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Large and Communitarian

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What should we call them? We can call them people's communes or not call them people's communes. My opinion is that we should call them people's communes People's communes are both large and communitarian. Many people, large territory, large-scale production, large-scale services.

Mao Zedong, 1958¹

Mao Zedong's coining of the slogan 'large and communitarian' (*yida ergong*) accompanied the launch of the people's communes (*renmin gongshe*) in 1958.² In the language of Maoism, collectivism had come to include a territorial aspiration, and the success of the communes depended on their size (see Gao's essay in the present volume). More than one hundred years earlier, in 1845, Friedrich Engels had instead emphasised how collectivism aimed at creating new, efficient spaces for the working class:

And then the preparation of meals—what a waste of space, ingredients, labour, is involved in the present, separate households, where every family cooks its little bit of food on its own, has its own supply of crockery, employs its own cook, must fetch its own supplies separately from the market, from the garden, from the butcher and the baker!³

In the same Elberfeld lecture, Engels was keen to call attention to Robert Owen's 1,650 square-foot residential block used to concentrate and enhance working-class labour power.

Besides the mundanity and technicality of Engel's vision and the grandiosity and focus on the wider territory that Mao expressed from the beginning of the Great Leap Forward, this different way of thinking about how to build collectivism also signals one of the less researched ways in which Maoism diverged from Bolshevism. Mao wanted communes to be big, something that could inspire awe in the imagination of the masses. It was about conquering the territory, extending the reach of the state. Only then would it be communitarian. Efficiency was a very distant priority for the Great Helmsman. The large territorial units were to replace the artificial division between cities and countryside (*yida*), while a large group of people were to collectively own the means of production (*ergong*): this was the double engine of communist transformation. The very size of the communes, sometimes as large as a county, and where means of production were in the hands of a local government at times hundreds of kilometres from agricultural sites, became one of the reasons why they failed. Already in August 1959, after the Lushan Conference revealed the first cracks in the leadership regarding the Great Leap Forward, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) exposed the exaggerations of the communes and suggested a prudent return to a more 'natural' collectivism—one that relied on cooperatives and production teams.

Just a Leftist Mistake?

The ideology of 'large and communitarian' went down in history as a 'leftist mistake' (*zuopai cuowu*). Nonetheless, it continues to signify one fundamental difference between the two main forms of socialist organisation: the efficiency-seeking Soviet version, and the territorial concerns of the Chinese version that aimed at seizing control of the collective strengths of a largely rural society. Notwithstanding the many contradictions, when pointing our gaze at a *longue durée* history of socialist China's developmental ideology, it seems clear that maintaining control and shaping physical territory is still a high-priority strategy. The two most significant attempts to reshape China—the communes and the current urbanisation drive—while undoubtedly different in ideology and form, are ultimately territorial projects of a state constantly obsessed with the patrolling of the shifting geographical and human borders between cities and the countryside. Through them, the state—admittedly different states with different priorities at different historical moments—is attempting to control increasing chunks of the country's vast territory and impose a nationwide rationality.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the rationale underpinning the communes was the need to control the prices of agricultural products to facilitate industrialisation and the transfer of resources from agriculture, of which China had plenty, to industry, of which China had little. Today, it is about imposing the rationality of the planning state as a means of resolving the messy territorial, environmental, and property rights uncertainties of the still existing collectives. In both cases, it was a state-directed project that implied the advantages of control—state-owned communes were the plan then, rationalisation through state-owned land in the cities is the goal now. Both imply that, once the state becomes involved, size is increased and the larger scale allows for *rational* decisions taken by a higher planning authority. The traditional reliance on large ventures that *project* the power of the state onto the territory, and limit the wasteful private use of land, survives the otherwise obvious differences between the two campaigns. No doubt

one was aimed at gaining control of the countryside, the other of cities; one had the goal of gathering productive forces, the other of assembling the consuming masses; one was aimed at rationalising consumption in a low-resource environment, the other to allow a growth in the value of land and the real estate built on it to support the expansion of cities. Yet, in both cases there was a reliance on 'large,' where size and scale allowed for the implementation of common priorities.

