

The 20th Party Congress of the Soviet Union and Mao Zedong's Tortuous Path

by Lin Yunhui*

With regard to socialist development in China, Mao Zedong once said, "at the beginning of building a new state, we just copied the Soviet Union as there was no path to follow."¹ He also said "during the first three years of recovery after Liberation, we were quite confused about development. Later on, when we drew up our first five-year plan, we were still not very clear about it, so we basically had to do what the Soviet Union did. But we were not satisfied and felt uneasy."² "In *On the Ten Major Relationships*, published in April 1956, we began to set up our own line on development. The principles of development were the same as the Soviet Union's but there were some differences in method. We had our own ideas."³ "Our own line on development" must have directly originated from the exposure of Stalin's mistakes at the 20th Party Congress of the Soviet Union. However, as circumstances changed, Mao's view's on the 20th Party Congress also changed a lot. This directly influenced the theory and practice of China's own brand of socialism.

Taking the Soviet Union as a Warning, Follow China's Own Path

According to Bo Yibo's recollections, all that happened after Stalin's death - including the exposure of Beria, the reversal of a series of unjust and wrong verdicts, the strengthening of agriculture, debates about the heavy industry centered policy, the change of attitude toward Yugoslavia and the rapid replacement of the successor chosen by Stalin - had made the Central Committee of the CPC aware of the problems in Stalin's and Soviet Union's experience. "In my memory, Chairman Mao advanced 'taking the Soviet Union as a warning' at the end of 1955."⁴ There is evidence for Bo's version of events. That year, Mao and the secretaries of provincial and regional Party

committees discussed and drafted *Seventeen Regulations on Agriculture* (the first draft for *Outline of Forty Regulations on Agricultural Development*), and wrote in the introduction to *The Socialist Upsurge in China's Countryside* that all trades and industries should criticize the right-leaning mentality in order to hasten the development of socialism. However, it was after the 20th Party Congress of the Soviet Union in February 1956 that an overall consideration of the Chinese socialist construction road started.

The 20th Party Congress of the Soviet Union was the first congress convened after Stalin's death in 1953. The political report addressed to the congress by Khrushchev, the First Secretary of the Party Central Committee of the Soviet Union, and speeches given by other delegates revealed the contradictions in Soviet society and Stalin's mistakes. These mistakes were:

- in state power, it was wrong to concentrate all the power in the Center as in the past. The power of the republics should be maintained and strengthened, leaving the matters that came within the jurisdiction of the republics for them to handle; correspondingly many industry enterprises controlled by the Center should be transferred to local administration in order to enhance the authority of local soviets and enterprises.
- in agriculture, the system of agricultural work-plans should be replaced and all aspects of bureaucratic central planning abolished, leaving specific planting plans to the agricultural collectives. The Central should only stipulate the state levy and the amount of the farm products purchased.
- in theory and ideology, Stalin was not necessarily correct when he stated in his *Economic Problems of Socialism in the Soviet Union* that the overall crisis of capitalism would bring production increases and technological progress in capitalist countries to a full stop. Mechanically copying old quotations, formulas and doctrines in theory and propaganda work showed serious dogmatism.

At the secret meeting after the closure of the congress, Khrushchev revealed more about a series of shocking events that showed how Stalin had devastated socialist democracy and trampled on the socialist system of the rule of law.

As the first socialist country, Soviet Union had long been considered a

model for socialism. All that people had seen and heard was that the people of the Soviet Union enjoyed a high standard of living in a heaven on earth. As for the suppression of the opposition in the late 1930s, it had long been concluded that those executed were “enemies of the people.” All the newly-released facts told another story. This broke down the long-standing deification of Stalin. A great figure as Stalin could make mistakes and Soviet socialism could be imperfect. This made people aware that the process of understanding socialism had not come to an end and that Communists in each country had to search further through their own practice. This undoubtedly represented a great intellectual liberation for the international communist movement.

