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Between Socialist Futures: Mao Zedong on the ‘Ten Major Relationships’

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Both inside and outside the Party a clear distinction must be made between right and wrong. How to deal with people who commit errors is an important question. The correct attitude should be one of allowing people to make revolution. When people commit errors, we must adopt the policy of learning from past mistakes in order to avoid future ones and curing the illness in order to save the patient so as to help them to correct their mistakes. Ah Q zheng zhuan (The True Story of Ah Q) is a fine piece of writing. I would urge comrades who have read this story before to reread it and those who haven't read it to read it carefully. In this story Lu Xun writes mainly about a peasant who was backward and unawakened and whose biggest fear was the criticism of others ... consequently putting him in a very passive position. ... It is no good if we bar people in society from making revolution. Nor is it good to prohibit those who have joined the Party and who have made errors from correcting their errors. We should allow people to make revolution. ... For the revolution, it is always better to have more people. Except for an extremely small number who cling to their mistakes, repeat them frequently, and refuse to mend their ways, the majority of those who have erred can correct their mistakes. Just as people can become immune to typhoid once they have had it, those who have erred may make fewer errors. ... On the contrary, it is those who have not erred who are in danger and need to be more vigilant; because they do not have such immunity, they are prone to become cocky.¹

Mao Zedong's speech 'On the Ten Major Relationships' was delivered to an enlarged meeting of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) leading body, the Politburo, on 25 April 1956 amid a turbulent international situation. Two

months earlier, Nikita Khrushchev had embarked on his de-Stalinization course, sharply criticizing the former Soviet leader and icon of world communism for his brutal dictatorship and extravagant personality cult. The secret speech triggered uncertainty about the future course of the Soviet Union and world communism, which was to result in calls for national variants of socialist construction as well as upheavals in several East European countries such as Poland and Hungary. The CCP leadership had not anticipated this change of direction and was at pains to develop an independent stance towards the Stalinist legacy and the future course of communism. The revolutionary past had been dealt with in a high-profile article written under Mao's personal guidance, published as 'On the Historical Experiences of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat' in the *People's Daily* on 5 April 1956, which acknowledged Stalin's mistakes but found them of secondary importance compared with his contributions to socialist construction. Outlining the future path of the revolution in China remained a more delicate task. By 1955, the CCP leadership had firmly consolidated its domestic grip on power and commenced with the transition to socialism by accelerating the collectivization of agriculture as well as transforming private property to collective and state ownership. Despite various clashes regarding specific policy measures, the CCP began self-confidently to depart from the Soviet model of development and to search for an alternative way of securing the victory of the socialist revolution in China.

The speech also occurred at a unique point in the development of Mao Zedong's political thought: it was delivered immediately after the consolidation of the communist dictatorship and the implementation of the first five-year plan, which had strongly relied on the Soviet model, and prior to the late Maoist mass campaigns of the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution. Based on several weeks of discussions with representatives from different sectors of the party-state, it represents the most comprehensive blueprint Mao was to develop for revolutionary China's future after the founding of the People's Republic in 1949. The speech was not made publicly available contemporaneously. In December 1965, State President Liu Shaoqi approached Mao Zedong to suggest that the speech be made available to cadres above county level. Mao explained that he was 'not completely satisfied'² with the speech but allowed Liu to circulate speaking notes as an internal study document. The proximity of these speaking notes to the actual speech cannot be ascertained because the original notes are held in the hermetically closed Central Party Archives. The textual history is further complicated by the fact that Mao delivered a second speech on the same topic just a week later on 2 May 1956 at the Supreme State Conference. According

