

Mao's political and economic models

by Mary Boyd,
Professor of Asian Studies
at Saint Mary's University

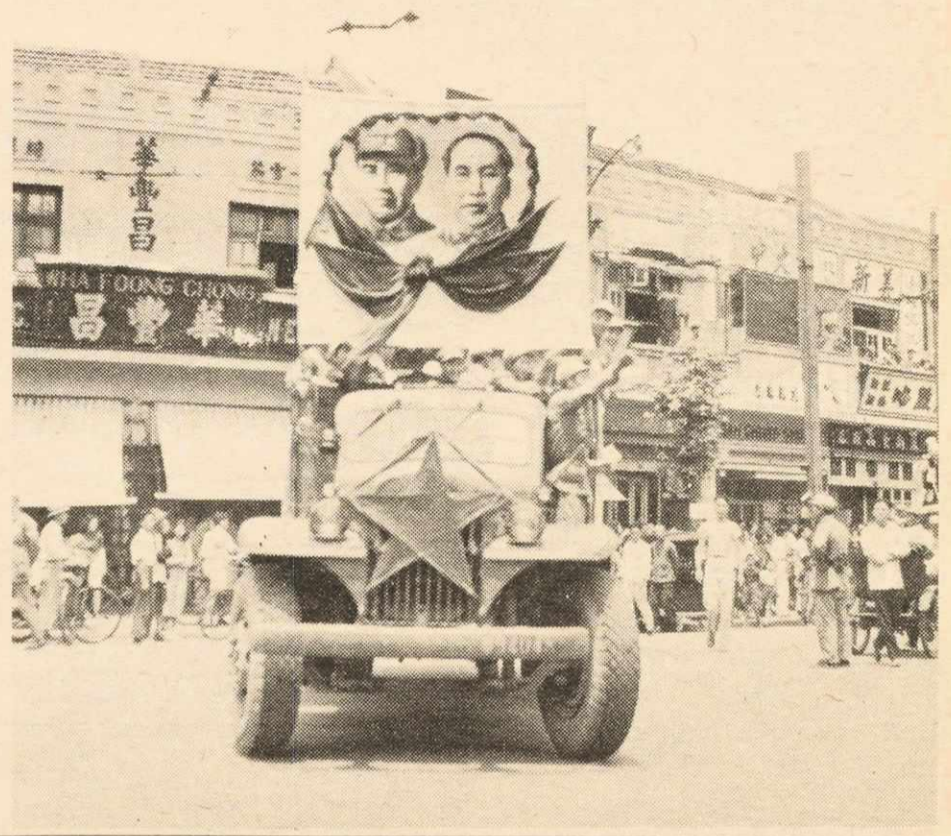
For many observers, China's policy changes over the last decade, and particularly during the last five years, have been confusing to the point of dizziness. It would seem that anything held dear as revolutionary theory throughout the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) has been turned upside down. Unravelling the political intricacies of that period will surely occupy Sinologists for a great many years. Moreover, the ties between political changes and economic planning are very complex, and very closely intertwined. However, we can draw a few tentative conclusions from evidence presented recently. Shifts in the party line and changes of personnel within the top echelons of power have had marked repercussions in economic life.

The economic slogans of the Cultural Revolution were notable for several factors. Two models were upheld as national examples: "In Industry Learn from Daqing" and "In Agriculture Learn from Dazhai". Both were cited as examples of self reliance and the correct application of Mao Ze-dong thought.

Daqing is the name of a large oilfield in China's Northeast, work on which began in the early 1960s. This coincided with the breakdown of Sino-Soviet relations, and so Daqing became not only a vital energy supplier for China (hitherto China had imported oil from the USSR) but also a symbol of Chinese independence. The government concentrated a great deal of money and effort in this project because of its obvious economic significance, and also mounted a propaganda campaign to drive home the political message. Heroes of the Daqing oilfield were men like Wang Jin-xi, popularly known as the "Iron Man Wang" because of his near mythical endeavours for the national purpose.



