dynasty that came to power with the Mandate of Heaven may deteriorate over time and eventually lose the Mandate, only to be replaced by another dynasty that was at the beginning of the process. This made history a collection of endless cycles of growth and decline, rise and fall.

One thing that each of these aspects of classical Chinese thought had in common was that each was described as the natural way of things. Forces of nature and the course of history, in traditional Chinese thought, were the way they were according to the will of Heaven or the Tao. In this view, the wisest men were those who learned to live with the world the way it was, rather than try senselessly to change it. Mao, influenced by the writings of such men as Chu Hsi and Wang Fu-chih, did not see the world that way. His classical education was only a foundation on which to build. Mao began to question the ways of his world early on, using his knowledge of the classics as a weapon against things he saw as unjust. He would “shoot classical quotes like arrows at his father during their quarrels.” In the words of Ross Terrill, “In the China of the early 1900s, to be soaked in the Four Books was no longer a guarantee of docility.” By the age of thirteen, Mao was already turning knowledge into power and the result was an emphasis on education that would drive him through the formative years of his life.

Education

While Mao’s need for education may have initially had something to do
with his rebellion against his father, it did not go against what he had learned in his traditional Chinese schooling. In Confucianism, there was great stress on education as a means of improving oneself and society as a whole. The Confucian focus on humanity rather than on abstract philosophies appealed to Mao because it meant that learning was not simply an end in itself.

The emphasis on moral force found in Confucianism also affected Mao in his early development and even more so once he moved beyond his village to further his education. Mao’s life under his father and his distaste for the blind obedience that was encouraged in the classical school he attended made him feel more strongly for people when he felt something to be unjust. Even before he left his village Mao was known to give money to beggars, which infuriated his miserly father. The hatred of his father’s greedy ways was compounded by Mao’s sense of injustice and his idolization of the populism found in the novels he read. Yet, the populism, morality, and immature outrage that loosely defined Mao’s thinking by the time he left his village for higher education in 1910 were only strands that had not yet been tied together.

At the Tung-shan Higher Primary School in Hsiang-Hsiang, Mao was able to study not only the Confucian classics that had dominated his education prior to this, but also natural sciences and the “new learning” of the West. Tung-shan was a modern primary school with some teachers who had studied overseas. As Li Jui states, “Mao Tse-tung learned a great many new things, and his horizons were widened considerably.” He was introduced to the history, geography, and historical figures of the rest of the world. After a year, Mao moved on to the Hsiang-Hsiang Middle School in Changsha where he began to read political newspapers and write on his own about his views on political activity and revolution.

Mao was not the only one becoming involved in this type of activity. Li
writes, “The Hunan of this time was a place marked by the ardent activities of the ‘revolutionary party’, a place where a new atmosphere prevailed.” Mao began to find himself in this “new atmosphere” mobilizing his comrades to show their determination to stand up to the Manchus by cutting off their queues. Mao joined the revolutionary army and, because he was only required to perform some minor duties in the town, was able to make his education current by reading up on contemporary political criticism and newspapers that covered political events and social problems.

When the 1911 Revolution failed to live up to Mao’s expectations and power fell into the hands of the feudal, warlord forces represented by Yuan Shih-k’ai, Mao tried out several schools in the area, but was unsatisfied with them, electing eventually to spend a period of self-study, teaching himself what he felt was important. During this period, Mao studied Chinese translations of much of the great works of Western thinking in all areas. He studied science by reading Darwin, economics by reading Adam Smith, ethics in evolution by reading Thomas Huxley, logic and ethics by reading J.S. Mill, sociology by reading Spencer, and law theory and social thought by reading Montesquieu and Rousseau.

This period of self-study, Mao’s love of learning, and his lack of interest in trade led Mao to enter the First Teachers Training School in 1913. At the Teachers School Mao found one of the most important influences in his life, Yang Changji. Yang revered Confucianism and learning, but had also studied overseas and brought back to China, and to Mao, an interest in European philosophy. He supplemented traditional Chinese thinking with a belief in the Mind and Will. Yang helped Mao begin to tie together the loose strands of his thoughts. With Yang, Mao learned about Western Liberalism, self-reliance, and responsibility with duty to society. In these teachings Mao saw a way to
effectively use education. The concepts of Mind and Will could help men to know themselves and therefore to better themselves. If more people could be educated in this way, then society as a whole would benefit. China as Mao and Yang saw it was disorganized. If China was to be renewed and strengthened, this must be changed, but not at the level of the government, as shown in the recently failed 1911 Revolution. Stuart Schram writes that Mao’s thinking in these years developed along these lines:

