
WHO WILL COMPENSATE VICTIMS OF THE ANTI-RIGHTIST CAMPAIGN?

By Shao Yangxiang

A renowned poet reviews the origin and development of the Anti-Rightist Campaign and argues that as the inheritor of Mao Zedong's regime, the Chinese Communist government owes a historical debt to the campaign's victims.

On the fortieth anniversary of the October Revolution in 1957, Hu Yaobang called on China's youth to advance the cause of socialism. Young people across the nation danced for joy.

No one could have imagined that in that same year,¹ Mao Zedong was switching his political strategy from inner-party rectification to an "anti-rightist" purge of great numbers of prominent people from the worlds of politics, culture, education, industry and commerce, and the sentencing of countless intellectuals, young students and ordinary people who had no interest in politics to "supervised labor," "Reeducation-Through-Labor" and even prison terms. More than 500,000 people were forced to "wear a (political) cap" (*dai maozi*) and millions of their relatives were dragged down with them. The government called this campaign, which it hailed as a great success, a "socialist revolution on the political and ideological fronts."

The background of the Anti-Rightist Campaign

In the fall of 1947, at the height of the Chinese Civil War, Mao telegraphed Stalin, "When the Chinese revolution is finally victorious, all political parties but the Chinese Communist Party will have to leave the political arena." Although Stalin immediately challenged Mao's claim,² within a decade Mao had launched the Anti-Rightist Campaign and achieved his aim of taming the "democratic parties."³

As far as most intellectuals were concerned, the Anti-Rightist Campaign was neither sudden nor unexpected. Since 1949, the Party had consistently enforced thought

reform, insisting that intellectuals were inherently guilty of all manner of offences by virtue of their class background, occupational status, educational and professional record, party affiliation and social connections. The regime was not looking for people of talent to serve the country, but rather for slaves to serve the Party and Mao Zedong. Anyone who proved unwilling to be a slave, no matter how worthy or talented, could not be employed, or at least could not be employed in any important capacity, and was cut down at the earliest opportunity.

After Stalin's death in 1953, Mao greatly stepped up the pace of "revolution." Reneging on his earlier promise that there would be a long "New Democracy" stage, at the beginning of 1956, he announced the successful completion of the socialist transformation of agriculture, handicrafts and capitalist industry and commerce. Mao believed that only one capitalist bastion remained to be conquered by the socialist revolution: the spheres of politics, culture and thought, which were infested with bourgeois intellectuals. He suspected that a small number of "higher intellectuals"⁴ and large numbers of "ordinary intellectuals" and young students constituted a hostile force that could instigate trouble like the Polish and Hungarian uprisings of 1956, and therefore concluded that they posed a threat to his political power.

To nip the evil in the bud, Mao issued a public call to "Let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools of thought contend!" This slogan was designed to mislead intellectuals into thinking that they were being called upon to "help the Party rectify its work style."⁵ Mao planned to kill three birds with one stone: First, the criticism would discipline grassroots Party cadres; second, if criticism was directed at the higher levels and even the top levels of the Party, Mao could use it to purge fellow leaders; third, by encouraging the masses to "speak out freely," Mao hoped that hidden troublemakers would come out into the open and instigate separate "small Hungarian incidents" in work units across the country, which could then be crushed one by one.

Mao's main focus was on the third of these, because he wanted to score a big victory in his preventive war against counterrevolutionaries. His unaccomplished goal of bombarding the "bourgeois headquarters" (within the Party) had to wait nine years until the beginning of the Cultural Revolution.⁶

The mass campaign against intellectuals

During the Hundred Flowers period, Mao used a tactic that had proved effective for him in the past: he lured out his enemies. For example, during the Rectification Campaign and the examination of cadres' personal histories in Yan'an in the 1940s, Mao had created an atmosphere of terror that enabled him to encircle and strike down his quarry. The same tactic had proved successful again in 1955, during the persecution of Hu Feng and the campaign to "weed out counterrevolutionaries."⁷ But during the 1957 Anti-Rightist Campaign, "rightists" were arrested on an unprecedented scale up and down the country, from the People's Congress and Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference to local primary schools in remote areas. The principle of "Party rule of

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the nation“ dictated that anyone who expressed any disagreement with a Party organization or Party cadre was an opponent of the Communist Party.

