

The road to capitalist restoration in the People's Republic of China

Part 2: Mao Zedong's suppression of the anti-bureaucratic movement, the Sino-American alliance, and Deng Xiaoping's rise to power

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During the Cultural Revolution, the most serious and radical criticism of bureaucracy and capitalist restoration occurred in Mao's hometown, Hunan province, where the opposition movement consisted of six social components. The first component comprised state-owned enterprise workers demanding higher wages, more social rights, and the right to speak and participate in decision-making processes; the second component comprised junior and senior middle school, and university students demanding the democratization of education through the lifting of bureaucratic restraints; and the third component comprised urban youth sent to the countryside after the collapse of the Great Leap Forward campaign, when the excess population could not be employed in the cities. While the children of bureaucrats did not stay in the countryside for long, the fact that young people who were not members of "red" families were forced to live there over a long term caused a serious reaction. In addition, these young people witnessed the anti-democratic practices of the village bureaucracy and the enormous economic burden placed on the peasantry. As a result, they began to raise their voices after the start of the Cultural Revolution. Taking advantage of the chaos, the vast majority of 78,000 displaced youth in Hunan began to return to their urban hometowns. They demanded both the

right to return to their cities and an end to the injustices imposed in the countryside.

The fourth component of the opposition in Hunan comprised neighborhood cooperative factory workers demanding the higher wages and social benefits given to workers in state-owned enterprises, while the fifth component comprised veterans of the People's Liberation Army. These veterans faced serious problems in finding jobs and accessing social benefits; they believed that the state established after the revolution which they had fought for had neglected them. After the Cultural Revolution, these former soldiers immediately organized. The Red Flag Army, an organization founded by veterans in late 1966, quickly reached 470,000 members. The sixth component of the opposition comprised those expelled from the party and government posts, as well as those imprisoned in previous years, particularly during the Anti-Rightist Campaign between 1957-1959. These elements began to raise their voices in alignment with the Cultural Revolution, claiming that they had been treated unjustly and demanding rehabilitation by readmission to party membership and government jobs.

After the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, each opposition group founded its own organization, but in October 1966, at a meeting in Beijing, the groups joined to form the "Xiang River Coalition".¹ In early 1967, the coalition's number of members reached one million. However, as in the Shanghai case, the Xiang River Coalition soon encountered Mao's retribution. In February 1967, almost simultaneously with the liquidation of the Shanghai People's Commune, the People's Liberation Army attacked the Xiang River Coalition, causing it to crack under the army's repression campaign. In April 1967, the Workers' Alliance (*Gong Lian*) was formed. Quickly reaching a membership of 300,000, this organization consisted mostly of state-owned enterprise workers. At first, *Gong Lian* was not an organization under the Maoist bureaucracy's control; however, over time, its relationship with the Xiang River Coalition became strained, giving the Maoist bureaucracy's repression campaign an advantage. Nevertheless, this remained far from guaranteeing the Maoist bureaucracy's victory over the rebels.

Dissatisfied with the direction of the Cultural Revolution (more specifically, the attempts of Mao and his associates to stop mass mobilizations), the displaced youth, workers of neighborhood factories, veterans, and purged cadres and intellectuals reconstructed the Xiang River Coalition in the summer of 1967. The coalition blamed *Gong Lian* for "supporting the conservatives" and "repeating the mistakes of the military."² Due to Mao's uncontested leadership and prestige, as well as the rebels' absence of knowledge of strains of Marxism other than Maoism (especially revolutionary Marxism represented by Trotsky), the rebels used a Maoist discourse. In fact, non-Maoist variants of Marxism were completely banned and labelled as counterrevolutionary. Hence, the rebels targeted conservatives rather than Maoism itself. However, Mao, aware of the implications of such critique, orchestrated ef-

1 The Xiang River is one of the principal tributaries of the Yangtze River that runs through the Hunan province.

2 Yiching Wu, *The Cultural Revolution at the Margins: Chinese Socialism in Crisis*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014, p. 155.

forts to stop the mass movement.

In a meeting held on 30 October 1967, the Xiang River Coalition became the “Hunan Provincial Proletarian Revolutionary Great Alliance Committee” (known by its Chinese acronym *Shengwulian*). The new organization’s name was strategically chosen. As noted above, the Maoist bureaucracy had begun to replace rebel-controlled factory and school committees with new committees consisting of the party, army, and rebel representatives. This new setup meant that the rebels were under the tight control of the CCP and PLA. These new committees controlled by the Maoist bureaucracy were called a “great alliance.” Therefore, the coalition’s new name was a criticism levelled against such a bureaucracy. Shengwulian refused to align with the Workers’ Alliance or to be under the control of the party and the army. In other words, Shengwulian represented a genuine revolutionary alliance against both Maoist and non-Maoist variants of the party-state bureaucracy.

Although a growing body of literature has shed light on certain aspects of the Cultural Revolution, many dimensions of it are still unknown, and knowledge of organizations that flourished outside Mao’s control remains minimal. Nevertheless, Shengwulian is purportedly the largest anti-bureaucratic socialist organization in the PRC’s history. It is also assumed that Shengwulian was the first serious opposition to Stalinism since the decline of Chinese Trotskyism in the 1930s. Yang Xiguang, a 19-year-old high school student, was Shengwulian’s chief theorist. As noted earlier, after 1949, it was nearly impossible for ordinary people to learn about non-Maoist variants of Marxism by reading original sources. Due to censorship and repression, Chinese people did not have access to Leon Trotsky’s *The Revolution Betrayed: What Is the Soviet Union and Where Is It Going?* (published in 1937) or different types of critiques of Stalinist regimes such as Milovan Djilas’ *The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System* (published in 1957). Hence, people like Yang Xiguang did not have knowledge of such sources. Taking these limitations into account, Yang’s writings are a sharp critique of the bureaucracy of the workers’ states and represent a real challenge to Maoist theoretical dogmas and inconsistencies. A close study of these writings contributes to a deeper understanding of why the Maoist bureaucracy swiftly repressed the Shengwulian organization before its full maturation.

