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# Speaking Bitterness

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**T**o relate abstract ideologies to the lived experiences of ordinary people is the great task of all revolutionaries. How do we then explain the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) remarkable success in mobilising workers and peasants, many of whom had little interest in Marxism-Leninism, to join its fervent, violent cause? One of the key foundations of the CCP's successful mobilisation was its ability to tap into human emotions, which it did most notably and effectively through a practice known as 'speaking bitterness' (*suku*)—the public expression of an individual's woes with the intent to cultivate sympathy toward the speaker and outrage against those who caused his or her suffering.<sup>1</sup> As one of the foremost strategies the CCP used to build the revolutionary subjectivity of the masses, its principal purpose was to leverage morality and emotion to inculcate in the populace new mass identities that accorded with the Party-state's ideology of class struggle. Operating through outrage and sympathy, it sought to build hostility towards an outgroup of class enemies and solidarity among an ingroup of ordinary villagers (see also Dutton's essay in the present volume). By the time of the Chinese Civil War, speaking bitterness had become a mainstay of the Party's repertoire of mobilisation techniques to incite villagers to pursue land reform, a tool for 'soliciting tales of suffering for mobilising the masses.'<sup>2</sup>

## *Mobilising Outrage and Sympathy through Suffering*

Although speaking bitterness was always a public act, it occurred at many different scales: cadres guided villagers to speak bitterness in both small, face-to-face settings and large mass rallies—e.g. struggle sessions and public sentencing. Early on in the course of land reform mobilisation, work team cadres met with local villagers, often in the homes of the poorest in the village, to discuss their concerns and grievances in 'small groups' (*xiaozu*) and 'informal chats' (*mantanhui*) (see also Perry's essay in the present

volume). These meetings provided safe spaces for poor peasants and farmworkers—and middle peasants—to speak bitterness in focus group-like settings before their fellow villagers. Officials designated those who spoke suffering as ‘the aggrieved’ (*kuzhu*)—literally, ‘masters of bitterness.’ Not everyone at these meetings spoke bitterness, but for both the speaker and the listener such affectively charged words ‘construct[ed] the old order as oppressive, inherently violent, and immoral by recalling instances of social antagonism between individuals who occupy very different positions within hierarchies of power in Chinese society.’<sup>3</sup> In this way, speaking bitterness unified various strata of peasants—the landless, the land-poor, and even the average landholder—as ‘oppressed class subjects.’<sup>4</sup>

Speaking bitterness, particularly when performed in front of large audiences at struggle sessions, was a highly organised process. Officials cautioned against speaking bitterness ‘recklessly,’ and instructed cadres to use it ‘at a proper time and against a proper target.’<sup>5</sup> At struggle sessions, cadres organised the aggrieved to take turns speaking against their alleged oppressors. To heighten the efficacy of their storytelling, cadres coached speakers on their dramatic delivery, and even arranged the lineup of speakers to forefront those who were the best storytellers, had the most pitiful stories, and had the most damning and colourful evidence against their targets. As one eyewitness remarked, speaking bitterness at struggle sessions was ‘ordered and methodical’ and ‘rich in theatricality.’<sup>6</sup>

Speaking bitterness in small groups and informal chats sought to generate ingroup solidarity among ‘the masses’ (*qunzhong*) by eliciting villagers’ sympathy toward those who were suffering (see also Lee’s essay in the present volume). Sympathy is a powerful method for building ingroup solidarity: empathising with another’s pain triggers the same affective responses in an individual as if he or she were the recipient of pain.<sup>7</sup> In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith defines ‘sympathy’ as a ‘fellow-feeling’ that ‘does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from that of the situation which excites it ... . [W]hen we put ourselves in his case, that passion arises in our breast from the imagination.’<sup>8</sup> Indeed, it was seeing one’s own suffering reflected in the stories told by others that forged this collective bond among villagers. Cadres viewed collective sympathy as a sign of successful speaking bitterness. Township cadres in Fengyang county, Anhui province, reported that speaking bitterness succeeded to the extent that when ‘a single person spoke bitterness, everyone sympathised’ (*yi ren suku, dajia tongqing*).<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere in Fengyang, a township’s small group meeting had 13 people speak about their plight and how they lived on the brink of starvation without land or draft animals. Touting the success of this session, the report notes that ‘there were three people at the meeting who “spoke bitterness” until they were in tears. Class consciousness, therefore, greatly increased.’<sup>10</sup>