The other implication of 'large' is integration. When the CCP launched the ultimately unsuccessful extension of communes to the cities in 1959—the so-called 'urban people's communes' (*chengshi renmin gongshe*)—they were supposed to 'become the unifying organisation to integrate production, trade, distribution, and public services and to unify the politics of *gong nong shang xue bing* (workers, peasants, traders, intellectuals, and soldiers).'⁴ When Shanghai communised in the same year, planners hailed a new era of integration with three emphatically stated goals: a) turn the isolated areas of the municipality into 'planned industrial and agricultural areas' where the two activities support each other; b) change the former *separation* between industrial and cultural life; and c) eliminate the existing separation of urban and rural in planning the territory.⁵

Talks of an integrated development of cities and their hinterland have been one of the main goals of current urbanising trends: among many urban slogans about the sustainable city, *chengxiang yitihua*, or the integration of the industrial periurban with the hypermodernity of the inner cities, remains one of the main—and most elusive—goals of today's planners.

A Spiritual Connection

The second objective of the original slogan was never abandoned and contributes to the CCP's grip on power today by establishing the connection between the territorial and the spiritual objectives of a policy campaign. In 1958, *ergong* was meant to signify a movement towards a more communitarian society, where the cohesiveness of communities would overcome their lack of resources, where nature would be the ultimate enemy, and growth a utopian benchmark that could only be achieved through struggle. Today the CCP has hardly abandoned the goal of controlling the motivation of individual citizens, and mounts campaigns in which the good citizen is a righteous, law-abiding, and high-consuming human being. The reward is no longer a utopian communist society for all, but a more ordinary place among the social elites. Faith in the Party's authority is an element of that righteousness and a condition to be part of this new elite. While *gong*, the public community of collective memories, may not be the ultimate goal anymore (despite attempts to revive it), controlling the definition of public good remains central to any ideological efforts of the Party.

In this process of transformation the officially promoted and reward-based conception of morality has changed radically. In 1960, the goal of the communes was described as 'reforming radically the lifestyles of the masses, ultimately eliminating the distinction between cities and countryside, between industry and agriculture, and between manual and intellectual labour.'⁶ When planning communes in the city, for example, it was imperative that the new communist way of life be inscribed in the new spaces:

In the old cities, the design of services and residential areas was influenced by a certain idea of 'family' that still reflected capitalist privilege and focussed on individualistic lifestyle. For example, houses were planned with an apartment for each family, with each apartment featuring its own kitchen and stove. Once the door was closed, the home became a sacred, undisturbed space, where women were bound to cooking, raising children, and other home chores. Two doors faced each other or neighbours lived one above the other but they would never visit even if their chickens and dogs could hear each other's calling (*ji quan xiang wen, er laosi bu xiang wanglai*). These buildings of one-family-one-house where households cook meals on their own are incompatible with the collectivisation of life and the socialisation of service labour.⁷

The *gong* that this description suggested was a utopian approach to the atomisation and the alienation (see Ou's essay in the present volume). The critique often heard by voices nostalgic for a more collective life usually emerges in the context of lifestyles that can be characterised by today's gated communities and privatisation of governance in new real estate residential communities.⁸ It remains, however, a fact that lifestyles even today are not the expressions of individual choice but rather of individuals willingly buying into a certain aesthetic, packaged by the developer of a large community with the approval of the local state that is keen to use new residential settings to attract 'high-quality' citizens. It is not uncommon for developers to sell a specific lifestyle and even to register its trademark, and for local developers to reproduce the same language associated with campaigns of the state.

Yida ergong is a lost slogan, one that reminds us of a different age of China's modernisation. Yet, *da*, intended as the need to shape the territory and to project the power of the state on it, and *gong*, a public good around which the building of a social coalition is possible that justifies the ideology of the ruling Party, are both still pervasive in today's China.

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.2019.18