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Classicide in Communist China

Harry Wu

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, China has known only one form of government: the authoritarian communism of Mao Zedong. Although China has undergone 30 years of major social and economic transitions, from a political standpoint, the fundamental system of dictatorship established by Mao Zedong has not changed. Why? Because China's leaders are deeply afraid of falling from power and allowing real freedom, democracy, and human rights to flourish.

The Party of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao is the party of Mao Zedong. We cannot just forget the crimes committed against humanity over the course of its 60-year history. The world rightfully remembers the tragedy of the Holocaust where around 20 million were killed. But many in the West do not realize that genocide has taken place on an even greater scale in the People's Republic of China. Under Mao's reign, it is estimated that 65 million people died of unnatural causes- many of whom were killed because of their class background.

"Genocide," as defined by the United Nations, "involves acts committed with the intent to destroy a national, ethnic, racial or religious group." The methods of genocide are not limited to killing, but also include mental harm and restrictions on people's rights and freedoms. The brutal and widespread "classicide" committed by the Chinese government was indeed genocide.

What is classicide? In order to consolidate his power, Mao Zedong implemented a nation-wide ideology to undermine those who previously held power. According to the Chinese Communist Party's revolutionary theory, society is composed of different classes of people who can be divided into two major groups: the exploiting class and the exploited. The Communist Party sought to exterminate the "exploiting classes," so it launched a political campaign to determine the political and social status of individuals. According to each individual's possession of land, capital, property, and income (as well as the situation of their family members), everyone in the country was designated as a member of the landlord class, the rich peasant class, the middle peasant class, or the poor worker and peasant classes.

The poor classes were praised for their humble way of life and work ethic, and so they willingly supported the Communist Party. Meanwhile, the landowners, the wealthy, the intellectual elite, and the remnants of Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government were demonized and persecuted as "black classes". Not only was their property seized, but they were sent to do the most difficult and dangerous manual labor in the countryside. Some of these people were beaten to death during various political movements, and

many were sent into the Laogai – China’s forced labor prison system.

The Communist Party proclaimed that class struggle was necessary for promoting social development, and said that the violence which ensued was necessary to establish a proletarian socialist state. According to research, in 1949 there were around 10 to 15 million members of the landlord and rich peasant classes nationwide. By the end of the 1970s, when the Cultural Revolution had ended, only 10 to 15 percent of them remained alive.

As for myself, I made some comments in a student political meeting at my university: I criticized the Soviet suppression in Budapest in 1956. I also disagreed with those Communist Party members who treated the common people as second-class citizens. Because of these remarks, I was labeled a “Bourgeois-Counterrevolutionary-Rightist”. In 1960, I was sentenced to life in the Laogai. At the time, I could not believe this injustice, but afterwards I realized that there were other reasons I had become a target. My father was a banker who was already considered a counter-revolutionary due to his capitalist ways and contact with people overseas. The children of “rightists” were often deemed to be “historical counter-revolutionaries”, and so they also suffered a similar fate.

From the 1950s to the 1970s, nationwide, an individual’s class background was greatly emphasized in terms of the distribution of work, promotion in employment, and acceptance into schools, the Communist Party, and other organizations; many were sent to the Laogai prisons to work. In addition to my father’s bad reputation, being baptized Catholic was another strike against me. At a time when all religion was frowned upon, Christianity in particular was viewed as an invasion of imperialist Western ideas.

Mao Zedong had stipulated that 5% of intellectuals must be “rightists,” so at least two people in our class had to wear this label. Only two others among the 30 students had a negative class background like mine. The “rightist” label was also given to a classmate from Shanxi Province who came from a landlord family. But even those from the targeted classes who managed to avoid persecution during the Anti-Rightist Campaign were not able to escape the Cultural Revolution unscathed.

All throughout the Cultural Revolution, elimination of the targeted classes continued. Under Mao Zedong’s direction, the Red Guards – made up of Chinese youth who held the “Revolutionary Quotations of Mao Zedong” in hand – incited violence and social chaos. On August 18, 1966 in Beijing, Mao Zedong directly called on the Red Guards to “make revolution.” Beginning in schools, the Red Guards soon took to the streets to annihilate “class enemies” and the exploiting classes.

From August 18 to the end of September, 1966, 1,714 of the “five black elements” were beaten to death, but there are no statistics for how many were killed or injured, how many had their homes searched and their property confiscated, and how many were sent off to the Laogai. This kind of annihilation was carried out throughout the country.

