Contradictions Among the People: Mao Zedong and the Aims of the Hundred Flowers Policy

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Mao Zedong and the Aims of the Hundred Flowers Policy

Cameron C. Nielsen

As the year 1956 dawned, the People's Republic of China (PRC) was at a crossroads. After a mere six years in power, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had successfully consolidated its control of mainland China, stabilized and reformed the economy, won the hearts of the peasants through land redistribution, fought the United States to a standstill in Korea, and silenced dissent through re-education campaigns. However, questions began to arise over where to go from there. To the surprise of many, at this moment of the Party's uncertainty, Mao Zedong began to push for greater openness to critical voices. Known as the "Hundred Flowers Campaign" after the slogan Mao used to describe it, this policy began in 1956 as a slight loosening of restrictions on China's educated classes. By the early summer of 1957, it had grown to an all but mandatory call for intellectuals to criticize the CCP and help "rectify" its "working style." But after only six weeks of heady protest and dissent (including much that called for the removal of the CCP from power), Mao and the Party reversed course, announced a new "Anti-Rightist Campaign," and repressed those who had spoken out.

This odd chain of events has puzzled historians ever since. Why would Mao encourage the expression of dissent he was not prepared to tolerate? Why would he turn to China's intellectuals, of all people, to correct his own party, then reverse course? These events made sense to Mao at the time, however, so if they do not make sense to us our models must be inadequate. China-watchers have floated a number of theories over the years, but most of them focus primarily on
possible external stimuli of the Hundred Flowers policy. This has led to a sense of Mao’s actions as having been irrational, because these explanations fail to address fully his internal reasons. Mao was guided far more by his experimental social theories than by actual events, and in the case of the Hundred Flowers he was simply testing out his philosophy of “contradictions,” and all China was his laboratory.

Contradictions are ideological conflicts within society that had to be fought out, one way or another. To Mao the former guerrilla, finding and manipulating these hot spots represented the highest form of problem-solving, and he fancied he was quite good at it. Mao saw three main contradictions in 1956 China: those between intellectuals and the realities of the single-party system, between his role as secular leader of a diverse China and his status as ideological prophet of the Communist faithful, and between himself and those in his party who were uncomfortable with his growing personal power. The Hundred Flowers campaign was a response to these contradictions, and the results of the policy in turn shaped Mao’s attitudes toward these three issues. The resulting shift in Mao’s approach to government after the disappointment of these events would have unfortunate consequences for China’s future, culminating in the violence of the Cultural Revolution.

LET A HUNDRED THEORIES BLOOM

Before we can examine the issues that came into play during the Hundred Flowers, however, we must understand how the actual events unfolded and how those events have been interpreted by historians since. The Hundred Flowers campaign had two main phases: a period of general “thaw” starting with the special party conference on intellectuals held mid-January 1956, and the more uninhibited summer of “blooming and contending” that lasted for five weeks from May 1, 1957.¹ At the January conference, both Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong spoke about the need to be more inclusive and tolerant towards intellectuals; in the following months numerous other signals were given by top officials that social policy in general was to become more lenient, with effects as wide-ranging as a new trend towards cheerier clothing styles.² This was part of a phase of consolidation and increased focus on economic—as opposed to ideological—development that the Party now felt comfortable entering due to the success of

collectivization and the security of its own power. But it was soon given a new significance with the event of “de-Stalinization” in the Soviet Union and its attending “thaw.”

Reactions within the CCP to Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin were mixed to say the least. On the one hand, CCP leaders (especially Mao) felt vindicated in their previous disputes with Stalinist policy; on the other, they felt threatened by the sudden attack on the “personality cult” of Stalin, which they had supported and tried to emulate in the case of their own chairman. There is considerable disagreement among analysts as to how much of a real threat de-Stalinization posed to Mao’s power. Two historians, Rice and Teiwes, who have both written exhaustive and reputable histories of Communist China, exemplify this. Rice portrays the CCP Politburo (without Mao) consciously planning to gradually ease out Mao without harming his prestige, but Mao fearing being ousted altogether. Teiwes says it was Mao who was confident enough “in his own ultimate power and the loyalty of his Politburo colleagues” to plan his possible retirement. Whatever the exact ramifications might have been, other CCP leaders did take symbolic action to reduce Mao’s status at the eighth Party Congress that September by removing a statement on the importance of the “thought of Mao Zedong” from the new constitution. Significant complaints had also been heard about the Hundred Flowers policy and other reforms that Mao had been promoting over the summer. This contributed to Mao’s increasing impression that the party itself was one of his biggest obstacles to modernizing China.

