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USING FEUDALISM FOR POLITICAL CRITICISM AND FOR PROMOTING SYSTEMIC CHANGE IN CHINA

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This article examines the discussion about feudalism between 1978–1982 in the official Chinese press, including newspapers, academic publications, and party journals. This discussion is an example of the Chinese tradition of using history to analyze one's own society. This discussion did not examine historical conditions in feudal society as such, but reflected contemporary socio-political needs and agendas. In the Chinese tradition, history has been not only a method to speak about sensitive topics under strict political censorship, but also a tool for political influence through the writing of history. Conducted as a critique of feudalism, this discussion was one of the many components of the successful attack of the Mao Zedong era. It paved the way for the ascendancy of the reformists and the transformation from state planning towards a market economy.

This article offers an introduction to the discourse of feudalism, its emergence and its use to explain contemporary problems within the Chinese political and economic system, evident even today in academic and theoretical journals. Apart from the discussion about feudalism itself, the aim of this article is to understand how historiography is used for political criticism in China. This practice leaves space for counter-criticism to the official orthodoxy, whatever that currently may be.

For Western scholarly audiences, this article offers new insight into Chinese rhetoric. In contrast to some studies that emphasize strict orthodoxy and exact expressions, which allegedly stifle thought (Schoenhals 1992; Lu 2004), this article demonstrates the liberating and innovative qualities of Chinese Marxist rhetoric. It reveals that the critical quality of Marxist systemic analysis is present even in socialism. It shows Chinese political debate as an effort to redefine and reunderstand the political reality. This article demonstrates that when key analytical terms become contextualized in new situations, they can offer new ways to view problems and provide new solutions. Evidently, the concepts are separate from the content discussed by means of these concepts. Therefore, control over concepts does not

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automatically mean control over content. Likewise, Chinese rhetoric should not be seen as a factionalist tool per se (Kluver 1996). This article shows that Chinese political discussions are about what should and should not be done. As factionalist divides usually emerge over what should be done, many discussions – like the one over feudalism – tend to take sides in factionalist struggles, but less for personal alliances than for shared conceptions of the future policy line.

DISCUSSION IN THE PRESS

Discussion in the press about feudalism, which began in 1978 after the death of Mao Zedong two years earlier, led to a re-evaluation of China's socialist past. This ideological and practical re-evaluation took place in the context of a power struggle among leaders (Garside 1982; Baum 1994). Throughout the years of this discussion, the more ideological and the more practice-oriented factions were contending for influence and power (Dutton & Healy 1985).

In this context, scholars, party theorists, and other individuals interested in politics penned articles about systemic problems, historical injustices and available alternatives. Among many other contemporary topics, feudalism provided a context for the discussion of even sensitive issues about the future that China should choose. Regardless of its historical guise, it was closely related to issues of contemporary interest. It could be used for a veiled criticism of Mao Zedong, for promoting economic reforms, and for advocating reforms in the political system.

The Chinese leaders were active in cultivating these theoretical debates, including the discussion over feudalism (Goldman 1994). At some points, some of them actively showed a green light for adopting the subject of feudalism in public discussion (Anon. 1979; Hua 1979). Many of them referred to feudalism in their public speeches (Hua 1979; Deng 1980). Finally, they included the interpretation that feudalism is a major obstacle on the road to communism in China in one of the main Communist Party documents, *Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party Since the Founding of the People's Republic of China*, thus sealing the new reformist orthodoxy in 1981. This article follows the discussion until the emergence of this new orthodoxy.

The generation who wrote and read these critiques had been brought up believing in the superiority of socialism. Although many wanted political and economic change, few were prepared to introduce exploitative capitalism to China. Many authentically looked for a better form of socialism. While perhaps some writers were less convinced of the self-corrective potential of the socialist system, it would have been counterproductive to invite political censorship or reject the Marxist language that their readers were accustomed to. In Marxism, feudalism was an unquestionably negative label denoting backwardness. It provided a way to discuss problems in the Party and political system without blaming socialism. Moreover, feudalism was a handy concept for explaining why during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) the ultra-leftist line could be extremely left and still wrong. According to Joseph (1984), feudalism made it possible to argue that hastening to socialism, while disregarding backward material and social conditions, did not advance socialism but actually led to a feudal fascist dictatorship.