Following the PLA’s first assault against Shengwulian in February 1967, Yang was imprisoned for six weeks. He recalled that time as a period of disillusionment: “In prison I saw a newspaper [...] I saw that the tone of the editorials had changed to a position in favor of the conservatives, that the Cultural Revolution was to end soon. So I felt disillusioned.”³ After his release from prison, Yang participated in “revolutionary link-up” meetings in Northern China and read the Red Guard publications in Beijing that discussed the emergence of “a new privileged class of officials.” One of the texts that made a deep impression on Yang was a Red Guard publication blaming the officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for becoming “a high-salaried stratum” and a “new privileged class.” Yang also read “On New Trends of Thought,” a text published by the April 3 Faction in Beijing arguing that

³ Ibid., p. 172.

although the private property was abolished, a tiny minority of party-state officials had monopolized property and power. In a letter written to his sister, dated 4 July 1967, Yang wrote: “I believe that a high-salaried stratum has already been formed in China. Chairman Mao has said [the Cultural Revolution] is a revolution of one class overthrowing another. Today we must overthrow the high-salaried stratum.”⁴ As noted above, one of the most serious problems of the Maoist critique of bureaucracy was the lack of analysis of its material basis. In his essay titled “Ideas about the Formation of Maoist Groups,” dated October 1967, Yang criticized the entire rebel movement on this ground, without mentioning Mao’s name. Yang wrote:

We talk about rebellion every day, and about carrying on the revolution to the end. But these are really vague and empty notions. Questions such as a systematic class analysis of Chinese society, of the origins, nature, and goals of this great proletarian political revolution (this revolution definitely cannot be called a ‘cultural revolution,’ but for the present time we have no other term but to refer to it as such)—all these questions have remained unexplored [...] How do we assess and understand the situation of class struggle in China during the past decade or so? Why were various party committees and authorities overthrown? How is it that so many capitalist power holders were identified and dragged out? Why was the January Power Seizure necessary? Why is it that so many party and league members were inclined to become conservative? Why are those who dare to think and dare to rebel usually viewed as troublemakers? ... Why do most of the Cultural Revolution rebels feel they have just woken up from a long dream [...]? Why? Why?⁵

Yang increasingly sharpened his criticisms. From February 1967 onwards, while starting to divide and suppress the rebel groups, Mao and the Maoist bureaucracy were also popularizing the theme of a “great alliance represented by the revolutionary committees” in order to sustain their claim that the revolution was continuing. To make this claim credible, they promised to reconstruct the party before the CCP Congress in 1969. In a letter to a student in Shandong, Yang declared the fallacy of this claim:

[The CCP Congress in 1969] should not be expected to settle completely the question of where the party is going. The party that may emerge ... will *inevitably* be a party of bourgeois reformism that serves the bourgeois usurpers holed up in the revolutionary committees ... This determines that it would not be possible that the congress can settle the question of whither China is going, the core of which remains whither the Communist Party and whither the PLA.⁶

Yang poses the political conclusion based on this sharp critique targeting Mao implicitly: “[O]ld party committees remain mostly intact, and Hunan is still ruled by the same bureaucrats, who oppress the people [...] Thus we must choose between either waiting for defeat or rising up to resist [...] We must not let them consolidate their power ... I really doubt whether the Cultural Revolution can continue in the

4 Ibid., pp. 173-4.

5 Ibid., p. 174.

6 Ibid., p. 175 (emphasis added).

same way it is.”⁷ Based on these conclusions, Yang proposed to found a party called “the party of Mao Zedong–ism” as an alternative to the CCP’s official-bureaucratic interpretation of Maoism.⁸ Yang wrote:

After the seizure of state power, many socialist states have stagnated or even degenerated. Political and intellectual discussions in these countries have essentially become dead ... Few people engage in serious and lively discussions about matters regarding how to transform our political system; few people bother to raise new and interesting ideas about how to reform our society [...] The capitalist roaders abused their power to suppress the most creative, revolutionary, dynamic, and vital aspects of Chairman Mao’s ideas. Only the vaguest, most generic was allowed to be publicized and disseminated ... They have managed to deify Mao’s brilliant ideas into some ritualistic entities. In doing so, they have also distorted and rendered impotent the revolutionary soul of Mao Zedong–ism.⁹

Yang’s critique of the dominant understanding of Maoism, his proposal to establish a new political party as an alternative to the CCP, his use of the concept of “proletarian political revolution,” and declaration of the goal to overthrow the bureaucracy entirely (while using a respectable tone but implicitly critiquing Mao) all indicate that the Cultural Revolution did not continuously progress under the Maoist bureaucracy’s control. The potential for genuine political revolution began to flourish, weakening Mao’s control. Yang deepened his critiques in an essay that he wrote in late 1967 titled “Report of an Investigation of the Rusticated Youth Movement in Changsha.” In it, Yang wrote:

A new capitalist class has been formed in Chinese society: a privileged stratum. The form of China’s existent political power is essentially that of a bureaucratic structure; the privileged stratum that controls this structure is a mountain weighing on the Chinese people. By having the cities exploit the villages, they fill their wallets; their high salaries are the blood and sweat of the workers, peasants, and rusticated youth. The contradiction between the great mass of laboring people and this privileged stratum is becoming increasingly acute ... The rusticated youth are pressed by the privileged stratum to the lowest levels of society; they are its cheap labor force. All year long they cannot provide for themselves; they have neither a tile over their heads nor a speck of dirt under their feet. It is not that they are unwilling to work hard, so why is it they cannot provide for themselves? It is because the privileged stratum employs every ingenious method to exhaust their blood and sweat.¹⁰