Mao and other leaders of Central Committee of CPC made positive comments on doing away with blind faith in Stalin at the 20th Party Congress of the Soviet Union. On 17 March, 1956, Mao said at a meeting of the Secretariat of the Central Committee of CPC that Khrushchev’s “secret speech,” especially the problems referred to in the speech and the influence they have on the world are being discussed worldwide. We have to talk about them, too. Now at least two points can be made: he has taken the lid off; he has made a blunder. When we say he has taken the lid off, we mean his secret speech shows that the Soviet Union, the Soviet communist party and Stalin are not correct in every aspect, which helps do away with superstition. When we say he has made a blunder, we mean his secret speech contains grave mistakes both in content and method. Let us all make a study of whether this is so or not.¹

On 19 and 24 March, Mao presided over a meeting of the Political Bureau of Central Committee. In discussing the draft of *On the Historical Experience of Proletariat Dictatorship*, Mao made four points, the fourth of which said: Khrushchev took the lid off and made a blunder. He did away with the superstitious belief that the Soviet Union, the Soviet Communist Party and Stalin are correct in all respects, and this helps combat dogmatism. We should not copy mechanically everything Soviet any longer. We should think for ourselves. The fundamental tenets of Marxism-Leninism should be combined with the reality of Chinese revolution and construction in the quest for a socialist construction road for our country. As for the errors of Khrushchev’s secret speech, we should do our best to remedy them.²

Mao said when meeting foreign party delegates during the 8th Party

Congress that the 20th Party Congress of the Soviet Union exposed Stalin's mistakes and this criticism was good. Khrushchev's speech had one merit. It destroyed deification, did away with superstition and took the lid off. This is a liberation, a war of liberation. Everybody dares to voice his opinion and this makes us think. This can be seen as a process of affirmation, negation and the negation of negation.¹

Based precisely on this understanding of the 20th Party Congress of the Soviet Union, *On the Historical Experience of Proletariat Dictatorship*, an article discussed and finalized by an extended meeting of the Political Bureau of Central Committee of CPC, focused on the importance and necessity of combating the personality cult and dogmatism in addition to refuting attacks from the western capitalist world and affirming the historical merits of Stalin in constructing Soviet socialism. It said, "the developing socialist workforce, the socialist economic and political system and the party's life increasingly conflict with the mentality of the personality cult. The 20th Party Congress of the Soviet Union fought against the personality cult. It was a great and brave fight to remove the obstacles on the road of advance for the Soviet Party and people."² It also points out, "It is still necessary for the present to do away with dogmatic blind faith."³

Guided by the above-mentioned thinking and through discussion in the extended meeting of Political Bureau of Central Committee of CPC, Mao wrote *On the Ten Major Relationships*. He clearly pointed out, "Recently the Soviets exposed some shortcomings and mistakes in the process of their socialist construction. They took a roundabout course. Do we still want to repeat it? We avoided detours before through learning from their experience. Now we should learn this lesson even more thoroughly."⁴ With respect to the ten relationships, Mao said, the five relationships between industry and agriculture, between the coastal area and the inland, between the central and the local, between the national, the collective and the individual, and between national defense and economic construction are the main ones.¹

The relationship between industry and agriculture refers to the relationship between heavy industry, light industry and agriculture. It mainly counters Stalin's undue emphasis on the priority of heavy industry. Mao pointed out that in this aspect, the Chinese had not made mistakes in principles and had done a better job than the Soviet Union and some East

European countries. The present problem was to adjust appropriately the investment ratio between heavy industry, light industry and agriculture and further the development of light industry and agriculture. But the focus of investment remains on heavy industry. Related to this is the relationship between national defense and economic construction. Only when economic construction was well under way could national defense be solidly grounded.

The relationship between the central and the local refers to the Soviet economic system of the central unified planning which amasses all the power to the center and has local authorities in a stranglehold with no room to move. This fosters bureaucracy and hinders local initiative. Therefore, we should both have a strong unified central leadership with national unified planning and discipline and bring local initiative into full play in a manner adapted to specific regional characteristics.

