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Discussion between Zhou Enlai, Chen Yi, Pham Van Dong and Vo Nguyen Giap

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Summary:

Zhou Enlai discusses the class struggle present in China.

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ZHOU ENLAI, CHEN YI AND PHAM VAN DONG, VO NGUYEN GIAP

Beijing, 12 April 1967

Zhou Enlai: ...In the past ten years, we were conducting another war, a bloodless one: a class struggle. But, it is a matter of fact that among our generals, there are some, [although] not all, who knew very well how to conduct a bloody war, [but] now don't know how to conduct a bloodless one. They even look down on the masses. The other day while we were on board the plane, I told you that our cultural revolution this time was aimed at overthrowing a group of ruling people in the party who wanted to follow the capitalist path. It was also aimed at destroying the old forces, the old culture, the old ideology, the old customs that were not suitable to the socialist revolution.

In one of his speeches last year, Comrade Lin Biao said: In the process of socialist revolution, we have to destroy the "private ownership" of the bourgeoisie, and to construct the "public ownership" of the proletariat.

So, for the introduction of the "public ownership" system, who do you rely on? Based on the experience in the 17 years after liberation, Comrade Mao Zedong holds that after seizing power, the proletariat should eliminate the "private ownership" of the bourgeoisie. But the process will be left unfinished if it relies on the "from the top down" mode of leadership.

As I have told you, in our society, "private ownership" still exists. It is due not only to the influence of the international bourgeois ideology, but also to the fact that inside the country there are remnants of the bourgeoisie, of feudalism, and newly emerging capitalists, speculators, embezzlers...An even greater factor is that in the countryside, there are a great number of peasants who belong to the petit-bourgeois class. They are petit-bourgeois not only in their thinking but also in their actions. And still there exists private ownership, privately owned land, free market, free business. Therefore capitalism can recur at any moment. Moreover, in China the remnants and influence of thousands of years of feudalism and of capitalism are everywhere. As Comrade Mao said, if the broom is not good, the dust is not swept out, and even if it is swept out, there will be new dust. All the above-mentioned factors are fertile ground for the restoration of capitalism and the appearance of revisionism. In the past 17 years, we have been struggling against the "three anti-elements," and now there are three new anti-elements. We have reeducated the capitalists, but now within our party, there are new capitalists. We have criticized the rightists, but now there are new rightists in our party. The ruling circles in the party who followed the capitalist path have been dethroned. Now there are new elements in the ruling circles again following the capitalist path.

We planned to visit Sashi. But because the weather is bad, we had to cancel the visit.

Now, it will also be good if you can visit Dazhai. During the Cultural Revolution, Comrade Chen Yonggui^[1] firmly stood on his position because he always respected "public ownership." It is one of Dazhai's characteristics. Dazhai is not developed in terms of technologies. Yet, political activities come into play. The production team led by Comrade Chen Yonggui for the last 14 years borrowed money from the state just once, in 1953. But it paid the loan back the very next year. It did not ask for disaster relief aid from the state even though it was seriously affected by natural calamities. This production team consists of no more than 400 people. The natural conditions are not good there. But every year, it contributes between 100 and 150 tons of food to the State. If this example is multiplied nationwide, the state annually will have about 4 billion tons of food.

The most telling characteristic of Dazhai is that it has destroyed the notion of individualism, [and] upheld communalism according to the thoughts of Mao Zedong. This serves as an example. Comrade Mao asked me whether it was true. I answered yes. Later Comrade Mao visited Dazhai and acknowledged what Dazhai had done.

In such a production unit as Dazhai, consisting of between 300 and 1000 workers, the problems of private and public ownership still exists and poses complicated problems.

So you can imagine the scope of the problem nation-wide where there are between 800,000 and 900,000 production units. There are about 200 households in each production unit, and about 160 million households across the country. There are also a large number of factories in the cities. So, without a mass movement in which the

people take part, there is no way to identify who is receptive to the capitalist path, who is a capitalist agent.

On which forces do we have to rely in order to mobilize the peasants and workers? If we rely on members of the Party and the Youth League, they will use mechanisms of a hierarchical nature. And by so doing, the officials can cover each other's wrongdoings, thus leaving all the objectives half-achieved.

