

IDEOLOGY AND DISCOURSE: RHETORICAL CONSTRUCTION OF MAO ZEDONG'S 'NEW COMMUNIST PERSON' (1949-1976)

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I. Introduction

Ideology is commonly understood as a political doctrine and is closely related to mass consciousness or the collective state of mind. In his essay, "Power of the Powerless", Vaclav Havel defines ideology as "a specious way of relating to the world. It offers human beings the illusion of an identity, of dignity, and of morality while making it easier for them to part with them".¹ Further, Michal McGee states that "ideology in practice is a political language, presented in rhetorical documents, with the capacity to dictate decision and control public belief and behavior".² Ideologically imbued language is often in the form of what he calls "ideographs" or rather, slogans, that are often propagated in cultural contexts and socialized among the members of a society. Discourse is socially constructed and then socially conditioned. It is "produced, circulated, distributed and consumed in society".³ Discourse is often embedded in hegemonic structures. When he-

¹ Vaclav Havel, *Living in Truth: Twenty-two Essays Published on the Occasion of the Award of the Erasmus Prize to Vaclav Havel* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 42.

² Michael McGee, "The ideograph: A Link between Rhetoric and Ideology", *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 66 (1980): 1-16, see 5.

³ Jan Blommaert and Chris Bulcaen, "Critical Discourse Analysis", *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 29 (2000): 447-466, see 448.

gemony is exercised to achieve the consent of the masses, alternative voices are prevented or silenced in public and private discourse.⁴

In a number of his works, Michel Foucault showed his concern with how humans are confined by a system of thought and how such thought system is disseminated through discourse formation in a society's history and power structures. Foucault laid out three criteria for discourse formation: (1) the individualized discursive formation in defining rules; (2) generation of new rules from history on topics, concepts, and operations, and (3) connection of discourse between one area with other related areas in society and institutions.⁵ When each type of discourse permeates into society and people's mind, it provokes change or transformation.⁶ Such discourse can involve into a new cultural code and create a new system of speaking. However, at the same time a system of discourse, when controlled, distributed, propagated in society and among its people, not only creates new systems of speech, but also constrains other forms of expression, in particular, opposing discourse. Political discourse has served such rhetorical functions. It enables a new way of speaking while silencing dissent voices.

In the case of China, after eight years fighting against Japanese from 1937 to 1945, a three-year civil war followed between the Communist Party and the Nationalist Party (also known as Kuomintang). The Nationalist Party, headed by Chiang Kai-shek, was defeated and retreated to Taiwan. In 1949, the People's Republic of China was founded under the leadership of Mao Zedong, the Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party (the CCP thereafter). The new China, also known as 'Red China' in the West was facing formidable tasks of recovering from the war, economic development, establishing diplomatic relationships with foreign countries. Most importantly, Mao had to prove to the Chinese people that his Party was capable of leading the Chinese people out of poverty in order to change the image of the Chinese people as 'East Asian Sick Man' in the negative perception of Westerners. His ambition was to transform China from a Confucian society to a socialist nation-state guided by the communist ideology through a new way of thinking and speaking in the new era.

Mao held a negative view of ordinary Chinese people in his early years of writing. In his letter to his friend, Li Jinxi, dated 23 August 1917, Mao wrote, "I feel that my countrymen have accumulated many undesirable customs, their mentality is too anti-

⁴ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971).

⁵ Michel Foucault, "History, discourse and discontinuity", *Readings in contemporary rhetoric*, ed. by Karen A. Foss, Sonja K. Foss, and Robert Trapp (Prospect Heights: Waveland Press, 2002), 283-301, see 285.

⁶ Foucault, "History, discourse and discontinuity", 286.

quoted, and their morality is extremely bad”.⁷ Mao blamed Chinese history for shaping a morally weak, narrow-minded, and behaviorally uncivilized Chinese person. Mao believed these problems required “enormous force” to be removed and resolved and that fundamental change must occur within the individual mentalities. Changes included development of sage-like qualities of morality, wisdom, and intelligence. Mao used the concept of “ultimate principles” to name the qualities necessary for embodying a correct moral state.⁸ These ultimate principles composed of correct ideological orientations and ethical conduct. In his belief, moral education with the correct ideological orientation would transform the mindset and behavior of the Chinese people from the undesirable ways. The transformation process had to start from the individual’s desire to be a good person. A good person automatically would be motivated and would choose to do the right thing. No external pressure such as laws or regulations was needed for a good person to perform good acts.⁹ In other words, the individual’s will and determination decided the outcome of his or her action.

By the time he became the supreme leader of China in 1949, Mao has built a legacy of communist sage himself through his inspiring speeches, visionary writing, and shrewd military strategies to defeat his enemies. Moreover, Mao undertook the mission to convert the Chinese people by changing the fabric of their thoughts and actions. The ideological doctrine he passionately propagated to the Chinese people was the Marxist mantra of class struggle with the goal to shape the Chinese people into new communist persons. Qian Liqun writes that “Mao’s logic is that the masses (workers and peasants) granted him and his Party the mission of finding the Way (communism, socialism) to achieve peace and prosperity for China”.¹⁰ Driven by this logic, Mao projected his moral standard onto the Chinese people, using constant thought reform and moral teaching in a life-long pursuit of transforming traditional Chinese culture into a new communist society. While Mao appropriated classical Marxism and adapted it to the Chinese situation in establishing a proletarian dictatorship, he was paradoxically opposing Marxist concern that ideology of the dominant group or the ruling class can control the state’s information systems and determine the consciousness of large masses of people. Moreover, such an ideology served to suppress alternative ideologies and diverse ways of speaking.

