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Rectification

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But our aim in exposing errors and criticising shortcomings, like that of a doctor curing a sickness, is solely to save the patient and not to doctor him to death. A person with appendicitis is saved when the surgeon removes his appendix. So long as a person who has made mistakes does not hide his sickness for fear of treatment or persist in his mistakes until he is beyond cure, so long as he honestly and sincerely wishes to be cured and to mend his ways, we should welcome him and cure his sickness so that he can become a good comrade. We can never succeed if we just let ourselves go and lash out at him. In treating an ideological or a political malady, one must never be rough and rash but must adopt the approach of ‘curing the sickness to save the patient,’ which is the only correct and effective method.

Mao Zedong, ‘Rectify the Party’s Style of Work,’ 1942

There is a sickness within our Party As our socialist revolution advances, however, seeping more strongly into every corner of the Party, the army and among the people, we can locate the ugly microbes. They will be pushed out by the true nature of socialist revolution. We are encouraged to expel treacherous elements that pose problems to the Party and to our revolution. If we wait any longer, the microbes can do real damage.

Pol Pot, 1976¹

All revolutionary regimes confront a decision of life and death: to kill or reeducate the enemy. This has not only determined the fates of countless people, but also shaped the rise to power and approach to governance of revolutionary movements. There is a tendency to blur the distinctions between Stalin’s eliminationist approach and the Maoist norm of ‘curing the sickness to heal the patient’ (*zhibing jiuren*). Distinct contexts and organised applications of violence are painted with the

same brush of communist terror. This indiscriminate conceptualisation of violence, in turn, leads to faulty comparisons between Maoism and the methods of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK, the so-called ‘Khmer Rouge’) in Cambodia. Despite superficial similarities, the main difference—one that shaped two fundamentally distinct movements—is that China found a way to break out of the vicious cycle of purge and counterpurge while the Khmer Rouge swiftly and inexorably went down the dark path of liquidating any and all perceived opponents.

Despite key commonalities in the rise to power of the Chinese and Cambodian communists, their subsequent trajectories deviated from one another so much so that non-superficial comparisons are untenable. Specifically, these two movements embraced fundamentally different doctrines and methods about how to handle vanquished political opponents. China eventually settled on coopting them through the mechanism of rectification (*zhengfeng*), which remains built into the machinery of governance that functions up to the present day, while the Cambodian communists were unwilling or unable to move away from a single-minded obsession with eliminating the opposition, eventually cannibalising themselves into oblivion.

This essay is divided into three sections. The first describes the ‘Anti-bolshevik’ purges that are commonly referred to as the Futian Affair (*futian shibian*) of 1930–31 within the larger context of political bloodletting in the Jinggangshan and Jiangxi Soviet era, in which thousands died and scores of military and political organisations vanished because of political infighting. The second describes the rectification doctrine that emerged in Yan’an in the mid-1930s as the antidote to the kind of open-ended purges at Futian, which transformed the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) into a durable, self-moderating organisation. The third shows how the absence of a rectification doctrine left the Khmer Rouge bereft of a mechanism to prevent a Futian-esque model of governance on a national scale that eventually killed millions, accomplished nothing, and ultimately brought down the regime.

The Futian Affair (1930–31)

Prior to 1930, violent measures adopted by the CCP and the Red Army targeted individuals and groups *outside* the Party. However, this key norm was broken by Mao in the ‘Conclusion of the Joint Conference and Announcement of the Establishment of the Front Committee’ of 16 February 1930:

There is a severe crisis in the Party in western and southern Jiangxi ... the local leading organs of the Party at all levels [are] filled with landlords and rich peasants The Joint Conference calls on all revolutionary comrades within the Party to arise, overthrow the opportunist political leadership [within the Party], eliminate the landlords and rich peasants from the Party, and see to it that the Party is rapidly bolshevised.²

The reasons for this are debated by scholars—land reform, conflict between the Jiangxi and Hunanese wings of the Party, disagreements over the Li Lisan Line, and seepage of Stalinism into the Party ranks being just a few explanations that have been put forward—but the result was an intense factional struggle that began in October