Feudalism was only one topic in a wider political and economic discussion taking place in the official press (Salmenkari 2006), both in the theoretical platforms of the Communist Party (Goldman 1994) and outside the official system with wall posters and unofficial publications of the contemporary democracy movement (Nathan 1986; Paltemaa 2005). Understandably, the discussion about feudalism reflected other topics in this discussion. To tackle problems of the socialist system, which had been revealed during the Mao era, this wider discussion demanded changes in the political system. Critics detected problems, such as the severe concentration of power, and proposed to overcome them with elections and other processes of leadership selection and rotation, as well as with systems of checks and balances. At the time, persecutions committed during the Cultural Revolution became public and were discussed not only through the human rights agenda (Svensson 2002; Salmenkari 2007), but also through literary and artistic works and exposés of personal experiences (King 1981; Barme 1979). To resolve both problems of the arbitrary use of power and of human right violations, the discussion promoted the rule of law. It also sought to liberate culture and scientific research from political oversight and censorship.

The discussion took place at a time when the economic debate about whether to prioritize equality or growth, prevalent since the 1960s, was turning towards the victory of the party line which was prepared to accept more inequality in order to generate higher economic growth. The planned economy of the Mao era was giving way to economic liberalization and the producers' economic responsibility (Zweig 1997; Naughton 1995). According to Tang and Parish (2000), these years saw the socialist social contract being replaced by a market social contract. While the former had promised security and egalitarianism in exchange for dependency on and obedience to the Communist Party, the new social contract promised individual choice and growing consumption, but also more inequality and risk.

HISTORY, LEARNING, AND MORAL JUDGEMENT

The discussion about feudalism relied on an understanding of history as having two features which make history useful for contemporary criticisms. The first perceives that certain patterns repeat themselves throughout history. As the Song era historian Sima Guang (1019–1086) established, history provides universal examples for people to learn from.[1] This form of historical analysis is well described by Huang Chun-Chieh (2007: 180), who writes,

> Thinking concretely and analogically, the Chinese people are able to communicate with the past and to extrapolate meanings from history. In this way, historical experience in China becomes a library in which modern readers may engage in creative dialogues with the past.

The second feature is the moral evaluation of both historical and contemporary situations. Throughout the 1978–1982 discussion, as is common in Chinese historiography in general, writers sought to establish standards for correct behaviour, whether in terms of morals, good government, or economic welfare. This judgment is not limited to individual historical figures and governments. According to Benjamin Schwartz (1996: 23), Chinese historiography has traditionally aimed at detecting reasons for humanity to deviate from the good normative order and finding ways to restore this order. The discussion about feudalism pursued these same questions in the socialist context. Analogy and historical criticism have persuasive power because Chinese history writing does not share some of the basic tenets of modern Western historiography, such as pursuing value-free understanding of unique historical events.

Because the discussion was framed in terms of learning from history, regardless of its harsh criticism of problems in the existing system, it was essentially a corrective, rather than denunciating, discourse. Using the concept of feudalism helped to demonstrate that unwanted practices did not belong to socialism, despite the fact that many of them (such as a personality cult or privileges for the party elite) could be found in many other socialist countries as well. By defining feudalist influences as ideological relics of an earlier historical stage, socialism itself was presented as the solution to these problems, at least if it was correctly understood and its institutions were perfected. This duality – highly critical content combined with a claim to aid progress towards a truly socialist system –

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[1] The name of the classic he wrote, 资治通鉴 (*Zi zhi tong jian*), can be translated as 'The comprehensive mirror for aid in government'.

must have been one reason why thorough systemic criticism was possible in the state-controlled press.

I do not claim that this discussion had no motivations to understand history itself. Lawrence Sullivan (1990), who likewise has studied this discussion, sees it as a historiographical debate over the origins of despotism in China and over the relative influence of individual leaders and the economic base in history and progress. Overall, however, this discussion was highly political and highly contemporary. It was a tool for evaluating leaders, for promoting democracy and for advancing the role of the markets in the economy. Many participants wrote their pieces primarily for these political aims.

