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形式主义

Formalism

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In his 1942 speech ‘Oppose Stereotyped Party Writing,’ delivered at Yan’an, Mao Zedong critiqued Party discourse that was full of cliché but lacked concrete substance. He argued that such discourse constituted yet another kind of ‘eight-legged essay’ (*baguwen*), the formulaic standard for imperial examinations, and identified the ‘formalism’ (*xingshizhuyi*) of this discourse as being out of touch with the masses that comprised both its ostensible audience and object. Formalism in short order crystallised an objection to all manner of impertinent convention, feudalistic ritual behaviour, aesthetic ornamentalism, and empty rhetorical abstraction. In the Soviet Union, the aesthetic currents of the Russian Formalists that flourished in the early years of the Bolshevik Revolution had already been proscribed by Stalinist orthodoxy.¹ Crucially, the epithet ‘formalist’ expressed how elitist forms of expression and behaviour often indexed social and political privilege. Mao’s hostility to calcified institutional practices, and his suspicion that such attitudes only cemented elitist privilege, lent the term a strong affect of political resentment; he identified elitism not just in the old feudal ruling classes and urbanised intellectuals, but also as forming in the privileged attitude among many within his own revolutionary movement. Just a short time earlier, in another speech entitled ‘Rectify the Party’s Style of Work,’ he had criticised the Party’s ‘style of work’ (*zuofeng*) for promoting selfishness and dogmatism. Formalism prevented Party members from thinking of their own endeavours as integrated with the Party’s work and the people as a whole. Mao’s reference to the imperial eight-legged essay to figure both stereotyped Party writing, but more essentially, forms of self-centred conduct, implied that Party behaviour and discourse were essentially ‘textual’ in nature. As such, they corresponded to forms and styles whose relationship to mass politics could be assessed.

Form and Content

Anti-formalist sentiment derives from the culture of Chinese modernity as a whole; in the late 1910s, the New Culture Movement's iconoclastic attitude toward all varieties of premodern, 'feudalistic' (*fengjian*) norms of ritual behaviour was in keeping with the egalitarian aspirations of thinkers and reformers of that period. Liberal Hu Shi and radical Chen Duxiu alike proclaimed the need for Chinese literature and art to abandon outdated classical forms and adopt styles and genres in keeping with the modern age. While drawing on this tradition, Mao nevertheless charged urban intellectuals with saying one thing and doing another—while they upheld an image as agents of change, they remained hopelessly tied to their social privileges.

However, Maoist formalism encompasses more than a critique of elitist snobbery and empty rhetoric. The question of the proper relation between 'form' (*xingshi*) and 'content' (*neirong*) constituted an epistemological problem that Mao, who was intensely studying Marxist philosophy during the Yan'an period, sought to resolve. The relationship between 'form and content' was but one of many dialectical antinomies that appears throughout Marxist parlance. Its roots stretch as far back as German idealism, in particular the philosophy of Hegel. Indeed, the spirit of Mao's critique of formalism did not consist of a disavowal of all forms, but rather an exhortation to bring form back into a productive relationship with real social content. Formalism as a philosophical problem thus brought into its orbit such categories as literature, politics, and education—to wit, all forms of knowledge and cultural production.

The philosophy of Hegel iterates time and again the dynamic unity of form and content; they are not separate entities but two aspects of a dialectical whole. Content denotes undifferentiated, immediate existence in all its potentiality, while form expresses its internal structure as an organised self-reflection. The distinction between form and content is not absolute; rather, it can be grasped as how we perceive a thing in an immediate and total manner, as an essence, but also mediated through intelligible representations, so it emerges as appearance. As knowledge of reality proceeds in a dialectical *perpetuum mobile*, the distinction between form and content never remains static—they always appear relative to one another in a process of endless progression. Whereas 'idealist' philosophers such as Hegel identified real 'content' with notions of universal 'Spirit,' later materialists, including Marx, dispensed with such idealism as the basis of knowledge. Ultimate reality was not to be located in universal concepts and abstractions, but within the material world. Marxist philosophy locates the roots of knowledge within the processes of human labour. Real content, then, was not to be found in abstract concepts, but within the material forms of social life.

Overcoming the Domination of Form

That form and content are but two aspects of an integrated whole strikes at the crux of the problem of formalism—what happens when forms (of knowledge, of art, of philosophy, of behaviour, etc.) become alienated from their social content? As social life constantly progresses through struggle, the forms through which we mediate knowledge of social life should also change. But what happens when abstract form, through repetition, replication, and imitation, takes on the appearance of concrete

materiality, thus occulting the real content from which form ostensibly derives? What happens when form takes on a life of its own and forgets its very origins in the content that has been elided? To endlessly replicate forms, conventions, and institutions that have long outlived their social shelf-life can thus only serve one possible purpose: the maintenance of social privilege.