⁷ Stuart Schram, *Mao’s Road to Power: Revolutionary Writings 1912-1949*, vol. I (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1992), 132.

⁸ Schram, *Mao’s Road to Power*, 132.

⁹ Schram, *Mao’s Road to Power*, 205.

¹⁰ Liqun Qian [钱理群], *Mao Zedong shidai he hou Mao Zedong shidai 1949-2009* [毛泽东时代和后毛泽东时代] [Mao Zedong Era and post-Mao Zedong Era, 1949-2009] (Taiwan: Lianjing chubanshiye youxian gongsi, 2012), 175.

Remoulding the Chinese people, especially intellectuals, was singlehandedly the most important facet of Mao's ideological endeavor. This remoulding was accomplished through a series of thought reforms. Mao launched several rectification movements or thought reforms to restructure the minds of party members and intellectuals. Following Lenin, Mao believed in the idea of continuous, unmitigated reform because "the influence of the bourgeoisie and of the intellectuals who come from the old society, the very influence which constitutes their [bourgeoisie] class ideology, will persist in our country for a long time".¹¹ Thus, a Chinese person was expected to repeatedly fight against any capitalistic ideas and reform themselves accordingly for the Party. Mao wrote that "fighting against wrong ideas is like being vaccinated – a man develops greater immunity from disease as a result of vaccination".¹² Robert Ivie stated that metaphor in essence is a rhetorical invention. It elaborates "a primary image into a well formed argument" and "produces a motive, or interpretation of reality, with which the intended audience is invited to identify".¹³ Mao's use of the disease metaphor inevitably served this rhetorical function.

The history of the CCP is filled with a never-ending cycle of thought reform in both the public and private domains. Popular political ideographs like 'thought reform', 'denouncing selfish thought', and 'loyalty to the Party' pervaded in all spheres of life – in the workplace, at home, and in social settings during Mao's era (1949-1976). These ideographs embodied the values and ideology of communism. They signaled a call for political commitment of the collective members to a normative goal.¹⁴ McGee cautions us that "When one appears to think and behave collectively, therefore, one has been tricked, self-deluded, or manipulated into accepting the brute existence of such fantasies [...]".¹⁵ Such fantasies or myth have persuasive power. When an individual participates in the myth-making process through the use of ideographs or symbols, they can create a new perception of reality and use the myth as motivation for change within themselves.

¹¹ Zedong Mao, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol. V, 1957/1977 (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1977), 409-410.

¹² Mao, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol. V, 1957/1977, 410.

¹³ Robert Ivie, "Metaphor and the Rhetorical Invention of Cold War Idealists", *Communication Monographs*, 54 (1987):165-182, 166.

¹⁴ McGee, "The ideograph: A Link between Rhetoric and Ideology".

¹⁵ McGee, "The ideograph: A Link between Rhetoric and Ideology", 2.

II. Mao's Rhetorical Construction of New Communist Person

I grew up in Mao's China. I was a 'youth pioneer' when I was nine-years old along with millions of other children who wore a red scarf symbolizing our dedication to the communist cause, but more importantly, wearing the red scarf shows that you are striving for becoming a new communist person. The lyrics of the song "The Hymn of the Young Pioneer" goes:

We are the successors of communism;
 Carrying on the glorious tradition of the revolutionary predecessors.
 [we] love our motherland and love our people.
 Bright red scarf is waving on our chest.
 [We] are not afraid of any difficulties, nor our enemies.
 [We] study diligently and fight with determination;
 Toward victory and marching bravely.
 Marching bravely;
 We are the successors of communism.

This song embodies the criteria and expectations for the future new communist persons. A new communist person, according to Mao, must be "versed in Marxism-Leninism, politically far-sighted, competent in work, full of the spirit of self-sacrifice, capable of tackling problems on their own, steadfast in the midst of difficulties and loyal and devoted in serving the nation, the class and the Party".¹⁶ Moreover, a new communist person "must be free from selfishness, from individualistic heroism, ostentation, sloth, passivity, sectarian arrogance, and must be selfless national and class heroes".¹⁷ In sum, a new communist person is a moral person who must exhibit the following characteristics: (1) Having a correct ideology aligned with the Party; (2) Sacrificing for the Party and serving the people; (3) Participating in criticism and self-criticism, and (4) Living a plain life.

II.1. Having a Correct Ideology Aligned with the Party

Mao faced two kinds of Chinese people that he wanted to transform to new communist persons when he took power in 1949. One group were peasants who comprised 80% of Chinese population and who were only concerned about feeding themselves and

¹⁶ Zedong Mao, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol. I, 1937/1967 (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1967), 291.

¹⁷ Mao, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol. I, 1937/1967, 291.

their families. 90% of them were illiterate at the time. For Mao, peasants must be endowed with a new communist consciousness by engaging in ‘political work’ or ‘communist ideology’. They had to be transformed from focusing on their families to devoting themselves to the Party and the country, and ultimately become selfless, new communist persons. To achieve this goal, Mao launched the ‘eradicating the illiterate’ campaign in 1950, so that peasants could read Mao’s works and digest the communist propaganda.