USING FEUDALISM FOR MORAL EVALUATION

After Mao Zedong died, a critical evaluation of his era began in the official Chinese press. Feudalism, as one theme of this criticism, had emerged already before the open and public discussion. According to Jonathan Unger (1993: 3–4), during the Cultural Revolution ordinary Chinese had already informally used analogies of feudal courts to discuss contemporary power struggles. The concept of feudalism appeared in the Chinese official press first in 1977–1978, when the ultra-leftist theory of all-around dictatorship (*quanmian zhuanzheng*) was refuted as feudal-fascist dictatorship (see, e.g. Ma Zhongyang 1978: 25–28). The term "feudal-fascist dictatorship" was familiar from the Li Yizhe (1995) manifesto *On Socialist Democracy and the Legal System*, first presented in 1974. In 1978, its writers were still in prison and were rehabilitated only in February 1979 (Rosen 1985), but those launching the discussion must have been familiar with their manifesto.

Feudalism was a term that served as a means of criticizing absolutist emperors who very much resembled Mao Zedong. The arrest and trial of so-called "ultra-leftists", including Mao's wife, signaled the opportunity to criticize past problems by linking them to the ascendancy of these people. At the time, it was not permitted to blame Mao Zedong directly, and his role could only be hinted at through allusions. One of these allusions was as a feudal ruler. When articles dwelled on whimsical emperors punishing loyal ministers because they had expressed opinions differing from their own views and allowing empresses and their families to interfere in politics (Li Guangji 1981: 35–36; Li Jinquan 1981: 31), readers could understand the analogy to Mao Zedong, who had permitted the purge of some of his closest allies and whose wife Jiang Qing had been prominent within the ultra-leftist faction.

Feudal emperors arguably encouraged a personality cult, which was utilized by conspirators for denouncing good people and for advancing their own careers (see, e.g. Hu Yunfei 1979: 20). As emperors enjoyed a lifelong tenure, appointed all officials and had absolute powers, the quality of their rule depended on one person (see, e.g. Liu Xuepei & Wang Zhenglü 1980: 4). One needs little imagination to recognize that references to such emperors – who were originally able but in their later years degenerated and ceased to listen to other people's opinions, secluded themselves from society, and left state affairs to eunuchs and relatives of the empress (see, e.g. Li Guangji 1981: 35–36) – actually pointed to Mao Zedong. An article criticizing the Qin emperor Shihuang, whose suppression of critical opinions even among the leading group blocked him from receiving correct information, with the result that the country sank into poverty (Hong Jiayi 1980: 43), seems to allude to the economic catastrophes caused by Mao's unrealistic policies, possibly hinting directly at the famine during the Great Leap Forward (1958–1960).[2] These analogies followed the Confucian practice of evaluating rulers morally, as well as the customary Chinese form of covert criticism through seemingly unrelated references to history.

Similar kinds of analogies were made between the feudalist system and many practices prevalent during the Cultural Revolution, sometimes explicitly (see, e.g. Wang Yue 1979: 3; Dong Zhixin & Yang Shaoping 1979: 8; Hong Yi & Chuan Fu 1980: 3). Under feudalism, people were not equal, but their rank determined the privileges they enjoyed and even their treatment in court (see, e.g. Yang Yize 1980: 18–19). While many writers only hinted that Communist Party members likewise enjoyed privileged treatment, others explicitly made the connection. One article maintained that in socialist China, privileges manifested in the form of using one's position for material gain or to avoid punishment, using political inequality to suppress democracy and violate human rights, and as an authoritarian work style. It called this situation "distribution according to power", in contrast to the socialist principle of "distribution according to labour" (Gao Lie 1979: 35).

ERADICATING FEUDALISM IN THE ECONOMY

Some articles criticized mistaken policies of the past, but many targeted contemporary issues. These writers adopted historical materialism as one element of their criticism. Historical materialism presents historical progress through the categories of slave society, feudalism, capitalism, and socialism. The Stalinist and Maoist dogma maintained that socialism requires the uprooting of capitalism. These writers argued that, by concentrating on the anti-capitalist struggle, the

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[2] The writer strengthens this analogy with his evaluation of Qin Shihuang as a contradictory figure with great achievements and big mistakes.

