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A CONVERSATION WITH MAO TSE-TUNG

by EDGAR SNOW

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Mr. Snow, author of *Red Star over China* and a number of other books, has known Mao since 1936. He recently returned from a six-month stay in Communist China.

During a five-hour discourse with me in Peking on Dec. 18 last year, Chairman Mao Tse-tung expressed some of his views on Sino-American, Sino-Russian and other problems of foreign relations as well as on the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and its aftermath.

The chairman criticized the ritualism of the Mao "personality cult," explained why it had been a necessary nuisance during the Cultural Revolution and forecast its gradual modification. He said that the government of the People's Republic would shortly admit to China some visitors representative of a broad spectrum of American political and press opinion from the right, the middle and the left. He spoke in favor of opening conversations with American officials at the highest level, including Mr. Nixon. He expressed admiration for American achievements in production, science, technology and universal education and said that he held great hopes for the American people as a potential force for good in the world.

Chairman Mao emphasized that he did not wish to be interviewed. What we had was a conversation. Only recently I was able to confirm, however, that he would not object to publication of certain of his comments without the use of direct quotation. During most of our talk, notes were taken by Nancy T'ang, American-born daughter of T'ang

Ming-chao. (Mr. T'ang was editor of the *Overseas Chinese Daily* in New York City until 1949. Since then he has served in China as a leader of cultural and political relations with foreign countries.) One other person was present—a Chinese woman secretary. It was interesting that neither of the young women wore a Mao badge: this was the only occasion on which I met an official when the badge was not on display.

I recorded our dialogue from memory immediately afterward and also was given a copy of Miss T'ang's notes.

Chairman Mao's residence in Peking lies in the southwestern corner of the former Forbidden City, surrounded by vermilion walls and not far from the T'ien-an Men, or Heavenly Peace Gate, where he reviews the October anniversary parade. Behind these high walls, topped by glistening yellow tiles, the old imperial regime also housed its officials. Today members of the Politburo live and work here in close proximity to the chairman and Premier Chou En-lai. One enters through the West Gate, flanked by two armed guards. Circling around an empty wooded drive, one quickly comes to a one-story dwelling of modest size, built in traditional style.

At the entrance one is greeted by two unarmed officers, who wear no insignia of rank. "They are generals," confides Nancy T'ang. How

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does she know? They disappear when the chairman meets me at the door of his study. I apologize for keeping him waiting. I had been asleep when summoned without advance notice.

It was early morning. We had breakfast together and talked until about one o'clock. He was slightly indisposed with a cold and he wondered out loud what doctors were good for: they could not even prevent a simple disease like colds, which cost so much lost time. I mentioned Dr. Linus Pauling—he had heard of him—and his advocacy of large doses of ascorbic acid as a cold panacea. I offered to send him some. He said he would try it. If it helped I would get the credit. If it poisoned him I would not be blamed.

Mao's large study was completely lined with shelves filled by hundreds of Chinese books, with a sprinkling of foreign volumes. From many of them dangled slips of paper used as annotated bookmarks. The large desk was piled high with journals and scripts. It was a working writer's shop. Through the wide windows one could catch a glimpse of garden where the chairman is said to grow his own vegetables and experiment with crops. It is not a "private plot"; it belongs to the state. Perhaps he needs the output, since he is said to have taken a recent cut of 20% in his subsistence "wages."

We discussed my account of our last talk, in January 1965, in which I had reported his acknowledgement that there was indeed a "cult of personality" in China—and moreover there was reason for one. Some people had criticized me for writing about that.

So, he said, what if I had written about a "cult of personality" in China? There was such a thing. Why not write about it? It was a fact . . . those officials who had opposed my return to China in 1967 and 1968 had belonged to an ultraleftist group which had seized the foreign ministry for a time, but they were all cleared out long ago. At the time of our 1965 colloquy, Mao continued, a great deal of power—over propaganda work within the provincial and local party committees, and especially within the Peking Municipal Party Committee—had been out of his control. That was why he had then stated that there was need for more personality cult, in order to stimulate the masses to dismantle the anti-Mao party bureaucracy.

Of course the personality cult had been overdone. Today, things were different. It was hard, the chairman said, for people to overcome the habits of 3,000 years of emperor-worshipping tradition. The so-called "Four Greats"—those epithets applied to Mao himself: "Great Teacher, Great Leader, Great Supreme Commander, Great Helmsman"—what a nuisance. They would all be eliminated sooner or later. Only the word "teacher" would be retained—that is, simply schoolteacher. Mao had always been a schoolteacher and still was one. He was a primary schoolteacher in Changsha even before he was a Communist. All the rest of the titles would be declined.

