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# China's Struggle to Forget

Yu Hua MARCH 16, 2014

BEIJING — The history of Communist rule in China can be viewed from a number of angles. One such angle is class struggle.

China in the era of Mao Zedong had no landlords and no capitalists. Seen as archetypes of the exploiting classes, after 1949 they were quickly dispossessed. During land reform, the property of landlords was confiscated; and then, during the compulsory merging of public and private enterprises, factories owned by capitalists were taken over by the state.

My paternal grandfather originally owned 30 acres of land, a legacy bequeathed to him by his forebears. He did not, however, inherit his forebears' industry and thrift, devoting his energies instead to wining and dining, gambling and carousing. Every year, he sold off a plot of land, until, by 1949, he had disposed of practically all his property.

In so doing, he signed away his landlord status, and the people who had bought his land became landlords in his stead. They were subjected to endless “struggle sessions” in the political campaigns that followed, and their children and grandchildren always lived under a cloud. How lucky was my father — and how lucky was I! We owe a debt of gratitude to my grandfather for his profligate ways.

During the Mao era, when material shortages were the order of the day, everyone

was a pauper. Those who had once been landlords and capitalists were paupers, too — in most cases, even poorer than everyone else. In that period, there were no longer any classes, let alone class conflict. Yet every day, we would shout “Never forget class struggle!” all the same.

These words were plastered on the walls of cities and villages throughout China. Our cups had the slogan stenciled on them and our toilets had it painted on them. Even as we went to bed, we could not escape the injunction: It was printed on our pillowcases, commanding us even in our dreams to “never forget class struggle.”

Today’s China looks nothing like the China of Mao, who died in 1976. Classes and class struggle have emerged, and every moment we can see media reports of life at the two extremes.

In one five-star hotel, a dishwasher stashed away some dining-room leftovers, planning to take them home as a treat for her college-age son. When this was discovered, she was promptly dismissed on a charge of stealing hotel property. What grieved her most was not losing her job, but witnessing such waste: “It was perfectly good food, but they wanted me to chuck it in the trash — what a crying shame!”

In a hotel in another city, a company manager and his three guests spent more than \$32,000 on a single meal. Uneasy about the executive’s putting it all on his credit card, the hotel insisted he pay cash. After much argument, the boss-man called an underling and told him to get in a van and bring the money over — in 1 - yuan notes. The hotel had to deploy its entire staff to count the stacks of low-denomination bills, while the manager sat on the sofa, leafed through a magazine and said, “See, guys, I can afford to pay. Can you afford to count?”

To take another example: In January, the office of the top national prosecutor proclaimed the achievements of its onslaught against graft. From January through November of 2013, 36,907 officials were charged with corruption and bribery in 27,236 cases, with a total of \$910 million involved. The government was keen to

show its determination to clamp down on abuses by officials.

But in April 2013, when Yuan Dong from Xinyang, a city in the central province of Henan, and three other anti-corruption activists unfurled a banner in Xidan, Beijing's commercial hub, demanding that officials make a public accounting of their financial assets, they were arrested on a charge of illegal assembly. The campaign against corruption was all forgotten.

China has, over the last 30 years, gone through tumultuous changes. Its abnormal development has generated a huge gap between rich and poor, and pervasive corruption has ignited conflict between officialdom and the population at large. These days, Chinese society is riddled with contradictions, but "Never forget class struggle" has been replaced by "harmonious society" and "stability overrides all other considerations."

That earthshaking slogan of "Never forget class struggle" has vanished from the scene, absconding to another world and seeking refuge with Mao. For our current leaders even to mention class struggle would be tantamount to their digging their own graves.

So it is that during these last 64 years, China has written an absurd history of class struggle. In the past, class was eliminated, but our rulers decreed that the people must "never forget class struggle." Now class has returned, but our rulers demand that class struggle be forgotten.

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