

## 7

## 文化

## Culture

DAI Jinhua

[Translated by Rebecca E. KARL]

In the course of China's socialist history, during that period we are accustomed to calling the 'Mao era'—or the 1950s to the 1970s—'culture' (*wenhua*) was without a doubt an extraordinarily important social category of practice. It is a crucial keyword that provides an entry into or an explanation for the history of that period. Even when we take the twentieth-century history of the international communist movement as a baseline, or when we consider the various countries of the socialist camp in the postwar period, the high level of self-consciousness and the variety of practice in the creation or construction of a new culture of socialism in China's socialist history is particularly prominent and striking.

This is, of course, a result of Mao Zedong's designs for and conceptualisation of 'new China' and a 'new society.' At the same time, it follows from the fact that the Mao-era phase of Chinese socialist history coincided exactly with a crucial phase in the advancement of China's modernisation. Hence, if we see 1949 as the moment at which the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) achieved a completely sovereign, modern, nation-state and also a national state committed to socialism, then we can appreciate that what this polity faced from then on was the final unravelling of a millennium of dynastic governance as well as, at the same time, the ongoing two-sided and dual task of determining a modern and a socialist culture under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The enormous social transformations of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to a great extent underpinned Chinese society's subsequent radical turn in politics and culture. This not only is demonstrated by the fact that it was indeed the 1919 May Fourth New Culture Movement and not the 1911 Republican Xinhai Revolution that genuinely inaugurated modern Chinese history, but it is further expressed in the ways in which the practice of new culture exhibited modern China's complete rejection of and rupture with premodern culture.

For this reason, 'new culture' (including new language) was transformed into a political practice and social rhetoric adopted by 'young China.' The practice and rhetoric were two sides of the same coin.

### *Culture as Modern Problematique*

Indeed, the *problematique* of culture in the Mao era cannot be seen as a mere extension or elaboration of the democratic revolution or the processes of modernisation already in progress long before 1949. The relation of culture to the course of socialist transformation and the construction of socialism must be seen separately. That is, in the radical culture of socialism, sensuous cultural thematics were entirely rewritten through the new idioms of Mao-era Marxist emphases on class revolution and the right [of the oppressed] to rebel; class equality through the overturning of class hierarchy (represented by Mao's saying: 'the most humble are now the most noble'); and historical materialism featuring the centrality of the subjectivity of the [revolutionary] people (*renmin*).

To be sure, the need to promote and popularise Marxism among the people and throughout society created the ongoing importance of new rounds of state institutional involvements in translation, publication, and distribution networks. These operated at an unprecedented scope compared to the previous efforts at westernisation and modernisation. Raising the literacy of the whole populace; opening adult educational courses for peasants and workers; efforts to simplify Chinese characters: all of these were on the table and implemented to one degree or another. They all offered a foundation for the modernisation of society and culture. And yet, in the midst of all this, not only was the historical materialism of Marxism propagated, but even more importantly, the complete rewriting of Chinese history through the historical materialist method was included in school textbooks, thus producing a profound and broad impact on society. In addition, there was wave after wave of folk songs and dances popularised by the spread of education; and, meanwhile, transformed folk art and folk performances were pressed into service to help animate and mobilise political movements and social change (see also the essays by Barlow, Javed, and Lee in the present volume). At the same time as this popular culture incorporated certain aspects of the modernisation of cultural resources drawn from traditional China, a path also was opened to the creation of class culture and the new culture of socialism. Perhaps it is unnecessary to add that during the Mao era, almost every important political incident or social turning point had some single or group of cultural overtures or harbingers: from the discussions over the traditional classic *Dream of the Red Chamber* or the critique of the movie *Life of Wu Xun* and whether these texts could become important and prominent components of socialist transformation all the way to the debate over the new historical drama *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*, whose critique was the opening act of the Cultural Revolution, or the discussions about the old classic *The Water Margin* and the criticisms of the novel *The Builders*. These latter discussions were part of the roll out of the Cultural Revolution and the last chapter of the Mao era.

