

On Contradiction: Mao's Party-Substitutionist Revolution in Theory and Practice - Part 3

July 1, 2022



“The Reddest Reddest Red Sun in Our Heart, Chairman Mao”
(Women xinzhong zuihong zuihongde hong taiyang Mao zhuxi he women xin lianxin)

This is the third part of a four-part article. The other parts can be found here:

Part 1

Part 2

Part 4

V. FORGING THE “SUBSTITUTE PROLETARIAT”

The petty bourgeois intelligentsia as “substitute proletariat”

Mao and his comrades gradually, and almost unconsciously at first, began to assume the task of constructing a new *subjectively socialist* revolutionary social force. While maintaining the fiction of the “leading role of the proletariat” to mollify Stalin’s Comintern and the urban-centric Central Committee in Shanghai, Mao and his seconds Liu Shaoqi, Kang Sheng and others began the task of creating an entirely new communist party out of mostly petit bourgeois elements: students, teachers, patriotic intellectuals, journalists, artists, déclassé sons of the gentry, defecting GMD officers and soldiers, millions of peasants, and even lumpen bandits — converting the Communist Party itself into a mass party, a new social agency, a “new class” – what Paul Sweezy would later term a “substitute proletariat.”[61]

After losing tens of thousands of veteran communist workers and organizers in the coups of 1926-27, in the white terror that followed, in fighting off GMD attacks on the first rural soviets, and on the Long March, by the 1930s the Party was almost entirely composed of illiterate and semi-literate peasants – very far from proletarian pamphleteers. The Party badly needed educated cadre who could read and write, organize, produce propaganda, administer base-area governments — and eventually administer a future communist national government and economy. Thus in a Central Committee decision in 1939 Mao stressed the need for the party to recruit petty-bourgeois intellectuals: “Without the participation of the intellectuals, victory and the revolution will be impossible.”[62]

To this end, in 1936 the CCP leadership had launched what turned out to be a brilliant and highly effective propaganda campaign to attract patriotic urban intellectuals to remote Yan’an. In this campaign Edgar Snow’s 1936 bestseller *Red Star Over China* — systematically edited by Mao himself to ensure that it projected the correct message — played an outsized role not only in mobilizing liberal-left Western cheerleaders but also in mobilizing urban *Chinese* to join the CCP, as Julia Lovell describes in fascinating detail.[63] “Mao’s aims,” Snow declared, were “to awaken [China’s millions] to a belief in human rights, to combat the timidity, passiveness, and static faiths of Taoism and Confucianism, to educate, to persuade ... them ... to fight for a life of justice, equality, freedom, and human dignity.”[64]

The book was a sensation. “Translated into Chinese, it convinced crowds of young, educated liberals and patriots — in the mainland and across the Chinese diaspora — to abandon their urban existences and trek to the northwest to serve Mao’s revolution as organizers, administrators, and propagandists.” Translated into dozens of other languages it became a handbook for Third World revolutionaries around the world.[65]

After Japan invaded China in 1937, the CCP and GMD negotiated a truce and agreed to form a Second United Front against the invaders, CCP mobilization and recruitment went into overdrive. Mao’s generals Zhu De, Peng Dehuai, He Long, and others led the Eighth Army deep into North China to establish additional base areas. The Red Army grew from fewer than 30,000 men to 250,000 by autumn 1938. Parallel with the military build-up, tens of thousands of patriotic and leftist intellectuals frustrated by Chiang Kai-shek’s crumbling resistance, began trekking out to the Mecca

of revolutionary Yan'an to join the Communist "saviors of the nation" and experience for themselves the promised utopia.

These new intellectual recruits were inspired by the May Fourth movement's celebration of science and democracy. Before he co-founded the CCP Chen Duxiu had been the leading intellectual light of the May Fourth movement, famously calling for "Mr. Science" and "Mr. Democracy" to replace Mr. Confucius.[66] Thus many volunteers bought the CCP promise of a "new democratic revolution." In the words of Dai Qing, "Young people searching for a way to rescue the nation had broken through the lines of the KMT and Japanese blockade and had arrived at or were on their way to Yan'an - the barren yellow dirt plateau that in the young people's passionate aspirations was a holy place without exploitation and suppression, wherein equality, freedom, and democracy reigned." [67] One young volunteer described his feeling: "At last we saw the heights of Yanan city. We were so excited we wept. We cheered from our truck.... We started to sing the "Internationale" and Russia's Motherland March." [68]

