

MAO'S "KILLING QUOTAS"

BY LI CHANGYU

Rehabilitation of those labeled “counterrevolutionaries” during the anti-rightist campaigns of the 1950s may repair the reputations of the living, but can never restore the lives of those executed or persecuted to death under Mao’s capricious system of political quotas.

I was there

October 1, 2005, was the 57th time I observed China’s National Day. Thinking back, on October 1, 1949 I was still a lower middle school student, studying in Xinjian Middle School in Shanghai. Xinjian Middle School had a vast and long-standing Party underground. At the ceremonies celebrating the founding of the People’s Republic, students and teachers from our school, led and encouraged by numerous teachers and students who were Party members, turned out in near full strength to take part in the huge gathering of nearly a million people at what is today Shanghai People’s Park, but which at that time was a symbol of British colonial rule in Shanghai—the racetrack in the English concession. Later, on November 11, I was among the first group to be admitted to the Youth League in Shanghai. Later still, on January 8, 1951, I was appointed an official, and then admitted to the military academy to fight the U.S. and defend Korea, which meant I was enlisted in the army.

In this way, I became either an eyewitness or a participant in all of the political movements that followed Liberation.

“Quotas” of all sorts

This article introduces the “killing quotas” stipulated by the Movement to Suppress Counterrevolutionaries, which was initiated and led by Mao Zedong in 1952.

Speaking from my own experience, I know that Mao’s economic campaigns depended on quotas imposed on the lower levels. The best-known of these movements was the 1958 “backyard blast furnace” iron and steel production campaign.¹ On August 17, 1958, the Beidaihe meeting passed a resolution calling for the Party and people to produce 10.7 million tons of iron and steel. The resolution called for iron ore and steel

production to “double” from 5.35 million tons in 1957 to 10.7 million tons in the next four months. This great leader, who sprang from the farmlands of Hunan, thought that iron and steel production could be doubled through reliance on China’s enormous population.

On the orders of the supreme commander, all of the country’s workers, peasants, soldiers, students and businesspeople—men and women old and young—nearly ten million people, all pitched in, using crude methods to get on with the job, smashing cooking pots and iron gates, working through the night by lamplight, against magnificent backdrops of flames towering to the skies. We arrived in Ji’nan, put down our bags and joined right in on this unprecedented iron ore and steel smelting movement. As for the final result, it is not even worth mentioning.

Likewise, Mao set quotas for his political movements, as I know from personal experience. I was a student of Chinese at Shandong University, class of 1956, at the beginning of the Anti-Rightist Movement, when it was announced that our year had been allocated seven rightists; it was 1958 before I was labeled part of that rightist contingent. According to what one of the more decent of the Party members among my classmates told me privately, this happened because the “quota” had not been met. This “quota” should have applied to the whole school and not necessarily to individual departments and years. According to the *History of Shandong University*, the school had been allocated a total of 204 rightists, of which 144 were middle school students and 54 were faculty, including 16 full and assistant professors.

I returned to Shandong University 21 years later when the policy of “correcting” rightist labels was being implemented. A classmate from my same class and year was in charge of the 55 offices carrying out this rectification work. According to him, perusal of the case files showed that of the 105 students in our year, rightist data had been gathered on ten. Then why were only eight eventually labeled rightists? Probably because the “quota” had been reached. The two remaining students were the lucky fish that escaped the net, thereby escaping a great human disaster as well.

The rightist quotas I am talking about here probably refer to the “bottom line.” According to newspaper accounts of the time, at Tsinghua and Peking Universities, where Liu Shaoqi

and Deng Xiaoping were personally involved in the work, there were a certain number of classes in which 90 to 100 percent of the students were labeled rightists, indicating that the movement had mushroomed out of control. Deng Xiaoping, who had been the leader of an anti-rightist team, decisively declared that the anti-rightist movement had committed the error of “excessive expansion.”

