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## *Yang Xianzhen's Critique of the Great Leap Forward*

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Kang Sheng—a veteran counter-intelligence official and close political ally of Mao Zedong's—is said to have remarked in the winter of 1959 that among the critics of the Great Leap Forward (GLF) there was 'one soldier' and 'one civilian' whose criticisms were 'in close harmony'.<sup>1</sup> The soldier was Peng Dehuai, China's Minister of Defence, who had clashed with Mao at the Lushan Conference that summer, and whose criticism of the GLF had subsequently been denounced by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee as an 'attempt at splitting the Party' and 'a ferocious assault on the Party Center and Comrade Mao Zedong's leadership'.<sup>2</sup> The civilian was Yang Xianzhen, the President of the Central Party School, who had aroused Kang's wrath by condemning the GLF as hopelessly utopian, and by claiming that it already had brought on starvation and might yet bring about the collapse of the CCP.

For many years, Western scholars writing about opposition to the GLF within the CCP concerned themselves almost exclusively with Peng Dehuai's challenge to Mao at Lushan.<sup>3</sup> This preoccupation with

The research and writing of this paper were supported by a research grant from the Swedish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences (HSFR). I am indebted to Carol Lee Hamrin and Thomas Kampen for their valuable comments on an earlier draft.

<sup>1</sup> Ai Hengwu, *Guanyu 'Heer Eryi' de Lunzhan* [On the polemic concerning 'two merging into one'] (Wuhan: Hubei Renmin Chubanshe, 1981), 10.

<sup>2</sup> 'Zhongguo Gongchandang Ba Jie Ba Zhong Quanhui Guanyu Yi Peng Dehuai Weishou de Fandang Jituan de Jueyi' [Resolution of the 8th plenum of the 8th Central Committee of the CCP concerning the anti-Party clique headed by Peng Dehuai], in Qinghua Daxue Jinggangshan Bingtuan (ed.), *Lushan Huiyi Zhongyao Wenxuan* [Selected important documents from the Lushan conference] (Beijing: Jinggangshan Zazhi She, 1967), 24.

<sup>3</sup> One of the few histories of the period to mention Yang Xianzhen, and his 'doubts . . . about the great leap', is Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution 2: The Great Leap Forward* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 320.

Peng was not only motivated by his importance as a military leader, the bluntness and severity of his criticism, and the repercussions of his eventual demise, but also by the simple fact that his was the only opposition to the GLF about which there was any substantial information to be had. Today, with an unprecedented wealth of new data having come out of China since the beginning of the 1980s, there is no longer any reason for why Western writings on high-level opposition to the GLF should necessarily have to focus on Peng Dehuai. Not only has it become possible to assess—rather than merely speculate about—the role played at Lushan by the other three members of the so-called ‘Peng [Dehuai]–Huang [Kecheng]–Zhang [Wentian]–Zhou [Xiaozhou] Right-Opportunist Anti-Party Clique’, and to understand the details of the critique formulated at the conference by Zhang Wentian—one of Mao’s arch-rivals, and his predecessor as leader of the Party Politburo.<sup>4</sup> It has also become possible to review and comment upon cases of high-level opposition to the GLF expressed elsewhere, on occasions predating the fateful showdown at Lushan.

Yang Xianzhen’s critique was formulated in a number of talks given to different Party audiences in the winter months of 1958 and first half of 1959. Edited transcripts of these talks are part of a large and previously inaccessible corpus of Yang’s writings released by the CCP in the 1980s.<sup>5</sup> Bits and pieces of unedited extracts, plus some additional material, are reproduced in Cultural Revolutionary publications on Yang recently acquired by enterprising Western librarians.<sup>6</sup> Taken together, the current ‘positive’ official record, and

<sup>4</sup> Zhang’s crucial 21 July Speech at Lushan is in *Zhang Wentian Xuanji* [Selected works of Zhang Wentian] (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1985), 480–506. For the circumstances that prompted him to make it, see Zhang Peisen, ‘Zhang Wentian Lushan Fayan Sixiang de Youlai He Fazhan’ [Origins and development of the ideological content of Zhang Wentian’s statement at Lushan], in Zhonggong Zhongyang Wenxian Yanjiushi (ed.), *Wenxian He Yanjiu 1985 Nian Huibianben* [Documents and research, 1985 annual selection] (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1986), 399–415.

<sup>5</sup> Yang Xianzhen, *Zunzhong Weiwulun, Zunzhong Bianzhengfa* [Respect materialism, respect dialectics] (Wuhan: Hubei Renmin Chubanshe, 1980); Yang Xianzhen, *Shenmo Shi Weiwuzhuyi* [What is materialism?] (Shijiazhuang: Hebei Renmin Chubanshe, 1980); Yang Xianzhen, *Wode Zhexue ‘Zuian’* [My philosophical ‘criminal case’] (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1981); *Yang Xianzhen Wenji* [Yang Xianzhen’s works], 2 vols (Shijiazhuang: Hebei Renmin Chubanshe, 1984–).