In order to get things moving, it was necessary to move people’s hearts. The first requirement for this was to have some great basic principles. At present the reformers were beginning with details, such as assemblies, constitutions, presidents, cabinets, military affairs, industry, education and so on. The value of all this should not be underestimated, but all these partial measures would be ineffectual if they were not founded in principle…The place to start was with philosophy and ethics, and with changing the thinking of the whole country. China’s thinking, he [Mao] wrote, was extremely old, and her morals extremely bad. Thought ruled men’s hearts, and morals ruled their actions; thus both must be changed.²¹

By 1918 Mao felt that education was the only way to begin bringing about change in China. It was necessary to give the people of the country a sense of morals and a basic knowledge of the world around them. Throughout Mao’s life and all of his revolutionary activity, education of the people played a huge role. Very early on he started night schools for workers in the city and never gave up this drive even in the most difficult times, teaching peasants to read and think about their problems along the route of the Long March. These ideas were the ideas of the May 4th generation that would spring into action in 1919. However,
within his own mind, Mao was still working out how exactly to transform this knowledge, once it was given to the people, into real power.

**Will**

The concept of Will, which Mao first started to comprehend under Yang, had extremely important ramifications for Mao’s view of the world and his later life. Up until his time with Yang, Mao’s ideas of freedom and justice had had more to do with individualism than with mass movements. He saw the individual as primary and the group as secondary. This allowed the concept of Will to enter into Mao’s ideas for strengthening China. This concept followed the course of his own life; self-realization came as the result of education and was what made true Will possible. Will was what connected mind, body, and abstract thought with the physical world. Yang’s classroom was the perfect atmosphere for this kind of learning because he constantly compared Chinese philosophers with Western thinkers. In his lectures, Yang attacked what he saw as the useless rules of Confucianism while teaching the *Analects* according to his reading. For example, Confucius as interpreted by Yang said, “Those who are strong of will can control the deviant lusts of their own desires, and oppose the social oppression of authority…[For those who] possess a will which cannot be taken away, there is nothing which cannot be realized.” Yang was not a neo-Confucianist, since they tended to stress tranquility over action. Yang and Mao wanted change, and the slow, gradual change of Mao’s earlier hero, K’ang Yu-wei, was no longer possible in a China run by warlords.

The concept of Will appealed to Mao because it was logically natural. It was a force of nature found within man. Reading German idealists in Yang’s class convinced Mao that Will and egoism were not irrational or selfish, but “free, rational, and universal.” This last point, the universality of the power of
Will, must have been a breakthrough for Mao. In Mao’s copy of Paulsen’s book about Will, the margins are full of scribbled notes comparing his theories with historical figures from China’s past. The aversion to the unchangeable forces of nature found in classical thought that Mao had felt all his life could now be justified in his mind. If Will is natural, if it is a force of nature within man, and if it is universal, then Will could be a force of nature as man. Self-aware and educated men, understanding their Will and in control of it, could overcome any obstacle.

Mao had read some Marx in 1917, but at that point he did not have a great understanding of his theories. As Terrill writes, “Mao knew better what he was against than what he was for.” When Mao read the Communist Manifesto in 1919, Marx made more sense. The success of the Bolsheviks in Russia added weight to Marxism and Mao finally felt that he understood the Marxist idea of a process of history that would lead to a Bolshevik style revolution in China. It may have been the experience of Yang’s class that encouraged Mao to compare Marxist ideas with ideas from China’s classical thinking, and it fit into them well. The Marxist theory of historical progress could be compared to the classical Chinese idea of the cycles of history. The current government of China had replaced another regime whose greatness had fallen. In turn, this government too had become bad and must now be replaced. Marxism seemed to offer a way to do it and a theory to back it up.

Also, the Marxist idea of a Golden Age in the future could be compared to another idea from Chinese view. The Kung-Yang school of thought was based on an elaboration of Confucian writings. K’ang Yu-wei identified with certain aspects of this philosophy and used it to come to certain conclusions about Confucius’ teachings. Confucius wrote about an ancient time of Great Harmony, which, for unknown reasons, gave way to the cycles of history that had been
known for thousands of years. K’ang saw that if history was based on cycles and it began with a period of Great Harmony, then there must be another period of Great Harmony that would appear at the end of history. K’ang also felt that this did not contradict the modern theory of evolution which he knew to be true.\textsuperscript{26} This fit in perfectly with Mao’s understanding of Marx’s theory of history.