As we know, if a rightist stood accused of no other crime, the death sentence would not be imposed, and so 22 years later, having gone through the Cultural Revolution in the meantime (suicide, murder or fatal illness excepted), the overwhelming majority could thank their lucky stars, gain “rectification” and spend the rest of their days in quiet desperation.

The principle of “suppress and kill”

All the same, it never occurred to me that Mao’s suppression of dissent came with a proportionately-based “killing quota.” I gleaned this inside information only upon reading Volume VI of Mao’s *Collected Works*. Although this was 50-odd years after the fact, it still shook me in a way that I can’t put into words. Promotions, pay raises, the steel production campaign, identifying rightists: quotas were applied to the whole country on a proportional basis. The quotas may have been imposed with ruthless objectivity, but murder is a life and death matter, and it is inconceivable and bizarre that people should be killed merely for the sake of reaching a pre-established quota.

The movement to suppress counterrevolutionaries was ini-

tiated in 1951. I was in the military by then, a new soldier and a trainee. I had no knowledge of how the movement to suppress counterrevolutionaries was initiated in the army. I knew a bit about the situation in society—I saw exhibits, read the papers and heard some talk. But there was no one among my family and social contacts implicated in the suppression.

According to the chapter on “The Suppression of Counterrevolutionaries” in Volume VI of Mao’s *Collected Works*, on April 30, 1951, Mao issued the following order: “As for killings—imposing the death sentence, ‘The principle is that in cases where blood debts are owed or in the presence of other extremely serious crimes, when failure to execute would mean popular indignation would go unassuaged, then the death sentence should be carried out without hesitation, in order to pacify popular indignation and improve production.’”

“The death sentence should be carried out without hesitation”; these forceful, ringing words had been prefaced three years before by Mao’s pronouncement: “There should be no policy of benevolence.” Truly a case of actions matching words.

Here killing, that is, imposing the death sentence, is justified not only by “blood debt,” but even more by “popular indignation.” Generally speaking, the presence and importance of a “blood debt” can be quantified, but what standard should be used to measure the presence or degree of “popular indignation”?

Recently I have been researching the history of the war against Japan in Yunnan. During the war, a “poet of resistance”



Chinese authorities banned *The Past is Not Like Smoke*, the best-selling book by Zhang Yihe describing the experiences of her father and other liberal intellectuals during the Anti-Rightist Movement. Photos: Reuters

from Yunnan, Peng Gui'e, (1908–1952) became famous nationwide. He was a teacher in his homeplace of Mianning County (the present Lincang County). Later he was appointed principal of the provincial Mianyun Teachers' College.

Although he lived in Lincang County in the vast mountain ranges of Yunnan, Peng Gui'e employed his noble sentiments and outstanding talent in the creation of resistance poetry. At the time, newspapers and periodicals all over China carried his poetry, and he won high acclaim from venerable figures in literary and artistic circles such as Guo Moro, Wang Yaping, Cang Kejia, Lao She, Shu Qun, Meng Shihuan, Zhao Jingshen, Wen Yiduo, Mu Shutian, Xiao Jun and Di Ke.

According to the *New Annals of Lincang County*, "In 1949, Peng was appointed to the People's Government as County Magistrate of Mianning County and concurrently as deputy officer of security and garrison commander of Mianning District. On December 14, he became director of the reorganized military and political committee. On May 11, 1950 the Central Communist Party military representative took jurisdiction of Mianning County, and Peng became head of the Mianning cultural education coordinating committee, while at the same time teaching in a middle school. During the movement to suppress counterrevolutionaries, Peng was arrested and imprisoned, and on the eighth day of the first lunar month of 1952, he was sentenced to death."²

Peng Gui'e was rehabilitated after the Cultural Revolution, but who can undo a wrongful death? Peng Gui'e was not only known nationwide for his poetry, he was deeply respected in his native place. Where was there "popular indignation" against him?

