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超越

## Surpass

William A. CALLAHAN

**W**here is China going? How will it influence world politics in the twenty-first century? Such questions currently vex commentators not only in the West, but within the People's Republic of China (PRC) as well.<sup>1</sup> In his first month as China's leader in 2012, Xi Jinping addressed this concern when he proposed the 'China Dream' (*zhongguo meng*) as his vision of the PRC's future direction. Such discussion of directions and dreams is actually part of a broad and ongoing debate about the 'moral crisis' that China faces after four decades of economic reform and opening up. Public intellectuals from across the political spectrum, thus, are engaged in 'patriotic worrying' (*youhuan yishi*), where they feel that it is their job to ponder the fate of the nation, and to find the 'correct formula' to solve China's problems.<sup>2</sup>

Curiously, in this broad discussion, the concept of 'surpass' (*chaoyue* or *chaoguo*, also translated as 'overtake') keeps appearing to inform the 'correct formula' for saving China. Such surpass-speak characteristically invokes a quotation from Mao Zedong's 1956 speech on 'Strengthen Party Unity and Carry Forward Party Traditions':

Given 50 or 60 years, we certainly ought to surpass the United States. This is an obligation ... . [I]f after working at it for 50 or 60 years you are still unable to overtake [*ganguo*] the United States, what a sorry figure you will cut! You should be read off the face of the earth. Therefore, to surpass the United States is not only possible, but absolutely necessary and obligatory. If we don't, the Chinese nation will be letting the nations of the world down and we will not be making much of a contribution to humanity.

This essay will do two things. It will conduct a textual analysis of this quotation, first to locate it in its original context, and then to examine how it has been rejuvenated as a guide for the future. It will argue that surpass-speak is part of what can be called a 'nostalgic futurology' that looks back to key events, like the Great Leap Forward, in order to look ahead to Chinese success in the twenty-first century.

### *Mao's Strategy to Surpass America*

To imagine China's future, Mao employs a quantitative strategy measured by material metrics, as opposed to a qualitative strategy that invokes normative ideas. Earlier in the Speech, Mao stated that 'a country like ours may and ought to be described as "great." Our Party is a great Party, our people a great people, our revolution a great revolution, and our construction is great, too.' 'Greatness' (*weida*) here is not measured in terms of the normative measures of cultural achievement, economic equality or social justice, but in terms of the material metric of steel tonnage. 'Great,' thus, is the quantitative measure of 'big' (see also Tomba's essay in the present volume). Big-ness is not absolute, but relative, and for Mao, relative to the United States:

The United States has a population of only 170 million, and as we have a population several times larger, are similarly rich in resources and are favoured with more or less the same kind of climate, it is possible for us to catch up with the United States. What are your 600 million people doing? Dozing? Which is right, dozing or working? If working is the answer, why can't you with your 600 million people produce 200 or 300 million tons of steel when they with their population of 170 million can produce 100 million tons?

Surpassing the United States is not simply a national goal for China, but is seen as the PRC's responsibility to the world. Otherwise, as we saw above, Mao feels that China would be letting the world down, and therefore would not deserve any respect.

This was the first time that Mao spoke of his goal of surpassing the United States. The speech 'Strengthen Party Unity and Carry Forward Party Traditions' was delivered at a preparatory meeting for the Communist Party (CCP)'s Eighth Party Congress that was held in September 1956. At that time, Mao was fighting against Zhou Enlai and others who wanted to consolidate the economic and social gains of land reform and move forward with the nationalisation of industry. They criticised Mao's more radical economic ideas as a 'rash advance' (*maojin*) that was 'proceeding too rapidly without due consideration of actual circumstances and likely consequences.'<sup>3</sup> Mao's 1956 Speech was, thus, an early expression of his push for what would later be called the Great Leap Forward (1958–62).

