May the Revolutionary Régime stay
Red for ten thousand generations
Chinese Communist Slogan

As long as we are not assured of immortality, we shall never be fulfilled,
we shall go on hating each other in
spite of our need for mutual love

Eugène Ionesco
Books are responses to events. The unusual events in China from mid 1966 to early 1968 have led me to attempt a rather unusual kind of book. It is about Mao Tse-tung and the Cultural Revolution, but its larger concern is with men’s efforts to render their works, and especially their revolutionary works, eternal. It is therefore a study of the vicissitudes of human continuity.

The book evolves from a long-standing general interest in the contemporary interplay of psychology and history, as well as a specific interest in Communist China’s unique efforts at remaking men and women according to her ideological vision. My earlier study, Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism, explored these efforts as they extended into the late 1950s, including the ‘Hundred Flowers’ episode of 1956–7 and its aftermath. During the early 1960s my research interests turned to Japan, but I continued to follow events on the mainland as closely as I could. Once one has immersed oneself in matters Chinese, one never quite extricates oneself from them, nor does one wish to.

Until about the beginning of 1966, although much of great interest continued to take place in China, I had the impression that events were generally consistent with the patterns of reform or ‘rectification’, followed by relative
liberalization, that I had previously observed. During the late spring and early summer of 1966, however, this suddenly ceased to be true. Reports were confused, but they left no doubt that a movement of a very different order was developing. I found myself, like many others, puzzled and fascinated as I followed the Cultural Revolution from New Haven, New York, Cape Cod, and then London. My earlier work had provided many possible leads, but these seemed if anything to deepen the mystery. At that time a new English edition of my book on thought reform was being scheduled, and the publisher’s suggestion that I add a brief section on the Cultural Revolution seemed to me both sensible and problematic. Fortunately I was soon to be on my way to the Far East for half a year of follow-up interviews with young Japanese, and in February 1967 I was able to arrange a brief stay in Hong Kong for the purpose of gaining a closer glimpse of mainland events.

The Hong Kong re-exposure (I had done my original work there in 1954–5, and had returned for shorter visits on two subsequent occasions) was invaluable. There I could gather a great variety of extremely useful material, and at the same time exchange impressions with a large number of China-watchers who were thinking, talking about, and imbibing nothing but the Cultural Revolution. I could also converse at length with a few Westerners and Chinese who had recently come from the mainland, including one young man who had been actively involved in the Red Guard movement. I was thus able to obtain a ‘feel’ of the Cultural Revolution – a sense of the extraordinary environment that had been created in China and of the forces contributing to that environment.

I became increasingly aware that the general psycho-

logical principles governing the thought reform process could not adequately illuminate the Cultural Revolution. Its agitated extremities of destruction and attempted revitalization demanded a larger perspective, one that could deal with man’s struggles for various forms of renewal and transcendence. I had been thinking about such a perspective for some time in relationship to other work. Partly from research in Hiroshima, but also from a continuing effort to formulate the nature of the individual experience in historical change, I had evolved a series of concepts around what I call modes of symbolic immortality. These deal with both death symbolism and human continuity, and in a work in progress I had begun to apply them to different epochs and to a general view of the historical process.

The approach is consistent with Otto Rank’s emphasis upon man’s continuing need for ‘an assurance of eternal survival for his self’. But while Rank saw this need as part of man’s ‘irrational’ nature, it seemed to me best understood as an aspect of his symbolic life, which in itself is neither ‘rational’ nor ‘irrational’ but comprehensible within a formal and (in the larger meaning of the word) scientific framework. The sense of immortality, then, is the individual’s connexion with man’s general past and future. I found the concept of symbolic immortality to be highly relevant to the issues of personal and historical continuity, and to related matters of ideological purity, dominating the Cultural Revolution. What seemed indicated was a careful exploration, in the light of this concept, of forces at play in that movement. But this kind of exploration had to take on its own autonomy, had to become at the very least a ‘slim volume’.

