

# The Significance of the Family Problem, “Mechanistic Thought” and “Collective Labor”: Rereading “Mao Zedong’s Letter to Qin Bangxian” (August 31, 1944)—Part 1

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## Abstract

During the Yan’an period, Mao Zedong made important revisions to an editorial piece printed in Yanan’s *Jiefang Daily*. These revisions, along with a related letter of correspondence between Mao Zedong and Qin Bangxian, shall be analyzed in-depth within this article. Through them, we may better articulate Mao Zedong’s understanding of agrarian socialism, as well as transformations to the family unit during the period of New Democracy (*xinminzhu zhuyi*). His understanding [during this period] forms a contrast with that of the May Fourth period, as well as with that of large-scale industrial socialism, giving reflection to his focus on looking towards the future, his pragmatic spirit and his theoretical insight.

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## About the author

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The success of the “rate and interest-rate reduction campaign” (*jianzu jianxi*), as well as the later “agrarian reform” (*tudi gaige*) during and after the Anti-Japanese War resulted in a significant outpouring of enthusiasm from agrarian laborers. Due to the limits of “individual economy,” however, its net benefits could only be realized through the “single household” (*yijia yihu*) system. The “agrarian reform” led by the Chinese Communist Party was, in the beginning, often understood as [having the aim of] restoring the rural social order once nearly destroyed by local tyrants and gentry’s exorbitant taxes and levies, as once pointed out by Meng Yue in her analysis of *The White-Haired Girl*:

“ [The operation of the logic of civil ethics and [its] interplay with political discourse is clearly manifested here: the stability of the order of civil ethics is the legitimacy which political discourse is premised upon. It is only by becoming the enemy of the order of civil ethics that it is possible for Huang Shiren to become a political enemy ... Huang Shiren’s anti-social ethics are extreme, to the point of being ‘adversarial.’ The death of Yang Bailao and the kidnapping of Xi’er had dissolved the foundations upon which the basic order of society was dependent upon: both the basic unit of society (family) as well as its mechanism of perpetuation (marriage) were destroyed ... Under these circumstances, Da Chun’s return was predetermined by the moral logic of civil ethics, with the quelling of evil and redressing of injustice being this logic’s mechanism of self-fortification. Naturally, however, the now-returned Da Chun served as a dual-representation: on the one hand, he represented a return to civil order, yet on the other hand, he was also the agent of this new political force. It is only when he represents a return to civil order, however, that he is politically representative... in other words, it is only when Da Chun’s civilian identity becomes established that his political identity also established. This political [force], represented either by the Red Army or the Eighth Route Army, must thereby also be a supporter of this order of civil ethics, and must have given people better and happier lives, otherwise it would simply have no narrative function].”<sup>1</sup> If it was necessary for the revolution to win the hearts and minds

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1 Meng Yue, “Revelations from the Transformation of White-Haired Girl,” Wang Xiaoming (Ed.), 1997, *The History of 20th Century Chinese Literature*, Vol 3, Shanghai, Orient Publishing Center,

of the people, then the first things that ought to have been revived were the ethical order and the order of rural society that [had been] so trampled upon. Yet, could the goal(s) of revolution merely cease here – cease at the revival of civil ethics and the small-peasant ideal of “[having] a cow for every thirty *mu*, with the wife and kids [at home] warming the bed”? Even if Meng Yue holds that “civil order (*minjian zhixu*) molds the very nature of political discourse,” one cannot help but harbor some doubts: “We are unable to prove that the logic of the apolitical code of civil ethics necessarily represents the class consciousness of the lower strata [of society].”<sup>2</sup> More crucially, it was also necessary that the “class consciousness of the lower strata” overcame the rural-ethical order centered on the “family [unit].” At some level, China’s revolution must both revive the rural-ethical order, while at the same time face up to the task of reconstructing a new order. The “collective labor” called for through “organization” (*zuzhiqilai*) was not only a new form of material labor to be held in contrast with “individual labor,” but [one] which also embodied the grander goals and aspirations of the revolution.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the areas of dispute among “individual labor” and “collective labor” must ultimately boil down to the problem of the “family.”