In the above passage, Yang vacillates between the concepts of state capitalism and the bureaucratic worker’s state. His use of the concepts of “class” and “stratum” reveals this contradiction. The incorrect use of the concept of capitalism here appears to be due to Mao’s repetition of the same mistake in his polemics against the Soviet leaders after Stalin. Without any materialist analysis of Soviet society,

7 Ibid., p. 174.

8 Ibid., p. 175.

9 Ibid., pp. 175-176.

10 Ibid., p. 182.

and even though ownership of the means of production did not undergo any radical transformation before or after Stalin's death, Mao repeatedly claimed that the Soviet Union was socialist during the Stalin era but capitalist, imperialist, and fascist during the Khrushchev era. Mao's groundless claims diminished the theoretical level of Chinese Marxism to such an extent that, as in many publications of the Cultural Revolution, Yang's writings also conflated the "capitalist path" (an actual possibility in China) and "capitalism" as a social system that did not exist in China at that time. Despite this serious problem, Yang correctly diagnosed that high-salaried bureaucratic strata had already come to power in China. This diagnosis was theoretically more serious and politically more radical than Mao's critique of bureaucracy, which is precisely the reason why Yang became a target of the repression campaign soon after.

The analyses of other Shengwulian representatives are also noteworthy. In an article titled "Our Program," Zhang Yugang, an engineering student, noted that the Cultural Revolution had failed to "overthrow the newly born corrupted bourgeois privileged stratum" and to "smash the old state apparatus that serves bourgeois privilege." Zhang wrote:

Many still have a very poor understanding of its objectives, and their revolts against the privileged stratum have been limited to changing the immediate circumstances in which they suffer repression ... but have barely touched on the social-class origins of the reactionary line, as well as the bureaucratic institutions that serve it [...] [T]he seizure of power was regarded mostly as the dismissal of individual officials from their offices, and not as the overthrow of the privileged stratum and the smashing of the old state machine [...] [T]he political power is still in the hands of the bureaucrats, and the seizure of power is a change in appearance only whose nature is reformist [...] The movement in the whole is still in its rudimentary stage. Its historical mission is far from fulfilled.¹¹

Like other groups, Shengwulian also seized some of the PLA's ammunition and equipment during this period, willing to use those materials in the struggle to advance the revolution. Hence, Shengwulian opposed the PLA's efforts to reclaim those materials and disarm the rebels. Maoists wanted the left-wing bureaucracy to win a decisive victory over the right-wing bureaucracy that Deng and Liu represented. The Cultural Revolution and accompanying radical discourse aimed for the Maoist bureaucracy to establish political hegemony. To prevent a capitalist restoration, Maoists sought to nurture a relatively self-sacrificing and disciplined bureaucracy with strong ties to the masses. Their only goal in the international arena was to make the PRC a superpower. Objectives such as cleansing the workers' state from bureaucracy, giving workers and peasants more power in the workplaces and state administration, and taking action to reconstruct the Communist International (closed by Stalin in 1943) to move forward for world revolution were out of the question. The burgeoning, truly anti-bureaucratic revolutionary line set forth by Shengwulian and similar organizations extended far beyond what Mao and the

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 182-3.

Maoists expected from the Cultural Revolution. As Shengwulian crossed the line, the Maoist bureaucracy panicked and launched an attack to crush it.

The first signal of attack was Hua Guofeng's declaration that Shengwulian was "reactionary in thought" and "counterrevolutionary in action" (Hua Guofeng became the party secretary of Hunan province in 1970, a Politburo member in 1973, and CCP Chairman from Mao's death in October 1976 to June 1981). At a conference held in Beijing on 24 January 1968, attended by high-level leaders such as Jiang Qing, Kang Sheng, Yao Wenyuan, Chen Boda, and Zhou Enlai, the execution warrant of Shengwulian was issued. Kang, the head of the intelligence organization, declared Shengwulian a Trotskyist organization. He complained that the "Whither China?" pamphlet was "opposed to our great, glorious, and correct party and opposed to our peerless Chairman Mao."¹² The following meeting minutes illustrate the shock and awe of a Maoist bureaucracy challenged by an emerging and genuine anti-bureaucratic socialist critique:

Kang Sheng: I have noticed that Lenin is quoted: "A quotation from Lenin is very applicable to our state organs: 'Our machinery of state ... is very largely a survival of the past and has least of all undergone serious changes. It has only been slightly touched upon the surface, but in all other respects it is a most typical relic of the old state machine.'" I say that this is not the writing of a middle-school student or even a university student. I can prove it. Do any of you comrades present know what article by Lenin this statement is in, and when it was written?

Zhou Enlai: Can anybody answer?

Audience: No.

Zhou Enlai: Middle-school students cannot answer. Can cadres in government departments answer?

Kang Sheng: This passage was originally in Lenin's proposal at the Twelfth Party Congress in 1923 ... Lenin wrote this article with absolutely nothing of the meaning of Mr. Theoretician of the Shengwulian. What Lenin was talking about was the judicial organs of the Soviet Union, which, at the time, were not effectively suppressing the counterrevolutionaries ... The Shengwulian distorted and vilified Lenin's words, and by using Lenin's words this way, went against the proletarian dictatorship. They truly deserve ten thousand deaths for this crime!