In Tokyo during the spring of 1967 I worked with some excitement on the first draft of the manuscript. It
was a good place to do so, for Japanese reporters and travellers were moving more freely among the participants in the Cultural Revolution (then still in full swing) than were their Western counterparts. They were also better able to read the wall posters (even if they occasionally made mistakes); and in their reports — as well as in our conversations — they conveyed perhaps better than any other group a vivid sense of the movement’s evangelical enthusiasm and zealotry. Once I was back in the United States I had opportunities to present the general argument of the book, first to a summer work group devoted to ‘psychohistorical’ problems, and then to a Yale audience of faculty and students in Chinese Studies. The responses evoked strengthened my belief that this unconventional approach could have significance for a variety of people coming to the subject from very different vantage points.

What has emerged is an interpretive essay whose central theme — that of revolutionary immortality — serves to organize a large number of divergent events and attitudes. I want to stress that this is by no means the only theme one could have chosen for such a purpose. One could have instead emphasized the economic strains of a developing country, China’s confrontation with America, the Sino-Soviet dispute, or the inevitable conflicts arising in the history of any revolution. Large historical events cannot be attributed to a single cause, nor grasped by a single explanation.

Neither is mine the only possible psychological approach. One could have stressed, for instance, Mao’s individual-psychological development in more usual psychoanalytic terms, with emphasis upon the monumental conflict with his father which all accounts suggest. Indeed, a full-scale psychobiography of Mao will surely be undertaken sometime in the future, but that is not my intention here. Rather, I focus upon certain features of Mao’s psychological and revolutionary style as these come to bear upon a series of personal and historical exigencies of his and China’s situation. Such a focus is part of a continuing effort to find new conceptual connections between individual and collective patterns, especially under extreme historical conditions. What I would claim for the use of the theme of symbolic immortality is a particular pertinence to this kind of extreme episode, and a general inclusiveness permitting the alternative themes mentioned earlier to be taken into account.

It enables me, for instance, to explore, in what I believe to be a new way, an excruciatingly complex encounter between man and technology. While rejecting the simple polarity of rational versus irrational behaviour, I have found it necessary here to make certain psychological judgements concerning attitudes and behaviour as they relate to the potentialities of the environment. One example is the concept of ‘psychism’, the exaggerated reliance upon will and psychic power to achieve technological goals. But I apply the concept only where there have been strong indications of this tendency, as confirmed by peculiarly self-defeating results.

The evidence I cite does not derive from the kind of systematic series of interviews I have done in connexion with previous work. I did conduct a number of interviews and found them extremely informative. But I also depend upon observations at a distance — upon writings and reported actions of Mao and others — and I do not hesitate to speculate about the relationship of these to the general themes I develop. I do, however, attempt to discipline this speculation both by seeking converg-
ing evidence from several directions and by making explicit the steps of my psychological argument. Above all I stress shared experience and avoid resorting to what I regard as a solipsistic tendency all too common in my own profession, that of viewing large historical events as nothing but manifestations of someone’s individual psychopathology. I have in fact become newly impressed by the potential usefulness of a category of data falling somewhere between group ideology and individual-psychological style – a level of experience that has been largely ignored but which, I believe, will take on considerable future importance for both psychologists and historians.

I confine myself to the Chinese Cultural Revolution, preferring to leave farther-ranging theoretical explorations for another study. But as my title implies, I see the Chinese situation as a paradigm for revolutions in general. Hence, I believe that the experience of the Soviet Union could be profitably re-examined in relationship to the theme of revolutionary mortality – focusing upon the early expression of the Marxist–Leninist vision, and viewing subsequent developments under Stalin, Khrushchev, and the present régime as embodying simultaneous attempts to eternalize and alter that vision. One could bring a similar approach to the French Revolution, and to a number of other partial or even failed revolutions. Not that these events are all the same: indeed, the framework I suggest might shed some light on why one revolution aborts at its inception, another changes the world, and a third succeeds and then consumes itself.

