

TWO WORLDS

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ALIENATION AND REVOLUTION

A Hong Kong Interview

"There is no word in the Chinese language that is the exact equivalent for the word, alienation. The ideograms spell out: separation and distance." The young refugee from mainland China hesitated as she searched for words to describe what was happening there, and why she had fled to Hong Kong.

Let's call this refugee Jade, and let me admit at once that, in a few instances, Jade is a composite of several people I interviewed. This method of reporting the discussion with refugees serves as protection for them. Moreover, many of the stories do fit one into another since they are typical of those who, though they are now refugees, had not streamed out of China when the Communists first came to power.

WENT BACK TO CHINA

On the contrary, in the early 1950's they went back to what they considered to be their homeland: "We wanted to do something for our country. We wanted to live as free men and women. No one who has to live all his life in a colony can feel free. Even when he has the proper credentials to stay in Europe, or in the United States, he remains, always an outsider, a 'foreign student.'"

"As a Chinese," continued Jade, "I couldn't stand living in this colony where citizenship was denied me.

"Peking (Peking University) was my dream. We all felt ourselves the children of the May 4 (1919) Movement. Its new name was communism, but I do not think that most of us were communists. Humanist tendencies are very strong among the Chinese. I think the intellectuals went with Mao against the nationalists because of his democratic ideas; we all thought of communism as the truest democracy. In any case, I disliked, intensely, the merchant class. Almost everyone in Hong Kong sells something, and I certainly didn't want to be any sort of tradesman."

Jade's enthusiasm for the Maoist regime had not begun to wane until mid-1958. I asked her what impact the Hungarian Revolution had made on China. She replied: "I don't think the Hungarian Revolution was in the consciousness of the masses. There were dissatisfactions with conditions in China. Many, especially the older ones—at least at first it was the older ones—felt that after seven years of strict military rule it was time to relax the control. I had also heard that in Yu-men there was a strike of some oil workers. I had heard it from Lin Hsi-ling, the most famous student critic at Peking University. She was all the rage among us during the 'let one hundred flowers bloom, let one hundred schools of thought contend' debates in the spring of 1957. She was a very powerful orator and kept us spellbound for three and even four hours at a time. She could speak for that long a stretch of time. We would laugh when she derided the superior air of Communist Party members and the system of ranks in the Party.

"It was she who told us that a book critical of the Stalin era had been published, but it was sold only to cadres above the 11th rank. It's true she also mentioned the Hungarian Revolution, but if I remember right, this came only after the Party began accusing its critics of wanting 'to imitate Hungary.' But Lin Hsi-ling herself had drawn a distinction between the Russian Communist Party, which put down the Hungarian Revolt, and the Chinese Communist Party, which initiated the hundred flowers discussion. As I remember it, what she complained of mostly was that the 'contending and blooming' was confined to the upper strata, insisting that only when the masses are free to air their views can the problems that beset us be solved. But all this was said in order to assure our road to genuine socialism.

"Insofar as I was concerned I still thought that was exactly where we were going. Nor did I think it wrong to make some university lecturers clean spittoons. To me it was a sign of breaking down mandarin society that had always plagued Chinese civilization. Thus I participated actively in the anti-Rightist campaign in mid-1957—I was then in Shanghai. In 1958, when the Great Leap Forward was launched, I volunteered for work on one of the big dams. It was only there that my disillusion began."

"ALL LABOR WAS FORCED LABOR"

She stopped talking and seemed suddenly to be far, far away. I looked at this intense young woman who was less than five feet tall, and weighed about 85 pounds. I asked her how could she do the arduous and menial work of building a dam. She replied, "It isn't the menial work that upset me. It was the utter human waste, the bureaucratism, the inefficiency. We were transported by truck, and when we reached the place, we found that nothing was ready for us. Neither a place to live nor even the tools with which to work. It was the most primitive labor imaginable, as if we were to build the whole dam by hand. We lacked even such simple devices as a block and tackle to lift heavy rocks. These had to be pushed into place by sheer brute force.

"Also, although work didn't start until ten in the morning, we had to get up as early as five o'clock because we had no less than 20 miles to walk daily from where we slept to where we worked. All we had when we stopped for lunch was some bread. We did eat better when we finished work at sundown, but we had to reassemble for meetings. We didn't know which was the hardest to bear—the labor, the food or the meetings. We had to describe what we did that day, and we had to speak about our attitude to what we did.

