

## **VIOLENCE IN REVOLUTIONARY CHINA: 1949-1963**

### **Zhou Xun**

In 1848, commenting on the quashing of the Viennese popular uprising against the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Karl Marx predicted the only way the ‘bloody birth throes of the new society can be shortened, simplified and concentrated, [would be through] revolutionary terror’.<sup>1</sup> Marx’s pessimistic words evoking the Terror of 1793-4, with its mass executions across France, took on new meaning in twentieth-century China. After a long civil war, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) defeated the Nationalist army and established the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in autumn 1949. During the early years of the PRC, the CCP employed total terror in Marx’s sense. First, as a means to bring about revolutionary change; then to create a new social reality; finally to guard the ‘fruits of revolution’ against reactionary forces. In this process, the use of violence was justified over and over again and became common coin of social experience in the early PRC. For Mao Zedong and many top CCP leaders, ‘power grows out the barrel of gun’ and the revolution had to be maintained with those weapons. The use of violence was seen as necessary.

After the CCP seized power in 1949, remnants of the Nationalist army as well as hostile local forces staged fierce resistance across the country. For the new and fragile CCP regime, repression and terror were essential instruments to guard their newly gained power as well as, at the same time, to destroy the ‘old’ and to make a ‘new’ society free of the ‘evil remnants’ of the past. Together with the counter-revolutionary as well as the ‘bad’ elements, landlords

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, ‘The Victory of the Counter-Revolution in Vienna,’ *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* (November 1848), quoted in Michael Evans, *Karl Marx* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 127.

and rich peasants were classified as enemies of the people. They were to be eliminated at any cost. 'Be ruthless and be tough', 'To strive one must kill', for Mao there was no middle ground. Common people were encouraged to take up violence against their fellow countrymen.

Between 1950 and 1953, the CCP launched the Land Reform in the Chinese countryside and the Campaign to Suppress Counter-Revolutionaries throughout China. The top leadership urged local cadres to 'not fear executing people' and to punish those who were too lenient and practiced peaceful land reform. Killing quotes were handed down. In 1951, at a February CCP Central Committee meeting, it was agreed that one out of every thousand should be killed. A month later, when speaking about the Suppression of Counter-Revolutionaries campaign in big cities, Mao used the metaphor of 'blast rain': 'killing Counter-Revolutionaries should be fast and thorough like blast rain. We must kill a huge numbers of them,' he said.<sup>2</sup> Within one year, millions of people were charged as counter-revolutionaries. They were either executed, imprisoned, or controlled. According to official estimates, 712,000 'counter-revolutionaries' were executed, 1,290,000 were imprisoned, and 1,200,000 were subject to control at various times.' But both Yang Kuaisong and Frank Dikötter argue that the actual number of executions was much larger than the reported 712,000.<sup>3</sup> My recent archival research also shows that in subaltern regions such as Guizhou and Sichuan in the far southwest, the number killed far exceeded the quota handed down by the CCP Central Committee. In the heat of the killing, countless ordinary civilians were stirred up to violence.

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<sup>2</sup> 'Chairman Mao's instruction to Comrade Huang Jing on supplement plan for Tianjin', from Western Sichuan Party Committee Archive, file CX1-78, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> Yang Kuaisong, 'Reconsidering the Campaign to Suppress Counterrevolutionaries', *The China Quarterly* 193 (March 2008), 104-120; Frank Dikötter, *The Tragedy of Liberation: A History of the Chinese Revolution, 1945-57* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 85-100.

Revolutionary upheaval led to turmoil and lawlessness. Some used suppression of counter-revolutionaries as a way to settle personal scores. For others, killing became a job to do or, indeed, a habit. In some parts of the country, killing was undertaken at such speed that there was not enough time to determine who was counter-revolutionary or not. After thousands were killed, their crimes, as well as often their names, were invented to pass the inspection from the party. Physical torture such as burning, limb amputation, hanging, and beating were also widely used prior to the actual killing.<sup>4</sup> In Guizhou's Huishui County, a man named Xie Caoxiang was arrested simply because he had visited a landlord in the same village. Being charged with the crime of liaising with counter-revolutionaries, he was repeatedly hanged and beaten. Eventually he died while his body was hanging on a pole.<sup>5</sup> The violent atmosphere incited fear as well as rage. In Western Sichuan, at a public trial of a counter-revolutionary, the angry crowds jumped on the accused. After repeatedly beating him with wooden clubs and stone, in the chaos that followed the poor man had his eyes gouged out.<sup>6</sup>

In rural China, Land Reform provided villagers the context to overthrow the landlords and takeover their properties. The sins of the landlords, as well as the rich peasants, were not merely being counter-revolutionary but also being rich. Once the Confucian moral framework was removed, a common moral and cultural heritage shared by majority of population living in China, rural Chinese villages quickly turned into what Hannah Arendt called 'the

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<sup>4</sup>Chairman Mao's edict on the killing quota, 20 April 1951', from Western Sichuan Party Committee Archive, File CX1-834, pp. 75-7; South-western Bureau's report on the Suppression of Counter-Revolutionaries campaign and public security work, from Western Sichuan Party Committee Archive, File CX1-837, pp. 105-8.

<sup>5</sup> The Public Security of South-western China's report on the Suppression of Counter-Revolutionaries campaign, from Western Sichuan Party Committee Archive, File CX1-839, pp. 227-9.