Communists had ignored that the main threat for socialism in underdeveloped countries actually came from feudalism, not from capitalism (see, e.g. Wang Haibo 1981).[3] These critics argued that state-socialism had replicated many elements of the feudal system that had preceded socialism in these countries (see, e.g. Du Haozhi 1980: 79). For them, the feudal economic system was still manifest, in disregard of expertise and new technologies, in the centralization and bureaucratization of economic decision-making, as well as in self-sufficiency, low efficiency, and a lack of consideration for cost-efficiency (Du Haozhi 1980: 77). This was not the kind of socialism that Marx, when assuming that socialism would follow capitalism, had advocated (see, e.g. Qian Hourui 1980). Stalinist and Maoist economic measures, such as collectivization, could not liberate people from exploitation as long as the Chinese economy was too backward (see, e.g. Jin Jingfang 1980: 4).

Postulating that state-socialism had promoted many characteristics of feudalism as socialism, critics argued that socialism could make use of some capitalist approaches (Du Haozhi 1980: 79–80). In opposition to feudalism, articles recommended the adoption of certain features that these advanced systems – capitalism and socialism – both share. These included the commodity economy, markets, democracy, and the recognition of each individual's value (see, e.g. Xiao Liang 1980; Dong Zhixin & Yang Shaoping 1979: 8). In contrast to the self-sufficient natural economy of feudalism, articles saw both capitalism and socialism as relying on modern mass production and based on an effective circulation of goods (see, e.g. Zhang Youren 1981). Thus, the reinterpretation of Marxism-Leninism, of which the criticism of feudalism was a part, supported economic reforms against the Mao era hostility towards the markets. It endorsed commodity production and rebuked the old-style command economy, which prioritized production targets (see, e.g. Li Zhi 1980: 3).

Some writers classified the command economy as feudalistic. They complained about the subjectification of economic decisions to political power and the excessive concentration of power in economic management (see, e.g. Lin Jingyao & Chen Yuan 1980: 35; Yang Chenxun 1980: 3). Some, for example, blamed feudalist roots for the emphasis on state interest and central planning over the initiatives and interests of locality, enterprise, and the individual (Weng Jian et al. 1979: 4). Under socialism, cadres still planned and dictated how goods and funds were distributed, circulated, and used (Gao Shaoxian 1979: 62). According to critics, the feudal economic system inhibited economic progress when it established state monopolies, concentrated on agriculture at the cost of manufacturing and trade, and sought self-sufficiency (see, e.g. Yang Peixin 1981: 20–27; Du Haozhi 1980: 77). Although some economic measures during the Chinese imperial era can indeed be interpreted in these terms, these writers actually sought to repudiate the Mao era economic line of self-sufficiency and state ownership.

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[3] My interpretation thus differs from that of Lawrence Sullivan (1990), who takes Chinese writers' gloomy descriptions of the prevalence of feudalism through Chinese history all the way to socialism (because the small-scale peasant economy still continues to be the material base in China) as a justification for postponing democratization. Instead, these articles argue that China needs to change its material base by making up for the backwardness of its commodity economy and mass production in order to overcome its history of despotism.

These critics advocated the commodity economy and market competition. They wanted to reduce the role of economic planning and they wished China to open up to the international markets. Some showed how administrative control over the economy can cause a waste of human and material resources (see, e.g. Bai Gang 1980: 29). Some labeled state ownership as feudalistic, distinguishing it from proper socialist collective ownership (Weng Shisheng & Pan Shuming 1981: 41). Although seldom using the term "market", which was still a term with ideologically undesirable connotations, articles advocated adopting the market economy to China. They argued that the uprooting of feudalist influences was an imperative for economic progress towards modernization (see, e.g. Ren Jiyu 1979: 3). They challenged the view that egalitarian austerity was more socialist than economic inequalities, which could be helpful in creating progress. To overcome these customary attitudes, one writer argued that since feudal rulers are disinterested in the people's well-being, they make poverty a virtue and perceive even normal material needs as unnatural cravings. In contrast, true socialism improves people's living standards and attends to their demands for material rights, instead of labeling these reasonable claims as hedonistic (Ren Jiyu 1979: 3; 1980: 4).