"Yan'an spring" 1937-38

Yet, Yan'an soon turned out to be the opposite of what they had expected. Instead of critical thinking they found dogmatic instruction including rote memorization and recitation of Party texts mimicking Confucian pedagogical methods. Instead of equality and comradesly-shared sacrifice, they found a rigid hierarchy in which everything from the quantity and quality of food, to housing, health care, uniforms, and access to information, were all allocated by six categories of rank. Instead of democracy they found authoritarianism, enforced collectivism, enforced subordination of the individual to the Party. Instead of sexual equality they found rampant sexism. The young volunteers were spirited revolutionaries willing to sacrifice for the cause. But their May Fourth-inspired independence, anti-authoritarianism, feminism, critical thinking and pro-democratic political instincts were a threat to the Confucian Stalinized top-down CCP and Mao's vision.[69]

In the years before 1939 when Mao was not yet in charge and had not yet seized control of the schools and institutes, the atmosphere in Yan'an was relatively free. Mao, Wang Ming, Zhu De, and other Party leaders wore simple clothes, spoke casually with young people, and were unaccompanied by retinues. Young people addressed Party leaders as "Comrade Wang Ming," "Comrade Enlai [Zhou Enlai]," or "Comrade Bo Gu" without adding titles such as secretary or director. Relations between men and women were fairly relaxed. Young women felt able to "cast off their chains and feel liberated." "Taking their cue from Alexandra Kollontai, sexual desire was considered 'as natural as thirst.'" Revolutionary romantic attachments bloomed. "For a time," historian Gao Hua writes, "Yan'an rang out with laughter and cheer and it seemed to have become a utopia for the young" in the "idealism-filled days of 1937 and 1938." [70]

But once the Comintern endorsed him as "supreme [political] leader" of the Party in September 1938, Mao "moved forward with full confidence as he seized all Party and military authority from the Soviet faction." [71] The turning point came at a critical five-day senior cadres Politburo meeting in September 1941 where Mao delivered withering sarcastic and mocking critiques of Wang Ming, Zhang Wentian, Bo Gu, Wang Jiaxiang, and the rest over their history of failed military strategies and their dogmatic adherence to classical Marxist precepts which in Mao's words were "divorced from reality" in the Chinese context. The Comintern faction capitulated, disintegrated, and lost control over the CCP from then on. Wang Ming bowed to Mao, resigned from the leadership and never again played a leading role.[72] Other opponents criticized themselves and groveled in hopes of forgiveness from the rising Red Sun. Liu Shaoqi, Chen Yun, Ye Jianyang, and others in Mao's own faction issued their own self-criticisms, extolled Mao to his face with fawning tributes as "the model and exemplar for Marxists," as "dialectical materialism incarnate," as the "Greatest Chinese leader ever" and so on.[73] Mao lapped it up and relentlessly promoted this self-glorification, demanding

unconditional submission from subordinates.[74] From that point on we can say that the CCP had become effectively a totalitarian Stalinist-Maoist party and the cult of Mao begun in earnest. Minority views or even majority views that did not accord with Mao's henceforth invited punishment.

Bureaucratic centralism displaces democratic centralism

In 1938 Mao assumed command of an already more or less fully Stalinized, bureaucratic-centralized party and he set about in the late 1930s and early 1940s eliminating the last vestiges of independent thinking in Yan'an and the base areas. Mao himself had already become a thoroughgoing Stalinist and wannabe totalitarian as early as 1929 when, addressing the Ninth Congress of the Fourth Red Army in the Kiangsi Soviet, he complained that "ultra-democracy is still deep-rooted in the minds of many comrades." Comrades persist in making such "erroneous demands as that the Red Army should apply 'democratic centralism from the bottom to the top' or should 'let the lower levels discuss all problems first, and then let the higher levels decide.' It was imperative, he said, to "destroy the roots of ultra-democracy" and "ensure democracy under guidance" by enforcing the following rules: [paraphrasing: (1) the individual must obey the organization, (2) the minority must obey the majority, (3) lower echelons must obey higher echelons, and (4) the entire Party must obey the Central Committee"].[75] In short: Leaders make decisions, the rank and file carry them out. This is CCP "democracy" from Mao to Xi Jinping.

Of course one could say that after all this was an army and where is there any democratic army? True, but Mao insisted that the Red Army was not just a fighting force. It was a *party-army*, a political army:

[Some comrades] think that the task of the Red Army like that of the White army, is merely to fight. They do not understand that the Chinese Red Army is an armed body for carrying out the political tasks of the revolution.... The Red Army fights not merely for the sake of fighting but in order to conduct propaganda among the masses, organize them, arm them, and help them to establish revolutionary political power. Without these objectives, fighting loses its meaning and the Red Army loses the reason for its existence.

Besides, Mao didn't confine his enforcement of top-down bureaucratic centralism to the army. Like Stalin, he generalized it to the entire Party and government. This naturally raises the question, "why shouldn't rank and file civilian or military cadres have the right to offer input, discuss policy alternatives, and vote on decisions about 'the *political tasks* of the revolution?'"

