

Qi Benyu. *Qi Benyu's Memoirs*. BannedThought.net, 2023.

Review by Charles Andrews

This account by Qi Benyu (1931-2016) of the Great Leap Forward (GLF) and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (CR) is an important contribution to the history of socialism. Soon after Liberation in 1949, Qi was assigned to the staff who selected and compiled newspaper items and letters addressed to Mao Zedong; later Qi served as a deputy leader of the Cultural Revolution Group. Qi reflects on the GLF and CR from the standpoint of moving socialism along the road to communist society.

The anti-communist left in the West mocks the Great Leap Forward, claiming that “hugely exaggerated reports of grain harvests were taken seriously at high levels, and food was moved from the countryside to the cities while millions of farmers started to die of starvation...” (Mitter 2012). Qi found out otherwise. Mao received reports of harvests surpassing 10,000 catties of rice per mu, when peasants normally got from 200 to 500 – and he did not believe them. No wonder: a cattie, or jin, is 500 grams, and a mu is about one-sixth of an acre; hence, the claim was 33 tons per acre! (California rice fields today yield five tons per acre.) Mao told Qi Benyu’s supervisor to take his staff and

go down and work with the peasants and learn from them. When you go down there, you have to find the best piece of land, measure the area, use the best seeds, use the best methods of the peasants, plant the seeds yourself, manage it yourself, don’t let others interfere, do everything yourself from planting to harvesting, and see how much grain you can get. You must also weigh the grain you have sown yourselves, and you must not add a single jin more or less. (169)

Qi went to Sichuan early in 1959 and grew rice (169-172). Seeking guidance from veteran peasants, he harvested just over 500 catties per mu, approaching what the most skilled peasants got.

Where did newspaper photos showing 10,000 catties come from? Old farmers told Qi that “the so-called ten thousand jin of grain was by digging out the fast-ripening rice from other fields and putting them together on one mu of land, which is a satellite test field. So much rice was stuffed into the field that children could stand on it and step on it. The situation was almost identical to what Lin Ke had told me he had seen in Tianjin” (172).

More important, what was the *political* source of the wild claims? William Hinton reviewed many cases over the years. Again and again,

Liu [Shaoqi] came forward with ‘left in form, right in essence’ lines that, under superrevolutionary rhetoric, repeatedly targeted the mass of cadres down below

rather than expose the misleaders up above.... There is no better way to discredit an action than to carry it to absurd lengths. Would it not make sense for these forces, once they failed to stop any movement, to jump in and steer it toward disastrous ends? (Hinton 1990: 154)

Qi's memoirs support Hinton's indictment. For example,

In September 1958, Deng Xiaoping went to the Northeast for an inspection. The local leaders reported that the grain production plan for the second year would increase by 20-30%. Deng Xiaoping criticized them: 'Others have increased production several times, but you are only increasing by 20%. It is like a turtle crawling'.... His words were published in the People's Daily in October 1958. (168)

The people's commune

The historic achievement of the GLF was the people's commune, a step beyond the collective farms created by the Soviet Union. Local officials seem to have initiated them as an institution with enough scope, for example, to build a small dam and irrigate the land of ten or twenty cooperatives (Strong 1964: 14f.). With Mao's support, communes swept the country in 1958. The commune broadened the peasants' income base and therefore their outlook. It could shift distribution of grain and other staples from family purchase to free supply as conditions permitted. It invested in workshops and factories, which brought peasants into industrial work, introducing them to mechanical and other techniques.

To be sure, the progress of the communes could raise new political-economic problems later. When their factories began to produce more than the communes needed, would they sell surplus output within a state plan? How would commune investment coordinate with nationally planned investment? Members' education, work, and social benefits were tightly integrated into the commune; what would happen when people moved around the country? Thanks to the abrupt turn to capitalism after 1978, these issues never arose.

The GLF was over by 1961. The communes were the last big advance in China's socialist relations of production. Mao Zedong, while always a beloved national hero, was isolated at the top of the Party. In 1965, Qi relates, "Liu Shaoqi did not allow the Chairman to speak at a meeting and Deng Xiaoping told the Chairman not to go to a meeting." Mao had to barge in holding copies of the Constitution and Party Charter. "The struggle between the two lines within the Party was thus formed" (304). Qi does not explain how the capitalist-roaders kicked Mao upstairs. However, historians will find a treasure in Qi's anecdotes of twists, turns, crises, and showdowns of Party politics (sometimes repeated throughout the memoirs, which Qi obviously wrote in spurts).

Tortured path of the Cultural Revolution

After semi-secret preparation Mao launched the Cultural Revolution. It is a canard to label it a factional power struggle. Mao Zedong and his supporters, including Qi, had watched

the Soviet Union turn off the communist path, and the same thing threatened China. “The struggle did not start with the Cultural Revolution, but with socialism. Should we engage in socialism or capitalism?... After Liu Shaoqi, this struggle is still going on” (484).

