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## 纸老虎

## Paper Tiger

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**L**ike many other statements of Mao Zedong, the description of imperialists—or even all reactionaries—as ‘paper tigers’ (*zhi laohu*) became famous beyond China through the *Little Red Book*, where it features as the title of its sixth chapter. In fact, if one closely reads the chapter, only the first quotations deal with this term.<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere we find a different imaginary, such as ‘lifting a rock only to drop it on one’s own feet’ referring to the persecutions of revolutionary people by reactionaries; ‘nooses round the neck of US imperialism’ to describe American invasions and aggressions all over the world; or ‘the East Wind is prevailing over the West Wind,’ as a characterisation of the international conjuncture at that time. Amidst these passages, the paper tiger, far from being a *trompe l’œil* in which the fragility of the enemy would be masked by a belief in its appearance of ferocity, reveals the double nature of any class enemy.

*Classical Roots*

Paper tigers made their first appearance in Maoist discourse during the Civil War. When Chiang Kai-shek’s offensive began against the small communist bases scattered throughout China, Mao had to invent a way of framing their difficult situation so that communist soldiers could imagine their own possible victory. After its initial usage, the term came back into fashion in 1950 and 1951—years marked by the threat of a new world war linked to the atom bomb and precipitated by the US operation in Korea—and appeared once again at the outset of the so-called ‘Sino-Soviet Controversy’ in 1957. What these different situations had in common was the perceived danger that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the international communist movement would lose courage in the face of disproportionate enemy military forces, and fall prey to the temptation to capitulate or accept futile compromises.

The origins of the metaphors that appear in Mao's writings are often ancient and literary. In this specific case, the image probably comes from a classic of Chinese fiction that is known for having greatly inspired Mao: *Water Margin* by Shi Nai'an. This is the story of 108 rebels guided by Song Jiang, who fight against powerful and corrupted people and defy imperial troops through inventive stratagems. In the 23<sup>rd</sup> chapter, one of these outlaws, Wu Song, proves able to kill a terrifying tiger with his bare hands. Tigers, animals that represent both courage and cruelty, are omnipresent in the novel. The names of at least ten rebels contain the character for 'tiger' (*hu*), and throughout the book, the rebels' courage is continuously challenged in these terms: 'When the time comes for action, what good are you? Seeing a *paper tiger*, you cry out in fright!' In Mao's writing, it seems that the exploits of the incredible tiger-killer Wu Song and the fear of the cowards in front of simulacra of tigers combined to give birth to a new image that represented both the refusal to overestimate powerful enemies and the ability of overcoming the most terrifying threats.

*From Paper Tigers to Contradictions among the People*

Some people mock or despise statements of this kind—metaphors like paper tigers concentrating a political vision—taking them as an expression of a purely idealistic or even cynical position. But in Mao's thought, such formulas are never hazardous inventions. They are rather meant to condense experience, or enhance experimentation.

In 1946, Mao's rhetoric about paper tigers was clearly aimed at giving courage to the revolutionary army facing Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Party (*guomindang*, hereafter GMD) forces. The GMD was allied to the greater power of the time, the United States, then inflated by its victorious involvement in World War II. In 1950 and 1951, the injunction to not fear the enemy was still confidently rooted in the Marxist concept of History—who needs to be afraid when History is on their side? At the end of the 1950s, another conception emerges, introducing a displacement from history to politics: the crucial distinction between 'contradictions among people' (*renmin neibu maodun*) and 'contradictions with the enemy' (*diwo maodun*) (see Rojas's essay in the present volume).

This formula laid the foundation for a historical experiment that was confirmed by the final and complete victory against the GMD. A few years later, in a new threatening conjuncture, confronting the risk of a third world war, the victorious experiment was enlarged to a global philosophy of history. But the true power of the concept cannot be thought in separation from new political categories. It became clear to Mao that the solution of contradictions among people had been all along the key to the previous military victories and required being thought of in its own terms. What we can do today with paper tigers cannot be decided without a full examination of the conditions prevailing when it was invented.