With respect to the relationship between state, the collective and the individual, Mao pointed out, the Soviet way impoverished the peasants. They took measures such as obligatory sale which took too much away from the farmers and gave them too low a price. This way of accumulating funds seriously damaged farmers' initiatives. They wanted the hens to lay more eggs but did not feed them, and horses to run faster but gave them no hay. What nonsense! Therefore, we should simultaneously consider the interests of both the state and the factories; the state and workers; factories and workers; the state and co-operatives, the state and farmers, and the co-operatives and farmers. We cannot pay attention to one side only.

In addition, concerning the relationship between Han nationality and other minorities, party members and non-party members, revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries, right and wrong, and China and foreign countries, the report also drew lessons from Stalin's mistakes and proposed corresponding measures.

On the whole, however, the problems touched on in *On the Ten Major Relationships* mainly remained at the policy level. It was not until the 8th Party Congress in September that many of the policies and measures proposed by the political report, and in speeches and resolutions in relation to the report came into contact, to some extent, with institutional and systemic problems of ownership and the system of planning). What Chen Yun summarized as "the

three main bodies and the three complements” mainly reflected this change: in industry and commerce, the state-run and collectively-run operations were the main body complemented by a certain amount of the privately-run operations; in industry and agriculture, planned production was the main body complemented by market-oriented free production with the permission of national planning authorities; in the market, the state market was the main body complemented by free markets led by the state.¹ Later on , along with the enforcement of the policies of the 8th Party Congress, the private economy started developing.

On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among People, a speech delivered by Mao in February 1957 but containing significant modifications when made public in June, offered a basic point of view concerning class struggle in a socialist society which refuted Stalin's incorrect theory that the further socialism goes, the more intense class struggle will be.

Thus, the structure of ownership, the operation of the planned system and the function and the sphere of action of the law of value are somewhat different from that of Stalinist socialism. At the same time, Mao proposed the policy of “Hundred Flowers” policy (Let a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend) and the issue of the correct handling of contradictions among people. The booming economy, dynamic thinking and political unity that emerged across China between the spring in 1956 and the summer of 1957 demonstrated that this quest for a path to socialism was a fruitful one.

Refuting “Total Repudiation”; the Quest Changes Direction

After the Hungarian uprising in October 1956, Mao's comments on the criticism of Stalin at the 20th Party Congress of Soviet Union changed radically. He said in his speech at the Second Plenary Session of the 8th Party congress on 15 November,

I'd like to make one point about the 20th Party Congress of the Soviet Union. I think there are two “swords;” one is Lenin, the other is Stalin. Now the Russians have thrown away the sword of Stalin. Gomulka and some Hungarians picked it up to kill the Soviet Union and refute Stalinism. Many

communist parties in European countries also criticize Soviet Union, with Togliatti as their leader. The imperialists also kill people with this sword, and Dulles picked it up and played with it. This sword was not lent out but thrown away.¹

On 27 January 1957, Mao said more bluntly at the meeting of the Secretaries of provincial, municipal and autonomous regional Party committees, “the 20th Party Congress of the Soviet Union killed Stalin with a single stroke.”² This “kill with a single stroke” could be understood as total repudiation, but if one weighs the words carefully, it seems to be a little different as it focuses more on the impropriety of the mode and method of the refutation.

According to Wu Lengxi’s recollections, criticism of the “total repudiation of Stalin” first appeared on 19 and 20 December, 1956. In the afternoon and evening of those two days, the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the CPC held successive meetings to discuss the draft of the *Second Paper on the Historical Experiences of Proletariat Dictatorship* for modification. Wu recorded in his *Recalling Mao Zedong* that opinions voiced at the meeting focused mainly on five questions, the second of which was “As for the 20th Party Congress of Soviet Union, its positive significance should be affirmed. It is right to criticize Stalin’s mistakes, but Khrushchev’s total repudiation of Stalin is wrong.” Wu continued to say that Mao pointed out specifically, “We should give Stalin a careful analysis. First, his correct aspects, which cannot be erased; secondly, his mistakes, which should be emphasized with a view to their correction; and lastly, we have to be practical and realistic and we cannot repudiate him totally.” This is called “the third mother teaching her son,” and is a sort of syllogism.³