"Although I had volunteered for the job, I now began to feel as if all our labor was forced labor. I kept my tongue, but you couldn't always keep quiet since, if you kept silent, your team leader would see you afterwards and ask what was the matter. I began to feel like I was nothing more than an ant, and that not only because of the unthinking mass labor, but because you so often said, yes, when you meant, no, that you lost all confidence in yourself. Everyday it got harder to think any thoughts of your own. There was many a day when I wanted to bury myself in that dam.

"Finally, my health began to break down. I got what they call a nervous stomach. It got so that I couldn't eat the food at all. After a few months I couldn't bear it any longer and asked to be returned to Peking. Surprisingly, my team leader agreed to that on the condition I wouldn't immediately return to the university and that I shouldn't reveal that I quit. She said I really needed some rest before returning to school.

"For the first time since I had been so actively engaged in the anti-Rightist campaign I began to realize what they—I had now begun to put a distance between myself and the regime—feared most was the reaction of the youth. Of all the surprises during the hundred flowers campaign what must have shocked them most was the attitude of the youth, for the very generation that was a product of the new People's Republic had become its severest critics.

"In my opinion," Jade concluded, stressing the word, my, as if the counteropinion of an individual's view to that of the state and the Party was the highest possible daring, "in my opinion," she repeated, "the designations of the Right and Left were used only afterwards. At the beginning of the hundred flowers debates it was so obvious that the most brilliant students, those who had been the most dedicated Communists and who had been the most prized by the regime, and who themselves kept stressing that they were Communists and wanted no return to the old, had nevertheless become the most severe critics. As I told you, I volunteered for the building of the dam and I truly thought that it was a way not only of building up my country, but of 'uniting' mental and manual work. But now every one of my bones ached, and my brain, too, was tired, tired, tired."

STUDIED "MAO'S THOUGHT," BUT NOT MARXISM

Jade stopped talking. I felt that the telling of the story of the dam was an actual reliving of that shattering experience, and I didn't wish to break the silence. After a few moments she resumed talking, this time about how she used the period of rest to begin studying Marxism. Paradoxical as it may sound, it seems that Marxism was not taught to one and all; it was reserved for "the cadre"—the Communist Party and Communist youth members: "Well, you know, not everybody did consider himself a Communist. Actually only a very small percentage of the Chinese people are Communist Party members. We all, of course, had to know the latest pronouncements of the Communist Party and be acquainted with 'Mao's Thought' on current subjects, but as for serious study of Marxism, that's a different matter.

"I was peeved. I had not been taught Marxism in Hong Kong

or in the United States, and I was determined to study it by myself now. Business men, for example, could attend the Democratic People's After Hours Political Education School, and in four months come out as experts in Marxism, but it was not easy for me to get into a class that studied the original works of Marx.

"I found out what the ten basic books were, and I asked for these from the library: four volumes of Mao's Selected Works; two pamphlets by Lenin--Imperialism, and State and Revolution; two books by Stalin--Foundations of Leninism and History of the Communist Party of the USSR; and two volumes of the Selected Works by Marx and Engels. There are not many Chinese translations available of the original works of Marx. It is, however, possible to buy some books in the bookstores on the famous Wang Fu Ching Avenue in Peking if you can read a foreign language, and if you have the money. It is fun to go into those bookstores.

"I was told I should concentrate on Mao's Thought; that theoretically, the two most important essays are On Practice, and On Contradiction, as well as one of the latest, On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People. These, plus Stalin's The History of the Communist Party of the USSR, where the sum total of what constituted to them 'Marxism-Leninism.' The trouble was, the more I read, the more I began to doubt some of Mao's statements, because my own experience which kept intruding into my study didn't jibe either with his practice or theory. But I didn't dare to say so out loud, not even to myself.

SENO-SOVIET CONFLICT ERUPTS

"I had first heard about disagreements late in 1956, when Pinn Truc-nien, an editor of Hsinhua (the official news agency), listed ten points on which Soviet Russia disagreed with the People's Republic. He had begun reeling them off as the Great Leap Forward, the Three Red Banners, the 'non-dialectical' approach to technicians who, the Russians said, should be judged not on how 'red' they are, but how expert they are, and so forth and so on.

