

THOSE THINGS WE WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT CHINA AND THOSE WE DIDN'T

It is not controversial to say that there is so much material available on China that no one individual (or group of individuals) could make themselves acquainted with all of it. Even so, this is not enough to explain the extreme bias that all political groups demonstrate in their selection of what they think important in China. This is not a sociological investigation - so I won't look at how other political tendencies distort through biased selection what happens in China; I will concentrate on what I take to be major omissions in BF's selection of events - omissions that I think help to explain why we were so unprepared for the 'degeneration' of the Chinese revolutionary process.

SEXUAL FREEDOM

It is well known by now that a very oppressive sexual puritanism is the norm in China - this puritanism has been propagated by the Chinese CP as a method of population control. Contraceptives which exist in China are however only distributed to married people (like the South of Ireland) and there are very strong moral pressures put on people not to marry early and to wait before they have children. In fact, 'moral pressures' is an incorrect way of putting it since you can't get married without the Party's permission - you can't get housing, a job, food ration tickets etc. What is quite surprising is the number of Western feminists (e.g. Broyelle, Davin, Kristeva etc) who have written books about the position of women in Communist China and not seemed too bothered about this puritanism and sexual oppression. This is quite surprising given that they certainly would not be so lenient in their judgement of women's role in Western democracies or even countries like Iran. Why is this?

Double Standards

When asked about this seeming double standard, Kristeva's reply was; '...It's my view that in China the history of communism is the history of women's emancipation, even if this emancipation was also a recuperation of women's labour force. For a woman who had her feet bound and was coming out of feudalism, that means 400 million women, communism was an important awakening.

I think one must enter into Chinese history and not ask it our questions on sexual freedom, on the free individual..... Chinese society does not necessarily operate with these notions.,' Leaving aside the fact that capitalism would also have gotten rid of bound feet, it is important to grasp the imperialistic nature of such statements - what is being said is that ideas that we consider essential for our lives (e.g. sexual freedom) are a luxury that other people can do without. And of course, these judgements are always made without asking the people they are about. And from the many 'dissident' accounts on life in China that circulate, it is quite clear that many men and women are rebelling in their everyday lives against this moral puritanism. It is not that Chinese people do not have these 'notions'; it is that the Party has made them illegal. Pasqualini whose book 'Prisoner of Mao' is a disturbing skeleton on the Maoist cupboard, has this to say about the treatment of sexual 'delinquents';

'In China, crimes against the moral order are not treated lightly. In socialist countries in general but even more so in China, deviations from the norm are neither appreciated nor considered acceptable.

The reasoning is simple - those who do not behave like normal people must be punished for the purification of society. After the revolution, many male opera singers were arrested because some of their rôles had been as women. Sodomy and rape can be punished with death. Women get a five year prison sentence for pre or extra-marital relations. A married man who seduces a married woman gets 10 years....Lesbianism has always been infrequent in China, but homosexuality, which used to be very widespread, is no longer tolerated.'

JUSTICE

If it is true that the Party has a very large control over the lives of individuals in China through its control of jobs, housing, rationing - another facet of control is through the administration of justice. We have a very idealised vision of 'popular justice' in China with its peoples courts, struggle sessions. During the Cultural Revolution when the Red Guards were encouraged to 'bombard the head-quarters' and 'weed out the capitalist roaders' some pretty rough and ready justice was dispensed - there were many public executions and plenty of people disappeared. In more normal times, the administration of justice is very closely tied to the needs of the party. In the first place, the accused is presumed to be guilty. When members of the legal profession suggested that it should be the other way round - that the accused should be presumed innocent, the Party replied that this would be to put the interests of the accused before those of the people - it would be to 'protect the guilty from the punishment that awaits them and to restrict the judiciary organs and the masses in their struggle against counter-revolutionaries and other criminal elements'.*

Peoples lawyers have disappeared from circulation since apparently the masses are so well versed about the law that they don't need lawyers to defend them. In fact, there is a lot of unclarity about the laws and what happens in cases where there is no written law is that 'it is dealt with according to the line of the Party'. Judges and lawyers have demanded written laws - Chou en-lai's answer was;

'it is difficult to draw up civil and criminal codes of justice before the socialist transformation of the ownership of the means of production has been completed. In these circumstances, it is only necessary to elaborate provisional rules.'