Origins of terror, torture, and the mass murder of comrades

At the beginning of Mao's 1942 "Rectification Campaign" one of the young volunteers in Yan'an, Wang Shi-wei - a famous leftist writer and translator of Marx, Lenin, and Trotsky into Chinese - had the nerve to pose just this question. Wang penned several essays in the Party newspaper *Jiefang ribao* (*Liberation Daily*) criticizing Party authoritarianism, sexism, suppression of free speech, and the growing alienation of young people. His essay "Wild Lilies" depicted the rise of a "new privileged authoritarian class" already in the 1930s[76] and appealed for a humane and democratic socialism. He wasn't criticizing hierarchy and ranks in the military. He understood that armies aren't democracies. He was criticizing the internal regime of the Party. His essay, "Politicians and Artists" proposed a separation of powers, confining Party power to politics while leaving artists and writers free both to "arouse the revolution's spiritual forces" and also criticize the "darkness" wherever it was found. [77] His essays were widely popular among the new recruits.

Mao's response was "Who's in charge here, Karl Marx or Wang Shiwei?" In fact Wang and Marx were on the same page with respect to democracy. It was the aspiring dictator Mao Zedong who was contradicting Marx' democratic ethos. Mao "demanded the editors admit their fault in allowing such a work to be published and pledge to avoid any such error in the future." [78] Then he put Wang on trial and charged him with leading an alleged "Five Member Anti-Party Gang" — China's first show trial. The Party's senior cadre and the new intellectual recruits were compelled to condemn Wang. Artist Ai Weiwei recalls how his father, the poet Ai Qing, caved:

Under the pressure to conform, everyone sank into an ideological swamp of "criticism" and "self-criticism." My father repeatedly wrote self-critiques, and when controls on thought and expression rose to the level of threatening his very survival, he, like others wrote an essay denouncing Wang Shiwei, the author of 'Wild Lilies,' taking a public stand against his inner convictions. [79]

Wang's real offense was that he refused to recant, bow his head, admit errors, grovel and conform to Mao's authority. So Mao had him locked up in a cave for five years and then on July 1, 1947, a subordinate of Mao's dragged Wang out of his cave and chopped his head off. [80]

Yet this gratuitous murder of a Party comrade on trumped-up charges was no aberration on Mao's part. By the 1940s he was already accomplished in the tools and practices of terror, torture, cruelty, and gruesome mass murder. During the Kiangsi Soviet in 1930-32 Mao purged his opponents with a campaign of red terror against a supposed "Anti-Bolshevik League" (AB League for short). According to Nanjing University historian Gao Hua, Mao's campaign "encouraged the extortion of confessions under torture and a policy of 'killing without mercy'" that culminated in mass rallies and the execution of "Party members who came from landlord or rich-peasant families as well as complainers and malcontents." "In less than one month, more than 4,400 of the Red Army's 40,000 men, many of them ardent young volunteers, were identified as members of the AB League and ... were put to death." [81]

Mao not only ordered the slaughters but also approved Li's torture of comrades to obtain confessions:

Li Shaojiu used various forms of torture on these comrades until they were "a mass of wounds" and "their fingers were broken and their bodies were burned so badly that they could not move" with some dying on the spot. Whenever torture was employed, Li Shaojiu was always present. According to contemporary records, the tortured comrades "shook the heaven with cries that lingered in ones ears as every available form of torture was applied." On December 8, wives of Li Baifang, Ma Ming, and Zhou Mian visited their husbands in detention, but they were then also arrested as members of the AB League. They were similarly tortured, with bamboo strips driven under their fingernails, their genitals burned with incense sticks, and their breasts cut with small knives. [82]

The AB League massacres were, as far as I'm aware, the first mass murders of Communist Party cadres by Mao's partners in crime. They weren't his last. In 1937, Mao launched his own campaign of terror against Trotskyists. Again, it was not enough just to shoot them. Mao let loose his Rottweiler Kang Sheng (since 1936 head of the Office for the Elimination of Counterrevolutionaries and trained by Stalin's NKVD secret police in Moscow where he is said to have "eliminated" hundreds of Chinese Trotskyist students) and his crew who delighted in secret orgies torturing and murdering hundreds more Trotskyists - years before he put Wang Shiwei on trial. I'll spare the

reader details of the “72 methods” of torture employed by Mao’s sadists and their inventive means of mutilating and killing their comrades.[83]

