The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution inspired Gordon White politically and engaged him intellectually. Where Western commentators were either dismissive or seduced by the political theatre that characterised the Maoist project, Gordon, without abandoning his political commitments, demonstrated the need and the possibilities for serious social science analysis. *Micropolitics in Contemporary China* which he published with Marc Blecher was particularly important (1979). For although the Cultural Revolution intruded into most aspects of Chinese life, often in the most vicious ways, and although there was a personalisation of power through the cult of his personality and a politicisation of society through the cult of his writings, the Party–State managed to carry out its state functions.

The first part of this article is concerned with the personalisation of power and the second part with the politicisation of society. In both cases revolutionary iconography was developed to carry the message. In part three the relationship between the political theatre of the Maoist project and the political process of a basic level unit during the Cultural Revolution is examined through the work of Blecher and White. A brief assessment concludes the article.

1 The Personalisation of Power

There is no shortage of literature on the Cultural Revolution. But there is a movement away from the early adulation and from the subsequent total condemnation towards the analysis of its complexities. There is also the recognition of the need to distinguish between the 'high tide' years (1966–68) and the Cultural Revolution decade (1966–76). The study of Chinese revolutionary iconography is influencing this approach and is employed here (see Evans and Donald 1999).

Mao Zedong's role and the promotion of the cult of his personality was crucial, but has to be seen as one of several characteristics shaping the dynamics of the Cultural Revolution. After all, Mao had criticised Stalin's cult of the individual as a 'rotten carry-over from the long history of mankind' but fell short of denouncing him (cited in Schram 1969:431; see also Mao 1977:304). According to Stuart Schram, 'Mao's central and crucial role in bringing it [the Cultural Revolution] about is not subject to discussion but there are those who argued that he was merely the instrument, or the catalyst of objective

'Politics First'

The Maoist State and the Political Process during the Cultural Revolution

Robert Benewick

forces rooted in Chinese history and/or in the logic of a western-inspired revolutionary process. Others saw it as an arbitrary charade resulting from the caprice of an ageing and despotic ruler' (1986:613). Lynn T. White III evaluates Mao's role in the context of the broader origins of the Cultural Revolution to demonstrate more precisely the role he did play: 'Mao's role was to pull the pin on a grenade that he did not make alone, and whose effects no one could surely predict' (1989:310). Frederick Teiwes and Warren Sun argue 'Even within the authoritarian Chinese political tradition Mao's power was exceptional, a power comparable only to that exercised by the most awesome emperors' (1996:164).

The purpose of this section is to situate Mao's role and his personality cult within the dynamics of the Maoist project and the Cultural Revolution. An immediate impact created political theatre where the 'high tide' became synonymous with the Cultural Revolution, a dimension which Blecher and White tunnel beneath to reveal the political process of the Party–state. The second is the re-emergence of Mao Zedong as a symbol of authority, security and centre of gravity on the stage on which the conflicts and tensions of political theatre were played out in so far as the Maoist project was an attack on the Party–state. A longer term consequence was the embedding of the personalisation of power and the devaluing, if not undermining, of institutions. This was one of Mao's legacies to his successors which was to haunt them down to the Tiananmen protest of 1989 and beyond.

Chinese political iconography was a means but also a relationship and a two-way one at that. Messages were delivered, and received, but also interpreted and, no doubt, misinterpreted. While there is nothing unique in the promotion of a personality cult, the sheer volume, scale and pervasiveness of the iconography along with that promoting agriculture, industry, commerce, the Communist Party, the PLA, sport, health, education, the *new* (my italics) culture, Chinese revolutionary history, patriotism, and that portraying workers, peasants, soldiers, heroes and emulation models, women, children, national minorities, foreign friends and enemies, is revolutionary.