Onto this scene bursts the Hungarian Revolution of October 1956. This attempted overthrow of Hungary’s Soviet client government and its subsequent forceful putdown by the USSR seemed like a warning to the CCP, but a warning which inspired divergent solutions. Many were convinced that liberalization was the culprit, and that the mild Hundred Flowers policy they had been experimenting with risked creating a similar uprising. But Mao and some others felt that the Hungarian revolt had partially been caused by Communist corruption and misrule, thus the party needed to loosen up and reform itself even further to avoid provoking a similar backlash. A new government like theirs could hardly afford to have a tin ear. This would mean a new “rectification” campaign within the party itself, to shape up the lower levels of cadres. Rectifications had become a tried-and-true means for party leadership to educate on ideology, root out abuses, and enforce policy changes, but the process had usually involved only

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5 MacFarquhar, Origins, 1:100–102
internal debate and self-correction. This time, while there was some broad feeling that many bureaucrats did indeed need reining in, apparently Mao encountered significant opposition within the party to his idea of inviting rectifying influences from outside groups. This is why discussion of the Hundred Flowers focuses so much on Mao personally—it would never have happened without his efforts. Over the winter of 1956–57 he became convinced that party rectification was necessary, and that expanding the Hundred Flowers policy was the best way to do it. He then spent much of the spring campaigning for the idea single-handed, presenting it as the best solution to the questions raised by the Hungary incident.

What role the Hungary incident really played in Mao’s thinking is unclear. Some historians and Mao himself affirmed that it was a significant motivation. According to these theories, he wanted to somehow prevent Hungarian-style unrest by using a small quantity of dissent as a sort of vaccination. According to this theory, the idea was to make minor concessions that would pacify any unhappy elements enough to head off any real disturbance, and certainly this is what Mao told party people at the time. As other historians have pointed out, however, Mao cannot always be trusted to tell the unvarnished truth about his policies. The vaccination theory has obvious flaws, such as the scarcity of any signs of actual potential rebellion in China during the mid-50s. Mao later changed his story to make himself look more sagacious in retrospect, stating that it had all been a trap to lure out “rightist” elements—an idea which, while not exactly plausible nor endearing, did enhance the image of godlike control over events that Mao liked to project.

Some clarity, perhaps, may come from further study of new documents from the Soviet Archives, which show that Mao and the CCP were directly involved in Soviet decision-making process over Hungary. Apparently, when the Politburo first considered armed intervention in Poland and Hungary, the Chinese vetoed it. Only after the revolt in Hungary turned against the Communists toward the restoration of a “bourgeois” government did Mao urge suppressing it. Mao felt that this need not to have happened, which suggests that the timing, at least,
of the "Hundred Flowers" may have been influenced by an urge to show the Russians the right way to handle "contradictions among the people." Mao and senior party leaders had previously planned to begin party-wide rectification in 1958, but it was soon decided that it would start immediately in spring 1957, and Mao was determined that it would happen his way, with "blooming and contending."¹¹

**OPENING WIDE AND CLAMPING DOWN**

It is indicative of Mao's broad aims for his campaign as well as his low expectations for party support, that he chose to give his landmark speech, "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People," before a meeting of the Supreme State Conference. This was an assembly that he could call in his role as China's head of state, not that of CCP Chairman, and it included many non-Communists.¹² In this rambling four-hour discourse, Mao reflected on current events, digressed onto tangents like birth control and singing, called out to famous members of the audience, used folksy traditional aphorisms, admitted to "mistakes," and joked irreverently about himself and other prominent figures.¹³ But what mattered was the open way he talked about the expression of critical or even counterrevolutionary ideas. He said that there could be both "antagonistic" and "non-antagonistic" contradictions in socialist society; and that, since the dangerous, antagonistic contradictions in Chinese society had been mostly eradicated by the revolution already, broad tolerance towards remaining dissidents should now be employed. Using the metaphor of flowers blooming, in keeping with the slogan that had been in use for almost a year, he pointed out that "poisonous weeds" were to be expected when growing a crop, but that one could not clamp down on all plants as a result.

This had all been heard before, but what made this speech different was the public scope of its application and the forceful way in which Mao expressed it. At one point, he gave some generalized figures about the size and diversity of China's population of 600 million and its numerous politically unreliable classes, and then asked a rhetorical question:

You want all these people not to express opinions, to have them completely gagged, only letting [the gag] off a little when they eat, and as soon as they've eaten gag them.