Throughout the establishment in the 1950s to 1970s of the culture of socialism and the institutional mechanisms through which this new culture would operate, China directly borrowed the systemic structures of the Soviet Union. Among the

more important of these were literary journals, writers' associations, and the system of movie production studios, all of which manifested the deep influence of Lenin's cultural thinking and the theory of the 'socialist new person.'<sup>1</sup> And yet, the difference between China and the Soviet Union resides in the fact that China's new culture was also, to a certain degree, an extension of the Republican era cultural thematic of 'transforming the national character.' Even if the cultural thematic of socialism extended that of the Republican period, there was also a very important difference: under socialism, new culture was not to be based upon the theme of the 'individual' derived from Euro-American logics of human nature. That was a cultural imagination that had been proposed by the modernising Republican nation-state as the alternative to the long-persistent premodern Chinese family-clan ethics. By contrast to both the premodern and the individual cultural logics, Mao Zedong and the CCP promoted socialist education, thought reform, and mass culture and art in part, of course, to disseminate socialist ideology, but also as levers intended to dislodge the hugely dominant premodern Chinese cultural disposition towards hierarchical order, or that logic that formed the class and social status basis for the production of the ideology of obedient people or slavishness. In this regard, the most exemplary Maoist expression of class consciousness was: 'Where there is oppression, there is opposition.' The simplest expression of the Maoist theory of class struggle can be encapsulated in the saying: 'The teachings of Marxism ... in the end can be summed up in one phrase: it is right to rebel!'

### *Culture of Socialism*

The culture of socialism of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s was simultaneously a culture of revolution and rebellion; it was a culture aimed at undermining the value judgements on superiority and inferiority, high and low, good and bad of traditional China. It was to become a class culture; in other words, it presented an opening to an equality of practice. The focus and dynamic plotting of socialist or historical materialist historiography took the centrality of peasant revolts against dynastic rule as its narrative centre, not the rise and fall of dynasties. It was within this historical contextual gambit that new Chinese culture attempted to instantiate the social, historical, and cultural subject of 'the people,' which was concretely anchored in the just-emerging social categories named by the trinity 'worker/peasant/soldier' (see also Guan's essay in the present volume).

Perhaps we could say that in the Mao era, one of the most prominent characteristics of the CCP's state-cultural practice was its leading promotion of the art and culture of workers, peasants, and soldiers. In this regard, many highly politicised sites functioned as mechanisms to nurture producers of 'mass culture.' These included various state institutions, factories and mines, villages and people's communes, military installations and others. All of these helped introduce new writers and artists to the cultural scene, thus fundamentally altering the class composition of culture producers as well as the class nature of the audiences for art and culture. At the same time, the relationship between audiences for and producers of art and culture also changed. This can be considered as a totalising attempt to create new culture as part of the project to simultaneously create the 'new person' and vice versa.

And yet, we could also say that, within the context of a global political perspective that takes 1989 as the historical moment at which the socialist camp disintegrated and the international communist movement was completely defeated, the reforms initiated by the Party-state in the 1980s represent not only a political failure but, perhaps primarily and at the very least simultaneously, a cultural failure. The implosion of socialism—or maybe it was just defeated without a battle—is one piece of evidence for this proposition. If we for the moment bracket a discussion of the role of political economics in this ‘grand failure;’ if we bracket the fact that, internal to many socialist countries (including China), the task of building socialism was at the same time and foremost the task of realising modernisation within the context of the global capitalist system; if we bracket, as well, critical reflections on Leninist theories and practices of ‘state and revolution;’ then I believe a precipitator of the internal combustion of socialism and the socialist camp was a dynamic within socialism which cannot be encapsulated by its lack of actual economic development or its paucity in material life, but rather, more precisely, it can be understood through the gradually accumulated tension between a revolutionary party and the realities of governing, between revolutionary culture and the requirements of ruling. China in the Mao era, with its systemic social-cultural logic of revolution/rebellion, oppression/resistance is particularly indicative of these tensions. On one side were the uniquely broad, continuously promoted social mobilisations—‘the violent and tempestuous mass movements’<sup>2</sup>—whose logic of revolution/rebellion inserted itself deeply into the hearts of the people; and on another side was the anxious global situation of the Cold War, for which the process of modernisation and industrialisation was most urgent and because of which socialist countries implemented internal order, coerced obedience, direct political pressure, and all-around surveillance policies.