During the height of the Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1957, the whole Party and nation became theoretically and practically engaged in the collective persecution of intellectuals. Only a year earlier, Zhou Enlai had delivered a report recommending better treatment for intellectuals, particularly for “higher intellectuals.”⁸ But when Mao criticized this report in 1957 for being “rightist,” Zhou Enlai and other farsighted policymakers were unable to defy his will, and the whole Party took part in the ruthless persecution of intellectuals. Any intellectual branded a rightist (literally “made to wear a cap,” *dai maozi*) was subjected to personal surveillance and psychological intimidation. The Party also issued new regulations formalizing the “Reeducation-Through-Labor” system, which treated its victims like common criminals and required them to perform forced labor.⁹ Countless families were broken and lives lost as a result.

Mao Zedong then decided to apply the grand tactics that had proven so successful for him during the Anti-Rightist Campaign to the field of economics. He launched the Great Leap Forward, a movement that forced millions of farmers to neglect their crops to make iron and steel in backyard furnaces and organized them into “people’s communes,” with the result that 25-30 million people starved to death. At the “7,000 Cadres Conference” in early 1962, Mao once again beat the drums of class struggle, foreshadowing the launch of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, about which there is no need to go into detail here.

Rehabilitation but no apology or admission of guilt

Around the time of the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Party Congress in December of 1978, a major campaign was launched to “redress unjust and erroneous cases” (*pingfan yuanjia cuo'an*) from past political campaigns. The Party intended to signal that now that the Cultural Revolution was over, it recognized that it had made mistakes and sought to win back the people’s trust through reconciliation. Although the real reasons for the campaign had much more to do with the Party’s need to reestablish its legitimacy to govern, many cadres who had lived through the disaster of the Cultural Revolution did engage in reexamination and soul-searching and transcended their narrow self-interests to seek the truth and recover the facts of history.¹⁰ Hu Yaobang was one of these leaders. He was representative of the generation of Party members who had come to realize that neither history nor the people could be cheated.

I was a relative latecomer, and my awareness was also late in coming. In an article I wrote in 1982, I asked, “As a member who joined the Communist Party before 1957, shouldn’t I assume some measure of responsibility for the leftist disaster that caused the whole socialist undertaking such profound harm and pain?”

When my article was published, some people came right out and told me, “Who asked you to assume this responsibility? Are you able to assume it? Who appointed you? Whose responsibility are you assuming?”

It felt as if someone had thrown a bucket of cold water on me. But I never heard anyone say who was supposed to assume historical responsibility. All I heard was that opposing rightists had been necessary. Platitudes became ever more frequent, and the Cultural Revolution gradually became a taboo subject that was never discussed openly. After Yang Xianyi's wife Gladys Yang died, his sister, Professor Yang Minru, spoke of Gladys Yang's imprisonment during the Cultural Revolution and the pain of losing her son:¹¹ "On behalf of my country, I want to say 'Sorry' to you!" Reading this, I could not help shed an old man's tear.

Yet was Yang Minru the right person to make this apology? Although I, too, had been attacked during the Anti-Rightist Campaign and the Cultural Revolution, compared to many, I could count myself fortunate. Unlike many who were killed, I came out of it alive, and unlike many whose families were destroyed, I still had family on whom I could depend. Was I qualified to apologize on behalf of the Communist Party to the innocents who had lost their lives? All I could really do was quietly examine my conscience in the still of the night. What is an individual's remorse weighed against the lack of historic repentance from a group that wielded the power of life and death in the name of millions upon millions?

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Apology and reparations in Taiwan; none in China

It was recently reported that a rich man who was sentenced to death by a Beijing court for hiring a killer had been executed. After the execution, a creditor of the rich man sued the man's wife and children for repayment of a debt of several million *yuan*. The court ruled that as the inheritors of the debt, the wife and children had to pay it back.

After the February 28 Incident in 1947, the Nationalist, or Kuomintang (KMT), government owed a debt of blood to the people of Taiwan.¹² Half a century later, the Taiwan authorities rehabilitated the innocent victims of the incident and set up a reparations fund for them. Ma Ying-Jeou, a leader of the KMT, which is now the opposition party, also extended condolences and apologies to the victims. The Taiwan authorities thereby showed that they had made a wise choice in supporting the values that are most consistent with the spirit of the age and trend of history: freedom, democracy, the rule of law and human rights.

So much for the situation on the Taiwan side of the strait. On this side of the strait, from 1949 to 1976, the Mao regime also incurred a debt with the people of a size and duration that cannot be ignored. Acting as one of his right-hand men, Liu Shaoqi built up Mao's individual power and promoted his ultra-leftist line. But by the beginning of 1962, in the face of a famine that cost tens of millions of lives and was "three parts natural disaster and seven parts man-made disaster," Liu and his colleagues began to fear the censure of history.¹³ Liu told Mao: "If you starve people to death, it will make the history books."¹⁴ But Mao behaved as if nothing had happened, and Liu Shaoqi fell into disfavor because of this run-in.