¹¹ MacFarquhar, Origins, 1:180-82.
¹² Ibid, 1:184.
¹³ Mao Zedong, "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People (Speaking Notes)" (Feb. 27, 1957), in MacFarquhar, Secret Speeches, 131-189.
up again. How can that work? ... We cannot use coercive methods to stop them from expressing [themselves]; [we] can only debate with them at the time of the expression.

But Mao faced an uphill battle both to convince party members that this was in their best interest and to convince potential critics that he meant what he was saying. However, after several more speeches that grew even more strident on the necessity of “opening wide,” an official directive was issued declaring a “campaign to rectify working style.”14 This document stated that “this campaign should be guided ideologically” by Mao’s speeches, and party members were instructed to study them. Criticism was to be moderate: “This campaign should be a movement of ideological education carried out seriously, yet as gently as a breeze or mild rain.” But the truly game-changing part of the directive was the statement that “non-party people who wish to participate in the rectification campaign should be welcomed.”15 With this, the summer of blooming and contending began in earnest.

As soon as Mao got his wish, however, he discovered that this new openness was not to his liking. The opinions that began airing definitely did not come “gently as a breeze or mild rain.” As Li Zhisui, one of Mao’s doctors at the time, later recalled:

As days went on, the “mistakes” of the party were subjected to increasingly ruthless criticism. Finally, the very right of the party to rule was questioned. . . . In the end, Mao’s own leadership was criticized. The Communist party was likened to a Buddhist monastery where the abbot (Mao) dictated the “scriptures” that were then echoed by the monks—the leaders under Mao.

Mao of course was shocked. He had never intended that any of the criticisms be directed against him.16

The period of “blooming and contending” ended with an editorial in People’s Daily, most likely written by Mao, bearing the aggrieved title of “What Is This For?” In it, he iterated a suitably Maoist explanation for what was happening—“rightists.”

Under the pretext of “helping the Communist Party in its rectification,” this small minority of Rightists is challenging the leadership of the Communist Party and the

14 MacFarquhar, Origins, 1:193.
working class, or even blatantly clamoring for the Communist party to “step down.” They attempt to seize this opportunity to overthrow the Communist Party and the working class, and to topple the great cause of socialism.17

Mao had been sincere enough about wanting some criticism, but only within certain limits. Ignoring these limits turned out to be dangerous, as many people soon discovered once Mao announced it was time to “repel the attacks of the bourgeois Rightists.”18

There are numerous contrasting opinions on what exactly the Anti-Rightist Campaign meant.19 To some Sinologists, such as Roderick MacFarquhar, it was “a major defeat” of Mao’s plans: “His vision of a benevolently-run communist society had to be abandoned in yet another assault on the luckless bourgeoisie and unwary party members.”20 More cynical historians see this reversal as another example of Mao’s arbitrary and totalitarian leadership style, which frequently involved pitting groups of people against each other, then purging those who made the wrong step.21 However, we do know that Mao made a point of imposing relatively gentle punishments on “rightists,” compared to what the party usually did to people accused of such evil motivations in similar purges.22 These people had followed what Mao had said, and though they needed to be “corrected,” he implicitly recognized that they could not be blamed much. Whichever way one looks at it, the whole thing was an embarrassment to Mao in the eyes of other party leaders.23 Mao recovered quickly, but the events of the Hundred Flowers were transformational for Mao’s ideology and his relations with key groups, such as intellectuals and the party itself. The events of the Hundred Flowers were shaped by and in turn helped determine Mao’s thinking on these important “contradictions.” The remainder of this essay will deal with what these were and how they figured in these events.

18 Mao, “Repel the Attacks of the Bourgeois Rightists” (July 9, 1957), in Leung, Writings, 2:620.
19 For some excellent further discussion of these theories, see Maurice Meisner, Mao’s China and After: A History of the People’s Republic (New York: Free Press, 1986), 195–9.
21 Benjamin I. Schwartz, “Thoughts on the Late Mao—Between Total Redemption and Utter Frustration,” in MacFarquhar, Secret Speeches, 19–38.
22 Teiwes, Politics and Purges, 222–3. Also in many of his speeches before, during, and after the Hundred Flowers, Mao spoke against executing subversive elements, signaling a more lenient approach in general as compared to during the Revolution.
23 Schwartz, “Thoughts on the Late Mao,” in MacFarquhar, Secret Speeches, 31.
Mao was fascinated by contradictions. To him, they embodied something of a universal law of opposition, such that, as he said in one speech, "without contradictions there would be no world." In his mind, seeming chaos and destruction became creative forces, required to bring about needed change.