In the midst of all this, the paradoxical aspect of the articulation of the culture of socialism was in its preservation of revolutionary or communist ideals, which were then ‘translated’ or ‘transplanted’ into expressions of loyalty towards the Party (the revolutionary party? the ruling party?) and the state (the national state? the socialist state?). Revolution/rebellion/overthrowing of the old society and vanquishing the oppressor were all parts of a mainstream expressive value system as well as part of a personal or social promise about the future. This promise was soon closed off by a past that receded into history even as the promise was projected into a future imaginary and vision, which then was rendered into a unique kind of suspension of reality. Continuous calls for mass movements and the uninterrupted summons to social mobilisation facilitated the accumulation of the cataclysmic capacities of society (see also Li’s essay in the present volume). In these processes, both intimate social organisation and harsh social supervision coexisted as a condition of social life itself. Such social capacities, on the one hand, could be turned to serve for the requirements of modernisation, industrialisation, and other experiments in economic construction. And yet, those processes also could not completely deplete or free up the amassing of social energy, thus inevitably leading to the extremity of social (cultural) tension. This situation perhaps helps explain how the Cultural Revolution could be ‘launched’ from ‘top-to-bottom’ and then, instantaneously, burst forth from ‘bottom to top;’ thus making it very difficult to summarise the movement exclusively as a ‘top to bottom’

event. This can also perhaps help explain how in the first year of the Cultural Revolution the young student/red guard movement exploded onto the scene with two absurdly mismatched slogans: 'the right to rebel' and 'boundless loyalty'.

### *Culture and Future Scholarship*

In short, in the 1950s and 1960s, there was a self-contradictory and paradoxical condition to political culture and political economics that, in the end, created a huge tension within socialist countries, tugging at them and finally causing them to implode. For this reason, to encapsulate the Cultural Revolution is, in reality, to encapsulate the terminus of the Mao era. Yet, ironically, the 1976 Tiananmen Square mass protest movement deployed the classic forms of socialist mass culture and art: a movement on the Square for popular poetry and singing. Meanwhile, the cultural form of clearing accounts for the Cultural Revolution was through 'scar literature,' along with a wave of publishing whose major constituents had themselves emerged from the mass art and literature movements animated by and through the advent of worker/peasant/soldier writers.

Of course, any further discussion of these topics would need to be more complex. It would, at minimum, require a consideration of the fierce debates among cultural producers about how capitalist-bourgeois culture functions as a potential force undermining the establishment of socialist culture, not to mention an exploration into the narrative form that requires collectivist action to be undertaken by individual heroes. Ultimately, such complexity would have to deal with an investigation into the contradictory relationship between the universals of historical materialism and the particularities of China.

Chinese socialist cultural experiments of the Mao era profoundly rewrote Chinese society and culture, as well as the psychological structures of the Chinese people and their social life. These revisions have created a unique inheritance for a still-evolving modern Chinese culture. Perhaps these legacies could yet open another path towards, or another entry into, an alternative society or an alternative cultural practice.

This text is taken from *Afterlives of Chinese Communism: Political Concepts from Mao to Xi*, edited by Christian Sorace, Ivan Franceschini and Nicholas Loubere, published 2019 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

[doi.org/10.22459/ACC.2019.07](https://doi.org/10.22459/ACC.2019.07)