The other group Mao was concerned about were the educated intellectuals; some of them were influenced by Western liberal ideas of democracy. Mao faced more challenges to transform this group. For Mao, Marxism-Leninism was infallible and absolutely correct, but he was aware that Marxism and communism were foreign concepts. To make these concepts appealing and relevant to the Chinese, Mao appropriated certain tenets of Marxism and communism into basic and concrete moral values such as honesty, loyalty, and selflessness. Mao linked these values with ideological correctness and proletarian consciousness.

In 1942, Mao launched his first Rectification Movement in Yan’an among party members. He was mainly concerned with those party members who came from a rich family background and have doubts about communism. Mao believed that even these party members demonstrated revolutionary zeal, their minds were still not completely aligned with Marxist or communist ideology due to their backgrounds. In Mao’s words, “the revolutionary fervour of these comrades was admirable [...] but they had brought with them into the Party ideas which are out of keeping or not altogether in keeping with Marxism”.¹⁸ Mao was deliberately vague about the nature or specifics of these ideas. According to Gao Hua’s research (2000),¹⁹ these ideas were the demands for freedom of speech, the demands for equality between the officials and soldiers, and insistence on respect for democracy. Mao justified his launch of the movement by condemning these ideas as contradictory to Marxism.

The purpose of the Rectification Movement, according to Mao, was to spread Marxist education so that “our Party can go forward with great, firm strides in unprecedented (though not complete) ideological, political, and organizational unity”.²⁰ Mao heralded Marxism as the theoretical guidance for China’s revolution and lauded communism as the sole belief and value system for China. Those who refused to conform to the Mao’s version of Marxist ideology and who expressed different views from the Party line

¹⁸ Zedong Mao, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol. III, 1945/1967 (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1967), 278.

¹⁹ Hua Gao [高华]. *Hongtaiyang shi zenyang shengqi de: Yan’an zhengfeng de lailongqumai* [红太阳是怎样升起的: 延安整风的来龙去脉] [How Does the Red Sun Rise: The Story of Yanan’s Rectification Movement] (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press), 2000.

²⁰ Mao, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol. III, 1945/1967, 278.

were labeled as morally defective people who needed to be rescued. This Rectification Movement was the kickoff to China's continuous rounds of thought reforms for the educated Chinese after 1949. For Mao, the Rectification Movement was effective in 'curing' the moral defects of the political dissidents, but the approach should be self-persuasion through self-criticism. He used a weather metaphor and a health metaphor to illustrate his points:

From now on, all problems among the people or inside the Party are to be solved by means of rectification, by means of criticism and self-criticism, and not by force. We are in favor of the method of the 'gentle breeze and mild rain', and although it is hardly avoidable that in a few cases things may get a little too rough, the over-all intention is to cure the sickness and save the patient, so we truly may achieve this end instead of merely paying lip-service to it.²¹

Mao called such ideological reform a political task and the "life-blood of all economic work".²² He labeled communist ideas and socialist practices as *new*, while thoughts and actions deviating from communist ideology and socialist practice as *old*. Moreover, Mao associated 'new' with 'good' and 'old' with 'evil'. Thus, he argued, it is natural and reasonable to abandon the old and establish the new, placing ideological differences on a high moral ground. As Meisner writes, Mao's thought reforms "marked the appearance of a rigid ideological determinism that since has governed the history of Maoism".²³ Mao's success in establishing ideological conformity in China remains unprecedented in Chinese history.

II.2. Sacrificing for the Party and Serving the People

After studying China for many years, John K. Fairbank went to China after Nixon's visit in 1972 and wrote his impression of the Chinese people at the time, observing that "Mao not only created a new society, but also a far-reaching moral crusade to change the very human Chinese personality in the direction of self-sacrifice and serving others".²⁴ Although China had never had any institutional caste systems, the Chinese people even

²¹ Mao, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol. V, 1957/1977, 348.

²² Mao, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol. V, 1957/1977, 260.

²³ Maurice Meisner, *Mao's China: A History of the People's Republic* (London: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1977), 185.

²⁴ John K. Fairbank, "The New China and the American Connection", *Foreign Affairs*, 51 (1972): 31-43, see 37.

before Mao's era were very class conscious. Confucius divided people into *junzi* (gentleman) and *xiaoren* (small person, base person). *Junzi* symbolized the educated social elites, who supposedly possessed moral attributes, while *xiaoren* represented the uneducated masses who only cared about pursuing material self-interests. In traditional China, *xiaoren* also were looked down upon for their participation in manual labor. Interaction between the two groups was limited. Mao's revolution not only brought these two groups together, but also reversed the social hierarchy and subverted traditional perceptions of morally desirable and undesirable people. Mao claimed that the proletariat class, which consisted of the uneducated masses such as peasants and workers, was the true emblem of morality. He called on the educated to learn from the humility of the masses as a way to dissolve their inherent hubris as members of the social elite.