When Mao looked back on his life, he said that personally launching the Cultural Revolution was one of his immortal contributions, along with his seizure of national power. Most of the speeches and essays Mao wrote immediately before, during and after the Anti-Rightist Campaign were included in the five volumes of his *Collected Works* and became part of the canon of Mao Zedong Thought. Deng Xiaoping's speeches that had a bearing on the Anti-Rightist Campaign also became part of Deng Xiaoping Theory.

Mao's legacy of no apology, no regret

Mao Zedong Thought and Deng Xiaoping Theory are the guiding ideological foundation of the CCP's third and fourth generation leadership. Therefore, after the Party proclaimed a "thorough repudiation of the Cultural Revolution," "concealing the truth on behalf of the high in rank" (*wei zunzhe hui*)¹⁵ became the order of the day, and the history of the Anti-Rightist Campaign and the Cultural Revolution became a sensitive matter that was not to be brought up again. Repeated prohibitions were issued to news publishers. Even the question, "If Lu Xun were alive today," which was raised in academic circles, was ruled off-limits by the authorities on the grounds that it sowed discord between the Party and intellectuals. Ba Jin's essay proposing that a Cultural Revolution museum be established was redacted and censored.¹⁶ Clearly, the Party has found it difficult to break the old Maoist practice of controlling public opinion, concealing the truth and distorting history.

In other words, the historical legacy of the past, manifested in both thought and deed, continues to exert an insidious influence to this day. It is inescapably apparent that after the system was established by the leaders of the first and second generation, it continued to run by inertia and to exert a pervasive influence on people's thoughts, feelings and daily life.

For example, Mao Zedong considered the legalist statesmen Shen Buhai and Han Fei¹⁷ his teachers, modeled himself on successive Chinese emperors and acknowledged that he was a student of Lenin and Stalin. He not only wanted to set up a dictatorship of the proletariat, but also arrogated all power and authority to himself. He personally added the slogan "Long Live Mao Zedong" to the May 1 celebrations in 1950, and was pleased to hear Hu Qiaomu extol the Party as "great, glorious and correct,"¹⁸ because an encomium to the Party was an encomium to himself.

Mao was a law unto himself, did not let others speak their minds, would not brook criticism and never admitted a mistake. Consequently, he made new mistakes to cover up old ones, and used other people as scapegoats, even when they had not criticized him. On top of the old debts he had incurred toward the people, he ran up new debts, but he never felt he owed them anything, even when famine left the country littered with corpses and the whole nation was deprived of all means of livelihood. Even then he maintained that he was the representative of the revolution and the embodiment of truth, and that the whole people ought to prostrate themselves in worship to him.

The CCP must not ignore demands for reparation

This year is the 50th anniversary of the Anti-Rightist Campaign, and many Anti-Rightist Campaign victims have demanded reparations. The letters they have sent to Party committees and government agencies at all levels have gone unanswered. For the most part, the victims are asking for wages that were withheld during the Anti-Rightist Campaign and the Cultural Revolution to be paid, and the woefully inadequate pension benefits that have been disbursed since they were rehabilitated to be supplemented. Numerous urgent cases are crying out for resolution. Why is no one paying attention? The question of reparations may appear to be economic, but it is actually political. Financial reparations are certainly needed, but political reparations even more so. Moreover, the political debts incurred during and after the Maoist period are not limited to the Anti-Rightist Campaign. They are too many to enumerate.

The problem right now is not that the government cannot afford to pay reparations, but that it does not know how to confront the negative aspects of history to avoid repeating them. Therefore, before problems arising from the historical legacy can be resolved in a realistic and responsible way, a clear consensus has to be reached on the urgent need for political reform. In the 1970s and 1980s, it was no easy matter to set in motion a reevaluation of history, the debate on the “criterion of truth”¹⁹ and the “redress of unjust and erroneous cases.” This process was tragically interrupted. Today, it needs to be restarted, but this is still no easy undertaking. Given that the victims of past political campaigns are inexorably aging, will they and other witnesses to the events gradually disappear and thus end the matter once and for all?

If the lessons of history fail to be applied both in theory and practice to political reform, old debts will never be settled and new ones are likely to be added to them. A quarter century has elapsed since 1980, when Deng Xiaoping promised political reform.²⁰ Time and again, opportunities have been missed and action delayed. And now time is running out.