These arguments concerning the economic aspects of feudalism actively promoted the reformist economic line, stressing economic efficiency over ideological correctness. They turned to the criticism of feudalism as they looked for new interpretations of Marxism to replace the Stalinist dogma. Both claims mentioned above – that Mao Zedong had committed mistakes and that the markets are an essential part of the socialist economy – were later included in the reform era official orthodoxy.

FEUDALISM AND POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

The third line of argumentation against feudalism was less appealing to the new reformist leadership, and much less of its program has since been put into practice. The third line advocated reforms within the political system. It used the topic of feudalism to discuss the excessive concentration of power in the emperor, who was unchecked by laws and institutions (see, e.g. Yan Jiaqi 1980: 14; Li Chuntang 1980: 60–61). It demonstrated the powerlessness of the ordinary people under such a system, regardless of the claim that socialism was empowering them (see, e.g. Dong Zhixin & Yang Shaoping 1979: 9). According to certain articles, a feudal denial of individualism and patriarchal dominance over one's dependents still continued under socialism (see, e.g. Liu Xiaojun 1980: 3; Ren Jiyu 1980: 2). Feudalist power relations continued to make workers so dependent on cadres that they had to compete for the favours and material allocations that their superiors had the power to distribute (Liu Xiaojun 1980: 3).

Feudal leaders were typically seen as dictating decisions, suppressing differing opinions, and evading all supervision. These articles argued that, as appointments rested in the hands of superiors, officials were selected on the grounds of personal intimacy and flattery rather than talent and honesty (see, e.g. Liu Xiaoming 1980: 3; Li Guihai 1981: 95–96). Dependency on one's superiors makes people seek favors from their superiors instead of caring for their subordinates or the consequences of their actions (see, e.g. Liu Xiaoming 1980: 3). In the socialist version of this feudalist dependency, obedience to one's superiors arguably precedes obedience to one's organization and to majority decisions (see, e.g. Jiqun Nanhao 1981: 16). Members in the "clan" of a leader's loyal followers utilize these dependencies in order to distribute benefits and open backdoor opportunities amongst themselves (see, e.g. Hong Yi & Chuan Fu 1980: 3; Dong Zhixin & Yang Shaoping 1979: 8). This kind of factionalism, favoritism and nepotism was seen to encourage corruption, privilege-seeking, and indifference to the needs of the people. Along with corruption, demands of superiors to obey their will contributed to irrational economic management (see, e.g. Liu Xiaoming 1980: 3).

Hierarchical power relations and an excessive concentration of power arguably continued in socialist China. Articles proclaimed that some cadres still expected total obedience, dictated decisions, refused to listen to any differing opinions, punished their opponents, and anticipated that their position will bring extra material benefits (see, e.g. Gao Lie 1979: 35; Li Jinquan 1981: 31). Some writers noted that socialism could even exacerbate these problems. A centralized economic administration in a modern industrialized country can cause power to be concentrated to a degree that was unseen during the feudal era (Yang Chenxun 1980: 3). Privilege-seeking behavior occurred easily because socialist collective ownership granted unalienable powers to a single cadre, not only in the Party but also in the government and in economic management (Xiong Jiali 1980: 58).

In strongly moralistic terms, articles contrasted this type of behavior with proper socialist behavior. They saw it as incompatible with the social and political equality of true socialism, in which the powers of cadres are granted by the people and cadres are obliged to use them for serving the people (see, e.g. Qin De 1980: 16). Articles appealed to the self-interest of the Communist Party as well. They recognized the unpopularity of privileges. Articles warned that the misuse of power harmed the Party's reputation and the masses' enthusiasm to work for the ends determined by the Party (see, e.g. Qin De 1980: 16). Consequently, even the socialist character of the Chinese system allegedly became endangered.