<sup>6</sup> Shoudu Pipan Zichanjieji Fandong Xueshu ‘Quanwei’ Lianluo Weiyuanhui (ed.), *Liu Shaoqi Yuyong Zhexue ‘Quanwei’ Yang Xianzhen Fangeming Xiuzhengzhuyi Yanlun Zhaibian* [Collected extracts from the counter-revolutionary reactionary utterances of Yang Xianzhen, Liu Shaoqi’s philosophical court-‘authority’] (Beijing: Zhongguo Renmin Daxue, 1967); ‘Chedi Qingsuan Fangeming Xiuzhengzhuyi Touzi Peng Zhen Zai Zhongyang Dangxiao Fanxia de Taotian Zuixing’ [Thoroughly eradicate

its earlier 'negative' counterpart—during the Cultural Revolution, Yang was labelled a 'counter-revolutionary revisionist'—make a comprehensive reconstruction of Yang's critique of the GLF possible.<sup>7</sup>

Yang Xianzhen was born in Yunxian, Hubei province, in 1896.<sup>8</sup> In November 1926 he joined the CCP. In August 1927, after Chiang Kai-shek's anti-communist coup, he was arrested and imprisoned by the Guomindang. Upon his release from prison two years later, he worked for a leftist publishing firm in Shanghai and in the Party underground in northern China. In July 1931, he was once again arrested and imprisoned by the Guomindang.<sup>9</sup> Five years later, in September 1936, his release was arranged by Zhang Wentian and Liu Shaoqi under circumstances which were to be the subject of considerable controversy decades later. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao's 'proletarian headquarters' referred to Yang as a 'despicable traitor'. In an investigation report compiled 'at the instruction of Comrade Kang Sheng' and subsequently circulated inside the CCP in the form of Central Committee Circular [67] No. 96, Yang was said to have 'surrendered to the enemy' in order to get out of jail.<sup>10</sup> (The

the towering crimes committed by the counter-revolutionary revisionist boss Peng Zhen in the Central Party School], in *Guanyu Peng, Lu, Luo, Yang Fangeming Xiuzhengzhuyi Jituan Cailiao* [Materials on the Peng, Lu, Luo, Yang counter-revolutionary revisionist clique], 8 vols (Beijing: Douzheng Peng, Lu, Luo, Yang Fangeming Xiuzhengzhuyi Jituan Xijiao Choubeichu, 1966), 4, 1–9.

<sup>7</sup> For a comprehensive account of Yang's lifelong struggle to develop 'a comprehensive explication of a more orthodox Chinese Marxism-Leninism' than Mao Zedong's, see Carol Lee Hamrin, 'Yang Xianzhen: Upholding Orthodox Leninist Theory', in Hamrin and Timothy Cheek (eds), *China's Establishment Intellectuals* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1986), 51–91. Other studies of Yang in English include Donald J. Munro, 'The Yang Hsien-chen Affair', *The China Quarterly* 22 (April–June 1965), 75–82; Carol Lee Hamrin, 'Alternatives Within Chinese Marxism 1955–1965: Yang Hsien-chen's Theory of Dialectics', Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1975; Merle Goldman, *China's Intellectuals* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 95–101; Carol Lee Hamrin (ed. & transl.), *Selections from My Philosophical 'Criminal Case'* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, forthcoming in *Chinese Law and Government*).

<sup>8</sup> Guan Shan (ed.), *Yang Xianzhen Yanjiu Ziliao* [Research materials on Yang Xianzhen] (Changsha: Hunan Renmin Chubanshe, 1987), 110–25. All statements pertaining to Yang's biography and career in the present text are, where not otherwise noted, based on this source.

<sup>9</sup> For information on Yang's years in prison, see Timothy Cheek, 'The "61 Prisoners" Speak for Themselves: New Sources on CCP Prison Experiences from the 1930s', forthcoming in *CCP Research Newsletter*, 1991.

<sup>10</sup> 'Guanyu Bo Yibo, Liu Lantao, An Ziwen, Yang Xianzhen Deng Ren Zishou Panbian Wenti de Chubu Diaocha' [Preliminary investigation into the matter of the surrender and treachery of Bo Yibo, Liu Lantao, An Ziwen, Yang Xianzhen *et al.*], in collection of documents (title page missing) from the campaign to 'clean up the class ranks' available in the Library of the Fairbank Center for East Asian Research, Harvard University, 21–3.

lifelong enmity between him and Kang Sheng is a murky and endlessly fascinating piece of CCP history that still awaits its chronicler. According to Yang, the sinister and unscrupulous Kang 'only knew how to persecute people, and lacked even bourgeois morals'. He represented 'sinister politics in its crystalline form'.<sup>11</sup> Not until December 1978 did the CCP reverse its verdict on Yang and his fellow prisoners, and admit in Central Committee Circular [78] No. 75 that 'theirs was not a case of treachery'.<sup>12</sup> Their 'surrender to the enemy' had merely been a stratagem. While they may have renounced communism on paper, they had never really done so at heart.

From 1936 until the founding of the People's Republic of China, Yang lived in the communist-controlled areas of China. During this time, he held a number of posts within the CCP's network of Party Schools. In 1948, when the Central Party School was founded, he was appointed its dean; in 1955 he became its president and first Party secretary. Directly subordinate to the Central Committee, the school was the most important of its kind, and directed the training of the younger Party elite.

In their *Biographic Dictionary of Chinese Communism*, Donald W. Klein and Anne B. Clark mistakenly state that Yang studied philosophy in Germany in the twenties, and was head of the China Department of the Soviet Union's Foreign Languages Press in the thirties.<sup>13</sup> Yang's PRC biographers, however, make no mention of any visit to a foreign country prior to 1954, and Yang has himself explained—in conversation with Carol Lee Hamrin—that his knowledge of Marxist theory and philosophy was acquired primarily during his years in prison, where he translated a number of Marxist–Leninist classics into Chinese. By the late 1950s, Yang had a reputation within the CCP as an erudite Marxist philosopher and theorist. In 1959, the mayor of Beijing, Peng Zhen, told Peng Dehuai—who, after his clash with Mao at Lushan, was being sent to the Central Party School to take a crash course in Marxism–Leninism—that 'people like us cannot compete with [Yang] when it comes to being well versed in the works of Marx,

<sup>11</sup> Guan Shan 72–3.

