Machiavelli and Mao Zedong, the Comparison Across Centuries

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Abstract. With similar background conditions of the two great political thinkers, Mao Zedong and Machiavelli shared some similar political wisdom in gaining and ruling the throne. However, as a Communist that innately has a significant number of idealistic beliefs and doctrines within, Mao differed greatly from a purely pragmatic politician. This paper analyzes the similarities and differences in thoughts between Mao Zedong, the founding leader of the People’s Republic of China, and Machiavelli, the famous Italian Renaissance writer who introduced realism and pragmaticism to the European world. Mao's political career is divided into two primary stages in this essay, which are the pre-proclamation and post-proclamation of the formation of People’s Republic of China. The differences in time eras and political ideologies between Mao and Machiavelli made Mao unable to be qualified entirely as a Machiavellian. Rather, Mao should be considered as a pragmatic Communist leader with realist traits similar to the ones discussed in Machiavelli’s books and thoughts.

Keywords: Mao Zedong; Machiavelli; realism.

1. Introduction

With the lagging and reluctant reformation, the ancient Chinese Empire struggled against its modern imperial counterpart, such as the German Empire, the British Empire, the United States, and, most surprisingly, the Japanese Empire. With all the peace treaties signed after multiple military defeats of the Qing Dynasty, the intellectual class sought other ways to free the Chinese civilization from foreign invasion and intervention and regain its dignity and glory besides advocating for reforms in the decaying Empire. Mao Zedong, Jiang Jieshi, and Sun Zhongshan are some of the most prominent revolutionary figures. Sun Zhongshan, or Sun Yat-sen, organized and initiated the Xinhai Revolution, overthrew the Manchu-led Qing Dynasty, and established the Republic of China. However, the newly formed Republic was failing in creating a strong central government and improving the conditions of its peasantry, a distinct social group that takes up the majority of the Chinese population, with multiple warlords, nominally residing under the central government, setting up separatist regimes with arms and the major collision between the Nationalist Party, or Kuomintang, and the Chinese Communist Party, or CCP. The government, established by intellectuals and the bourgeois class with an autocratic leader Jiang Jieshi, or Chiang Kai-shek, put forth minimal effort to improve the peasant classes’ lives, with limited political and economic reforms across the nation. The lower classes experienced few changes in their life, which were often negative, meaning that their living conditions were still miserable with all the oppressions experienced during the previous Dynasty. With his Communist Party, Mao noticed such a breaking point and utilized it to organize Communist revolutions centered around rural populations after failing to instigate a worker's revolution in China. Hence, Mao's emphasis throughout his era has been on the proletariats, especially the farming class, as they were the foundation of the success of him and his party.

As a Communist, Mao's fundamental ideal and doctrine in his ruling and policymaking have been the demolition of class and private property, with a picture of the perfect Communist society in which there will be no class, wealth, or status differences. However, the condition in China at that time was different from the conditions before the revolution of the Soviet Union. Hence, Mao adopted the Bolshevik Marxism-Leninism and gradually formed his Maoism. The peasantry, instead of industrial workers, was regarded as the revolutionary vanguard with favorable reforms and policies. On the other hand, as a political realist, Machiavelli, born in shattered Italy in the memory of the glorious Roman Empire, followed empirical political practices, regardless of the potential moral code of such practice, so long as the action could bring benefit or power to the nation and the rule, in the pursuit
of power, which guarantees the survival of the regime and potentially brings back the old glory by unifying the Italian peninsula.

Although with such a massive ideological difference, as Mao was an idealist with faith in Communist and Machiavelli was a realist and a pragmatist in his political practices, they shared some commonalities in their political behaviors and social order in establishing the regime. Nevertheless, because of such a vast difference in ideology, after forming his People’s Republic, the policies were heavily influenced by Communist ideals with traces of Realpolitik characteristics, making Mao not qualified as a Machiavellian and only as a pragmatic Communist.

The essay will break up Mao's political career into two periods: before the proclamation of the People's Republic of China, which includes the two stages of the Chinese Civil War and the 2nd Sino-Japanese War; and after the establishment of the PRC but before the Cultural Revolution, consisting of the Great Leap Forward, 7000 National People's Congress Meeting, the Socialist Education Movement, and the Cultural Revolution Period. It will compare the policies and practices to Machiavelli's ideas and beliefs and determine whether the specific policies can be classified as Machiavellian, or at least with Machiavellian characteristics.