To generalize in this way does not preclude, and in fact requires, a stress upon what is peculiarly Chinese. Only from an emphasis upon cultural roots and historiical context can one derive the stuff of generalization. An upheaval like the Cultural Revolution demonstrates all too forcibly the need to view Chinese behaviour neither as identical in motivation and nuance with Western behaviour, nor as a self-enclosed form of Oriental exoticism. To see Chinese experience as both distinctive and part of the general flow of human events would seem a simple enough principle, but it has been long in coming into practice. China differentiates herself from the West by means of her specific combination of cultural symbols evolved over the course of her history. But these symbols depend upon psycho-biological potential available to all men in all epochs; they are, moreover, subject to the increasingly shared currents of world history.

Finally, I hope that this essay speaks to certain contemporary issues quite beyond China’s struggles or even general questions of revolution. I refer to dilemmas of historical discontinuity – to the broken connexion or impaired sense of immortality – that now affect people in every society. By gaining some understanding of China’s resulting combination of desperation and excess we may better learn to live not only with her but with ourselves as well. My hope in fact is that this study of a closed and totalistic revolutionary vision will serve to strengthen the more humane and searching forms of radical thought now struggling to take shape throughout the world, especially among the young.

My debts in this work are many, but I will mention only a few of them: enlarging dialogues over the years with Erik H. Erikson, David Riesman, and Kenneth Keniston; continuing mentorship on matters Chinese from
Preface

Benjamin I. Schwartz, John K. Fairbank, Mary C. Wright, and Arthur F. Wright; thoughtful responses to the manuscript from all of the above, as well as from Jonathan D. Spence, Lawrence W. Chisolm, and Frederick C. Redlich; valuable suggestions from members of the Group for the Study of Psychohistorical Process; generous help with references and Chinese terminology from Weiyong Wan; careful preparation of the manuscript by Lily B. Finn; and much of everything from my wife, Betty Jean Lifton.

R. J. L.

New Haven, Connecticut
March 1968

1. The 'Power Struggle':
An Approach

We do well to recognize our ignorance of China. That ignorance has been perpetuated by two decades of virtual absence of either diplomatic or journalistic contact between the United States and China — a situation which, in the not too distant future, will surely be regarded as a historical oddity of the mid twentieth century. Moreover, even those Westerners and other non-Chinese who have been permitted extensive residence on the mainland have rarely had an opportunity to observe closely the actual states of mind of individual Chinese. Nor has the régime been interested in revealing much more than its own ideal image of what that state of mind should be.

It is nevertheless possible that we have become too accustomed to a stance of ignorance. For a good deal of significant information had been reaching us — from people coming out of China, from the official press and radio, and from a great variety of semi-official and unofficial writings and speeches (including the celebrated 'great-character posters' of the Cultural Revolution) — as recorded by an international coterie of China-watchers, many of them very well informed, whose numbers ever increase. Could it be, then, that our ignorance has to do not so much with 'facts' alone as with an inability to make sense of the vast amount of information
we do possess? What I am suggesting is that a good part of our ignorance is conceptual.

Indeed, how is one to make sense of the extraordinary events that occurred in 1966 and 1967 as part of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution? How is one to understand the dramatic emergence of militant new groups such as the Red Guards and the Revolutionary Rebels who at times seemed all-powerful as they pursued their campaigns of ‘purification’ and vilification? The unprecedented and undiplomatic verbal and physical abuse accorded British, French, Russian, Indian, Burmese, and other foreign diplomats? And the still more startling attacks upon Party leaders, along with general undermining of Party authority, including periods of violence and confusion of such magnitude as to suggest complete national chaos and even civil war?