And if starry-eyed China visitors have come back with the impression that China is not a heavily policed society, it is because they have not looked properly. Edgar Snow, who certainly cannot be accused of being anti-Maoist, makes the point that 'the Party, its satellites and security commissions are infiltrated throughout society'. In work-places, cadre-managers are in charge of committees of the people's security that have a constant surveillance function. Street committees are another form of surveillance. According to Snow 'these committees keep order, get involved in discussions, and are authorised to alter the thoughts of individuals. They are involved in collecting information for the census and keep files on every family'. Snow concludes that China 'is a very well patrolled society from the interior.'**

For those who are convicted of crimes, a stay in a labour camp is the norm. A recently published report by Amnesty (Political Imprisonment in the People's Republic of China) makes it clear that conditions in the camps are harsh - so harsh as to make the goal of re-education very difficult to attain. Estimates of the population of the camps vary from 1 to 4 millions - whatever the numbers it is quite clear that the camps have important ideological and economic functions. Snow writes; 'the camps are evidence of the deep inter-gration of the prison system with the needs of production and the ceaseless campaign to make the wills of individuals serve the aims of the regime. And it is often the case that after serving their sentence prisoners find it difficult to leave the camp - since the labour camps are situated in areas where the regime is short of labour power. A Minister of Justice explains the problem this way;

'Not only do we avoid for criminals who have served their time the problem of finding a job, but at the same time we diminish the problems the

* Quoted in Shao Chuan-leng 'Justice in Communist China'.

** from Snow's 'The Long Revolution'

the state is having in dealing with the problem of unemployment. As well, it makes sure that criminals who have served their time and who cannot get together the means of subsistence don't lapse into crime again.'

No doubt it is true that China is a less repressive regime than the U.S.S.R. - certainly the function of labour camps is nowhere near what it was during Stalin's rule. Even so, given the very fundamental erosions of personal freedoms that exist in China, the silence of the revolutionary left of Western democracies is surprising.

THE PROBLEM OF THE YOUNG EDUCATED

One of the aspects of the Cultural Revolution that impressed us the most was the attempt during it to break down the division between mental and manual labour, between town and countryside. No doubt many good things were done around this aim - e.g. the workers who were sent from their workplaces to universities etc. On the other hand, the principle was used to force hundreds of thousands of 'young educated' (those who had been to higher education) to leave the cities and go and live in agricultural areas. Young people were forced to go wherever the Party sent them since once they have been excluded from the cities they cannot work in them, get housing, food rations etc. So many discontented 'young educated' were sent to the countryside that they have become an important social movement in China. Many of them have risked their life swimming to Hong Kong *, others have collectively protested in the cities to be allowed the right to return to live there and it is young educated's who have been leading the current wall-poster campaign for socialist democracy and a proper legal system.** The young educateds who have escaped to Hong Kong have written books about their experiences. From their writings, it is apparent that their forced migration usually did not work out well - they did not integrate into the rural societies they were sent to. Speaking of their own experiences, the young educated write;

'That the lot of the young educated was not a happy one was recognised by the authorities; the central committee took the matter up. Already in 1965, documents were published which insisted that the rape and forced marriage of young educateds were severely punished.

The young educateds were sacrificed. Of course, for political reasons; the Cultural Revolution used the youth. When the youth were considered to be out of control, they were deported. And I believe that's how the Chinese experienced what was happening; because it's nothing new in our history. Long ago, our rulers sent criminals to work the land in the border countries.'

'And at the same time, the sending of the young educated to the countryside was a cheap solution to economic problems. Wasn't the official reason for the operation 'a better distribution of the population'? In Canton, it was the office for the reduction of urban population that was in charge of the operation. What was going on? There was a problem of employment. If industry is not growing fast it cannot absorb all the people looking for jobs in the cities.....'