(Long and enthusiastic applause from the audience)

Kang Sheng: If any of you still have doubts, please consult Volume 33 of Lenin's *Complete Works*. Then you'll be able to understand how vicious the tricks of these counterrevolutionaries are! They take advantage of the ignorance of middle-school students and young people about Marxism-Leninism in order to oppose our proletarian dictatorship. Comrades, even you didn't recognize this piece, you didn't know this article of Lenin's. Therefore, I say to you that this document could not possibly have been written by a middle-school student, or even by a university student.¹³

It is unknown whether those in the hall followed Kang's advice and read Lenin's speech after the meeting. Readers could have seen that the scope of the address was much broader than the effective suppression of counterrevolutionaries. Precisely

12 Ibid., p. 185.

13 Ibid., p. 186.

as the Shengwulian representatives understood, Lenin advanced a diagnosis to the effect that the old state apparatus had largely survived, a problem that could only be solved by increasing the direct participation of workers and peasants in state administration. However, admitting that Shengwulian was right and Kang was a liar was highly risky, and there is no evidence that anyone took such a risk. Continuing his speech, Kang Sheng added that he found Shengwulian's claim that the Cultural Revolution aimed "to smash the old state apparatus" and to overthrow the new ruling elite "insane," "shameless," and "thoroughly reactionary." Chen Boda, head of the Cultural Revolution Central Group, one of the most important political bodies of the 1966-1968 period (Mao's wife Jiang Qing being one of its members), recommended the immediate dissolution of Shengwulian.¹⁴

Two days after the meeting, on 26 January 1968, an anti-Shengwulian demonstration of more than 100,000 people was held in Changsha, the capital of the Hunan province. Speaking at this meeting, a typical Stalinist show, the PLA general Li Yuan claimed that the Shengwulian was a "hodgepodge of social dregs" consisting of "landlords, rich peasants, counterrevolutionaries, rightists, unrepentant capitalist roaders, KMT remnants, and Trotskyist bandits." General Li then called to decisively purge the Shengwulian. Following the meeting, a large-scale operation against Shengwulian began. The military ammunition under Shengwulian's control was seized and made public as evidence of the organization's counterrevolutionary plans. Yang Xiguang, who went missing during the first days of the operation, was captured in Wuhan, the capital of Hubei province, and remained in prison until the end of Mao's reign. At large public gatherings, Yang's mother was repeatedly questioned, humiliated, and forced to "confess" that she was the black hand behind her son. She eventually committed suicide. By the end of February, the Shengwulian organization was destroyed. On 21 February 1968, 12 mass organizations, including the Workers Alliance and the Xiang River Coalition, publicly announced their self-liquidation, "with all members returning to their original work units to participate in the great alliance." The Hunan Provincial Revolutionary Committee, representing the so-called "great alliance" of the Maoist bureaucracy, was formally established on 8 April 1967. Mao was content that the line of anti-bureaucratic political revolution represented by Shengwulian was crushed. In his meeting with the Red Guards in Beijing on 28 July 1968 (which ended the radical phase of the Cultural Revolution), he spoke about the "Shengwulian-style hodgepodge," and during his visit to Hunan in June of 1969, Mao gladly noted that the "ultraleftist current of the Shengwulian [...] attempted in vain to reconstruct the party and the army."¹⁵

During the Cultural Revolution, organizations like Shengwulian had also formed in other parts of the country. The Bohai Battle Regiment and the October Revolution Group in Shandong province, for example, advocated similar ideas. The Shandong rebels argued that "power seizures had already degenerated into the restoration of capitalism." They claimed that "this present revolution [...] definitely cannot be called the Great Cultural Revolution, insofar as there has been no indication that

14 Ibid., p. 186.

15 Ibid., p. 187.

this is a great ‘social revolution’ ... that aims at abolishing the bureaucracy and bureaucrats.” The Big Dipper Society, founded in Wuhan in late 1967, argued that “the establishment of revolutionary committees marked the abandonment of the Paris Commune principle, and that the Cultural Revolution should be a thorough social revolution in which China’s working masses rose up to topple the new bureaucratic bourgeoisie.” The society likewise argued that “[t]he existing Communist Party must also undergo revolutionary changes, and radical rebels like themselves should become the nucleus of a reorganized party.” All such organizations were destroyed between 1968-1969 through various threats or at gunpoint.¹⁶

A similar process took place in Beijing, where the Cultural Revolution began and “Red Guard” organizations declared by Mao as protectors of the revolution first emerged. Signals that radicalization was exceeding Mao’s limits began to appear in the early days of the Cultural Revolution. In an open letter sent to Mao and the CCP Central Committee in late August of 1966, two Beijing University students, Qiao Jianwu and Du Wenge, argued that the current party and state bureaucracies “were not subject to the supervision of the masses.” Qiao and Du called for replacing the party and state organizations with “revolutionary committees created by the masses themselves ... and constituted through general election of the Paris Commune type.” In mid-October of the same year, Li Wenbo, a physics student at Beijing Normal University, published an essay titled “The Commune Is No Longer a State in Its Original Sense,” describing the PRC as “a capitalist state without a bourgeois class” and calling for “reforming the socialist system” by the principles of the Paris Commune. Two middle-school students in Beijing using the pseudonym Yilin Dixi sent an open letter to Lin Biao, criticizing his “idolization of Mao” and arguing that “the Paris Commune model must be extended to the entire structure of state and societal organizations.”¹⁷ In Beijing, as in other regions, anti-bureaucratic socialist tendencies and groups were suppressed at the latest in 1968.

In short, the Cultural Revolution spiraled out of the Maoist bureaucracy’s control and turned into a kind of anti-bureaucratic political revolution. In a context in which it was impossible to learn and propagate the ideas of an ideological-political current other than Maoism (for example, the revolutionary Marxism represented by Trotsky), radicalized youth interpreted and capitalized on Mao’s critique of right-wing bureaucracy in a radical manner intolerable for Mao. The Maoist bureaucracy, panicked by the spread of genuine anti-bureaucratic opposition, stepped on the brakes. The so-called “revolutionary committees” established under the control of the army and the party served as the transmission belt of Mao’s pro-bureaucratic turn. As a result, the Cultural Revolution, which began in the summer of 1966, started to vanish at the beginning of 1967. The first “revolutionary committee” was established in Heilongjiang province on 31 January 1967, and the last two were founded in Xinjiang and Tibet on 5 September 1968. At the end of the process, in August 1968, the CCP’s official newspaper *People’s Daily* published an editorial titled “Unity of Wills, Unity of Steps, and Unity of Actions,” which declared that

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 191.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 191-192.

the anti-bureaucratic mass initiative was going to be crushed by stipulating absolute obedience to Mao and the party center:

Truth is in the hands of the proletarian headquarters, which it is terribly wrong not to worship ... Every revolutionary fighter must resolutely obey and thoroughly carry out every order of Chairman Mao and the proletarian headquarters. Whether they fully understand or not, they must carry out the orders unconditionally. In the absence of full understanding, they must first carry out the order while striving to deepen their understanding.¹⁸

It is well known that many were killed and tortured during the conflicts between organizations; however, violence and casualties increased during the suppression of the Red Guards following the establishment of “revolutionary committees.” After this wave of violence, beginning in late 1968, hundreds of thousands of young people were sent from the cities to the countryside. The Maoist bureaucracy claimed that this practice was meant to reduce the urban-rural difference and increase the youth’s revolutionary awareness. As stated earlier, this practice significantly contributed to rural development. However, the primary motivation of the policy was to rid the cities of radicalized youth. In this manner, mass opposition to the bureaucracy, which Mao had unintentionally created with the Cultural Revolution, was decisively defeated.

From bureaucratic consolidation to capitalist restoration (1969-1979)

The crushing of genuinely anti-bureaucratic organizations and reestablishment of the party-state’s authority under the leadership of the Maoist bureaucracy brought the left and right wings of the bureaucracy closer together. This bureaucratic consolidation strengthened the capitalist restoration trend in the 1970s. The Maoist bureaucracy claimed that the Cultural Revolution continued until Mao’s death in 1976. The 9th Congress of the CCP, convened in 1969, asserted that the Cultural Revolution had triumphed. In the 1970s, numerous radical rhetorical campaigns were presented as part of the Cultural Revolution. However, in an environment where mass organizations were crushed and failure to obey the party-state was considered a crime, radical campaigns and rhetoric had no significant credibility. Due to disillusionment with Maoist radicalism, the masses increasingly doubted the transformative power of politics, resulting in a strong depoliticization process. The noisy campaigns of the 1970s concealed this process of depoliticization but did not prevent it. Indeed, depoliticization fed the shift to the right in China as well as in the rest of the world. Moreover, although the campaigns between 1969-1976 hurt some bureaucrats, they did not harm the economic and political power of the bureaucracy. Power struggles within the bureaucracy continued unabated during this period and fueled political weariness, depoliticization, and a shift to the right.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 202.

The road to capitalist restoration in China (2)

The CCP Central Committee's rump meeting in late 1968 launched the process outlined above. Only Liu Shaoqi and a number of cadres close to him were targeted at this meeting. An intelligence report released in the meeting declared Liu Shaoqi to have been a Guomindang special agent since the 1920s¹⁹ and his wife Wang Guangmei a US agent. The political logic of this Stalinist absurdity was to create the illusion that the overwhelming majority of the party-state's cadres were not bureaucrats and to conceal the fact that the bureaucracy (with its tendency towards capitalist restoration) was the ruling strata of the PRC. Due to its pivotal role in crushing the mass movement, the army emerged from the 1969 Ninth CCP Congress considerably more powerful, which strengthened the position of Lin Biao, the PLA's chief commander. Mao suspected that the growing strength of the PLA might soon pose a threat. A disagreement had occurred between Mao and his successor, Lin Biao, over the military's place in the regime. The second major conflict between Mao and Lin was over the relationship with the United States. While Mao advocated immediate rapprochement with the United States, Lin was against it. On 13 September 1971, a plane carrying Lin crashed over Mongolia. It was said that Lin had attempted a coup d'état against Mao and that his plane crashed while fleeing to the USSR after the coup's failure. Precisely what happened is unknown even today. Following this event was a large purge of PLA commanders close to Lin. Thanks to this operation, Mao was able to weaken the army's strength. An absurd campaign entitled "Criticize Lin, Criticize Confucius" was launched between 1973-1976. Mao's demonization of Lin (who had been his closest collaborator for a long period) as a putschist deepened the depoliticization of the Cultural Revolution generation. A teenager named Rae Yang, who was sent from Beijing to the countryside of Yunnan province, wrote in her diary:

This incident shocked me and made me question the nature of the Cultural Revolution. Was it really an unprecedented revolution in human history led by a group of men (and a few women) with vision and exemplary moral integrity, as I had believed? Or was it a power struggle that started at the top and later permeated the whole country?²⁰

Similarly, another rusticated student wrote:

I was totally shocked. The incident further deepened my confusion. Chairman Mao's handpicked successor betrayed him and even wanted to kill him! My trust in many things suddenly turned shaky. It was like you had been walking firmly toward a goal and felt good about it. Then one day you found out that the goal was only an illusion.²¹

19 Maurice Meisner, *Mao Zedong: A Political and Intellectual Portrait*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007, pp. 188-9.

20 Wu, p. 204.

21 Ibid.

“Advance victoriously while following Chairman Mao’s revolutionary line” (A 1971 Chinese propaganda poster showing Mao Zedong and Lin Biao together).



“Denounce the heinous crimes of the renegade and traitor Lin Biao!” (A 1973 Chinese propaganda poster)



The convergence and consolidation of different wings of the bureaucracy along a right-wing line was the natural result of China’s economic impasse due to its pre-revolutionary backwardness and post-revolutionary isolation. Despite its rapid industrialization after 1949, the PRC was not even close to the material abundance

required for reaching the stage of socialism. Consumption per capita increased by only 2.3% per year between 1952-1978.²² Similar to the USSR, the shortage of consumer goods was a severe problem in China, and the urban housing problem was also significant. The economic distance between China and imperialist countries was not closed, and China's share in the global economy did not increase during this period. As is known, the USA took South Korea under its protection against North Korea and Taiwan against the PRC during the Cold War. The USA provided a vast amount of economic assistance to these two countries and opened its domestic market to their imports. As a result, South Korea and Taiwan developed rapidly. The Japanese economy also recovered during the same period, preserving its imperialist character. The economic successes of these three East Asian capitalist countries located near China seriously affected the Chinese people and bureaucracy. The bureaucracy was aware of China's continuing economic backwardness, which posed significant obstacles to its political hegemony within the country and its international standing. In the 1970s, the PRC leadership decisively moved toward a policy of rapprochement with Western countries and Japan.