The explanation usually put forth is that there has been a ‘power struggle’, or, allowing for a few complexities, ‘essentially a power struggle’. The implication is that this designation, accompanied by a few comments about political rivalries, explains all. During a visit to Hong Kong in February 1967 I found many Western and Chinese observers, rivalling in agitation the participants in the Cultural Revolution itself, putting forth endless – and endlessly elaborate – speculations on how Liu Shao-ch’i or Lin Piao or Chou En-lai really felt about Mao Tse-tung, or, when these were exhausted, how their wives really felt about one another. Such speculations, when offered as a total explanation for the Cultural Revolution, were consistent with certain cultural tendencies affecting the observers: the Chinese inclination to see the world as no more than a network of human relationships and rivalries; and the American preoccupation with what might be called ‘practical

mechanisms’ rather than ideological or theoretical considerations.* Without denying the psychological importance of personal rivalries, the great shortcoming of the individual-power-struggle theories was their failure to place such struggles and rivalries within a larger psychological and historical framework. They thus contained a number of implicit but unexplained and highly dubious assumptions about ‘power’ and ‘rivalry’ as ultimate human motivations.

A related kind of explanation focused upon the state of Mao’s physical and mental health as the key to everything taking place. And in Hong Kong in particular one encountered articulate, even passionate, defenders of the points of view that Mao was in excellent health, severely ill, senile, mad, or dead. Here too we may say that Mao’s physical and mental health is an important question, but that its use as the explanation of the Cultural Revolution is an effort to take refuge from complexity by means of an individual ‘diagnosis’. During those early weeks of 1967 all news from the mainland was seized upon by Hong Kong China-watchers, but the adherents of the ‘power-struggle’ and ‘individual-diagnostic’ theories (both often held by the same people) seemed to be expecting – or at least hoping for – that specific news item that would, once and for all, supply the missing piece to the puzzle that lay bare the power struggle or establish the diagnosis.

But there have also been, in Hong Kong and elsewhere throughout the world, much more thoughtful approaches to an understanding of the Cultural Revolution. These have stressed such factors as China’s (and

*The American stress upon mechanism and the Chinese emphasis upon human relationships are themselves ideological; both can be thought of as anti-Ideological ideologies.
especially Mao's) 'Yenan Syndrome' or 'Complex', the nostalgia for the heroic revolutionary methods and achievements of days gone by; China's abrupt loss of a comfortable relationship to her own cultural past; her sense of mounting threat from the outside, especially from America's intervention in Vietnam; and her undergoing a kind of 'Protestant–Catholic dispute' between evangelical reawakening and established bureaucratic compromise. All of these interpretations contain considerable truth, and the first in particular illuminates much of what has been occurring. But we have lacked a general perspective within which to comprehend both psychological motives and historical context – that is, a psychohistorical framework.

I propose such a framework, however tentative and precarious, because I believe it can reveal much about motivations behind and relationships between seemingly unfathomable and disjointed events, and at the same time possibly contribute to the general understanding of such upheavals, wherever they may occur. My goal is not to reduce the vast canvas of the Cultural Revolution to a set of individual-psychological observations. Rather, I wish to suggest a theoretical perspective which, while unitary, is also open and broadly inclusive, and which stresses shifting symbols and forms in the interplay of the individual with the collective. The approach, then, as I have elsewhere indicated, is most accurately termed that of psychoformation.

I should like to suggest that much of what has been taking place in China recently can be understood as a quest for revolutionary immortality. By revolutionary immortality I mean a shared sense of participating in a permanent revolutionary fermentation, and of transcending individual death by 'living on' indefinitely within this continuing revolution. Some such vision has been present in all revolutions and was directly expressed in Trotsky's ideological principle of 'permanent revolution' (even if other things were also meant by this term); but it has taken on unprecedented intensity in present-day Chinese Communist experience.

