

# Mao's revolution: a Marxist mode of production reinterpretation

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How is the left to understand China today? How did a communist party that was once overwhelmingly comprised of proletarians (60 % workers in 1926) and in the mid-1920s led the largest workers' and peasants' revolt in history, end up installing a Stalinist totalitarian police state that, under Mao, worked and starved to death 30 to 45 million of the same peasants that powered the party to victory in 1949, then under Deng, sold hundreds of millions of China's workers to foreign capitalists at the world's lowest, Industrial Revolution era, wages?

## **The maoist myth of Chinese socialism**

My approach rejects the standard theoretical framework and historical narrative that has shaped discourse about the nature of the Chinese revolution since the 1950s and is taken for granted by Maoist politicians and most China scholars regardless of their attitudes to Mao and the communists – namely that Mao's revolution installed a socialism of sorts, and Deng Xiaoping restored capitalism. In this view, Mao's China was socialist despite its contradictions and disasters because his revolution abolished capitalism and private property, nationalized the economy, replaced the market with central planning, liberated women, introduced the "iron rice bowl" job guarantees, free medical care, free schooling, and cradle-to-grave state-provided social services. By contrast, Deng Xiaoping and his successors re-introduced the market, broke the "iron rice bowl" job guarantees, privatized housing, medical care, schooling beyond middle school; invited foreign capitalists to ruthlessly exploit Chinese migrant workers, and promoted the

development of domestic capitalists, even inviting them to join the Communist Party.

I maintain that China was neither socialist under Mao nor has become fully capitalist since Deng. As to socialism:

### **About socialism**

#### ***Nationalization isn't necessarily socialist.***

Under Mao, the party-state nationalized all the land and natural resources, and the entire economy. This all became the exclusive property of the party-state. Ordinary Chinese owned nothing, had no say in any of this.

#### ***Economic planning isn't necessarily socialist***

It depends on planning for whom for whom. In China planning always been planning by bureaucracy for the bureaucracy. Again, the masses of ordinary Chinese have always been completely shut out of this process. They have no say or rights with respect to what gets produced or not.

#### ***"Iron rice bowl" job guarantees weren't necessarily socialist either***

Under Mao, workers had the "right" to a state job not because China was socialist but because Mao sought to maximize economic growth by maximizing labor inputs so he needed all hands on deck. In fact they had no right not to work. Under Mao, the state provided industrial workers with jobs, housing, schooling, medical care, and modest retirement benefits because without a market there was no other way for people to access such services. But workers lived their entire lives in conditions of unfreedom. The party-state controlled every aspect of their lives.

They had no private lives. Under Mao, the country was the world's largest open-air prison, sprinkled with forced-labor gulags where millions languished – like Stalin's Russia, which Mao modeled China after.

***Likewise, Mao liberated women but only to make them work***

Their entire lives were out of their control: China's women were coerced to have children under Mao (birth control was suppressed by Mao), were coerced not to have children under Deng Xiaoping's "one-child policy," and under Xi they're being pressured to become baby-making machines again. Women never had any say in any of this and have always been systematically discriminated against in the party and government since Mao's day. Today, the 24 -member CCP Politburo has zero women. Of the 205 members of the Central Committee, barely 5 % are women. In the sexist capitalist USA, 10 % of Fortune Five Hundred CEOs are women, too small a number, but twice as many as in "socialist" China.

***Deng's market reform and opening introduced plenty of capitalism but capitalism has never been fully restored in China***

Private property has never been restored, and the old Stalinist state-owned state-planned economy is still dominant. As chief economic planner Chen Yun put it back in the 1980s, we need some capitalism but we keep it "like a bird in a cage." China is neither fully capitalist nor fully Stalinist. It's a hybrid marketized Stalinism, a kind of communist capitalism or capitalist communism. In forty-five years of market reform, China has never missed a Five-Year Plan. What capitalist economy operates on Five-Year Plans?

***In his Civil War in France, his book about the Paris Commune, Marx observed the Communard's self-emancipation, their workers' democracy, their elections of representatives by universal suffrage with representatives paid at ordinary workman's wages and subject to recall by the citizenry – and declared that "That's socialism"***

That's my definition as well and it was also the vision of the chief founder of the Chinese Communist Party, Chen Duxiu<sup>1</sup>.

As a Marxist, the Maoist just-so story never made sense to me. In my experience the ideological framework of Maoism has posed an insuperable barrier to understanding the nature of the Chinese revolution and the regime it installed.

First, it fails to grasp the theoretical originality and non-Marxist character of Mao's party-substitutionist "new class" revolution.

Second, Maoist theory has no capacity to explain the historical contradictions of the system Mao installed because if China was socialist then its horrors were inexplicable.