2. The Chinese Civil War

At the end of the Northern Expedition, the Nationalist Party of China purged the Communist Party, secretly or openly massacring CCP members in Shanghai. Civil war broke out between the two parties. After the failing Fifth Encirclement Campaign against the KMT, the CCP was forced to abandon the Jiangxi Soviet and start the Long March. Because of the military mistake they made during the campaign, which resulted in the strategic retrograde for the Red Army, Bo gu, Otto Braun, and Wang Ming were forced, by Mao and his political faction, to resign from the leading positions. Hence, Mao and his faction became the leader of the party. In this political struggle within the party during the Zunyi Meeting, Mao swiftly proved the military incompetence of Otto Braun, the military advisor sent by the Comintern, and consolidated his power within the party as the party leader. Although unintentionally, Mao "'imitate both the fox and the lion', supplementing the ideal of manly decency with the arts of force and fraud." (Skinner 46) As some believe that Mao intentionally resigned the military leader position in the party before the 5th Encirclement form, the cunningness of Mao saved him from taking the potential blame of losing the campaign. Plus, the swift and political action Mao took to overtake the pro-Soviet-Union faction in the party won him the most prominent voice within the CCP.

During the Long March, Mao demonstrated his superior military ability for the first time, with countless instances of an inferior CCP army tricking or defeating the superior KMT army in the pursuit of a particular macro-strategic objective. One of the best examples was the Battle of Chishui River, or Four Crossings of the Chishui River. With bold and innovative military maneuvers and tactics, Mao successfully brought his Red Army out of the KMT encirclement through a series of mobile warfare, which freed the northward path towards the Shaanxi Communist Base for the Red Army. Because of such a decisive and ground-breaking victory, Mao consolidated his position in the party as both the supreme military leader and the political leader.

In Chapter 21 of his excellent book The Prince, Machiavelli, through the example of Ferdinand of Aragon, who conquered many territories under the name of Christianity and religion, discusses how a prince should earn a reputation, such as “setting a fine example” and “to show himself a patron of ability, and to honor the proficient in every art.” (Machiavelli 70, 72) With his faction, Mao did not seek any personal privileges during the Long March, besides necessary protections for the core party members. Instead, he set up an excellent example for the Red Army by undergoing the same conditions that the soldiers were going through. By being the example of the Chinese Red Army, Mao earned his reputation and leadership through fine commandments and outstanding military commands.

Once Mao regained its leadership and the Long March had ended, China was under the aggression of the Japanese Empire. Instead of strictly following the Marxist-Leninist dogma, which puts a heavy
emphasis on the class struggle and proletariat's revolution, Mao decided to cooperate with the bourgeoisie and autocracy within its region and among the whole nation to fight collectively against the Japanese invasion. If the alliance is considered from a Communist perspective, it is wrongful and vicious. However, such a pragmatic decision illustrated the deceitfulness of Mao's political maneuver, as he successfully justified the notion of collaborating with the "class enemy" without arousing too much public indignation and criticism within the Party. Again, the political practice resonates with the Machiavellian belief, as such "vice" is conducted under the virtuous disguise – the collective struggle against the invaders.

During the Sino-Japanese War, Mao redistributed the land under his regime among the farmless farmers, whose support was valued the most by the CCP government. Although it significantly damaged the interest of the landowners, such policy gave Mao and his regime the necessary support from the lower class, which, in turn, provided him with enough power to prevent and eliminate potential unrest among the propertied class. Love and fear, the two attitudes that do not usually exist together, were used by Mao simultaneously. The farmers loved Mao and his land redistribution, and the landowners feared further persecution from Mao upon them. Although the economic reformation contains elements of Communist ideals and doctrines, there are still traces of the qualities of an ideal leader that Machiavelli admires in Mao.

The relatively mild land redistribution and the collaborative attitude towards capitalists quickly became more radical once the Sino-Japanese War terminated and the Communist-Nationalist Chinese civil war, or the War of Liberation, started to break out due to the disagreement between the two most prominent parties, the KMT and the CCP, and Chiang's extremely hostile attitude towards the Communists (which is also partly due to his aristocratic background). During the Land Reform movement, which started later in the civil war and lasted till 1952, a massive number of landlords, which were the primary ruling class of China during and after the downfall of the Qing Dynasty, were killed or banished by the Communist regime when the People's Liberation Army was advancing on the frontline.