He had developed this philosophical outlook in his extensive earlier writing on Marxist class conflict and revolution, in which (coming as he was from a Chinese cultural and philosophical background) he had iterated a new and uniquely Chinese Marxism. As a past master of revolution, the highest form of contradiction, he felt himself uniquely qualified to diagnose and treat "contradictions among the people." Mao saw contradictions everywhere, and many of those he saw in Chinese society were reflections of contradictions within his own ideas. Mao's solution to these tensions was born of his revolutionary experience and his concept of the Marxist doctrine of "struggle"—simply to have society fight out its antagonisms in public debate. His goal was to have a comfortable level of strife in the ideological sphere, a goal he was to return to again and again throughout his rule of China, though with mixed results. Understanding this helps us to see why, when confronted by contradictions between his roles, intellectuals, and the party, he turned to the idea of "contending" as the solution to the problem.

However, the boundary Mao mentioned in his original "Contradictions Among the People" speech between "antagonistic" and "non-antagonistic" contradictions is essential. Mao, despite his idealistic rhetoric, was not a tolerant person—especially if he saw a threat to socialism or his own power. The original speech, given when Mao was feeling secure and expansive, did not give much explanation as to where this boundary lay. But it implied that any criticisms

25 Lueng, Writings, 2:176, note 33.
26 Nick Knight, Rethinking Mao: Explorations in Mao Zedong's Thought (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 159–64.
27 Lieberthal, Governing China, 68–9. "Time and again Mao created situations in which his subjects would have to engage in personal struggle, perhaps even at the risk of their lives. Whereas most political leaders around the globe have tried to ensure their people peaceful lives, Mao constantly stirred up the social pot as a calculated part of his rule."
28 Even after the seemingly negative experience of the Hundred Flowers, Mao could say of this kind of strife, "We should 'set fires' regularly. How should things be handled from now on?...In each five-year plan we can have at least two [fires]." (Mao, "Repel the Attacks of the Bourgeois Rightists" (July 9, 1957), in Leung, Writings, 2:622).
arising from loyal Chinese would be non-antagonistic, and that such people could never be treated like the enemy.\textsuperscript{29} However, when the speech was actually published—near the beginning of the Anti-Rightist campaign—it appeared in a significantly altered form, with a new and restrictive list of criteria for acceptable criticisms.\textsuperscript{30} Two of the points on this list of six stated that criticisms must be "beneficial" to socialism and not "undermine or weaken" the party's "democratic dictatorship," and the following paragraph re-emphasized the same two as the "most important" points in keeping criticism "on the right track."\textsuperscript{31} The addition of this list was regarded by those now branded "rightists" as a betrayal by Mao. However, it is likely that this list represented Mao's expectations at the time of his original speech as well. The tenor of the "new" restrictions is consistent with Mao's other statements and actions throughout his career, while his seeming embrace of free speech is not. Whether he simply did not think that any hard-and-fast restrictions needed to be given or purposely chose to downplay them is something that may never be known.

Nor can we let Mao's apparent policy shift dissuade us of his sincerity in asking. As long as it did not become dangerous to his regime, Mao desperately wanted to see "struggle" occurring in Chinese society, even going so far as to encourage seemingly intolerable events such as strikes.\textsuperscript{32} Much of the rest of the party, involved as it was in the practical bureaucratic matters of maintaining order and stability, was less enthusiastic. Mao sensed this, and frequently lectured party cadres on the importance of allowing uncontrolled activity within the ranks of the people.

The correct attitude should be one of allowing people to make revolution. When people commit errors, we must adopt the policy of learning from past mistakes in order to avoid future ones and curing the illness in order to save the patient so as to help them to correct their mistakes.\textsuperscript{33}

As an example of this evil, he mentioned some early CCP leaders he had disagreed with, accusing them of having "always arbitrarily charged people who were not to their taste with having committed such and such a mistake and barred them from the revolution. . . . We must learn this lesson well."\textsuperscript{34} Of course, it was the fact that Mao did exactly the same thing himself that made

\textsuperscript{29}Mao, "Contradictions," in MacFarquhar, Secret Speeches, 132–33.
\textsuperscript{30}Tiewes, Politics and Purges, 220.
\textsuperscript{31}Mao, "On Correctly Handling Contradictions Among the People," in Leung, Writings, 2:333–4.
\textsuperscript{32}Ibid, 2:541–545.
\textsuperscript{33}Mao, "On the Ten Major Relationships" (April 25, 1956), in Leung, Writings, 2:58.
\textsuperscript{34}Ibid.
working with him so dangerous—and made many people so reluctant to rebel in the way he urged. In a system where ultimately the only acceptable course was whatever Mao felt like at the moment, it was simply too easy to misstep.

