1951

After taking power in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party pursued a staggeringly ambitious transformation of every facet of the productive economy. The pivot from which factories and other workplaces were revolutionised was the mobilised working class, organised by the Party through a series of mass political campaigns—starting with the Democratic Reform Campaign launched in 1951—targeting corrupt or abusive managers and labour bosses. At first glance, this seems to fit cleanly within orthodox Marxist-Leninist tenets: a vanguard party seizing state power, shepherding the workers to class consciousness and overcoming capitalism. Yet the structure that emerged from this process was a far cry from the Party's promise to make the workers masters of their factories and of society. Instead, campaign mobilisation established top Party cadres as the centres of authority in the factories and imposed on them and those they oversaw the compulsions of the state plan. The new system repudiated the free market and violent exploitation of the prior period by integrating the working class into a form of exploitation that was in many respects deeper because it was more egalitarian.

Revolutionising the Factory through the Mass Political Campaign

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The mass political campaign of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was a social form at once political, cultural and technical that simultaneously democratised the factory and intensified labour discipline. It was a technique that drove a rapid restructuring of the labour process and a significant increase in productivity and output even in the old industrial centre of Shanghai, which, unlike previously underinvested areas, did not benefit from substantial new capital commitments.

For most of the country, the initial months following the takeover left economic relations largely untouched as the Party built its administrative apparatus, addressed potential political threats and revived economic growth. Though confrontation with labour bosses and factory managers was put off, new institutions were quickly established that would allow workers a voice in the workplace. Labour–capital consultative conferences (劳资协商会议) were set up in private factories; factory management committees (工厂管理委员会) in state-owned enterprises; and staff and worker representative conferences (职工代表会议) and trade unions in companies of all ownership types. The Party also began to organise the workforce into 'small groups' (小组) of around ten employees each. These were to become the organisational foundation for the Party's remoulding of workplace relations and workers' consciousness, the basic unit in which everyday political study would be carried out and through which mass campaigns would be brought to the lowest levels of the organisation.[2]

The crucial factory campaigns began with the Democratic Reform Campaign (民主改革运动 or 民改, *mingai*) in 1951. The aim of *mingai* was not to destroy enemies but to redeem those members of the working class who had made 'mistakes' under the influence of the old society. Both the victims and the victimisers were organised and guided towards reconciliation. To those with grievances, it was explained that their abusers were also exploited labourers who had been under the influence of the old ruling class. The targets of the campaign—who included both labour bosses and regular workers 'estranged' from their fellow workers due to

their work style, regional identity or gang membership—were coached on performing self-criticism and seeking forgiveness in front of other workers. They were told that their past mistakes were primarily due to the reactionary system under which they had lived but they also had to accept some responsibility, which gave them a chance to earn the respect of the other workers.[3] The second principal aim of the campaign was to animate the new structures of authority that were often little more than words on the factory organisational chart. The factory Party committee was to be consolidated as the locus for unified leadership in the factory, and the labour boss system was to be replaced with elected production group heads.

Following *mingai* came two additional campaigns—the Three Antis Campaign (三反运动 or 三反, *sanfan*) in state-owned factories and the Five Antis Campaign (五反运动 or 五反, *wufan*) in private factories—which targeted graft and corruption. These campaigns aimed to extirpate the 'bourgeois hedonist thinking' (资产阶级享乐思想) that had arisen among complacent factory cadres since the takeover and to stop the private capitalists' volleys of 'sugar-coated bullets' (糖衣炮弹; bribery and dissolution) that were corrupting cadres.[4] They focused on leaders such as the factory director and secretary of the factory Party committee, as well as administrative staff like accountants, but their ambit extended as well to petty theft among the workers.

