

Chinese Lessons

by Amitai Etzioni

REVOLUTIONARY IMMORTALITY. By Robert J. Lifton. 178 pages. Random House. 1968. \$4.95.

In this fine small book, Dr. Lifton alternates effectively between his interpretation of a recent event—the Cultural Revolution in China—and his extension of psychological theory. Man, Lifton says, must deal with the prospect of his death. He thus may attempt to extend his life biologically, by having children; theologically, by believing in a life hereafter; or politico-ideologically, by identifying with a revolutionary project that will continue after him. Lifton argues that the recent social spasms in China illustrate this last approach, which was triggered there by the aging leader and the imminent crisis over succession and, on a deeper level, by the “end of charisma.” The leadership in Communist China had tried to create a life of intensive ideological commitment, especially with the Great Leap, in which psychic efforts by the people were supposed to compensate for technological backwardness and lack of resources. However, when this policy yielded more chaos and loss of production than progress, a measure of “liberalization” was finally introduced.

The Cultural Revolution, according to Lifton, was “a last attempt” to restore to the Chinese a pure and youthful militancy, to rekindle a total commitment, and to deny

death. The attempt failed because of limitations in human nature (which resists total mobilization over long periods), the penetration of external influences, and the leaders’ inability to move the country on psychic “legs” alone when resources were lacking. By mid-1967, pragmatic considerations had regained ascendancy, and accordingly Lifton closes with a cautious prediction of a less turbulent and less messianic China.

Lifton sees emerging in China a new “protean man,” an opposite type from the Red Guard fanatics and one he finds frequently in the West, the Soviet Union, and Japan. The protean man’s “psychological style . . . is one of interminable explorations and flux, his self-process characterized by relatively easy shifts in belief and identification.” He may also be called a McLuhan man, since he is “influenced by the worldwide revolution in mass communication which tends to flood the individual psyche with endlessly variable images in every sphere of life.” While the pure revolutionary strives to attain an everlasting, deep, and unified social commitment, which usually eludes him, the protean man adjusts to a rapidly changing society—what Bennis and Slater recently

AMITAI ETZIONI is Professor of Sociology at Columbia University, and is a contributing editor to *Psychiatry & Social Science Review*.

referred to in their book *The Temporary Society* (Harper, 1968)—by having no ideological anchor and no fixed course.

For those interested in interdisciplinary controversies over concepts and methodology, Lifton openly avoids any concern with social structure in his explanation of social upheavals and transformations. However, his psycho-historical explanations can be viewed with profit as complementary to those provided by a social structural analysis.

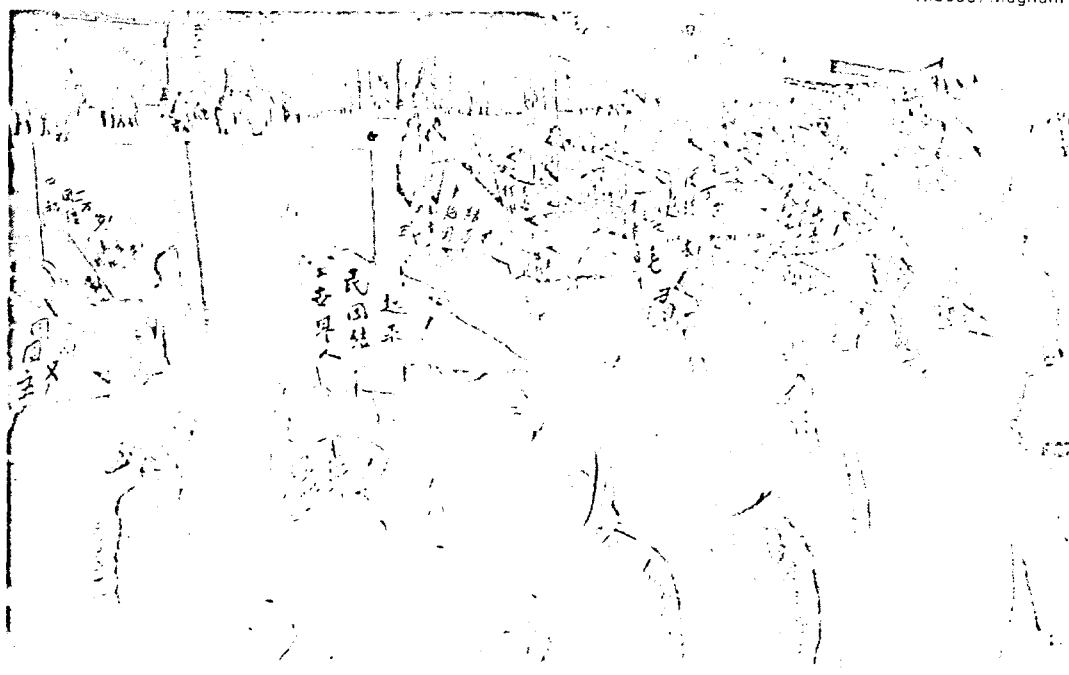
Lifton's fascination with death, which underlies part of the book's title seems quite unnecessary. Should a patient reader replace most of the allusions to the search for immortality by references to a search for meaning, keeping the author's focus on revolutionary societal projects, little would be changed in the overall analysis, despite the few occasions in which Mao or others are quoted regarding "rebirth" or the "youthfulness" of the revolution. However, one need not make as much of these allegories as Lifton does.