<sup>12</sup> Su Donghai, 'Shiyi Jie Sanzhong Quanhui Yilai Zhongda Yuanjiacuoan Pingfan Gaishu' [Summary account of the reversal of major unjust, fabricated and erroneous cases since the 3rd Plenum of the 11th Central Committee], in *Dangshi Yanjiu Ziliao* 4 (1983), 777–8.

<sup>13</sup> Donald W. Klein and Anne B. Clark (eds), *Biographic Dictionary of Chinese Communism 1921–1965* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 973.

Engels, Lenin and Stalin'.<sup>14</sup> In 1964, one of Yang's colleagues said that 'before 1959, I thought that he was very good, very learned, hard-working and plain-living, honest and upright, diligent and conscientious, and very approachable'.<sup>15</sup>

At the 8th National Congress of the CCP, in 1956, Yang was elected alternate member of the CCP Central Committee. On the eve of the GLF, in May 1958, the Central Committee elevated him from alternate to full membership.

\* \* \*

The earliest available text of any consequence by Yang Xianzhen dealing directly with events and developments during the GLF is a transcript of a lecture given to a class of Xinjiang students and students of the dialectics of nature at the Central Party School on 19 November 1958.<sup>16</sup> It suggests that, at this time, Yang was still nowhere as denunciative of the GLF as he would be a few months later. He is quoted as saying that 'recent propaganda about communism has been lively and successful', and that, as far as concrete problems are concerned, 'the main current remains good, and only in some places have one or two erroneous tendencies appeared'.<sup>17</sup> His overall tenor, however, is already critical. One is led to suspect that the above remarks may possibly have been concessions to the constraints imposed on him by his environment and the rules governing CCP political discourse in general. This is to say little more than that Yang, as a ranking member of the Central Committee addressing ordinary cadres, probably felt that he had to make at least one or two positive remarks about the GLF before he could begin talking about all that he considered problematic about it.

In his lecture, Yang touched upon a number of aspects of the GLF, ranging from the way in which the policy of 'more, faster, better, and more economically' was being executed, to the way in which the Party's 'general line' was being explained and propagated. He also dealt at length with the ideological foundation of the GLF, and how it related to dialectical materialism.

Since the summer, Yang said, quite a few lower-level Party cadres had been committing 'serious errors'. Rural cadres, for instance, tried

<sup>14</sup> 'Chedi Qingsuan', 2.

<sup>15</sup> Fan Ruoyu, Vice-President of the Central Party School, quoted in Ai Hengwu, 44-5.

<sup>16</sup> Yang Xianzhen, *Wode Zhexue 'Zuian'*, 83-112.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 84-6.

to realize 'communism in one county' (citing, albeit tongue in cheek, Stalin's words about creating 'socialism in one country' in support of their actions). In some cases, they claimed that their counties had in fact already entered communism, which in Yang's opinion indicated that they had lowered the standard of communism to a ridiculously low level. Some urban factory cadres were carrying out anarchistic administrative reforms that had absolutely nothing to do with communism: under the pretext of 'abolishing inequalities and promoting democracy' they were, in Yang's words, actually 'subverting the authority of the Party'.<sup>18</sup>

At the Central Party School, Yang revealed to his students, some people had expressed themselves in agreement with the thesis that one or a few counties could enter communism first, ahead of others. Others had argued in public that under communism, everything will become public property, including the private possessions of the individual. As a result, capitalists in Beijing and Tianjin had become 'scared out of their wits' and 'sold their possessions'. In the theoretical sphere, a so-called 'theory of the progressive peasantry' had been put forth, in which it was argued that 'peasants are more progressive than workers, because they have much less difficulty entering communism'. Some were dispensing with formal theory altogether and maintained that practice *is* theory.<sup>19</sup>

Yang sharply disagreed with these 'absurd notions'. He bemoaned what he saw as an incomplete understanding of Marxist dialectics:

Tell them to dare to think, dare to speak and dare to act, and they will ignore laws; tell them to militarize and they will ignore democracy; tell them to combine education with labour and production, and they will ignore studies, or they will stick to studying but remain firmly opposed to doing labour. Examples like these are to be found everywhere.<sup>20</sup>

Yang was of the opinion that, since the beginning of the GLF, grave errors had been committed not only by those whose task it was to execute, but also by those whose task it was to explain and propagate the GLF. In their writings, he said, the Party's theorists had 'not yet succeeded very well in correctly explaining [communism] according to the principles of Marxism'.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 84–5; 105. For an overview of events in China in the summer and autumn of 1958 at the high point of the 'transition to communism', see Michael Schoenhals, *Saltationist Socialism: Mao Zedong and the Great Leap Forward 1958* (Stockholm Föreningen för Orientaliska Studier, 1987), 66–127.

