

# 1958

*In September 1958, Zhang Chunqiao, who was only an aspiring critic at the time, published an article titled 'Smash the Ideology of Bourgeois Right' in a Communist Party theoretical journal in Shanghai. In it, he argued that the wage marked a social relationship that reproduced a capitalist logic of labour and proposed prioritising the development of new ideological or moral incentives that would supersede the wage as the basis for stimulating production. With Mao Zedong's personal endorsement, this article opened a series of theoretical encounters that would have dramatic implications for the trajectory of the Chinese Revolution for years to come.*

# Beyond the Wage: Zhang Chunqiao, Bourgeois Right, and Maoism as Theory

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On 15 September 1958, the Shanghai-based theoretical journal *Liberation* (解放) published an article titled ‘Smash the Ideology of Bourgeois Right’ (破除资产阶级的法权思想) by aspiring critic Zhang Chunqiao. The article drew on the conceptual vocabulary of ‘bourgeois right’, derived from Marx’s late writings on transition, as an attempt to theorise the reproduction of social inequalities under socialism in ways that would challenge the hegemony of the Soviet model as it had been previously applied. A copy of each published edition of *Liberation*, formed in 1958 as a local parallel to the national-level journal *Red Flag* (红旗), was delivered to Mao Zedong himself for his perusal. This opened a series of theoretical encounters that were to have dramatic implications for the trajectory of the Chinese Revolution.

Having read Zhang’s article, Mao ordered that it be reprinted in the *People’s Daily* (人民日报), where it promptly appeared on 13 October, complete with an editorial comment in which Mao asserted that ‘this question’—referring to the question of bourgeois right—‘needs to be discussed because it is a pressing question at the current moment. We believe that Zhang’s article is fundamentally correct, but that it is somewhat too partial, which is to say, that its explanation of the historical process is incomplete.’<sup>1</sup> Mao’s excitement and approval established Zhang’s leading role as a theorist, whose interventions from this point on posed a series of crucial questions about the problem of socialist transition. For Zhang, the continued deployment of the wage-form under socialism could not, as Soviet theorists had assumed, be radically demarcated from the capitalist wage. If a socialist society relied on material incentives for stimulating productivity, and neglected the formation of new modes of consciousness, Zhang believed that, not only would there be no guarantee of an automatic transition to communism, but also the wage would create the material and ideological conditions for a capitalist reversal and the defeat of the revolutionary process. In the theoretical production of Chinese socialism, Zhang’s article has the status of an *event*. We need to not only engage

Zhang's thought, but also recognise that the most original contributions of Maoism lie in the post-1949 period, consisting of a series of reflections on the social organisation of labour under socialism, and the extent to which transitional social forms—specifically, the wage—could be historically and theoretically demarcated from capitalist relations of production.

By arguing that the wage marked a social relationship that reproduced a capitalist logic of labour, and prioritising the development of new ideological or moral incentives that would supersede the wage as the basis for stimulating production, Zhang, together with Mao, sought to inaugurate a theoretical understanding of socialism that differed from the Soviet model in its most basic features. For Zhang, socialism itself encompassed certain social relations and forms that were drawn into socialism from capitalism, such as the wage, and which needed to be superseded through the constant transformation of social relations and consciousness. Zhang's intervention was therefore a theoretical rupture that offered radical insight into the heart of the Chinese Revolution and engendered a new series of debates until the exhaustion of Maoism in the late Cultural Revolution.

Marx at Beidaihe

The problem of 'bourgeois right' arose in China amid the tumult of the Great Leap Forward as part of an extended process of reflection on the inadequacies of the Soviet model of socialism. Over the course of key meetings held from early 1958, Mao began to rethink socialism in terms of the persistence of contradictions and modes of unevenness between different sets of social relations. This was, at the same time, a project of locating new theoretical categories that would not be dependent on the edifice of Soviet political economy as encountered in China, especially in the form of Stalin's 1952 *Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR* and the Soviet textbook on political economy.<sup>2</sup> In the second half of August, at the Beidaihe Conference, Mao introduced the vocabulary of bourgeois right by asserting: 'We must smash the ideology of bourgeois right, for example, the competing for position, the competing over ranks, seeking bonuses, the fact that mental labourers earn higher wages, and manual labourers lower wages, all of these are manifestations of bourgeois right.'<sup>3</sup> He went on: 'Having resolved the problem of the status of ownership, the system of bourgeois right persists, for example in the system of ranks, and in the problem of relations between the leaders and the masses.'<sup>4</sup> Mao emphasised that changes in the formal status of ownership do not exhaust

the problems of socialist transformation because socialism continues to be marked by social forms, relations, and modes of consciousness that originate from capitalism, and which therefore render socialism itself a site of contradiction rather than a stable or homogeneous mode of production. This was also the opportunity for a return to Marx as the basis for a new beginning that would be beholden neither to the Soviet experience nor to the strict letter of Marx's own categories. The Marx to which Chinese theorists returned was not the early Marx of humanism but rather the late Marx of 'bourgeois right'.

