

40

为人民服务

Serve the People

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On 8 September 1944, in China's far northwest communist base headquarters of Yan'an, Party Chairman Mao Zedong eulogised a just-deceased soldier, Zhang Side, as a paragon of 'serving the people' (*wei renmin fuwu*).¹ While a common soldier's death in wartime is always tragic, it is usually not the cause for a major tribute, much less for the coining of a vital phrase that, after a half-century of earnest usage, has now devolved into a commodified cliché. Yet, in this small piece of oratory—the speech is no more than a few paragraphs long—we find a text that called into being, and now can recall, an entire kind of history: a prospective and prescriptive socialist history of China. In the deceptively simple locution 'serve the people' is embedded a political injunction, a social ideal, a cultural expectation, and an economic norm, which, in the several decades after its initial articulation, summoned a form of common sense—an ideology—that once was lived as a concrete social practice.

In China's official historiographical understanding, 'serve the people' is primarily an ethical demand. It names a requirement for pure selflessness and individual sacrifice, ideally through death, for the already constituted revolutionary collective. As it turns out, Mao's tribute became one of the three 'constantly read articles' (*lao san pian*) of subsequent socialist education campaigns—the other two texts being Mao's tribute to a Canadian surgeon, Norman Bethune, who devoted his life and skills to global leftist causes from the Spanish Civil War to the Chinese Communist Revolution; and the mythical figure of the foolish old man who moved the mountains, whose legendary perseverance despite impossible odds was given a new positive spin. Indeed, by the time of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, 'serve the people' had become a mostly empty incantation, and its prescriptive and inscriptive scope narrowed to the sole demand to 'wholly and entirely... live or die for the people.' While the modifying 'wholly and entirely' (*quanxin quanyi*) was a later addition (1945) to the basic phrase (1944), the narrowed Cultural Revolution era attitudinal directive—as well as the narrowed

definition of 'service' to a willingness to sublimate the self in death—stuck, as if original to the pronouncement. It is this rigid dogmatic version of the phrase that is thoroughly lampooned in Yan Lianke's scandalous 2005 novel, *Serve the People*.²

Yet, in its time and in its more immediate afterlives, the simple text contains several interpretive levels that should not be so readily ridiculed. On the surface, the tribute was penned for a beloved comrade: a man who had worked his way from poor peasant obscurity in Sichuan province into the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as a soldier in an elite armed division; who had completed the arduous Long March in 1935, becoming quite close to Mao and other Party leaders; and who had died at the age of 32 in 1944, when a charcoal kiln collapsed on him during the process of mining, just as the armies of the Nationalist Party were besieging the communist base that housed their ostensible allies in the ongoing War of Resistance against Japan. At a more abstract level, Zhang Side was rendered through Mao's tribute into a repository of all the elements of an emulative model of socialist becoming, a so-called *bangyang*. In this process of abstraction, his particularities came to be dissolved into a universal type—a *dianxing*—through which the timelessness of service/labour and the timeliness of socialism could be coproduced. In this play of temporalities, the phrase inspired by Zhang's death proposed a new form of social relation, a socialist organisation of time and society that was at once abstract and concrete, lived and 'yet to be made,' remembered and 'not yet existing.'

Heavier than Mount Tai, Lighter than a Feather

When Mao Zedong first spoke the phrase on 8 September 1944 at the mass meeting to commemorate Zhang's death, 'serve the people' indicated a method through which the enduring and repetitive fact of human death in war could be wedded to the ethical imperative and materially spontaneous creation of the revolutionary unity called 'the people.' Hence, the injunction to 'serve' can be understood as a method in the widest Marxist sense: it is a 'practice of theory.' The locution *wei ... fuwu* (serve for...) had been used by Mao in his 1942 'Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art,' when he proposed that the purpose of socialist culture was 'to serve the masses' (*wei dazhong fuwu*) (see Sorace's essay in the present volume). It was thus initially used for promoting the welding of all cultural production, as a form of abstract intellectual labour, to the very concrete and lived historical materialist creation of revolutionary culture in China that 'service' came to be elevated to the pinnacle of expectation for the definition and realisation of socialist social relations.

With the eulogy of Zhang Side, this creative principle was expanded and deepened to speak to the production not only of the masses as a cultural concept, but of the 'people as unity' who were the very objects and subjects of socialist revolution itself. Thus, in 'serve the people,' the objects and subjects of service are merged into the same revolutionary productive process: one is to become properly part of the people by serving and being worthy of being served. 'To serve' becomes a concrete abstraction: a form of labour indifferent to space/time but also productive of a determinative space/time; even while 'the people' is the everlasting but concrete revolutionary 'unity in formation' appropriate to a particular historical moment—socialism.