Social engineering the virtuous communist mandarin

Once he had secured monopoly control of the military in 1935 and formal political control of the Party and government in 1938, Mao turned to the task of achieving ideological supremacy: dethroning the last of the Soviet faction, and establishing his own “revision of Marxism” (substituting the peasantry for the urban proletariat, substituting guerilla war for workers’ insurrection, replacing democracy with dictatorship, and replacing materialism with voluntarism) and remolding the Party cadre to instill in them the tenets of Maoism. The “Thought of Mao Zedong” would be enshrined in both the Preamble to the revised Party Constitution of 1945 and in the first rewrite of Party history: “Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party” (April 1945).[84]

To this end, Mao reorganized the Party’s training schools, put himself and Kang Sheng in charge and imposed a radically new Confucian-Stalinist curriculum based on 22 short texts, mostly written by Mao and Liu Shaoqi. Gao Hua says that Yan’an became “virtually a college town” with schools disseminating CCP ideology, teaching military arts, and playing a key role in Yan’an’s political life.[85] By 1939, Yan’an City had a population of about 6-7,000 local residents and 30,000 young volunteers, cadres, and soldiers. The eight-year long Second United Front gave Mao the freedom from most fighting to use his schools to as Gao Hua put it, “stockpile and maintain a senior cadre corps” of future government administrators and managers.[86] During the eight years of the United Front with the KMT from 1937 and 1945 Party membership grew from 40,000 to 1,200,000 and its military forces from 30,000 to one million plus another million militia support groups, and they governed nineteen base areas with nearly a hundred million people.[87] By 1949 Party membership would soar to 4.5 million.[88]

The schools were established to train a new revolutionary-cum-ruling class, to be a politicized party-bureaucracy of competent, disciplined, incorruptible, and obedient organizers, propagandists, managers, and administrators who would govern the base areas and eventually the whole country as *beneficent dictators* over and above society — not unlike the Mandarin scholar-officials of the ancien regime.

But the notion of Party cadres as beneficent dictators posed a two-fold problem: First, without democratic elections there was no way to hold those officials accountable to society. Second, without inner-party democracy there was no way to hold the Party leaders accountable to the membership. Without democracy, what was to prevent the substitute proletariat from morphing into a new ruling class, serving themselves instead of the people? This idealist theme of a permanently self-reforming substitute proletariat was the central contradiction that ran through Mao’s thought from Yan’an to the Cultural Revolution. His “solution” at this stage was to try to social engineer his cadre into an upright, self-denying, self-disciplining, self-reforming “virtuous” elite by combining elements of Confucianism and Stalinism.

Mao’s synthesis of Confucianism and Stalinism

It’s deeply ironic that while the Chinese Communist Party was born in struggle against the shackles of traditional Confucianism, when Mao set about social engineering his “New Men” and “New Women” in Yan’an, he sourced neither Marx nor Lenin but Confucius and Stalin — prompting the Chinese Trotskyist Wang Fanxi to ask rhetorically “How could an idealist, ‘feudal,’ class-bound Confucianism be an integral part of Mao’s communist ideology?” And “not just a source but an enduring component.”[89] Wang, like many China scholars, tends to see Mao’s “residual”

Confucianism as an aberration, a cultural hangover from his pre-Marxist days. But what this approach fails to appreciate is how central and *essential* Confucianism was to Mao's whole project of constructing a "substitute proletariat" – his scholar-official like "communist mandarin" revolutionary-ruling class.

Mao copied plenty from Stalin: his top-down bureaucratic centralism; his party-state organizational structure that insured party control of all institutions of government, military and civil society; his shameless vilification of veteran Bolsheviks as "opportunists," and "enemies of the people"; his ruthless use of terror and violence to destroy the so-called "old Bolsheviks"; his mendacious rewriting of official history to glorify himself; his primitive thought reform that Mao systematized and developed, and more.[90]

But he also copied plenty from Confucianism because it uniquely and conveniently suited his need to engineer his communist mandarin. Confucianism assumed that human beings were perfectible through instruction, self-cultivation, emulation of virtuous models, and lifelong self-reform. In his book *Creating The "New Man"* Yin Hong Cheng writes that that "[t]he Confucian ideas of *ren* (benevolence), *li* (sense of propriety), and *xiao* (filial piety) were all exalted moral qualities embodied in *junzi* – an ideal moral person [aka superior man]."[91] In Confucian China ordinary people sought virtue by respecting Confucian ethical principles and "rectifying" their behavior such that each member of the family fulfilled the duties and obligations required of their position and accepted the limits of his/her rank in the patriarchal social order (younger son submits to elder son, wife to husband, family to state, etc.). To the extent that one can discern a coherent political ideology in the fortune cookie maxims and parables attributed in the *Analects* and other collections to The Sage, Confucius held that the cultivation of virtuous leaders was the key to good governance. A *junzi* virtuous administrator, Cheng tells us, disciplines himself, refrains from self-indulgence and governs in the interest of society. By contrast, *xiaoren*, a "small or petty" person or official, is egotistic, self-indulgent, seeks power and fame, and his governance suffers in result.[92] The job of Mao's schools was to combine Stalinism and Confucianism to train this virtuous communist mandarin ruling class.

