

## 20

## 群众路线

## Mass Line

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In post-Mao China, the concept of the ‘mass line’ (*qunzhong luxian*)—consulting the masses, interpreting their will, and implementing policies in their interests—has been widely reviled in public and academic discourse. As the transformative objectives of the Mao era fade into obscurity, all that is remembered is the violence of oppression and persecution, which is condemned in retrospective judgment. Still, whereas in English, with an air of elitist condescension, the term ‘masses’ conjures up the loss of individuality in an indistinct crowd of people, during the Mao era, to be part of the ‘revolutionary masses’ was to belong to a collective political subject, which amplified one’s sense of individual worth and glory. Today, China’s ordinary people could only dream of such substantial and symbolic respect. In addition to its association with Mao-era chaos, the mass line rings anachronistic in an age of conservative governance which, regardless of the political system, attempts to contain ‘excessive’ democratic desires. How do we approach the mass line in times of mass dispossession, degradation of the public, and waning belief in popular power? If by returning to the lessons from history, the true nature of the present can be accessed and transformed, then the relevance of the mass line lies in its noble conviction as an unfinished project: ordinary people can be proud of themselves as direct producers of both material and cultural wealth in the collective mastery of their own destiny.

*China’s Lost Mass Line*

The mass line was an innovative concept and a powerful tool of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as it struggled to seize and consolidate power. As is typical for political ideals, it is an ideological commitment as well as a working method. By design, it entails a dynamically interactive bottom-up and top-down process of ‘from the masses, to the masses,’ in which the leadership collects scattered views from below and turns

them into systematic positions and experimental policies, the effects of which are then investigated, debated, and fed once again back into the system. This process of ‘pooling the wisdom of the masses’ (*jizhong qunzhong zhihui*) through solicitation, aggregation, articulation, and adjustment repeats itself in an endless cycle. Instead of the competing ‘interest groups’ of liberal democracies, this form of politics and governance seeks to integrate public preferences for sound policymaking while minimising cleavages and mistakes. Meanwhile, in the communist tradition of rural mobilisation, the Party must attend to every detail of the basic needs and interests of the population, as the core of its social contract with the people, described in the popular analogy of a fish-in-water or seed-in-soil relationship. Institutionally, the mass line is also a novel adaptation of the Leninist principle of democratic centralism which aims at balancing deliberation and discipline, and avoiding bureaucratic dogmatism and blind commandism. When not confined to inner-Party operations, the mass line emphasises popular input based on the premise of the sovereignty of the people.<sup>1</sup>

I have been using the present tense not because mass line politics exists today, but because it is a normative model. For the same reason, an analytical distinction between the rhetoric and utility of mass line is necessary. Historically, Party building, the united front, and armed struggle were taken as the three ‘great magic weapons’ of the Chinese Communist Revolution (see De Giorgi’s essay in the present volume). The mass line was imperative for achieving them all—as the benchmark for Party programmes and groundwork, as the baseline and pathway to the alliance between workers and peasants at the core of a wider rallying front, and as the epitome of the people’s war (see Guan’s essay in the present volume). Class- and state-building in the red base areas prior to the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) depended on the mass line, so did the war effort in Korea in the early 1950s and the subsequent socioeconomic transitions throughout the Mao era. The effective mass movements to alleviate illiteracy, improve sanitation, eliminate endemic diseases, and so on, were good examples. Mass line-style accumulation of both capital and labour also featured in China’s socialist build-up of infrastructure and industrialisation.