<sup>6</sup> Western Sichuan Public Security Bureau's report on the Suppression of Counter-Revolutionaries campaign, from Western Sichuan Party Committee Archive, File CX1-843, p. 98.

atmosphere of disintegration'.<sup>7</sup> All of a sudden, the old rule of the world had ceased to apply. Gone with it was the moral balance between right and wrong and between good and evil. Some interpreted Revolution in their own light. In many areas, the Land Reform turned out to be an exercise in looting others. Hatred began to play a central role in everyday human interaction as well as in public affairs. Everyone was pitted against everybody else, most of all against their next-door neighbours, their fellow villagers. Many villagers took up violence in almost medieval fashion. In central and south China, for example, under the disguise of the Revolution or the Land Reform, the bloody feudal style of clan fighting was rife. Hundreds indeed thousands were brutally murdered as result. Protected by the local command of the Public Security Police or village militia, known as the Peasant Association (*nonghui*), villagers of one clan openly robbed fellow villagers from another.<sup>8</sup> In addition to landlords and rich peasants, many middle-level peasants were also targeted. In China's southwest, in Yunnan province's Zhanyi County, seventy villagers were tortured to death within twenty days during the Land Reform in 1951. One landlord was beaten to death simply because a fellow villager wanted his trousers.<sup>9</sup> In Guizhou province's Wuchuan County, a region with a predominantly Miao and Gelao ethnic population, a seventy-year-old local peasant Zhang Baoshan was butchered after had been falsely classified as landlord in the Land Reform in 1951. His two sons sought revenge for their father's death. One son was caught and hacked to death by two fellow villagers with an axe, the other son Zhang Ren'an was besieged by a group of revolutionary activists in the village and then hanged. After Zhang Ren'an's death,

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<sup>7</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, second edition (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1958), p. 268.

<sup>8</sup> The CPPC and the Southwest Bureau's instruction on how to carry out Land Reform and Tax collection work, from Western Sichuan Party Committee Archive, File CX1-882, p. 16.

<sup>9</sup> The Central Committee of the Communist Party and the Southwest Bureau's instruction to carry out Land Reform, 1950–1952, from Western Sichuan Party Committee Archive, File CX 1-882, pp. 16, 21, 156-58, 284-85.

they chopped off his tongue and sexual organ and burned his body. The rest of the family was also arrested and brutally tortured by local cadres and villagers.<sup>10</sup> In some cases, the party had to intervene to save landlords from sheer butchery, though killing and looting were allowed as long as they were done in what, according to the authority, was labelled a civilized manner. In Southern Sichuan's Zizhong County, for example, during the Land Reform more 400 people were beaten to death within 10 days. Most of those being killed were not landlords or counter-revolutionaries. They were beaten to death simply because someone else in the village hated or envied them. When the local authority was alarmed to the seriousness of the situation, instead of mediating, they instructed villagers: 'Don't kill anyone in broad day light', in other words, killing was allowed as long as it was done secretly or in the dark.<sup>11</sup> In parts of Guangdong, which were historically the base for revolutionary guerrilla fighters, after Mao issued instruction to speed up the pace of Land Reform, killing had become so uncontrollable that eventually its extent even alarmed the Central China Party Committee.<sup>12</sup>

For some local officials, the use of violence also became a habit, an obligation, or a pathway to promotion. A student from the elite Tsinghua University in Beijing sent to the south to assist Land Reform and tax collection was so shocked by the sheer scale of violence in the countryside that he wrote a letter to the Beijing Municipal Government raising serious concerns. According to him some village officials in rural Zhejiang tortured people routinely

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<sup>10</sup> The Southwest China Public Security Bureau's instruction on how to carry out the Campaign to Suppress Counter-revolutionaries, 1950–1952, from Western Sichuan Party Committee Archive, File CX 1-839, pp. 127-8.

<sup>11</sup> Western Sichuan Party Committee's report on Land Reform, from Western Sichuan Party Committee Archive, File CX 1-884, pp. 32, 38-9.

<sup>12</sup>The CCCP's instruction regarding the problems during the Land Reform, from Western Sichuan Party Committee Archive, File CX1-886, p. 6.

in order to secure their position: they arrested or tortured villagers when they could not collect enough grain to meet the government's tax quota. When being challenged, they replied: 'our job is to meet the target. We will have remorse later.' As result, majority of villagers lived in fear and horror. 'What kind of revolution is that?' this student asked.<sup>13</sup>

As landlords were being killed or arrested, their properties were to be 'distributed'. Villagers, encouraged by local officials, rushed to chop down trees as they now belonged to the public. The logs were sold for profit to boost local funds. The authority tried to stop the unrestricted logging leading to clashes with villagers. In addition, villagers from different villages fought each other to secure more logs, thus more profits. This often led to further bloodshed.<sup>14</sup>

Such violence was ubiquitous in regions of mixed populations such as in Gansu and Ningxia, where since the Manchu conquest in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the ethnic Hui and the Han lived next to each other under the imperial rule. At the eve of Liberation, their fragile or (perhaps) artificial sense of solidarity — 'All under the Heaven' as it was labelled in imperial China — evaporated. As what happened with Serbs and Croats in the former Yugoslavia in the late 1980s, ethnic hatred and violence soon followed. This quickly escalated into spontaneous pogroms. In Gansu province's Linxia region in the northwest, the local authority fell in the hands of the Han officials who were seconded here from other parts of China. The local Public Security office too was dominated by the Han. In the name of ridding the area of bandits, they openly arrested and tortured a huge number of the local Hui population. One

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<sup>13</sup> The CCCP and the Southwest Bureau's instruction on how to carry out Land Reform and Tax collection work, from Western Sichuan Party Committee Archive, File CX1-882, p. 21.