In March of 1944, so as to comply with the Big Production Campaign (*dashengchan yundong*) taking place in the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia border region, the Yan’an *Jiefang Daily* began running a series of reports on the promising changes that were occurring in rural households throughout this area. On March 14<sup>th</sup>, a news report entitled “[Family Meeting]” (*Jiating Huiyi*) was written by Wei Xiwen and Tian Fang and published on the fourth page of the *Daily*. It intro-

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page 195.

- 2 Cai Xiang believes that the “cooperative form” “substituted for the family as a productive unit and its corresponding dispersed individual productive mode. But also, at the same time, cooperatives clearly conflicted with the unitary and exclusive mode of production characterized by individual production and private property. It was through this conflict that cooperatives created a practice of collective labor as well as a new collective imaginary.” Moreover, the support for “cooperativization” also implied that “[The central political] consideration for this movement resided in the attempt by the Chinese revolution to show that its point of departure in equality (land reform) could be deepened into a processual equality that could lead to actual equality.” Xiang Cai, 2016, *Revolution and Its Narratives: China’s Socialist Literary and Cultural Imaginaries, 1949- 1966*, Durham, Duke University Press, page 289, 271 (respectively).
- 3 Regarding Mao Zedong’s revisions to Ai Siqu’s editorial, one may reference Yu Guangyuan’s “Some Background Materials for Comrade Mao Zedong’s Letter Regarding the Family Problem to Bo Gu on August 31<sup>st</sup> 1944.” Also see Party History Research Center of the CPC Central Committee researcher Yang Qing’s articles, “A Manuscript by Mao Zedong Once Nearly Lost” *Treatises on Party History*, 2003, Volume 12, and “An Unpublished Manuscript by Mao Zedong,” *Xiang Chao*, 2004, Volume 3.

duced a family meeting which had been convened at tenant farmer Li Shuhou’s home in Haojiaqiao village, located in the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia boarder region. In this meeting, the family principally discussed the ways in which they would produce [economically] that year. Li Shuhou’s family had seven members in total, therefore according to the basic principle that men should till the fields and grow crops while women should spin yarn and weave cloth at home, work was accordingly divided based on the required manpower. Li Shuhou’s “family meeting” may not appear to be very special, yet, at the time, it was regarded as a type of new democracy or a new form of democratic relations developing within the peasant farmer’s home. Prior to this, regardless of whether it was [household] production or [household] living, all matters big and small were to be decided by its eldest members. Thus, by this time, the family had already been transfigured. During the Big Production Campaign, some families began to change their patriarchal structure, [adopting] more democratic forms of household management, [creating] production plans, apportioning labor as well as allocating the fruits of labor, et cetera, all of which were discussed and resolved through this “family meeting” that involved all its family members. On May 5<sup>th</sup>, the *Daily* printed an article on its third page titled “The Manifestoes of Various Model-Women Conferences in the Shanxi-Chahar-Hebei Border Region.” It introduced the experiences of creating The New Democracy and new families by farmers such as Wang Shixing, Zhang Shufeng, Du Yuanlin, et cetera. On June 2<sup>nd</sup>, the *Daily* again reported from the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia border region, [this time] featuring labor-hero Wang Guobao of Jingbian County, who spoke glowingly of his family’s [economic] production situation. In July, the editorial board of the *Daily* received letters that introduced Li Laicheng’s family from Xiangyuan County in the Taihang Region as well as Cai Dewang’s family from Qingyang County in the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia region. So as to give more prominence to the theoretical as well as realistic implications of the changes experienced in these families, the editorial board decided to write up an editorial piece that would be published alongside the two submitted letters. Hence, Ai Siqi, who at the time was the director of the Yan’an *Jiefang Daily* literary supplement, took up his pen and wrote a piece titled “[Establish the Foundation of the New Democratic Society in the Home]” that was originally planned to be published alongside the reports on Cai Dewang and farmer Li Laicheng’s new family lifestyles on August 9<sup>th</sup>.