"I often wonder," I said, "whether those who shout Mao the loudest and wave the most banners are not—as some say—waving the Red Flag in order to defeat the Red Flag."

Mao nodded. He said such people fell into three categories. The first were sincere people. The second were those who drifted with the tide—they conformed because everyone else shouted "Long live." The third category were hypocrites. I was right not to be taken in by such stuff.

I remember," I said, "that just before you entered Peking in 1949 the Central Committee adopted a resolution—reportedly at your suggestion—which forbade naming streets, cities or places for anybody."

Yes, he said, they had avoided that; but other forms of worship had emerged. There were so many slogans. Pictures and plaster statues. The Red Guard had insisted that if you didn't have those things around, you were being anti-Mao. In the past few years there had been need for some personality cult. Now there was no such need and there should be a cooling down.

But after all, he went on, did not the Americans have their own personality cult? How could the governor of each state, how could each President and each Cabinet member, get along without some people to worship them? There was always the desire to be worshiped and the desire to worship. Could you, he asked me, be happy if no one read your books and articles? There was bound to be some worship of the individual and that applied to me too.

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Chairman Mao has obviously pondered very much over this phenomenon—the human need for and to worship, about gods and God. On earlier visits he had discussed it at length. Now, at 76, he was in general good health but once again he said that he would “soon be going to see God.” It was inevitable; everyone eventually had to see God.

“Voltaire wrote that if there were no God it would be necessary for man to invent one,” I said. “If he had expressed himself as an outright atheist it might have cost him his head, in those times.”

Mao agreed that many people had lost their heads for saying much less.

“We have made some progress since then,” I said. “And man has been able to change God’s views on a number of things. One of them is birth control; about that, there is a great change here in China compared with five or 10 years ago.”

No, he said. I had been taken in! In the countryside a woman still wanted to have boy children. If the first and second were girls, she would make another try. If the third one came and was still a girl, the mother would try again. Pretty soon there would be nine of them; the mother was already 45 or so, and she would finally decide to leave it at that. The attitude must be changed but it was taking time. Perhaps the same thing was true in the United States?

“China is ahead in that respect,” I said. “A women’s liberation movement in the United States is making some impact, however. American women were the first to achieve the vote and they are now learning how to use it.”

At this point we were interrupted by the arrival of some glasses of *mao t’ai*, a fiery rice liquor made in Kweichow Province. We drank a toast. To my mortification the chairman noticed that I had omitted to toast the ladies present. How could I have done so? I had not yet accepted women as equals.

It was not possible, said the chairman, to achieve complete equality between men and women at present. But between Chinese and Americans there need be no prejudices. There could be mutual respect and equality. He said he placed high hopes on the peoples of the two countries.

If the Soviet Union wouldn’t do [point the way], then he would place his hopes on the American people. The United States alone had a population of more than 200 million. Industrial production was already higher than in any other country and education was universal. He would be happy to see a party emerge there to lead a revolution, although he was not expecting that in the near future.

In the meantime, he said, the foreign ministry was studying the matter of admitting Americans from the left, middle and right to visit China. Should rightists like Nixon, who represented the monopoly capitalists, be permitted to come? He should be welcomed because, Mao explained, at present the problems between China and the U.S.A. would have to be solved with Nixon. Mao would be happy to talk with him, either as a tourist or as President.

I, unfortunately, could not represent the United States, he said; I was not a monopoly capitalist. Could I settle the Taiwan question? Why continue such a stalemate? Chiang Kai-shek had not died yet. But what had Taiwan to do with Nixon? That question was created by Truman and Acheson.

It may be relevant to mention—and this is not a part of my talk with Chairman Mao—that foreign diplomats in Peking were aware last year that messages were being delivered from Washington to the Chinese government by certain go-betweens. The purport of such communications was to assure Chinese leaders of Mr. Nixon’s “new outlook” on Asia. Nixon was firmly determined, it was said, to withdraw from Vietnam as speedily as possible, to seek a negotiated international guarantee of the independence of Southeast Asia, to end the impasse in Sino-American relations by clearing up the Taiwan question and to bring the People’s Republic into the United Nations and into diplomatic relations with the United States.

Two important Frenchmen were in China in 1970. The first was André Bettencourt, the minister of planning, the second was Maurice Couve de Murville, premier under De Gaulle’s regime. M. Couve de Murville completed arrangements for a visit to China by General de Gaulle which was to have occurred this year. It was to Gen-

eral de Gaulle, I was authoritatively informed, that Mr. Nixon had first confided his intention to seek a genuine *détente* with China. Some people had anticipated that De Gaulle, during his visit, would play a key role in promoting serious Sino-American conversations. Death ruled otherwise. Chairman Mao's tribute to the general, sent to Mme. de Gaulle, was the only eulogy which he is known to have offered for any non-Communist statesman since Roosevelt died.