Only in the 1980s did the Chinese Communist Party make new policies removing the “Hats”, or labels, of “landlord” or “rich peasant” or “rightist” from the survivors of these groups. But this came too late; nearly all members of the landlord and rich peasant classes in the countryside had been exterminated during the preceding 30 years. As of today, no one has been put on trial for these atrocities.

Tyrannical governments all need a system of suppression to maintain power. Hitler had the concentration camps, and Stalin had the Gulag. Similarly, since the dawn of the People’s Republic of China, Chinese authorities have never hesitated to use forced labor prison camps in their efforts to maintain political control. In China, they are called the “Laogai”. Literally, the word means “reform through labor,” but it has come to stand for the regime’s vast system of politically-imposed slavery. Laogai forced labor prisons were a major tool used to eliminate political opposition, and the system continues to thrive today.

Communist Party leaders demand that the Laogai must produce two kinds of “products”: the first includes agricultural, industrial, and consumer products needed to fuel the nation’s economy. The second is the man himself - the “reformed socialist person.” The extermination of thought is possibly the greatest invention of the Chinese Communist Party. “Thought reform”, as CCP officials say, is: “The use of forced labor to reform the thinking of criminals and transform them into self-dependent, socialist new men.” This is brainwashing! The CCP wants all prisoners, from thieves and murderers to political and religious “criminals”, to abandon their political or religious beliefs, reform their incorrect social views, and live life according to the tenets of Communist rule. They must learn to support the Party while in prison, or else they will not gain release. Should they dare to voice any public criticisms of the government, they could find themselves locked in prison again.

Many Western academics choose to ignore the significance of the Laogai, even though it has existed for more than 60 years. The Laogai Research Foundation estimates that since 1949, almost 50 million people have been thrown into the Laogai. However, all information related to the Laogai is treated as a state secret, and so no one can know the real number. Ignoring the Laogai will have devastating effects. Just as China’s economy is now booming, Germany’s economy expanded by 73 percent from 1933 to 1937, and

most Germans agreed with Hitler's policies. Meanwhile, foreign businessmen cooperated with German companies. No nation saw any reason to boycott the 1936 Olympic Game in Berlin. Not until 1939, when Germany invaded Poland, did the world realize Hitler's intent. Only when people were liberated from the concentration camps did the world begin to fully understand the scale of this atrocity.

Thankfully, we have witnessed the end of the Hitler and Stalin regimes, but in China, the world's most extensive system of forced labor camps persists. We cannot condemn the atrocities committed in the camps of Hitler and Stalin but ignore the continuing brutality of the Laogai. The U.S. never dreamed of doing business with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, especially in the fields of science and technology. Yet business with China is ever-increasing, even as the rising global power becomes a major security threat to the U.S. and other democratic nations.

Capitalism is growing widely and rapidly in China today. In 1978, Deng Xiaoping put aside communist economic ideology in favor of capitalism. But this was not to be Western capitalism as we know it; it is capitalism under the limitations of a one-party state. Yet this totalitarian "communist" regime is not bad for business, because the government controls the land and the market. Meanwhile, cooperation with foreign companies is at an all-time high and the economy's growth rate is holding strong. However, the leadership in Beijing is not only using this money to strengthen its control over the Chinese people: it is also giving China unmatched bargaining power in its foreign relations.

By now, we know that capitalism does not automatically bring about democracy and freedom. Today in China, those with wealth are largely those with political power. And conveniently, the flag of class struggle is no longer raised. Having eliminated a large portion of the nation's intellectuals and capitalists, Communist Party members and their offspring have filled the void created by decades of slaughter. Of course, what is ironic is that the new China is built upon the idea which Mao Zedong hated. Class divisions in Chinese society have become increasingly apparent. The working class, held up on such a high pedestal throughout Mao's reign, is in fact struggling to get by as Chinese government officials get rich from corrupt business deals.

China's future leader Xi Jinping will not change the existing political system. Did we ever hear Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin or Hu Jintao publicly condemn Mao Zedong, who died back in 1976? No, because China is not a "former" communist country. Modern China remains under the firm control of the Chinese Communist Party. Its core ideology is incompatible with freedom and democracy. We can see from the suppression of contemporary democracy and human rights activists, and from the recent tide of Tibetan self-immolations, that there has been no improvement of freedom of expression, assembly, or religion. The situation is getting worse.

The People's Republic of China is now facing an enormous political, ideological, social and economic crisis. At this critical moment, the people of the world, and particularly the Chinese people, must realize that if China wants to become a free, democratic and prosperous nation, it must have a clear picture of its own dark history, so that it will not repeat the violence of the past. Only then can the Chinese people know what must be rebuilt; only then can they know how to move forward.