Speaking to party members and intellectuals who tended to come from wealthy family backgrounds, Mao faced the task of transforming their possible bourgeoisie worldview and instilling the proletarian consciousness in the mind of the educated by forcing them to mingle with and serve for the masses or the uneducated workers and peasants. The hallmark of the CCP, according to Mao

is that we have very close ties with the broadest masses of the people. Our point of departure is to serve the people whole-heartedly and never for a moment divorce ourselves from the masses, to proceed in all cases from the interests of the people and not from the interests of individuals [...].²⁵

Throughout his life Mao emphasized this point of the Party's necessity to integrate with the masses. Mao's call for serving the people functioned as a rhetorical strategy to win the support of the majority of the Chinese people as well as to maintain the Party's legitimacy. To serve the people, Mao believed, every comrade must

love the people and listen attentively to the voices of the masses; to identify himself with the masses wherever he goes and, instead of standing above them, to immerse himself among them; and, according to their present level, to awaken them or raise their political consciousness [...].²⁶

Accordingly, party members had a twofold mission. They must humble themselves to learn from the masses the first-hand experiences, but were also responsible for disseminating communist ideals among the masses. To Mao, this integrated experience was the best way to "solve their problems and help them achieve liberation

²⁵ Mao, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol. III, 1945/1967, 265.

²⁶ Mao, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol. III, 1945/1967, 265-266.

and happiness”.²⁷ Integrating with the masses would allow party members, the new social elite, to cultivate ‘the proletarian consciousness’ and remain connected with the real world.

Mao’s identification with and sympathy for the working-class Chinese people gained him support for his revolution. Confucius taught his students to put family duties first, be considerate of others, and sacrifice for the collective. Mao turned these traditional values of personhood into a secular dogma of serving the people and performing sacrifice for the Party and the State. In her study of Chinese moral models selection, rhetorical scholar Rya Butterfield contends that Chinese rhetoric surrounding the selection and promotion of moral models in China plays an epideictic function and “provides symbolic equipment by which people can make sense of their community, engage in self-definition, [and] shape collective memory [...]” for the service of the nation.²⁸ Ironically, Mao’s desire to construct a new communist person was based on a traditional Chinese approach of model emulation in moral teaching/learning.

Mao perceived altruism and self-sacrifice as crucial facets of the virtue for a new communist person. On March 5, 1963, Mao inscribed “Learn from Comrade Lei Feng” and launched a nationwide propaganda campaign to cultivate new communist persons. Lei Feng (1940-1962) was an ordinary soldier of the People’s Liberation Army. After his accidental death, his diary was published, which was filled with writing devoted to upholding the beliefs of Mao and the Party. Lei Feng was exalted as a model of a new communist person, a shining example of selflessness and modesty, and a model of serving the people. Mao called on the Chinese people to emulate his communist spirit and moral integrity. Soon Lei Feng became a household name and a celebrated soldier. He has remained a cultural icon for decades.

In serving the people, Mao demanded the deprivation of self. To Mao, selfishness was the kernel of the bourgeois world outlook while selflessness was the core quality of a communist. In his essay, “Combat Liberalism”, Mao identified eleven types of selfish behaviors, such as “To let things slide for the sake of peace and friendship when a person has clearly gone wrong [...]” or “To indulge in irresponsible criticism in private instead of actively putting forward one’s suggestions to the organization”.²⁹ Other examples of selfish behavior include showing no regard to the collective life, disobeying orders, and attacking others. Mao listed many common human flaws, but he attributed these

²⁷ Mao, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol. III, 1945/1967, 158.

²⁸ Rya Butterfield, “Rhetorical Forms of Symbolic Labor: The Evolution of Iconic Representations in China’s Model Worker Awards”, *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 15 (2012): 95-126, see 100.

²⁹ Zedong Mao, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol. II, 1937/1967 (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1967), 31.

types of behavior as stemming from the selfish motives of the petty-bourgeois. A true communist, according to Mao, must subordinate his or her own interests to those of the people and the revolution; a true communist must value “the collective life of the Party and strengthen the ties between the Party and the masses”.³⁰ In the name of serving the people, Mao denied that selfishness was inevitably a part of human nature and politicized the Chinese collectivistic cultural traits in ideological terms. Not until the end of the Cultural Revolution and after Mao’s death was the question raised of whether a person could achieve a state of total selflessness. There was no sense of self in Mao’s moral teaching; the individual had to subjugate himself or herself to the prevailing political standard and party line.

II.3. Participating in Criticism and Self-criticism

Mao claimed that the necessary tools for remolding oneself were ‘criticism and self-criticism’. Mao believed that the method of criticism and self-criticism was the most effective approach for educating and transforming a person to the accepted communist morality with proletarian consciousness. Mao justified his position by evoking a hygiene metaphor: “As we say, dust will accumulate if a room is not cleaned regularly, our faces will get dirty if they are not washed regularly. Our comrades’ minds and our Party’s work also may collect dust, and also may need sweeping and washing”.³¹ Mao concluded that criticism and self-criticism was “the only effective ways to prevent all kinds of political dust and germs from contaminating the minds of our comrades and the body of our Party”.³² Mao reasoned that a true communist person must acknowledge his or her own shortcomings and be willing to self-correct; the abilities to do so would demonstrate high levels of morality and self-cultivation.³³

In every thought reform campaign, intellectuals and party members were expected to denounce their past ‘immoral behavior’ (selfishness) and ‘erroneous views’ (doubts about Mao’s leadership). They were to report how they would work hard to overcome their ‘ideological disease’ and how they would move closer to becoming a new communist person under Mao’s guidance. In order to avoid being labeled ‘class enemy’, many intellectuals and ordinary people strived to gain acceptance into the revolutionary fam-

³⁰ Mao, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol. II, 1937/1967, 33.