Mao found in his understanding of the philosophy of Will the driving force behind these processes of history and evolution. This understanding of Will was very similar to the idea of \textit{ch’i}, which is the vital force that flows through all things. Will was no longer simply men acting in their own interest, it was a force of nature that drove all of history and could not be denied. Mao eagerly became a member of the Chinese Communist Party when it was founded in 1921 and started forming the beginnings of Communist cells in Changsha at the request of the Commintern.\textsuperscript{27}

Despite all this, Mao still did not fully understand all the aspects of Marx’s theories, but that did not matter to him. He saw China as the patient and Marxism as the medicine.\textsuperscript{28} For this reason he was able to be flexible and look for whatever solutions made sense in different circumstances. His idea of Will made class identification more subjective. He understood the term proletariat to mean property-less. This meant that all poor and oppressed people, along with anyone who was willing to identify with them, could consider themselves on the side of the proletariat. The urban working class, the most accessible and most able to be educated, would still lead the revolution in China, but the peasants would make up the vast body of its forces. Other members of the CCP, such as Lin Biao and Li Lisan, did not agree on this view of the revolution with Mao, and Mao himself did not pursue it as the only correct course until after Chiang Kai-shek’s rise to power in the KMT and Mao’s retreat from Changsha in 1930.\textsuperscript{29}
This way of using Marxism provided the bricks with which Mao could begin building his revolution, but a different aspect of Marxist theory also gave him the ability to understand and explain the abstract meanings behind real events. This allowed him to present his philosophies and arguments in such a way that they could be clearly understood, and he gained a credibility in Marxist circles that proved important to Mao as his importance in the CCP grew.

**Contradiction**

One of the main propositions of Marxism was that everything could be understood as the results of a synthesis of two sides of a contradiction. In Marxism the study of this phenomenon and its use in understanding problems is known as dialectics. In his work, *On Contradiction*, Mao explains that within each thing can be found the seed of its opposite. We cannot have light without the concept of dark and we cannot have life without the concept of death. Without these opposite concepts, the world would lose all meaning. This synthesis of opposites, of which the world and history are the results, is not only true for all things, but at all levels. There is contradiction between the essences that make up matter, the matter that makes men, the men that make classes, and the classes that make history. The way to understand truly and change the world is to grasp the importance of contradictions at different levels and manipulate the essential ones.\(^{30}\)

This understanding of the world was good Marxism, but it also had support in the classical teachings of Mao’s early development. The idea of the Yin-Yang in Taoism, which “described a regular progression of constantly shifting [male/female, weak/strong] relationships which could be ignored only at dire risk to the individual”\(^{31}\) was a good starting point for studying contradiction. In the Taoist worldview things were generated by a combination of opposites.
According to the *Tao Te Ching*, “All things originate from being. Being originates from non-being,” and

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Is and Isn’t produce each other.} \\
\text{Hard depends on easy,} \\
\text{Long is tested by short,} \\
\text{High is determined by low,} \\
\text{Sound is harmonized by voice,} \\
\text{After is followed by before.}^{32}
\end{align*}
\]

The only difference between the Taoist view and that of Marxism is that in Taoism the opposites are complementary while in Marxism it is a struggle between them that brings about the synthesis. One can see both of these in Mao’s thinking. His ideas of China’s situation from the 1920s on were filled with struggle, Communists and Nationalists within the United Front\(^{33}\), man against nature on the Long March, Chinese against Japanese, then classes and parties against each other after the war. At the same time, the contradictions in his ideas of education and development were often in practice complementary, finding a balance between old and new, East and West, or learning and experience. However Mao may have envisioned the structure of the laws of nature at any certain point, it was still only philosophy until it was acted upon. Practice was needed to bring philosophy into the real world. Years of education and experience meant nothing if it was not used.

**Practice**

Through action, a man who understands himself and the world can make his thought reality. In fact, much of the knowledge of the world that man can
acquire comes from action as well. For Mao, practice was the final and highest step in true knowledge. Knowledge began with perception (learning about or experiencing the outer world), moved on to conceptual understanding (coming to grips with the inner contradictions of things by considering them in one’s mind), and finally culminated in practice (acting on one’s conclusions, testing hypotheses).³⁴

This view fit with Marxist dialectics and also with what Mao had learned earlier, since he had been exposed to Wang Yang-ming and his theory of the unity of thought and action.³⁵ Through this unity one action could accomplish two tasks. For example, working with peasants would allow the Communists to learn from them, becoming acquainted with their lives and problems. This would allow the Communists to then present the knowledge, which had always existed within the peasants, back to the people in such a way that would assist in their self-realization. Thus, practice becomes “the primary and basic standpoint in the dialectical-materialist theory of knowledge.”³⁶ Concrete action is philosophy in the world.