The issues of the Cultural Revolution were almost entirely about the superstructure. People denounced old superstitions, reformed wedding and funeral ceremonies that reinforced Confucian rules of obedience, and created new operas and songs. Individual party and state officials came under fire. People demanded that an official exercise authority in a more democratic style. They exposed treasures and privileges that an official had grabbed.

Beginning with the Red Guards in the colleges and schools, the CR spread into factories and the countryside. The foci of struggle, however, remained the class line and behavior of individual officials, cultural practices, and evaluations of Chinese history. Institutional change in the relations of production was not on the agenda, nor for most of the CR was the structure of the state. As for the economy, Mao’s staff knew that

in a country as large as ours, production cannot be stopped for a moment... I remember where Engels said that when production stops for two days, a society will be in chaos and will not be able to sustain itself. This is a matter of common sense. ... That is why Chairman Mao always told the Premier [Zhou Enlai] to take charge of production, and asked the Central Cultural Revolution and the Premier to work together well, with the slogan ‘Grasp revolution and promote production’, so that both the revolution and production could not be lost. (473, 474)

In some areas peasants seized democratic freedoms, reined in overbearing officials, and re-organized their labor. More collective work increased output and improved their living standard (Han 2008). It appears that such initiatives were local efforts, encouraged by slogans of the CR but not part of a national plan or campaign.

In 1967 institutions and whole cities divided into factions, usually coalescing into two coalitions between which everyone had to choose. Mao and the CR leaders had called on the people to sort out dedicated communist officials from “representatives of the bourgeoisie who have sneaked into the communist party and who wave ‘red flags’ to oppose the red flag” (Communist Party of China 1966). However, factions did not divide cleanly between communist orientation and capitalist-roaders. Sectional interests were at play, too, as well as contention to oust an official and take his place. Worse, factions turned to violent struggle. “They ignored the policy of the ‘sixteen Articles,’ which stated that they should fight with persuasion and not with arms” (422). Worst of all, violent struggle seeped into the military. “Soldiers are armed with guns, and if you mobilise them to rise up in rebellion, their antagonists will also take up guns, so isn’t that the same as calling for armed struggle?” (579)

In July, armed conflict between factions in Wuhan, fed by conservative military commander Chen Zaidao, almost set off a civil war in the country. Qi gives a blow-by-blow account of the watershed event. This led Mao to instruct in October, “There is no fundamental clash of interests within the working class. Under the dictatorship of the proletariat, there is no reason whatsoever for the working class to split into two big irreconcilable organizations.... The

revolutionary Red Guards and revolutionary student organizations should realize the revolutionary great alliance” (Peking Review 1967: 17). Qi underscores that Mao called for “a ‘grand coalition’ of the revolution, that is, all factions should take part in taking power, instead of supporting one faction to overwhelm another. This was in fact a major change in strategic thinking” (584).

Rein in the CR – or set off a civil war? That was the choice Mao faced in 1967, and civil war was an unthinkable alternative.

Qi was put under house arrest in January 1968 and imprisoned a few weeks later (613). He says he “failed to understand” Mao’s strategic turn, but he apparently does not know exactly how he came to be arrested and then imprisoned (615, 620f.). Qi endured twenty years in prison; to his dying day he remained committed to Mao and efforts to advance socialism through the GLF, the CR and further communist projects.

Qi recognizes, “The Cultural Revolution was a tragedy, and Chairman Mao did not achieve the aims he originally envisaged” (483). Deng Xiaoping came to power and proceeded “to clear the way for his so-called ‘reform and opening up,’ which in essence was the restoration of capitalism” (622).

Socialism is a series of communist projects

The GLF and CR teach that socialism is a series of communist projects. Each project aims to communize something of the relations of production. Each must win popular support. The majority will want to move forward, but some will resist in defense of their privilege. Westerners give much more attention to the CR than to the GLF. For socialists, this is a mistake. We have much to learn if we compare these two communist projects.

From Marx and Engels, revolutionaries knew the first job was to smash the exploiters’ state and then to abolish the main class relation – the exploitation of labor. Following that, socialist regimes did such things as investing to provide health care for all. They set limits on the inequality of incomes; they instituted equal or communist distribution of some goods and services.

It remains to liberate our labor in all respects. The division between those who plan the work and those who do the job must be overcome. The split between giving orders and taking them must be changed so that everyone does both – in group forms to be discovered, in leaders rotating to work on the floor, etc. We need to transform the boundaries and timelines of occupations, especially lifelong isolation in one. And how can we shrink the contradiction between the toil of labor and the delight of work?

The Soviet and Chinese revolutions undertook socialist industrialization of their agrarian country. They created an alternative to polarized, dehumanizing capitalist industrialization. Today, socialist currents in the developed capitalist countries lack a broad yet concrete vision.

They fall back to a clutch of reforms of education, health care, housing, and so on.¹ They do not see beyond a goal of humanizing capitalism. Study of China's GLF and CR helps prepare for the task of revolution in our time: break up the mode of production that is killing us and bring the new mode of production to life.

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¹ They typically add talk about democratic planning and decision-making. This is a hand-waving evasion, since they never provide a usable definition of democracy.



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