Drawing on Khrushchev's 1957 prediction that the Soviet Union would surpass the United States in 15 years, 'surpass Britain and catch up to America' (*chao ying gan mei*) became Mao's key slogan for the Great Leap Forward. According to Bo Yibo, 'the stated goal of the Great Leap Forward movement was to overtake Britain in iron and steel production within just two years, overtake the Soviet Union within four years,

and overtake the United States within ten years.<sup>4</sup> As we can see, Mao became more ambitious as the movement developed.<sup>5</sup> But as is well-known, this ambition eventually led to humanity's greatest famine, killing more than 30 million people.<sup>6</sup>

### *Public Intellectuals Revive 'Surpass America'*

Why then would this passage about surpassing America, which exemplifies the key ideas of the disastrous Great Leap Forward, continue to be popular? Actually, according to CNKI—China's largest academic database—Mao's 1956 'Strengthen Party Unity' speech was not regularly cited in the 1970s, 1980s, or 1990s. It regained currency in the 2000s as a way of explaining China's dramatic economic expansion, in the context of predictions that the gross domestic product (GDP) of the PRC would soon surpass that of the United States. In the past decade, Chinese confidence has grown, with Chinese futurologists no longer just speaking of the 'rise of China,' but also of the impending 'fall of the West.' For many, Mao's dream of a strong China that could beat America was coming true, and even according to his 1956 timetable of '50 or 60 years'—i.e. between 2006–16.<sup>7</sup>

For instance, military intellectual Colonel Liu Mingfu, development economist Hu Angang, and political scientist Zhang Weiwei each come from very different institutional backgrounds and pursue quite divergent approaches to China's future. But they all appeal to Mao's surpass-speak to make similar arguments about China's unstoppable rise. For Colonel Liu, China is in an era of strategic opportunity, where it is incumbent to seize the day to become the 'world's No. 1' superpower (*shijie diyi*). To describe why Mao is the top ideologist of 'world No. 1-ism,' Liu conducts a close textual analysis of the surpass quote from Mao's 1956 Speech. Mao is heroic for Liu because he dared to craft a grand plan to surpass America, stating again that beating the United States would be China's great contribution to humanity. Liu is fascinated by the Great Leap Forward, seeing the outrageous ambition of this Maoist mass movement as the key to China's success in the twenty-first century. He admits that the Great Leap Forward 'suffered defeat,' and that 'a large population met an irregular death,' but concludes that 'the "Great Leap Forward" is the roadmap for surpassing Britain and catching up to the United States' in the twenty-first century because it shows that in order to create a new path one has to destroy old rules.<sup>8</sup> Liu thus understands Deng Xiaoping's post-Maoist reform and opening policy as a continuation of Mao's Great Leap Forward plan. China's current and future success, here, is the upshot of Mao's ambitious aspirations from the Great Leap Forward era. Colonel Liu's ideas and arguments are important because his China dream of the PRC as a strong military power has been largely adopted by Xi Jinping.

Hu Angang also quotes the 'Strengthen Party Unity' speech at length to argue that Mao and the Speech are important because they created 'the strategic concept of catching up to, and then surpassing the United States.'<sup>9</sup> He elaborates on Mao's materialist quantitative way of measuring power and status, quoting him to explain that because of its large territory, large population, and superior socialist system, China is the only country in the world that is capable of catching up to and surpassing the United States.<sup>10</sup> Like with Liu Mingfu, Mao is important for Hu because he dared to dream of China as the 'world's No. 1' power.<sup>11</sup> Hu's understanding of China's future direction is important

because he is a very influential public intellectual. He leads Tsinghua University's China National Conditions Research Centre, which writes important reports for the Chinese government and consults for the PRC's Five-year Plans.

In asides and footnotes, Hu actually acknowledges the problems with Mao's 'leap-forward' economic policy, and is quite critical of the negative economic impact of the Great Leap Forward: 'By 1965, GDP was 41 percent less than it would have been had the Great Leap Forward not taken place.'<sup>12</sup> Former World Bank Chief Economist Justin Yifu Lin explains that Mao's 'leap-forward strategy' did not lead to sustainable economic growth because its capital-intensive development model defied the country's comparative advantage of abundant cheap labour.<sup>13</sup> Since Mao's political campaigns to develop heavy industry—i.e. steel production—actually retarded China's economic growth, Mao's grand political goal of surpassing the United States could only be achieved by discarding Mao's economic policies. Like most economists, Lin contrasts the problematic first three decades of the Maoist planned economy with the successful three decades of Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening policy. Hu, on the other hand, follows China's New Left to rehabilitate the Maoist period, arguing that 'China's pre-1978 social and economic development cannot be underestimated.'<sup>14</sup>