The Party's ultimate targets in all of these early campaigns were not its 'competitors' but the conditions that produced these social groups. The instrumentality with which the Party treated the masses was more than mere cynical manipulation. It was an attempt to make the masses fit their concept as understood in Party theory, which would in turn allow the masses to realise their historical mission. As one pamphlet explained: 'The working class is rich in organisational capacity and discipline, but under the oppressive rule of the old society and the old enterprise, it suffered all kinds of injury and restriction.'[5] Party leaders believed they were not coercing compliance but actively remaking subjectivities—from those deformed by the 'old society' into those required by a truly democratic society. They thought there was a potential among the workers that had been suppressed and could be unleashed through participation in the mass campaign.

The Campaign Process

The first stage of the campaigns took place behind closed doors within the Party committees at individual factories, with an intensive series of meetings convened to 'unify thought' (统一思想) among Party members. Members of the Party committee conducted self-criticism—some of them more than once, if they were judged inadequate. A variety of infractions might be uncovered, ranging from visiting prostitutes to using factory property for personal reasons and, at one factory, to arranging separate banquets to celebrate production of the plant's first boring machine for the owner and for the workers—but serving inferior food to the latter.[6] Party leaders were told to use their own self-criticism as a model for the other Party members, making a deep and thorough confession of their mistakes along the lines laid out in campaign directives. Hearing these confessions often inspired panic among factory leaders who did not belong to the Party, and they rushed to harshen their own self-criticism.

In the next stage, the now unified Party organs brought the campaign to the non-Party 'masses' at the factory. The first step was to collect complaints and accusations and to educate workers on the campaign. Demonstrating the central importance of the campaign's performative elements, a key aim of gathering this information was to ensure that the wider factory assembly would be 'lively' in expressing their discontent. A number of 'active elements' (积极分子)—non-Party individuals willing to take an active part in the campaign—were recruited to provide information and assume roles in the larger assemblies.[7]

With preparations complete, the staff and workers' representative conference was then convened. The main event was a presentation of top leaders' self-criticism—again, meant to set the tone and provide a model for all those observing. As in the intraparty meetings, small groups were convened after the self-criticism session to critique the performances of the leaders. At the same time, these meetings provided a chance for the workers' representatives and small-group leaders to formulate their own confessions of graft, waste and bureaucratism, which would then be presented to the workers on the shop floor. A representative at one factory noted that he had initially thought the campaign would only target leaders, but he now understood that the failure to draw a clear line between proletarian and bourgeois thinking was a much wider problem.[8]

The meeting of the representative conference concluded with an announcement of the names of those suspected of corruption who had been

singled out in the preparatory stages. With this, the campaign shifted directly to the grassroots. Rumours were already circulating among the workers; anxieties were growing among those who, having witnessed earlier campaigns, feared they might be targeted, and many began clamouring for a chance to come clean and seek forgiveness.[9]

During *sanfan* in Shanghai, the city-level managers of the campaign judged this phase to have gone well overall, but they believed the leadership at a few plants was 'suppressing democracy': Party members were few in number or cowed into silence. At this point, the higher-level district or sectoral committee could step into the process and rally the workers of the factory against their domineering administrators. The East Shanghai District Committee (沪东区委), for example, organised the workers at two different plants to confront the factory directors with allegations of corruption raised by Party members at the factory. The confrontation was exhilarating for some employees and improved the standing of the Party committee within their factory. One worker embraced a Party member afterward and admitted he had made a mistake in blaming him for the failure to implement his rationalisation suggestion.[10]

With the arrival of *sanfan* at the factory grassroots, the 'masses' were now called on to make their own accounting (交代). Pilfering of materials was found to be very common, both before and after 1949. At Shanghai Iron and Steel (上海钢铁 or 上钢, Shanggang) Factory No. 1, 476 of 509 workers admitted to petty theft. Stealing funds, while less widespread, was not uncommon. At Shanggang No. 1, sixty-nine workers were implicated in graft. After the representative conference meetings, workers came forward fairly quickly to confess. Only a small number refused to cooperate at all, primarily those implicated in larger corruption cases involving connections with professional staff. As these minor cases moved forward, the masses were exhorted to make a clean break with the past and to participate in locating the criminal ringleaders within their factory.[11] In this way, it was made clear to the workers that they had been absolved and could, with relief, join the Party in its battle against the real targets of the campaign. As attention shifted from the workers to the staff, the campaign moved towards its climax.