Meanwhile, other diplomats had been active. The head of one European mission in Peking, who had already made one trip to see President Nixon, returned to Washington last December. He bypassed the State Department to confer at the White House, and was back in China in January. From another and unimpeachable diplomatic source I learned, not long before my departure from Peking in February, that the White House had once more conveyed a message asking how a personal representative of the President would be received in the Chinese capital for conversations with the highest Chinese leaders. About the same time, I was enigmatically told by a senior Chinese diplomat who had formerly maintained quite the opposite, "Nixon is getting out of Vietnam."

I must once more stress that none of the above background information was provided to me by Mao Tse-tung.

As we talked, the chairman recalled to me once again that it was the Japanese militarists who had taught revolution to the Chinese people. Thanks to their invasion, they had provoked the Chinese people to fight and had helped bring Chinese socialism to power.

I mentioned how Prince Sihanouk had told me a few days before that "Nixon is the best agent for Mao Tse-tung. The more he bombs Cambodia, the more Communists he makes. He is their best ammunition carrier," said the prince. Yes, Mao agreed. He liked that kind of help.

I reminded him that when I had spoken to him two months before, during the October Day parade at T'ien-an Men Square, he had told me that he was "not satisfied with the present situation." I asked him to explain what he meant.

He replied that there were two things of which he highly disapproved during the Cultural Revolution. One was lying. Someone, while saying that the struggle should be carried out by reasoning, not by coercion or force, actually gave the other fellow a kick under the table and then drew back his leg. When the person kicked asked,

"Why did you kick me?" the first person said, "I didn't kick you. Don't you see my foot is still here?" That, Mao said, is lying. Later the conflict during the Cultural Revolution developed into war between factions—first with spears, then rifles, then mortars. When foreigners reported that China was in great chaos, they were not telling lies. It had been true. Fighting was going on. (I was told by Premier Chou on another occasion that the army suffered thousands of casualties before it took up arms to suppress factional struggles.)

The other thing the chairman was most unhappy about was the maltreatment of "captives"—party members and others removed from power and subjected to reeducation. The old practice of the Liberation Army—freeing captives and giving them fares to go home, which resulted in many enemy soldiers being moved to volunteer and join their ranks—had often been ignored. Maltreatment of captives now had slowed the rebuilding and transformation of the party.

If one did not speak the truth, Mao concluded, how could he gain the confidence of others? Who would trust one? The same applied between friends.

"Are the Russians afraid of China?" I asked.

Some people said so, he replied, but why should they be? China's atom bomb was only this size (Mao raised his little finger), while Russia's bomb was that size (he raised his thumb). Together the Russian and American bombs were (putting two thumbs together) that size. What could a little finger do against two thumbs?

"But from the long-range view, do the Russians fear China?"

It was said that they were a bit afraid, he answered. Even when there are a few mice in a person's room the person could become frightened, fearful that the mice might eat up his sweets. For instance, the Russians were upset because China was building air raid shelters. But if the Chinese got into their shelters, how could they attack others?

As for ideology, who had fired the first shot? The Russians had called the Chinese dogmatists and then the Chinese had called them revisionists. China had published their criticisms, but the Russians had not dared publish China's. Then they had sent some Cubans and later Romanians to ask the Chinese to cease open polemics. That would not do, Mao said. The polemics would have to be carried on for 10,000 years if necessary. Then Kosygin himself had

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come. After their talk Mao had told him that he would take off 1,000 years but no more.

The Russians looked down on the Chinese and also looked down on the people of many countries, he said. They thought that they only had to speak the word and all people would listen and obey. They did not believe that there were people who would not do so and that one of them was his humble self. Although Sino-Russian ideological differences were now irreconcilable—as demonstrated by their contradictory policies in Cambodia—they could eventually settle their problems as between states.

Referring once again to the United States, Chairman Mao said that China should learn from the way America developed, by decentralizing and spreading responsibility and wealth among the 50 states. A central government could not do everything. China must depend upon regional and local initiatives. It would not do (spreading his hands) to leave everything up to him.

As he courteously escorted me to the door, he said he was not a complicated man, but really very simple. He was, he said, only a lone monk walking the world with a leaky umbrella.

As a result of this and other informal conversations, I believe that in future Sino-American talks, Chairman Mao will surely adhere to the basic principles which have guided China in all her foreign policies, her ideological and world view as well as her regional policies. On the other hand, I also believe that, following an easing of international tensions, China will seek to cooperate with all friendly states, and all friendly people within hostile states, who welcome her full participation in world affairs. ■