Chen Yi: And if these bad officials cannot be uncovered and overthrown, they will form a new clique of bad people.

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Zhou Enlai: So we solve the problem by mobilizing students and youngsters. They are eager and more receptive to the thoughts of Mao Zedong. On 1 June 1966, Comrade Mao released his article in Beijing University's Big Character Newspaper, thus mobilizing students and youngsters across the country. This initiative by Comrade Mao was approved by the Central Committee. But Comrades Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping still maintained the old way of doing things. They sent work units down to the provinces. What were the results? At the places where the leaderships were dismissed by the people, the work units took control of everything, without knowing who were good, who were bad among the dismissed officials. Moreover, the work units repeated the same old way of doing things, i.e., refusing to rely on the people. The latter disagreed, [but were] oppressed by the former, who said that opposition to them was opposition to the Central Committee and Chairman Mao. Thus fiercer opposition mounted. The situation, therefore, was that the masses—echoing Chairman Mao's appeal—stood up, but at the same time, the new leadership—replacing the Party's line—oppressed them. At the central level, Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping were in charge. They are repressive to the masses, dividing them into three categories: Left, Center, and Right. Anyone critical of the work units belonged to the Right category, i.e, reactionary, thus being subject to physical harassment, even imprisonment. After less than two weeks of applying the work units' methods, there appeared nationwide a counter-movement to what Comrade Mao initially proposed. During June and July, for less than 50 days, there was repression in all universities and schools against those who had criticized the leadership. This situation verified what Chairman Mao had said some years before: mistakes by someone at the Central level could become mistakes nation-wide because of the hierarchical mechanism that allowed blind obedience. This also helps explain why Khrushchev could seize power in the Soviet Union.

When Comrade Mao learned of the situation, he immediately returned to Beijing. And after investigations showed clearly what was going on, he was determined to withdraw the work units and launch a bottom-up cultural revolution with a view to letting the masses liberate themselves. He convened the 11th Plenum with the participation of all heads of Provincial Party Committees. This Plenum criticized Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping for their mistakes. In connection with the Plenum, Comrade Mao released another big-character article, and Comrade Chen Boda[2] read a report and the Standing Committee of the Politburo was extended. No other measures were taken. The 16-point decision and a statement of the Plenum then were released.

On 18 August 1966 Comrade Mao received representatives of the Red Guards. Following these events, the Red Guard movement developed across the country, first in schools and universities, then spread to the whole society.

At that time, leadership at all levels was passive. Most of the Secretaries of Party Committees in all 28 provinces and cities used to take part in revolutions and wars. They used to rely on the people. But after peace was restored, after they came to power, they were afraid of the people.

Chen Yi: When the people criticize them, they oppress the people.

Zhou Enlai: When power was not gained, they relied on the people. But when they came to power, they privatized it and were afraid of being criticized, of losing power. During August and September, Party Committees at all provincial and municipal levels were attacked by the Red Guards. The General Secretaries at these levels were, to various extents, very much afraid.

Wei Guoqing:[3] All of them were afraid.

Zhou Enlai: This showed that they found it easy to revolutionize others' lives, but hard to avoid privatization of their own privileges.

In October 1966, another Central Committee meeting was convened. The question now was clear as far as theoretical matters were concerned. The previous Plenary meeting only mentioned a struggle between two lines. But at this meeting, the two lines were defined as the revolutionary and proletarian line on the one hand and the capitalist and reactionary line on the other.

During the national liberation revolution, different lines, whether bourgeois or proletarian, could still have imperialists as common enemies. But at present, in the socialist revolution, different lines, in the absence of a common enemy, naturally become antagonistic.