Translated by Paul Frank

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Translator’s notes

1. The broad crackdown of the Anti-Rightist Campaign began in June 1957.
2. Stalin telegraphed Mao in April 1948: “We do not agree with this. We believe that several political opposition parties that represent the middle classes of the Chinese population and oppose the Kuomintang clique will continue to exist for a long time and the CCP will be forced to involve them in the fight against the Chinese reaction and the imperialist powers once it has achieved hegemony, by which we mean the leading opposition.” Quoted in Dieter Heinzig, *The Soviet Union and Communist China 1945-1950: The Arduous Road to the Alliance* (M.E. Sharpe, 2003), pp. 140–41.
3. In May 1948, eight “democratic parties” responded to the CCP’s call to hold the Chinese Peo-

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- ple's Political Consultative Conference that established the PRC in September 1949. In theory, the CCP still promises to consult with the "democratic parties" and accept supervision from them, but in reality these parties always do the CCP's bidding. See Gerry Groot, *Managing Transitions: The CCP, United Front Work, Corporatism and Hegemony* (Taylor & Francis, 2004).
4. In the Chinese Communist context, "higher intellectuals" (*gaoji zhishifenzi*) refers to writers, artists, academics, scientists, engineers and other professionals. "Ordinary intellectuals" (*yiban zhishifenzi*) refers to people with a middle or high school education. See Mao's resolution entitled "Recruit Large Numbers of Intellectuals" of December 1, 1939, in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, vol. 2 (Foreign Languages Press, 1967–77), pp. 301–303.
 5. Mao recalled that the formula of a hundred schools of thought contending dated from the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (c. 770–221 BC), when there were a hundred schools of leading philosophers with many different doctrines, all freely engaging in debate. Stuart Schram, *The Thought of Mao Tse-tung* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 120.
 6. In August of 1966, Mao attacked Liu Shaoqi as "China's Khrushchev" in an article entitled "Bombard the Headquarters: My First Big-Character Poster." At the Twelfth Plenum of the Eighth Central Committee in October 1968, he declared that the Cultural Revolution was necessary for the consolidation of the proletarian dictatorship and the destruction of the 'bourgeois headquarters represented by Liu Shaoqi and his local agents, who dreamt of usurping power in the Party, administrative and military spheres.'" See Michael Schoenhals, *China's Cultural Revolution, 1966–1969: Not a Dinner Party* (M. E. Sharpe, 1996), p. 95; Lowell Dittmer, *Liu Shaoqi and the Chinese Cultural Revolution* (M. E. Sharpe, 1998), p. 92.
 7. In several intra-Party debates going back to the mid-1930s, Hu Feng resisted Communist propaganda in literature and defended the May Fourth legacy of realism. In 1955, Mao decided that Hu Feng's non-conformism threatened his cultural orthodoxy and denounced him as the captain of an anticommunist, counterrevolutionary clique. See Liu Kang, Xiaobing Tang, *Politics, Ideology, and Literary Discourse in Modern China: Theoretical Interventions and Cultural Critique* (Duke University Press, 1993), pp. 26–27; Harry Harding, *Organizing China: The Problem of Bureaucracy, 1949–1976* (Stanford University Press, 1981), p. 42.
 8. In January 1956, Zhou Enlai delivered a report to the CCP Central Committee, "On the Question of Intellectuals," in which he argued that "the fundamental question of intellectuals was no longer a question of their political and ideological reliability" and recommended improving "the manner of employing and placing them," giving them "due confidence and support," and providing them with "the necessary working conditions and appropriate treatment." See Cong Cao, *China's Scientific Elite*, (Routledge, 2004), p. 43.
 9. The "reeducation through labor" system (*laodong jiaoyang*, or *laojiao*) had its roots in the early 1950s, but it became formalized and widespread during the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957–58. See Richard Anderson, James D. Seymour, Fan Sidong eds., *New Ghosts, Old Ghosts: Prisons and Labor Reform Camps in China* (M. E. Sharpe, 1998), p. 19.
 10. In 1978, Hu Yaobang launched a massive rehabilitation campaign, which continued for more than five years, to review and correct politically motivated miscarriages of justice and cases of persecution in the past. "Together with their families, the affected numbered one hundred million, or one-tenth of China's population, Hu later told a group of Yugoslav journalists." Andrew Nathan, *Chinese Democracy* (University of California Press, 1986), p. 7.
 11. Yang Xianyi and his British wife Gladys Yang were the most prolific translators of Chinese literature immediately before and after the Cultural Revolution. In 1957–58, Xianyi narrowly escaped being labeled a "rightist" for his outspokenness. In 1968 both Gladys and Xianyi were jailed without trial, and she was held in solitary confinement. Their son committed suicide in 1979. See obituary by Bill Jenner, *The Independent* (London), December 1, 1979.
 12. On February 28, 1947, an incident of police brutality in Taipei sparked an uprising that quickly swept through Taiwan and lasted until the end of March that year. The Kuomintang army brutally repressed the uprising, killing an estimated 10,000 to 20,000 people in what for many Taiwanese became the symbol of mainland Chinese domination over local Taiwanese. In February 1992, the Taiwan government issued a multi-volume publication, "February 28 Incident Research Report," that acknowledged that KMT government corruption and
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misrule were the fundamental causes for the uprising and admitted the killing up to 20,000 Taiwanese. In 2003, Taiwan's Control Yuan reopened investigation into the incidents, and recognized officially the innocence of the victims. The government subsequently paid compensation to the families of victims through a memorial foundation, and established several "2–28" memorials and exhibits.