	Real GDP per capita (in 2011\$)²³			
	1950	1960	1970	1980
USA	15240	18057	23958	29611
PRC	799	1057	1398	1930
S. Korea	998	1548	2975	6064
Japan	3062	6354	15484	21404
Taiwan	1460	2157	4044	8384

The USA-PRC rapprochement and subsequent alliance against the USSR was a turning point in this respect. Mao had declared that the USSR had been a capitalist, imperialist, and fascist regime since the 1960s and proposed the "Three Worlds Theory" in order to provide a pseudo-radical cover to this fallacy. Accordingly, Third World countries, including the PRC, stood against the US and Soviet imperialisms. These developments of the 1960s made the anti-Soviet alliance of the 1970s possible. On July 9-11, 1971, Henry Kissinger, the national security adviser to US President Richard Nixon, met with Zhou Enlai in Beijing. On February 21-28, 1972, Nixon visited China, where he met with Mao and other PRC bureaucrats. Mao met with Kissinger on 17 February 1973 and then-US President Gerald Ford on 2 December 1975. The USA-PRC alliance further increased nationalist rivalry between the PRC and the USSR —two giant bureaucratic workers' states— and significantly bolstered imperialism. The crushing of the anti-bureaucratic socialist alternative by Mao himself had already made it impossible for the PRC to move in the socialist direction, and the alliance with the USA and economic relations with the West made it increasingly difficult for the PRC to survive as a bureaucratic

²² Ibid., p. 205.

²³ Maddison Project Database 2020, www.rug.nl/ggdc/historicaldevelopment/maddison/releases/maddison-project-database-2020?lang=en (accessed 2 July 2021).

workers' state. In short, although the PRC's capitalist restoration took place after his death, Mao's policies prepared the ground for it.

Following Zhou Enlai's recommendation and Mao's approval, Deng Xiaoping, who had been declared the country's number two capitalist roader (after Liu Shaoqi) and purged in 1966-7, was readmitted to the party at the CCP's 10th Congress in 1973. In 1974, he was appointed as the Deputy Prime Minister. The bureaucracy's left and right wings reconciled in a line that gradually shifted to the right. By compromising with the capitalist roaders, Mao contributed immensely to the erosion of faith and support for anti-bureaucratic socialist politics.

“Down with Liu Shaoqi! Down with Deng Xiaoping! Hold high the great red banner of Mao Zedong Thought - Great Meeting to thoroughly criticize the reactionary capitalist line of Liu and Deng” (Shanghai, January 1967)



A photo showing Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping handshaking at a meeting in Beijing in 1974



Tectonic shifts in the political landscape deepened after Zhou Enlai's death on 8 January 1976. Hundreds of thousands of people, consisting mostly of youth, visited Zhou's grave in Beijing on 4 April 1976 during the Qingming Festival (Tomb-Sweeping Day), when people visit the graves of older generations. The mass visit to Zhou's grave soon turned into a protest against the party-state's restrictive stance. The next day, clashes broke out between the police and civilians, who gathered again to continue protests that quickly spread to other cities before eventually being suppressed. The Gang of Four claimed that Deng Xiaoping was behind the protests, and on 7 April 1976, with Mao's approval, Deng was dismissed from his administrative positions in the party and state apparatuses. However, unlike in the Cultural Revolution era, he was not expelled from the party. Although this liquidation temporarily shook Deng's position, the weight of the capitalist restoration trend in the economic, social, and political fields quickly restored and strengthened his standing. In July of 1977, Deng became one of the CCP's five vice presidents.²⁴

After the purge of Lin Biao, Mao designated Hua Guofeng as his successor. Hua, who became the CCP chairman after Mao's death on 9 September 1976, staged a palace coup on 6 October and ordered the arrest of the Gang of Four. In a show trial in 1981, reminiscent of the Moscow Trials in 1936-1938, the court found the Gang of Four guilty for putschism, betrayal, and abuse of power. Two so-called "gang members" (Yao Wenyuan and Wang Hongwen) pleaded guilty, while Zhang Chunqiao rejected the charges. The most uncompromising defense came from Jiang Qing, Mao's wife. Jiang put up a tough defense, stating that all actions taken were Mao's direct orders. She described her political role in the Cultural Revolution as follows: "I was Chairman Mao's dog. I bit whomever he asked me to bite."²⁵ Thousands of

24 Jack Gray, *Rebellions and Revolutions: China from the 1800s to the 1980s*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990, pp. 374-381.

25 Jin Qiu, *The Culture of Power: The Lin Biao Incident in the Cultural Revolution*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999, p. 148.

party, state, and military cadres close to the Gang of Four were purged, and after the organization's liquidation, Deng and Hua competed for power. Deng, a gifted politician, won this battle over the scope and pace of capitalist restoration. Many cadres close to Hua were also dismissed.²⁶ At the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the CCP, held on December 18-22, 1978, the party leadership embraced the "reform and opening up" orientation, which led capitalist restoration to begin. As noted earlier, despite his opposition to it, Mao Zedong paved the way for China's capitalist restoration by crushing the anti-bureaucratic communist opposition, readmitting Deng Xiaoping to the party-state leadership, and allying with imperialism against the USSR. Deng and his associates brought all these dynamics to a logical conclusion. The Chinese Revolution, which won a victory in 1949, was defeated by the bureaucracy.

Critique of some of the misconceptions about Maoism and the Cultural Revolution

The framework established in this paper is entirely different from the ideas advocated by Maoist (or close to Maoist) intellectuals. Because covering the extensive literature on the subject is not possible within the scope of this paper, I will focus on the arguments of two intellectuals close to Maoism who have recently written on this issue —Italian sociologist Alessandro Russo and French philosopher Alain Badiou.