In this final stage, the primary targets of the campaign were isolated and tremendous social pressure was exerted on them to confess wrongdoing. This pressure was leveraged through factory-organised 'tiger-beating teams' (打虎队), which were enjoined to carefully prepare the ground for interrogations, gathering accusations from others in the factory and

marshalling incriminating documents to confront any uncooperative targets with damning evidence. To allay the fears of their targets, they were to constantly reiterate the policies of the campaign—that those who confessed and cooperated would be treated with leniency or even let off without punishment. Confessions were important not only for their own sake, but also because they allowed the tiger-beaters to isolate others who refused to confess by turning their accomplices against them.

The interrogation teams fell prey to a variety of abuses and mistakes. The Party centre always insisted that any kind of physical pressure had to be forsworn, but inevitably there were tiger-beating teams that resorted to literal beatings.[12] Even without physical violence, the intense pressures exerted by the campaign could produce false or unsound confessions; if those running the campaign did not immediately verify the information they elicited, the case against their target might eventually fall apart.[13] Targets were sometimes pushed to breaking point. By late February 1952, eleven people in the Shanghai campaign had committed suicide and an additional nineteen had attempted it.[14]

There were also tiger-beaters who failed to prepare adequately when interrogating their targets. One team faced a suspect who rambled on and on in response to their questioning, never coming to anything on which they could pin him down. Finally they took a severe attitude and forbid him from being so 'long-winded' (啰嗦). He closed his mouth and stopped talking altogether. The team, because it had failed to prepare independent evidence, was stymied. Ultimately, they gave in: 'Ok, why don't you be a little more long-winded?'[15]

In Shanghai, the campaign culminated with five mass meetings held around the city in which a select number of major cases were aired before the workers. At each meeting, around a dozen of the accused were placed before an audience of more than 1,000 and encouraged to confess and turn in their accomplices. A key aim of these meetings was to 'clearly embody the Party's policies by dealing with specific individuals'.[16] To this end, individuals considered to be representative were chosen—'living emblematic types' (活的典型事例), as they were called. Those who readily confessed were released without punishment while those who resisted were arrested.[17] Making a vivid example of these individuals was meant to terrify the holdouts who had been placed in the audience. Immediately after the meeting, these individuals would be taken back to their factories and interrogated—deep into the night if necessary. One said: 'This is the

first time in my life I've ever been to a meeting like this, I was so afraid that I cried. I swear that I'll come clean on all the problems.' After attending one of the meetings, the factory director at Shanghai State Textile (上海国营棉纺织 or 国棉, Guomian) Factory No. 15 was called on to write out his confession, but his hands were shaking so violently he could not form the characters.[18]

The other key aim of the mass meeting was to 'overcome bureaucratism and reluctance among [factory] leaders'.[19] Some factories were criticised for conducting the campaign with inadequate vigour, due to fears that targeting management would leave the company rudderless and holding so many meetings for the campaign would reduce production.[20] Such ideas were branded 'rightist', causing leaders to lag behind the masses in their prosecution. At Guomian No. 5, the lack of Party leadership left the non-Party masses to act on their own initiative. At the representative conference, they raised complaints against the factory director and set their own deadline for him to do a self-criticism. They posted their own, undirected accusations against individuals among the staff. A group of 'active elements' even broke into the home of one suspect, looking for his ill-gotten gains. Returning to the factory, they exhibited at the door of the union an overcoat and other items as evidence.[21]