<sup>19</sup> Yang Xianzhen, *Wode Zhexue 'Zuian'*, 84–6.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

After having presented his catalogue of 'serious errors', Yang attempted to explain *why* everything was not well. So doing, he performed a discursive great leap from the concrete world of politics to the rather more abstract world of philosophy, and proclaimed that:

There is a problem here, and that is that one must respect materialism when one is giving play to the subjective initiative; and one must accept that rules (i.e. laws) have an objective nature—and that they are inviolable—when one is giving play to the subjective initiative.<sup>22</sup>

Cadres were committing errors because they carried out Chairman Mao's instructions not in the proper dialectical-materialist way, but in an 'idealist' fashion and in disregard of 'objective laws':

Chairman Mao has instructed us time and time again to respect materialism, and to act in accordance with the [objective] laws. Chairman Mao also instructs us to dare to think, dare to speak, dare to act, and to develop a communist style. When you are really able to unite these two opposites, then you have understood dialectics. At present, a lot of errors are being committed because of an inability to unite these two things.<sup>23</sup>

The implementation of Mao's instructions, and in particular his call for mobilizing the subjective initiative through so-called 'intellectual emancipation', had to take place in accordance with, and not in defiance of, objective laws.<sup>24</sup> In fact, the Party Chairman himself

tells us that we must base ourselves on Marxism when we dare to think, dare to speak, and dare to act. The problem at the moment is that some people have forgotten this. One must not mobilize the subjective initiative in defiance of the constraints imposed on it by objective conditions. This is what dialectical materialism is all about.<sup>25</sup>

In the summer of 1959, Yang was to dispense with much of this philosophical theorizing, but on this occasion he still devoted considerable time to discussing the '-isms' which he felt were to blame for what was happening in People's Communes and factories all over China. Later he admitted to having found 'lecturing on theory' in 1958 an 'intensely depressing' experience.<sup>26</sup>

Although quite a few of Yang's comments unfortunately obfuscate, rather than clarify, the overall point he seems to be trying to make,

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 86–7.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>24</sup> For an analysis of Mao's concept of 'intellectual emancipation' as part of the ideological foundation of the GLF, see Schoenhals, 23–39.

<sup>25</sup> Yang Xianzhen, *Wode Zhexue 'Zuian'*, 103.

<sup>26</sup> Yang Xianzhen, 'Zai Gaoji Dangxiao Dangwei Kuodahui Shang de Jianghua' [Speech at enlarged meeting of the Central Party School Party committee] (27 March 1959), in Shoudu Pipan, 7.



that point does in the end become fairly clear: the GLF had run into difficulties because too many Party cadres had an insufficient grasp of dialectical materialism, which in turn made them prone to misunderstand and misrepresent the correct policies of the Party and Chairman Mao's instructions. Yang's remedy for this problem, as he perceived it in November 1958, was intensified study of the basics of philosophy, materialism and dialectics. Cadres had to 'do (*gao*) more philosophy' and then relate it to their practical work and make sure they were able to 'figure out' (*moqing*) the laws of development, of socialist economics and of the natural world.<sup>27</sup>

At first glance, Yang's remedy may have seemed identical to what Mao Zedong already had suggested in a circular letter to Party cadres on the central, provincial, prefectural and county levels on 9 November. This was what Mao had said:

Comrades, I suggest you read two books. One is Stalin's *Economic Problems of Socialism in the Soviet Union*, the other is *Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin on Communist Society*. Every one of you should carefully read each book three times, and think about what you are reading while you are at it. Make an analysis, and determine what is correct (I would think most of it), what is incorrect, or not very correct, or where the author is confused, and where he is not entirely clear on some points about what it is he wants to say. . . . Now many people have a lot of confused ideas, but if they read these two books, things may become clearer.<sup>28</sup>

It must be remembered, however, that Yang's understanding of what was meant by theoretical study was very different from Mao's. At a Party congress in May 1958, Mao had—in a speech on why one should not be afraid of professors and academic authorities—directed his audience's attention to Yang as someone who might just about have read everything there was to be read by Karl Marx. Mao, however, impressed upon his audience that he saw little reason for people to read all that many of Marx's works, since the only way to become a good theorist in any case was through practice. 'Revolutionary practice' he said 'becomes theory by being reflected in ideology',

<sup>27</sup> Yang Xianzhen, *Wode Zhexue 'Zuian'*, 91; 92; 99; 106; 118. Examples of this kind of imprecise language abound in the text of Yang's lecture, which he himself nevertheless claims in an accompanying note was revised in more than 300 places by his academic secretary prior to publication.

<sup>28</sup> Mao Zedong, 'Zhi Zhongyang, Sheng Shi Zizhiqu, Di, Xian Siji Dangwei Wei yuan' [Letter to members of Party committees on the four levels of the Center, the provinces, cities and autonomous regions, the prefectures and the counties], in *Mao Zedong Shuxin Xuanji* [Selected letters of Mao Zedong] (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1983), 552–3.

and as far as 'revolutionary practice' was concerned, China's communists had already 'surpassed' Marx.<sup>29</sup>

How much did Yang Xianzhen, in November 1958, actually know about what was going on among those of China's grass-roots who had been engaged in the 'revolutionary practice' cited by Mao? He has himself suggested that he was less than well-informed, and his opinions at the time were probably based in part on what he had seen during a recent visit together with his Xinjiang students to Xushui county in Hebei. Here, according to the *People's Daily*, the transition to communism had been making exceptionally rapid progress, and the county was a 'model' suitable for nationwide emulation. Yang's opinions may also have been influenced by what he had read in *Internal Reference*, the New China News Agency's daily intelligence reports for high-level Party cadres, and *Trends in Propaganda and Education*, a weekly information bulletin put out by the Central Propaganda Department.