More than 20,000 images of Mao were designed for 3.5 to 4.8 billion badges. These identified the wearer with Mao and served as a ticket for admission to theatre politics. Audience participation was common. An example of the fanaticism engendered during the 'high tide' was the Red Flag Combat Regimental team of the Beijing Institute of Aeronautics and its counterparts in other cities who attempted to turn China into a 'Red Sea'. Wearing a Mao badge and carrying a copy of *Quotations of Chairman Mao*, members painted everything in sight red. According to one account 'the stores, government offices, tea shops, noodle restaurants and various eateries were so completely covered that it was impossible to tell which was which'. The Central Committee and State Council were forced to issue a proclamation at the end of 1966 titled 'Notice about Restraining the Indiscriminate Action of the so-called Red Sea' (Yan Jiaqi and Gao Gao 1996:89–90).

Domination and power, as well as iconic adulation, is most explicit in the 2.2 billion poster portraits of Chairman Mao (Barmé 1996: 8). They signified deification, distance and omnipresence. They identified him with the Chinese nation and as 'the state' in counter-distinction to the Party–state or the Liu Shaoqi faction. This visual representation was also expedient given the limited means of alternative communication, limited literacy and Mao's limitations as a public speaker. Consequently there was no physical, let alone politically permissible, space to challenge Chairman Mao, thereby imparting meaning to the slogan 'the whole country is red'. This is the total personalisation of power.

Great care could be taken in presentation. Posters would be reproduced from oils, watercolours and photographs. The principal standards for painting Mao after 1971 were 'red, bright and shining'. For the red flag and for the star on Mao's cap only the purest red pigment could be used (Silbergeld 1993:43). The portraits and posters can be classified into those that feature Mao directly and those that represent him indirectly. In the first set Mao either fully occupies or shares poster space, and may be depicted in different poses, settings and at different ages. In the second set this domination is represented indirectly and symbolically, or by what Stephanie Donald describes as icons of political activism (Donald 1999). The figures may be wearing Mao badges depicting Mao, carrying the *Quotations of Chairman Mao* or copies of the *Selected Works*, or may be Red Guards wearing armbands considering themselves acting on his behalf, mouthing slogans while the captions may repeat his quotations. They may appear in combination and in non-political settings to promote production, education or health, for example. In every poster however they are expressions of power.

A poster of Mao addressing a Red Guard rally from the bridge outside Tiananmen appeared in several versions. A 1967 painting, widely reproduced, shows Chairman Mao on the bridge with Zhou Enlai, Lin Biao and the leaders of the Cultural Revolution Group, Chen Boda, Jiang Qing and Kang Sheng. They wear Mao badges and hold the *Quotations of Chairman Mao*. Mao's right hand is stretched out as if to shake hands with the adoring crowd wearing Red Guard armbands, badges and carrying 'little red books'. The scene is one of Mao investing the crowd with a mission. The captions read: 'The hearts of Chairman Mao and the revolutionary masses beat in union' and 'Chairman Mao, to see you marks the realisation of our most cherished dreams. We will never forget these happy times. Guided by your brilliant thoughts we will bring the revolution to a conclusion.'

A 1973 version, based on a painting by seven artists, is less militant, but also less celebratory and more authoritarian. Mao is depicted in a Lenin-like pose with his left arm raised and outstretched towards the admiring crowd. Even though workers, peasants and soldiers have replaced the Cultural Revolution group, including Zhou Enlai and the disgraced and now dead Lin Biao, and the Little Red Book has vanished, the physical and emotional distance between Mao and the crowd has increased. An inscription on the left reads 'Long Live the Communist Party of China' and on the right 'Follow Chairman Mao's Long March'. The caption reads: 'March forward to achieve the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution'. The 1976 version is identical to that of 1973 with the exception of the caption which now reads 'As far as consolidating the dictatorship of the proletariat, guarding against capitalist restoration and establishing socialism are concerned, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution could not be more necessary or timely'. Posters then could be altered to fit changing circumstances but Mao was always placed centre-stage and occupied the most space. The same applies to the posters of the 1970s which are more specific in content and pacific in approach in contrast to the mobilisation themes of the 1960s. For example, posters show Mao on 'inspection tours'. A prominent theme refers to his Report on the Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan (1927), on the revolutionary potential of the peasantry. In one poster, 'Chairman Mao's rural investigation in the Jinggang mountains', he appears as a young revolutionary in uniform. Even though the crowd are armed peasants who were supporting the early Red