In essence, Ai Siqi’s editorial had affirmed [the conviction] that employ-

ing this democratic type of family meeting improved family relations, resulting in both more harmonious relations among family members and an increase in economic production – both positive outcomes which proved that the shift in familial-political relations had liberated the production force within the family. These new phenomena, though not yet widespread and only having just begun, may still provide us with some insight on the new orientation that the political [program] of The New Democracy took towards resolving the family issue. In this regard, his paper went on to claim that opposition and struggle in the context of the family problem had begun during the May Fourth movement. From that time onwards, the task of opposing the old-style feudal family structure was seen as an inseparable element in the struggle for bringing about a democratic China, hence the youth were called upon to rebel against it and forsake it. That being said, in the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia border region as well as the in anti-Japanese resistance bases located behind enemy lines, the approach to solving the family problem should be distinguished from the one championed during the struggle for democracy in the May Fourth period and onward, as they were situated in a new environment and a new stage of history. In the previous stage, it was advocated that [they] rebel against the old family and leave it behind; in the this stage – in the political environment of The New Democracy as situated in the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia border region and the anti-Japanese resistance bases – it was advocated that the family [unit] must be strengthened, and that family relations must be ameliorated. This was because the family which they were dealing with was the new-style peasant family – the family of the laborer. In this type of family, gender equality was championed, and both the political and economic standing of all family members were equal. This was fundamentally different from that of the old feudal family, because the economy was still an agricultural one, and the foundation for the development of economic production was still an agrarian system structured around smallholder farms as well as the handicraft industry. The whole economy under The New Democracy could only be developed given that the economic status of the peasant farmer family was allowed to flourish. Thus, it follows that a united and harmonious family [environment] was needed, that all the members of the family, regardless of age and/or gender, were of one heart and one mind and that they worked together to help one another realize the cause of economic production. This is to say that what was needed was the establishment of a New Democracy family [unit]. Now, what were familial relations like under

the New Democracy family unit? [Ai’s] editorial pointed out that, first of all, in terms of family administration, a centralized democracy needed to be formed while the authoritarian patriarchal system must be scrapped. The heads of families (*jiazhang*) needed leadership ability, work experience and prestige among the people. The head of the family could be democratically elected, and it was unnecessary that this role was strictly reserved for the family elders. Secondly, that democratic partnership should be established at the level of household economy; each family member needed to, in accordance with their own capabilities, share some portion of the workload and assume some degree of responsibility in the overall household production plan. Third, it was necessary for family members to help others – that aside from their own nuclear family (*xiaogongjia*) – they also needed to assist the broader communal family (*dagongjia*) in their resistance efforts against the Japanese, in helping disabled or downed soldiers, in helping refugees, participating in exchange labor groups (*biangong zuzhi*), et cetera.

After the editorial was written, Ai Siqi would submit it to Zhang Wentian, a member of both the Standing Committee of the Central Political Bureau and the Organization Department of the Communist Party of China, for further review. Zhang then made some revisions and provided several suggestions by using a red pencil to [either] cross out certain sections, re-write certain sections, or mark certain sections and jot down question marks in blank spaces next to them. For example, in a sentence which read “the May Fourth New Culture Movement had once called upon young intellectuals to revolt against the old family [structure],” he underlined the three words “*jiujiating*” (“old family”) and wrote “what kind of family [structure]?” (*hezhong jiating*) next to it with a question mark. Another example is in a sentence which read “in terms of family administration, a centralized democracy [ought to] be established, while the authoritarian patriarchal system [must be] scrapped,” he underlined the five words “*minzhu jizhongzhi*” (centralized democracy), jotting two question marks next to it. Upon completion of his review, Zhang Wentian sent the editorial to Mao Zedong for review and further instruction.