*A New David against Goliath?*

Returning to the Civil War period and the origin of the Maoist usage of the term, in 1946 Chiang Kai-shek had a professional army with more than four million soldiers. As Mao described in 'Farewell, Leighton Stuart!' (18 August 1949), immediately after

the barbaric atom bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, and the following Japanese surrender, the armed forces of the United States were deployed to help the GMD fight the Civil War in China. In Mao's words, the US government '[supplied] the money and guns and Chiang Kai-shek the men to fight for the United States and slaughter the Chinese people.' By the end of June 1946, the United States had equipped 45 GMD divisions, trained 150,000 GMD military personnel, and landed 90,000 Marines. According to Mao: 'There were US naval bases in Qingdao, Shanghai, and Taiwan. US troops were stationed in Beiping, Tianjin, Tangshan, Qinhuangdao, Qingdao, Shanghai, and Nanjing. The US air force controlled all of China's air space and took aerial photographs of all China's strategic areas for military maps.' In different places, US troops and other military personnel clashed with the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the American air fleet took part in the war on Chiang Kai-shek's side.

Mao's immediate conclusions were that the American policy against the revolutionary bases in China was a major component of 'the US imperialist policy of worldwide aggression since World War II.' From his perspective, in 1946 not only did the war continue, but a new world war seemed possible—maybe unavoidable—based on the military superiority of the US and their expansionist tendencies. It was the beginning of what would later be called the 'Cold War,' a period marked by the obsession over the possibility of conflicts between the US and the Soviet Union with global repercussions.

To face the GMD and American forces, the PLA had 900,000 guerrillas isolated and scattered throughout China. By the end of June 1946, Chiang Kai-shek and his allies launched an all-out offensive against the liberated areas, opening six major theatres of war. The PLA was outnumbered by its enemy. It is no surprise, therefore, that a pessimistic appraisal of the situation gained traction within the CCP, with some people showing weakness in the face of enemy assaults and superior military strength.

Mao tried to counter pessimism, first through the diffusion of inner-Party documents that excluded the possibility of any new short-term compromise between the Soviet Union on one side, and the United States, Britain, and France on the other. The point was to reassure CCP members that there was no possibility of an American-Soviet agreement, which would leave the Chinese revolutionaries isolated and alone. It was a hard task, considering that in August 1945 Stalin had already recognised Chiang Kai-shek's government as the central government of China and negotiated a partial occupation of Manchuria, choosing the Nationalists over the Communists as interlocutors.

### *Courage or Recklessness?*

In the face of Stalin's desertion, Mao's statement on paper tigers was deliberately addressed to Anna Louise Strong, who was a freelance American journalist, already linked to revolutionary Russia. This meant that Mao's words were aimed at a global audience, including the American government and the American people. It was August 1946, only one year after the terrifying destruction of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, and two months after the beginning of the GMD offensive in China. In this context, Strong asked a question that was far from rhetorical: 'Suppose the United States uses the atom bomb? Suppose the United States bombs the Soviet Union from its bases in Iceland, Okinawa, and China?' To which Mao responded: 'The atom bomb is a paper tiger which

the US reactionaries use to scare people. It looks terrible, but in fact it isn't. Of course the atom bomb is a weapon of mass slaughter, but the outcome of a war is decided by the people, not by one or two new types of weapon.' And he went on: 'All reactionaries are paper tigers. In appearance, the reactionaries are terrifying, but in reality they are not so powerful. From a long term point of view, it is not the reactionaries but the people who are really powerful.'

In other words, Mao subordinated the power of weapons to the conduct of the war. But how long would it take for the CCP to defeat the GMD armies? Strong asked this exact question: 'Suppose the United States gives Chiang Kai-shek no help, besides that already given, how long can Chiang Kai-shek keep on fighting? Mao: More than a year. A.S: Can Chiang Kai-shek keep on that long, economically? Mao: He can.' Here Mao firmly opposed the long-term reality to the immediate perception of powers. On one side the GMD could keep going for a long time, more than one year, at least 'economically,' and even without US help. On the other side, Mao was confident that recent historical facts were going to vindicate his apparently adventurous statement about Chiang's fragility. He quoted the fall of the tsar in Russia, the smashing of Axis allies (Hitler, Mussolini, and Japanese imperialism) as elements supporting his faith in a communist victory, in spite of the initial disproportion between forces. And he did not hesitate to announce the impending defeat of Chiang Kai-shek before its time: 'We have only millet plus rifles to rely on, but history will finally prove that our millet plus rifles is more powerful than Chiang Kai-shek's aeroplanes plus tanks.' This last sentence sums up Mao's belief in the power of the masses, and people's war, to defeat those on the wrong side of the people and therefore on the wrong side of history (see Guan's essay in the present volume). For him as for Marx, although articulated in different conceptions, progress remains a driving force of history: reaction has no future in the face of progress, and people are on the side of progress.