Transformational Effects of the Campaign Form

As these examples illustrate, the campaign form was not simply a performance for passive onlookers. On the contrary, it opened up powerful new possibilities of participation for those at the bottom of the factory power structure—opportunities that ranged from serving as workers' representatives or volunteering as 'active elements' to joining the crowd in the clamour for a more exacting self-criticism from the factory director. The campaigns of the early 1950s exposed widespread accumulated frustrations and grievances against factory leaders, technical personnel, managers and labour bosses. By unleashing these energies, the Party presented factory leaders with a straightforward choice: they could either work in concert with the masses in an attempt to channel grassroots participation in a constructive direction or risk bearing the brunt of undirected wrath. The campaign form thus squeezed staff and management—including Party, union and youth league leaders—between the mobilised workers below and municipal and central Party authorities above. By institutionalising

and legitimising worker participation, the Party centre established a powerful means of disciplining lower-level cadres who might be less than enthusiastic in following the centre's guidance.

At the same time, the campaigns of the early 1950s cemented the factory Party committee as the ultimate locus of power in the factory. They targeted the Party committees' main rivals in the factories—labour bosses, gang networks, professional staff and factory management—battering if not destroying them. They also pioneered new modes of gathering operational intelligence. Through the systematic investigations carried out in preparation for the campaigns, which involved combing through factory records and speaking with numerous workers and staff, the Party committees compiled detailed information on both work conduct and personal relationships at their factories. As a third party antagonistic to management (in the context of the campaign), the Party committee could take advantage of bottom-up resentment against overseers to establish its credibility among workers, thereby gaining unprecedented access to their knowledge. This gave the Party a mastery of functional details that had always proved elusive to management in the past.

By establishing the Party committee as the only force to which the besieged targets of the campaigns could appeal, it was ultimately the campaign dynamic itself that breathed life into the new structures of authority in the factory. The process of producing this authority was often very direct and personal. As one report on *sanfan* put it:

> Most high-level skilled personnel start out arrogant and condescending and they look down on the Party committee. So in certain situations it's entirely proper to shake them up a bit and wipe that smug expression off their faces … leading them to bow their heads and meekly seek the help of the Party committee with their self-criticism. Thereafter they will earnestly do their work.[22]

The Party did not manufacture the tension between management and workers. Such hostilities had been a persistent feature of Shanghai's factories before 1949, but they had been crosscut by numerous other divisions and deflected by ideology, fear and repression. The campaigns of 1951–52 crystallised the worker–management divide as the privileged axis of conflict, suppressed competing expressions of animus and encouraged the workers to articulate their grievances through the newly authorised language of proletarian identity and the collective good. The process was

intended to be transformational—to purify the workers into genuine members of the proletariat adequate to their historical mission, and to steel the recently established factory Party committees through leadership of the masses in struggle. The form of this struggle was, in turn, meant to enact an organic unity between the Party and the masses. Factory Party leaders stood before the masses, confessing their shortcomings and promising reform. Those workers who had erred were forgiven and welcomed into the fold. Then both the Party and the masses joined as one to confront the labour bosses and corrupt managers.

Yet the unity of the Party and the masses was ambiguous in nature. The Party committees' antagonistic stance against managers and technical staff was not structural but situational. Its solidarity with the workers against their superiors was likewise transitory. Even during the campaigns, this imperfect alignment was evident in the way the Party committee dominated the staff and workers' representative conference—the nominal organ of worker sovereignty. With the beginning of the first five-year plan, the tension would grow.

Yet the early campaigns also established a durable structure of identity and authority that would channel resentments away from Party rule, leaving individual managers and obstreperous workers to bear the brunt of popular anger. The Party committee was an independent third figure within the newly congealed power structure of the factory. It stood outside the immediate tensions between workers and management, sometimes aligning with one side and sometimes with the other. It represented an external authority—not a despotic Communist Party but something more fundamental. Its role was to enforce the impersonal compulsions expressed in the five-year plan. With the completion of the campaign cycle of 1951–52, the process of Taylorist rationalisation that would permit the plan's quotas to be met assumed a new course, and the campaign form was increasingly employed to tighten labour discipline and ratchet up labour intensity.