According to articles, adequate institutions were needed to control, sanction, and prevent feudalistic behavior by socialist functionaries. Elections were a commonly mentioned remedy to overcome the excessive concentration of power (see, e.g. Li Chuntang 1980: 62). In addition, articles advocated that socialist China must abolish lifelong tenure, improve the one-man/one-vote system in party committees, grant courts and inspective organs necessary independence, and recruit by announcing vacancies and holding examinations for applicants (Lin Jingyao & Chen Yuan 1980: 35, 38–39). Articles maintained that China needed an effective evaluation system for promotions and awards. In order to permit resignation in a dignified way, China also needed a retirement system allowing retired cadres to sustain their prestige and living standards and a consultation system permitting retirees to continue contributing in public affairs (Gong Pu 1980: 3).

Certain writers linked cadre privileges with the inadequate use of traditional methods of inner-party democracy (Gao Lie 1979: 37). Others, however, put little trust in inner-party mechanisms without wider democratization. One article argued that limited democracy among the ruling class under feudalism was only a tool of dictatorship. It excluded the masses, and its institutions could limit the emperor's powers only to the point that he himself allowed (Wei Guozhong 1979: 91). Articles advocated popular supervision, elections, and legal sanctions for uprooting the feudalist working style among communist cadres (see, e.g. Li Zhi 1980: 3). Articles pointed out that if a leader had no fear of losing his post, and if he could only rise in the official hierarchy and not be demoted or dismissed, there were few means available to compel him not to resort to bureaucratic and patriarchal working styles or even misuses of power (Jiang Guotian 1980: 20). It was posited that when the people cannot elect or recall cadres nominated by their superiors for life, cadres will not be responsible for the masses (Jiang Guotian 1980: 20; Li Chuntang 1980: 62). One article recommended that, apart from elections, the masses should be permitted to use the press, meetings, and wall posters as additional channels for exposing cadre misconduct (Hu Yunfei 1979: 21).

Eliminating feudalism was said to require separating the functions of the Party and the government, strengthening the people's congresses, and improving socialist law (Yan Jiaqi 1980: 15–16). As one had an obligation to obey the decisions of a ruler, an individual was not protected by the law, writers reminded.

Accordingly, feudalism barred the rule of law in several ways. Under feudalism the ruler's power was unchecked and not restricted by laws; political intrusion in the juridical process was common (see, e.g. Wang Yue 1979: 3); the emperor was both the highest legislator, the head of the judiciary, and the head of the administration (Zhang Jin & Liu Hainian 1980: 18–22); players without institutional position, such as eunuchs and favorite concubines, wielded political influence over emperors; and people were treated unequally depending on their status (see, e.g. Yang Yize 1980: 18–19).

Often articles depicted the lawlessness of arbitrary arrests and punishments for disobedience towards one's superiors (see, e.g. Weng Jian et al. 1979: 5), making allusions to persecutions during the Cultural Revolution. Sometimes these problems were expressed in the context of human rights discourse. One writer, for example, argued that, unlike in bourgeois societies that proclaimed respect for human rights, in a feudal society there are no independent individuals with recognized rights but only subjects who exist for their rulers. Due to the lack of democratic tradition in China, feudalist relationships between superiors and subordinates were often confused with socialist ones (Ren Jiyu 1979: 3; 1980: 2).

The discussion marked the relationship between feudalism and democracy as mutually exclusive (see, e.g. Xiong Jiali 1980: 52–53). One view saw feudalism as an obstacle of democratization (see, e.g. Sun Wenliang 1980: 14), which was necessary for modernization (see, e.g. Li Zhi 1980: 3). Therefore, uprooting feudalism was mandatory for both democratization and modernization (Jia Chunfeng & Teng Wensheng 1980: 5). Another view took democracy itself to be the best way to root out feudalism (see, e.g. Dong Zhixin & Yang Shaoping 1979: 8). In this way, democracy was introduced as necessary for the socialist system, which needed to rid itself of feudalist influences (see, e.g. Jia Chunfeng & Teng Wensheng 1980: 5). According to the third view, the lack of democracy explained how feudalism still had a place in socialist China. Articles argued that conspirators had succeeded in ascending to political power during the Cultural Revolution because the people, lacking an institutionalized right to rule the state, were unable to stop antidemocratic acts in time (Jiang Guotian 1980: 20; Dong Zhixin & Yang Shaoping 1979: 9). All three types of arguments used feudalism to make democratization an imperative for socialism, although their motivations differed. Some sought to guarantee economic progress, others to eradicate backward customs, and still others to prevent misuses of power.