"However, the real shockers did not occur until 1960--and those we heard first, not officially, but through the grape-vine--and those concerned an exchange of gunfire between Chinese and Russian border guards, and the departure of the Russian technicians with their blueprints. All work had to stop. The campaign then began full force against the Russians. We had no specific love for them; there had actually been very little contact between Russians and Chinese, but the regime itself had always played up the Russians as the greatest friends we had, and Stalin's History of the CP had been studied as much as any work by Mao. And now all we heard about them was that they were 'revisionists.' Somehow, instead of hatred against the Russians, a feeling of utter isolation descended upon all of us.

"Then something else took place that set me thinking. African students began coming to our university. We were very interested in them, their countries, their revolutions, but we were not permitted to fraternize with them. They were ghettoized both as to living quarters and any socializing. Meanwhile, living conditions in China had become so difficult that we wanted to ask these new arrivals for things we were short of, like soap. And we were stopped from doing that. So once again, we felt very frustrated. I felt more strongly than ever that things were reeling backwards. At the same time my health hadn't improved much; it seems I was now stuck with a bleeding ulcer. I wanted to flee. I began to plan my escape. It took me two years to achieve it, and yet

Jade stopped and looked at the mountain at the top of which one could see the radar of mainland China. She resumed talking as if she was talking only to herself: "And yet, I wasn't back in Hong Kong very long--I only came last year, you know--when I began to feel all the old alienations that drove me from this island to the mainland. I'm referring not only to the British colonial administration, but the so-called independent British scholars--and they are not as poor a breed as the Americans who seem to have so exhausted themselves in learning the Chinese language that they do not bother to learn anything about the Chinese people.

"It's funny, their attitude to their 'specialty, China,' seems to be like that to a skill, like oil drilling. People exist for them as so many millions--a figure, a figure they wish they could cut, that's all. They don't exist as people with feelings, thoughts, aspirations. Not a single one of them is a Marxist, for example. OK, I can understand that. What I cannot understand is their cynicism. It seems to be one big joke for them, but Marxism isn't one big joke to the Chinese people. No wonder Mao feels so sure that no outsiders will ever get to first base in China, much less win the leadership over the Chinese."

MAOISM IS RETROGRESSIONISM, NOT REVOLUTIONARY

Heretofore I had intervened only in order to ask questions, but I felt it necessary at this point to make my own position clear. I told her that what she knew about me was that I was an American, what she didn't know was that I was a Marxist-Humanist. And as a Marxist-Humanist I wish to state most categorically that Mao was no sort of Marxist. Quite the contrary. Were it not for the fact that he had state power over a vast land of 700 million human beings, no one would pay any attention to his sophomoric essays—*On Practice, On Contradiction*—much less consider them original contributions to the Marxism of our age. As for *How to Handle Contradictions Among the People*, that is not only a revision of Marxism, it is the pronouncement of an exploitative tyrant who is so drunk with power that he thinks that the objective contradictions of capitalist production can be abolished by fiat. Mao decrees so, and so it is.

The shocker, to me, I concluded, was not the power conflict between those two state-capitalist societies, Russia and China, that euphemistically call themselves Communist. The shocker was ingrained in Mao's contention that "for decades" — and "even a century" — the class struggle would continue "in all socialist countries . . . as an objective law independent of man's will." Far from being a new theory of revolution, that is the most sinister of all theories of retrogression.

At this Jade fairly jumped out of her seat, exclaiming: "Retrogression, that's it. That really is it. Mao is a retrogressionist! That's the word that escaped me when I said everything seemed to be reeling backwards. That word never came into my consciousness because I was afraid to face its consequences, though I had felt for some time that Mao was the real revisionist. Retrogression, that really sums up 'Mao's Thought.'" Jade took my book out of my hands and began glancing at the chapter, "The Challenge of Mao Tse-tung," saying "I must translate this and get it into the mainland." She kept stressing, over and over again, that Mao was the retrogressionist, not the Chinese masses: "Marx's Humanism will raise their spirits once more, and then history can move forward. The youth stands ready to make a new revolution."

No wonder, I thought to myself as the interview drew to a close, that some Chinese refugees consider the American scholar no more than a new form of the CIA. It is, after all, impossible to bridge the gulf between a tired exponent of "the end of ideology" age and the energetic revolutionary who had suffered through more than a decade of "Mao's Thought" and hard labor and still dreams of new revolutions. No doubt Jade exaggerated the proximity between philosophy and revolution. But the Maos fear their youth, and not those who bemoan their fate at the hands of "the gods that failed." For the dreams and energies of youth are the stuff revolutions are made of, totalitarianisms undermined, Maos overthrown.