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On “Liberation”

When the editor asked me along with other ex-editors to offer some thoughts on the occasion of the *CQ*'s 50th anniversary, I was at a loss. At the celebration which David Shambaugh held for the 35th anniversary in 1995, I wrote fairly extensively about the founding and early development of the journal and did not have much to add. So I made the suggestion that I should reprise a special feature of *CQ* 1. For that founding issue, I solicited a number of senior sinologues to give their appraisal of the PRC on the occasion of its 10th anniversary. Could I, now senior, be given a similar opportunity to look back at the founding of the PRC on the occasion of its 60th anniversary? This article is the consequence of the editor's kind agreement.

The Chinese Communists, CCP, refer to their victory in 1949 as the “Liberation,” and it's good shorthand for that event. But after 60 years, a cycle of Cathay, it is an appropriate time to consider the validity of that term in the light of events that followed that victory.¹

"Liberation" officially meant lifting the three great burdens off the backs of the Chinese people: imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucrat-capitalism, and "their general representative, the reactionary Kuomintang government,"² as Mao put it on September 21, 1949 in his speech entitled "The Chinese people have stood up." Imperialism had in fact mostly disappeared some years before the Communist victory, and the British were pleasantly surprised that the process was not completed with a takeover of Hong Kong. Taking the term feudalism to mean the

¹ Longer versions of this article were delivered in conferences in Hong Kong and Shanghai and in a speech at Claremont McKenna College earlier this year.

² Opening address to the 1st plenum of the CPPCC, Sept. 21, 1949; *Selected Works of Mao Tsetung* (Beijing: FLP, Vol. 5, 1977), p. 16.

traditional Confucian social system, hierarchical and patriarchal, that did still exist, and indeed, despite all the Chairman's efforts, much of it survived him and flourishes in the countryside in the reform era.

As for bureaucrat-capitalism, big business, especially firms with foreign connections and close ties to the KMT regime, this simply referred to those proprietors who had fled to Taiwan or Hong Kong. Those who stayed in China could be classified as national, i.e. patriotic, capitalists by the CCP, whatever their previous connections or activities, as Premier Zhou Enlai's explained frankly to one self-confessed and worried "comprador bureaucratic capitalist."³

What was certainly true in Mao's litany was that the "reactionary Kuomintang government" had been soundly beaten. What October 1 marked was not a revolution, but victory in a Civil War. The revolution followed the victory.

After a horrendous century of foreign invasions, domestic rebellions and warlordism, the CCP triumph had brought the enormous boon of peace and unity. For the first time since the Opium War, the Chinese had a strong central government in place. The hitherto hobbled search for wealth and power could resume as the revolution began. And at least partial liberation might have been achieved had Mao kept the promise of "New Democracy."

The ideas of New Democracy were delivered in a speech by Mao on January 9, 1940, a desperate time for China in general and the CCP in particular. The anti-Japanese United Front between the CCP and the KMT was being undermined by Nationalist pressure on Communist base areas and clashes between military units of their respective armies. So in "New Democracy," Mao began trying to construct a different united front by appealing to China's notional "third

³ See Sherman Cochran, "Capitalists choosing Communist China: The Liu family of Shanghai, 1948-56," in Jeremy Brown & Paul. G. Pickowicz (eds), *Dilemmas of Victory: the Early Years of the People's Republic of China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), p.370.

force," principally intellectuals who had chosen neutrality between the main contenders for power in China and formed a few parties of their own.⁴

According to Mao, the historical characteristic of the Chinese revolution was that it was part of the world revolution, but that it would be divided into two phases, democracy followed by socialism, and that the democratic stage would be of a new and special type, "New Democracy." Its task would be to change the colonial, semicolonial, and semi-feudal form of society into an independent democratic society. China was currently in this first phase.⁵ With the formation of the CCP in July 1921, the proletariat had joined the bourgeoisie in leadership of this revolution. But the big bourgeoisie, Mao said, was "extremely flabby economically and politically, and it also has another quality--namely, a proneness to compromise with the enemies of the revolution."⁶ Under these circumstances it would be welcomed in the revolutionary ranks, but the proletariat, the peasantry, and the petty bourgeoisie, notably the intellectuals, would constitute the basic forces in a future democratic Chinese republic. An important part of the appeal of New Democracy to members of the third force was supposed to be the distinction which Mao drew between Soviet proletarian dictatorship and China's future dictatorship of several revolutionary classes, though this distinction would turn out to be illusory in practice.⁷

⁴ For a discussion of the Chinese situation in which Mao gave birth to "New Democracy," see the introduction to Stuart R. Schram (Ed.), *Mao's Road to Power: Revolutionary Writings 1912-1949, Vol. VII: New Democracy, 1939-1941* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2005), pp. xxxvii-lxxxii. For the United Front, see Lyman P. Van Slyke, *Enemies and Friends: The United Front in Chinese Communist History* (Stanford University Press, 1967).

⁵ Schram, op.cit., p. 333.

⁶ Ibid., p. 338-339.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 342-3.