<sup>14</sup> The CCCP's instruction regarding the problems during the Land Reform, from Western Sichuan Party Committee Archive, File CX1-886, pp. 110-2.

night at the regional Revolutionary Political Department office, eight local Huis froze to death during detention. After they died, their bodies were openly abandoned in the nearby wasteland. The incident caused a huge public outcry and a riot broke out. Local bandits stirred up public anger, and recruited an army of 8,000 Hui ‘rebels’ to wage a war against the communist officials and armies as well as the local Han population. More than 400,000 of the local population were implicated in this ethnic massacre. In chaos, thousands, both the Han and the Hui, were brutally murdered. To escape the massacre between 40 to 50,000 Hui fled to what is now called Inner Mongolia in the PRC.<sup>15</sup>

In Gansu province’s Guiyuan, now under the administration of Ningxia Hui autonomous region, ethnic conflicts dated back to the warlord period. After the Communist Liberation, to reduce financial and administration burdens, the region was forced to be integrated with another nearby region. The majority of the local population, both the Han and the Hui, refused the amalgamation. A major revolt broke out. The populace tried to disarm the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers. In chaos that followed, some PLA soldiers killed one of the civilians. This stirred up further violence. The civilians turned on the regional CCP head. After repeatedly kicking and beating him, they tied him up and used him as bargaining chip to deal with the authorities. When the authorities refused to listen to their appeal, they turned on each other: the Huis took up violence against the Hans, and the Hans seized weapons to kill the Huis.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The CCCP, the PLO, and the Public Security’s instruction on eliminating bandits and spies, from Western Sichuan Party Committee Archive File CX1-857, pp. 19-20; The CCCP and the CCCP United Front’s instruction on works in the ethnic regions, from Western Sichuan Party Committee Archive, CX1-879, pp. 3-7.

<sup>16</sup> The CCCP and the CCCP United Front’s instruction on works in the ethnic regions, from Western Sichuan Party Committee Archive, File CX1-879, pp. 15-6.

In China's far southwest, prior to the Communist Liberation, Xikang province, now part of Sichuan, had been the territory controlled by the warlord Liu Wenhui. Historically on the periphery between the Chinese empire and the Himalaya kingdom of Tibetan, the region was of strategic importance both militarily and commercially. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Manchus had pacified these regions. After the fall of the imperial rule, it fell into the iron grip of the warlord. During the Manchu rule as well as under the warlord, the Han Chinese, the Tibetans as well as some nomadic tribes were integrated. They traded with each other as well as married each other. Prior to any substantial settlement, the nomadic Lolo tribes had been moving back and forth in these regions, and occupied different hills. Trade in merchant goods as well as opium allowed settlements to flourish. The Lolo tribes soon learnt that they could make a living from the Han and Tibetan merchants as their caravans had to pass through their hills. From the late nineteenth century, an increasing number of Han villagers moved there to cultivate the cash rich opium crops as the Manchu government imposed a ban on opium in the Chinese heartland. They rented hills from the Lolo tribes on which to grow opium, and in return the Han villages paid the Lolos in silver, food, and sometimes weapons. This was not without conflict, but there was a general understanding and agreement between all groups that as long as the Han as well as the Tibetans kept the Lolo in supply of silver, food and weapons, the Tibetan and Han were allowed to trade and the latter to grow their opium. This continued to be the case after the warlord Liu Wenhui took over the region. Liu was one of the 'opium lords', who profited greatly from the illicit drug trade. Under him opium became the major life blood for the region.

The Communist Liberation, however, broke down the existing harmony resulting from the economic system in the region. The new freedom became an open invitation to violence. As soon as the former ruler – the warlord – was obliterated, so too were the old rules. Now the



warlord was gone, lawlessness prevailed. Bandits – many of them were opium lords – as well as remnants of the Nationalist army took advantage of the situation, threatening the CCP authority as well as the civilian population. To rid the region of bandits was also interpreted as a call to rid the area of opium, suppressing the opium trade. As the opium fields were wiped out, the new Communist authority also hunted down all opium farmers and traders. The Lolo, who were the previous possessors of the hills and had weapons, were classified either as landlords or counterrevolutionary bandits. To start with, the Lolo understood this meaning that the Han had broken the rules governing their relationship. In response, they blocked trading routes, looted caravans carrying essential supplies, and massacred the Han villagers. Fearing for their lives, and in panic, the remaining Han population began to flee. Zhaojue, the capital of Xikang, turned into total chaos. Instead of mediating between these different groups, the CCP officials, most of them were Han from elsewhere in China, began treating all of the Lolo tribal chiefs as bandits.<sup>17</sup> As these tribal chiefs were arrested or beheaded, the different Lolo tribes were reorganised into ONE group with the NEW ethnic label ‘Yi’. As Yi, these different tribes came under the new leadership of the CCP with Mao as their superior head. Ethnic hatred, previously unknown to the region, became a living reality. The chaos soon spread across Xikang. It continued into the late 1950s. Although Xikang was merged to become part of Sichuan province after 1955, it took nearly 10 years for the CCP to finally consolidate its rule in the region. In the process, the CCP authority gradually isolated the Yi population into the hills around Zhaojue. The Lolos, the former possessors of a range of different hills, had since been turned into a permanent underclass with their new ethnic label Yi.

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<sup>17</sup> Xikang provincial party committee’s instruction regarding the Suppression of Counter-Revolutionaries campaign, From Xikang Regional Party Committee Archive, File JK1-418, pp. 19-22.