Speaking at the founding of one of those schools in 1937 Mao emphasized the necessity of building character, moral uprightness, and selflessness in the "vanguard" of the revolution in prose that updated Confucius:

We must educate ... the kind of people who are the vanguard of the Revolution, who have political farsightedness, who are prepared for battle and sacrifice, who are frank, loyal, positive and upright; the kind of people who seek no self-interest, but only national and social emancipation.... [93]

And again:

At no time and in no circumstances should a Communist place his personal interests first; he should subordinate them to the interests of the nation and of the masses. Hence, selfishness, slacking, corruption, seeking the limelight, and so on, are most contemptible, while selflessness, working with all one's energy, whole-hearted devotion to public duty, and quiet hard work will command respect.[94]

The Confucian moral education of the upright communist official was the foundation of Communist Party schools in Yan'an — and remains so to this day. Thus in June 2020 Xi Jinping's *People's Daily*

front page sermon explaining “How to measure up as a party member in the New Era” was all about morality, character, feudal tradition, and emulation of virtuous public servants:

The country does not prosper without virtue ... Party members ... should be the practitioners of good moral character, the general public’s moral benchmark.... All party members, especially leading cadres, must talk about cultivation, morality, integrity, cultivate the high moral character of the Communist Party.... Party members and cadres must ... consciously draw nutrients from the excellent Chinese traditional culture, always and everywhere ... strengthen self-discipline and ... carry forward the spirit of Jiao Yulu [touted as a “heroic” 1960s Henan province party secretary].[95]

Needless to say, none of this moralistic claptrap has any roots in Marx, Lenin, or even Stalin. This is all straight out of Confucius, Mencius and Xunzi.

Thought reform of the intellectuals

To enforce this “thought revolution” the first task was to, as the communists themselves called it: *xiniao*, “wash the brains” of the students. Yan’an’s young recruits and older cadres as well were subjected to intense pressure, required to engage in “criticism and self-criticism” (*piping yu ziwo piping*, or *jiantao*) to examine their “mistakes and shortcomings,” to express their feelings of guilt regret over their petit bourgeois backgrounds. They were ordered to write running confessions about their personal and family histories and reveal their “bad thoughts.” These became the basis of the first dossiers in Communist China – a record that would follow individuals for the rest of their lives.[96] These confessions were regularly examined and criticized by the teacher and the whole class who then demanded more, deeper self-reflection and longer confessions. Students were made to publicly humiliate themselves often in front of large audiences. They were told to “draw a line” between themselves and their bourgeois parents, renounce their past, renounce individualism, swear unconditional loyalty and obedience to the Party and to Mao, and declare their heartfelt gratitude to the Party for their redemption. Recalcitrants were subjected to “struggle” sessions, sometimes before mass audiences of thousands. Incurables were imprisoned and sometimes executed.[97]

Mass Mobilization the Yan’an Way

The Communist Party’s victory was hardly foreordained. Mao’s guerilla road to revolution was novel but had no guarantee of success. The Party had been all but destroyed twice in 1927 and again in 1934. In 1936 the remnant party-army was still no mass popular movement. What saved the CCP this time were the Japanese invasions of 1931 and 1937. In 1931 the Japanese occupied Manchuria. Chiang offered no resistance. When the Japanese invaded in force in 1937 to seize the whole country, Chiang’s armies retreated southward, abandoning the capital and major cities one after another to end up in southwest Sichuan province. Given a choice between the incompetent, corrupt, and dictatorial GMD and the Communists, most Chinese chose the Communists and hoped for the best. That said, to their credit, Mao Zedong and his comrades built a massive popular movement to support the Red Army, a story celebrated by Western authors and scholars from Edgar Snow’s *Red Star Over China* to Mark Selden’s *Yenan Way in Revolutionary China*.

To improve the peasants’ livelihood and mobilize existing resources for the war effort, the communists organized agricultural and industrial cooperatives and sponsored literacy campaigns and medical programs. These relied on primitive technology, “men over machines,” popular initiatives, and local self-reliance. They were designed to overcome the peasants’ fatalism, to give

them the confidence in their capacity to win the war and the revolution. It was the Party's consistent and ever more refined application of these policies that enabled the Party to win the active support of the rural villagers who fed, clothed and hid the Red Army, provided it with spies, informants and recruits, and permitted the party-army to move through village society as "fish in the sea." [98]

"From the masses to the masses"? Where do correct ideas come from?