13. An estimated 30 million people died of starvation during the Great Leap Forward. Following a conversation with Hunan peasants in 1961, Liu Shaoqi affirmed that the famine was due 70 per cent to "man-made disaster." See Liu Shaoqi, "Extended Central Working Conference Speech" in *Liu Shaoqi Anthology*, Vol. 2 (Renmin Chubanshe 1985), pp. 337; and David M. Bachman, *Bureaucracy, Economy, and Leadership in China: The Institutional Origins of the Great Leap Forward* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 2.
14. See "Liu Shaoqi: Esi zhome duo ren lishi yao xieshang ni wo (Liu Shaoqi: If so many people starve to death, you and I will go down in history)," People's Daily Online, November 15, 2005, <http://culture.people.com.cn/BIG5/40479/40480/3857061.html>.
15. The reference is to the Gongyang Commentary on the *Spring and Autumn Annals*: "The Ch'un Ts'ew conceals [the truth] on behalf of the high in rank, out of regard to kinship, and on behalf of men of worth." James Legge, trans., *The Ch'un Ts'ew with the Tso Chuen*, vol. 5 of *The Chinese Classics*, SMC Publishing Inc. reprint, Taipei, 1991, p. 40.
16. Ba Jin achieved great popularity for his short stories and novels in the 1930s and 1940s and became one of the most widely-read Chinese writers of the twentieth century. Labeled a counterrevolutionary during the Cultural Revolution, he was rehabilitated in 1977. Shortly before his death in 1987, he wrote an essay proposing the establishment of a Cultural Revolution museum.
17. Shen Buhai (280–233 BC) was a legalist minister in the state of Han who introduced a series of administrative reforms. Han Fei (400–337 BC) was the leading proponent Legalism, a political philosophy that argued that it was pointless to "try to win the hearts of the people," as the Confucians believed, and that rewards and punishments were the "two handles of the ruler." From *Han Fei Zi*, in De Bary et al. trans., *Sources of the Chinese Tradition*, vol. 1 (Columbia University Press, 1960), pp. 131–32.
18. Hu Qiaomu was director of the General Press Administration, and a key architect of Mao's cult of personality. The appellation "*weida guangrong zhengque*," typically abbreviated to *weiguangzheng*, is now often scornfully applied to the Party by dissident writers.
19. On May 11, 1978, the *Guangming Ribao* published a pseudonymous article entitled "Practice is the sole criterion for testing truth," which became a rallying cry for Deng Xiaoping's supporters because it challenged a fundamental tenet of Cultural Revolution doctrine, namely that Mao's writings were eternal truths that must not be tampered with. Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Politics of China: The Eras of Mao and Deng* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 317–318.
20. In a 1980 speech to the CCP Politburo, Deng Xiaoping advocated establishing systemic checks on arbitrary rule: "First of all, it is not good to have an over-concentration of power. . . . Second, it is not good to have too many people holding two or more posts concurrently or to have too many deputy posts. . . . Third, it is time for us to distinguish between the responsibilities of the Party and those of the government and to stop substituting the former for the latter. . . . Fourth, we must take the long-term interest into account and solve the problem of the succession in leadership." Deng Xiaoping, "On the Reform of the System of Party and State Leadership," August 18, 1980, in *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping 1975–1982* (Foreign Languages Press, 1983), p. 303.