Although not criminal in nature, the acquisition of power through revolution can still be regarded as gaining power through violence and cruelty. Hence, according to Machiavelli in his book of the Prince, when the ruler is ruling over his newly-acquired territories through the "immoral" approaches, he should be swift in eliminating the political rivalries that may be a potential threat to his ruling, making it easier to alter the impression of the ruler in the rest of the subjects. Mao did precisely that through the Land Reform. Through the planned and rapid liquidation of the landlord class, with the further redistribution of land that benefits the rest of the population, Mao successfully eliminated the most reactionary force and the previous ruler in his territory while maintaining to be the liberator in the eyes of the masses.

In the meantime, Mao, a genius in political struggles and practices, was also a great military strategist. His sensitivity and ability to determine the viability and approach to achieve a specific political or military aim was another essential attribute that Mao possessed. Battle of Jinzhou, the most critical part of the Liao shen Campaign in the Chinese civil war, was pointed out and emphasized by Mao as the determining factor of the whole campaign, as he stated that the key to winning the Liao shen Campaign was to "take over Jinzhou in one week." Mao was proven correct as Lin Biao, with his Northeastern Field Army, successfully took the city and encircled the entire Nationalist army in northeastern China, leading to a phenomenal military victory for Communist China. Together with all the successful strategic moves, including but not limiting to the success in the first few Encirclement Campaigns against the Nationalists, the Long March, the guerrilla warfare in the Japanese occupied territory, and the crucial decision to abandon the Yan'an Base, which is the core region of the CCP since the long march, during the Chinese civil war due to Chiang's increasing pressure, this military insight and vision demonstrated that Mao had mastered the art of war, at least within the Asian arena, which was anticipated in a good leader by Machiavelli.

Machiavelli, in his The Prince, anticipates that a prince "ought to have no other aim or thought, nor select anything else for his study, than war and its rules and discipline." (Machiavelli 46)
Although slightly differed from the middle ages' standard of a great military leader, which consisted of self-discipline and dedication to military practices, and some attention to politics and ideology, being the head leader with extraordinary military talents suited the conditions within the rather unmodernized China and among the nations in an international perspective, Mao had, again, corresponded with the expectations of excellence in a prince from Machiavelli. The countless victories throughout the Sino-Japanese and the Chinese Civil War has shown that Mao had distinctly superior military commands and strategic insight, corresponding to Machiavelli’s ideals.

Hence, because of the similarities between the two figures, Mao can be considered partly a Machiavellian during the period of the Chinese Civil Wars. Moreover, because of such Land Reform, resulting in the popularity of Mao and his Communist regime and the support of the masses, and the superior military abilities, including better overall morality, higher morale, and superior strategies and tactics, the Chinese Communist Party successfully seized the entire mainland China, with a minority of reactionary strongholds scattered in major cities, and proclaimed the People's Republic of China on October 1st, 1949.

3. The People's Republic of China

After the proclamation, Mao became the leader of the People’s Republic of China. After getting the reign through revolution, Mao needed to rule the devastated nation successfully within its Communist standards. A few political and economic changes can be observed accordingly. During this phase, the comparison between Mao and Machiavelli will mainly be regarding their respective governing philosophies, analyzing a few significant decisions made by the Party, such as the Socialist Transformation of Ownership of the Means of Production, The Great Leap Forward, the Socialist Education Movement, and ultimately, the Cultural Revolution. 1

With the immense amount of reputation gained through the initial years of the new republic, the CCP had decided to initiate their plan of transforming the country into an actual “socialist” state through nationalizing land, company, and production as a part of the first Five-Year Plan of China. The country practiced Socialist Transformation of Ownership of the Means of Production. The collectivization was voluntary initially, which turned into a forced transformation of the production. Land, production, and capital were managed on a macro level by the government, and private possession of those was fundamentally eliminated. Across the major decisions made by Mao and the Party, this event was the most significant contradiction to Machiavellian principles. Mao did precisely the opposite of the advice in Machiavelli’s book. Machiavelli believes, in his book of *The Prince*, that the only way a leader will be hated by his subordinates is by taking away their possessions, and when private possession is guaranteed, “the majority of men live content,” which is what a government would want in its country. Mao, on the other hand, nationalized all private ownership of capital.