to the official edition of Mao's post-1949 manuscripts, upon Liu's request the speaking notes of this second speech were reprinted for study purposes in 1965.³ The reprint of the first speech leaked out to marauding students during the early Cultural Revolution and it was unofficially reprinted by different Red Guard organizations in 1967. These texts present the earliest available edition of the speech. In July 1975, the recently rehabilitated Deng Xiaoping approached Mao with the request of publishing the speech, which by now had been redacted by one of the party's foremost propagandists, Hu Qiaomu, in order to have it included in the upcoming fifth volume of Mao's *Selected Works*. For a second time, Mao opted to delay publication. Therefore, the speech was only officially published after Mao's death. The redacted version appeared on the front page of the *People's Daily* in commemoration of Mao Zedong's birthday on 26 December 1976 and was republished as part of the fifth volume of Mao's *Selected Works* the following year. Despite later rumours, interim party leader Hua Guofeng does not seem to have tampered with the content.⁴ However, he made strong political use of the speech's tone of moderation and of 'bringing into play all positive factors and mobilizing all forces that can be utilized to achieve greater, faster, better, and more economical results in building socialism' (45) in order to consolidate his rule in the wake of the purge of the 'Gang of Four'.⁵ While the original speaking notes still have not been published, the two available editions are fairly congruous in terms of general argument, although the latter version is much more explicit in its criticism of the Soviet Union. Our reading relies on the earliest extant edition of the text, the Red Guard reprint, since the unpolished character of the speaking notes bears a closer resemblance to Mao's contemporary rhetoric than the later redacted version.⁶ The specific passage under review here, however, differs only marginally between the two editions.

The main objective of the speech was to outline a set of ten major 'relationships' (*guanxi*) understood as dialectical 'contradictions' (*maodun*), a crucial pillar of Mao's political thought, characterizing the current state of the Chinese revolution. These relationships included economic aspects, such as the relative percentage of investments in light and heavy industries or the unequal development of coastal versus inland regions, the relationship between agriculture and industry as well as between economic and defence construction, but also social and political contradictions, including the relationship between centre and localities, between revolution and counter-revolution, the relationship between Han Chinese and minority nationalities and the ties between China and foreign countries. Our excerpt pertains to section nine, an outline of the relationship between right and wrong, a task deemed crucial for both revolutionary practice

and as an epistemological means of obtaining truth. According to the perception of the CCP leadership, Khrushchev's harsh criticism of Stalin had violated the most basic standards of truth. The previously proclaimed infallibility of the Soviet leader had hampered initiatives at lower levels, while the secret speech had simply aimed at erasing Stalin's legacy with one blow.

China was to follow a different path. According to Mao, the success of the Communist Party dictatorship depended on closely following the 'mass line' (*qunzhong luxian*) by way of distinguishing right from wrong in each policy field through an endless process of dialectical reasoning. Hence, wrong judgements were bound to occur once in a while. Mistakes were not to be perceived as bad, but rather as an opportunity to correct former standpoints through sustained and 'well-intentioned' criticism (59). Always fond of biological metaphors, Mao compared this process to active immunization against typhoid fever. It is important to note that Communist Party members were by no means exempt from making mistakes. Yet while previously, for example, during the so-called 'rectification campaign' of the early 1940s, the method of 'curing the patient in order to save the patient' (58) had applied to internal criticism only, by 1956 Mao was willing to widen the circle. Representatives of democratic parties were to be allowed to voice opinions 'as long as what they say make[s] sense' (55). A few days later, he would for the first time use the phrase of 'letting one hundred flowers bloom' in arts and literature, and of 'let[ting] a hundred schools of thought contend' (70) in academic circles, in order to allow for unorthodox appraisals of the present situation.