Mao Zedong meticulously went through the editorial word by word, sentence by sentence and paragraph by paragraph, making very detailed revisions and changing its title to “Ameliorate Family Relations, Establish a New Family [Structure].” Mao’s revision of the original draft first began with an analysis of the important social problem of the family. For example, in the manuscript, it

stated that the old family structure had been created in accordance with [principles] of feudalist hierarchy. In this type of family, the mother and father --- the heads of the family --- wielded absolute power, while their sons and daughters --- particularly the latter --- were placed in a position of powerlessness. Mao gave an example to illustrate how women in the structure of the feudal family were bound under [moral] precepts such as the “three obediences and four virtues,” or the [notion that] “A son and the daughter-in-law should have no private goods, nor animals, nor vessels; they should not presume to borrow from, or give anything to, another person.”<sup>4</sup> Both of these deprive a person of their human rights as well as their property rights on both a legal and moral level. To this, Mao Zedong’s analysis stated that “the rules prescribed in these ancient classical and legal texts have, following the birth and development of capitalism in China, already undergone a great deal of change. However, significant traces of the feudal clan system still remain. In areas where The New Democracy is prevailing, these forms of feudalism are left in even deeper ruin, yet even then, traces still remain.” Mao also pointed out “for all circumstances in which these severe feudal shackles exist, this [effort] (which is to say the revolt against the old family [system]) remains necessary,” however using “the old way of dealing with various problems” is not applicable for the working people’s family problem in the anti-Japanese base areas, where they must instead unite the family. What brings people to collectively organize “is, on the one hand, still the family unit, but on the other hand, the new forms of military, political, economic and cultural communities as well, which are composed of groups of individuals, therein allowing for a tremendous development of [their] individuality. In this regard, they will not only alter the structure of society, but also greatly influence the structure of the family.” In another passage on the problem of democratically electing the heads of households, Mao Zedong pointed out that “it is on the foundation of democracy in which real and natural, rather than false and contrived, family relations such as being ‘a kind father, a filial son, a loving elder brother, a respectful younger brother, a well-mannered husband and a virtuous wife’ will be able to be established. Some say that we Communists are opposed to these categories of relations, such as ‘kind fathers, filial sons···,’ [but] this is incorrect. On the contrary, it is only under the

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4 Translator’s note: This passage is referenced from James Legge’s *The Li Ki: Book of Rites Part 1*, Book 10, “Neh Zuh”

democracy which we propose that these types of relations may be established.” With regards to the crucial point of establishing a democratic family [structure], Mao Zedong emphasized that “during its implementation, it must be fully understood and supported by the masses; party workers will take on the responsibility of advocating its implementation and persuading [the masses], however any forceful command is forbidden.” It is worth noting that among Mao Zedong’s revisions, the editorial’s title had been changed from one which implied a fundamental guiding principle, “Establish the Foundation of the New Democratic Society in the Home,” to a relatively neutral one, “Ameliorate Family Relations, Establish a New Family Structure,” thereby revealing his reservations on the question of whether or not the “foundation of the New Democratic Society” was to be established at “home.” At the same time, he also stressed how the “individual” would be “liberated” from “the family,” participating in various “new forms of military, political, economic and cultural communities,” and how the “development of individuality” for these “individuals” would occur in these “communities,” both “altering the structure of society, but ... also greatly affecting the structure of the family.” Therefore, he viewed the “family” as an object awaiting further transformation, rather than a goal having already been accomplished. Yet, even after making major adjustments and additions to the original draft, after he was done editing the paper, Mao Zedong wrote his instructions on top of the front page, simply stating: “Do not publish.” This was because he felt that the edited version “was altered to the point where it was no longer in accord with the original,” and “requested that the press office rewrite a different article for publishing which does not touch upon so many fundamental issues.” Thus, the revised manuscript of the editorial was unable to be published.<sup>5</sup> The newspaper office wrote a separate article on Li Laicheng’s newly-formed family in Xiangyuan County, Shanxi, entitled “Promoting the New Family in the Anti-Japanese Base Region,” which was published on the front page of the *Jiefang Daily* on August 25<sup>th</sup>, 1944. Yet once published, this editorial would similarly arouse the displeasure of Mao Zedong, who believed that it still touched upon “too many fundamental issues” regarding the family. As such, on August 31<sup>st</sup>, in a letter written to the *Jiefang Daily* publisher Bo Gu (Qin Bangxian), Mao would further elaborate on the

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5 Mao Zedong, “Letter to Qin Bangxian (August 31<sup>st</sup>, 1944),” *Selected Letters of Mao Zedong*, 1983, Beijing, People’s Publishing House, page 237-239.