One of the methods Mao used to rationalize his inconsistent policy of struggle was to equate loyalty to the party line he laid down with patriotism. He wanted a suitably mild form of opposition, but once the CCP made a decision, he wanted non-party groups to show their loyalty and immediately “proceed from being in opposition to not being in opposition.”35 The CCP followed this “policy of both uniting and struggling” with the democratic parties it allowed to exist at this time; in promoting the Hundred Flowers, Mao probably wanted to take this paradigm and use it as a model for the whole country.36 Certainly this is what the party’s oft-repeated rectification mantra of “unity-criticism-unity” meant: unifying behind the party line after discussion had led to Mao approving it. This opens the question of whether, if the critics who spoke up during the summer of “blooming and contending” had exercised more restraint and followed the pattern Mao expected, they might have been able to influence policy without being persecuted for it. It is possible that the answer to this question would be yes, as Mao did adopt some of the concerns raised during the period as his own later, despite the offense he took at the way the campaign played out.37 In the end, the policy of encouraging “struggle” worked quite well for Mao, if for no one else. It kept his subjects on their toes, revealed enemies, and supplied him with fresh ideas to plagiarize. The Hundred Flowers campaign was simply another product of this strategy to jump-start what Mao viewed as a natural process of resolving contradictions through conflict.

**Contradictions Between Mao’s Own Roles**

It is difficult to talk about Mao and Maoism without using quasi-religious imagery, whether it was the dogmas and doctrines he preached as revealed truth to his followers or the personality cult of believers devoted to the god-like figure of the Chairman.38 During more intense periods of Mao-worship, even miracles were attributed to the diligent application of Mao Zedong Thought or some

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36 Ibid.
other influence of his.\textsuperscript{39} While this "cult of Mao" was not as prominent during the Hundred Flowers period as it would be later, the fact that it existed does demonstrate that Mao had two contradicting roles: that of secular leader of the government of China and that of ideological leader of the party faithful.\textsuperscript{40} The Hundred Flowers period could be viewed as a conflict between these two roles, during which Mao’s secular concern for the welfare of the country’s economy temporarily overrode his usual love of ideological purity.

That this relaxation was unnatural for him can be seen from his speeches, for even while encouraging criticism of the Party when speaking to general audiences, he had to affirm the party’s grip on truth. When speaking to the Communist Youth League, obviously a prime audience of impressionable future faithful, he reminded them that “all words and actions that depart from socialism are completely mistaken.”\textsuperscript{41} He recognized that there was a question in party members’ minds about his new stance:

Some people ask: “Is there any inconsistency between upholding the policy of ‘letting a hundred flowers bloom and letting a hundred schools contend’ and recognizing Marxism’s leading position in the realm of ideology?”

For Mao, these two approaches did not at first conflict, because he was absolutely confident that, once they had been exposed to all points of view, the superiority of Marxism would be obvious to the people.

The leadership of Marxism . . . is demanded and determined by objective existence. . . . Needless to say, the leadership of Marxism accepts the existence of non-Marxist ideas as a basic premise. . . . Therefore, to educate the people with Marxism not only means not to rely on violence to “liquidate” non-Marxist ideas among the people; it also allows for, even requires, the conducting of discussion from various different ideological viewpoints among the people, so as to allow the people to arrive consciously at accurate conclusions through such discussion.

His encouragement of discussion took on a sort of proselytizing zeal:

This bestows upon the Marxist the tremendous responsibility of propagating Marxism. We can be sure that, since Marxism is objective scientific truth, and because the scientific truth of Marxism will win and win again, there will be more and more


\textsuperscript{40} Mao’s actions could thus be more fruitfully evaluated by comparing him with absolute theocratic rulers—such as the Supreme Leaders/Ayatollahs of Iran—than with secular dictators, as historians have usually done.