### *Victory over Paper Tigers*

Six months after Mao's talk with Anna Louise Strong, the GMD's offensive was halted, and a counteroffensive began. This eventually would lead to the victory of the communist forces in 1949, less than three years after Chiang's violation of the truce agreement and in spite of all his American support. Mao's statement had been submitted to experiment and proved right, at least in the context of the Chinese Civil War.

In fact, in that case, the conditions—'progress' and mass support—that made victory possible were anything but abstract or metaphysical. They consisted in the minute care with which the war of self-defence was organised and guided, including decisions and strategies such as accepting mobile warfare and the temporary abandonment of specific places and cities; developing close cooperation with the masses of the people; moderating policy towards middle peasants and landlords; and working to increase production in protected areas in order to become self-sufficient.

In an inner-Party directive entitled 'On some Important Problems of the Party's Present Policy' (18 January 1948) produced a few months before the CCP's final victory, it is possible to find some honest reflections stemming from the paper tigers notion: 'We have reason to despise them and we are confident and certain that we shall defeat all the domestic and foreign enemies of the Chinese people. But with regard to each

part, each specific struggle (military, political, economic or ideological), we must never take the enemy lightly; on the contrary we should take the enemy seriously and concentrate all our strength for battle in order to win victory.' Here a new distinction appears, between strategy and tactic, between the whole and the part: there must be no strategic overestimation, but also no local imprudence or tactical eagerness. Everything depends on specific circumstances. In other words, non-adventurist policies always require a clear identification of the real process.

*From Circumstantial Statement to Political Concept*

Ten years later, Mao brought up paper tigers again in three different contexts: a talk with two Latin-American public figures ('US Imperialism is a Paper Tiger,' 14 July 1956); a speech at the Moscow Meeting of Representatives of the Communist and Workers' Parties ('All Reactionaries Are Paper Tigers,' 18 November 1957); and a publication in his *Selected Works* ('On the Question of Whether Imperialism and All Reactionaries are Real Tigers,' 1 December 1958). In each text, Mao went back to the period of the Civil War, emphasising its victorious outcome. In his mind, victory remained tightly linked to the correctness of a strategy that minimised the power of the enemy. He henceforth elevated what originally was only a circumstantial statement to a proper political concept. 'We have developed a concept over a long period for the struggle against the enemy,' he wrote in 1957, 'namely, strategically we should despise all our enemies, but tactically we should take them all seriously.'

To broaden and find potential value for this concept in other situations and countries, Mao produced new arguments belonging to what we might call 'historical dialectics,' insofar as these arguments take the form of historical laws. In his 1956 Talk, first he presented an extension of the Marxist vision of History: 'History as a whole, the history of class society for thousands of years, has proved this point: the strong must give way to the weak.' In so writing, Mao introduced a dialectics of the strong and the weak, still related to the Marxist vision of the transformation of ruling classes—first vigorous, revolutionary, and progressive, like the bourgeoisie itself—into backward, decaying classes. He then added his own optimistic theory of universal change and becoming: 'Everything is subject to change. The big decadent forces will give way to the small newborn forces.' Or again: 'Bigness is nothing to be afraid of. The big will be overthrown by the small. The small will become big.'

The philosophical ground for these affirmations is what Mao calls 'the law of the unity of the opposites,' which he expounded in his 1958 Essay: 'Just as there is not a single thing in the world without a dual nature (this is the law of the unity of the opposites), so imperialism and all reactionaries have a dual nature—they are at the same time real tigers and paper tigers.' This law is defined in these terms: 'This basic concept of Marxism, the concept of the unity of opposites ... is the concept of the dual nature of the development of the universe, the concept of the dual nature of the development of things, the concept that a thing invariably manifests itself in a process and that every process without exception has a dual nature.'

### *The Return of Real Tigers*

Nevertheless, in 1956, Mao warned his interlocutors that, if it was true that ‘all oppressed nations want independence ... the day will come when the paper tigers will be wiped out. But they won’t become extinct of their own accord, they need to be battered by the wind and the rain.’ And in 1958, again:

They are at once real tigers and paper tigers, they are in the process of being changed from real into paper tigers. Change means transformation. Real tigers are transformed into paper tigers, into their opposite ... . Hence, imperialism and all reactionaries, looked at in essence, from a long-term point of view, from a strategic point of view, must be seen for what they are—paper tigers. On this we should build our strategic thinking. But they are also living tigers, iron tigers, real tigers, they can devour people. On this we should build our tactical thinking.