We can basically affirm that the conclusive expression of “total repudiation” was formulated at the meeting of December 1956. However, it was not made public until the Sino-Soviet Debate in the 1960s. On September 6, 1963, the editorial departments of the *People’s Daily* and *Red Flag* journal jointly issued an article on *The Origin and Development of the Divergence between Soviet Communist Party and Ourselves: A Comment on the Public Letter of the Soviet Central Committee*, in which it said, “Khrushchev’s total repudiation of Stalin at the 20th Party Congress of Soviet

Union virtually means the repudiation of the dictatorship of the proletariat, of the fundamental tenets of Marxism-Leninism defended and developed by Stalin. It was precisely in his summing up speech at this congress that Khrushchev began to desert Marxism-Leninism on a series of major issues.”¹ This was the first time that the expression “total repudiation” appeared publicly. Thereafter, it has been used to this day to describe the 20th Party Congress of Soviet Union.²

Half a century later, having the access to the Chinese version of Khrushchev’s “secret speech,” we can safely point out that the conclusion of “total repudiation” is biased and does not tally with the facts. In other words, we may say it is incorrect.

This is because Khrushchev’s “speech” clearly affirmed Stalin’s historical contributions to socialist construction round about the October Revolution, during the Revolutionary Civil War and before 1936. The speech concluded that Stalin’s fight with Trotsky, Zinovyev, and Bukharin was a pro-and-anti struggle around Leninist theory and line, a struggle between socialism and capitalist restoration. It also asserted that there would be no socialist industrialization, no victory of collective agriculture and no socialist victory in the Soviet Union without the triumph of this struggle. Undoubtedly this was a total affirmation of Stalin’s socialist construction line which gave priority to heavy industry, the comprehensive collectivization of agriculture and a cultural revolution. Although the speech says that the suppression of the opposition faction with the charge of being “enemies of the people” resulted directly from Stalin’s personal arbitrariness, and that Stalin’s theory that the further socialism develops, the more intense the class struggle will be is wrong, and although it particularly exposes a series of major events showing Stalin’s suppression and wanton killing of the innocent, it still points out that “all these things were not done by a misguided tyrant. He (referring to Stalin here) thought all this must be done for the benefit and interests of the party and workers and the defense of the fruits of revolution. That’s is where the whole tragedy lies.”¹

As a surge of anti-Soviet and anti-communist sentiment emerged in the capitalist world after the 20th Party Congress of Soviet Union, there developed in the socialist countries in eastern Europe a tendency to cast off Soviet control, which later led to Polish Event and in particular the Hungarian uprising. At that

time, the leader of the Yugoslavian Communist Union, Tito, thought that the cult of Stalin was an institutional problem. He blamed the communist leaders who stuck to Stalinism for being “Stalinists” and asked them to abandon Stalinism. He also emphasized the correctness of the Yugoslavian road. All this, in the eyes of Mao, was a disastrous effect of Khrushchev’s criticism of Stalin. The Chinese communists had a duty to strike back in order to strengthen the existing socialist position. Therefore there was a shift from emphasizing learning from Stalin’s mistakes to an all-out defense of Stalin’s position. This was shown in the *Second Paper on the Historical Experience of Proletariat Dictatorship*, which was discussed and finalized at the extended meeting of Political Bureau of Central Committee of CPC in December 1956.

In the *Second Paper*, the Soviet Union’s experience from the October Revolution to socialist construction led by Stalin was summarized into five points, which read, “All these fundamental matters are the truths of universally applicable Marxism-Leninism.” Although revolution and construction in every country has its own way of development, “basically the October Revolution road represents a universal law for revolution and construction at a certain period in long-term human social development. It is not only the highway to success not for the Soviet proletariat but also the road that the proletariat in other countries must traverse.” The *Second Paper* pointed out that at present, imperialists claimed a mission to “change the character of the communist world.” “What they want is to change this revolutionary road. For decades, revisionist opinions on Marxism-Leninism and the spread of Right opportunism have attempted precisely this avoidance of the only way forward for proletarian liberation.” The *Second Paper* concluded, “The very fact of the Soviet Union’s rapid economic development proves that the Soviet economic system basically suits the development of productive forces and the Soviet political system basically meets the needs of the economic base. Stalin’s errors are not due to the socialist system. It is surely unnecessary to ‘revise’ the socialist system because of these mistakes.” On this basis the *Second Paper* proposed that revisionism be combated. It said, “The severe result of Stalin’s errors is the development of dogmatism. Communists in various countries combat dogmatism in criticizing Stalin’s mistakes. This combat is absolutely necessary. However, some communists adopt an attitude of total repudiation towards Stalin and raise the incorrect slogan of opposing ‘Stalinism’, which helps the

