Howlett, Jonathan J. "Revolutionary Cultivation: Liu Shaoqi's *How to Be a Good Communist* (1939) and the Rejection of Confucian Tradition." *Revolutionary Moments: Reading Revolutionary Texts*. Ed. Rachel Hammersley. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015. 151–158. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474252669.0025>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 04:26 UTC.

Copyright © Rachel Hammersley 2015. You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

Revolutionary Cultivation: Liu Shaoqi's *How to Be a Good Communist* (1939) and the Rejection of Confucian Tradition

Jonathan J. Howlett

Confucius said:

'At fifteen, I had my mind bent on learning. At thirty, I stood firm. At forty I had no doubts. At fifty, I knew the decree of Heaven. At sixty, my ear was an obedient organ for the reception of truth. At seventy, I could follow my heart's desire, without transgressing what was right.'

Here Confucius was relating the process of his steeling and self-cultivation. He did not regard himself as a born 'sage'.

Mencius said:

'When Heaven is about to confer a great office on any man, it first exercises his mind with suffering, and his sinews and bones with toil. It exposes his body to hunger, and subjects him to extreme poverty. It confounds his undertakings. By all these methods it stimulates his mind, hardens his nature, and remedies his incompetencies.'

What Mencius said also refers to the process of steeling and self-cultivation that a great man must undergo. As Communist Party members have to shoulder the unprecedentedly 'great office' of changing the world, it is all the more necessary for them to go through such steeling and self-cultivation. ...

Steeling and cultivation are important for every Party member, whether he be a new member of non-proletarian origin or even a veteran member of proletarian origin. This is because our Communist Party did not drop from the heavens but was born out of Chinese society and because every member of our Party came from this squalid old society of China and are still living in this society today. ...

That is the reason why Communist Party members must undertake self-cultivation.¹

Liu Shaoqi's *How to Be a Good Communist* was first delivered to the Institute of Marxism–Leninism in the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) remote wartime base at Yan'an in Shaanxi province on 8 July 1939. In this speech, Liu emphasized the importance of individual party members undergoing a sustained period of 'self-cultivation' and 'steeling' in order to forge them into true communists. This was a Leninist text that borrowed heavily from the Soviet model, urging discipline and sacrifice in the pursuit of victory. In the ideological context of the time, Liu's calls for the reordering of society – focusing in particular on changing the relationships between individuals and political organizations – were firmly revolutionary. Liu was among the founding members of the CCP and he excelled in the role of theoretician and organizer, first as an underground activist in trade unions and in enemy-controlled 'White areas', and later as a member of the party secretariat, before finally assuming a position as the second highest government official under Mao Zedong after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. He fell from power during the Cultural Revolution.

Interpretation and reinterpretation of *How to Be a Good Communist* played a key role within the cycle of exaltation and defamation that defined Liu Shaoqi's career. Few texts have been as influential in the history of communist China. The promotion of the speech began when a revised version was included in the collection *Rectification Documents*, first published in 1943 during the Zhengfeng (rectification) Campaign in Yan'an. It had a physical life as a widely disseminated object: copies of it found their way into millions of hands as the party recruited new cadres and attempted to remould its existing cadres throughout the war with Japan (1937–45), the Chinese Civil War (1946–9) and the first decades of communist rule. In communist 'New China' the speech was circulated widely and featured prominently in the domestic media: it was published as a book and in 1951 was translated in to English for distribution overseas. Following the Great Leap Forward (1958), a disastrous leftist adventure, Liu ascended to the position of head of state. The speech was revised and republished in 1962 and was serialized in the leading newspaper *People's Daily* and the journal *Red Flag*. Usually this kind of circulation was reserved only for texts by Mao.²

Liu went from being Mao's most useful ally and heir apparent to dying an ignominious death under house arrest in 1969 as the highest ranking casualty of the Cultural Revolution. In the spring of 1967 criticism of Liu focused on *How to Be a Good Communist* as evidence of his having put Soviet-style bureaucratic careerism and party supremacy above the needs of the people. The attacks culminated in an editorial titled 'Treason to the Dictatorship of the Proletariat is the Essence of the Book on "Self-Cultivation of Communists"'. The cycle came

full circle when, following Liu's posthumous rehabilitation by Deng Xiaoping's 'reform faction' in February 1980, three of his works, including *How to Be a Good Communist*, were declared 'Marxist works of great significance'.³ The speech was again circulated widely to reinforce the importance of political discipline in the face of economic liberalization and as a tacit criticism of the Cultural Revolution.

