

46

第三世界

## Third World

TENG Wei

[Translated by Craig A. SMITH]

The revolutionary origins of the term ‘third world’ (*di san shijie*) in China are now buried under a litany of developmental discourse. After all, as Deng Xiaoping famously said: ‘Development is the only hard truth’ (*fazhan shi ying daoli*)—everything else is fanciful utopianism. In China in the twenty-first century, belonging to the third world is not a source of pride and revolutionary potential as it was in the Mao era, but a stigmatised and shameful mark of backwardness. The changing connotation of the concept—from the starting point for revolution to the beginning of a technocratic development path—registers a profound sense of the abandonment of China’s revolutionary potential.

*Mao’s Theory of Three Worlds*

The fluidity of the concept of the third world has posed conceptual conundrums. These questions were further refracted through the perspective of those asking them. Did China belong to the third world, the Soviet bloc, or was it something else entirely? Early on, Mao wavered on this question, and even into the early 1960s had not yet formalised a theoretical answer to the problem.

In this period, Mao experimented with different ideas such as an ‘extremely expansive ... intermediate zone’ (*zhongjian didai*) between the United States and the Soviet Union. This shifting zone included a ‘great many capitalist, colonised, and semicolonised countries in the three continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa.’<sup>1</sup> He also detected contradictions among imperialist powers, and between imperialist nations and oppressed nations. As Mao’s thinking developed over time, these different formulations and experimental lines of thought developed into the Theory of Three Worlds (*san ge shijie de lilun*).

In the early 1970s, the concept of the third world became a regular part of CCP discourse and self-identity. In November 1971, Zhou Enlai described China by saying: 'We are also very poor and very backwards. As a developing nation, we are a part of the third world.'<sup>2</sup> Also, in the same month, at the 26th Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations, China regained its seat in the assembly. In his first speech as the leader of the Chinese delegation to the United Nations, Qiao Guanhua stated: 'Just as the vast majority of Asian, African, and Latin American nations, China is a third world country.' In January 1974, the *People's Daily* published the Xinhua News Agency's authoritative interpretation of the third world:

The third world is the new power progressively forming after World War II. The countries of the third world suffered under the oppression of imperialism and colonialism for extended periods of time, and still face the aggression, bullying, and intimidation of the superpowers today. Economically, these countries are all developing countries. The vast majority of Asian, African, and Latin American countries are in the third world.<sup>3</sup>

This was followed by the unequivocal statement:

Socialist China is part of the third world. China is also a developing country and shares a common [fate] with the countries and peoples of the third world, facing a common enemy and a common struggle. With mutual sympathy and mutual support, they unite to advance in the struggle to oppose imperialism, oppose colonialism, and oppose hegemony.

However, the CCP had yet to formulate an integrated understanding of the divisions that defined the three worlds.

The Theory of Three Worlds was formally announced on 22 February 1974. In a meeting with Zambian president Kenneth Kaunda, Mao Zedong explained:

I see the United States and the Soviet Union as the first world . . . . The United States and the Soviet Union have many nuclear bombs and are both quite wealthy. The second world, including Europe, Japan, Australia, and Canada, have fewer nuclear bombs and are not as wealthy, but remain wealthier than the third world. We are the third world, and the population of the third world is very large. Apart from Japan, all of Asia is in the third world. The entirety of Africa is in the third world, and so too is Latin America.<sup>4</sup>

Three days later, Mao also said to the leader of Algeria: 'China is part of the third world. Due to politics, economics, and various other aspects, China cannot be compared to the rich and powerful nations, but must be grouped among the relatively poor countries.'<sup>5</sup>

However, Mao Zedong did not expand upon this issue with a detailed analysis. Rather, on 10 April 1974, with Mao's approval, Deng Xiaoping related the Theory of Three Worlds in an address to the Sixth Special Session of the UN General Assembly. He spoke in a formal language to clearly and succinctly express Mao's theory:

Regarding the transformation of international relations, there are three sides or three mutually integrated and mutually contradicting worlds existing under the real conditions in today's world. The United States and the Soviet Union are the first world. Asian, African, and Latin American developing countries, as well as the developing countries of other regions, make up the third world. The developed countries that lie between these two comprise the second world.<sup>6</sup>

As a representative of the Chinese government, Deng continued: 'China is a socialist country and a developing country, and therefore is a part of the third world. China is not nor ever will be a superpower.' This principled refusal to become a superpower did not mean that China did not desire nor reflect on power; quite the contrary, its aim was to fight alongside oppressed nations and bring about a new way of conducting international relations and thinking about one's place in the world.

### *Cold War Politics*

In the Cold War system that took shape following World War II, the competition for supremacy between the United States and the Soviet Union delivered the world into a precarious situation. In order to gain a peaceful and safer environment, the newly-established People's Republic of China (PRC) endeavoured to unite those outside of the spheres led by the United States and the Soviet Union. Postwar leaders such as de Gaulle and Tito were also searching for roads to development that could transcend Cold War thinking and maintain independence. Historical events such as the 1955 Bandung Conference, the 1961 Conference of Non-aligned Countries, and the 1964 establishment of the Group of 77, all pointed to the efforts of a growing number of nations to engage in new forms of united and peaceful development.

Furthermore, beginning in the 1960s, the divisions and discord between the PRC and the Soviet Union grew deeper by the day. A series of activities by the Soviet Union, including the deployment of troops to Czechoslovakia, the Sino-Soviet border conflict at Zhenbao island, and the amassing of millions of troops along China's border, all prompted Mao to increasingly consider the Soviet Union as a social-imperialist state. In order to check and balance the Soviet threat, China began to contact, engage in negotiation, and finally establish official relations with its ideological enemies—the governments of the 'counterrevolutionary' United States, West Germany, and Japan, as well as the non-socialist or even anti-communist countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Naturally, Mao's introduction of the Three Worlds Theory in this complicated and fluctuating historical context was informed by the diplomatic survivalist strategy of 'making friends with distant states and attacking those close by' (*yuanyjiao jingong*). However, as a plan born of necessity, this strategy in no way implied that Mao was willing to renounce his revolutionary perspective. On the contrary, to act according to the real situation, to act from practical experience, and to be flexible in distinguishing the enemy, ourselves, and friends according to the time and place, were all in complete accordance with the theories he expressed in his essays 'On Practice' and 'On Contradiction' (see the essays by Aminda Smith and Rojas in the present volume).

Although Mao never published an article specifically dealing with the Three Worlds Theory, his judgement of the world situation and China's position in it clearly emerged from his discourse and practice. First, he based his division of the three worlds upon military and economic strength. Second, this division transcended ideology and Cold War mentality, placing both the United States and the Soviet Union in the same world. Third, by situating socialist China in the third world, he indicated his willingness to occupy the same camp as Asian, African, and Latin American countries, bridging differences and establishing an extensive united front to oppose the hegemonic rule of imperialism and colonialism.

Although Mao's Three Worlds Theory divided the world into three, it was by no means a hierarchical structure. The first world was not superior to the third world, just more powerful militarily and more developed economically. From this position of strength, it dominated the weak, attempted to rule the world imperialistically, and threatened to undermine world peace with its war bases. It was, therefore, an unjust and immoral world. In his words:

We are the third world! I support the countries of the third world engaging in mutual support. The people of the third world must unite. Just as humans fear mosquitoes, so too shall the powerful nations fear the small nations.<sup>7</sup>

It is clear that Mao did not consider the three worlds to be a standard diplomatic strategy of the 'horizontal' or 'vertical' schools.<sup>8</sup> The theory still maintained his belief in world revolution and internationalism, amassing strength to push through the low tide of revolution that plagued the 1970s by striving to unite anti-imperial and anti-colonial power. Despite the Sino-American Shanghai Communiqué of 1972, he also asked for Zhou Enlai to resolutely convey the position that 'wherever there is oppression there will be resistance. Countries must be independent, nations must be liberated, and the people must revolt. This has become the irresistible tide of history.'