In this sense, the locution ‘to serve’ pertains and appeals to a kind of enduring history different from, and yet made to engage with a socialist one. So, while ‘the people’ is a peculiarly revolutionary formulation that is politically specific to the socialist era, the durational ‘service’ ethic must be embedded in socialism in very particular ways. Let us note briefly that an important prior history of the injunction ‘to serve’—as an ethic but also as a form of labour—resides in filiality, where service is labour performed with the proper expression, or attitude. That is, in the Confucian classics, labour is not merely the performance of an atomised task, but rather also an attitude commensurate to the project of producing and maintaining a form of social relations. ‘Labour as service’ is an embedded form of social relation. For Confucius and the tradition that follows from his teachings, the social relations sought after through the appropriate performance of service were those defined by and through the family. That is, for example, the son serves the father by labouring *as a son* for the father *as a father*, where each of those social positions is predetermined by relation to the other in a social hierarchy. By contrast, the desired social relations in Mao’s China were intended to produce a very different social formation altogether: one defined by and through egalitarianism and social equality in pointed opposition both to the hierarchies of the Confucian past and to the global capitalist inequities of China’s midcentury present (see Lee’s essay in the present volume). Thus, for Mao, ‘service’ would create the conditions not for the mutually binding reproduction of hierarchical social relations, but rather the possibility for their undoing.

In this regard, in Mao’s speech, the meaning of labour/service (or sacrifice) is historically contextualised and productive. This historicity is dependent on the individual attitude of the performer and the moment of her performance. Specifically, Mao says: ‘People die, yet the meaning of their deaths is variable.’ How is one to understand the meaning of death? Paraphrasing ancient historian Sima Qian, Mao indicates that the meaning of death can be heavy or light depending on the dialectical relation between personal intention/expression (attitude) and historical situation. From that older principle, Mao derives the concrete meaning of the moment in which the sacrifice (service) occurs: specifically in the eulogy, to die for the benefit of ‘the people’ (revolution) is as weighty as Mount Tai, whereas to die on behalf of fascism, exploitation, or oppression is feather-light. The contrast between ‘the people’ as a revolutionary concept, whose existence and equality is created at the same time as it is being secured, and ‘fascism/exploitation/oppression’ is thus established as the historical specificity required to materially produce the particular meaning of Zhang Side’s death and the nature of his service. While the people will have been—as a predicated future—created as revolutionary, they also will have led that revolution through the weighty service rendered to one another as masters (*zhurenweng*), shaping and realising their own histories.

It is evident, then, that at the same time as it extols the merits of a soldier who died in the course of the anti-Japanese war, this speech is already looking forward to the end of the war against Japan and to the coming civil conflict with the Nationalists. Much of the organising in the base areas from this point onwards was thus aimed at transforming rural society into ideological and military bastions of socialism in preparation for the imminent domestic showdown. Part of this transformation included the expansion of popular education movements focussed on literacy and economic skills. Thus, for example, the 1944 directive to ‘develop production, expand

the schools' was never merely a technocratic problem, but rather—as with 'serve the people'—it was an ideological imperative to reformulate social relations along the lines of socialist equality.³ In other words, the creation of revolutionary unity through the dual emphases on production and education was not just a sociological problem of a class alliance between workers and intellectuals, where each readymade constituent part of society occupies its proper place; rather, it was a materialist-ideological problem of producing a new social formation altogether (see Dai's essay in the present volume).

End of Politics

In Mao's 'serve the people' the practice of theory is precisely the realm of politics. That is, it is the realm of the futurity whose glance back towards the present calls into being the necessity for an ethical form of social relations in the here and now. Unlike any Confucian notion of filial service, aimed at transhistorically reproducing social hierarchy, Mao's 'serve the people' names a revolutionary political unity as the historically mandated form of ethical social formation, whose creation will be accomplished through the labour of service and the service of labour. The imperative to serve is thus an injunction to properly pursue class struggle (see Russo's essay in the present volume); yet perhaps more important, it is an imperative to create out of the contingent historical moment marked by the spontaneous potential of the people as a revolutionary subject the possibility for socialism. This revolutionary unity could never be free of conflict—for, as Mao theorised earlier, contradictions would persist into whichever social formation eventually took shape—but it would always be the site of concrete politics aimed at its own realisation through labour as service.

The retreat of Maoism from the social field of substantive ideology and social practice has meant the erasure of the original embedded capacity of 'serve the people' to produce socialist meaning. Thus, today, if and when it is evoked—as in the 2012 ill-fated and much-mocked 'Learn from Lei Feng Day'—the topos of service is entirely instrumentalised and mechanically reproduced as a hierarchical desire for popular obedience.⁴ This is not service in the Maoist sense of producing a new collective lifeworld of socialist equality; this is Party injunction nakedly appropriating resources for their opposite use. 'Serve the people' today can only be communist kitsch or empty Party blandishment. Its life as a socialist text has gone the way of socialism itself: dead, gone, buried.

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