Liu's references to Confucius and Mencius were particularly sensitive and these are the parts of the speech that were criticized most strongly during the Cultural Revolution. They are often referred to by scholars who analyse the tension between 'radical' Mao and 'conservative' Liu and by those who seek to find continuities between Chinese Communist ideology and Confucian statecraft. In revisiting *How to Be a Good Communist* it is important to explore two main lines of enquiry: the first of these is to consider the speech as a product of the revolutionary moment of its delivery – that is, to contextualize it historically, divorcing it from the meaning applied to it as it was variously promoted and denounced. Second, it is necessary to place Liu's references to Confucius within the context of the speech as a whole. Cultural Revolution-era critics used these quotes to damn Liu, and western scholars have deployed them in support of explanations of communist behaviour as being based on an inherited Confucian world view, but those who make reference to the quotes often ignore the fact that they are deployed within the context of an argument that is iconoclastic and anti-Confucian in its call for a revolutionary reordering of society.

Liu spent 1938–9 at Yan'an and among his duties was serving as director of the Cadre Training Department. It was in this capacity that he presented *How to Be a Good Communist*. In the early 1940s, he went on to play an important role in the Zhengfeng Campaign that cemented Mao's position as paramount leader.⁴ The Zhengfeng Campaign was an intense period of party reform designed to instil ideological uniformity among new and established cadres and it marked the introduction of the extensive use of small-group 'study' and criticism meetings in China. 'Study' often led to the expulsion or punishment of dissenters. It was focused largely on the *Rectification Documents* collection, which contained sections from *How to Be a Good Communist* focusing on the unconditional subordination of individual interests to those of the party and on correcting 'mistaken ideologies'. Liu's was one of eighteen texts, the rest included seven by Mao, six Central Committee resolutions (usually credited to Mao), two Soviet documents (one by Stalin) and two by other party leaders. This collection, which was to become required reading for hundreds of thousands (later millions) of cadres and new recruits, emphasized the importance of tying theory to practice and of applying Marxist–Leninist doctrine to Chinese realities.⁵ As such, it

criticized the 'dogmatism' of the Moscow-trained 'returned Bolsheviks' faction. Liu's contribution was rather dry: the first American translator to tackle it described it as 'tortuously written'.⁶

After 1949, the Communist Party-state put a great deal of effort into constructing the narrative of its revolution and western observers sought to explain the success of the revolution in a similarly teleological manner. For both, the great texts of the movement served as markers on the road to victory in 1949, and as such, analysts sought to explain wider phenomena (state- and party-building, military successes etc.) through texts, rather than seeing the texts as reflections of historical events. It is important then that we consider Liu's *How to Be a Good Communist* as a historically contingent text, written in a period of uncertainty and borrowing heavily from Soviet models. We may perhaps then be able to escape reading the text backwards from Liu's fall (the 'Good Communist' deposed).

When the speech was delivered in July 1939, China had been at war with Japan for two years and the communists had been fighting for survival against the nationalist regime since 1927. Their 'Long March' (1934–5) had delivered them to their remote base area in the caves of Yan'an but had left them vulnerable. Between 1937 and 1945 a fragile peace, the 'Second United Front', held between the CCP and the Nationalists as the country experienced total war. Thus when Liu quoted Mencius' saying that when Heaven is about to confer a 'great office' it 'first exercises [the recipient's] mind with suffering, and his sinews and bones with toil' he was reassuring his audience of war-weary cadres that victory would one day be realized despite their present trials.⁷