\textsuperscript{41} MacFarquhar, Origins, 1:220.
people who will come to believe in Marxism, and the numbers of true Marxists will increase.\textsuperscript{42}

To properly interpret this material in light of the events of the Hundred Flowers, it is important to realize that Mao was a true believer himself. For him, Marxism was not empty rhetoric. His actions in initiating the "blooming and contending" were certainly not motivated by any love of liberal theories like free speech, but because he believed his ideology was immune to attack. He hoped to both gain converts to and revitalize the original idealistic vigor of the party by taking down the stifling walls it had built around itself. Apparently, when his assumptions did not prove correct, and he saw that socialism and even he were vulnerable to attack, the balance shifted. Discovering that he still faced a hostile public, Mao turned to his orthodox, revolutionary side for solutions to China's problems. As his colleagues purged the "rightists" who dared oppose him, little did they know that they were laying the groundwork for the disaster of the Great Leap Forward by removing the counterbalances to Mao's frightening radical tendencies.\textsuperscript{43}

\textbf{CONTRADICTIONS BETWEEN MAO AND INTELLECTUALS}

Of course, whether or not China's intellectuals would have been effective in warning about the impracticality of Mao's future policies if they had not been terrorized into silence by the Anti-Rightist Campaign is a matter of speculation. Communist governments tend to regard intellectuals as a "problem," both because of their ideological independence and because they do not belong to a proper Marxist "class." But before the start of the Hundred Flowers, at least, the political situation was looking extremely promising for Chinese intellectuals. The CCP had consolidated its power and was looking to build China into a more modern, industrial nation. To do this, they realized, they had "to deal with the question of the intellectuals correctly, in a way that [would] stimulate their activity and enable them to apply their energies more fully to serve our great work of Socialist construction," as Premier Zhou Enlai put it in a groundbreaking speech on the subject in 1956.\textsuperscript{44} To understand what went wrong, we must

\textsuperscript{42} Mao, "Continue to Let Go, Implement the Policy of Letting a Hundred Flowers Bloom and Letting a Hundred Schools Contend" (April 10, 1957), in Leung, \textit{Writings}, 2:481–2.

\textsuperscript{43} Schwartz, "Thoughts on the Late Mao," in MacFarquhar, \textit{Secret Speeches}, 32.

understand the contradictions present in Mao's attitude towards intellectuals, whom he both admired and despised.

Zhou's generous stance toward intellectuals included proposing they be included within the ranks of Marxism's most favored class—workers. He rationalized this by saying that "the overwhelming majority of the intellectuals have become government workers in the service of Socialism and are already part of the working class." To back up this optimistic assessment, Zhou had some equally optimistic statistics that claimed that only ten percent of "higher" intellectuals were opposed to the Communist enterprise.45 This probably influenced Mao's expectations going into the Hundred Flowers, though he was generally less sanguine about intellectuals than Zhou and was reputed to be "deeply suspicious" of them.46 This was due partially to his envy of the challenge they posed to his own intellectual pretensions. However, he also had a different group in mind than Zhou did; Zhou focused on scientists and professionals in his remarks, but to Mao the most important groups were the literary and scholarly establishments. Mao was less concerned with scientists and professionals because their work was not as politically charged:

Art is different from natural science. For example, medical treatments such as appendectomies and taking aspirin do not have a national form. But art is different; art involves a question of national form. This is because art is the expression of the way of life, thought, and feelings of the people and is closely related to the national custom and language.47

As MacFarquhar put it, "as a poet and man of letters he [Mao] continue[d] as in the past to assign an extraordinary weight to literature as a force in human society."48 Mao may have sensed that authors and thinkers had been stifled under Communist rule, and he may have intended the Hundred Flowers to help reinvigorate China's artistic scene. This is something we can guess he would have liked to see—even if some "poisonous weeds" had to be tolerated—both for political reasons (to show that socialism could produce great cultural achievements) and for his own personal enjoyment (he enjoyed reading novels he himself had banned as "reactionary"). Despite his admiration for literature and his own participation in pursuits such as writing traditional poetry, however, Mao became more and more anti-intellectual as he grew older.49