The main gist of the passage is directed at paving the way for local initiative and mobilization. Mao explicitly refers to a character from Lu Xun's famous novella *The True Story of Ah Q*, which is set in a small township of Eastern China during the 1911 Xinhai Revolution. The nameless anti-hero, Ah Q, is portrayed as inherently passive. He is held in contempt by his fellow citizens and continuously bullied and maltreated. Mao specifically points out his fear of being criticized by others, for example, for the 'ringworm scars on his scalp' (58), which he did not want others to talk about, yet his behaviour resulted in the very opposite. Mao here is mainly interested in showing how passivity engenders negative personal consequences, and also how certain local authorities decide on who is allowed to join the revolution as a sort of elitist privilege. He does not dwell on the question of whether the 'Ah Q spirit', the inability to face one's shortcomings and to turn defeats into unfounded expressions of moral superiority, should be read as a symptom of the Chinese national character. For Mao the immediate point of comparison is domestic politics. The Red Guard edition offers former

CCP leader Wang Ming and the 'dogmatists' as examples of those who barred people who were considered to have committed political errors from making revolution. Since Mao himself had been among those criticized in the early 1930s, there is clearly an element of personal vendetta involved. Yet besides these clearly subjective motives, the speech displays elements of cherishing popular revolution and a contempt for bureaucratic routines that foreshadow Mao's later policy choices. He calls for giving greater leeway to lower-level units and even voices the idea of reducing party and government institutions by two-thirds (54).

What makes this speech so special in the development of Mao's political thought is that it explores the role of contradictions within Chinese state and society without yet framing everything under the overarching concept of class struggle.⁷ It does not neglect the basic idea of contradiction as the primary force propelling history forward, and yet change is not solely equated with violent struggle against perceived enemies. Mao proceeds in dialectical fashion to challenge the current status quo by probing alternatives. He opts for strengthening heavy industry by first spurring the level of consumer goods production in order to raise the people's living standards (47). He calls for budget cuts in the military sector in order to free capacity for economic construction, thereby creating positive side-effects for the military such as an indigenous automobile industry: 'How good it would be if one of these days we could ride to meetings in cars of our own make' (49).

The correctness of the dictatorship of the proletariat or the importance of eliminating its enemies is by no means negated: 'In a great revolution embracing six hundred million people, the people would not have approved if we had not killed off a bunch of [local despots]' (57). However, preference should be given to reforming this 'rubbish ... into something useful' (57), since chopped-off heads could not be replaced. Finally, within international relations, China should stop slavishly following the Soviet model and rather try to adapt the strong points of each nation, irrespective of whether it belonged to the socialist or capitalist camp. In his earthy rhetoric, Mao in a follow-up speech yet again chose a biological metaphor: 'A fart can be fragrant or stink. We can't say that all the Soviet Union's farts are fragrant. At this time, when other people say that something stinks, we have been following them, and also say that it stinks. We should learn whatever is applicable, good things [even if they are] in capitalist [countries], should be studied' (71). Currently, the Chinese remained 'poor' and 'blank' (60), owing to the legacy of imperialist oppression and a belated revolution. Yet again, these weak points should be utilized as means of mobilizing all positive forces in

achieving new victories of the Chinese revolution without becoming arrogant or cocky: 'We still need to learn from others. Even ten thousand years from now we [will] still need to learn! What's wrong with that?' (61).

This dialectical process of reasoning is vintage Mao: challenging the current status quo by creating alternative spaces of discourse, watching things unfold and thus continuing to hold a strategic advantage within inner party decision-making processes. No factor could be decided upon by itself but always in dialectical relation with other factors, mutually impacting on each other and incessantly shifting the balances in an endless process of moderating and accelerating policy decisions. Therefore, the revolution according to Mao was by no means over with the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949. His concept of revolution rather referred to a continuous process of social transformation which China had just started to embark upon and was literally to continue for ten thousand years. Shortly after, Mao would use Trotsky's idea of the 'permanent revolution' (*bu duan geming*) to convey this understanding of continuous change, which in a sense mirrored classical connotations of the Chinese term for revolution, *geming*, indicating both stellar movements and changes in dynastic leadership.⁸ By 1956, Mao felt sufficiently confident to call for greater local independence and for constructive criticism of party rule in order to unite the largest part of the Chinese populace along the path towards a Chinese future characterized by integrating the 'universal truths of Marxism-Leninism with the concrete practice of revolution in China' (60). This optimistic view of continuing social transformation without class struggle was shattered by the failure of the Great Leap Forward. It was replaced by increasing scepticism regarding the true intentions of his fellow party leaders, whom he suspected of harbouring 'revisionist' sentiments, which ultimately might lead to a return to capitalist relations of production. This observation was not without factual basis as post-1978 developments reveal.