³¹ Mao, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol. III, 1945/1967, 267.

³² Mao, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol. III, 1945/1967, 267.

³³ Mao, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol. III, 1945/1967, 177.

ily and reinvent their identities as new communist persons by publicly confessing their ‘flaws’ and aligning with the Party.

Actually, criticism and self-criticism were not Mao’s invention. As an approach for self-cultivation, the word *fanxing* (self-examination, self-reflection) was a Confucian concept appropriated from a line in *The Analects*: “I examine myself three times a day”.³⁴ *Fanxing* was commonly practiced among ancient sages and *junzi* – even today, self-examination is embedded in the Chinese culture as it is a part of the Confucian tradition. Criticism and self-criticism proved to be an effective approach in bringing uniformity within the Party during the Yan’an 1942 Rectification Movement during which Mao requested the party officials and intellectuals who were the targets of rectification to write self-criticism journals and reflect their “incorrect” thoughts and rectify their errors.³⁵

After the founding of the People’s Republic of China, Mao continued his Rectification Movement and his emphasis on the importance of criticism and self-criticism. Although he had defeated Chiang Kai-shek and ultimately had won the war, Mao was not confident that the Chinese people, particularly intellectuals and party officials, were truly convinced by the communist ideology and the CCP’s legitimacy to rule. In his report to the Third Plenary Session of the Seventh Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, Mao called for continuous thought reform and criticism to “raise the ideological and political level of cadres and rank-and-file Party members”.³⁶ To prove the CCP’s legitimacy, Mao focused on consolidating ideological uniformity, emphasis on good work ethic, and the selfish behavior among party members. Either by coercion or by willingness, some well-known intellectuals cooperated with Mao by publishing their confessions.

During the Anti-Rightist Movement (1956-1957), many people, including college students, engaged in the political ritual of self-criticism. Qian Liqun, a professor from Beijing University recalled the time when he had to write self-criticism reports constantly to criticize his “western democratic thought” and denounce his “bourgeois family background” as a way to show his loyalty to the Party and willingness to reform.³⁷ Yang Dongping, a research fellow from Beijing Institute of Technology, remembered the times when he was criticized by his high school peers that he had too much “bourgeois thought and feelings, lacking principles and a fighting spirit” simply because he showed

³⁴ Confucius, *The Analects of Confucius*, transl. by Simon Leys (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 1-4.

³⁵ Gao, *Hongtaiyang shi zenyang shengqide: Yan’an zhengfeng de lailongqumai*.

³⁶ Mao, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol. V, 1950/1977, 31.

³⁷ Liqun Qian [钱理群], *Yilu zuolai* [一路走来] [A road walked through] (Henana wenyi Publishing, 2016), 110.

his interests in traditional Chinese paintings and the life of the recluse.³⁸ Any thought, feelings, behaviours that showed the trace of Western influence and traditional Chinese values would be criticized or forced to engage in self-criticism. One must eliminate anything 'old' (old customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas) in order to become a new communist person.

During the Cultural Revolution, criticism and self-criticism reached its climax. A typical self-criticism report, in either spoken or written form, would begin with a poetic eulogy of Chairman Mao and Mao's quotation, and then moved to the confession of the writer's own flaws and 'incorrect' thinking. The deeper a person could dig into their 'dark side', the more their confession proved their true revolutionary passion. The practice was known as a 'revolution in the deepest part of the soul'. The confession would then be followed by more quotations from Mao Zedong and then an application of Mao's quotations to the analysis of one's flaws and incorrect thought. In the report, the person also had to express how Mao's teaching elevated their moral perceptions, which led them to act according to these moral guidelines. In their conclusion, the person had to admit they still had room for further improvement and to express a willingness to engage in more self-criticism. The self-criticism report would conclude with adulation for Mao and an expression of determination to follow Mao down the revolutionary road.

For example, Hua Luogeng, a famous Chinese mathematician, wrote a self-criticism report following this format, where he criticized himself as a 'self-made man from the old society' and he denounced his attachment to science without consideration for the interest of people. He thanked Mao and the Party for helping him realize his moral defects and for guiding him in doing science. He expressed his admiration for those who worked selflessly and mingled with the masses, beginning his report with the line: "had it not been for the guidance of the Thought of Mao Tse-tung, I dare say that I would surely have been contented with what I was".³⁹ Hua ended his report by writing, "Chairman Mao's thinking has stayed the sun for me. Under the brilliance of this sun that never sets, I will resolutely and ceaselessly walk on the road of revolution!"⁴⁰

Ba Jin, a well-known and well-accomplished writer, is another example of being forced to engage in self-criticism and redeem himself. He admitted that he genuinely felt guilty when he was denounced by Red Guards. He was determined to transform

³⁸ Zongtao Li [李宗陶], *Silv zhongguo* [思虑中国] [Worrying China] (Beijing: New Star Press, 2009), 223.

³⁹ *Communist China*, ed. by Franz Schurmann and Orville Schell (London: Penguin Books, 1967), 163.