Here's another example. There was a geography teacher at my Xinjian Middle School who was particularly outspoken, but I've now forgotten his name. He was chair of the teachers' union, and there was a never a meeting without him at the podium. His speeches were impassioned, all seriousness and solemnity. We all thought he was an activist. At that time, students had a special respect for teachers who were activists. He was the kind of teacher who could teach geography without a textbook, simply letting loose a flood of eloquence, and he could draw a map of any country or province from memory. To hear him teach was absolutely enthralling; he was very popular among the students.

In 1951, when Shanghai was suppressing counterrevolutionaries, there were two big roundups in which ten thousand people were arrested in one night. This geography teacher was arrested in the first roundup. No one knew what became of him after his arrest.

Some thirty years later, I went to Beijing to visit Su Shoutong, the man who had been dean of academic affairs at the time, as well as the school's Party branch secretary, and was later appointed editorial chief of historical materials at the People's Education Press. We reminisced about this geography teacher. Mr. Su still had fond memories of him and admired his ability. He said that this teacher had been a Party member and had spent time in prison. He had only a lower middle school education, and in prison he had only one book to read—an atlas—so he took advantage of his time in prison to study this

atlas until he had it down pat, and later became an outstanding geography teacher. He had also been a Party commissioner in Anhui and had a close relationship with Ren Bishi.³ When Ren Bishi died, he wrote an elegiac couplet and sent it to Beijing. As for what had become of him after his arrest, Mr. Su didn't know anything either. So where was the "popular indignation" against this geography teacher?

A few days after Mao issued his order, a public trial of the Shanghai's counterrevolutionaries was held at the Hongkou stadium, during which some "arch criminals" were publicly executed. How many of these arch criminals were there? More than three hundred. The *People's Daily* reported on this public trial and mass execution in a lead article on page one with the horrific headline, "100,000 citizens watch with thunderous shouts and applause." What was the "blood debt" and "popular indignation" relating to these 300 "arch criminal" counterrevolutionaries? Did their execution "assuage popular indignation"? Naturally there was no need to justify this to the Chinese people.

Killing quotas

In fact, the execution of more than 300 counterrevolutionaries in Shanghai fell far short of Mao's quota. On May 15, two weeks after the order mentioned above, Mao issued another kill quota: "On the question of executing counterrevolutionaries, in the rural areas the proportion has reached one out of every 1,000 individuals, while in the northwest and in the urban areas it is one for every 2,000, so mass executions should be halted immediately."⁴ Given that the population of Shanghai at that time was four million, 2,000 individuals would have had to be executed in order to meet the quota and put an end to mass executions. And so there was another public trial meeting at the Hongkou Stadium where more than 300 people were executed, and another million "observers" came to "enjoy the spectacle."⁵

Perhaps Mao issued quotas because he feared that once the killing started, it would be difficult to prevent unrestrained bloodshed.

The killing of large numbers of people according to plans and quotas was common throughout China at that time, from the capital to the most remote and backward villages, and the *People's Daily* reported widely on what was seen as a great event in New China. But ultimately Mao feared that excessive killing would give rise to popular indignation, and so the quotas he set of one per thousand for rural areas and one per two thousand for urban areas represented a reduction from the original quota of 5 or 10 or 20 percent.

Mao said, "Of all the counterrevolutionaries who are ferreted out in the afore-mentioned Party, government, military, economic and people's organizations, it is estimated that those who owe blood debts or have committed other crimes that rouse popular indignation and those who have seriously harmed the national interest account for only a small number, roughly 10 to 20 percent, while some 80 to 90 percent of those sentenced to death may be granted a suspended sentence." This is the origin of the policy of "sentenced to death suspended for two years," which has now been in force for half a century.

Mao Zedong rationalized his decision in this way: “If we have such people executed, it will not be easily understood by the masses, nor will public figures be sympathetic; furthermore we would be deprived of a large pool of labor, and it would serve little use in dividing the enemy.” From this we see that Mao’s decision was not based on any element of tolerance or mercy.

So how many were ultimately executed as a result of the movement to suppress counterrevolutionaries? From the quotas discussed above, we can begin to make a calculation, which is almost too frightening to consider. Of course an actual figure for the number of executions will always be classified, but various estimates put the figure at two to three million.