The CCP, claiming to have no special interest of its own, took the motto ‘to serve the people’ as another catchphrase to indicate the mass line (see Karl’s essay in the present volume). ‘We the people,’ however, were not a given but had to be forged through revolutionary socialisation. It involved painstaking tasks at the grassroots fulfilled by the Party’s foot soldiers, work teams, and activists mobilised by the ‘mass organisations’ (*qunzhong tuanti*), i.e. various wartime local associations and later branches of the official trade union, women’s federation, and youth league as arms of state corporation (see Perry’s essay in the present volume). The famous Yan’an way of raising consciousness favoured peasant art forms and networks in indigenous dialects to popularise a Sinified Marxism. The ‘continuous revolution’ that followed 1949 went farther ideologically: school classes should include productive and scientific labour; regular folks could become philosophers through mass learning (*qunzhong xue zhexue*); and ‘emperors, ministers, and generals’ (*diwang jiangxiang*) should be replaced by commoners who would then ‘occupy stages of the superstructure’ (see Schmalzer’s essay in the present volume). Mao concurred with Marx that theory can be a material force for winning over the masses. In this sense of self-confidence and self-reliance of a liberated nation, the Chinese people had stood up in 1949 and placed their country on equal footing

with the nations of the world, long before the so-called rise of China credited to its market economic ‘miracle.’ Not only did their revolutionary victory have an immense impact on the third world, but it also inspired a whole generation of intellectual rebels in the global 1968 (see the essays by Lanza and Teng in the present volume).

Still, actual tensions between centralism and decentralisation, mobilisation and participation, and guidance and spontaneity or vanguardism and populism posed a serious challenge, both conceptually and operationally. Mass line politics was often overshadowed by either increased Party control or willful voluntarism. What was designed to provide a two-way flow of information and exchange became a conduit for the imposition of the Party line or the lawless anarchism of mass movements. Such contradictions could only be partially made up for by the Maoist assertion that educators must be educated by the masses, as well as the call for constant criticisms and self-criticisms within the Party. Mao’s decision to mobilise the masses to attack the Party-state itself was also doomed from the beginning. However, the belief in the entitlement and creativity of ordinary men and women in constructing socialism while remaking themselves, in the intrinsic good of their public and political participation, and in their right and ability to expel the old and new ruling classes, transcends traditional liberal hostility towards popular power, denounced as ‘mobocracy’ or a hotbed of totalitarianism. That is, according to the mass line, power is not handed down from above but attainable only by the masses through their own daring struggles.

The mass line is the creation and lodestar of the Chinese Revolution. The masses, like the revolutionary classes and the people, are made through revolutionary practices. If we stick to its original vision, waves of arbitrary victimisation and policy blunders would appear not as the by-products of the mass line but its very betrayal. It would thus be fair to draw the lesson, dearly paid for by countless sacrifices, that only when the Party is ideologically and practically faithful to its traditional mass line, can it triumph against all odds; otherwise it fails, regardless of how the failure might be self-deceptively packaged or perceived.

### *From the Paris Commune to the Angang Constitution and Beyond*

Marx’s visionary assumptions about the Paris Commune loom large in the background. The ‘utopia’ of removing distinctions between governors and governed, and the regular selection of administrators by lot with a constant leeway of their being recalled, was glimpsed in the Paris Commune as within the realms of possibility. In the legislative bodies of the PRC, for example, the people’s deputies (*renmin daibiao*) are not professional politicians. They come from all walks of life and go back to their individual professions when the Congresses are not in session. If only the National People’s Congress was truly ‘the highest organ of state power’ as proclaimed in the Constitution! If only the deputies who sit on it and its local bodies were truly representatives of the people and empowered as lawmakers! The relatively recent phenomenon of the super-rich and bureaucrats dominating the institution violates the original design but does not nullify its promise.

What connects the Paris Commune to the mass line is self-governing or participatory governance in workplaces and residential communities, which is qualitatively superior to money-fuelled electoral politics. An active citizenry and high-intensity politics

were indeed hallmarks of Chinese socialism. If certain ‘bourgeois rights’ were deemed unavoidable in a transitional period to communism, Mao nevertheless insisted on the role of labour in managing government, enterprises, cultural institutions, and public affairs.<sup>2</sup> In his critique of Stalin’s political economy textbook, Mao remarked that the right to state management was missing from the 1936 Soviet constitutional rights of workers to employment, paid leave, education, and security in old age and sickness (adopted in the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948).<sup>3</sup> In his words, this absent right should be labour’s ‘biggest and most fundamental right in a socialist system.’ Without it and its institutionalisation, other rights cannot be guaranteed. This point has been abundantly vindicated by the postsocialist ruins. Familiar axioms such as ‘labour’s dignity’ and the working population as ‘masters of society’ have vanished under a bureaucratic-market dictatorship (see the essays by Wang Ban, Meyskens, and Franceschini in the present volume). The catastrophic consequences of losing even an imperfect workers’ state are laid bare in front of our eyes.