development of revisionism. This revisionist tide is undoubtedly helpful to the imperialists' attack on communism and indeed, imperialists are actively taking advantage of this tide. We have to resolutely oppose revisionism at the same time as we resolutely oppose dogmatism.”¹

It is thus clear that censuring the criticism of Stalin's mistakes at the 20th Party Congress of Soviet Union as “total repudiation” actually further dogmatized and solidified Stalinist socialist theory and practice, thus blocking the quest for China's own road to socialism.

In 1958, *Resolutions about the Congress of Communist Parties and Labor Parties in Each Country Held in Moscow* which was passed at the Second Session of 8th Party congress of the CPC criticized the Yugoslavian Communist Union Program as an “out-and-out revisionist program” and at the same time laid down the general line for China's own socialist construction, ie “Go all out, aim high and achieve greater, faster, better and more economical results in building socialism,” and initiated the Great Leap Forward campaign and the People's Communes campaign. These were all reflections of the double-bladed sword of criticism of “total repudiation.”

Not only was the practice of Socialist construction in 1958 was not only a communist fantasy; it also remained in the theoretical framework of Stalinist socialism. It went even further than Stalin's framework because it practiced a rapid transition from collective ownership to ownership by the whole people, tried to upgrade the supply system of distribution to “free meals” communism, initiated steel-making guided by the principle of “taking steel as a key link,” made the ratio of heavy industry higher than before, set blowing the “communist wind” that made the peasants even poorer than the Soviet's surplus grain collection system did, and opened the “two account books” of the central and the local authorities which not only hindered initiative at the central and the local level but led to the practice of making false, exaggerated and empty claims. Consequently, the new tendency to search for China's own road to socialism initiated through *On the Ten Major Relationships* and the 8th Party congress was swept away and turned into its opposite.

Opposition to “Revisionism” Goes Astray

The failure of the “Great Leap Forward” led to such grave economic

difficulties that Chinese communists had to face reality. That is why the economic policies formulated at the 8th Party congress were put forward again to a certain extent. At the same time, however, the Sino-Soviet conflict was also escalating. The public Sino-Soviet debate begun in 1963 again brought up the issue of how to understand the historical experience of the international communist movement. The comments by the Central Committee of CPC's Ninth Congress on the public letter of the Soviet Party Central Committee made another summary on the basis of the two papers on the historical experience of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

These documents say, "The leader of the Soviet communist party totally repudiated Stalin," "which meant the repudiation of Marxism-Leninism as defended and developed by Stalin and the opening up of a way forward for the implementation of an overall revisionism line." The Yugoslav road was the "capitalist road." The documents emphasize, "Socialist society will be a very long historical period, through which runs the struggle between the capitalist class and proletariat, the issue of 'who beats whom' between the capitalist and the socialist road and in which there is the danger of restoration of capitalism." They further conclude that a privileged stratum has formed in Soviet society. "This privileged stratum is the main part of the present capitalist class in the Soviet Union and the social basis for Khrushchev's revisionist clique. This clique is the representative of the Soviet capitalist class, especially the privileged stratum of this class."¹

This series of conclusions made possible the emergence of theories of the "proletarian cultural revolution," such as "continuous revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat," and the idea that revolution's key target was "the capitalist-roaders in power within the Party" and that the capitalist class was precisely "within the Party."