#### *Post-Maoist Interpretations*

After Mao passed away, the Cultural Revolution soon ended and the Party restored Deng Xiaoping. Deng then had Hu Qiaomu organise a writers group to draft an article discussing the topic of 'Mao Zedong's Theory on the Division of the Three Worlds.'<sup>9</sup> Deng himself repeatedly revised this article during the writing process and recommended multiple discussions in the Politburo, in each province, and in the military divisions. Finally, the article was published in the *People's Daily*, *People's Liberation Army Daily*, and *Red Flag*. This was the first important theoretical document in which the CCP addressed the international situation since the nine criticisms of the Soviet Union in 1963–64. It established the basis for the fundamental diplomatic policies of the Deng Xiaoping era. However, unlike Mao, Deng did not emphasise world revolution, instead favouring peace and development.

Current Party theorists generally praise Deng for this revision, seeing this as a useful development of the Three Worlds Theory to overcome the limitations of Mao Zedong's version.<sup>10</sup> Deng attributed the East-West divide to a difference in politics and the South-North divide to an economic difference, which transforms the latter

into a developmental issue. Particularly in the final stages of the Cold War, when the outcome was inevitable, and amidst the discourse of judging the defeated and bidding farewell to the revolution, the Chinese people gradually became accustomed to examining the history and present conditions of the third world through the lens of economic development. All that remained of the third world was poverty, backwardness, underdevelopment, and a lack of civilisation—a position to be escaped from with increasing haste. In today's China, the division of the three worlds is possessed of a concrete hierarchical meaning, with the third world occupying the lowest substratum as the 'other' of the entire world structure.

In the past, the third world was the locality of the Chinese self in the Cold War. It was the place of China's subjectification. However, in the post-Cold War world China's subjectivity is consciously being shifted to a position above that of the developed countries of the West. At the same time, the third world has been other-ised while its stereotype has been internalised within the Chinese episteme. This transformation is even clearer when seen alongside the neoliberal global order indicated by China's entry into the World Trade Organisation, and China's rise to become the second largest economy in the world.

In *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri categorically assert that the spatial division into three worlds is already an outmoded paradigm, as 'we continually find the First World in the Third, the Third in the First, and the Second almost nowhere at all. Capital seems to be faced with a smooth world—or really, a world defined by new and complex regimes of differentiation and homogenisation, deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation.'<sup>11</sup> Although it may be tempting to give in to the thought that 'empire has no outside,' this position excessively stresses the homogenous nature of today's world structures. In contrast to Hardt and Negri's conception of the empire/multitude, the Maoist discourse of the 'third world' retains powerful insight into the constant reterritorialisations carried out through globalisation.<sup>12</sup> It is only in those places which span or fracture borders that there is the possibility of the emergence of new political thought and practice.

The third world is not necessarily located only in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, but may be close at hand—as every place of poverty and every destitute person is the third world. We must strive to recover the third-worldism that Mao formulated through the dialectical relationships of 'world peace, national liberation, people's democracy, and socialism.'<sup>13</sup> Despite global capitalism's unceasing self-renewal through reliance on technological advancement, and despite the relentless tightening of hegemonic rule, we must strive to reunite, through mutual assistance, deliberation, and the fight against capitalism, the entirety of the third world across all of its oppressed and exploited countries, classes, societies, and individuals. In the third world we find a uniqueness, subjectivity, and unity that, although weak, cannot be ignored.

This text is taken from *Afterlives of Chinese Communism: Political Concepts from Mao to Xi*, edited by Christian Sorace, Ivan Franceschini and Nicholas Loubere, published 2019 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

[doi.org/10.22459/ACC.2019.46](https://doi.org/10.22459/ACC.2019.46)