1930 and led to the widespread torture and execution of *CCP members* identified as part of an 'AB' (Anti-bolshevik) 'League' (*tuan*).³ A lack of institutional 'checks on both the leadership and the security organisations contributed greatly to the ... [subsequent] expansion of the purges' which completely bypassed judicial process ('except as theatre') with execution as the only possible outcome.⁴ Dutton concurs, arguing that within the binary logic of the time, 'there could be no "soft option" when dealing with the enemy.'⁵ Over the course of a week, some 4,400 First Front Army officers and men confessed to having ties to the AB *tuan*; 2,000 or more were shot.⁶

These confessions provided information targeting leaders in the Jiangxi Provincial Action Committee and officials in the Twentieth Army allegedly opposed to Mao. Five weeks later, in the Futian Affair, these officials were tortured with the goal of forcing them to provide the names of their coconspirators. This continued well into 1931:

The overall death-toll from the purge in the summer and early autumn of 1931 can only be guessed at. Four hundred officers and men from the 20th Army perished, and probably several hundred from the 35th Army... . From other Red Army units, there were many more. In the local Jiangxi Party, 3,400 were killed in just three of the more than twenty counties. By the beginning of September, a CCP Central Inspector reported that '95 percent of the intellectuals in the south-west Jiangxi Party and Youth League' had confessed to AB *tuan* connections. Today the best-informed Chinese historians say merely that 'tens of thousands died.'⁷

Given the small number of active Chinese communists, those figures mask the proportional scope of the massacre: 'By the end of 1931, virtually all of the county- and regional-level Party cadres who had collectively been involved in accusing Yuan Wencai and Wang Zuo of becoming counterrevolutionaries—and in killing them—had themselves suffered the same fate.'⁸ Guo finds that in mid-1931, '90 percent of CCP cadres in southwestern Jiangxi were killed, imprisoned, or dismissed.'⁹

Futian occurred in the context of the ongoing 'counterrevolutionary suppression' (*sufan*) campaigns, borne out of an inherently dark view of revolutionary parties under duress, an atmosphere in which 'the purges went to such extremes because there were no mechanisms to check potential abuses of power ... [moreover] the *sufan* campaigns did not always benefit those leaders who initiated the campaigns [because of the] overwhelming terror they induced and widespread purges.'¹⁰ And they were to continue through the years leading up to the Long March in the Minxi (1931), the E-Yu-Wen (1931–32), and the Xiang-E'xi (1932–34) base areas.¹¹

To the scholar of Cambodia, these campaigns are virtually indistinguishable from actions undertaken deliberately and enthusiastically by Pol Pot. Yet the Futian incident continued to weigh heavily on the post-1949 Chinese leadership: Mao considered the incident a mistake, and subsequently moved away from this type of bloody political manoeuvring by adopting rectification doctrine—a decision that would ultimately, and fundamentally, separate the two revolutionary movements in China and Cambodia.¹²

Yan'an and Rectification

Mao introduced a number of innovations to the Chinese approach to Marxist revolution and governance by emphasising peasants over proletarians, privileging spatial alongside vertical governance, and establishing Party rectification. Teiwes defines rectification as:

The distinctive approach to elite discipline developed by the CCP leadership under Mao Zedong in the early 1940s, [that] occupies a key position in the Party's organisational norms. It embodies several principles which quickly became basic Party doctrine: the vast majority of officials are 'basically good' and their mistakes can be corrected, discipline must aim at achieving reform and utilising the talents of such officials for the CCP's cause, and disciplinary methods on the whole should be lenient and limit purges to exceptional cases.¹³

Rectification doctrine arose in Yan'an in tandem with Mao's rise to supremacy in the Party as an attack on the twin evils of 'subjectivism' (*zhuguanzhuyi*) and 'sectarianism' (*zongpaizhuyi*), and alongside the goal of eliminating the differences between individuals, particularly intellectuals, on the one hand, and workers and peasants, on the other.¹⁴ Rectification proved to be an exceptionally useful political tool which created a set of genuine incentives for politically vulnerable targets to demonstrate fealty to the regime and for leaders who, instead of liquidating the opposition, were able to coopt a grateful, relieved, and softened new, mobilisable political resource. The crushing of individualism was not universally celebrated (see below), but it was also not a completely foreign concept, tapping into deeper, Confucian principles: that thought can be purged of incorrect elements and reset to align with (in this case) Maoist doctrine (see Cheek's essay in the present volume). Finally, in addition to the substantive normative conditioning, the purely strategic effect of rectification as a demonstration of the Party's supremacy provides a signalling device to keep potentially errant cadres in line.¹⁵