Thirdly belief in this theory has obliged Maoist China scholars and ideologues to defend (or ignore) indefensible, even criminal practices by the Chinese regime that are blindingly obvious and defy any common-sense definition of socialism.

Fourthly, Maoist theory equally fails to explain why, if Deng Xiaoping and his market reformer successors were "restoring capitalism," have they systematically subverted their own market reforms precisely to prevent the wholesale restoration of capitalism?

In short, the Maoist theoretical framework is not just useless, it's led scholars and Maoist leftists to produce empirically untenable analyses, write shelves full of nonsensical books, and proffer morally indefensible apologetics for China that, like an earlier generation of Western apologists for Stalin's crimes, have only further discredited the very idea of socialism.

So how did Maoism come to dominate Western discourse and China studies despite its manifest contradictions and inadequacies? At least four reasons come to mind.

*First, Marxism never had deep roots in China.* China's commercial and industrial proletariat in the early 20th century was quite small and China had no tradition of Social Democracy or revolutionary socialist politics. Early 20th century radicals were more attracted to anarchism than Marxism because Marx's focus on the industrial working class

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1. Publisher's Note. Chen Duxiu (1879-1942) was one of the founders of the Chinese Communist Party. He was expelled from the party in 1927 and joined the International Left Opposition.

seemed irrelevant in the Chinese context. Indeed, the founders of the Communist Party in 1921 were inspired by the Bolshevik revolution but most had little if any knowledge of Marxism when they founded the Party. They converted to communism before they had read Marx and most never became Marxists at all. They became Stalinists and Maoists or were driven out of the Party in the late 1920s and 30s.

*Secondly, China's totalitarian police state has been far more effective in completely crushing dissent and erasing virtually all historical memory of non-Maoist currents - the Trotskyists, the Tiananmen democracy activists, the Charter '082 movement and others - than Soviet and East European Stalinist rulers. Mao and his henchmen like Kang Sheng murdered hundreds of Chinese Trotskyists during the 1930s and 40s and in 1952 locked up the last thousand of them for decades, extinguishing the last active alternative socialist political pole of attraction beyond Maoism. There was never space in China for dissidents, samizdat, or a Marxist underground such as the Workers Defense Committee KOR that developed in Poland from 1976 to promote worker self-organization and politicize their movement which ultimately gave rise to the Solidarność trade union in 1981. China's own would-be Marxist theoreticians, socialist labor organizers, and socialist revolutionaries such as 1970s-era Trotskyists and democracy activists Chen Erjin, Wang Xizhe, Wei Jingsheng, Tiananmen and Charter '08 democracy advocates including Liu Xiaobo, have all been ruthlessly crushed, murdered, locked away in prisons or labor camps for decades, driven into exile, and forgotten in China. Today, Xi Jinping talks up Marxism all the time. But when Beijing University students took him seriously and initiated study groups to read Marx, they were arrested and disappeared. As a result, since the 1940s all legitimate political discourse in China has been constrained within the Maoist framework. Today, China's censors have to be taught some of this history because growing up behind*

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2. Publisher's Note. Published in 2008, the charter declared its support for democracy in the People's Republic of China. It has been signed by more than 5,000 people. One of its authors, Liu Xiaobo, was imprisoned from 2009 to 2017,



the Great Firewall, they had never heard of Trotsky or Chen Duxiu or Wei Jingsheng or Liu Xiaobo or Fang Zhi Li or the Tiananmen democracy protests. Without instruction, they would not know to censor those names and events.

*Thirdly, there has been nothing in China studies to compare with the debate around the "new class" theories of Russia and the East European Stalinist regimes advanced by Bruno Rizzi, The Bureaucratization of the World, Milovan Djilas The New Class, Michael Voslensky, Nomenklatura, Konrad and Szelényi, Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power, Max Schachtman, The Bureaucratic Revolution, and others.* There are no such equivalents in China or even in Western China studies. In the brief opening in the late 1970s after Mao died, Chinese leftists and democracy activists such as Chen Erjin and Wei Jingsheng did advance some rudimentary theses arguing that the CCP had become a new "social fascist" or "totalitarian fascist" ruling class. But they were soon locked up and forgotten in the *People's Republic of Amnesia* (title of Louisa Lim's book).

*Fourthly, and closely related to the last point, the left wing of Western China studies was founded by a cohort of young anti-war, Cultural Revolution-infatuated graduate students and young professors in the 1960s and 70s who idealized China and Vietnam in response to U.S. imperialism in Southeast Asia.* They were liberal anti-imperialists, not Marxists, romantic third worldists who worshiped the Red Sun. As Orville Schell recalls "We were in love with China." As Maoist professors, those scholars misled generations of students with a delusional ahistorical fabulist vision of Mao's China. I know, I sat in their classes.