The first point of discussion is the cult of personality surrounding Mao. After lengthy passages attempting to justify the cult of Mao, Badiou claims:

We know that the cult of Mao has taken truly extraordinary forms during the Cultural Revolution [...] It is striking to see that the most violent rebel groups, those who break most decisively with the bureaucratic order, are also those who push this aspect of the situation the furthest. In particular, they are the ones who launched the formula of 'the absolute authority of Mao-Zedong Thought', and who declare the need to submit oneself to this thought even without understanding it. Such statements, we must confess, are purely and simply obscurantist.²⁷

Badiou's claim here is problematic. The most brutal groups did, indeed, cling to the cult of personality, but these were not the groups that definitively broke with the bureaucracy. As stated earlier, the groups representing the anti-bureaucratic political revolution trend that began to flourish during the Cultural Revolution criticized both Mao's line of protecting the bureaucracy and the cult of Mao (albeit implicitly). As also stated, Mao, who possessed enormous power thanks to his personality cult, crushed the anti-bureaucratic opposition and established an alliance with

²⁶ For detailed information regarding Deng and his associates' purging of their actual and potential adversaries within the party-state, see Michel Chossudovsky, *Towards Capitalist Restoration? Chinese Socialism after Mao*, London: MacMillan, 1986, pp.11-18.

²⁷ Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis*, translated by David Macey and Steve Corcoran, London and New York: Verso, 2010, pp. 149-150.

imperialism by making extreme turns. Therefore, Badiou's effort to justify the cult of Mao by presenting it in a radical light has no historical basis.

In the following passage, Badiou argues that Mao made all efforts to advance the revolution but the triumph of bureaucracy and capitalist restoration were inevitable:

But Mao is also a man of the party-state. He wants its renovation, even a violent one, but not its destruction. In the end he knows full well that by subjugating the last outpost of young rebellious 'leftists', he eliminates the last margin left to anything that is not in line (in 1968) with the recognized leadership of the Cultural Revolution: the line of party reconstruction. He knows it, but he is resigned. Because he holds no alternative hypothesis – nobody does – as to the existence of the state, and because the large majority of people, after two exalted but very trying years, want the state to exist and to make its existence known, if necessary with brute force.²⁸

In the end, the Cultural Revolution, even in its very impasse, bears witness to the impossibility truly and globally to free politics from the framework of the party-state that imprisons it. It marks an irreplaceable experience of saturation, because a violent will to find a new political path, to relaunch the revolution, and to find new forms of the workers' struggle under the formal conditions of socialism ended up in failure when confronted with the necessary maintenance, for reasons of public order and the refusal of civil war, of the general frame of the party-state. We know today that all emancipatory politics must put an end to the model of the party, or of multiple parties, in order to affirm a politics 'without party', and yet at the same time without lapsing into the figure of anarchism.²⁹

Here, Badiou conflates different issues. Is it common for the leader of a communist party to be content with following this process for the sake of the state's survival even after understanding that the country is moving towards capitalist restoration, not communism? Could the crushing of the rebels whom Mao called for action to prevent capitalist restoration be explained by Mao's desire to avoid civil war and ensure public order? Is it possible to explain or justify the readmission of a leader who was declared the country's number two capitalist roader to a leading position in the communist party only a few years earlier? Could public order be the reason why the People's Commune, which was established in Shanghai with the enthusiastic participation of one million workers, was dissolved after 19 days at the command of a single person? It is clear that the issue is not simply about the survival of the workers' state but mainly about the survival of the bureaucracy. Trotsky established the necessity of a political revolution led by a genuine communist party as the only viable way to purge the workers' state of the bureaucracy. He also stated that the workers' state, which would become revolutionary and consolidated thanks to the political revolution, must advance the world revolution and overcome its isolation by reviving the Communist International. There was no other way to prevent bureaucratization and capitalist restoration. Therefore, contrary to Badiou's claim, the topic of discussion was not the choice between utopian ideas such as the abolition of the state or its survival but the aim and purpose of the existing workers'

²⁸ Ibid., p. 148.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 155.

state(s). Trotsky and Mao approached this issue very differently. Badiou's position (though he tries to distance himself) is anarchism, which does not consider revolutionary alternatives to bureaucratic and non-party politics. Alessandro Russo makes a similar comment:

The main political clash was between an increasing number of workers' independent political organizations, on one side, and the cadres of the party-state, on the other, who did their best to mobilize in their defense legions of "model workers." The latter were "Scarlet guards," while the rebel workers were more often Red Guards. Did not this acute contradiction between shades of red reflect a subjective breakdown internal to the working class? In fact, the questions that divided the groups were intensely political, and they were often bravely argued and refuted: They concerned nothing less important than the political existence of workers. Was the worker, as a political figure, a part of a socialist state, linked to it for ascertainable historico-political, economic, and even philosophical reasons? Or could this very web of connections no longer guarantee any political relevance for the category of worker, other than in disciplinary terms, so that it became urgent to find a new path? [...] If today the worker is virtually invisible as a political figure, the archaeology of this absence should be researched in the workers' political movements of the 1960s and 1970s, rather than in the shifts of the capitalist mode of production [...] As was true for the crisis of the working class, the crisis of the category *political party* would develop its worldwide character later, to be fully consummated in the 1980s, when the political role of parties in the state had become precarious in countries well beyond the sphere of the socialist states. The same might be said, too, for the conceptual exhaustion of the historico-political dialectics of the modes of production, whose first major crisis should likewise be traced back to the Cultural Revolution.³⁰

Like Badiou, Russo's criticism of Mao is minimal; he views Mao as a revolutionary who pushed limits but failed to prevent bureaucratization and capitalist restoration. The lesson that Russo derives from the Cultural Revolution's failure is that the working class and its political party had become unimportant categories, but he fails to explain why the diversity of political tendencies within the working class makes the category trivial. As long as the working class maintains its vital position in the capitalist mode of production, communist politics should base itself on the working class. Marx and Lenin developed the theory of communist party precisely because they were aware of the critical position of the workers in capitalism in that there were different political tendencies within this class. Adopting the same outlook, Trotsky also concluded that the political revolution led by a communist party was the only way to prevent the bureaucratic workers' states from turning to capitalism. If there is one lesson to be learned from the Cultural Revolution, it is not that the categories working class and political party are invalid but that a strong, organized revolutionary political party within the working class is indispensable.