To facilitate the cultivation of sympathy, work teams specifically tried to recruit women and the elderly to speak bitterness at struggle sessions because they believed they could better attract sympathy from the masses. In Liyang county, southern Jiangsu province, cadres, in their collection of speaking bitterness material, discovered that nearly 200 local women had been raped by Japanese soldiers. They used these women’s stories to ‘educate the broad masses’ about the evils of the old feudal order, but, more importantly, to help locals ‘understand the roots of their own suffering.’ From this, the Southern Jiangsu Regional Party Committee concluded that ‘in the struggle against

feudal “evil tyrants” (*e’ba*) and landlords, women are the most powerful force in sparking the class consciousness of the masses.<sup>11</sup> These sympathetic figures helped create feelings of commiseration that cadres could shape into violent outrage. In a striking example of this, an elderly woman in Baoxi township, Chongming county, cried herself hoarse, prompting others to break down sobbing, after which they subjected the evil tyrant landlord to ferocious struggle.<sup>12</sup>

Inextricably tied to the cultivation of sympathy for the aggrieved was the elicitation of outrage against those who were claimed to have caused their suffering, with the ultimate intent to justify and mobilise violence against them. The link between outrage and violence is well established: outrage is an emotion that ‘motivates people to shame and punishes wrongdoers’ in response to perceived violations of moral norms.<sup>13</sup> Importantly, speaking bitterness used individual instances of landlord malfeasance to elicit outrage and establish hostility towards landlords *as a group*. These individual examples of moral transgression were often deployed in speaking bitterness conducted at struggle sessions, where the theatrical retelling of stories of suffering could most effectively generate outrage and instigate violence. During the public sentencing of evil tyrant and landlord Chen in Huaining county, southwestern Anhui province, an old couple entered the stage, sobbing, to tell the crowd their story of how Chen had beaten their son to death while attempting to settle a debt owed to him, hounded their daughter-in-law to death, and rendered them destitute, causing their newly born grandson to die of starvation. The crowd of over 2,000 people were so enraged by the couple’s story that they began to yell: ‘Down with the evil tyrant landlord, a blood debt must be repaid in blood.’<sup>14</sup>

That the Party used speaking bitterness within the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) illustrates its utility as a tool of ingroup consolidation for mobilising outrage and violence. Wu Guo’s thoughtful and fascinating exploration of the PLA’s use of speaking bitterness shows how the Party used it to recruit soldiers, build camaraderie, and forge a violent hatred of internal ‘class enemies’ as well as the Nationalist foe.<sup>15</sup> The *Speaking Bitterness and Seeking Vengeance (suku fuchou)* handbook, published in 1947 by the PLA, contains a collection of ‘classic’ speaking bitterness materials that the Party used as templates for PLA soldiers. With colourful titles like ‘How Vicious Are the Hearts of the Landlords?’ (*dizhu laocai de xin duo hen ya!*), ‘When Will Two Generations of Hatred Be Avenged, Setting One’s Mind to Eliminating Chiang Kai-shek’ (*liang dai yuan chou he shibao, lizhi xiaomie Jiang Jieshi*), and ‘Tell My Bitterness to the Party’ (*ba wo de ku gaosu gei dang*), these stories were designed to conform to generic narratives of suffering that could trigger the righteous indignation of soldiers before battle. Some of these stories of exploitation were even written in verse.<sup>16</sup> Because speaking bitterness was used to provoke outrage against both the Nationalists and landed elite and strongmen who allied with them, cadres drew on examples of injustice from members of the local community to mobilise soldiers. To an audience of soldiers at the battlefield of the Qingcang Campaign in 1947, an elderly man surnamed Liu spoke of his abuse at the hands of the region’s notorious strongman—a ‘traitor-evil tyrant’ landlord named Gao Hongji—who beat Liu senseless after failing to extort money from him: ‘As the soldiers heard this, they became moved, one by one, [until] everyone shouted, “Resolutely avenge Old Man Liu!”’ After hearing more stories of how Gao Hongji raped women, ordered the demolition of people’s houses, and otherwise oppressed locals, one of the

army commissars led his troops to yell the slogans 'Avenge the people!' and 'Resolutely exterminate Gao Hongji!' after which the soldiers 'through gritted teeth, avowed to avenge the people.'<sup>17</sup>