Negative repercussions

Mao’s evil, ruthless killing of so many people naturally brought tremendous negative repercussions. In “The Suppression of Counterrevolutionaries” Mao wrote:

Vice-Director of the Shandong Military Region Political Department Comrade Huang Zuyan was assassinated on March 13 (1951) at a meeting by counterrevolutionary element Wang Jumin. The assassination of a high-ranking cadre by a hidden counterrevolutionary element in our Party had been a rarity and should put the entire Party on alert. Wang Jumin was deputy section chief of the Propaganda Office in the Political Bureau of the Shandong Huimin Military Region, who wormed his way into the Party in 1941. He came from a family of local tyrants who were struggled against during land reform. Following his crime, Wang committed suicide at the scene.

It is hereby announced that you must pay attention to the following: (1) Be on high alert against vengeance from counterrevolutionaries. We should acknowledge that vengeance by counterrevolutionaries is inevitable, and preemptive measures should be taken to guard against it. This must by no means be neglected. In addition to heightening vigilance, it is most important to adopt positive measures to break up counterrevolutionary organizations, eliminate their lairs and resolutely and quickly execute all counterrevolutionaries who should be executed, ensuring that they be caught unawares and powerless to carry out revenge.

(2) We must realize that there are already a small number of counterrevolutionaries who have made their way into the Party, government and military; we absolutely cannot believe that all is secure. We must begin to pay attention to this issue now, investigating suspicious elements and gathering evidence. We should pay special attention to investigating this kind of element in prefectural Party committees and the offices of first-rank prefectural commissioners and above, at the military sub-area and first-rank division level and above, and organizations at the municipal level of city and district. When evidence is present, we should deal with the matter in a way that will guarantee the purity and safety of leading

organs in the Party, government and military. We absolutely cannot be irresolute; to tolerate evil is to abet it. This is critical. (March 18, 1951).

I personally felt the impact of this “counterrevolutionary revenge killing.” It was about six months after this incident that I was transferred to work in Nanjing. In those days there were *ad hoc* guards at the office doors of high level leaders, and a guard had to be posted at the gate whenever a large-scale meeting was to be held. Anyone entering the meeting place was searched, and if a weapon was found the high alert went up all around.

The Wang Jumin “counterrevolutionary revenge” case gave Mao even more reason for killing. Given the resolve that “we cannot be irresolute; to tolerate evil is to abet it,” there was no error in mistaken killings or excessive killing, only in not killing enough, and executions proliferated throughout the suppression movement. Even after the suppression movement ended, the work of “investigating suspicious elements and gathering evidence” went on uninterrupted, and was resurrected in the Elimination of Counterrevolutionaries Campaign in 1955. The military district logistics command where I served had more than 40 persons targeted for investigation. That was really a case of “on Bagong Mountain, every bush and tree looks like an enemy soldier.” But Mao Zedong never admitted that he had committed the error of “excessive expansion,” or any other error, for that matter.

October 1 comes every year, this year too. And every time October 1 rolls around, Mao’s brave words echo on all sides: “The Chinese people have stood up.” But nobody knows how they were brought to their knees.

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Translated by a friend of HRIC

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NOTES

1. One of the more disastrous campaigns of the Great Leap Forward (1958–1960), which drew labor away from food production and led to a severe shortage of food, as a result of which an estimated 30 million Chinese died of starvation.
2. Wu Dingyun ed., *Xinbian lincang fengwuzhi*, Yunnan Renmin Chubanshe.
3. Ren Bishi was a Communist Party elder and veteran of the Long March. He helped direct the People’s Liberation with Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai during China’s civil war. Ren died of illness in October 1950.
4. “Zhenya fangeming bixu shixing dang de quncong luxian” (In suppressing counterrevolutionaries the Party’s mass line should be carried out).
5. See Lu Xun’s preface to *Call to Arms* [trans] Na Han (1922), cited in *Selected Stories of Lu Hsun* (Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, 1960, 1972).