Between 1937 and 1940 the party membership had increased at a rapid rate and this had exacerbated one of the party's most pressing concerns: instilling a sense of common purpose in cadres from diverse backgrounds. In response to this problem, the Mao faction launched the Zhengfeng Campaign to instil a new orthodoxy and discipline and to consolidate their leadership position. The new orthodoxy was essentially the affirmation of Marxist–Leninist principles as a guide for action (opposing peasant radicalism or intellectual liberalism) and the Sinification of the theory, relating it to Chinese practice. This was an attempt to forge an ideology and organization suitable for guerrilla warfare across scattered 'base areas' forging 'good communists' who could act independently but with iron discipline.⁸

While some scholars have interpreted the Zhengfeng era 'Sinification of Marxism' as a rejection of the Soviet model, with Mao's party seeking a new direction by grafting communism to Chinese belief systems, others have

maintained that this was really a response to Comintern leader Georgi Dimitrov's 1935 call for national parties to adapt to their own surroundings.⁹ In this context, we can see that Liu's speech was arguing towards an immediate goal: strengthening party control over its cadres during a desperate struggle for survival. Liu's references to Confucianism in the speech should be read in this light: as directed by the Comintern, he was simply deploying Chinese cultural references to introduce unfamiliar concepts.

The mixture of Leninist principles and references to the Confucian classics in Liu's speech meant that for Cold War 'China watchers' this was a key text in explaining how an 'alien' ideology had managed to successfully take root in China despite that nation's strong indigenous traditions. Today, the text is still often referred to by those who seek to demonstrate Confucius' continuing influence.¹⁰ Teemu Ruskola, for example, argues that the CCP shared the Confucian preference for ruling society by internalized morality rather than by the rule of law and that *How to Be a Good Communist* simply served to replace the Confucian *Analects*. This view is seemingly evidenced by Liu's quotations from the classics.¹¹ Chen Weigang suggests in *Confucian Marxism* that Liu believed 'that "proletarian consciousness" was identical to the ethical qualities as prescribed in the Confucian ethical tradition' and that there was a 'rigorous effort to mesh "a new Communist ethic" with Confucian thought'.¹² There has long been a tendency to see Confucianism as the key to unlocking the secrets of Chinese society, but as with most historical labels, use of the term 'Confucianism' has the power to obscure complex historical realities and to suggest shared values frozen in time.¹³

A common observation is that while the title of the 1951 English translation is *How to Be a Good Communist*, a direct translation of the Chinese version would be '*On the Self-Cultivation of the Communist Party Member*'. Boorman suggests, however, that the English title was chosen so as to avoid the ambiguity of the original. In deploying these overt references to Confucian models was Liu really calling for the emulation of Confucian practices?

In section five, Liu foresees the dawning of a new era, one in which the realization of communism brings into being 'the best, the most beautiful, and the most advanced society in the history of mankind' (40). He goes on to say that the new society can be actualized only when communism triumphs over the exploiting classes 'along with all of their influences, traditions and customs' (41). This kind of utopian talk was unusual from Liu, a consummate pragmatist. It is clear that while he was making use of Confucian references to express new ideas about discipline in the Chinese context, he certainly was

not calling for a perpetuation of tradition. Against the charge that Liu may have been inadvertently reproducing the lessons learnt during his Confucian schooling, we should note that throughout the text Liu consistently advocates a complete rejection of all ideology except Marxism–Leninism. He argued that man was a product of his environment and as such good communists should strive to reject all inherited influences of which they were aware (12–13). The ‘exploiting classes’ had ruled for thousands of years, he said, perpetuating ‘backwardness, ignorance, selfishness, mutual deception, mutual antagonism, mutual slaughter etc.’ This was hardly an endorsement of the ideology of the Confucian order (43).