*The Historical and Cultural Foundations of Speaking Bitterness*

What were the origins of speaking bitterness? Considering the Western roots of the CCP's mobilisation tactics, Frederick Yu remarked that '[the Chinese Communists] appear as such veterans of what seem to be psychiatric and psychoanalytical practices that one could even suspect that they had read Freud and Jung along with Marx and Lenin in their early revolutionary days. But there is no evidence that they did so.'<sup>18</sup> It is more plausible that the Party developed speaking bitterness into a structured technique by drawing upon cultural norms regarding the public expression of suffering and storytelling traditions.<sup>19</sup> The goal of making its audience sympathise with suffering resembles the neo-Confucian idea that one can cultivate virtue through witnessing and being upset by suffering. As De Bary explains: 'For the neo-Confucians it was the mark of the humane man that he could *not* endure the sufferings of others, but felt compelled to take action to remedy them.'<sup>20</sup> The use of suffering to elicit sympathy appears to have been widely practiced in various contexts in pre-communist China. In an intriguing anecdote from his memoir of life during the Taiping Rebellion, Zhang Daye writes of how ferryboats often hired 'one-headed women'—childless widows—to wail and tell their stories of suffering to defuse brawls among passengers by making everyone cry or feel deep pity.<sup>21</sup> Shi Jianqiao, who infamously shot and killed the warlord Sun Chuanfang in public, disseminated pamphlets to onlookers detailing how Sun had murdered her father; the Nationalist media used Shi's tale of filial vengeance to solicit the public's sympathy and successfully pressured the government to acquit her.<sup>22</sup> These various cultural precedents could possibly explain how the Communists came to see this technique as a legitimate and effective form of political education and why ordinary villagers may have accepted it as a practice.

The structure of speaking bitterness and its attentive focus on public performance appears to be inspired by China's folk operatic tradition. The Party did not simply find those who were aggrieved to serve as accusers, they actively guided them to understand their suffering and trained them to deliver their stories in the most effective way possible. Speaking bitterness, as Anagnost notes, was 'not the spontaneous flow of pent-up sorrow but the careful reworking of perception and experience into the narrative frame of Marxist class struggle.'<sup>23</sup> The ways in which cadres coached 'accusers' to speak bitterness resembled acting lessons. In his research on the use of speaking bitterness during land reform in Shandong and Hebei during the Civil War, Li Lifeng observes that speaking bitterness participants received a great deal of instruction on how to deliver their tragic stories: speakers needed to learn how 'to summarise several [of the landlords'] most heinous crimes that could make the masses feel a high degree of hatred and thus a desire to join the struggle.'<sup>24</sup> Cadres treated accusers like actors playing before an audience. A cadre would push an accuser, when delivering his or her stories, to 'wear a sad facial expression' and to 'become an actor who can move the people.' In fact, when the Party introduced speaking bitterness to the PLA during

the 1947 Speaking Bitterness Campaign, it used an opera—‘Wang Keqin’s Squad’—to demonstrate the technique: at one point in the opera the titular character literally performs speaking bitterness on stage.<sup>25</sup>

### *The Legacy of Speaking Bitterness after Mao*

Speaking bitterness, as a mobilisation practice, disappeared with the ascendancy of Deng Xiaoping, but the use of suffering to legitimise and justify state repression quickly resurfaced in the campaigns of the early reform era. Though the Party claimed to continue to draw on the experiences of the masses, it now spoke bitterness on their behalf. The Anti-spiritual Pollution Campaign of 1983, aimed at attacking intellectuals who were ‘polluting’ China with bourgeois liberal ideas, linked degenerate intellectual thought with societal decay—i.e. rising rates of rape, murder, and corruption. The ensuing Strike Hard Campaign of 1983 to 1986 used sensational, morally abhorrent acts, such as sexual crimes and murder, to rally public enthusiasm for a broad crackdown on criminals who were harming society. As Thaxton writes:

In city after city, top CCP and Public Security personnel stoked public indignation toward accused criminals, often issuing calls for quick, violent revenge against the accused . . . [P]eople were sentenced and shamed in mass public meetings and alleged wrongdoers were paraded through the streets with derogatory signs around their necks while scores of police cars, sirens screaming, were dispatched to seize ‘criminals’ reported by ‘the masses.’<sup>26</sup>

Although speaking bitterness was never a spontaneous grassroots practice, it still succeeded in creating a form of mass politics that vocalised suffering that had long been mute or met with resignation. Today, such places have again fallen silent, as the masses have been moved off the stage of history, relegated to passive spectators of their own suffering.

Under Xi, the anti-corruption drive and the Eliminate Crime and Purge Evil Campaign (*saohei chūè*) again resorted to sensationalised accounts of criminal activity to teach the masses the nature of their suffering and to provoke outrage against corrupt officials, drug dealers, and those who threaten social order, and to rally sympathy for the Party-state’s harsh repression of them. Instead of the masses, it is the alleged agents of suffering themselves who speak. Even when it is the Party that is responsible for the suffering of the masses, it ventriloquises and individualises guilt through the confessions of fallen cadres. In the resurgence of televised confessions under Xi—a more contemporary manifestation of the age-old communist practice of self-criticism—allegedly corrupt cadres enumerate their sins to a national audience who can only applaud or remain silent.<sup>27</sup> And so the Party continues to speak bitterness—to quote the title of the hit anti-corruption television series—‘in the name of the People.’

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