Rectification facilitated the establishment of core tenets of organised governance, such as minority rights in collective decisionmaking, and in particular the norm of democratic centralism (*minzhu jizhong zhi*), as a way of preempting factionalism and extra-Party manoeuvring.¹⁶ One need not establish a causal link between the Futian Affair of 1930–31 and rectification doctrine 12 years later; one need only to demonstrate the vastly different political outcomes that accompany choosing one over the other. That said, Mao reportedly did make an 'indirect' self-criticism during the Yan'an rectification specifically about the brutality of the *sufan* campaigns.¹⁷

There are several possible reasons why rectification doctrine emerged under Mao at this time in Yan'an. Organisationally, it was a necessary response to the unmanageable growth of CCP membership from 40,000 in 1937 to 800,000 in 1940. Fully 95 percent of CCP members were new and thus required ideological conditioning to absorb them as trustworthy partners within the revolutionary ranks. The differences among and across these groups were vast. As Bonnie McDougall argues, 'it is difficult for Westerners to appreciate the depth of the distaste for manual labour that the new intelligentsia

inherited from the old gentry class' and most of the new CCP recruits making their way to Yan'an held this view. Even the May Fourth Movement intellectuals were referred to by Mao as 'heroes without a battlefield, remote and uncomprehending,' a phrase that richly invokes the spirit and goals of rectification.¹⁸ And all of this was taking place as Mao was being enshrined in a position of absolute leadership, where developing a governing programme distinct from the Soviet Union, in terms of both substance and *practice*, was becoming a political imperative. Rectification was thus not something that happened in the absence of agency; it was a conscious decision to shift governance from one identifiable form to another.

At the same time, lest rectification seem overly benign, it should be noted that, quite apart from the intellectually horrific notion of externally 'controlling one's thought,' the process could be physically and mentally excruciating. This was particularly true in its more severe iterations, as in the case of 'brainwashing' (*xinao*) in the late 1940s and early 1950s.¹⁹ Moreover, it was not completely separate from purges and violent struggle, as the 1942 Rescue Campaign (*qiangjiu yundong*) and subsequent excesses by Kang Sheng (who was enabled by Mao) made clear. At the time Yang Shangkun observed:

We can see that the Rectification movement contains two kinds of struggles. One is the inner-Party struggle ... to remould the ideological methods of both cadres and Party members The other struggle is the one that exposes and opposes those Trotskyites and dissidents who snuck into our Party to destroy and undermine it.²⁰

Clearly, the ghosts of Futian were difficult to exorcise. Nonetheless, even as rectification doctrine itself was not immune to the more violent side of revolutionary governance, it fostered leadership norms that allowed the CCP to evolve from a revolutionary organisation into the wards of a mature state borne from the fires of revolution. Rectification emerged and evolved as an important tool that to this day provides the necessary institutional 'give' for the CCP to continually recast and recalibrate itself as new challenges arise, avoiding the excesses of non-institutionalised political struggle while simultaneously eschewing the 'transfer of power' of contested elections.²¹ The longevity of the CCP in exceptionally changing circumstances arguably owes a great deal to rectification doctrine.

The Khmer Rouge Rise to Power

Rectification's 'curing the patient' metaphor was fundamentally at odds with the Stalinist idea of the rusty screw that needed to be eliminated for the machinery of the state to operate more efficiently, which was the tacit political logic underlying the events encompassed by the Futian Affair.²² Pol Pot used the metaphor of the microbe (*merok*), but his view was fully consistent with Stalin's.²³ If after Futian, the CCP rejected Stalinist purges, the CPK embraced them.