“family problem” inside the liberated zones. The original text is as follows:

“Comrade Bo Gu:

I had made some revisions to the manuscript which was originally set to be published. However after [editing], I felt it to be altered to the point where it was no longer in accord with the original, [so I] requested that the press office rewrite a different article for publishing which did not touch upon so many fundamental issues. With regard to the flaws of the original text, my opinions are as follows: The original places much emphasis on restructuring the family unit, yet very little is said about linking this to broader mass movements (even for the editorial which has now already been published, the same is also true). The crux of the matter, however, precisely lies in linking together this restructuring of the family with broader mass movements. Among the different mass movements, some are local and do not [require] parting with the family, [such as] exchange-labor teams cooperatives, Self-Defense Army (*ziweijun*) and the people’s militia (*minbing*), town councils (*xiang yihui*), primary school, literacy education groups (*shizi zu*), Yang Ge dance troupes as well as all sorts of interim assemblies; other mass movements [involve] parting with the village and with the family, [such as] joining the military (needed to form the revolutionary army), entering the factory force (needed to form the labor market), attending schools and universities (needed for training intellectuals), as well as other tasks which require trips outside [one’s] locale. The central goal of democratic revolution is to liberate the peasantry from invaders, landlords, and compradors, and to establish a modern industrial society. The slogan ‘Strengthen the family’ only becomes a revolutionary slogan when linked together with all of the revolutionary movements stated above. The dissolution of the peasantry’s family is a matter of necessity, and to join the military or enter the factory workforce simply is that dissolution, it is simply “leaving the family behind” in vast numbers. In fact, then, we are both advocating for the policy of ‘leaving the family behind’ as well as ‘strengthening the family.’ [Programs] such as the expansion of military forces, the re-recruitment or re-enlistment of soldiers, hiring of laborers, enrolling of students (these two are sure to be particularly numerous in the future), migration of people, the engagement in revolutionary work outside of [one’s] locale, seeking other careers, et cetera, all uphold the [policy of] leaving behind the family. [Moreover] the number of these activities taking place behind enemy lines is already significant, and will continue to be significant after the war has ended. It is the remaining men and women, then, who are upholding the [policy of] strengthening the family. During the Civil War period in Guoxing County, there were a number of families who stayed behind, waiting for our support. The number [of these families] had actually reached what amounted to a small portion of the population. Yet, in moments of upheaval, such as the capture of Peking or other analogous events, these small populations of rural families located in what are currently the stalemated border regions shall also witness a significant number of individuals leaving the family. In fact, this continuous leaving behind of the family

[unit], as well as constant strengthening of the family, is exactly what we need. Therefore, to categorically reject the “May Fourth” slogan, to fundamentally oppose leaving behind the family, is both objectionable and impossible.

In the absence of any social movement (war, factory, rent reduction, exchange labor teams, etc.), it will be impossible to reform the family. The reformation of Li Laicheng’s family in Xiangyuan County was made possible precisely by the sweeping tides of these mass social movements. The transformation of the rural family’s feudal [structure] into that of a democratic one cannot simply just take place through one family member reading about some good idea from a newspaper or book; it will only happen through mass movements.