The formula of bourgeois right (in German, *bürgerliche Recht* is only ever used in the specific singular, not to be translated as 'bourgeois legal rights') is discussed mainly in Marx's 1875 *Critique of the Gotha Program*, which contains one of his only extended discussions of the problem of socialist transition.<sup>5</sup> Marx posits a society in which commodity production and the law of value have been abolished through the reorganisation of production on an immediately social basis. Yet, he also postulates that the early development of such a society will fall short of the communist society regulated according to the principle of 'from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs,' because, having emerged from the cultural and ideological conditions of capitalism, it is 'still stamped with the birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it emerges.'<sup>6</sup> For this reason, the adequate mode of distribution in this society is one of 'equal right' or, more precisely, 'bourgeois right,' meaning a mode of distribution that remains premised on the exchange of equivalents, where 'the individual producer receives back from society—after the deductions have been made—exactly what he gives to it. What he has given to it is his individual quantum of labour.' As Marx acknowledges, in a statement that caused endless consternation for subsequent theorists, with the exchange of equivalents in the sphere of labour, 'the same principle prevails as that which regulates the exchange of commodities' in capitalist society—namely, the abstract norm of universal exchangeability, or remuneration according to labour done that does not account for the particularity of different individuals. Insofar as remuneration according to a universal norm of labour contribution fails to take account of differing needs and abilities, it 'is, therefore, a right of inequality, in its content, like every right'. The transcendence of this narrow horizon of right as an abstract norm that reproduces inequality is precisely the movement of transition towards communism. This 'higher phase of communist society,' Marx anticipates, is one where

after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labour, has vanished; after labour has become not only a means of life but life's prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-around development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly—only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!<sup>7</sup>

Mao's deployment of the vocabulary of bourgeois right involved a stretching of Marx's categories. In the first place, there could be no suggestion that China had already abolished commodity production and the law of value as Marx described. Yet, for precisely this reason, in China, bourgeois right came to stand for a great deal more than its specific content in Marx's thought, encompassing the reproduction of social inequalities under socialism. The Maoist deployment of bourgeois right at this juncture was therefore intimately related to the transformation of everyday life that also figured as central to the Great Leap, insofar as it designated not only the central problem of the wage, which hewed closely to its 'original' Marxist connotation, but also acts of superiority on the part of officials, anticipating the radical anti-bureaucratic movements of the 1960s.<sup>8</sup> Most importantly, by speaking of the ideology of bourgeois right, Mao gestured at the dialectical relationship and dynamic tension between social forms and modes of consciousness and how a transformation of consciousness could bring about the transformation of social relations.

These early interventions created the space for a more systematic exploration of the problem of bourgeois right. When, having returned from Beidaihe, the Shanghai mayor Ke Qingshi (1902–65) informed Zhang Chunqiao of the discussions that had taken place, Zhang set to work writing his article.

Lenin in Shanghai

Zhang's article rests on and revisits the legacies of the return to Marx embodied by Mao's early deployments of 'bourgeois right'. Zhang's argument was distinguished less by its reading of Marx than by its recovery of the supply system during the revolutionary war that could be re-theorised and developed as part of a sustained transition to communism. The supply

system consisted of the open, nonmonetary provision of goods to cadres and soldiers in wartime. For Zhang, the egalitarian relations of the Red Army in the 1930s encompassed ‘communist mutual relations’ not only within the army but also between the army and the masses, and offered an alternative to material incentives, such as the wage. In Zhang’s terms, ‘when comrades used to live under the supply system they did not envy wage labour, and so they enjoyed a life that expressed relations of mutual equality between comrades’. By contrast, Zhang posits, ‘the core of the ideology of bourgeois right is the wage system’ through which material incentives reproduce and naturalise bourgeois expectations that labour is compensated by wages and, as such, prevent the consciousness of communist forms of distribution. This intervention momentarily called into question the absolute difference—central to the Soviet discourse on political economy—between the capitalist wage as the purchase and sale of labour power and the socialist wage-form, which, under the formula of ‘remuneration according to labour’ (按劳分配), was said to reward labourers in strict proportion to work done.

Zhang’s text suggests that the socialist wage-form is not fundamentally different from the wage in capitalist relations of production, insofar as both participate in a shared logic of atomised labour that is incompatible with the formation of new communist social relations. To a greater extent than for Mao, for Zhang, ‘bourgeois right’ offered a way of establishing the continuity between capitalism and socialism, so that, for him, socialism became legible as a contradictory ensemble of social forms, with the wage relation itself a site of radical contradiction.<sup>9</sup> Throughout the text, Zhang refers to those who privilege the continued use of material incentives as ‘the economists’ (经济学家), which allows his own intervention to be posed as a question of politics. Zhang’s article therefore embodies a strategic separation of politics from economics that is summed up in his explicit privileging of ‘politics in command’, whereby politics is understood in terms of the transformative capacities of consciousness to rupture with transitional social forms such as the wage.