46 Li, Private Life, 198.
47 Mao, "Talk with Music Workers" (August 24, 1956), in Leung, Writings, 2:95.
48 Schwartz, "Thoughts on the Late Mao," in MacFarquhar, Secret Speeches, 26.
49 Lieberthal, Governing China, 70–72.
This anti-intellectual trend in Mao’s thought (and therefore in the party line) came about because politics was uppermost with Mao. The intellectuals were the party’s natural rivals in its claim to possess “scientific” truth. Mao and his fellow revolutionaries, who had fought so hard to get where they were, resented having to take advice from these uncommitted remnants of the old order.50 But he and the party did give them a chance to “reform” themselves and treated them with tolerance until the summer of “blooming and contending” showed that many of them had not really changed. Before this, Mao had been willing to resolve the contradictions surrounding intellectuals in the People’s Republic by allowing them to take on a role in his utopian vision, despite his suspicions. The result of the Hundred Flowers experiment was to turn him “decisively in favor of the peasant cadres instead of their intellectual critics,” a shift with wide-ranging and rapid consequences for China’s economic policies.51

**Contradictions Between Mao and the Party**

Finally, one of the main motivating factors behind Mao’s course during the Hundred Flowers was the growing strain between him and the rest of the CCP. While much of this strain stemmed from the other “contradictions” already discussed, the main sticking point was Mao’s growing power in a party that presumably valued collective leadership. In the wake of “de-Stalinization” in the USSR, awkward questions over Mao’s role in the party were raised. Mao also experienced conflict with the party over the role of intellectuals. Ironically, this was because most party members felt much the same way about intellectuals that Mao did—suspicious and jealous of the threat to their authority. But this clashed with Mao’s temporary willingness to be conciliatory towards them, a la Zhou Enlai.52 This paralleled an even deeper mismatch between Mao and Party that led more directly to rectification: Mao’s philosophy of “contradictions” and “struggle.” Many in the party, including high-ranking officials like Zhou Enlai, simply did not understand Mao’s radical ideas.53 What they did know was that his philosophy was a source of unpredictable challenges to their authority as party cadres, and they resisted it. This foot-dragging attitude was condemned in turn by Mao as “bureaucratism,” and his frustration with it led him to take

50 Schwartz, “Thoughts on the Late Mao,” in MacFarquhar, Secret Speeches, 28.
51 Lieberthal, Governing China, 102.
52 Teiwes, Politics and Purges, 175. See also Schwartz, “Thoughts on the Late Mao,” in MacFarquhar, Secret Speeches, 28.
53 Pantsov, Mao, 429-430, 448.
a more extreme stance for outside criticism. Perhaps he hoped that highly educated people like college professors would be able to understand his Thought in a way that his comrades could not, and help reinforce his authority as the "great theoretician."

One of the side effects of the Soviet system that the CCP had been copying was the creation of a large, centralized bureaucracy. To Mao, the transition the CCP had made from a revolutionary organization to an administrative one had resulted in corruption of their "working style." This "bureaucratism" consisted of a number of problems common to any large government apparatus: out-of-touch and high-handed cadres, corruption, wastefulness, and intolerance towards non-party members. However, in his zeal to fight bureaucratism, Mao often offended his fellow Communists with his proposed solutions, which presented a threat to their positions. Suggestions by Mao that "the party and government organizations be greatly streamlined and [their personnel] cut by two-thirds," or that the party should submit to supervision by other groups stiffened opposition to the Hundred Flowers in its early stages. Other stances Mao took during this period represented an even more direct threat to party control, such as his siding with local cadres against centralized control or siding with the people against corrupt cadres. We can see why CCP members could agree wholeheartedly when Mao said, "ours is a great, glorious, and correct party," but when in the next breath he said, "nevertheless, we still have shortcomings" and urged criticism of bureaucratism, there was little enthusiasm. Even the party propaganda machine became subtly insubordinate. The People's Daily resisted publicizing Mao's speeches and even published opposing views, making Mao furious. As Mao experienced more opposition to his policies, his suspicions of

54 Meisner, Mao's China, 168-9.
55 Mao, "Speech at the Second Plenum of the Eighth Central Committee" (Nov. 15, 1956), in Leung, Writings, 2:171. See also Teiwes, Politics and Purges, 171.
56 Mao, "On the Ten Major Relationships" (April 25, 1956), in Leung, Writings, 2:54-5. See also Meisner, Mao's China, 142-43.
57 Mao, "Talk at Enlarged Meeting of the Political Bureau" (April 1956), in Leung, Writings, 2:69.
58 Mao, "Speech at the Second Plenum of the Eighth Central Committee" (Nov. 15, 1956), in Leung, Writings, 2:169. See also Mao, "Contradictions," in MacFarquhar, Secret Speeches, 174-76.
60 Merle Goldman, "Mao's Obsession with the Political Role of Literature and the Intellectuals," in MacFarquhar, Secret Speeches, 50-52. The prime example of this is Mao's attitude toward the People's Daily: see Mao, "Criticism of Renmin Ribao" (April 1957), in Leung, Writings, 2:515.
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Growing bureaucratism in the party were only confirmed. His response was to push even harder for rectification.