The Red Guards find it easy to absorb the thoughts of Mao Zedong and the revolutionary-proletarian line, so they criticize the reactionary-capitalist lines. In the meantime, a small group of leaders at the provincial and ministerial levels organized their own forces to defend themselves. These units are para-military units among the workers and conservative groups among the students. Comrade Mao has mentioned them. These leaders resort to materialism, buying other people with money and at the same time creating economic difficulties, opposing strongly the revolutionary-proletarian lines. The Red Guards are vehemently defending the correct lines, introducing their movement to the whole society, especially to government offices and to the countryside and they win the support of the people. As Comrade Mao has mentioned, the revolutionary forces in Shanghai developed from 2000 [people] into a million. They then moved into the second phase: seizing power. The deeper the movement went, the more the capitalistic leaders were isolated.

Since the beginning of this year, the struggle's objective is seizing power by combining the forces of the revolutionary people, the revolutionary cadres, and representatives of the armed forces. They denounce any relationship with capitalist leaders, form Revolutionary Committees—provisional governments—in government offices and factories. The countryside is busy with agricultural production, so seizing power has not yet started. Comrade Mao, other comrades, and I believe that the Great Cultural Revolution first of all has to rely on the masses because after 17 years of socialist construction, they have been educated, their level of knowledge has been raised, and the absolute majority of them accept the path of socialism. At the same time, we believe that the [People's] Liberation Army will support us, defend the socialist system and the Revolution since they are the children of the people and they are educated by the thoughts of Mao Zedong. We also believe that the majority of our cadres are relatively good. In the end, we will be able to unite more than 95 percent of our cadres and people.

Of course, it takes time to destroy "individualism" and establish "communalism" and produce great unity. This also has to be done over and over again and smooth sailing is not assured. That is why Comrade Mao predicted that the main trends of the movement would be clear between February and May this year and results of the movement will be seen between February and April next year.

First of all, we have to understand that once the masses are educated and enlightened, once they are equipped with the thoughts of Mao Zedong, their strength is limitless. Last year alone, the production outputs were very high, surpassing the standard quotas, especially in industry, agriculture and transportation. The activities of this year focus on seizing power and the situation will be more complicated. On the one hand, factionalism can be seen in mass organizations, thus making it more difficult to achieve great unity. And on the other hand, revolutionary cadres, who denounced the capitalistic line and stand on the side of the people, now want to return to their previous posts. We cannot restore their positions, because if we do so, we will in effect restore the old system. We therefore have to fight both tendencies.

Vo Nguyen Giap: What are these two tendencies?

Li Fuxian: One is total confirmation and the other is total denial.

Zhou Enlai: One tendency among the masses is advocating total denial. They hold that everything attached to the old system should be destroyed. And another tendency among the cadres is advocating total confirmation, total restoration, and total coalition.

There is another important issue, namely the role of the armed forces. The armed forces have to help the people both in production and revolution, helping them to seize power. In addition to that, the armed forces have to provide military training in schools, offices, and factories. The tasks of the armed forces, therefore, are heavy. There have been several meetings of the armed forces, and some are taking place now, to discuss those tasks.

We see many big difficulties. However, we also believe that these difficulties can be overcome by mobilizing the people. The focus of the work of mobilization is propagandizing the difference between the two lines, namely the revolutionary-proletarian one and the reactionary-capitalistic one. In order to propagandize we have to set examples.

Since our talk with President Ho in Hangzhou in May and June last year [1966] and especially after the 11th Party Central Committee Plenum in August last year, the situation has changed much with great developments. The movement has grown in depth, the masses have been mobilized, several examples have been studied, and the nature of the issues has been addressed. We have brought the Liu Shaoqi-Deng Xiaoping case, especially the records of Liu Shaoqi's mistakes in the past, to public attention. Over the past 20 years, Liu's thoughts have turned reactionary. The works that he wrote, the documents that he initiated, all show that he opposed the Party's lines and opposed the thoughts of Mao Zedong. I have told you some of these on the plane. Liu also committed mistakes in international relations. In reality, he was conducting a big-country, big-party policy, even though he was verbally feigning opposition to this policy. You may have felt and detected this mistake during his visit to Vietnam in 1963. Under the leadership of Liu, Peng Zhen and Deng Xiaoping also have this behavior, and they do not respect equality among the fraternal parties. We have not found out all of their specific mistakes. But the mistakes by Liu are clear now. He was practicing chauvinism in the relations with the fraternal parties and defeatism in relations with Sukarno. Examples of the mistakes of this kind are many.