The net result of the foregoing is that, while there are important Trotskyist interpretations by Livio Maitan and Au-Loong Yu, and state-capitalist expositions by Tony Cliff (Ygael Gluckstein) and Nigel Harris, there are no "new class" theorizations of China either in China or the West. My book-in-progress aims to partially redress that lacuna by presenting a bureaucratic collectivist theorization of Mao's party-substitutionist revolution, as a new class revolution that installed a new class system with its own built-in tendencies

and contradictions which are neither capitalist nor socialist.

### **My argument in brief**

The title of my book in progress is *The Triumph and Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution*. The triumph was that Mao's revolution succeeded where the bourgeois revolution of 1912 failed and the workers' revolution of 1925-27 was crushed by Chiang Kai-shek. The tragedy was that Mao's party-substitutionist revolution was a Stalinist-nationalist revolution, not a socialist revolution. It installed the party-army-bureaucracy as a bureaucratic collectivist ruling class modeled on Stalin's USSR, and proceeded to try to build socialism in one even more backward country by exploiting its own peasants and workers.

Mao was first and foremost an ethno-nationalist in the tradition of China's nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century 'self-strengtheners'. From Sun Yat-sen to Mao, Deng Xiaoping, and Xi, China's leaders have all been obsessed with one overarching goal: to overcome China's "century of humiliation", achieve "wealth and power," and "overtake the West" to reclaim what they imagine is China's deserved pride of place as the premier civilization and culture in world history.

Yes, he was also a socialist -- but not a Marxist. Instead, he was a latter-day pre-Marxian utopian "socialism-from-above" kind of socialist. His socialism drew not from the working class, democratic, self-emancipation "socialism from below" ideas of Marx and Engels exemplified by the Paris Commune and the Russian Soviets, but from the pre-Marxian "socialism-from-above" ideas of the utopian socialists, anarchists, and agrarian populists. This was the socialism of self-appointed elites, convinced that they alone possessed the "correct" vision and strategy to create and run a socialist society, so they should rule as beneficent dictators dispensing socialism to the benighted masses. Like the Babouvistes who wanted to set up a well-intentioned "educational dictatorship," like Joseph Proudhon who imagined himself a beneficent "manager-in-chief" ruling a society where trade unions, universal suffrage, constitutions and the like, were all banned. Like Mikhail Bakunin for whom the realm of "absolute freedom"

was to be found in absolute conformity to Bakunin's own "invisible dictatorship" – virtually the model for Mao's own ultra-authoritarian "anti-bureaucratic" "Cultural Revolution." And like Alexander Herzen who claimed that "the advantages of backwardness" could enable agrarian nations to "skip over historical stages" and "pure" peasants could lead Russia to an idyllic rural socialism bypassing the horrors of Western capitalism. Mao repurposed Herzen's idealist vision with his doctrine of socialist construction by means of mind over matter, "red over expert," the power of human will, etc. Mao did not "revise" Marxism. He was a latter-day pre-Marxian utopian socialist.

Mao's theory of party-substitutionist-led peasant revolution proved adequate to lead the first successful peasant-based social and national liberation revolution and provided the model for the entire wave of third world revolutions from the end of WWII through the 1970s. But for all their years of guerilla-war "plain living and hard struggle" nowhere did a single 'substitute proletariat' install any kind of workers' government, any kind of socialist government, or any democracy. Instead, in every case, the petty bourgeois intelligentsia revolutionaries developed their own "new-class" interests which were nationalist,

bureaucratic, autocratic, anti-democratic, and they installed themselves at the head of new class societies: either Stalinist as in Yugoslavia, North Korea, Vietnam, etc. or one-party (or even one-man) dictatorships with capitalist or state-capitalist economies as in Algeria, Mozambique, Angola, Zimbabwe etc.

Furthermore, their strategy of socialism from above, led by self-styled omniscient "savior dictators" like Mao, was doomed from the start in China and everywhere else. In

China, the prototypical case, Mao's overriding priority was to "catch up and overtake the West" by means of forced-march self-industrialization, and this could only be financed by decades of coercive surplus extraction from China's workers and peasants which in turn could only be enforced by a dictatorship that crushed worker struggles for trade unions and all struggles for democracy.

Seen in this light, when Mao's revolution is understood for what it really was – a revolution of, by and for the Stalinist "new-class" party-army-bureaucracy that seized power and installed a totalitarian police state and bureaucratic collectivist economy, then the apparent contradictions of the system vanish.