Convinced that human agency and socialist potential had been stifled in the Soviet Union, Mao’s attempted remedy focused on curbing bureaucratisation, material incentives, and rigid divisions of labour. His alternative was social empowerment by ‘walking on two legs’ (*liangtiaotui zoulu*), which meant liberating popular energy in all sectors, at all levels. In what came to be known as Mao’s ‘7 May Directive,’ he envisioned communal socialism, in which labour would have a collective purpose, enabling each individual to perform several roles, thereby fulfilling Marx’s promise of emancipated human creativity. The commune would engage in industry, agriculture, commerce, education, healthcare, and defence simultaneously. Its members would practice united labour together, freely debate politics, as well as enjoy leisure, while creating new people and society. Mao however did not elaborate on how to arrange intercommunal relationships (as a global problem), which created a major hurdle to fostering equality between local groups and workers from outside of the community.

Mao was also firmly for industrialisation and a strong advocate for economic democracy. The eminent Angang Constitution, proposed in 1960 for the Anshan Steelworks and other large state firms, introduced egalitarian approaches that required managers to join workers on the shopfloor, workers to partake in executive decisions, and technicians to contribute to both undertakings. The scheme promoted multiskilled practitioners and smooth horizontal and vertical communications. Fluid hierarchies and shared responsibilities would, in turn, boost morale and efficiency. However short-lived, the experiment pioneered a mass line managerial revolution against both statist and capitalist ‘sole-head systems’ (*yizhang zhi*) and Taylorism. Economic democracy involved democratic planning and budgeting, equal pay for equal work, and mechanisms of public control over the surpluses in a model of production for needs rather than profits. This ambition of countering capitalist primitive accumulation as ‘nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production’ is what ultimately underscored the mass line in the sense of labour gaining freedom and power (see also Hayward’s essay in the present volume).<sup>4</sup>

### *Politics in Command*

In China's market transition, the conditions in which the mass line had flourished are gone. Its brief return in the official vocabulary under Xi Jinping's direction a few years ago sounded hollow and ended abruptly. A first explanation is obvious: the relationship between the Party and masses has radically changed. After all, we are talking about a different Party whose remaining communist identity contradicts its non- or anti-communist direction and conduct. The alienation of officials from the masses is now an everyday experience in Chinese society. Despite his own failures to institutionalise worker power, Mao repeatedly predicted the scenario of 'a nation-wide counterrevolutionary restoration, when the Marxist party becomes a revisionist or fascist one, and the whole of China changes its colour.'<sup>25</sup> With the masses out of the picture after the Cultural Revolution, families of the 'red aristocracy' and the new elites have enriched themselves at an unprecedented speed and scale by devouring state resources, and colluding public offices with private (domestic and foreign) capital. The early, popular enthusiasm and mandate for reform collapsed when a new 'comprador-bureaucratic capitalism' (one of the main enemies of the Communist Revolution) emerged. Anti-graft campaigns have been plainly selective and left the root cause of corruption and degeneration intact. Above all, the loss of the mass line implies that the Party and government are no longer supposed to be publicly supervised (see also Andreas' essay in the present volume). Chinese rulers refuse the popular demand to transparently declare their personal assets, for example, which is routine in capitalist democracies. Deprived of their 'right to rebel' (*zaofan youli*), the masses cannot question or resist Party decisions in any form.