Mao even saw war in terms of philosophy. According to Terrill, “Mao made the gun an expression of a humanistic world view...people count more than weapons...the gun is useless if the trigger puller is not the missionary of an appealing cause.”³⁷ In this way war was an argument with the enemy. Guns and bombs were only important as far as they could be used to prove points and win hearts and minds. This focus on the people as the critical objectives to be won in battle made land positions, front lines, and many of the other ideas familiar in the traditional concept of war close to meaningless. Land is only taken when the people that live on it agree with you. As long as you believe in a cause you do not have to hold a hill or a line or a machine gun nest.

Mao’s idea of war was fluid and was supported by the teachings of Sun Tzu,
the legendary general of ancient China, who wrote, “The Way means inducing the people to have the same aim as the leadership, so that they will share death and share life, without fear of danger.” and “To unfailingly take what you attack, attack where there is no defense. For unfailingly secure defense, defend where there is no attack.” For Mao, who had no real military experience aside from doing errands for officers in the revolutionary army of 1911, his military ideas became most effective once he was joined by a brilliant soldier named Zhu De on Well Mountain in April 1928. Together, Mao and Zhu made an excellent team, complementing each other to the point that many people who did not know them thought that there was a single person named Zhu-Mao. With Zhu’s help, Mao was able to perfect his idea of guerrilla warfare, synthesizing the contradiction of strength and weakness into flexibility, speed, and power; the ultimate example of philosophy in practice.

**Conclusion**

These examples of the evolution of Mao’s early thought show that Mao himself was a contradiction in the same way that he would have thought of everything as a contradiction. His thinking contained old ideas and new ideas. It contained ideas from both East and West. He saw himself as part of a natural process of history, but also as a force of nature. He fought when he felt it was necessary, but only as an accompaniment to his philosophy. He was able to bring together these contradictory factors through his nationalism. He believed in Marxism, but only as a medicine for a sick China. He believed in learning from education and experience. Western and modern philosophies were the subjects, but China was always the context. His thought could be very philosophical, but it was never completely abstract. He always required the proof of practice, and he only saw theories in action in China. The Western
philosophies he was exposed to were made Chinese as he found examples of them in Chinese history and thought, and when he came to conclusions about this synthesis, they were tested in the Chinese people.

The Chinese people and Mao’s sense of justice were the only factors in Mao’s thinking that were never changed or modified in his early development. He was always interested in what was best for China, even in his earliest writings. With this nationalism as a starting point, Mao’s thinking was not only interesting intellectually, but persuasive in the real world. It gave Mao both a beginning and a framework with which to tie together all of the loose strands of knowledge that he picked up from one source or another. It allowed him to see through and define the contradictions of man and nature, individual and masses, parties with each other, old and new, East and West, and to act on them to make his vision of a united and strong China a reality.

**Endnotes**

1. Terrill, p.137
2. Ibid., p.137
3. Howard, p.118
4. Terrill, p.128
6. Wakeman, p.97
7. Terrill, p.8
8. Wakeman, p.98
9. Li, p.11
10. Schram, p.15
11. Wakeman, p.98
12. Ibid., p.83
13. Terrill, p.10. At points Terrill and other sources refer to the Four Books of Confucian classics or the Five Books. John King Fairbank and Merle Goldman list (p.98) four classical books in China: *A New History*. These are the *Analects* by Confucius; the work of Confucius’ successor Mencius; The Doctrine of the Mean; and The Great Learning.
14. Terrill, p.10
15. Li, p.6
16. Ibid., p.7
17. Ibid., p.7
18. Ibid., p.8
19. Terrill, p.29
20. Schram, p.17
21. Ibid., p.18
22. Ibid., p.26
23. Wakeman, p.158
24. Ibid., p.201
25. Terrill, p.40
26. Wakeman, p.130
27. Terrill, p.52
28. Ibid., p.145
29. Womack, p.100
31. Wakeman, p.75
32. Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Sect. 2 and 40
33. During the First United Front of the 1920s the struggle between the contradictory parties was still mainly ideological. Mao enthusiastically worked with the KMT, judging that the contradiction between the parties was not yet the essential contradiction of Chinese society.
34. Wakeman, p.231
35. Ibid, p.238
37. Terrill, p.95
38. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*
39. Terrill, p.99
40. Mao, “A Study of Physical Education”

**Works Cited**


Goldman, Merle. “Mao’s Obsession With the Political Role of Literature and the Intellectuals.”

*The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao: From the Hundred Flowers to the Great Leap For-