What has happened to Daqing since Mao's death? The answer, so far as we know, is nothing startling. Certainly the heroes are not emphasized in the same way, but rather than feel the need to debunk the Daqing legend, China's new economic planners are now including Daqing in a general industrial development strategy. The difference between the 1960s and the 1980s of course lies in the current eagerness for foreign investment and foreign technical help, but it seems that the initial, albeit Maoist, development of Daqing was not out of line with presently favoured economic thinking. The new industrial managers are assessing the achievements and failures



of the past few years (post-Mao) which saw a tremendous emphasis on heavy industry, and it seems the future emphasis will shift to a focus on light industry and consumer goods. While Daqing may no longer enjoy pre-eminence it does seem to have been recognized as a legitimate industrial effort.

The ups and downs of the Dazhai legend are far more dramatic, and I think this is rightly so because any changes in agricultural policies will have enormously far-reaching effects simply because China is an overwhelmingly agricultural country (80% of the population are peasants). Dazhai is a former model agricultural commune in Shanxi province, a traditionally poor area in the country. Faced with problems of terrain and organization, the peasants (in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s) embarked on an ambitious program to terrace hills for farm land and to carry out total agricultural collectivization. At this point the legend and the facts tend to differ, with Dazhai's detractors claiming that the army did most of the work and that the state provided enormous subsidies. Dazhai's admirers maintain that volunteer peasants worked as zealous shock troops, contributing their Mao inspired labour. What actually happened, in fact, was less important than what was seen to have happened as Dazhai became more and more important politically. The brigade leader, Chen Yong-gui, was soon to become a vice-premier of the Politburo and Dazhai's methods of administration (work point distribution, accounting system) and operation (crops planted etc.) were greatly praised. Dazhai's reliance on intensive human labour and public avowals of zeal were important political considerations in the early 1960s as Mao outmanoeuvred those in the Politburo who rejected such "Great Leap Forward"* tactics. These opponents were such men as Liu Shao-qi and Deng Xiao-ping. Mao's triumph in 1966 meant Dazhai's triumph as well and his personal identification with the model commune meant that Dazhai was enveloped by his personality cult.

Post-'76 "de-Maoification"

Mao's death in 1976 and the subsequent coup d'etat in which the "Gang of

Four" was removed signalled a shift away from the policies of the sixties. The "four modernizations"*** were to be the new direction and important in that was an emphasis on the mechanization of agriculture. If Dazhai had only been an agricultural model, it could have adapted to the new policy; however, it had acquired an emotional and political significance far beyond its function as an "advanced agricultural unit" and as such could not escape de-Maoification. In this summer of 1980 Chen Yong-gui was dismissed from his post and his commune has since become a symbol of erroneous planning and "Gang of Four boasting". Dazhai's concentration on grain and its distribution system were predictably criticized as the country diversified its crops and reinstated cottage industries and local markets. As China's agriculture is exceedingly labour intensive and the commune is the chief economic unit, these changes will affect the livelihoods of hundreds of millions of people. The new agricultural model appears to be Sichuan province where Deng's protegee, Zhao zi yang (now the Premier) oversaw post-Cultural Revolution economic reconstruction from 1977-1979.

What do these shifts in economic planning mean? For one thing they inevitably entail tremendous difficulties of implementation because of the politicization of economic planning and the need for massive education campaigns. This is natural in a socialist economy but one of the main disadvantages is inflexibility. Having elaborated a policy and incorporated it as a long term plan (usually a 5 year plan) the state has a very heavy commitment, which is difficult to redirect. Certainly it is to be hoped that China's current leadership will demonstrate their most valued virtue, pragmatism, in dealing with China's latest economic problems, namely record crop failures caused by drought this summer.

*The "Great Leap Forward" was Mao's attempt to industrialize China in the 1950s by using intensive small scale 'backyard' industries and saturation political encouragement

**Four modernizations: Agriculture, Industry, Science, Military