Moreover, the foundation of the New Democratic society is the factory (social production, both publicly and privately operated) and the cooperative [*hezuoshe*] (which includes labor exchange teams), rather than decentralized individual economic [units]. The decentralized individual economy, [namely] household agricultural production and household industrial production, is the foundation of feudal society, not the foundation of democratic society (this includes Old Democracy, New Democracy and socialism); this is the difference between Marxism and populism. To put it simply, the foundation of New Democracy is machinery, not manual labor. Since we have not yet acquired machinery, we have not yet triumphed, and if we are never able to acquire machinery, we will never triumph and will simply perish. The village, as it stands today, is [but only] a temporary base; it is not and will never be a key foundation of China’s entire democratic social [structure]. The shift from an agricultural foundation to that of an industrial foundation is, in essence, the task of our revolution.

Please share this message with comrade Ai, comrade Lu and comrade Yu. If any of you have comments, please share them. Respectfully,

Mao Zedong  
August 31<sup>st</sup>

P.S. Among the revisions made [to the editorial], I also added the liberation of the individual, which is by necessity also part of the democratic overthrow of feudal society. There are those who say that we ignore or suppress individuality, but this is incorrect. If individuality is not allowed to be freed from its repressed [state], then there shall be no democracy, and hence no socialism.<sup>6</sup>

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6 Yu Guangyuan (Ed.), Han Gang (notes), *The Historical Fate of “On New Democracy Society”*,

## Mao Zedong and Bo Gu in Yan' An

The importance of this letter written by Mao Zedong goes without saying. He concentrates on the problem of the “family,” and on the basis of “reality” – or in his own words, “the currently stalemated border regions” – links together “mass movements” to “restructure the family unit.” Moreover, with his eyes to the future – [referring] not just to “moments of upheaval,” but more importantly, the prospect of “The New Democracy” and “socialism” – he notes that “modern industrial society,” built upon the foundation of “collective labor,” must “dissolve” the “family [structure]” formed by the “individual economy.” Also, in giving some consideration to “history,” which is to say the tradition of “liberating individuality” that began with the “May Fourth Movement,” he shows how “The New Democracy” and “socialism” both inherit and develop upon the “May Fourth tradition” in a deeper sense. It could be said, then, that this letter touches upon the overall direction [taken by] the “Yenan way,” as well as the larger question of “whether or not Marxism could be really produced from the countryside.”

Given that [they] were located in “the countryside” (*shangougou*), the [situation] was exactly as Ai Siqi stated in his editorial: the economy of the liberated zones was still an agricultural economy whose foundation for the development production was still a [system] of smallholder agrarian production as well as household industrial production structured all around the family unit. [Thus], the whole economy under The New Democracy would only develop given that the economic status of the peasant farmer family was first allowed to flourish. Ai Siqi, however, had not yet grasped the real difference between “agricultural economy,” which is to say the “individual economy” centered upon the “family unit,” and the “economy of The New Democracy,” namely a system of “collective labor” that would outpace “single-household style production.” Rather, [he] had simply conflated the two, which is why Mao Zedong had specifically pointed out in his letter that: “Moreover, the foundation of the New Democratic society is the factory (social production, both publicly and privately operated) and the cooperative [*hezuoshe*] (which includes labor exchange teams), rather than de-

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2005, Wuhan, Changjiang Press of Literature and Art, page 53. The section quoted here is from Han Gang's annotations.