The ever-growing chaos in Xikang, as well as its geographic position at the periphery of China provided the authorities a further context to introduce hard-line approach. In 1954, in two villages in the suburb of Xichang—the place of the CCP’s regional authority headquarter—hundreds of innocent villagers were arrested. They were interrogated and tortured until they were forced to admit they were counter-revolutionary bandits.<sup>18</sup>

While the chaos in Xikang, coupled with violence, persisted into the late 1950s, for most of the rest of China, the Land Reform and the Campaign to Suppress the Counter-revolutionary gradually ended towards the quarter of 1953. Violence, however, did not cease. On the contrary, as the CCP regime began to introduce the national ‘grain procurement policy’ (centralised grain collection system), demanding set quotas of grain collection from across rural China from 1953, violence found a new context. Many local officials, who had become used to the practice of violence during the earlier revolutionary campaigns, took up violence as an instrument to force villagers to hand over ever more grain. On the other side, villagers took to violence as a necessary weapon for self-defence. In China’s agricultural heartland, Anhui province, for example, between 1953 and 1955, more than 32.5 percent of the total number of crimes were ‘crimes of sabotaging’ government’s grain procurement policy.<sup>19</sup>

Those saboteurs being caught were charged not according to their supposed crimes, but as counter-revolutionaries. The use of violence against them was thus further justified. Looting, physical torture, and public humiliation were some of the most common methods used. As

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<sup>18</sup>Investigative report by Xichang and other backward regions party committee, From Xikang Regional Party Committee Archive, File JK1-1978, no page number.

<sup>19</sup> Anhui Difangzhi editorial department, *Anhui Local History – Legal Section* (Beijing: Fangzhi chubanshe, 1997), p. 409.

with the Land Reform, many officials once again used grain procurement as a weapon to attack their rivals or to settle personal scores left over from previous eras. In Xikang province's Huili County, more than half of the homes were looted, and many villagers suffered physical abuse. The methods of torture varied from hanging to beating, suffocation by smoke, and poisoning by forcing villager to swallow large dose of hemp. Sometimes, torture sessions would last as long as three days and three nights.<sup>20</sup>

Direct personal violence and structural violence went hand in hand. As James Gilligan observed, it led to behaviour violence such as suicide.<sup>21</sup> When the pressure to handover grain and the fear of physical torture became too great, when they had been denied human dignity, when they have no one to turn to for their grievances, many villagers turned their anger and the sense of helplessness into self-loathing and self-hatred. Some believed it was better to be a criminal than free as life in prison seemed a better and safer outcome than being constantly abused or being starved to death.<sup>22</sup> An even greater number were driven to commit suicide. In northwest Anhui's Fuyang region, for example, within less than one month between December 1953 and January 1954, thirty-two villagers committed suicide because they could not endure the public humiliation or physical torture inflicted on them by local officials

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<sup>20</sup> Xikang Party Committee's report on Grain Procumbent work (1953-5), From Xikang Regional Party Committee Archive, File JK1-2173, pp. 50-1.

<sup>21</sup> See James Gilligan, *Violence: Reflections on a National Epidemic* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), p. 196; for study on structural violence see Johan Galtung, 'Violence, Peace, and Peace Research,' *Journal of Peace Research* 6.3(1969), 167-91.

<sup>22</sup> Ya'an region's special report on grain procumbent work (1954-5), From Xikang Regional Party Committee Archive, File JK1-2174, pp. 55-6.

during the grain procurement campaign.<sup>23</sup> Suicide was not limited to one or two areas, or to the grain procurement campaign. It had become a widespread phenomenon in the early years of the People's Republic. Between 1954 and 1955, 512 cases of suicides or suicide attempts were reported to the central authority of the CCP. The frequency of suicide among the wider public had alerted the CCP's political centre. Although Lu Dingyi, the man in charge of national political cultural work, who became the PRC's first Minister of Propaganda, admitted that the CCP did not like the fact that so many people had committed suicide, in his address to the 18 provincial leaders' meeting that year he insisted that 'we should not let this hold us back. We must have confidence. We must try to think positively. [...] being petrified, lack of control, as well as lack of confidence are the reasons behind high suicide rates. We must encourage the masses to participate in our national political culture. We must take total control. [...] If we don't win them over, they will join the enemies.' He urged the provincial leaders, and 'to win them over is to educate them over and over again.'<sup>24</sup>

For the next thirty years, 'thought reform' dominated the everyday political culture of the PRC. As Wang Lishi, a survivor of the Great Leap Famine told me during an interview, 'there were just endless meetings in those days. We used to say that under Chiang Kai-shek there were endless taxes to pay, and under Chairman Mao there were endless meetings to attend. [...] Every night they called us out to meetings. Only one or two nights when there

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<sup>23</sup> Fuyang regional party committee documents on grain procurement work, from Fuyang Regional Party Committee archive, File J3-2-57, pp. 40-2.

<sup>24</sup> Lu Dingyi's speech at eighteen provincial leader conference, From Xikang Regional Party Committee Archive, File JK1-3123, pp. 10-13.

was no campaign meeting could we get some rest. But the peace never lasted long. Soon, another campaign would begin.’<sup>25</sup>

In the meantime the national grain procurement policy persisted. In 1955, the CCP went ahead and launched the agricultural collectivisation in the Chinese countryside. As with the grain procurement policy, collectivisation was regularly met with contention. Violence was used as form of ‘power propaganda’ to realise the ideological claim in building the NEW socialist countryside or the future socialist utopian. While not all of local officials accepted the CCP’s ideological claims, many were intimidated into competing with each other. To outdo others many local officials used violence to whip unwilling individuals into joining agricultural collectives. By 1956, to Mao’s surprise, virtually all agricultural households in China had been organised into farming collectives. The use of violence was thus retrospectively ‘justified’.