Conclusion

30 Alessandro Russo, "The Probable Defeat: Preliminary Notes on the Chinese Cultural Revolution", *Positions*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 1998, pp. 185-186.

The People's Republic of China, which was established in 1949 as a product of a permanent revolution in which the national liberation war and the socialist revolution were intertwined, was one of the two most important workers' states of the 20th century, together with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The USSR was founded on the basis of the revolution of 1917 as a revolutionary workers' state and soon turned into a bureaucratic workers' state due to the devastation caused by the civil war and (more importantly) the economic and geopolitical isolation created by the stagnation of the world revolution. On the other hand, the PRC was established as a bureaucratic workers' state from the start due to the effect of the bureaucratic model created by the USSR and the significant damage it caused in communist movements in individual countries, primarily through the Communist International. As in the case of the Soviet Union, Trotsky's prediction in *The Revolution Betrayed* that the isolation of the workers' state would make bureaucratization and restoration of capitalism inevitable was confirmed in the PRC.

Under Mao, the CCP/PRC bureaucracy was divided into two camps. The left wing of the bureaucracy, led by Mao, wanted the workers' state to be preserved and opposed capitalist restoration. Mao argued that concessions to private property and the market mechanism, namely "market socialism," could pave the way for capitalist restoration in the long run. Mao and his followers were not entirely opposed to the existence and material privileges of the bureaucracy as a social stratum; they also enjoyed these privileges. Rather, they wanted the bureaucracy to be disciplined, selfless, and strongly tied to the masses. Therefore, they opposed the uncontrolled expansion of the bureaucracy's material privileges but also were entirely against the direct participation of workers and peasants in the administration of the state, the existence of different socialist currents and parties, and freedom of speech. The right wing of the bureaucracy, led by Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, favored market socialism and did not oppose uncontrolled increase of the bureaucracy's material privileges. They were aware that despite the PRC's economic successes, it could not close the gap with imperialist countries, especially because of economic isolation. However, like the left/Maoist wing, the right wing of the CCP/PRC never considered adopting an internationalist line aimed at world revolution in order to overcome this impasse. The right wing's solution, therefore, was capitalist restoration and alliance with the USA against the Soviet Union.

The struggle between the left and right wings of the bureaucracy reached its peak in 1966-1968. Mao and his followers attacked the right wing, bypassing the normal-official mechanisms of the party-state, engaging directly with and mobilizing the masses. They argued that this offensive was designed to prevent bureaucratization and capitalist restorationism. Being the most important and prestigious leader of the CCP since the mid-1930s and the PRC since 1949, Mao loudly declared that the party-state was bureaucratized and in danger of becoming bourgeois. He called the masses to fight against such tendencies. This strange situation, unseen in other bureaucratic workers' states, shocked and confused both the Chinese people and broad sections of the international left (especially young revolutionaries alienated from the USSR's rigid, dull, and reformist model). It soon became apparent that this rhetoric was a complete hoax. An anti-bureaucratic tendency for political revolution

began to sprout among the workers and students whom Mao called to the streets. Rebels sought to reveal the material bases of the bureaucracy and expand the power of workers and peasants in party-state apparatuses. They defended direct democracy inspired by the Paris Commune and pushed for a genuine revolution (beyond that of “cultural revolution”) as a method of establishing such democracy. This unexpected development tested the authenticity of the Maoists’ anti-bureaucratic rhetoric. Mao and his associates acknowledged the rebels’ potential threat to their material and political privileges and crushed the rebels through a series of bureaucratic manipulations, often by force.

The crushing of the anti-bureaucratic socialist opposition before it had a chance to develop ensured the consolidation of the bureaucracy. In 1968-1969, the Maoist bureaucracy made it impossible to fight bureaucratization and capitalist restoration tendencies by reducing these tendencies to the interests of the pre-1949 ruling classes and imperialists. This distorted argument concealed the deep roots of these tendencies in the CCP and PRC. Deng Xiaoping, who was declared the number two capitalist roader and purged in 1966-7, was readmitted to party-state posts with Mao’s approval in 1973 and subsequently made deputy prime minister, indicating the reconciliation between the two wings of the bureaucracy. In addition to this development, Mao’s purging and demonization of the PLA commander Lin Biao (the top PLA commander and second leader of the party-state) in 1971 significantly reduced the prestige of not only Mao but also of all kinds of socialist politics in the eyes of the masses.

The material-economic factor behind these political developments was the continued and significant economic backwardness of the PRC compared to imperialist countries. Despite rapid industrialization and the modernization of agriculture, the economic distance between the PRC and imperialist countries did not significantly decrease. In addition, the enormous economic development of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan (founded by the Guomindang, which the CCP defeated in the Chinese Civil War) after 1950 under the aegis of the United States deeply affected both the Chinese masses and the bureaucracy. The nationalist rivalry between the USSR and the PRC made it impossible to rectify the backwardness of the PRC through socialist international cooperation. Under these conditions, the PRC began to tighten its relations with imperialist countries, especially the USA, in order to relieve its isolation and accelerate its economic development. In the early 1970s, the PRC and USA formed an anti-USSR alliance, and the fermenting capitalist restoration trend quickly rallied to power after Mao’s death. One month after Mao’s death, the right wing led by Deng and moderates led by Hua purged the so-called Gang of Four. Deng soon eroded Hua’s basis of power, and after the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee of the CCP in December of 1978, liquidation of the bureaucratic workers’ state and restoration of capitalist relations of production began in China.