⁴⁰ Gao, *Hongtaiyang shi zenyang shengqide*, 166.

himself, heart and soul, into a new communist person.⁴¹ He believed that he was a person who came from the old society with old ideas, thus needed to be reformed and transformed. During the Cultural Revolution he wrote many self-criticism reports to deny himself as an author and a good person. He was determined to “change bones and start anew” to reform and transform himself.⁴² These examples exhibit a willingness to expose one’s alleged selfish motives and show an ability to overcome one’s own flaws, which signaled loyalty to the Party and true political commitment to the communist cause. Those who were reluctant to engage in self-criticism were immediately accused of counterrevolutionaries. In fact, criticism and self-criticism had become political rituals that served to recreate a political identity and to communicate the myth of transcending to a new communist person.

Lifton notes that this political ritual of self-criticism was constituted by the manipulation of emotions.⁴³ He writes that

it employs no theologians, but it closely resembles an attempt at inducing religious conversion – saving souls, stressing guilt and shame, demanding atonement, recantation, and rebirth. It makes use of no psychiatrists, but is certainly a coercive form of psychotherapy – focusing upon catharsis, analytic interpretations, and causative influence from early life.⁴⁴

Lifton’s observation echoes with Kenneth Burke’s rhetorical theory of redemption which consists of three steps: pollution, purification, and redemption.⁴⁵ Although it is based on the Christian notion of soul cleansing, the process of redemption applies to physical, spiritual as well as psychological state and patterns.⁴⁶ Pollution is the stage when a person feels guilty for having done something wrong measured by the hierarchy or social order created by language or symbols. This guilt creates the need for redemption and purification as the means through which redemption can be achieved. Purification can be achieved by finding a scapegoat (blaming others) or by self-mortification (blaming the self). By assuming guilt and then purging that guilt through either means, a community or individual can achieve a sort of vicarious atonement for

⁴¹ Jin Ba [巴金], *Sui xianglu* [随想录] [A Collection of Reflections] (Beijing: Life, Reading & New Knowledge, 1987).

⁴² Ba, *Sui xianglu*, 77.

⁴³ Robert J. Lifton, “Brainwashing in Perspective”, *New Republic* (13 May 1957): 21-25.

⁴⁴ Lifton, Reprinted in *Communist China*, 142.

⁴⁵ Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966).

⁴⁶ Foucault, “History, discourse and discontinuity”.

sins and thus find redemption, remove the error, and experience a new birth.⁴⁷ Thus, the purification stage is the effort to cleanse the guilt and achieve redemption. Mao's methods of criticism and self-criticism involved these stages of redemption. Through his speeches and writings, Mao established Marxism-Leninism and Mao-Zedong Thought as the moral and political hierarchy for Chinese people. A person had guilt if his or her thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours were not in alignment (or were accused of not being in alignment) with Marxism, Leninism, and Maoism. The guilt would inevitably force the person to conscientiously self-correct by acknowledging the infraction publicly and by offering remorse.

Under the banner of criticism and self-criticism, the person accused of wrongdoing would have no option but to choose the route of mortification (blaming self, self-sacrifice, self-denial) for redemption to demonstrate that growth or change had taken place and to prove their loyalty to Mao and the Party. Mao bestowed intellectuals with original sin since most of them had come from wealthy families and were often critical of the Party's policies. As a result, the intellectuals had to constantly repeat the process of guilt, purification, and redemption or pollution, purification, and redemption. Because of the inherent nature of human imperfection, the cycle never ended. In his book *The Captive Mind*, Czesław Miłosz shares his experience with Polish communist practices, which also consisted of remolding a self into a "new man" who is "conditioned to think and act like others".⁴⁸ Overtime, this new man could "no longer differentiate his true self from the self he simulates, so that even the most intimate of individuals speak to each other in Party slogans".⁴⁹ The independent thinking of Ba Jin, Hua Luogeng and that of many other Chinese intellectuals was dissolved by the political ritual of self-criticism; the repetition facilitated their becoming slaves of the party discourse.

Diary writing was a prevailing trend for self-criticism after the publication of Lei Feng's Diary in 1963. This 'private' zone was invaded to drive out any faulty thinking that deviated from Mao's teaching. Here is an example of self-criticism when a 13-year old teenage was sent to labour in the countryside with her family. She wrote in her diary dated March 1970:

Because of the bourgeoisie trace in my mind and because of the feudal education in the old school, I look down upon the working class people; I want to avoid hard labor; I refused to use an oil lamp and sleep on an earth-made bed. When I talk

⁴⁷ Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

⁴⁸ Czesław Miłosz, *The Captive Mind* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), 76.

⁴⁹ Miłosz, *The Captive Mind*, 55.

with the peasants, I find them like country pumpkins. When I live with them, I find them dirty. In sum, I do not like anything in the rural area. I only think of myself and believe those who come from the city are noble people.⁵⁰

Li continued to criticize herself and expressed how much she had learned from the peasants and how Mao's words had enlightened her and made her aware of her wrong thoughts. Through diary writing, a person reflects his or her own 'sins' and scrutinizes any selfish thoughts and motives. It is expected that by repeatedly engaging in this kind of self-criticism, selfish thoughts will be cleaned up, loyalty to Mao and the Party will be solidified, and a new communist person will be made. Wang writes that

the transforming of the soul is carried out through the voluntary cooperation of the participant, who must learn to hate him-or herself for the slightest deviation from the party line and watch over his or her mind with utmost vigilance.⁵¹

Indeed, many people genuinely felt guilty about not living up to Mao's moral standards. Publicly or privately, exposure of their guilt was viewed as courageous and they were seen as potential candidates for genuine thought reform. This process of self-persuasion served as a powerful mechanism of control in thought and action.