Central to this point of view is the concept of symbolic immortality I have described in earlier work: of man's need, in the face of inevitable biological death, to maintain an inner sense of continuity with what has gone on before and what will go on after his own individual existence. From this point of view the sense of immortality is much more than a mere denial of death; it is part of compelling, life-enhancing imagery binding each individual person to significant groups and events removed from him in place and time. It is the individual's inner perception of his involvement in what we call the historical process. The sense of immortality may be expressed biologically, by living on through (or in) one's sons and daughters and their sons and daughters; theoretically, in the idea of a life after death or of other forms of spiritual conquest of death; creatively, or through 'works' and influences persisting beyond biological death; through identification with nature, and with its infinite extension into time and space; or experimentally, through a feeling-state – that of experiential transcendence – so intense that, at least temporarily, it eliminates time and death. While this may at first seem a rather abstract approach to the passions and actions of old revolutionaries and young followers, I believe that only by recognizing such life-and-death components of the revolutionary psyche can we begin to comprehend precisely these passions and actions.

Applying these modes of symbolic immortality to the
revolutionary, we may say that he becomes part of a vast 'family' reaching back to what he perceives to be the historical beginnings of his revolution and extending infinitely into the future. This socially created 'family' tends to replace the biological one as a mode of immortality; moreover, it can itself take on an increasingly biological quality, as, over the generations, revolutionary identifications become blended with national, cultural, and racial ones. The revolutionary denies theology as such, but embraces a secular utopia through images closely related to the spiritual conquest of death and even to an afterlife. His revolutionary 'works' are all-important, and only to the extent that he can perceive them as enduring can he achieve a measure of acceptance of his own eventual death. The natural world to which he allies himself is one that must be transformed by revolution while continuing to contain all that revolution creates. And his experiential transcendence can approach that of religious mystics, as a glance at some of the younger participants in China's Cultural Revolution confirms.

What all this suggests, then, is that the essence of the 'power struggle' taking place in China, as of all such 'power struggles', is power over death.

Central to China's recent crisis, I believe, is a form of anxiety related to both the anticipated death of a great leader and the 'death of the revolution' he has so long dominated. This death anxiety is shared by leader and followers alike, but we do best to focus for a time upon the former.

It is impossible to know Mao's exact physical or mental state. But let us assume, on the basis of evidence we have, that the seventy-four-year-old (born on 26 December 1893) man has generally been vigorous, that he has experienced rather severe illness in recent years, and that he has always been a man of strong revolutionary passions. We can go a bit further, however, especially on the basis of a valuable interview with him conducted by Edgar Snow, perhaps the American who over the years has been closest to Mao, in January 1965.1

Snow found Mao alert, 'wholly relaxed', and impressive in his stamina during their four-hour meeting.*

*Snow also states: 'One of the chairman's doctors informed me that Mao has no organic troubles and suffers from nothing beyond the normal fatigue of his age'; and points out that an interview of that kind, coming as it did at the end of 'strenuous weeks' devoted to the National People's Congress, 'might have been more speedily terminated by a sick man'. But he describes
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He also found him ‘reflecting on man’s rendezvous with death and ready to leave the assessment of his political legacy to future generations’. Indeed, Snow’s general description of the interview suggests a man anticipating, if not preoccupied with, death. Snow reports Mao to have said that ‘he was going to see God’.* And when Snow responded by reassuring Mao that he seemed to be in good condition that evening, Mao Tse-tung ‘smiled wryly’ and expressed some doubt, again saying that he was ‘getting ready to see God very soon’.

We need not dwell on Mao’s rather striking use of the theological idiom, other than attributing it to a combination of playfulness and perhaps an unconscious inclination — on the part of a man who early in his life had renounced rural supernatural beliefs in favour of watching Mao, after seeing Snow to his car, ‘brace his shoulders and slowly retrace his steps, leaning heavily on the arm of an aide’. Subsequent observations on his health differ, but they suggest that from 1965 until 1967 he was neither completely well nor totally incapacitated. The infrequency of his public appearances and his even rarer public speeches, together with a certain amount of observed bodily rigidity, have led to speculation that he might be suffering from some kind of arteriosclerotic condition, or possibly a form of paralysis agitans (Parkinson’s disease). Such conditions could affect the mental state, both through organic damage and compensatory efforts to deny incapacity, with related changes in symbolic organization of thought. But if dysfunction were present it would probably take the form of exaggeration or even caricature of prior psychological tendencies rather than the sudden appearance of totally new ones.