It was during the Sino-Soviet Debate of the 1960s that Mao raised the strategy of "Combating and Preventing Revisionism." At that time the policy of *san-zi-yi-bao* (more plots for private use, more free markets, more enterprises with sole responsibility for their own profit or loss and the fixing of output quotas on a household basis) set within the Party was branded a "revisionist program." The circular of the Central Committee of the CPC released on May 16, 1966, said bluntly that "Khrushchev's ilk are sleeping right beside us." A *Great Historical Document*, a paper jointly issued in the name of the editorial

departments of the *People's Daily* and the *Red Flag* journal, says more clearly that what Stalin has bequeathed to us is the lesson that his revolution was not thoroughgoing enough. It said that Stalin was a great Marxist-Leninist who actually did away with a large number of representatives of the counter-revolutionary capitalist class who had made their way into the Party..... His shortcoming was that he did not admit in his theory that class and class struggle exist throughout the whole historical period of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the issue of who which side wins or loses in the revolution has not yet been settled. If we fail, capitalism may be restored. The article says that this is just where Mao's historical contribution lies: "Comrade Mao has fully understood the experience of the Soviet Union. In his series of great works and instructions, in this great historical document (referring to Circular of May 16) and the great practice of the proletarian cultural revolution that he has initiated and led in person, he has solved all these problems correctly. This is an important landmark indicating that Marxism has developed into a new stage."¹ The Chinese road to socialism took a wrong turning just as this "new stage"— the Cultural Revolution--was being hymned.

To summarize, Mao's search for China's own road to socialism was closely related to the understanding of and comments on the 20th Party Congress of the Soviet Union and Khrushchev's criticism of Stalin in his "secret speech," shifting from affirmation of exposure of Stalin's mistakes as lifting the lid and an ideological liberation and from taking Soviet Union as a warning to refuting the 20th Party Congress of Soviet Union as a "total repudiation of Stalin," to affirming Stalin's socialist construction theory and line as the general law to be followed by other socialist countries and to criticizing the market-oriented reform which had just begun in socialist countries as revisionism and the restoration of capitalism. Correspondingly, the search for China's own socialist road made a sudden turn from its original correct approach good to the tragic "proletarian cultural revolution." "Total repudiation" was the key point for this historic shift.

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Notes

1. *Collected Works of Mao Zedong*, vol. 7, People's Press, 1999, p. 365.
2. Mao's talk after reading the Soviet textbook *Political Economics* during Dec.1959 to Feb. 1960.
3. *Collected Works of Mao Zedong*, vol. 7, People's Press, 1999, pp. 369-370.
4. Bo Yibo, *A Retrospection of Major Policy-makings and Events*, The Central Party School Press, 1991, p. 472.
5. Wu Lengxi, *Recalling Chairman Mao: Fragments of Several Major Historical Events I Experienced in Person*, Xinhua Press, 1995, pp. 4-5.
6. *Ibid*, pp. 6-7.
7. Shi Zhongquan et. al., eds, *The History of the 8th Party Congress*, People's Press, 1998, p. 278.
8. *Selected Important Documents since the Founding of People's Republic*, vol. 8, The Central Documentation Press, 1994, p. 231.
9. *Ibid*, p. 237.
10. *Collected Works of Mao Zedong*, vol. 7, p. 23.

11. Mao's talk at the Working Conference of the Central Committee of CPC in Chengdu on 10 March, 1958.
12. *Selected Works of Chen Yun*, vol. 3, People's Press, 1995, p. 13.
13. *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, vol. 5, People's Press, 1977, pp. 321-322.
14. *Ibid*, p.352.
15. Wu Lengxi, *Recalling Mao Zedong*, pp. 25, 27.
16. *Debate on the General Line of International Communist Movement*, People's Press, 1965, p. 57.
17. See a note to *Khrushchev is Finding the Going Tougher and Tougher* in *Collected Works of Mao Zedong*, vol. 8, p. 360.
18. *The Whole Story of Khrushchev's Secret Speech*, Shanghai People's Press, 1988, pp. 53-125.
19. *A Collection of Documents for Readings in the Socialist Education Curriculum*, Book I, vol. 1, pp. 395-396, 398, 404.
20. *Debate on the General Line of International Communist Movement*, pp. 122, 137-157, 390, 408.
21. *The People's Daily*, 18 May, 1967.