### **Violence during the Great Leap Famine**

Once the CCP regime had completed or achieved its initial goals of Land Reform, the suppression of counter-revolutionaries as well as the initial stage of collectivisation through terror, the system quickly turned to against, not only its stated enemies, but against much wider sections of the population. From the end of 1957, as Mao and the top leadership pushed for the Great Leap Forward, the CCP inaugurated radical collectivisation in the Chinese countryside. Terror and violence were the foundation of the Great Leap Forward’. In the People’s Commune, the new and the highest form of administrative, economic, and political organization in rural China created to lead rural China into a ‘Communist Paradise’, terror,

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<sup>25</sup> Zhou Xun, *Forgotten Voices of Mao’s Great Famine, 1958-1962: an Oral History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), pp. 89-91.

repression, and violence were used directly against the Chinese peasantry, who had been among the CCP's most loyal supporters before its claim to power. Organised violence was practiced as means of total control. The aim was to 'kill one in order to deter one hundred,' or, as a Chinese proverb says: 'Kill the chicken to scare the monkey.'

From its outset, Mao conceived of the People's Commune as an environment without legal safeguards, which operated strictly as a military organization, meaning that violence could be practiced with impunity. At the CCP 'Enlarged Politburo conference' in August 1958, Mao urged his colleagues that 'we must re-establish our military tradition. It is Marxist tradition. Being boorish is good a thing. It shows we are sincere. Bourgeois politeness is deceitful. [...] an orderly society is built on discipline. [...] We don't rely on civil or criminal law to ensure public order. [...] The Soviet Union used force to collect grains. We have 22 years of military tradition.'<sup>26</sup>

Echoing the chairman, Tan Zhenlin, the Minister of Agriculture, reminded provincial leaders that 'last year we achieved high yield by giving forceful orders. [...] This year, we need to pay more attention. We must fight with peasants. Cadres should continue giving forceful orders. The practice of giving forceful orders will continue for the next ten thousand years. [...] this is not the best method, but it's necessary.'<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Chairman Mao's speeches at the August Enlarged Politburo Conference (August 17-30, 1958), from Hunan Provincial Party Committee archive, File 141-1-1036, pp. 27-30.

<sup>27</sup> Chairman Mao and other CCPC leaders' conversations with provincial leaders (1958), From Hunan Provincial Party Committee archive, File 141-2- 62, p. 148.

Violence quickly turned into a normal practice in the People's Commune. As violence permeated every aspects of daily life in the People's Commune, for some the practice of violence became habituated or indeed, for some, an 'addiction'. Once made into a habit, the act of violence no longer needed any intellectual rationale. In Guangdong province's Huaiji County, for example, within four days one commune party secretary physically assaulted eleven people. Villagers called him the 'tiger'. In their eyes, he no longer acted as a human but had turned a beast.<sup>28</sup> Endless 'struggle' meetings provided opportunities for venting personal revenge. Local cadres used their positions of power to extract as much benefit for themselves as possible, while punishing anyone they disliked or with whom they disagreed. Villagers were also encouraged to 'struggle' against each other, and in some cases even family members fought one another. In Guangdong province in southern China, the practice of violence had reached an unprecedented level. As mentioned earlier, Guangdong has a long revolutionary tradition. The CCP was extremely active there from its earliest days, and in 1927, China's first rural Soviet base was established in Haifeng and Lufeng counties in eastern Guangdong. One legacy of Guangdong's revolutionary culture was a propensity for political violence. With the People's Communes, the region's military tradition was restored by Mao's order; oppressive control was revived. Violence became a routine practice. Local cadres as well as villagers were co-ordinated to take up violence against fellow villagers. Most communes set up their own prisons or labour camps. These were called 'little prisons'. Commune or brigade officials, as well as villagers could arrest anyone they disliked by labelling them potential 'saboteurs' and put them in these little prisons. They needed no warrants. They only had to frame it as they were supporting the 'General line' or the People's Commune. In Taishan County, one elderly woman aged in her sixties suffered poor health.

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<sup>28</sup> A report on several recent cases [of commune cadres] violating the law (June 1959). From Kaiping County Party Committee Archive, File 3- A0.09- 80, p. 5.

When she asked for permission to be absent from a commune's celebration meeting, the local cadre forcefully brought her to the meeting where she came close to death spitting blood. In one commune, more than seventy villagers were locked up in the commune labour camp. Their crimes were that they were 'disobedient' and 'wilful'. When the number of arrests had become so extensive that there was no longer any room to accommodate them, they were crowded into village toilets. Those under arrest were routinely tortured, beaten, and hanged. Common methods of torture included whipping with sticks; administering electric shocks; pouring boiling water over their heads; using red-hot metal to burn faces or bodies; forcing prisoners to kneel for long hours; mutilation such as scalping or chopping off ears; medieval style humiliations such as tattooing. In one commune in Luoding County, nearly a hundred villagers were clubbed to death.<sup>29</sup>

As the People's Commune, the CCP's so called 'bridge to Communist paradise', descended into the 'people's hell', grain production plummeted. As of spring 1959 a severe famine took hold across rural China. The procurement system for the acquisition of grain and other agricultural products broke down across large sections of the country. But crop failure and famine conflicted with the state's utopian vision of abundance. Mao and many top CCP leaders determined to win 'the war'. On 22 February 1959, in a letter to provincial leaders, Mao suggested that the food shortage was a conspiracy: the peasants were hiding grain and this was due to corruption at the local level. To 'take back the countryside' and to 'educate the peasants', he gave orders to launch of the Anti- Hiding Campaign. A month later at a top

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<sup>29</sup> A report on several recent cases [of commune cadres] violating the law (June 1959). From Kaiping County Party Committee Archive, File 3- A0.09- 80, pp. 5- 6; 42.