Second, by the same logic, the transformation of social and class relations renders any organised class politics a sheer impossibility. Without a 'leading working class' (constitutionally designated) in the first place, the majority of Chinese workers, who are rural migrants often on subcontracted or precarious jobs, are hardly a conscious class force. The 'labouring people' no longer signal a powerful political category. Instead, they are viewed through the lens of negative signifiers, such as 'vulnerable groups' (*ruoshi qunti*) prone to 'mass incidents' (*qunti shijian*) that threaten social stability. In Beijing's ruthless campaign to expel migrants from the outskirts of the capital in the freezing cold in the winter of 2017, the abusive reference to them as a 'low end population' (*diduan renkou*), and the violent treatment of many of them as nothing but cheap, disposable commodities sparked a national outcry.

Yet, the blurred nature of the Party-state continues to prevent class consciousness from forming by occupying the symbolic space through which it could be articulated. The Party also cracks down on any sign of collective organisation and action. Labour's dilemmas lie in whether to accept or reject the nominally communist regime and its arbitration, and whether to rely on ever distant state protection or attempt to collectively organise itself while running the high risk of being repressed. As such, labour vacillates between a waning hope of empowerment and the harsh reality of powerlessness, as shown in 2018 in the police pursuit of students supporting workers' unionisation at the Shenzhen Jasic Technology factory. The state-capital coalition severely limits the Party-sanctioned legal channels. These channels are utilised only because workers are robbed of a socialist state that functions as an institutionalised class power committed

to their wellbeing and recognition. At best, depoliticised litigations and lawsuits seek isolated legal redress while thwarting the political representation of class interests or ferment of insurgency. The notions of judicial independence and formal procedures presume a 'normal' polity that protects capitalist private property and order, in contrast to the mass line presuppositions that subject legality to the fundamental morality of social justice (see Hurst's essay in the present volume). Given China's profound revolutionary inheritance, neither the rule of law prioritised in the state agenda nor political democratisation as a liberal yearning can be legitimately accomplished without reinstating this moral substance.

A third explanation is that the Party's current ideological position is incompatible with the mass line, as reflected in the lack of persuasiveness and cultural capital of the Party's people-centred rhetoric. Under Deng Xiaoping's interdiction against 'arguing' (*bu zhenglun*), decades of a state-sponsored commodification and single-minded growth have nurtured a monoculture of money fetishism, consumerism, and political cynicism. Xi Jinping's 'New Era' has so far produced no reorientation while at the same time endorsing a superficial and even deformed Marxism. Exemplary is his depiction of the contradiction facing Chinese society as 'between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people's ever-growing needs for a better life,' rolled out at the Nineteenth Party Congress.<sup>6</sup> Evaded outright is a basic class analysis of China's actual contradictions: its exploitative productive relations, structural inequalities, as well as class, gender, ethnic, and regional disparities and conflicts. The fact that 60 million children are left behind in dilapidated villages by struggling parents working faraway as urban subalterns alone taints any socialist decoration. This deliberately apolitical formulation will not revive the pride of labour but only further encourage developmentalist greed, waste, rifts, and resource depletion—both at home and abroad.

One may argue that due to the Party's suicidal departure from its founding creeds, we have witnessed a historical defeat of the CCP by capitalist global integration. But things are not all fixed. The regime is still capable of responding to popular pressure on certain issues, such as improving general welfare and government services, as shown in a few celebrated policies of 'accurately' identifying and eradicating poverty or 'greening' the environment. Such policies may have nothing to do with socialism, and their implementation is far from free of biases or mismanagement. Neither poverty nor pollution is yet treated at its root cause and hence inevitably keeps being reproduced. However, the message of 'politics in command' resonates in its absence and urgency, in the midst of China's ongoing neoliberalisation (as others are phasing it out) as seen in its virtual privatisation of land, opening the commanding height industries and the financial and security sectors to private tycoons and foreign investors, relentless overaccumulation and overseas adventure, as well as the recentralisation of personalised and repressive power. The possibility of a transformative politics in an age of illusion as well as despair depends on the most imaginative and fruitful legacies of the Chinese Revolution and experimental socialism being critically relearned. Confusions, retreats, and setbacks notwithstanding, the future is open. A new popular and historical subject could be remade in a countertransformation of society and its structure of feelings and values. The mass line is dead, but its lessons and aspirations live on.

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