The quality of the New China News Agency's reporting in *Internal Reference* had recently been the subject of some debate within the upper echelon of the CCP. *Internal Reference* was meant to be free from propaganda, and contain only 'raw intelligence'. A problem, however, was that since the Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1957, the roughly 400 journalists who regularly wrote for it had become afraid of 'telling the truth'. They were afraid of being punished for writing objectively about 'the seamy side of socialism'. In order to resolve this problem, the CCP Central Secretariat had decided that particularly sensitive issues from now on were to be dealt with only in what was to be called *Internal Reference Galley Proofs*—a collection of even more highly classified reports than *Internal Reference*. Yang may just possibly, as a member of the CCP Central Committee, have belonged to those privileged few who, since the beginning of the GLF, were able to develop an idea of what was happening on the basis of *Internal Reference Galley Proofs*.<sup>30</sup>

Yang may also have received additional information from friends and colleagues. At the end of 1959 he said that 'I heard some of those

<sup>29</sup> Mao Zedong, 'Zai Ba Da Er Ci Huiyi Shang de Jianghua' [Speech at the second session of the 8th National Congress] (8 May 1958), in *Mao Zedong Sixiang Wansui* [Long live Mao Zedong thought] (Beijing, 1967), 287–8.

<sup>30</sup> 'Zhongyang Shujichu Dui Gaijin Neibu Cankao Gongzuo de Yijian' [Views of the Central Secretariat on improving the work of the *Internal Reference*], in *Xinhuashe Wenjian Ziliao Xuanbian* [Selected New China News Agency documents and materials], 4 vols (Beijing: Xinhuashe Xinwen Yanjiusuo, 1987), 4, 182–3. For additional information on *Internal Reference*, see Michael Schoenhals, 'Elite Information in China', *Problems of Communism*, XXXIV September–October 1985, 65–71.

things from leading comrades at the Center. How else would I have known about them? Comrade Peng Zhen told me some'.<sup>31</sup> He also stayed in touch with a group of teachers from his school who had been engaged in political study and manual labour in the Henan countryside since September.

In any case, some time after Yang had attended a plenum of the CCP Central Committee at the beginning of December, he experienced what was to be a real eye-opener to him. As the head of a delegation from the Central Party School he visited Zhengzhou, Kaifeng and Qiliying in Henan. There he met with some of his colleagues who had been in Henan for over four months. Twenty-one years later he described his meeting with them in the following way:

But late that night, our cadres came to look for me, to tell me about the real situation, as they had witnessed it during the past months. What they had seen, and what the papers propagated were two entirely different things. Let me give an example: two cadres working in a commune located just outside a county seat told me that in their commune, the commune members already did not have enough grain to eat. How was it possible that—in a province which had reported 'thousand *jin*-harvests'—there could be a place where, not long after the autumn harvest, there was already no grain to eat? . . . Those were the true living conditions of the people in the days of the Great Leap Forward in the province that was called the nation's number one 'thousand *jin*-province'.<sup>32</sup>

Yang's visit to Henan was crucial in turning him into a fierce opponent of the GLF. He was both dismayed and devastated by what he heard and saw, and called it a disaster of major proportions. Before leaving, he doubted whether there really was a way out of it: 'What do I tell the people back home?', he asked his colleagues.<sup>33</sup> In a meeting with local officials, he said that 'if this is communism, then beggars who own nothing but an empty bowl and a pair of chopsticks reached communism a long time ago'.<sup>34</sup>

Nowhere is Yang's disgust with the GLF more visible than in a conversation with a delegation of cadres from the Henan Party School on 12 June 1959.<sup>35</sup> On this occasion, he was too agitated to discuss

<sup>31</sup> 'Chedi Qingsuan', 2. Also, on the basis of a different source, in MacFarquhar, 430.

<sup>32</sup> Yang Xianzhen, *Wode Zhexue 'Zuian'*, 121–2.

<sup>33</sup> 'Xiaowei Bangongshi Zhibu Jianbao' [Brief report from the Party branch in the school committee], in Shoudu Pipan, 13.

<sup>34</sup> 'Zai Kaifeng Shi de Baogao' [Report in Kaifeng municipality], in Shoudu Pipan, 14.

<sup>35</sup> Guan Shan, 321–8. Additional passages in Shoudu Pipan, 6, 8–9, 12–14, 26–8, 35, 38, 40, 50.

philosophy and theory. Rather than elaborate in abstract terms on the nature of the relationship between policy, objective conditions and subjective errors, he impressed upon his guests the seriousness of China's present predicament by citing drastic examples of 'communist miracles'. In China's countryside, he said, lower-level cadres were resorting to wholesale deception in order to be able to report so-called 'rice sputniks':

In order to be able to report an illusory bumper crop and launch a fake sputnik, one production team transplanted all the rice from dozens of paddy fields into one special paddy field which they showed to visitors. Although the rice withered during the day, they kept transplanting new rice during the night. I think we can do without sputniks like that.<sup>36</sup>

In his report to a provincial CCP Congress, one county secretary had claimed in all seriousness, according to Yang, that:

'unless you fake reports, you will not be able to fully mobilize the energy of the masses; unless you fake reports, you will not be able to give the Great Leap Forward a push; unless you fake reports, the faces of the masses will not beam with pride'.<sup>37</sup>

In view of this, Yang said, the time had come to

carefully investigate whether or not false reporting really is the way to fully mobilize the energy of the masses? Or is truthful reporting the way to do it? As a result of false reporting, there is nothing to eat and the faces of the masses are swollen. Is this what is meant by making the faces of the masses beam with pride?<sup>38</sup>

The problem was that those who produced false reports were praised by their superiors, whereas those who did not were presented with 'black banners'. If the masses spoke out against what was happening, they were forcibly subjected to 're-education' in the name of socialism:

'Monkey' was able to pull out a strand of hair, breathe on it and have whatever he wanted. We no longer possess that ability of his, and there is nowhere for us to acquire it. What we need now is real iron, and real steel, not some fake 'steel sputnik'. Big talk will not give us socialism: only hard work will create it, step by step. We must not reward those who hand in fake reports, and give 'black banners' to those who speak the truth. If we do that, I insist that such 'black banners' are a lot better than the 'red banners' given to people who engage in deception. The history books tell us there was once a man by the name of Liu Yongfu who opposed the French imperialists, and whose forces were called the black banner army. . . . Commune members who refuse to accept what is going on are being subjected to so-called socialist education. No wonder the masses say, 'we already find socialist

<sup>36</sup> Guan Shan, 322.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

education hard enough to take; God knows what communist education will be like'.<sup>39</sup>

In speaking of the way in which 'the masses' were being mobilized to study philosophy, Yang cited the grotesque example of one county where:

they organized a huge philosophy lecturers' regiment of some ten thousand people. First I heard that the youngest philosophy lecturer was only six years old, and I thought to myself this child must be a real genius. Then I heard that there was even a five year-old, lecturing in philosophy. They had things like philosophical clapper talk, philosophical rice sprout-songs, and philosophical cross talk. They had a whole mess of weird things like that. I don't know how you dance to the philosophical rice sprout-song. Perhaps its one step forward, one step back, and that becomes the unity of opposites . . .<sup>40</sup>

Even writing poetry sometimes had truly disastrous consequences, according to Yang:

There were 'geniuses' everywhere. In one place they claimed 'everyone's a poet'. Their slogan was 'Surpass Du Fu' (*chao Du Fu*)! I guess they meant 'fry beancurd' (*chao doufu*)! In Beijing, a worker caused an accident by walking away from his machine to write poetry, setting the factory on fire and causing damages worth 700,000 Yuan. That was really highly prized poetry. It really 'surpassed Du Fu'. . . . One soldier spent 48 hours writing poetry; when he had finished he was unable to get up, and had to be carried away on a stretcher.<sup>41</sup>

And if that was not bizarre enough, then there was always the story of how one production team had attempted to produce 1.2 million *jin* of rice per *mu* with the help of some very special high-protein fertilizer:

Some people's sense of figures seems to be the bigger the better; in close cropping it's the closer the better, and in setting targets it's the higher the better. One production team planted a wheat field for which the target yield had been set at 1.2 million *jin* per *mu*. The first thing they did was to crop it very closely, the second to apply a very special fertilizer—dog meat soup. They killed over seventy dogs to make dog meat soup, which they poured onto the fields. As they had planted too many seeds, there was no room for the seedlings to grow and so they had to cut down three fourths of them, leaving only one fourth of the original number. My feeling was that with one fourth left, they would still be able to harvest 300,000 *jin*, but wouldn't you know, after only a few days, they cut down the remaining fourth as well. While cutting down the wheat, the commune members would put on sad faces and make fun of the cadres, sighing 'Aya! My dog!'<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 322–3. Incomplete text amended on the basis of Shoudu Pipan, 38.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 323. Incomplete text amended on the basis of Shoudu Pipan, 6.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 324. Incomplete text amended on the basis of Shoudu Pipan, 27.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

In his conversation with the Henan delegation, Yang did not criticize any member of the CCP leadership by name. But implicit in his criticism of the slighting of basic Marxist theory was an attack on at least one prominent superior, namely Chen Boda, the editor-in-chief of *Red Flag*.

Yang maintained that in 1958, a trend towards slighting the study of Marxism–Leninism had become very marked in some circles. In the course of repudiating the traditional habit of Chinese intellectuals to ‘stress the past and slight the present’, some people had gone so far as to say that the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin were ‘of the past’, and that to study them therefore amounted to ‘stressing the past and slighting the present’.<sup>43</sup> Some had even counterposited the Marxist classics and Mao’s works, and said that to study the classics amounted to ‘slighting the works of Chairman Mao’.<sup>44</sup> Since Chen Boda had been the Party’s foremost critic of the habit of ‘stressing the past and slighting the present’, and also acted as primus motor behind the popularization of the slogan ‘Stress the present and slight the past’, it is likely that Yang’s repeated references to the evils of ‘slighting’ were veiled attacks on Chen.

To some, Yang’s derisive criticism of the head of a production brigade in Henan may also have implied criticism of Chen Boda. On the surface, Yang’s choice of Chen Yanli’s speech at the Second Congress of the National Association for the Popularization of Science as an example of how ‘resorting to deception reached “epidemic” proportions last year’ seemed innocuous enough.<sup>45</sup> But by elaborating, not only on the contents of Chen’s speech but on its publication in the Chinese Academy of Science’s *Research Bulletin on the Dialectics of Nature* as well, he was once more implicating Chen Boda. As the senior Party member within the Academy, Chen was ultimately responsible for the way in which its forum for discussions on problems related to science and philosophy had degenerated from a highly discriminating journal into a miscellany of scientific and pseudo-scientific writings.

Scattered throughout Yang’s talk were warnings about the political dangers inherent in the reckless and stupid behavior of lower-level Party cadres since the beginning of the GLF. In November 1958, Yang had limited himself to giving his students ‘comradely advice’ on how ‘a member of the Communist Party must have an honest and truth-loving attitude’.<sup>46</sup> Now he spoke without any qualms of how last year’s ‘wind of exaggeration’ destroyed the fine working style of seeking

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 321.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 322.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 323.