The ubiquity of the Khmer phrase 'no gain in keeping, no loss in weeding out' in describing their subjects provides a window into the stark Khmer Rouge worldview.²⁴ The doctrine—and certainly the practice—of the Khmer Rouge had an extremely dark

view of human nature. Describing in aspirational terms the purity of the hill people in the northeastern highlands, they deemed that anyone who had deviated from upland purity—‘lazy’ lowland rice farmers, ethnic Chinese and especially Vietnamese, Muslim Cham, urbanites, artists, intellectuals, politicians, and beneficiaries of the ancient regime—had no claim to innate goodness or even utility. As Ta Mok said of Pol Pot after his death: ‘He is nothing more than cow shit. Actually, cow shit is more useful because it can be used as fertiliser.’ This provides an apt description of the Khmer Rouge’s view toward potential enemies, real or imagined.²⁵

Second, the fact that people could be rehabilitated was dismissed almost completely out of hand. Rectification, insofar as it existed under the Khmer Rouge, was in the form of ‘tempering’—hard labour mixed with torture. More often, people who were accused by the authorities, or named in three or more confessions of others being tortured, would be brought into the national processing centre of Tuol Sleng (or a local counterpart) with the sole purpose of confessing under brutal torture before facing inevitable execution.²⁶

Indeed, as in Futian, attacking elements within the Party was a key feature of Khmer Rouge governance. During the CPK rise to power in 1973, its united front strategy—adopted in 1970 as a way to offset their initial weakness vis-à-vis the government in Phnom Penh—came to an abrupt end, when it turned on its erstwhile allies, killing many of them or expelling them from the country. And this continued after they gained national power in 1975. After the initial killing of elements from the Khmer Republic regime that had just been overthrown, the CPK shifted to targeting its own cadres: zone commanders of the North, Northeast, East, and Northwest Zones were all killed, as were several generations of ministry heads.²⁷ Torture was widely used to uncover networks (*khsae*) of often imaginary conspirators. During Futian, Jiangxi Provincial Action Committee Member Li Bofang gave up the names of a thousand cadres perhaps to confuse his accusers; former CPK zone secretary and minister of commerce Koy Thuon similarly named thousands who were subsequently brought in for torture.²⁸ All this was used as evidence to build the narrative that the respective leaders’ political line was correct, and to utterly vanquish their opponents (see Ishikawa and Smith’s essay in the present volume). Leniency—a central tenet of rectification—was simply not part of the Khmer Rouge vocabulary.

This rectification-free political environment fostered a necropolitical culture of distrust and secrecy, of preempting one’s enemy by attacking him first. As a result, loyalty to other individuals, let alone the regime, was a luxury that was not only unaffordable, but one that made no sense. Such an environment formed an extremely brittle regime bereft of legitimacy, which collapsed spectacularly in only a matter of days following the Vietnamese invasion of 1978 after being in power for less than four years. Indeed, some two decades after this, ragtag Khmer Rouge remnants along the Thai-Cambodian border had not learned this lesson. Suspecting his number three lieutenant, Son Sen, of conspiring against him, in 1997 Pol Pot had him and his extended family (including grandchildren) killed and ordered a truck to repeatedly run over the corpses and leave them there for public viewing to deter others from doing the same.²⁹ This led his hitherto loyal commander Ta Mok to preemptively rout Pol Pot’s forces and arrest Pol Pot himself, bringing the Khmer Rouge to an ignominious end.

Seeds of Authoritarian Resilience

To sum up and reiterate, the Cambodian communists self-destructed after proving unable to advance beyond the same political dynamic exemplified by the Chinese communists in and around the Futian Affair. Had they been able to adopt a model of rectification like the CCP, the CPK may well have strengthened their ability to govern and enjoyed the longevity of their erstwhile Vietnamese allies. Had the CCP not adopted the doctrine of rectification, it may have easily have been snuffed out before Chiang Kai-shek's troops ever got near them. Instead, China witnessed multiple instances in which rectification doctrine was developed (early post-1949 campaigns), debased (the Anti-rightist Campaign, the 1959 Lushan Conference, the Cultural Revolution), resuscitated (the 1983 Rectification Movement, the 1998–2002 Three Stresses Campaign), and brought into the twenty-first century (Xi Jinping's current anti-corruption measures). Taken together, this essay provides a first cut, a soft, comparative-historical engagement with the hypothesis that such internal rectification is an important explanatory variable which helps account for regime stability in the absence of external accountability, contributing to what is commonly referred to as 'authoritarian resilience,' a key preoccupation within the field of Chinese politics scholarship today.

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