Army base they do not appear aggressive or threatening. It is a meeting among equals. A second poster, 'Chairman Mao visiting Guangdong Province' depicts Mao and a crowd of peasants, some of whom are wearing badges, striding across the countryside. Mao is slightly in the lead accompanied by the team or brigade leader. He cuts a striking figure but not, as in the earlier posters, disproportionately so. Yet his white shirt, open at the neck, and grey trousers are markedly different from the working clothes of the peasants. A southern peasant hat, however, in his right hand, as well as being functional, serves as a badge of identification, as signified by two similar hats in the crowd. It is a happy scene, with the crowd pleased to show Chairman Mao their achievements since the founding of the communes and take pleasure in his presence.

A third, late poster (1977) reproduces another favourite theme, 'A heart to heart talk'. Mao is dressed so as to identify him with rural China; yet his outfit contrasts with those of the peasants, which clearly identifies them with the Yan'an region. He sits chatting, smoking, drinking tea with and listening to the small crowd. Also set in Yan'an is another popular poster depicting Mao in a celebratory crowd. Here, in 'A new spring in Yan'an', Mao as expected is centre stage, wearing a dress tunic, smoking and not portrayed markedly out of proportion with the crowd. What is most unusual, however, is that it is one of the few posters in which he is shown making human contact – and then with a child (see also Laing 1988, figures 65–7). Even when he is sited as part of the crowd, narrowing the distance with the viewer, a degree of distance is usually maintained by the absence of physical contact. The crowd is also interesting for its representation of different groups in the area. Printed in 1972, the *Quotations* and Mao badges are absent, but the slogans displayed by the children read: 'Be self-sufficient – use your own resources'.

There is no shortage of posters representing Mao indirectly through icons of activism. For example, one repeats the popular slogan 'Chairman Mao is the red sun in our hearts'. Although dated 1966, in place of the Red Guards and the *Quotations of Chairman Mao*, the poster features the cultural revolutionary correct triumvirate of worker, peasant (often female), and soldier, with minority nationalities in the background holding the *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*. While the worker in the foreground holds his copy aloft, the others hold their copies against their hearts.

2 The Politicisation of Society

The cult of Mao's personality is well documented, even though the responsibility for its promotion remains disputed. Less well known is the cult of Mao's writings, at least for systematic analysis. The two, of course, are closely related. The writings contributed to the promotion of the cult of personality and the writings would not have acquired their own authority and status independent of Mao's power. They were legitimated as Marxism–Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought. The writings served other purposes too. They were employed in the factional struggle between the Maoists and the Party–state. Each faction could feed upon the writings either imbibing revolutionary inspiration or advocating practical caution. The writings, like the posters, were also meant for discussion (Gittings 1999) and, like the badges, they were icons of power carried or clutched in the hands of millions of people. Above all, they were the instrument of the largest experiment in the politicalisation of society that was ever undertaken. As Lin Biao wrote in the introduction to the *Quotations*, 'the large-scale publication ... is a vital measure for enabling the broad masses to grasp Mao Tse-Tung Thought and for promoting the revolutionization of our people's thinking' (Mao 1966). In addition to the official characterisation of Mao as 'Great Leader, Great Teacher, Supreme Commander and Great Helmsman', he could be styled 'Great Political Entrepreneur'.