While the references to Confucius and Mencius in section one of the speech grabbed the headlines, Liu’s call in section five for the establishment of a completely new value system is seldom mentioned by scholars. Elsewhere, Liu draws a clear distinction between ‘revolutionary cultivation’ and self-cultivation on the Confucian model (9). In section three, he quotes Zeng Zi, a follower of Confucius, as saying ‘I reflect on myself three times a day’ in support of the point that China had a long history of introspective self-awareness and he noted that a key feature of this reflection was the writing of mottoes to encourage contemplation (23). He criticizes such techniques, saying:

These scholars and religious believers exaggerate the function of subjective initiative, thinking that so long as they keep their general ‘good intentions’ and are devoted to silent prayer they will be able to change the existing state of affairs, change society and change themselves under conditions separated from social and revolutionary practice. This is, of course, absurd. We cannot cultivate ourselves in this way. We are materialists and our cultivation cannot be separated from practice. (23–4)

For Liu the separation of theory from practice was ‘one of the biggest evils bequeathed to us by the education and learning of the old society’. We should be conscious, therefore, that while Liu praises the ‘excellent and useful teachings’ of the sages, he also says that people preached righteousness and ‘acted like out-and-out robbers and harlots in everything they did’ (26–7). While the teachings of the sages may have been ‘excellent’, Confucianism was for the old society and Marxism–Leninism would define the future (13–22). ‘Revolutionary cultivation’ was necessary to bring about a new form of morality.

There are certainly many parallels between Liu’s ‘revolutionary cultivation’ and Confucian self-cultivation, but we should not mistake the medium for the message. Despite presenting a more sophisticated analysis than most,

Nivison suggested that Liu's 'conscious didactic use of Chinese tradition is something that is itself entailed and called for by an acceptance of that tradition'. For Nivison, Liu was 'merely urging that Marxist "sages" be imitated in the Confucian manner'.¹⁴ In fact, *How to Be a Good Communist* denounces Confucianism and posits true 'revolutionary cultivation' in opposition to it. The idea that a form of 'Confucian communist' ideology determined the success of the Chinese communist revolution seems to have a greater explanatory appeal to some scholars than historical accounts emphasizing the contingent nature of the events that led to victory in 1949. Defeat was a likely prospect on several occasions, but the communists' eventual success conferred legitimacy on their revolutionary 'model'. Documents from the preceding decades were then seen in the West as important texts to be analysed in the search for the ideological and organizational origins of victory. Liu's speech was a product of its time and it addressed two main concerns of the Yan'an era: the training of individuals to build a strong organization and the adaption of Marxist-Leninist theory, matured in the Soviet Union, to Chinese realities. The text could be read as an attempt to transplant a Leninist revolutionary model and graft it to a Chinese host – indeed, references to Confucius, Marx, Lenin, Stalin and Mao are often juxtaposed, but we should note that in all cases the correctness of Marxist and Maoist theory is emphasized while Confucianism is simply engaged with as a useful rhetorical device.

Liu wrote that 'every member of our Party came from this squalid old society of China' (12–13) and so in making their revolution manifest they could not avoid becoming exposed to social evils. 'Revolutionary cultivation' was Liu's suggested means of warding off these corrupting influences; his method was later denounced as 'counter-revolutionary'. The way in which he had presented his arguments, including the language he used and the examples he chose, aided his critics. In embedding his ideological argument in the local context, Liu left himself exposed to accusations that he had been contaminated by the very traditionalism he was trying to eradicate. We should perhaps follow Boorman in observing that even revolutionaries are 'creatures of time and place, prisoners of folkways, culture and language'. We should not mistake a common language and pool of cultural references for an innate Confucianism.¹⁵ The CCP were, above all else, engaged in a fundamental reordering of relationships between individuals and groups in society. The significance conferred on the references to the Confucian classics came later when they were seized upon by Liu's Cultural Revolution critics and by Western scholars who sought to explain Chinese history through the lens of Confucianism.

Further Reading

Boorman, Howard L., 'How to be a Good Communist: The Political Ethics of Liu Shao-Ch'I, *Asian Survey* 3, no. 8 (1963): 372–83.

Communist Party of China, *Mao's China: Party Reform Documents, 1942-46*, trans. and intro. Boyd Compton (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1952).

Dittmer, Lowell, *Liu Shaoqi and the Chinese Cultural Revolution* (Armonk, NY and London: ME Sharpe, 1998).