Nevertheless, for businessmen, and peasants, too, if they were listening, New Democracy held out attractive promises for the economy. Mao reiterated the words of the 1924 KMT manifesto, blessed by Sun Yat-sen, which undertook to nationalise major banks and industrial and commercial enterprises. But Mao went on to say that the new democratic republic "will neither confiscate capitalist private property in general nor forbid the development of such capitalist production as it does not 'dominate the livelihood of the people,' for China's economy is still very backward." Mao asserted that the new state would introduce land reform, confiscating the property of big landlords and giving it to poor peasants, in line with Sun Yat-sen's slogan of "Land to the tiller." But it would, he said, "turn the land over to the private ownership of the peasants without establishing a socialist agriculture. A rich peasant economy will be allowed in the rural areas."⁸

In view of future events, New Democracy might be considered a bogus prospectus promulgated by a deceitful political entrepreneur *in extremis*. Yet for a few years after 1949, New Democracy still seemed to be in place. Mao was understandably obsessed with the importance of ensuring that production was maintained in town and country after the CCP victory. In March 1949, he still saw the way ahead in terms of the first New Democratic phase of the revolution. "Our agriculture and handicrafts are still scattered and individual, somewhat as they were in ancient times, and they will remain so for a fairly long time to come. Whoever overlooks or belittles this point will commit 'Left' opportunist mistakes." Turning to industry, he asserted that anyone who advocated "too much or too rigid restriction of private capital or holds that we can

⁸ Ibid., p. 343.

simply eliminate private capital very quickly, is also entirely wrong; this a 'Left' opportunist or adventurist view.”⁹

In a report circulated within the party later in the year, Mao's heir apparent Liu Shaoqi also warned against "adventurism" and explained: "This means going beyond realistic limits in drawing up economic plans and measures by trying to bring in too many socialist measures too early and without preparation. This can lead to forfeiting the support of our Party by the peasants and small producers, thus undermining the alliance between the urban proletariat and the peasants and courting the failure of the new democratic political regime led by the proletariat.”¹⁰

Liu maintained his support for the New Democratic order into the early 1950s. In July 1951, he condemned attempts to undermine the basis of family farming and move into agricultural cooperatives as "mistaken, dangerous and utopian agrarian socialist thinking." As late as October 1952, he was explaining to Stalin that it would be in 10 to 15 years that the party hoped to move the peasants into cooperatives or collective farms, a timeline which Stalin approved.¹¹ But by the autumn of 1952, Mao had changed his mind and was ready to discard his brainchild, New Democracy, and move towards rapid socialisation.¹² Perhaps this was why, when marking the 90th anniversary of Liu Shaoqi's birth in 1988, the onetime chief editor of the

⁹ *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung* (Beijing: FLP, 1961), IV, pp. 367, 368.

¹⁰ *Selected Works of Liu Shaoqi* (Beijing: FLP, 1984), I, p. 428.

¹¹ Lin Yunhui, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo shi*, vol. 2, *Xiang shehuizhuyi guodu, 1953-55* (The transition to socialism, 1953-55) (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2009), pp. 11,50-51.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

official People's Daily, Hu Jiwei, exclaimed: "If there really had been a Liu Shaoqi line, that would have been so good!"¹³ Good for China almost certainly, but not for socialism.

For as ever, Mao's political instinct was better than Liu's. Had New Democracy persisted for 10- 15 years as planned, it would have been extraordinarily difficult and disruptive to launch the socialist phase 2 of the CCP program. New Democracy would have developed and entrenched capitalism.¹⁴ The experience of the last 30 years suggests that it would have brought prosperity much earlier to China, but Mao did not fight for 22 years to preside over a capitalist nation.

So he changed the party line. By June 1952, Mao was criticising phrases like "Firmly establish the new democratic social order" uttered by Liu or Premier Zhou Enlai.¹⁵ But Liu and Zhou followed his lead, partly because he had so often proved correct in the past, and partly because in 1943 they had voted him the right of final decision.¹⁶

The key issue was rural collectivisation. In the summer of 1955, with the prospect of a bountiful harvest, Mao proclaimed that a new socialist mass movement was imminent throughout the countryside and he launched a ferocious attack on party officials who disagreed with him as "tottering along like a woman with bound feet."¹⁷ Mao's speech galvanised rural cadres into a frenzy of activity to prove that *they* were not women with bound feet.

¹³ Ibid., p. 12. During the Cultural Revolution, all the alleged sins and errors of Liu were lumped together as the Liu Shaoqi line.

¹⁴ This view is shared by Professor Lin Yunhui; *ibid.*, pp. 6-8.

¹⁵ *Selected Works of Mao Tsetung*, V, p. 93.

¹⁶ See *Lin Yunhui*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

¹⁷ *Selected Works of Mao Tsetung*, V, p. 184.

By autumn 1955, victory was in sight, and Mao turned his sights on the urban sector. Meetings were held with leading capitalists. Urban cadres turned out to be as dynamic as their rural colleagues. During January 1956, nationalisation or collectivization of all commercial, industrial and handicraft enterprises was achieved in all China's major industrial cities. By the 8th party congress in September 1956, the transition to socialism was basically over. Instead of beginning after 10-15 years, it had been completed in six, and without the catastrophes associated with the same process in the Soviet Union. In addition to Mao's charismatic leadership, the victory was due to the party's authority over the populace, asserted in a series of often bloody campaigns in the early 1950s. The fear generated by these campaigns was an integral part of the socialization process. Thus was the "liberation" of New Democracy, favored by Liu Shaoqi and Zhou Enlai, exchanged for the **Stalinist** straight-jacket ordered by Mao.

Later Mao abandoned the command economy for the tragic experiment of the Great Leap Forward. Later still he undermined the dictatorship of the Leninist-Stalinist party by instigating the chaos of the Cultural Revolution. In the thirty years since the abandonment of Maoist economics and politics, the Chinese have finally achieved the partial liberation promised by New Democracy 60 years ago, and contributors to the *CQ* have chronicled the resulting Chinese economic miracle. The Chinese people must hope that one of the Chairman's most famous sayings applies today: 'The successes are great, the problems are many, but the future is bright.'¹⁸

¹⁸ 'Chengji weida, wenti bu shao, qiantu guangming,' (*Mao Zedong sixiang wan sui* (1967), p. 261