One month after the publication of Zhang’s essay, in October and November 1958, six meetings were held in Shanghai to discuss the problem of bourgeois right. Participants were overwhelmingly drawn from the circles of propaganda work rather than being the ‘economists’ whom Zhang disparaged. They followed Zhang in attending to a complex relation between politics and economics, and between the structure of the wage-form and the transformative capacities of consciousness. *Liberation*

summarised these debates over bourgeois right by stating: 'It cannot be denied that definite economic relations always give rise to corresponding forms of consciousness, and that with distribution also being a kind of economic relationship, the remnants of inequality in distribution will also generate bourgeois consciousness.'<sup>10</sup>

The communist consciousness of labour, by contrast, was characterised as labour 'without remuneration'. These divergent modes of consciousness were characterised in terms of the distribution of desire and consciousness between the 'self' (私) and 'society' (公). In sketching the contours of such a consciousness, the radicals who agreed with Zhang made recourse to the early utopian days of the Soviet Union. They noted that 'Lenin had already taken great efforts to support "communist subbotniks" in the early days of the Soviet Union, because from this he could see "communist things", he could see the sprouts of communism.'<sup>11</sup> In his 1920 essay 'From the Destruction of the Old Social System, To the Creation of the New', Lenin described the *subbotniks* as labour performed on a voluntary basis 'for the benefit of society'. The supersession of bourgeois right would require the wholesale reconstruction of consciousness and social relations so that all labour would be 'for the benefit of society', no longer mediated by the wage and its attendant mode of consciousness. The layered references to Marx, Lenin, and the early phases of the Chinese Revolution allowed the language of bourgeois right to function as a critique of Stalinism from a specifically Maoist perspective.

The utopian phase of the Great Leap Forward soon ran into disaster, which forced a reckoning with the heady expectations that had accumulated during 1958, including the idea of an imminent abolition of bourgeois right through a supersession of the wage-form. At the Wuchang Conference in November, therefore, Mao urged that

it is only possible to eliminate one part of bourgeois right, such as bureaucratic airs, excessive privileges, masterly attitudes, old relations, these must definitely be destroyed the more thoroughly the better. But the other part, such as the wage system, relations between upper and lower levels, and the definite compulsion of the state, cannot be done away with.<sup>12</sup>

He went on in even more striking terms, that 'there is a part of bourgeois right that is still of use under socialism, and which must be preserved and made to serve socialism.'<sup>13</sup> The question of how bourgeois right could

be made to serve socialism deepened the complexity of the problem of the wage-form, consisting of how a social relation that marked the persistence of capitalist organisation of labour under socialism could be made to work in a way that would produce the material and ideological conditions for its eventual supersession in favour of the communist society described by Marx.

#### Towards Communist Labour

The cultivation of the new subject of communist labour that would enable the supersession of bourgeois right became the consistent problem of Chinese socialism from 1958, and yet was also the point of struggle that ultimately contributed to the ossification of the Chinese Revolution and the theoretical vocabulary of bourgeois right. The strategic bifurcation between politics and economics that had informed Zhang's 1958 article entered a new configuration during the Cultural Revolution when Zhang himself was charged with writing a new textbook of socialist political economy. In it, he and his fellow authors sought to develop an account of socialist political economy that replaced the Soviet understanding of socialism as a stable mode of production by revealing its contradictory character. The failure to restrict bourgeois right provided the basis for a retrospective critique of the Soviet Union as well as an explicit affirmation of the continuity between the wage relation of capital and remuneration according to labour under socialism:

Under the socialist system, the production relations reflected by the wage are different from those production relations reflected by the wage under capitalism. Yet, the category of the wage and its specific form, whether it be piece or time rates, is ultimately an inheritance of capitalist society.<sup>14</sup>

The significance of this passage from the final version of the textbook drafted in 1976 lies not only in the restatement that the socialist wage remained basically consistent with its capitalist pre-revolutionary counterpart, but also that the wage relation would provide the foundation for a prospective reintroduction of capitalism, whereby the wage would be on hand to assist the reinsertion of labour power into a process of capitalist accumulation. Zhang presciently understood that socialism provided the 'ready-to-hand' possibilities for the process of capitalist restoration that

emerged in the 1980s. The final version of this textbook was published in September 1976, preceding the coup following Mao's death.<sup>15</sup>

Zhang and his interlocutors, however, could only conceive of the supersession of the wage in the form of heroic acts of will that could not be sustained outside particular periods of exhausting mobilisation. Although they were unable to invent new communist forms of labour, the problems they highlighted—the continuity between the capitalist and the socialist wages, and the need for a systematic reconfiguration of desire to render communism possible—were, and remain, real problems. It falls to us to take up these challenges in our own time, amid the ruins of twentieth-century socialist experiments.