centralized individual economic units. The decentralized individual economy, [namely] household agricultural production and household industrial production, is the foundation of feudal society, not the foundation of democratic society (this includes Old Democracy, New Democracy and socialism); this is the difference between Marxism and populism.” Therefore, it becomes evident that on this particular issue, Mao Zedong exhibits his deep conceptual understanding of Marxism. The profundity of his understanding may be expressed in [two ways]: On the one hand, he emphasized, more than anyone else, the uniqueness of China’s problems, fearlessly addressing the realities of “the countryside” (*shangougou*). On the other hand, however, he remained constantly wary of the tendency to turn this “uniqueness” (*dutexing*) into a “special quality” (*teshuxing*), merely treating “China problems” as some kind of “exception.” Rather, he was firm in his conviction that this “uniqueness” ultimately possessed “universal” implications which bestowed upon the Chinese revolution a type of new-world-history significance. Hence, just like the notion that “the countryside can produce Marxism” demonstrates, this was not just an application of the universal truths of Marxism in a Chinese [context], but rather, and more importantly, that both the theory behind and practice of the Chinese revolution had greatly enriched Marxist thought and had re-written the course of history taken by the international communist movement, thus giving way to a new revolutionary orientation which [also] possessed “universality.” It was precisely upon this dialectical understanding of “the countryside” and “Marxism,” which is to say “uniqueness” and “universality,” or “China’s state of affairs” and “the universal truths of Marxism,” that Mao articulated the Chinese Communist Party’s ambitious target of nation-building: “The foundation of New Democracy is machinery, not manual labor. Since we have not yet acquired machinery, we have not yet triumphed, and if we are never able to acquire machinery, we will never triumph and will simply perish. The village as it stands today is [but only] a temporary base; it is not and will never be a key foundation of China’s entire democratic social [structure]. The shift from an agricultural foundation to that of an industrial foundation is, in essence, the task of our revolution.” It may be seen that “industrialization” and “democratization” are bound closely together, both having become the main goal and task of the Chinese revolution. Thus, on this particular matter, Mao Zedong took an extremely resolute stance: “Since we have not yet acquired machinery, we have not yet triumphed, and if we are never able to acquire machinery, we will never triumph

and will simply perish.”

According to a general understanding, it is believed that “machines” and “industrialization” are simply linked together, and what Mao Zedong termed “triumph” must not “only be understood as the triumph of China’s New Democracy, or as the Chinese Communist Party’s seizure of political power, but should also be seen as the fundamental goal of the New Democratic Society, which is the realization of industrialization.”<sup>7</sup> While this understanding is generally sound, it ignores the specific meaning conveyed by the word “machine” in Marx’s theoretical expositions. In *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* as well as *Economic Manuscripts: Theories of Surplus-Value*, Marx discusses at great lengths the influence of “machinery” and “modern industry” on new forms of society as well as the “New Man.” For example, in a famous argument in *Capital, Volume One* [Marx stated]: “It took both time and experience before the workpeople learnt to distinguish between machinery and its employment by capital, and to direct their attacks, not against the material instruments of production, but against the mode in which they are used.” Here Marx distinguishes between the “material instruments of production” and “the mode in which they are used,” as well as how a new, or progressive, “class consciousness” among the workpeople will only develop [after] they have mastered the “machinery” through “experience.”

<sup>8</sup> Here, “machinery” is not simply the material basis for “industrialization,” as

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7 Yu Guangyuan (Ed.), Han Gang (notes), *The Historical Fate of “On New Democracy Society”*, 2005, Wuhan, Changjiang Press of Literature and Art, page 53. The section quoted here is from Han Gang’s annotations.

8 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1999, page 288. Some critics argue that Marx’s criticism of “machinery[’s] ... employment by capital” must also be linked with “machinery’s employment by Communism,” and that “machinery’s employment by Communism” would necessitate a “subject revolution” (*zhuti geming*), which is to say that a new “technological subject” (*jishu zhuti*) would need to be born. Only in this way could the following be brought about: “1) Revolution of final cause, or telos, which is to allow the ultimate purpose of machinery to be the liberation of labor from the production of relative surplus value. This involves a criticism of the products of technology, and at its core is a transformation in the system of ownership. 2) Revolution of agent, which is how labor can, from its state of being controlled and disciplined, phase into that of a self-governed, [highly] skilled labor. This revolution is related to the criticism of the process of technology, and what it revolutionizes is human and inter-human relations in the process of labor, including the redesign of important elements touched upon in the process of labor, such as production management, et cetera. 3) Revolution of form, which is to systematically regroup the technological elements of machinery, granting it both a democratized and ecologized form.” See: Xia Yonghong, Wang Xingkun, “[Labor and Capital in the Machine], *Marxism and Re-*