This conflict between Mao and the party led him into some awkward positions in defense of his policy. An example of this was the case of Wang Meng, a young writer who had been encouraged by early Hundred Flowers rhetoric to publish a story critical of CCP bureaucracy. His story was harshly attacked in an editorial in the People's Daily, written by four high-ranking People's Army propaganda officials. These officials tried to discredit the Hundred Flowers policy by making the story into an example of the depths to which revolutionary culture had sunk under the influence of the policy. Mao came to Wang’s rescue with an equally scathing editorial in which he called the propaganda officials “anti-Marxist” and their views “an extreme distortion of reality.” However, in his editorial, Mao attacked only the attackers, and never mentioned Wang’s story itself. That fact that he was uncomfortable with Wang’s story is shown by the confused mix of grudging approval and dangerous-sounding criticism he offered up in a more informal talk later. In the end, Wang became one of the targets of the Anti-Rightist campaign, though he was treated more leniently than most.

This incident was part of a wave of party pushback against Mao’s policies over the winter of 1956–57 that made Mao turn to the idea of party rectification through criticism by intellectuals. Irritated by party opposition to the Hundred Flowers after he had made it his personal project, Mao’s knee-jerk reaction was to defend his policy against all comers, even if that meant protecting things he was actually uncomfortable with. Wang’s story illustrates how the contradictions between Mao and the party led him to promote more “blooming and contending” than he would otherwise have.

**Conclusion**

Mao’s policy decisions throughout the Hundred Flowers period can seem irrational to historians today, and many theories have been advanced to explain his motivations. The best way to understand Mao’s actions, however, is to use his own theory: that of “contradictions.” The Hundred Flowers was not initiated as a reaction to the Hungarian Revolt, “de-Stalinization,” or hidden subversives,
nor did it happen because Mao was a closet libertarian. Rather, he saw contradictions—between his own roles, between himself and China’s non-Communist intellectuals, and between himself and the party bureaucracy—then sought to use his longstanding strategies of “struggle” and “rectification” to combat them and resolve them in the way he wanted.

Of course, one cannot know exactly how Mao expected the Hundred Flowers policy to achieve his aims, but a potential explanation of his reasoning is not hard to see. Perhaps by introducing free discussion and criticism, he hoped to resolve conflicts between his roles by showing that “Marxism-Leninism/Mao Zedong Thought” could stand up to free debate, and thus increase intellectuals’ acceptance of his ideological role. By allowing intellectuals to participate in party matters this way, he might have expected to make them better Maoists and jump-start China’s cultural and technological development, while also combating the threat of bureaucratism within the party. The added incentive this oversight would give the party apparatus, in turn, would help make the bureaucracy more efficient and responsive to party leaders, thus helping Mao achieve his ultimate goal of creating a Chinese socialist utopia.

None of this worked the way Mao expected it to, however. Most of China’s intellectuals had not been and did not want to be converted to Maoism, which moved Mao to the side of the party’s anti-intellectual camp. The fact that he had turned to the intellectuals at all increased distrust between Mao and the party, which drove Mao to push rectification too far, with embarrassing consequences. After the intellectuals had proven unreliable, Mao went through the motions of mending bridges with the party—but began increasingly to not trust anyone but himself to express the will of “the masses.” As one author has noted, “his joining with the ‘people’ against the party in what he perceived as party opposition to his policies began in the Hundred Flowers.”65 The contradictions between Mao and the party were not to be resolved during this period, but the Hundred Flowers was a crucial battle that set the stage for Mao’s wholesale attack on the party during the Cultural Revolution. Realizing that he could not unite everyone behind him, Mao became more unabashedly ideological, relying on only his theories to provide him with the way forward for China—no matter how divorced from reality they became. The Hundred Flowers had not turned out the way he had planned, but he had resolved many of the ideological contradictions at issue in his own mind, determining his policy directions thereafter. This had disastrous consequences as he turned to ever-more radical and ideologically pure solutions to China’s problems, such as the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution.

65 Goldman, “Political Role of Literature,” in MacFarquhar, Secret Speeches, 56.
The way Mao identified and handled contradictions during the Hundred Flowers period was a precursor and portent of things to come.

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