Under Mao's Chinese Communist Party (CCP), then, formalism as a term of denunciation was meant to correct the dominance of mere form over social content. Content was seen as the primary criterion against which all forms were to be judged, and all had to conform to the CCP's vision of what social content ought to be. In practice, what the campaign against formalism ensured was the prohibition against the formal autonomy of academic disciplines and cultural production. The constant need to justify all intellectual and aesthetic activity on the basis of its ostensible relation to concrete social reality constituted a political imperative that brought serious consequences to those who committed the sin of formalism.

The rise of a 'model' (*mofan*) culture in the aesthetics of the People's Republic, however, demonstrates how the Communists sought to align innovative aesthetic forms that not only reflected real social content, but could also shape utopian forms of social life to emerge in the future.² In his 1942 'Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art,' Mao himself argued that such art 'ought to be on a higher plane, more intense, more concentrated, more typical, nearer the ideal, and therefore more universal than actual everyday life.' Model types were distinct from formalism in that there was a putative organic link between these forms and real social transformation. If model forms did not reflect a current social reality, then they could potentially instigate a process by which they would eventually materialise.

The imperative that all aesthetic forms reflect an undeniable social content tended to result, ironically, in the formalisation of social life into shopworn conventions. How is it possible to encapsulate the complexities and vicissitudes of social life into a few sanctioned forms? As Jason McGrath has noted, the more rigid the ideology and aesthetics of the Cultural Revolution became, the more model operas became untethered from social life and started to 'drift' into formulaic convention.³ In the guise of resisting formalism, Maoist culture often ended up imposing its own readymade representational formulas on the social world (see also Sorace's essay in the present volume).

A New War against Formalism

The end of the Mao era undoubtedly brought fresh air into domains of knowledge and cultural production that had become moribund as a result of anti-formalist attitudes. To a certain extent, starting in the 1980s, academics and artists were granted a formal autonomy they had rarely experienced. Western modernism, with its emphasis on formal sophistication, flourished in Chinese literary and visual arts. The achievements of Chinese writers, artists, and intellectuals of the postreform period confirm that a degree of formal autonomy in their respective disciplinary domains was not only healthy for their intellectual and cultural development, but could also provide new perspectives on ever-changing social realities.

But the reintroduction of the market economy has created class differences that exist not simply on a material level, but on a formal one as well. Urbanites and migrants, rich and poor, elite and common, have grown increasingly alienated from each other, not simply in terms of wealth, but also in terms of dress, language, and styles. Since Mao's death, education has reverted to extremely competitive modes of standardised testing which seem only to replicate the domination of elites, approximating the eight-legged essays of the imperial examination system that Mao hated so much. State bureaucrats, while nominally professing the communist creed, behave more like genteel aristocrats than committed cadres. Postmodern Chinese art garners top dollar on the market, seemingly more tied to the accumulation of cultural capital than the reflection of social conditions. Popular resentment against the emergence of a new social hierarchy has continued to spill over into outbreaks of discontent.

It is no wonder, then, that under Xi Jinping formalism has reemerged as a target. Critiquing the Party's increasing alienation from the people it serves, in 2013 Xi declared formalism as one of the 'four forms of decadence' (*si feng*) to be opposed, along with 'bureaucratism' (*guanliao zhuyi*), 'hedonism' (*xianle zhuyi*), and 'extravagance' (*shemi*).⁴ His critique of formalism echoes Mao's own criticisms of selfishness within the Party's style of work. Xi has sought to channel popular discontent with a Party perceived as hopelessly out of touch; by bringing back rhetoric against formalism, he seems to suggest that the Party should return to its populist roots, and that its formal gestures correspond to a sincere commitment to social life.

But what is missing from Xi's critique of formalism is the dynamic interplay between ideological form and social content—one fuelled by the ever-churning internal roiling within social life. Mao's critique of formalism was connected to the necessity of recognising continuously changing social conditions and contradictions, and how they foster new forms of knowledge that aid in analysing them. Mao thrived upon, if not relished, the kind of social upheaval that made visible new roads of political possibility. Xi has abandoned class struggle in favour of consolidating national unity. However, railing against the sins of formalism while trying to tamp down any kind of grassroots social struggle ensures that this critique will remain stuck in the logic of formalism—an ironic cliché.

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.2019.12