Why then would Mao stop his former top lieutenants Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping from making the speech publicly available? The main reason probably rests with the ambiguity enshrined in the ten major relationships. On the one hand, the speech could be read as a statement of moderation, of striking a national balance in economic construction, and it was indeed this aspect that fellow leaders like Zhou Enlai emphasized when propagating the content of Mao's speech in 1956-7.⁹ The interests of Deng Xiaoping in 1975 were likewise directed at countering the overarching rhetoric of class struggle, which had come to dominate Chinese political discourse from the early 1960s. Mao resented being overtly pushed in this direction of moderation at the expense

of highlighting the second element argued for in the speech: incessant popular revolution and social transformation.

While official party evaluation has come to the conclusion that this speech 'initially summed up our experiences in socialist construction and set forth the task of exploring a way of building socialism suited to the specific conditions of our country'¹⁰ and dropped the concept of 'revolution' in favour of 'reform' (*gaige*), the speech could just as well be read as a statement for doing away with the privileges of the party bureaucracy, of 'narrowing the "scissors differential"' (52) between agricultural and industrial production and, finally, for thinking about ways of doing away with the Communist Party dictatorship altogether. As part of the sixth relationship, that between party and non-party, Mao without naming his source harks back to Lenin's writings on *State and Revolution* from 1917 and argues that parties, as products of history, will eventually 'wither away' (54). While by 1956 Mao was still convinced that the dictatorship of the proletariat was needed to suppress foreign and domestic enemies, ten years later at the outset of the Cultural Revolution and against the background of recent developments in the Soviet Union, which he interpreted as a revisionist return to capitalist policies, Mao had come to the conclusion that conditions were ripe to experiment with new forms of governance. He called upon 'all positive forces' within society, mainly the country's youth, to smash first old culture and then party institutions. No other communist leader went so far as to call for the destruction of the party-state he himself had been instrumental in bringing about. Inkling of this thought may already be found in the 'Ten Major Relationships', although crucial elements such as class struggle and revisionism are still missing.

'On the Ten Major Relationships' has received scant attention in western scholarship in recent decades. Current readings of the speech in Chinese-language scholarship clearly favour an economic reading. Elements of popular revolution and social transformation are downplayed. Instead, new political challenges are singled out as sets of 'major relationships' or 'contradictions', which are to be solved by the omniscient party. Even party leaders such as Jiang Zemin continue to build on the legacy of the speech by defining their own sets of major relationships.¹¹ The passage quoted above gave the post-Mao leadership a pretext for claiming the possibility of correcting mistakes committed under Communist Party rule and of returning to the path of raising the people's living standards through economic construction. On the other hand, more than any other section of the speech, the passage reveals the danger of elevating the party above the masses, of becoming self-content and neglecting political participation

and popular criticism. It is here that our reading departs most obviously from standard interpretations of the speech by party historians.

The quote ends with a cautioning against claims of infallibility and the danger of becoming ‘cocky’ as a consequence. The possibility of committing and learning from mistakes for the late Mao Zedong was clearly a privilege applying to anyone but himself. In splendid isolation, the ageing dictator unleashed forces he proved unable to direct towards positive ends, resulting in a period of cruel persecutions and suffering, shaded by the rhetoric of popular revolution and ‘great democracy’. The return to an economic reading of the speech after 1976 has by no means ended the existence of the dialectical contradictions sketched out in the ‘Ten Major Relationships’, and as abuses of party privileges become increasingly rampant, revolutionary readings have regained attractiveness for those left behind by the post-Mao reforms.

Further Reading

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