The *Quotations* and Mao's *Selected Works* readings and poems figure prominently in photographs and in the poster art of the Cultural Revolution. In short, his writings were ubiquitous. According to the New China News Agency by the end of 1967, 86.4 million sets of the *Selected Works*, 47.5 million copies of the *Selected Readings*, and 57 million copies of Mao's collected poems were published (cited in Ch'en, 1969: 41–2). In particular, there were the *Quotations* popularly packaged as the Little Red Book. Originally published for the People's Liberation Army in 1964, estimates vary between 350 million and one billion copies distributed. Both the colour and the size would have been deliberate. Red was the colour of the Cultural Revolution, but it also promoted visibility and, as with the badges, signified Mao as the red sun in the hearts of the Chinese people. The pocket size encouraged portability so that the book, like the badge, was a mark of identification but one that could be waved and the quotations recited, shouted or even sung (365 were set to music) if the situation demanded (Barmé 1996:190, note 10). Most of all, the quotations could be carried

to the compulsory study sessions or pulled out and read whenever and wherever convenient.

As for the contents, the Little Red Book was divided into 33 chapters covering the Communist Party, cadres and members; class struggle, the mass line, and democracy; imperialism, people's war, patriotism and internationalism; self-reliance, self-cultivation and self-criticism; women and young people, culture and art. The entries were drawn from Mao's speeches, reports and writings. Some were simply epigrams, others were substantial in length and substance and might appear in more than one chapter as deemed appropriate. These included extracts from 'On Practice', 'On Contradiction', 'Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan' and, in particular, 'On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People'. Mao's favourite, 'The Foolish Old Man who Removed the Mountains', a metaphor to conquer imperialism and feudalism, appears in full (see Appendix 1).

The Little Red Book was not *just* (my italics) for chanting or shouting slogans, as often characterised in the Western press. The method drew upon precedents in the Chinese history of learning through memorisation by recitation, for example, of Confucius's Sayings, a method which is still prominent in Chinese pedagogy. Lin Biao in his introduction to the *Quotations* instructed units to select the passages for study 'that are relevant to the situation, their tasks, the current thinking of their personnel, and the state of their work' (Mao 1966). In sum, the Little Red Book was a distillation of Mao Zedong Thought or the official ideology and provided the acceptable and conceptual vocabulary for public discourse.

Mao's *Quotations* and other writings also figured prominently as icons of power. They were used in poster art to promote Mao Zedong Thought and enhance the status of whatever else was being portrayed (Evans and Donald 1999:10). In this sense the icon is more important than the substance. Like the badges to be worn, the volumes were deemed to be seen. For example, a 1971 poster celebrates: 'the construction of the bridge over the Yangzi at Nanjing is a great victory for Mao Zedong Thought' (Landsberger 1998:58–9). In the foreground are four workers and one soldier. The one woman is holding aloft a portrait of Mao. Two workers and the soldier are wearing Mao badges. One worker and the soldier are carrying the Little Red Book and

another is carrying the *Selected Works*. All are surrounded by red flags. It is left to the viewer to interpret how it is a triumph for Mao Zedong Thought.

3 Micropolitics in Contemporary China

Blecher and White's work is of a different order from the foregoing. *Micropolitics in Contemporary China* can be likened to going backstage at the political theatre of the Cultural Revolution. The importance of their study lies in their systematic and rigorous analysis of the interaction between the political theatre that characterised the Maoist project and the ordinary functioning of a unit at the basic level of governance. This was offstage for most observers of the Cultural Revolution. Blecher and White set out to discover the kind of politics that took place during the course of the Cultural Revolution. What they found was an extremely complex and multifaceted political process.

Our interest is in the extent to which the personalisation of power and the politicisation of society intruded in the work and life of a technical unit or, in their words, 'the relationship between the movement in this particular unit and nationwide ideological content and political dynamics of the Cultural Revolution' (1979:2). The unit was engaged in technical survey work as part of a long-term nationwide scientific programme. As such it is particularly germane for the present purposes. First, the unit was relatively isolated from the epicentre of the Cultural Revolution. Second, the personnel involved were tightly defined, administrative and technical, so that the political issues, ideological appeals and class and professional conflicts are identifiable. Third, the study is not confined to the 'high tide' period so that the changes within the unit are traced over the course of the Cultural Revolution. Indeed, the movement got off to a slow start due to the remote location of the unit and the number of personnel who were absent through fieldwork. This may well have insulated the unit from the most intense ideological struggles of the Cultural Revolution.