Through the more than two decades of anti-Japanese war and civil war the Party crucially depended upon voluntary mass support in the rural base areas and it could not force this. Setting a moral example and establishing "clean governments" sharply distinguished the Communists from the corrupt and plunderous Guomindang -governments and military. As Mao wrote in 1928:

Every Communist engaged in government work should set an example of absolute integrity, of freedom from favouritism in making appointments and of hard work for little remuneration. Every Communist working among the masses should be their friend and not a boss over them, an indefatigable teacher and not a bureaucratic politician. [99]

The Party sought to elicit active participation of the masses by persuasion rather than diktat, what Mao termed "mass line" (*qunzhong luxian*) politics. In one of the most famous quotations in all of Mao's work, from a 1943 Politburo resolution on leadership, he said:

In all the practical work of our Party, all correct leadership is necessarily "from the masses, to the masses." This means: take the ideas of the masses (scattered and unsystematic ideas) and concentrate them (through study turn them into concentrated and systematic ideas), then go to the masses and propagate and explain these ideas until the masses embrace them as their own, hold fast to them and translate them into action, and test the correctness of these ideas in such action. [100]

In the high tide of Western Maoism in the 1960s and 70s Maoist China scholars wrote no end of nonsense about this "fundamental principle" of the Party. They took Mao's text to mean that the peasants themselves were the source of manifold "correct ideas," that the Party was merely "learning from the masses," articulating their ideas, and implementing policies that reflected their wishes - even, some argued, superior to "Western liberal democracy." Thus Stanford University economist John Gurley told us that "the politically conscious leadership listened to the "largely inarticulate, largely illiterate and politically undeveloped mass of the local community, learns from the community ... sums up these ideas ... then returns them to the masses in articulate form ... and with the agreement of the majority, puts the consequent practices into practice..." [101] Even today, London School of Economics Professor Lin Chun suggests that Mao's mass line approach is superior to Western democracy: "Instead of competing 'interest groups' of liberal democracies, this form of politics and governance seeks to integrate public preference for sound policymaking while minimizing cleavages and mistakes [and resting upon] the premise of the sovereignty of the people." [102]

Rubbish. "With the agreement of the majority." Please. When did Mao ever put any decision up for popular vote? For all the reasons I've adduced above — the incapacity of isolated, illiterate, economically backward peasants to lead their own revolution much less conceive of an alternative social order; the need to restrain poor-peasant "left excesses" in order to maintain a multi-class united front; Mao's own explicitly derisive opinion of backward localist-minded peasants who hadn't a clue about modern industry or imperialism; and Mao's own fierce hostility to democracy, imbued

by his elitist Confucian schooling, reinforced by the Stalinist culture of the CCP, put into practice with his criminal direction of torture and executions of thousands of comrades who simply differed with him over policy issues – for all his “from the masses to the masses” mumbo jumbo, he knew very well that it was not from the peasant masses that the correct strategy and tactics for successful national liberation war came from; it was not from the peasant masses that Five-Year industrialization plans were developed; it was not from the peasants that the vision of socialism came, but from above, from the Party, especially from the leadership, and especially from the Great Helmsman himself. So while he insisted that the cadre “must listen to” the masses, Mao warned at the same time against “an erroneous emphasis on “doing everything as the masses want it done and an accommodation to wrong views existing among the masses.”[103]

Once the CCP had abandoned the urban working class, democracy would no longer be possible. The only way to steer a multi-class mass movement whose basic interests were not in the direction of socialism, was for the substitute proletariat to constitute itself not merely as the political leadership of the struggle but as a *proto-ruling class* over and above the masses.

Even Mark Selden, the most sympathetic historian of the Yan’an period, emphasized that while the Party supported local government elections to win popular support, they were designed to elicit mass *participation* but not democratic control from below. The Party insured that real political power and control remained firmly and exclusively in its hands:

Although the laws stipulated that all anti-Japanese parties were entitled to campaign, there was at the time but one party, the Communist.... This did not eliminate debate, discussion, or criticism, nor did it assure that all candidates elected were party members. Indeed, party branches had not yet been established in large areas of the border region. But it redefined the grounds for discussion: this focused more often on policy *implementation* than on formulation of policy guidelines, and on the performance of individual officials and local issues where there was considerable latitude for maneuvering within established policies. Finally, elected government was never the ultimate authority: rather it was but one facet of New Democratic politics in which power was shared by the party, the bureaucracy, the army, and mass organizations.... The party remained the ultimate arbiter in policy matters.[104]

Unsurprisingly, such built-in elitist practices regularly generated complaints about “commandism” and “bureaucratism” if not yet significant economic corruption – that would come later. But so long as Mao was determined that the substitute proletariat should rule unencumbered, then such tendencies would become endemic and it would be impossible to prevent the party-bureaucracy from morphing into a new ruling class.