One may well ask—but why a cultural revolution at this particular juncture, when

Mao is aging and the revolution is showing some geriatric symptoms of its own? The answer is that efforts to keep the revolution from routinization, oligarchization, and bureaucratization occurred earlier, notably in the Great Leap, and hence seem less related to Mao's biological future than Lifton argues.

A subject Lifton unfortunately had to overlook in this short book is the role of violence in the Chinese leadership's attempts to keep the revolution boiling. In some leftist circles the earlier infatuation with the Soviet Union has been replaced by a romanticization of China. Here, it is said, a way has been found to mobilize the masses of peasants and workers for revolutionary efforts to build a 20th-century technology, economy, and army, relying not on force but on the use of ideological participatory techniques ranging from party-led discussion groups to public condemnations and exaltations by the Red Guards. However, as Lifton hints in one place, ideological fervor did in fact lead to mass violence, and as he quite clearly indicates, the result was largely anarchy.

Riboud/Magnum



One hopes that Lifton will give us next a book on Western man and his search for meaning on the societal level. The concept of a protean man does not do full justice to the subject; around us we see old as well as new types. The prevailing life-style still seems to include the obsession with consumption, over-conformity, and addiction to status races. These characteristics are not only typical of the members of our production-oriented society; they are also sources of meaning that do not deeply satisfy, based as they are on relations to material objects, the manipulation of others, and an insatiable seeking of success. The term "protean man" describes a highly neurotic attempt to accommodate to the "temporary society" by shifting rootlessly with the winds, floating in whatever direction they blow at the moment.

However, this portrait can hardly be said to exhaust the analysis of Western man. We also see around us increasing attempts to rejuvenate this civilization—to restore legitimacy and vitality to democratic politics through social movements whose aims are ethical and ideological rather than materialistic or conformist. Thus, we may ultimately find that Western societies have at least as much of a chance to be revitalized as do communist ones whose revolutions have ossified and which are shaken by violent upheavals as a result of their efforts to restore collective meaning to the actions of their individual members. Although the West may not yet have found the rejuvenating elixir—the "fountain of youth" — the medicine administered by the Chinese seems to have been both ineffectual and upsetting. ●

Managing The Imperial System

by Harold J. Fine

EMERGENT APPROACHES TO MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS. Edited by Emory L. Cowen, Elmer A. Gardner, and Melvin Zax. 474 pages. Appleton-Century-Crofts. 1968. \$9.00.

"Telling it like it is, and like it ought to be consists of precision, persistence, and profanity."¹ This volume somewhat succeeds where persistence and precision are concerned, but it is profane only in surveying the malaise and new strategies evolving in the field of mental health. In a recent issue

of *Trans-action*, M. Brewster Smith, who should know better, labeled the current trends in mental health care as a revolution, an exercise in hyperbole that lacks both precision and persistence. Everyone since Szasz has been beating the supine horse of the medical model and the current "uptightness" of all mental health projects, but every

¹ Bob Teague, *New York Times Magazine*, September 15, 1968.