It could be argued that there were problems of knowing about the oppression of the young educated. And it is true that we have been criminally misinformed by the endless 'observers' who after a trip to China in which they saw what the party wanted them to see, have written glowing inaccurate accounts of what life is like in China. But it is also true that we made sure that we found out what we wanted to find out about China. The knowledge that in China the division between mental and manual

* from where they publish 'Yellow River' an important journal

** in 1974, Li Zhengtia and two other young educateds wrote the famous 40,000 word wall-poster 'Chinese people, if you only knew' which attacked the gang of four and demanded democracy. Li Zhengtia was sent to a labour camp. He was recently released as the result of a vast wall-poster campaign that pointed out that he had been quite correct to attack the gang of four - his crime was to have done it too soon.

labour was being broken down played an important psychological role in re-inforcing our belief that somewhere socialism was being built - not surprisingly we didn't look too carefully for evidence that suggested that the process was not as smooth as all that. There is a sense in which we were making what was happening in China fit certain pre-concieved ideas we had - we weren't all that interested in checking the reality of the situation. Yu Xue, an ex-Red Guard who fled China by swimming to Hong Kong, is well aware of this attitude to what happens in China;

'When one talks about China, you must begin by a sincere understanding of its people. To understand China, you must first understand the people who live there, how they live their life, how they think and how they feel things. Chinese are human beings, and they must be understood to be so. I insist on this point, since they are many who make statements on China, but who only see Chinese as 'objects of research' or even as 'reflections of their fantasies'. They say - isn't the Chinese system fantastic? There is, of course, no freedom of speech, of thought nor of literary expression, but the Chinese don't need these things! Thus, for these observers, Chinese are rather special people, 'useful men' specially destined to make or build this or that. Or they take them to be 'superman'. For these observers, the Chinese can be anything but human beings like themselves. This attitude is an insult to Chinese people. I have spent my whole youth in China and I know the life of the workers and peasants there. They have needs, wishes and desires like any other peasants and workers - not withstanding the political power of the current regime. '

LIFE IS MORE THAN A MODE OF PRODUCTION

I have looked at sexual freedom, justice and migration to the countryside as an alternative to looking at China from the perspective of the question whether its mode of production is socialist, state collectivist or state capitalist. No doubt the latter is an important question, but over-concentrating on it leads to analysing China at a level of abstraction that tends to diverge from Chinese reality. It leads to relying on government slogans and statements by Chinese political leaders as a shortcut to understanding what life is like in China. Take the exemple of the 'radicals' (the 'gang of four') and the events in T'ien-an-men Square after the death of Chou. The 'gang of four' are considered to be radicals by some western Maoists - yet it was they who repressed a popular demostartion of the masses; who went to mourn Chou. Again it was these so-called radicals who banned operas and books, who forced the youth to the countryside and who during the Cultural Revolution attacked the left-wing 16th May movement. If you judge the 'gang of four' by their statements, they were radical - their deeds were authoritarian and repressive.

There is a great danger that over concentration on the concept 'mode of production' means that you over-emphsize economic relations - a distortion common to many Marxist interpretations. As Mao himself said;

'.....it seems that democracy is an end, but in reality, it is only a means.....Democracy is part of the superstructure,....it is in the realm of the political.'*

In the communism we want to build there cannot be a separation between democracy and relations of production - the presence or absence of democracy fundamentally affects relations of production. For there to be working class control of production, distribution and social relations in general, there must exist forms of proletarian democracy. Traditionally, in situations where the working class (as opposed to a Party acting in the name of the working class) has seized power, it has set up institutions along the lines of workers councils and soviets. The argument put forward by the Chinese CP is that the State and the Party are

*From 'On the Correct Handling of the Contradictions Amongst the People'.

the organs through which the dictatorship of the proletariat is exercised. In fact, it is clear that the higher up one goes in instances of decision making in China, the more it is the Party and not the people who decide.

The current wall-poster campaign makes it clear than many Chinese have seen through the sham 'participation schemes' they have been invited to participate in - they want the power to make real decisions. However, it is unclear how much their ability to protest relies on the existence of conflict amongst the leadership of the Chinese CP. Deng has used the aspirations of the masses for democracy in his factional struggle to smash the gang of four, and their followers. Now that he no longer needs this mass support - will he be able to defuse it?

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THINGS TO READ

To be added to the list at the end of Gwen Daniels paper;

- Pasqualini 'Prisoner of Mao'.
- Claudie and Jack Broyelle 'China - The Second Visit' to be published in May by Harvester. An important book by two ex-Maoists who reflect on the causes of their prejudice and blindness.
- The recent Amnesty report on political imprisonment in China.