The intelligentsia as a class for itself

The Red Army, as Liu Shaoqi described it, was the “crucible” that forged the revolutionary cadre into an independent political force:

More than twenty years of civil war and national war have steeled our Party.... They have had to undergo a stern ideological and organizational schooling and tempering: as a result, their class-consciousness and collective will have been raised and their sense of organization and discipline strengthened.[105]

Decades of guerilla warfare and intense Maoist political indoctrination also forged the substitute proletariat into a revolutionary class for itself, imbued with a vision of its own superiority and

indispensability since it was the font of all “correct ideas.” Indeed, the party-army-bureaucracy had already become the de facto ruling class in the base areas for more than a decade before 1949. As historian Maurice Meisner described it:

The Party emerged from the revolutionary years as a highly disciplined and tightly knit organization with a membership of nearly 5,000,000. Two decades of armed struggle had imparted a military-like discipline to its organization.... Its cadres were not only experienced revolutionary organizers but also experienced governmental administrators - and they possessed a strong sense of national consciousness and purpose. Functioning as a quasi-government long before the formal establishment of the People’s Republic, the Party provided the main organizational base, leadership, and methods of mass organization for the new state.... The pattern was repeated down to the lowest levels of the state structure;.... Between 1949 and 1952 the organizational web of the CCP was woven throughout the fabric of Chinese society....

Although the new political order [the so-called New Democracy] was officially represented as based on an alliance of four social classes and appropriately decorated with “democratic personalities,” the locus of state power resided in the CCP which officially represented itself as the party of the proletariat. Or more accurately, political power rested with the Party’s Central Committee (which had forty-four members in 1949) and more particularly with its 14-member Political Bureau (Politburo); or more precisely still, the levers of state power were in the hands of the five men who made up the latter’s Standing Committee in 1949: Mao Zedong, Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai, Zhu De, and Chen Yun.[106]

Substitute proletariat or substitute bourgeoisie?

In the event, for all its internal contradictions, Mao’s revolution was a stunning triumph. With the end of WWII the Guomindang crumbled and as U.S. patience with Chiang Kai-shek wore out and the U.S. aid was reduced, Mao’s peasant armies swept into the cities with relatively little opposition. His party-army overthrew the old regime, kicked out the last of the imperialists, united the country, wiped out the old gentry landed classes, and initiated forced-march industrialization. Simply put, Mao’s revolution succeeded where the bourgeois revolution of 1912 and the workers revolution of 1925-27 both failed. But instead of socialism, the substitute proletariat installed itself as the new ruling class. “Liberation” abolished old forms of exploitation and oppression to replaced them not with freedom but with new forms of exploitation, oppression, and unfreedom.

Maoism: revision or rejection of Marxism?

Mao claimed to have “revised” Marxism by substituting the peasants for the proletariat. But this both misrepresents and understates his actual accomplishment. Mao did not revise Marxism, he completely abandoned every tenet of Marxism. He kept the useful vocabulary but he rejected Marxist materialism for idealism and voluntarism, rejected workers’ democracy for a dictatorship of the substitute proletariat, rejected proletarian internationalism for ultra-nationalism and Han chauvinism, and rejected workers’ self-emancipation via insurrection for military conquest. His real accomplishment, and originality, was to provide the theoretical framework and political-military strategy for the post-war wave of party-substitutionist revolutions across the Third World, and the rationale for the dictatorship of the substitute proletariat.

[continued in part 4]

Notes

[61] On the social composition of the revolutionary party in the 1920s and 30s see Philip C.C. Huang, "Mao and the Middle Peasants, 1925-1928", *Modern China* (July 1975) pp. 271- 296; and idem, "Intellectuals, lumpenproletarians, workers and peasants in the Communist movement," in Philip C.C. Huang, Lynda Schafer Bell and Kathy Lemons Walker, *Chinese Communists and Rural Society 1927-1934* (Berkeley: Center for Chinese Studies, 1978), pp. 5-28. Also Mao, "The Chinese revolution and the Chinese Communist Party," (1939).

[62] "Decision of the CC on the absorption of intellectual elements (December 1, 1939)", Conrad Brandt, Benjamin Schwartz, and John K. Fairbank eds., *A Documentary History of Chinese Communism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1952), 349; Mao Zedong, "Recruit large numbers of intellectuals."

[63] Julia Lovell, *Maoism: A Global History* (London: The Bodley Head, 2019), chapter 2.

[64] Lovell, *Maoism*, 61-62.

[65] Lovell, *Maoism*, 62.