### *Back to the Future*

It certainly is odd to imagine China's future in terms of the audacious aspirations and disastrous results of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. But this is not simply a historical lesson—Mao's 'great leap strategy' is back in vogue. China's recent 'great leap forward mentality' can be seen in the leadership's demands for rapid and glorious achievements, such as the PRC's high-speed train network, a domestically-built aircraft carrier, and a Chinese space station. This rush to greatness, critics argue, has led to a rash of accidents, including a major train accident in 2011, as well as to broader social and environmental problems (see Lora-Wainwright's essay in the present volume).<sup>15</sup> Hu, however, is unconvinced, reasoning that Mao's 1956 'Strengthen Party Unity' quotation is actually the origin of the economic reform plans unveiled by Deng Xiaoping in 1979. Hu thus concludes: 'It now seems that Mao Zedong's grand strategy for China is on the verge of being realised. China overtaking the United States in terms of GDP, regardless of how it is calculated, is inevitable.'<sup>16</sup>

While Colonel Liu focuses on military power, and Hu focuses on economic power, Zhang Weiwei emphasises political power. His main goal is to show that China's political system is better than the (Western) democratic system. To do this, he cites many Western sources to 'prove' that China will soon surpass the United States economically, politically, and culturally—and even argues that his native Shanghai is already better than New York. In a section called 'To the Top' of *The China Wave*, Zhang reviews British economist Angus Maddison's predictions of the PRC's surpassing the United States by 2015, before noting: 'This reminds many Chinese of a famous observation made by Chairman Mao in 1956.' Zhang then reproduces the surpass quotation in full, to conclude that 'Maddison's prediction seems to tally well with Mao's forecast back in 1956.'<sup>17</sup> After citing predictions from PricewaterhouseCoopers and Goldman Sachs that China soon will overtake the United States, Zhang concludes the chapter by stating that 'like it or not, China has risen, or to say the least China is now being held by many

as the “No. 2” in the world economy. Taking a longer-term view, China will eventually be “No. 1” in the future.<sup>18</sup> Once again, Mao’s 1956 surpass-speak is applied alongside current economic analysis to explain how the PRC is destined to become the world’s top power. Once again, the huge differences between Mao’s method of analysis and those of Maddison, PricewaterhouseCoopers, or Goldman Sachs are effaced simply because they come to similar conclusions. In a later book, *China Surpasses: The Glory and Dream of a ‘Civilization-State,’* Zhang combines Mao’s ‘surpass America’ trope with Xi Jinping’s China Dream to argue that China has already overtaken ‘the West and the Western model,’ and will soon be at the top of the world.<sup>19</sup> Zhang is important because his books sell millions of copies in China, are assigned readings for CCP study sessions in Shanghai, and were reportedly read by Xi Jinping in the summer of 2012, just before he became China’s leader.<sup>20</sup>

### *Misreadings*

Certainly, it is not strange for China’s public intellectuals to think about how the PRC could be a great power, while looking to previous predictions of when China would be the world’s No. 1 power. What is remarkable, however, is the ‘correct formula’ China’s patriotic worriers invoke to guide their national and global aspirations: they all choose a reference to the Great Leap Forward, which employed such a different path from the reforms that facilitated China’s rejoining the world in 1978. In fact, employing Mao’s surpass-speak does not make sense in the twenty-first century because it embodies two serious misreadings: a) rather than being an example of causation (i.e. Mao’s Great Leap Forward idea led to China’s current economic success), it is actually an example of correlation (Mao’s prediction of success in 50–60 years came true in spite of his tragic policies that retarded China’s economic growth); and b) Mao’s notion of national power measured in terms of steel production does not make sense in the context of the current global political-economy, which is characterised by transnational production chains in a knowledge-based innovation economy. Indeed, China’s massive production of steel is now not seen as a strength, but is taken as a sign of the weakness of domestic overcapacity that has to be exported through state-subsidised projects like the Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>21</sup>

The attraction of Mao’s surpass-speak, thus, is not economic, but political. Liu, Hu, and Zhang all stress the ideological and conceptual value of the ‘Strengthen Party Unity’ speech. For the New Left, this is part of a campaign to rehabilitate Mao, the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution in order to confirm the continued relevance of socialism and the CCP in China. In many ways, it is an example of nostalgia for the imagined equality and order of the Maoist period, which is figured as the antidote for China’s current money-worship society. Mao’s 1956 Speech continues to strike a chord because it was memorised by a whole generation of Chinese who grew up during the Cultural Revolution. Its currency also benefitted from the rise of Maoist websites like *Utopia* in the 2000s, which further publicised such radical thought. Thus, surpass-speak is a key example of what could be called China’s ‘nostalgic futurology.’

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