CCP leaders' meeting in Shanghai (25 March 25 to 1 April), Mao again urged the leadership to 'be relentless' toward the peasants and to procure 'a third' of the total crop produced.<sup>30</sup>

A nationwide 'Anti-Hiding Campaign' was launched. It soon turned into a crusade against peasants. Under pressure from their superiors, provincial leaders turned on those at the level immediately below them. As the popular Chinese saying goes, 'The big fish eats the small fish, the small fish eats the little shrimp, and the little shrimp eats nothing but sand.' At the local level, cadres made up false production figures showing praiseworthy success. This led to the ever-increasing procurement quotas based on the false figures. When they failed to procure the projected amounts, local cadres forced starving peasants to hand over their very last kernels of grain and to work day and night in scorching summer and freezing winter. Anyone who did not follow orders was severely punished. Many were tortured or starved to death. In some counties in Shandong province, villagers caught hiding grain were treated as saboteurs or 'American devils'. In Dan County, more than one third of the families were looted. Local villagers commented that the CCP policy was worse than the wartime Japanese army's Three All Policy (burn all, kill all, and loot all). In Juye County, when one female villager asked for a leave to take care of her sick child, the brigade head refused by saying: 'If he dies we could save 180 kg of grain, and his corpse could be used as fertiliser.'<sup>31</sup>

In the aftermath of the CCP's Lushan Plenum in late July and early August 1959, Mao silenced the critical voices of the Great Leap Forward within the CCP leadership, and pushed

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<sup>30</sup> Chairman Mao's words at the Shanghai Conference (25 March 1959), from Gansu Provincial Party Committee archive, File 91-18-494, pp. 44-8.

<sup>31</sup> Report from Tian Qilang and Wang Ying regarding the food crisis and oedema Jining region (April 1959), from Shandong Provincial Party Committee archive, File A001-01-465, pp. 26-8.

the campaign even harder. Violence intensified across the countryside. At the local level, public meetings became the platform for the promotion of terror and the site for decisions about its execution. A mass campaign, engineered by the Party under the Three Red Banners (Socialist Construction, the Great Leap Forward and the People's Commune), turned into a 'beating frenzy.' It spread across the country at terrifying speed. Sichuan province, the proverbial land of abundance, was led by the provincial Party boss Li Jingquan, whom Mao once called more ruthless than even the earlier regional warlords. Having gotten to his position by being brutal, Li was keen to take up the public practice of mass violence for his own career interests. Early in the spring in 1959, serious food shortages afflicted the Sichuan countryside. But Li was only interested in receiving continuous praise from top CCP leaders in Beijing for Sichuan's continuous and generous provision of grain to the rest of country. He launched a 'Balance the Books Campaign' in March to achieve unrealistically high procurement quotas. This was part of the nationwide 'Anti-Hiding Campaign', accompanied by the 'Rectification Campaign'. Rectification, however, did not clean up corruption among the cadres. It enabled open looting of peasants' homes and the theft of the very last reserves of food they possessed. When no grain was found, peasants were physically torture or being punished by total food deprivation. In eastern Sichuan's Shizhu County, a county not far from prosperous Chongqing, more than 70 percent of the local population in the Xianfeng Big Brigade of the county's model Huaban commune were battered during the 'Balance the Books Campaign'. Here local cadres took pride in beating villagers up. Indeed special 'people-beating squads' were set up. Local cadres even encouraged children to attack other children. Between mid-1959 and mid-1961, Shizhu County had an average death rate as high as 60 percent. While the majority of those who died did so as the result of starvation, many were also beaten to death. In nearby Fuling County the situation was no better. Take the Baozi Commune, for example. This was once considered Fuling's granary. With its lush

green terraced fields, the area had produced such an abundance of food that over 2.5 million kg of grain were sent to the state granary in 1958. But in 1959 and the first half of 1960, the death rate there was as high as 29 percent. By January 1961 the population had dropped by 46 percent compared to 1957. The majority were either beaten to death or died of food deprivation during the 'Anti-Hiding Campaign'. In Qinglong Big Brigade, for example, in December 1959, the Anti-Hiding activists meeting lasted for 6 days and nights. During this protracted public ordeal villagers were repeatedly beaten. Some were club to death in the meeting and many more were severely injured as result. One former village cadre, an opponent of the acting brigade head, was so brutally tortured he was driven completely insane.<sup>32</sup> In Youyang County, an official estimate found that 359 people had been beaten to death in less than a year during the 'Anti-Hiding Campaign'. In Youyang's Longtan district, the local party secretary knocked out more 80 villagers' teeth and beat one four-year-old child to death for having eaten a small amount of sweet potato. A government investigative report shows that he had beaten every child in the district during the campaign.<sup>33</sup>

Humiliation inflicted as much pain as torture. In traditional China, public humiliation was used as a form of punishment. Under the Maoist regime humiliation was an essential tool for carrying out political violence and it was widely practiced in the People's Commune. In the

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<sup>32</sup> A report on how ordinary peasants from Qinglong big brigade in Baozi commune were encouraged to expose [corruption] and seize power (January 1961), from the Sichuan Provincial Party Committee Archive, File JC 1- 2068, pp. 1-3.