<sup>46</sup> Yang Xianzhen, *Wode Zhexue ‘Zuian’*, 112.

truth from facts which our Party has spent so many decades fostering. What a loss we have suffered! Comparatively speaking, it is many times bigger than the loss of all that grain on the ground. The masses say 'the communist Party always used to be so dependable, but last September they must have swallowed a drug or something because all of a sudden they changed'. . . . The task of our Party School is now even more serious. We must foster the working style of seeking truth from facts, and fiercely condemn idealist thinking and actions. Unless we thoroughly condemn idealism, who knows if the same wind might not one day begin to blow again. . . . I ask all of those who practice idealism to knock it off! You have already created one 'miracle', e.g. that of starvation; now please do not perform any more sins! . . . We must earnestly condemn utopian communism and destroy the 'communist wind' of last year. Without destruction, there can be no creation.<sup>47</sup>

'At present', Yang claimed:

the relationship between some cadres and the masses is like that between slave owners and slaves. At the blow of a whistle, all the productive work of the masses has to stop and everyone has to obey their blind commands. If anyone does not obey, he will be sent off to 'reform through labor'. No distinction is made between friend and foe, [and] whoever lodges a complaint runs the risk of having himself declared a 'counter-revolutionary'.<sup>48</sup>

Some of Yang's remarks were so fierce they have since been edited out of the official record. The following passage is missing from his works as published in the 1980s, but is contained in the Cultural Revolutionary record:

Some cadres are hounding the common people to death. They exploit them, and deprive them of every single possession they have. They treat them the way Tibetan slave owners treat their slaves, only they don't actually flay them. When they don't beat the masses, they curse them. They're even worse than the Japanese. How come some cadres dare to act this way? It's because they have a perfect (*mingzheng yanshun de*) excuse, the name of which is the practice of 'communism'.<sup>49</sup>

Also missing from the current official record is a passage in Yang's speech in which he asks himself why China's peasants are putting up with such inhumane treatment. 'They are truly amazing', he said. 'Their pots and pans are being smashed, and still they don't rebel'. Yang explained it to himself by suggesting that 'the masses' still had faith in 'the communist party and Chairman Mao'.<sup>50</sup>

Just like Peng Dehuai at Lushan, Yang knew he would likely be

<sup>47</sup> Guan Shan, 322–7. Incomplete text amended on the basis of Shoudu Pipan, 12.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 327.

<sup>49</sup> Shoudu Pipan, 12–13.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

offending certain people by his forthrightness, and so he ended his conversation on the following note:

I am bound to offend people by saying these things, but for the sake of the Party cause, and for the sake of the people, I cannot but speak up. If you feel I am exaggerating, then think for awhile and tell me, in dealing with comrades who still, to this very day, hang on to their idealism and metaphysics as if they were precious pearls, what else can one do but walk up to them and raise one's voice?<sup>51</sup>

That Yang was to suffer for being such an outspoken critic of the GLF should not come as a surprise to anyone familiar with the history of the CCP. In 1980, Yang admitted to having had his premonition of what might be in the offing when he received an edited transcript of his conversation from the Henan provincial Party committee. 'What I had not foreseen', he said, 'was that they would go home and edit and print my remarks, and give them a wide distribution'.<sup>52</sup> A transcript soon reached the members of the Central Party Secretariat and the permanent members of the Politburo.<sup>53</sup>

In August 1959, Yang attended the 8th Plenum of the 8th CCP Central Committee, at Lushan. If anything, a look at the texts of the resolutions passed at that meeting must have increased his anxiety. They contained ominous references to 'reactionary forces' who allegedly had maliciously attacked the GLF and the People's Communes. 'Reactionary forces' were said to have taken advantage of certain 'temporary and partial shortcomings' to attack the CCP in a 'vain attempt to create ideological and political chaos'. To defend the GLF at all costs, and to denounce the attacks on it by certain 'rightist opportunists', was at present the 'main fighting task' of all Party members.<sup>54</sup>

Upon his return from Lushan to the Central Party School, Yang made what probably constituted an attempt at deflecting likely criticisms of his own conduct over the past months. At the end of October,

<sup>51</sup> Guan Shan, 328.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 330.

<sup>53</sup> Yang Xin, 'Yang Xianzhen Mengyuan Ershi Nian Jishi' [Factual record of twenty years of injustices suffered by Yang Xianzhen], *Renwu* 4 (1989), 64-5.

<sup>54</sup> 'Communique of the Eighth Plenum of the Eighth Central Committee of the CCP', in Robert R. Bowie and John K. Fairbank (eds), *Communist China 1955-1959: Policy Documents and Analysis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 533-5. For the definitive account of the Lushan Conference by a participant, see Li Rui, *Lushan Huiyi Shilu* [True record of the Lushan Conference] (Beijing: Chunqiu Chubanshe & Hunan Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 1989). See also Chen Shihui, '1959 Nian Lushan Huiyi Jishi' [Chronicle of the 1959 Lushan Conference], *Zhonggong Dangshi Ziliao* 28 (1988), 111-49.



at a meeting of all Party members in the Central Party School, he joined in the chorus of denunciations of 'rightist opportunists' in a talk entitled 'Oppose Rightism, Rouse Everyone's Enthusiasm, and Greet the New Task of Our School'. He singled out 'elder cadres' for criticism, and accused them of obstructing the smooth progress of socialist construction in China.<sup>55</sup>

But all to no avail. The following month Yang was himself singled out by Kang Sheng as an archetypal 'rightist opportunist' whose 'malicious attacks' against the GLF had to be dealt with severely. Kang—who chaired the Small Group in charge of Culture and Education under the Party's Central Secretariat<sup>56</sup>—had been asked by the members of the Politburo to keep an eye on what was transpiring at the Central Party School.<sup>57</sup> At the Lushan Plenum, Kang had actively aided Mao Zedong in his attacks against Peng Dehuai. Now he initiated a denunciation campaign against Yang Xianzhen.