Blecher and White test their data, which is primarily based on a series of interviews with an unusually qualified informant, against four 'ideal types' of political process: ideological politics; policy politics; group interests; and particularistic politics. According to the authors, the Cultural Revolution had a differential impact on the unit ranging from the

profound, and even traumatic, to the superficial. Moreover, the changes brought about by the movement gradually wore off as the unit resumed its normal technical work in 1973 and 1974. Significant political alignments, organisational changes and disruption to work took place but were relatively short-lived. The authors are cautious in their assessment of attitudinal changes. Inter-personal relationships were affected well into the 1970s; awareness and knowledge of issues increased; and the political themes of the Cultural Revolution changed and expanded 'the agenda of legitimate political issues ...' (1979:125).

The inferences that can be drawn from Blecher and White's work are not straight forward. The Maoist project seems to have set the stage and provided the script for particularistic issues and conflicts within the technical unit. They note that the vocabulary employed was that of the national campaign, for example, 'bureaucratism', 'capitalist road', 'rightism', but the radical transformation that the ideology of the project demanded did not occur. It seems reasonable to suggest, however, that there was a 'politicisation' above and beyond the ordinary politics that preceded and followed the Cultural Revolution. There is no evidence of a cult of Mao's personality, and criticism and support of those in power and authority within the unit focused on individuals rather than cadres as such (1979:90). The personalisation of power at its most virulent led to the suicide of the head of the political office.

4 Some Concluding Thoughts

Political iconography is a subject for study on its own merits (Benewick and Donald 1996; Benewick 1999). Following the insights of Evans and Donald (1999), it has been used in the present context to develop two themes of the Cultural Revolution: the personalisation of power and the politicisation of Chinese society. Political iconography is also revealing where more conventional forms of information are limited. We do not know, however, whether political iconography played a significant part in the factional politics of the technical unit. Taking into account the location of the unit, the delay in the start of the movement and the educated personnel involved, it was probably relatively scarce, which suggests that the Cultural Revolution was not totalising or monolithic. Yet messages were transmitted and, even if subject to conflicting interpretations and perceptions, contributed to the politicisation of the unit and personalisation of

power. What Blecher and White demonstrate, among other things, is that this was of a different order from the political theatre of the Maoist project. That the unit recovered from the disruption and resumed normal work suggests a triumph of the Party–state. That there was longer term institutional devaluation can be ascribed to the legacy of Maoist politics.

Appendix
The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains (Mao 1945, 1966:201–2)
There is an ancient Chinese fable called 'The Foolish Man Who Removed the Mountains'. It tells of an old man who lived in northern China long, long ago and was known as the Foolish Old Man of North Mountain. His house faced south and beyond his doorway stood the two great peaks, Taihang and Wangwu, obstructing the way. With great determination, he led his sons in digging up these mountains, hoe in hand. Another greybeard, known as the Wise Old Man, saw them and said derisively, 'How silly of you to do this! It is quite impossible for you few to dig up these two huge mountains.' The Foolish Old Man replied, 'When I die, my sons will carry on; when they die, there will be my grandsons, and then their sons and grandsons, and so on to infinity. High as they are, the mountains cannot grow any higher and with every bit we dig, they will be that much lower. Why can't we clear them away?' Having refuted the Wise Old Man's wrong view, he went on digging every day, unshaken in his conviction. God was moved by this, and he sent down two angels, who carried the mountains away on their backs. Today, two big mountains lie like a dead weight on the Chinese people. One is imperialism, the other is feudalism. The Chinese Communist Party has long made up its mind to dig them up. We must persevere and work unceasingly, and we, too, will touch God's heart. Our God is none other than masses of the Chinese people. If they stand up and dig together with us, why can't these two mountains be cleared away?

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