*Snow presents Mao’s statements in close third-person paraphrase, rather than direct quotation, in accordance with an agreement he made with Mao’s aides. He was able to check his own recollections with a written record kept by one of the Chinese who had been present.

The Death of the Leader

Marxist–scientific ones — to hedge his bets a little. When Snow questioned him on the matter, he denied any belief in a deity but observed rather whimsically that ‘some people who claimed to be well informed said there was a God. There seemed to be many gods and sometimes the same god [when called forth for self-serving political purposes] could take all sides.’

More important from our standpoint are the reminiscences that immediately follow — about family members who had died, about his career as a revolutionary, and about the ‘chance combination of reasons’ that had caused him to become interested in the founding of the Chinese Communist Party. Involved here is an old man’s nostalgic need to review his past life in relationship to his forthcoming death. That is, death is seen as a test of the quality of one’s overall existence. And in the face of a threat of total extinction one feels the need to give form to that existence — to formulate its basic connectedness, its movement or development, and above all its symbolic integrity or cohesion and significance.

Prominent among these reminiscences is Mao’s sense of being an eternal survivor — his recollections of both his brothers having been killed, of the execution of his first wife during the Revolution, and the death of their son during the Korean War. Mao commented that it was ‘odd’ that he had escaped death, that although he was often prepared for it ‘death just did not seem to want him’. He described several narrow escapes from which he emerged unscathed, including one in which he was ‘splashed all over with the blood of another soldier’.

Mao seems to be telling us that his death is both imminent and long overdue. What he considers remarkable is not that so many family members and revolutionary comrades (the two categories become virtually insepar-
able) have died around him, but that he has in each case been spared. We recognize the survivor's characteristically guilt-laden need to contrast his own continuing life with others' deaths.*

For Mao is surely the survivor par excellence, the hero of a truly epic story of revolutionary survival, that of the Long March of 1934–5, in which it is believed that more than eighty per cent of the original group perished along a six-thousand-mile trek in order that the remainder -- and the Revolution itself -- might stay alive. To transcend his guilt, the survivor must be able to render significant the death immersions he has experienced -- and in Mao's case, done much to bring about. This kind of survivor formulation faces both ways: justification of the past and contribution to the future.

Thus, for a man in Mao's position -- of his age and special commitments -- the affirmation of a sense of immortality becomes crucial. The overwhelming threat is not so much death itself as the suggestion that his 'revolutionary works' will not endure.

We sense the passion behind his apparent calm as he goes on, during the same interview, to describe the 'two possibilities' for the future: the first the 'continued development of the Revolution toward Communism'; and the second 'that youth could negate the Revolution and give a poor performance: make peace with imperialism, bring the remnants of the Chiang Kai-shek clique back to the Mainland and take a stand beside the small percentage of counter-revolutionaries still in the country'. The first is an image of continuous life; the second of death and extinction, of impaired immortality. What he said next -- 'Of course he did not hope for counter-revolution. But future events would be decided by future generations ...' -- is unexpectedly stark in its suggestion of negative possibility. He is, in other words, far from certain about the fate of his revolutionary works, about the vindication of his own life.

*There is a suggestion here also of the survivor's sense of 'reinforced invulnerability', of having met death and, by means of a special destiny, conquered it. It is this sense that permits the survivor to enter into the myth of the hero, as we shall see to be the case with Mao. But I have found that such feelings can be fragile, and can readily reverse themselves to expose a heightened sense of vulnerability concealed beneath.²