For his critique of the GLF, Yang was criticized by the members of the Party Committee of the Central Party School at a series of closed meetings. He was, however, not 'struggled' publicly in front of the school's staff and students. This fact later led one of his colleagues to remark that 'the criticism to which Yang Xianzhen was subjected between 1959 and 1960 . . . was not very thorough'.<sup>58</sup> When the Party Committee of the Central Party School finally submitted a report concerning Yang's 'errors' to the CCP Central Committee in July 1960, its verdict was that they had amounted to 'rightist opportunism'. In the wake of the Central Committee's 9th Plenum, in January 1961, Yang was demoted to the posts of vice president and vice Party secretary of the Central Party School. Eventually, in 1964, he was made the target of a nationwide campaign of repudiation and vilification. Because of his caustic remarks directed against the GLF, Mao had developed a personal grudge against him. After the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, in 1967, Yang was arrested and thrown in jail. He was not to regain his freedom until 1978.

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<sup>55</sup> Quotes from this talk are in Shoudu Pipan, 38–9, and 'Chedi Qingsuan', 2. It is not referred to or quoted anywhere in recent official publications by or about Yang. Entries for September and October 1959 are conspicuously absent from the chronology of Yang's life included in Guan Shan, 110–25.

<sup>56</sup> Zhong Kan (pseud.), *Kang Sheng Pingzhuan* [Critical Biography of Kang Sheng] (Beijing: Hongqi Chubanshe, 1982), 360. Kang's appointment to this post had taken place on 15 March 1957.

<sup>57</sup> Yang Xianzhen, *Wode Zhexue 'Zuian'*, 81.

<sup>58</sup> Fan Ruoyu, quoted in Ai Hengwu, 44.

In some ways, Yang Xianzhen's critique of the GLF was even more damning than Peng Dehuai's at Lushan. Peng's critique was limited mainly to specifics: the steel-drive aimed at 'catching up with the United Kingdom in fifteen years' had been 'a total mess'; the propagation of the People's Communes in Xushui county as models for nationwide emulation had made 'a very bad impact'; the urban markets were in such a state of chaos that 'you can no longer buy matches or soap'.<sup>59</sup> Peng's most sweeping remark concerned the fact that 'the gains do not make up for the losses'. Yang's critique, on the other hand, while also concerned very much with details, included numerous sweeping denunciations of the GLF as a whole that were much more scathing than Peng's complaints. At one point, Yang went so far as to say that if nothing radical was done, the outcome of the GLF would eventually be a 'Chinese form of crude communism' and 'a society devoid of all culture and civilization, harboring only flocks of destitute people without ideals'.<sup>60</sup>

The politically crucial difference between Peng's and Yang's critiques concerned the fact that whereas Peng sought out Mao as the person responsible for what had gone wrong, Yang concentrated his attacks on lower-level cadres and propaganda officials. Peng challenged the emperor himself; Yang cursed the little people and put the blame on those under him. Peng pointed the finger at the supreme leader—'old Mao'—as he was reputedly the only person on the Central Committee to address him;<sup>61</sup> Yang lay the blame on the 'bad company' with which Mao surrounded himself—'sinister' people like Kang Sheng and Chen Boda.

Although he no doubt was one of the CCP's great authorities on Marxism, Yang nonetheless failed in making a profound *Marxist* critique of the GLF. His discourse is characterized by the same inner tensions and unresolved contradictions that are the hallmark of all attempts by CCP members with a strong sense of *partijnost* ('Party spirit') to represent and interpret the realities, as opposed to the ideals, of socialism in China. Common sense probably suggested to Yang that something was very wrong about the GLF, and something like a gut reaction would have told him that something ought to be

<sup>59</sup> Zhongguo Renmin Jiefangjun Gaodeng Junshi Xueyuan 'Honglian' Bingtuan (ed.), *Da Junfa, Da Yexinjia, Da Yinmoujia Peng Dehuai Fangeming Zuixing Huibian* [The collected counter-revolutionary crimes of the great warlord, great careerist and great schemer Peng Dehuai] (Beijing, 1967), 40–1.

<sup>60</sup> Yang Xianzhen, *Wode Zhexue 'Zuian'*, 148–9.

<sup>61</sup> For some amusing examples of Peng's 'disrespectful' references to the Party Chairman, see Zhongguo Renmin Jiefangjun, 6–9.

done about it. But his lectures and writings attest to the fact that there was a profound unwillingness on his part to accept even the possibility that part of the root of the problem might lie in the institution of the Party itself, or in the politics defined by the Party Center. Yang was incapable of turning the principles of Marxism of which he was so fond into a critique of the Party—as distinct from some of its members—or of Party politics. Instead, he used them to reduce what he saw and heard—in as far as it was incompatible with his ideals—to ‘human errors’. These ‘human errors’ he then further transformed, by linguistic means, into ‘miracles’ and ‘weird things’. By thus locating the negative aspects of the GLF in a mythical realm of less than real and therefore ultimately inconsequential facts situated somewhere between the ‘atypical’ (*bu dianxing*) and the ‘unrepresentative’ (*meiyou daibiaoxing*), Yang’s critique failed where, by proper Marxist standards, it should have been most successful, i.e. in dealing with reality. His vitriolic remarks are a pleasure to read, but his Marxist critique is less than convincing as an explanation of why the movement that should have led to communism brought about one of the greatest human tragedies in Chinese history.