Mao’s dialectics is the subject of another essay by Pang Laikwan included in this volume. What I would like to underline here is this: first, reactionaries have to become what they are in essence, but they do not reveal what they truly are without a political catalysation of the process. The historical process of change never works alone, this is what no one should miss, or forget. No great progressive transformation may happen without the invention of a new fair and real policy. Yes, Mao in 1956 claimed: ‘Small forces linked with the people become strong.’ And again in 1957: ‘All allegedly powerful reactionaries are merely paper tigers. The reason is that they are divorced from the people.’ But the true question, the crucial question, is: what kind of processes may create such progressive links with the people? Or rather, which processes nowadays, can give birth to ‘the people’?

Of course, popular movements advancing claims such as ‘We are the 99 percent’ or even to represent entire countries—such as the use of the slogan ‘We are Egypt’ in Tahrir Square—were far from being able to answer this question. The problem is: were they even aware of these underlying issues: what does it mean today to organise the existence of something durably solid, which we may name ‘the people,’ or rather a piece of ‘generic humanity’?

### *A New Starting Point*

Mao in 1958 reminded us that ‘the destruction of the rule of imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucrat-capitalism took the Chinese people more than one hundred years and cost them tens of millions of lives before victory in 1949.’ In other words, to be victorious takes time. Because this kind of war ‘can only be fought one by one’ (1957). But Mao himself did not entirely elucidate how the victory becomes possible, at least not until he wrote one of his most influential and significant essays: ‘On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People’ (27 February 1957). My own hypothesis is that this text represents the true political development of the paper tigers concept. It contains not only the theoretical aftermath of the vast former sequence—the Long March, the War of Resistance against Japan, and the War of Liberation—but also decisive elements

for a break with Stalin's policies. It begins by departing from a traditional notion of class struggle and opening to a non-classist definition of the category of 'people:' one belongs to the 'people' not strictly by virtue of one's objective class; more important is the subjective position towards revolution. To cite Mao's own words: "The concept of "people" varies in content in different countries and in different periods of history in a given country."

Even more important is the distinction between two kinds of contradictions—you will notice the name itself, which is not equivalent to 'struggle' or 'conflict'—those 'between ourselves and the enemy' and those 'among the people.' No need to be Chinese to understand these categories: they take the opposite course of Stalin's conceptions—anyone likely to be an enemy who could then be eliminated—and try to place the contradiction with the enemy under the rule of the contradictions among the people. The weight of emphasis is shifted entirely. For the first time, such distinction and the correlative assertion that 'the two are totally different in nature' allow the development of multiple policies, multiple treatments, depending on the antagonistic or non-antagonistic character of a contradiction. It was a turning point in the history of revolutionary politics, because it put an end to the exclusive bilateral face to face between the people and the enemy. It allowed a political work enlarging the existence of the people and diminishing the existence of the enemy. Henceforth, the departing point of any progressive politics had to be the ability to give existence to the people itself. When Mao claimed that real tigers—living tigers, iron tigers, tigers that devoured people—could be changed into paper tigers, he rested his claim on repeated political experiences of how the CCP had been able to constitute a Chinese people in the face of haunting odds and seemingly inevitable defeats and disasters.

The dialectics between real tigers and paper tigers may still be true, but remains of no use for us, as long as we do not connect the question of the enemy to the question of how a piece of 'generic humanity' today can exist, under which political conditions, through which local processes. Do real tigers and paper tigers still roam the world and haunt social space? This may very well be the case, but we wander among them blindly as long as we do not connect the question of the enemy to the circumstances in which people today live. Especially when we believe we understand the world around us, we are at our most ignorant. The production of knowledge no longer fully takes place within the university but depends on people's political capacity to speak about their lives as sites in which the present is contested and new futures are promised. One of the most enduring promises of communism is the egalitarian capacity of speech for all, regardless of national identity or traditional markers of belonging. In the words of a Malian worker in France and member in an organisation called Workers of the World/Architects of Peace, these conditions begin to be realised when 'those who have read all the books and those who have passed a hundred countries meet and work together.'<sup>2</sup>

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