[66] See David Bandurski, "The May 4th Movement: How China buried 'Mr. Democracy,'" *Hong Kong Free Press*, May 4, 2020.

[67] Dai Qing, *Wang Shiwei and "Wild Lilies"* (London, M.E. Sharpe, 1994), 10.

[68] Jung Chang and John Halliday, *Mao, The Unknown Story* (New York: Anchor, 2005), 234-35.

[69] Gao, *Red Sun*, 343; Frank Dikötter, *The Tragedy of Liberation* (New York: 2013), 174.

[70] Gao, *Red Sun*, 344-47, 369.

[71] Gao, *Red Sun*, 179, 279.

[72] Gao, *Red Sun*, 300-301, 318.

[73] Gao, *Red Sun*, 240. 303-308,

[74] Gao, *Red Sun*, 273-277.

[75] Mao, "On correcting mistaken ideas in the Party" (December 1929); Compton, *Reform Documents*, xli.

[76] Gao, *Red Sun*, 347.

[77] Gao, *Red Sun*, 343; Dai Qing, *Wang Shiwei*, 15-16; Gregor Benton and Alan Hunter, *Wild Lily, Prairie Fire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), Introduction.

[78] Ai Weiwei, *1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows* (London: Bodley Head, 2021), 79.

[79] Ai, *1000 Years*, 79.

[80] Dai, *Wang Shiwei*, 3.

[81] Gao, *Red Sun*, 20, and 10-30; and Lovell, *Maoism*, 76-77.

[82] Gao, *Red Sun*, 23-24. Regarding the extraction of those confessions through torture, Gao quotes General Xiao Ke who states in his 1982 memoir that “Even half a century later, one can only sigh in grief. Those of us who experienced this still cannot bear to recall it” (p. 24). In 1982 the Party admitted that the charges were fabricated and that there never was any Anti-Bolshevik League.

[83] See Gao, *Red Sun*, 477-482.

[84] Boyd, *Reform Documents*; Constitution of the Chinese Communist Party, June 11, 1945, in Conrad Brandt et al., *A Documentary History of Chinese Communism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1952) 419-39; “Resolution On Certain Questions In The History Of Our Party,” adopted on April 20, 1945 by the Enlarged Seventh Plenary of the Sixth Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party.

[85] David E. Apter and Tony Saich, *Revolutionary Discourse in Mao’s Republic* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1994) Appendix; Gao, *Red Sun*, 221-25.

[86] Gao, *Red Sun*, 224.

[87] Benjamin Yang, *From Revolution to Politics: Chinese Communists on the Long March* (New York: Westview 1990), 307. Kenneth Lieberthal, *Governing China: From Revolution to Reform* (New York: Norton, 2003), 43-48.

[88] Lian Xi, *Blood Letters* (New York: Basic Books, 2018), 258-59 footnote 40.

[89] Wang, *Mao Zedong Thought*, 73.

[90] On what Mao learned from Stalin’s *History of the CPSU* see Gao, *Red Sun*, 199-203. On copying Stalin’s organization structure see Boyd Compton, *Mao’s China Party Reform Documents 1942-1944* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1952), xl-xlii.

[91] Cheng, *Creating the “New Man”: From Enlightenment Ideals to Socialist Realities* (Univ. of Hawaii Press, 2009), 49.

[92] Cheng, *Creating the “New Man,”* 59-70.

[93] Jerome Chen, *Mao Papers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 11; Cheng, 61-62.

[94] Mao, “The role of the Chinese Communist Party in the national war,” (1938).

[95] Xi Jinping, “How to measure up as a party member in the New Era?” *People’s Daily*, June 30, 2020, trans. by David Cowhig.

[96] Peter J. Seybolt, “Terror and conformity,” *Modern China*, 12.1 (January 1986), 45.

[97] Seybolt, “Terror,” 46-47. See also the biography of one such student, in Lian Xi, *Blood Letters*.

[98] Selden, *The Yanan Way in Revolutionary China* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1971).

[99] Mao, “The role of the CCP in the national war” (1938).

[100] Mao, “Some questions concerning methods of leadership,” SW III.

[101] Jack Gray and Patrick Cavendish, *Chinese Communism in Crisis: Maoism and the Cultural Revolution* (New York: Praeger, 1968), 49-50. Selden, *Yenan Way*, 274-276 and passim.

[102] "Mass Line," in Christian Sorace et al., *Afterlives of Chinese Communism* (Verso: 2019), 121-22.

[103] Mao, *Selected Works* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1977) 4, 197.

[104] Selden, *Yenan Way*, 135 (*italics in original*).

[106] Meisner, *Mao's China and After* (New York: Free Press, 1977), 63-64.