The question then is: will these mistakes affect our party's prestige and leadership? Our answer is no. Detecting the mistakes and getting rid of them will make the party healthier. And we see even more clearly that the people represent a creative force.

We want to tell you another problem we are now facing. Before coming into power, our party was operating in various settings and party members were recruited from different sources. It was therefore difficult to detect some traitors inside the party. After the victory, under the leadership of Liu and Deng, party organizational bodies shied away from screening our cadres. Now, when the Red Guards have been mobilized, many documents have been found, involving many cadres' past behavior. A number of leaders have to be replaced because of their past wrongdoings.

Another question is posed: will examinations of the past obstruct the party's development? Our answer is no, provided the party has a correct policy to mobilize the people. As you have known, once the people take part in the people's war, revolution will proceed, sweeping away remnants of the old system, preventing revisionism from coming into being and capitalism from being restored. The history of the CCP has shown this. That previous CCP leaders were corrupted did not prevent the Chinese Revolution from succeeding. The founder of the CCP—Chen Duxiu[4]—later became a Trotskyist and a traitor. Then Qu Qiubai[5] defected from the party when he was arrested and imprisoned in Jiangxi. Xiang Zhongfa[6] and Li Lisan[7] also committed wrongdoings: the former betrayed the party but was killed by the enemy in the end, and the latter is still holding an incorrect point of view. Wang Ming [8] is the worst. He is now residing in Moscow and used by the Soviets to attack China. Before his defection, Wang Ming wrote articles against the CCP under a pseudonym. Zhang Wentian[9] is also a case in point: after the Zunyi Conference [15-18 January 1935], Comrade Mao should have been elected to the post of CCP Chairman. But as a modest person, Comrade Mao proposed Zhang to the chairmanship. Zhang held the post for 10 years until the 7th Congress which elected Comrade Mao to the post. In 1959, Zhang participated in the group against the Party that included Peng Dehuai and Huang Kecheng.[10] For 32 years out of the 45-year history of the CCP—i.e., before the Zunyi conference—the CCP was led by corrupted leaders. The Chinese Revolution, however, did succeed. The situation has been different under the leadership of Comrade Mao Zedong and Comrade Lin Biao as

successor.

In a broader context, the international Communist movement since Marx, Engels, and Lenin has also been led by corrupted leaders. This fact, however, did not prevent the revolutionary parties from progressing. The decisive factor, therefore, is the correct policy of each party, as shown in your people's warfare. Our socialist revolution, which is conducted in the absence of bloodshed, has also proved this.

[1] Chen Yonggui was a peasant from Dazhai, a poor and barren mountainous village in Shanxi province. In the 1960s, Dazhai and Chen Yonggui became the model of China's socialist revolution in the countryside. Chen would later become a CCP Politburo member and vice premier of the PRC.

[2] Chen Boda was head of the "Cultural Revolution Group," and a member of the CCP Politburo Standing Committee.

[3] Wei Guoqing was then head of the Revolutionary Committee of China's Guangxi province bordering Vietnam. In the early 1950s, he headed the Chinese military advisory group to Vietnam.

[4] Chen Duxiu was one of the founders of the CCP, but was later expelled from the party because of his "rightist mistakes."

[5] Qu Qiubai was a CCP leader of the late 1920s who committed "leftist mistakes."

[6] Xiang Zhongfa was elected the CCP's general secretary in 1928 largely because of his worker's background. He was later arrested and executed by the Guomindang.

[7] Li Lisan was a CCP leader who committed "leftist mistakes" in the early 1930s.

[8] Wang Ming (also known as Chen Shaoyu) was a CCP leader who controlled the Party leadership after returning from Moscow early in the 1930s, and who had committed, according to official CCP history, both "leftist" and "rightist" mistakes.

[9] Zhang Wentian was a veteran CCP leader who was purged together with Peng Dehuai in 1959.

[10] Huang Kecheng was chief of staff of the PLA and deputy defense minister of the PRC before his purge, together with Peng Dehuai, in 1959.