Some writers openly recognized that bourgeois regimes have introduced institutions to resolve many of the problems inherent in feudalist political systems. They noted that bourgeois states have succeeded in checking many of the problems prevalent in China with elections and by recognizing their citizens' political and social equality (Dong Zhixin & Yang Shaoping 1979: 8). Consequently, these states no longer centralize all powers in one individual, but divide powers between the parliament and the executive branch. By using elections and limited tenure to transfer powers, they have succeeded in putting an end to palace intrigues and bloody power struggles (Yan Jiaqi 1980: 13, 15). These articles explicitly urged socialist China to learn from these bourgeois initiatives.

FEUDALISM AND THE FACTIONALIST STRUGGLE

Factionalist disputes were evident in all discussions of this time, including the discussion about feudalism. Among the articles attacking feudalist conservatism and cultural dictatorship, seeking to free scientific innovation and artistic creation from ideological shackles (Lin Jingyao & Chen Yuan 1980: 35), some made implicit factionalist allusions. These articles referred to Confucian classics, which enjoyed absolute authority in imperial China. Diverging from the four Confucian classical texts allegedly brought either punishment or censure (Chen Zhengfu & He Zhijing 1981: 16–17). In feudal times, what was not in the classics could not be done (Ren Jiyu 1979: 3). Critics compared this to the special authority of the four volumes of the *Selected Works of Mao Zedong* during the Cultural Revolution. Likewise, they implicitly condemned the demands of some contemporary leaders that whatever Mao Zedong once said must continue to be a guiding principle even after his death. At the time, another faction challenged this stand by revitalizing the Marxist connection between theory and practice. Arguing that feasibility and successful results determine correctness, it maintained that ideological dogmas must be discarded if they do not work in practice (Schoenhals 1991). The aforementioned critics of feudal cultural dictatorship spoke against dogmatism and for this faction which, according to their own slogan, was "seeking truth from the facts", not from ideological authorities. In contrast to this approach, as one article put it, the conservative view of sages and emperors as an unchanging Heavenly principle was the feudalist criterion of truth (Wang Rending 1980: 24). In the discussion about feudalism, one writer even openly supported a single "correct Party line" (Zhu Hua 1980: 4), that of modernization policy, which rejected the arguments of its opponents by labelling them as feudalist.

However, not all writers took sides. Many condemned power struggles as themselves being feudalist. Some critical analogues to contemporary leaders pointed not only to Mao Zedong, but to the reformist leaders as well. One article about Tang Emperor Taizong, who had been the *second* emperor of a new powerful dynasty, appreciated Emperor Taizong's farsightedness in encouraging remonstrance, selecting talented people from various backgrounds, restricting court intrigues, and allowing those with ministerial powers to check him (Wei Guozhong 1979: 87–90). An obvious comparison was being made here with Mao, who had failings in these respects. Yet the same article criticized Tang Taizong for attacking a neighbouring country it traditionally had good relations with, disregarding the opposition of ministers and the people alike, and for heeding remonstrance only when it helped him to stabilise his own position. For Taizong, democratic atmosphere among the leadership was only a tool for his rule, not a real check and balance for his authoritarianism (Wei Guozhong 1979: 91). These allusions seem to refer more to China's border conflict with Vietnam and the contemporary strongman Deng Xiaoping's withdrawal of his support from the Democracy Wall Movement than to the remote events of the Mao era. Both the brief war with Vietnam and the suppression of the Democracy Wall took place in March 1979, about the time when this article was written. The message of this article was not that China needs a new, more enlightened leader, but that China needs institutions that can check the powers of any leader.