it also deeply influences new forms of society, both at the level of “experience” and “consciousness.” [It is] just as Lenin had once pointed out: “For the factory, which seems only a bogey to some, represents that highest form of capitalist co-operation which has united and disciplined the proletariat, taught it to organize, and placed it at the head of all the other sections of the toiling and exploited population. And Marxism, the ideology of the proletariat trained by capitalism, has been and is teaching unstable intellectuals to distinguish between the factory as a means of exploitation (discipline based on fear of starvation) and the factory as a means of organization (discipline based on collective work united by the conditions of a technically highly developed form of production). The discipline and organization which come so hard to the bourgeois intellectual are very easily acquired by the proletariat just because of this factory ‘schooling’.”<sup>9</sup> The so-called “progressive nature” of the working class is embodied precisely by their intimate connection with the “industrial mass production”, or rather “mechanistic” style of “collective labor.” This is to say that this progressive nature originates in the dual-connotation of the term “machinery,” namely at both the “material” and “psychological” levels. This is also what Mao Zedong refers to in his letter when mentioning terms such as “modern industrial society” and “democratic society.” Accordingly, when Mao Zedong states that “if we are never able to acquire machinery, we will never triumph and will simply perish,” his term “machinery” does not only refer to “industrialization” at the “material” level, but also suggests the task of creating a “New Man” at the level of “consciousness” [and] in relation to the larger project of “socialism.” In this regard, it is similar to the [phrase] “collective labor” mentioned above, which is not, strictly speaking, merely a new form of material labor, as it also encapsulates the grander goals and ambitions of the revolution within it.

Of course, in his discussions Mao does not discuss the importance of “machinery without regard for its historical circumstances either, as he had pointed out as early as 1939 in a letter to Zhou Enlai that: “With respect to economic factors, villages are more backward than the city, yet with respect to political factors, the opposite is true, and the same for cultural factors, as well. As I have discussed

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ality, 2012, 4<sup>th</sup> edition.

9 Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, “One Step Forward, Two Steps Back (The Crisis in Our Party),” *Lenin’s Collected Works Volume 7*, Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1964. Marxists Internet Archive <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1904/onestep/q.htm>

with you before, when depicting peasants [in his writings], Lu Xun stresses their dark and feudalistic side, while ignoring their heroic struggle and resistance against the landlord [class], which is to say their democratic side. This is because he himself had never experienced peasant struggle (*nongmin douzheng*) before. It may be seen, then, that it is unfit to view the whole village system as backwards; this so-called democratic quality, at least in China, is essentially that of peasant struggle. The same is true for past times, as well as for all colonial and semi-colonial regions. Even the anti-Japanese struggle of today is, in essence, also a peasant struggle. In large part, peasants are democratic, which is to say, revolutionary; their economic activities (*jingji xingshi*), lifestyles, ideologies as well as their manners and customs are all steeped in feudalism. However, this is only one aspect of the peasantry, and as such it is unnecessary to claim that all of peasant society belongs to Old China. Rather, as things stand today, all that remains of New China are villages.”<sup>10</sup> Though Mao Zedong stressed that “all that remains of New China are villages,” he had also not forgotten that “their economic activities, lifestyles, ideologies as well as their manners and customs are all steeped in feudalism.” Therefore, although the peasantry was established as the revolutionary subject, the issue of “educating the peasantry” would also simultaneously need dealing with. Deeper within this issue lies the central problem of the peasant family serving as the main vehicle carrying these “feudal vestiges.” “Their economic activities, lifestyles, ideologies as well as their manners and customs” were all concentrated in the “family unit,” the “form” of which fully expressed all these qualities. Thus, the transformation of this family [structure] was an important measure in peasant education. As far as how transformation would be brought about, experiences from the “May Fourth tradition” remained an important source [of knowledge], and it was under this recognition that Mao had specifically pointed out in his letter that “to categorically reject the ‘May Fourth’ slogan, to fundamentally oppose leaving behind the family, is both objectionable and impossible.

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10 Mao Zedong, “Letter to Zhou Yang (November 7<sup>th</sup>, 1939),” *Mao Zedong’s Writings on Literature and Art*, 2002, Beijing, Central Party Literature Press, page 259-260.