II.4. Living a Plain Life

In his book, *Marxism, Maoism and Utopianism*, Maurice Meisner identifies several Maoist values: selflessness, hard work, frugality, self-discipline, diligence, and honesty.⁵² Meisner contends that these ascetic values are similar to Western bourgeois virtues and Protestant ethics of capitalism. However, for Mao, these were not just social and cultural values – they were constituent parts of the communist ideology and were appropriated as 'socialist and communist values'. Mao consistently emphasized building the ethos of party members on two aspects: plain living and modesty, two Confucian values coded in communist terminology. He reiterated these two values a few times in his works. Upon his victory over the Nationalists in 1949, Mao's peasant-based army moved to the cities. Mao was concerned that his new government would be in danger of losing legitimacy if party members became weak-willed, facing the temptation of a better material life.

⁵⁰ Shuang Li, *Personal Diaries, 1970-1972*.

⁵¹ Ban Wang, *The Sublime Figure of History: Aesthetics and Politics in Twentieth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 222.

⁵² Meisner, *Mao's China*, 120.

Mao cautioned party members in his speech at the Second Session of Seventh Central Committee that

with victory, certain moods may grow within the Party – arrogance, the airs of a self-styled hero, an inertia and unwillingness to make progress, a love of pleasure, and a distaste for continued hard living.⁵³

Mao was worried that such party members would be defeated by “sugar-coated bullets” rather than being conquered by enemies with guns. Thus, Mao advised the Party that

the comrades must be taught to remain modest, prudent and free from arrogance and rashness in their style of work. The comrades must be taught to preserve the style of plain living and hard struggle.⁵⁴

Mao relied on the party members’ discipline, resistance to materialistic temptation, and stoic living styles to build the new China. For Mao, plain living was essential to preserve even after the CCP took power, and he called these values “intrinsic political qualities”.⁵⁵

A few years after the CCP came to power, Mao was still deeply concerned about party members’ moral integrity. According to Mao’s own observations, some cadres

scramble for fame and fortune and are interested only in personal gain [...]. They vie with each other not in plain living, doing more work and having fewer comforts, but for luxuries, rank and status.⁵⁶

Moreover, Mao described party members who had become bureaucratic in their leadership styles, further creating conflict with their subordinates, like workers and students. Mao saw this separation as a threat to the CCP’s legitimacy and issued a warning for sanctions. In his words,

There are several hundred thousand cadres at the level of the county Party committee and above who hold the destiny of the country in their hands. If they fail to do a good job, alienate themselves from the masses and do not live plainly and work hard, the workers, peasants and students will have good reason to disapprove

⁵³ Zedong Mao, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol. IV, 1949/1977 (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1967), 374.

⁵⁴ Mao, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol. IV, 1949/1977, 374.

⁵⁵ Mao, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol. V, 1957/1977, 349.

⁵⁶ Mao, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol. V, 1957/1977, 350.

of them. We must watch out lest we foster the bureaucratic style of work and grow into an aristocratic stratum divorced from the people. The masses will have good reason to remove from office whoever practices bureaucracy, makes no efforts to solve their problems, scolds them, tyrannizes over them and never tries to make amends. I say it is fine to remove such fellows, and they ought to be removed.⁵⁷

In 1957, Mao announced that there would be another rectification movement. In his speech at the Party National Conference on Propaganda Work, Mao claimed that the goal of the Party's propaganda was "to carry forward our Party's tradition of plain living and hard struggle".⁵⁸ Mao criticized those party members for their purported dwindling revolutionary spirit, lamenting that "they are clamoring for position and for the limelight, becoming particular about what they eat and wear, competing for salary and scrambling for fame and gain".⁵⁹ Mao called on party members to

maintain the same vigor, the same revolutionary enthusiasm and the same death-defying spirit we displayed in the years of the revolutionary wars and carry our revolutionary work through to the end.⁶⁰

Mao demanded that party members maintain a plain life style as they did during the war period, to demonstrate their devotion to the revolutionary cause. In Mao's logic, too much comfort would weaken one's spirit; hardship and suffering would help build resistance to temptations and pave the way for becoming a new communist person.

III. Conclusion and Impact

The communist ideology had exerted extraordinary power transforming Chinese society and the Chinese people. Mao made the transformation possible by appropriating Marxist-Leninist theories of social change and combining them with Confucian values of character development. For Mao, politics, ideology, and morality were intertwined. Transforming the Chinese people into new communist men and women with desirable moral attributes put into practice Mao's ambition as a young man to change the cultural character of the Chinese people. He successfully directed the moral sense of the Chinese people from a cultural orientation rooted in the Confucian vision of an ideal society

⁵⁷ Mao, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol. V, 1957/1977, 345.

⁵⁸ Mao, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol. V, 1957/1977, 436.

⁵⁹ Mao, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol. V, 1957/1977, 436.

⁶⁰ Mao, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol. V, 1957/1977, 437.

of harmony to an ideological battle and political formulation in a communist state. Mao's rhetoric toward the construction of a new communist person does not merely resemble the Confucian concept of *junzi* or gentleman, more notably, Mao has effectively appropriated Confucian moral standard for character development and use it as a persuasive appeal to enforce ideological uniformity and legitimize the CCP's rule. In this sense, Mao successfully combined his own individualized rhetoric with the discourse in Chinese history and culture in creating a new system of thought and a new way of speaking in communist China.