One of the pieces of advice of Machiavelli in ruling over a place is “in order to hold their states more securely, to build fortresses.” (Chapter 20) However, in the same chapter, Machiavelli also points out that based on the previous example of the castle of Milan, “the best possible fortress is – not to be hated by the people,” since the people are the community that ultimately helps the ruler in the functioning of the castle. Furthermore, according to the above-mentioned Machiavellian principles, one of the best ways for a leader to invoke hatred is by taking away possessions. Hence, by doing so, the regime indeed ended up with minor discontent and rebellions scattered across the nation. However, because of the innate difference between the government body portrayed in Machiavelli’s worldview and the actual one in Communist China, the populace was influenced by propaganda and Communist ideals, which preserved the love of the majority for Mao, preventing him from losing his power with the lack of public and intraparty support. Through this movement, Mao Zedong cannot be considered a Machiavellian, as realist elements in the ruling have not been shown in the intentions and processes of this event.

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With the relative success of the Socialist Transformation of Ownership of the Means of Production, the party was determined by economic centralism and initiated another economic movement, the Great Leap Forward, a plan intended to turn China from an agrarian nation to an industrialized one. With improper implementations and unscientific policymaking, the Great Leap Forward was regarded as a relatively unsuccessful campaign with long-lasting disastrous consequences such as the great Chinese famine. Later, in order to end the mistakenly initiated campaign, Mao publicly acknowledged his mistakes through the Seven Thousand Cadre Congress.

The event itself and the intentions of the event was irrelevant to Machiavellian ideals, as the initial goal was “exceeding the UK, catching the USA” (Rui) in order to match up with Soviet Communist Party First Secretary Khrushchev’s development plan of exceeding the United States in industrial output as the USSR. Rather, the 7000 National People’s Congress Meeting, with the preservation of “Three Red Banners” and the remembrance of the “class struggle,” showed that despite Mao using “love” to rule his people, his methodology is far from the Machiavellian one.

On one side, by seemingly admitting his mistakes and stepping down from the primary leadership position within the party, Mao successfully established a picture of an “ideal” Communist leader who was not reluctant to accept critiques and acknowledge mistakes, which, with the faith of the Chinese people in the Party from the Civil War and the First Five Years’ Plan, made Mao less of a target to be blamed for the atrocity. On the other side, the displacement of the goal of the Communist Party is another factor in Mao’s return to power and the maintenance of his reputation. The extreme-left approach Mao took after the Great Leap Forward, in order to distract people’s attention from the failed economic attempt of the party, was deemed successful in maintaining himself as the “Pope” of the Communist Party. Communist China, an ideology-ruled nation identical to all the rest of the Communist world, is often ruled by the person with the most orthodoxy. By denouncing the Soviet Communists as revisionists and reiterating class struggle, Mao showed his determination to make China become the leading figure in the International Communist Movement, which satisfied the Nationalist urge to have a prominent political position internationally, and, in the meantime, provided the theoretical basis for the Party against Communist critiques from around the world, gaining support within the Party.

Because of the limitation of the time era, Machiavelli never thought of the power of ideological authority. Communism had yet been invented, and most countries in his time in Italy were either monarchies or republics with strong religious influence. Besides the Papal state, there were only limited countries and organizations that Christianity strictly ruled without secular ruling. Contrastingly yet similarly, Mao’s approach to preserving his status and reign correlated closely with Machiavellian ideas. Because of the specific characteristics of an ideology-ruled nation, Mao was capable of maintaining his power through means that are not directly discussed in Machiavelli’s workbooks. In spite of that, because of his political success, Mao indeed shared some commonalities with some of his ruling preferences from Machiavelli. Two of the most predominant traits in *The Prince* shared by Mao are ruling with love and “seeming” to be virtuous. Again, as previously mentioned in this essay, although not as preferable to hate, being loved can be another effective way for a prince to secure his ruling over his subjects, which was one of the primary characteristics throughout Mao’s reign: the personality cult from love and admiration. In the meantime, in *The Prince*, Machiavelli implies that a ruler should try his best to have a positive public image that displays all his virtues. Although Machiavelli’s virtue may be different from the standards in Communist China, Mao’s public display remained the progressive politician and the representative of the populace in the government. In this event, albeit the fundamental differences in the social circumstances between the two figures, Mao’s political strategies showed significant similarities to that of Machiavelli.