<sup>33</sup> Comrade Liang Qishan from Sichuan Provincial Administrative Office's report on reification and famine relief work in Fuling region (1961), from Sichuan Provincial Party Committee archive, File JC 001-2605, p. 72; Comrade Yang Wanxuan from Sichuan Provincial Administrative Office's report on reification and agricultural production work in Fuling region (1961), from Sichuan Provincial Party Committee archive, File JC 001-2606, p. 3.

name of Anti-hiding, women in Shandong's Juye County were regularly raped or publically humiliated by being forced to stand naked if they were suspected of hiding grain or could not work in the fields due to menstruation.<sup>34</sup>

In time of scarcity, food was a more powerful weapon than torture. Food deprivation was a common method used by local cadres to force villagers to work harder or to extract more food. While the total number of people died of food deprivation during the Great Leap famine is hard to obtain due to the continued restriction of accessing archival material, from those examples gathered from local archives we learn this was a widespread problem. Take eastern Sichuan, for example, between 1959 and 1961, in one commune in Hechuan County 496 people died an abnormal death. Amongst those who died, forty-two were hanged or buried alive or frightened to death; sixty-two were beaten to death, while 392 died of food deprivation.<sup>35</sup>

What makes the Great Leap Famine in Mao's China different from famines in late imperial China and the brief time of the Chinese Republic is the extraordinary level of violence that was meted out during the famine. In the pursuit of the CCP's utopian vision to transform the Chinese countryside into a communist paradise, an estimate between 2 to 3 million people were tortured to death or deliberately killed between 1958 and 1961.<sup>36</sup> Some of these were buried alive; others were beaten to death; even more were starved to death by deliberate food

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<sup>34</sup> Report from Tian Qilang and Wang Ying regarding the food crisis and oedema Jining region (April 1959), from Shandong Provincial Party Committee archive, File A001-01-465, p. 28.

<sup>35</sup> Sichuan Provincial Administrative Office and the work team's report the situation in Jiangjin (1960), from Sichuan Provincial Party Committee archive, File JC 001-2609, p. 114.

<sup>36</sup> For further discussion on the figure see Frank Dikotter, *Mao's Great Famine: the History of China's most Devastating Catastrophe* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), p. 298.

deprivation. As with the earlier campaigns, the majority of those victims had done nothing wrong themselves: some happened to have been born into the ‘wrong class’, and others simply fell victim of lawless environment where privilege and cronyism were the only ways to survive. For most of local cadres who committed violent crimes, there was often no ideological conviction or specifically evil motives. As Hannah Arendt famously argued, ‘the sad truth that most evil is done by people who never make up their minds to be good or evil.’ When the practice of violence became a habit in the People’s Commune, it needed no intellectual or moral justification. Like all habits, it could be learnt over time.

Once they had been deprived of their dignity as well as their rights to live a human life, some began to live as criminals or indeed even as savages. The Chinese countryside turned into an even more violent world. Robbery, theft, murder and cannibalism were regularly reported between 1959 and 1961. According to an incomplete estimate by the Ministry of Public Security, from September 1960 to 25 January 1961, there were 30,000 incidents of gang robbery of state granaries in twenty-three different provinces and regions throughout China. Railways across the country had become the main battle field. Train robbery became a ‘weapon of the weak’, a survival strategy in time of famine. Starving villagers carrying knives routinely robbed passing trains carrying grain and goods. In Gansu alone, the Public Security reported more than 500 incidents of train robbery.<sup>37</sup> In Shandong province, famous for the Boxer sectarian violence at turn of the twentieth century, sectarian groups were active again. They put out slogans such as: ‘To have enough to eat, we must unite together to kill cadres and rob granaries.’ In southern and southwestern China, there also saw a revival of sectarian activities. There were regular reports of sectarian followers storming the local

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<sup>37</sup> Zhou Xun, *The Great Famine in China, 1958-1962: A Documentary History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 127-9.

Public Security and furnishing themselves with armoury. Saw the famine was a sign that the CCP had lost the 'Mandate of Heaven', they killed local CCP officials and hailed to go to Beijing to overthrow the CCP government. To suppress these 'counter-revolutionary sabotages' led to many violent clashes between the PLA soldiers and followers of sectarian groups.<sup>38</sup> In parts of the country, cannibalism became so widespread. In Linxia autonomous region in Gansu province, for instance, where there had been violent clashes between the Chinese officials and the Hui ethnic group during which thousands were massacred (as mentioned earlier), more than fifty instances of cannibalism were uncovered in one municipality between late 1959 and the following summer. While the majority consumed the flesh of villagers who has died as a result of starvation, five villagers also murdered victims before consuming their flesh. One even killed his own younger brother and ate his flesh. Faraway from Gansu, in Sichuan's Fuling region as well as in parts of Guizhou in southwest of China, cannibalism was regularly reported. Here again, it was often children who became victims of human scavengers. On one occasion, a desperate mother strangled her own son to death and consumed his flesh.<sup>39</sup> In Henan's Xinyang region, China's agricultural heartland and the birth place of the People's Commune, villagers in Guanshan County told me that every village had cases of cannibalism.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Zhou Xun, *The Great Famine in China*, pp. 105-7; 112-3; *Wuchuan Gelao and Miao Autonomous County Gazette* (Guiyang: Guizhou renmin chubanshe, 2001), p. 40; *Zhunyi City Gazette* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1998), p. 63; *Guizhou Provincial Gazette* (Guiyang: Guizhou renmin chubanshe, 2007), p. 451; *Shizu County Gazette* (Chengdu: Sichuan chishu chubanshe, 1994), p. 25; *The CCP Chronicle of Major Events in Sichuan* (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 1998), p. 206; *Lushan County Gazette* (Beijing: Fangzhi chubanshe, 2000), pp. 28-9.