Mao's rhetorical charisma, his moral argument for the necessity of the thought reforms, combined with his brutal approach to ritualize and institutionalize them left little room for counterarguments and chance for resistance. As Ip points out,

when the top leadership of an authoritarian party pressed for changes that were unassailable in both ideological and pragmatic terms, the situation did not encourage others to question his decision, however unreasonable.⁶¹

Rectification through means of self-criticism became a deprivation of individual freedom in thought and speech as everyone had to conform to the Party line and infallible Mao Zedong thought. Those who refused or failed to conform to Mao's orthodoxies were politically persecuted and deprived of their dignity and political freedom.

When Mao first launched the Hundred Flower Campaign in 1956, Chinese citizens were encouraged to openly criticize the Party for any wrong doings. However, this short period of freedom of speech was soon shut down and followed by the Anti-Rightist Movement when Mao perceived that criticism of the Party was too harsh and had threatened the Party's legitimacy. Either out of fear or due to repeated inculcation, Chinese people, particularly Chinese intellectuals, were silenced. Some chose compliance over resistance, subjecting themselves to manipulation and coercion by political power. Some stopped speaking altogether and their critical and reflective capabilities disappeared; some became cynical and disillusioned. The political ritual of criticism and self-criticism turned out to encourage lies, personal attacks, self-denial, and self-humiliation. Not until after Mao's death did some Chinese intellectuals begin to tell the truth and play active roles in public and political life.

Mao's efforts to transform the Chinese people into new communist persons were, in some ways, successful for the time in which he lived. When Orville Schell visited China in early 1970s, he noted the spirit of sacrifice among the Chinese people. In his comparison between China and the US, Schell remarked, that

⁶¹ Hung-Yok Ip, "Mao, Mao Zedong Thought, and Communist Intellectuals", *A Critical Introduction to Mao*, ed. by Timothy Cheek (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 169-195, see 139.

to work and forget oneself is one of the leitmotifs of these young and political-ly ambitious workers. They seem to view sacrifice with the same relish that their Western counterparts view self-indulgence. They make sacrifices during the normal day which most men in our society make only at times of extreme hardship. They discuss sacrifice as a way of life for ordinary times, rather than as an unusual event.⁶²

This image of the new communist person is the one Mao had wished for, rhetorically constructed, and effectively remolded.

On the other hand, Mao's efforts of constructing a new communist person failed after his death. Mao's efforts to create a new communist person are seen by many Chinese people as propaganda, as the manipulation of fears, hopes, and passions in today's China. The emergence of Lei Feng and many other communist moral models was seen merely as the products of Mao's propaganda tactics and mind control. In fact, ever since Deng Xiaoping launched economic reforms in the early 1980s, China has become increasingly materialistic and preoccupied by consumption. Chinese people are more interested in money than politics. Although government-controlled media still propagates the "Lei Feng spirit" to promote virtuous behaviour, such an effort is largely regarded by the average Chinese person as an *ex post facto*. Based on Mei Zhang's research of model emulation in post-Mao China,⁶³ the CCP continues to promote role models of altruism and self-sacrifice for the public good. However, the efficacy and impact of such models have lost its moral appeal as the pursuit of money and self-interest rises. Mao's political enterprise of remoulding the Chinese people through ideological education has largely failed.

In fact, since its economic reform forty years ago, China has been experiencing an ideological and moral void. Mao's notion of a "New Communist Person", directly opposes the generation of the "exquisite egocentric person", – a term coined by Qian Liqun to refer to the current Chinese educated youth who are highly intelligent, but selfish, crafty, cunning, and know how to take advantage of the system for personal gains.⁶⁴ In response to this moral crisis, Xi Jinping, the current President of China, proposed a set of "socialist core values" that include "prosperity, democracy, civility, harmony, freedom, equality, justice, the rule of law, patriotism, dedication, integrity and friendliness".⁶⁵

⁶² Orville Schell, *In the People's Republic: An American's First View of Living and Working in China* (New York: Random House, 1977), 183.

⁶³ Zhang Mei, "Official Role Models and Unofficial Responses: Problems of Model Emulation in Post-Mao China", *Chinese Perspectives in Rhetoric and Communication*, ed. by D. Ray Heisey (Stanford: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 2000), 67-86.

⁶⁴ Liqun Qian [钱理群], *Daxue li juehui jingzhi de lijizhuyizhe* [大学里绝对精致的利 主 义者], May 20th, 2015, <http://edu.qq.com/a/20150520/041737.htm>.

⁶⁵ Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2014), 71.

These core values are proposed as criteria for the 'New Socialist Person' in contemporary China. These core values, in the form of a new set of ideographs, are publicly disseminated and reiterated among Chinese citizens, displayed on billboards, and circulated on internet. This set of core values embraced both Confucian value of harmony and civility as well as Mao's elements of patriotism and dedication (to the Party) in the criteria for the 'New Communist Person'. At the same time, the 'New Socialist Person' criteria have also incorporated concepts of Western origin such as democracy, freedom, and equality. Ultimately, however, these words come across as empty slogans as there is no true sense of democracy, freedom, and equality under Xi's new authoritarian regime. Moreover, the Chinese people do not really take them seriously. Thus, the discourse of the socialist core values becomes inert when communist/socialist ideology lost its rhetorical appeals and replaced by capitalism and consumerism.