With his reputation being preserved, Mao was capable of initiating a series of intertwined leftist movements that eventually brought him to power, such as the Socialist Education Movement and the Cultural Revolution, with one leading to the other. Mao launched Socialist Education Movement in 1963 that sought to remove reactionary elements within the bureaucracy and the society in fear of a
potential “capitalist” takeover in the nation. The “four cleanups,” or the cleanse of political, economic, organizational, and ideological aspects of the country, were executed. However, the method was proven unsuccessful. Moreover, in response to the inefficacy of the movement and Mao’s discontent, a larger scale Cultural Revolution was initiated, which would be the final movement in Mao’s reign to be discussed.

Although widely accepted as the major mistake in Mao’s political career, The Cultural Revolution is a complicated sociopolitical movement that lasted ten years with quite a few years of precursor and aftermath. Hence, the event requires a thorough dissection to see the essence behind the motivation, the propaganda, and the actions themselves. After the Socialist Education Movement, Mao was determined to remove the presumed “revisionary elements” in the party and the bureaucratic leaders, which, in return, brought him and his ideology, Maoism, to ultimate power in China. According to the chronology provided by the official website of the history of CPC, the movement can be broken down into three phases: mass struggle in the first few years (1966-68), the Lin Biao phase (1969-1971), and the “Gang of Four” phase (1971-76). One needs to view these events from different perspectives: Mao as a pure and orthodox Communist and Mao as a pragmatic Machiavellian.

Throughout the Cultural Revolution, other than the third phase of the movement, when his health status was significantly deteriorating, Mao utilized the populace to purge the opponents in the government, which left him with vacancies in the government for Maoists to fill in, with the most significant examples of Jiang Qing and Lin Biao. On the one hand, Mao supporters interpreted the movement in a “positive” way. They beheld the belief that Mao Zedong was the only populace representative in the bureaucracy amongst the corrupted party members who went from “revolutionary” to “reactionary” because they were the ones in the party. However, the major interpretation of such a movement was a successful political move for Mao and his clique to regain power after the failed operation of the Great Leap Forward. Hence, despite some elements of struggle between different Communist doctrines, the primary emphasis that the movement had was a power struggle.

Being a pragmatic politician, Mao shared some commonalities with Machiavellian thoughts. One of the most significant similarities is that Mao only depicts his political struggles as a proletariat-benefitting movement, as Machiavellian researchers pointed out in their work that one of the essentials of high-grade Machiavellianism is the tendency to only show to the populace what they want to see. (Liao) It is also significant for Mao to blame the failed Great Leap Forward and the economic development on the imaginary “capitalist roaders,” such as Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping. They were de facto devout Communist fighters with milder different approaches, in order to successfully regain the “thrown” without provoking the miserable memories of the people. As Machiavelli states in Chapter 17 of his book The Prince, “he (the ruler) must endeavor only to avoid hatred, as is noted.” Although the approaches to eliminating the hatred may be different, Mao was successful in redirecting the dissatisfaction of his people from his mistake to the existential threat of the Communist party by the Capitalist erosion and infiltration.

Therefore, during this period of the Cultural Revolution, Mao was a distinct pragmatic politician thriving for regaining political power. And even though there are resonances between his political wisdom and that of Machiavelli, Mao should not be qualified as a pure Machiavellian, as these pearls of wisdom are often shared among great political leaders, regardless of their beliefs and education.

4. Conclusion

To conclude the essay, even though Machiavellianism has been portrayed throughout the research of his political career, Mao Zedong is still a devout Communist leader with a substantial amount of Communist ideal in his ruling. The pragmatic influence in his ruling, although seemingly identical to the thoughts discussed in The Prince and Discourses on Livy, may likely come from the Chinese historical classics that are filled with conspiracies and ruling techniques for the ancient Chinese Emperors, such as Han Feizi and his Legalist school of thought, as there is a notable amount of
pragmaticism and utilitarianism in his works. Hence, Mao should not be deemed as a Machiavellian. He should be considered as a Communist leader with a significant influence from pragmaticism.

References