<sup>39</sup> Zhou Xun, *The Great Famine in China*, pp. 59-71.

<sup>40</sup> Zhou Xun, *Forgotten Voices of Mao's Great Famine*, pp. 258-60.

The systematic violence that haunted the PRC during the Mao era was not merely the result of a series of unplanned and disconnected events. Violence was a state weapon used to implement radical political changes aiming toward a perfect, utopian state that is free of mass violence. Once such practices were built into the system, violence became habituated, and therefore beyond any justification. The restraints against mass violence that had been inherent in China because of the alterations in the scope of Imperial and then Republican state control, as well as under the warlords, of violence as a state weapon which resulted in the breakdown in the Confucian ideals that underpinned such controls on the level of the individual. This meant that it became easier and easier to instrumentalise violence for a wide range of purposes, both public and private, under Mao's leadership. Thus, violence in the PRC took a wide range of forms and was not necessarily 'top-down'. From torture and beatings to public humiliation and starvation, violence became the common coin of human interaction in the PRC. It became a vocabulary through which state policy was seen as validated and thus also became simultaneously a means by which individual interests and desires could also be fulfilled. The PRC under Mao's leadership became defined by violence on every level, well exceeding Marx's pessimistic view of the nature of revolution in 1848.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY ESSAY**

### **VIOLENCE IN REVOLUTIONARY CHINA: 1949-1963**

Zhou Xun

Until the 1990s, due restricted access to the party archives and other essential primary sources, there had been no in-depth analysis that scrutinizes violence in revolutionary China. Scholars studying the history of the PRC, who relied on the published works, could do little

more than providing a broad view that, to a large extent, echoed the CCP's official historiography. This coincided with the period, a decade leading up to as well as after Nixon's visit to China in 1972, when a group of Westerners, including some China specialists, took an increasingly sympathetic view of the PRC. They often credited the CCP with establishing a stable government after decades of war and political turmoil. This began as a counter-trend that quickly took momentum in the wake of the Vietnam War. This positive image of the Chinese Communist revolution and the achievements in the PRC was a useful weapon in their criticism aimed against America's military aggression in Southeast Asia. After the death of Mao, however, in the late 1970s and early 80s, the stories of persecutions of intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution years (1966 -1976) began to challenge this earlier positive image. The background for this was the 1981 Chinese Communist Party Central Committee's (CPCC) 'Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of our Party' that divided the history of the PRC into pre and post 1957. In this modified version of Chinese historiography, the years before 1957 were depicted as the 'Golden Years' of the PRC, during which the CCP and the PRC government had successfully accomplished Land Reform and embarked on the First Five-Year Plan that foreshadowed the rapid and non-violent agricultural collectivization from 1955 to 1956. Western as well as Chinese scholarship quickly adopted the CPCC's 1957 division. This was further supported by an increasing number of autobiographical and fictional texts on the Cultural Revolution that were published in and outside of China. They re-enforced the official view that the Cultural Revolution was the disastrous period of the PRC history.

This position began to change in 1989 when the news of armed violence against unarmed students on Tiananmen Square shocked the world. Gradually in the 1990s, a bleaker picture of the pre-1957 PRC history began to appear. An increasing number of Chinese as well as



Western scholars began to challenge the image of the pre-1957 'Golden Years'. In the 1990s, in part triggered by similar developments in the former Soviet Union and its East European ex-satellites, changes took place in the PRC archives. The 1990 new archival regulation (revised in May 1999) theoretically made documents more than thirty years old available for the public access. In practice, however, a great number of documents were and are still classified as 'unsuitable' for public access and are remained as 'closed' files. After autumn 2012, greater restrictions were introduced by the State Archives Administration of China (SAAC), which made it difficult for researchers to read documents from the period of 1949 to 1979. The short window of openness between 1990s and 2012, however, allowed Chinese as well as western scholars in the humanities and social sciences access to a great mass of declassified original party and other sources on the PRC's first three decades. This newly unearthed information, often in conjunction with newly available documentary materials in other countries, transformed the ability to study, understand, and explain the social, economic and political history of the PRC under Mao. This resulted in a far more critical view of the Chinese Communist Revolution and the early PRC history. In this re-appraisal, we learn that coercion and violence existed throughout the Mao era from the early PRC to the end of the Cultural Revolution. Edward Friedman, Paul G. Pickowicz and Mark Selden's *Revolution, Resistance, and Reform in Village China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), for example, showed us that during and after the Great Leap Famine (1958-1962), intra- and inter village clashes erupted and spilled over into violence. It continued into the Cultural Revolution, when violence peaked throughout the countryside. At the same time, Yang Kuisong's 'Reconsidering the Campaign to Suppress Counterrevolutionaries' allowed the English reader to see that how violence was an essential tool used by the CCP regime to maintain its fragile power in the early 1950s after the Liberation [Yang, 'Reconsidering the Campaign to Suppress Counterrevolutionaries,' *The China Quarterly* 193 (2008), 104-120].

Frank Dikötter's major history of the Great Leap Famine Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe (London: Bloomsbury, 2010) argued that violence was the very foundation of the Great Leap Forward. There was widespread of violence on the local level throughout the famine period. The argument presented by Dikötter was further re-enforced by Zhou Xun 's companion volumes. Using first hand oral interviews of the survivors as well as previously unseen party archival documents, Zhou Xun's Forgotten Voices of Mao's Great Famine: An Oral History (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013) and The Great Famine of China, 1958-62: A Documentary History (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012) allowed reader to see for themselves that the sheer violence that took place during the Great Leap Forward famine was beyond doubt.