COUNTER-DISCOURSE

This is a story about how the Chinese historiographic tradition was used for attacking the existing political and theoretical orthodoxy. This attack relied on the assumption that history provides universal examples for moral behaviour and normative order. It successfully contributed to the emergence of a new orthodoxy, which consequently replaced the old one. As Yuezhi Zhao (2008) shows, the Maoist left is now marginalized and often forced to express its views outside of the mainstream media where it becomes vulnerable to closures, censorship, and arrests. She argues that the present regime suppresses these voices because they defend those who suffer under the new economic policy and because they claim the right to interpret communism outside the Communist Party.

Ironically, in the same manner of using history for political criticism, the Mao era now provides a counter-discourse for those who have lost ground in the economic reforms. Again, history is evaluated in moral terms and linked to an interlocutor's own time through a moral mapping of what constitutes a good government. Calls for justice in the name of the Mao era values reflect resistance by a subaltern counter-public against liberal intellectuals and those Communist Party leaders who were purged during the Cultural Revolution and whose critical evaluation of the Mao era still remains the hegemonic elite discourse. As Nancy Fraser (1997: 81) defines it, subaltern counter-publics refer to "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs". This counter-discourse reflects a moral economy among the ordinary Chinese and is often articulated in informal daily occasions. This kind of informal moral economy among the underprivileged people is a form of resistance (Scott 1976). It is expressed within a moral counter-public which, however, is widely marginalized in the elite-defined hegemonic publicity. The counter-public's voice seldom appears in the media or in the official documents and statements, but it is widely present in informal contexts.

Although the elites have widely rejected Maoist standards for equality and justice, ordinary Chinese people often demonstrate "a hidden 'authentic' form of plebeian discourse/agency" (Brass 2002: 337) when they continue to appeal to the Maoist moral standards. Again and again, I have witnessed ordinary Chinese people commenting on contemporary injustices with the statement: "This could never have happened during the Mao era." Researchers have shown that many Chinese villagers feel nostalgia for the Mao era, during which the peasants had a respectable political and moral status and political campaigns combated cadre corruption more efficiently than any contemporary measures have done (O'Brien & Li 1999; Jacka 2005; Yan 1992).

This subaltern moral economy does not remain within the context of casual and informal, but is often voiced through official channels as well. Individuals and groups seeking justice through petitions (Thireau & Hua 2003) or collective action frequently appeal to the Mao era values. Protesting workers, pensioners, and farmers often frame as injustice an employer's or a local government's withdrawal from the Mao era reciprocal relationship, guaranteeing their livelihood and social security in exchange for their diligent work (Hurst & O'Brien 2002; Lee 2000). Apart from these moral values being widely shared, there are practical reasons for protesters to choose to appeal to the Mao era rhetoric. When the Chinese state represses protest activities that it sees as illegitimate, Maoist slogans permit protesters to make their claims in a way which demonstrates their ultimate loyalty to the socialist system (So 2007). These slogans are readily available when the framing of grievances needs to be relatively mass-based, spontaneous, and informal, given the restricted publicity available for Chinese protesters (Hurst 2004).

Moreover, Chinese workers have little experience in making claims for their own interests outside of the language belonging to the paternalist state which formerly used to take care of them (Chen 2003). Hence, the Mao era moral economy provides little protection for workers who are employed by the state. It becomes a tool of resistance only after workers lose their state employment and all moral, political, and economic rights belonging to the worker in a state enterprise (Lee 2000).

This article has introduced a cycle of historic analysis as a tool for political claim-making. In the case of feudalism, this cycle proceeded from an informal criticism of contemporary politics to open attack, supported by one leadership faction, and further to establishing the new orthodoxy. This attack succeeded in establishing the new orthodoxy. The irony of the Chinese-style political historiography is that comparing the past to the present is not the privilege of the powerful. Confucian historiography was created as much for criticizing immoral rulers as for strengthening a virtuous rule. Although the new orthodoxy no longer has a need to speak through historical allusions, one popular discourse still defends the old dismantled orthodoxy by framing it as an ideal historical moral order.

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