

19 Mao Zedong: *Overthrowing Religious Authority* (1927)

Introduced by Hubert Seiwert

Introduction

The text presented below, authored by Mao Zedong (1893–1976), is a segment of his report on the peasant movement in Hunan province. This movement, which had been gathering momentum since 1925, sought to instigate revolutionary transformations in the countryside.^I At its core, it aimed to ameliorate the economic and political plight of landless and impoverished peasants, by disempowering landlords and local authorities. In his report, Mao analyses the peasant movement's prevailing conditions and notable accomplishments. The section selected here focuses on changes in the consciousness of the peasants, and the liberation from the belief in authorities – including the belief in the power of ancestors and gods.

This text exemplifies the perspective on religion of revolutionarily minded intellectuals during the Republic era. In the process of radically transforming Chinese society, their primary objective was, indeed, the alteration of political and economic structures. However, from the outset, it was intrinsically linked to a revolution in thought. Both the Communists and substantial segments of the ruling Kuomintang opposed the worldview of pre-revolutionary China, and propagated an ideology predicated on scientific principles. In this paradigm, science and religion were viewed as diametrically opposed, with faith in the power of deities and spirits criticised as mere superstition.

Within Mao Zedong's report, the struggle against superstition is framed as an emancipation from 'religious authority.' 'Religious authority' is a translation^{II} of the term '*shen quan*' (神权), literally meaning 'the power of the gods.' Mao seamlessly intertwines the struggle against religious authority – i.e. belief in the power of gods and ancestors – with the battle against the authority of large landowners, powerful familial clans, and male patriarchal control. Notably, Mao refrains from utilising the term 'religion' (*zongjiao* 宗教). For him, religion does not represent an independent source of power; instead, he regards belief in supernatural forces as an auxiliary

I For the history of this movement, see Yokoyama Suguru, "The Peasant Movement in Hunan," *Modern China* 1, no. 2 (1975): 204–38.

II The translation reprinted below is a 'quasi-official' translation, published by Beijing Foreign Language Press. It has been reproduced here without any changes.

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component of societal conditions obstructing the peasants' emancipation from oppression. The belief in the potency of gods and spirits is therefore labelled superstition (*mixin* 迷信), hindering the peasantry from recognising and confronting the genuine origins of their miserable conditions.

A distinction between religious and secular structures is not contemplated in this context. The root causes of social inequity and oppression are not traced to religious beliefs or institutions, but instead to the prevailing political and economic power structures. The liberation from "religious authority" is primarily viewed as an inevitable consequence of the overarching political and economic revolution. This aligns with Mao's Marxist interpretation of religion as an epiphenomenon of class society.

Mao's report, penned in March 1927, accentuates the strides achieved by the Hunan peasant movement up to that juncture. As he notes, many peasants had abandoned belief in supernatural forces, following their liberation from the tyranny of local authorities and landlords. However, the triumphs of the peasant movement proved ephemeral. Following the dissolution of the United Front between the Kuomintang and the Communists in April 1927, the reactionary faction within the ruling Kuomintang – closely aligned with economic elites and landowners – ascended to power, and ruthlessly suppressed the peasant movement.

Bibliographical Information

Mao Zedong 毛泽东. "Hunan nongmin yundong kaocha baogao" 湖南农民运动考察报告 [Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan]. In *Mao Zedong Xuanji* 毛泽东选集 [Selected Works of Mao Zedong], vol. 1, 12–44. Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1991; 31–34.

Page numbers given in square brackets refer to this edition.

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Mao Zedong. "Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan." In *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, vol. 1, 23–59. Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1965; 44–47.

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Overthrowing the Clan Authority of the Ancestral Temples and Clan Elders, the Religious Authority of Town and Village Gods, and the Masculine Authority of Husbands (Tuifan citang zuzhang de zuquan he chenghuang tudi pusa de shenquan yizhi zhangfu de nanquan 推翻祠堂族长的族权和城隍土地菩萨的神权以至丈夫的男权)

A man in China is usually subjected to the domination of three systems of authority: (1) the state system (political authority), ranging from the national, provincial and county government down to that of the township; (2) the clan system (clan authority), ranging from the central ancestral temple and its branch temples down to the head of the household; and (3) the supernatural system (religious authority), ranging from the King of Hell down to the town and village gods belonging to the nether world, and from the Emperor of Heaven down to all the various gods and spirits belonging to the celestial world. As for women, in addition to being dominated by these three systems of authority, they are also dominated by the men (the authority of the husband). These four authorities—political, clan, religious and masculine—are the embodiment of the whole feudal-patriarchal system and ideology, and are the four thick ropes binding the Chinese people, particularly the peasants. How the peasants have overthrown the political authority of the landlords in the countryside has been described above. The political authority of the landlords is the backbone of all the other systems of authority. With that overturned, the clan authority, the religious authority and the authority of the husband all begin to totter. Where the peasant association is powerful, the clan elders and administrators of temple funds no longer dare oppress those lower in the clan hierarchy or embezzle clan funds. The worst clan elders and administrators, being local tyrants, have been thrown out. No one any longer dares to practice the cruel corporal and capital punishments that used to be inflicted in the ancestral temples, such as flogging, drowning and burying alive. The old rule barring women and poor people from the banquets in the ancestral temples has also been broken. The women of Paikuo in Hengshan County gathered in force and swarmed into their ancestral temple, firmly planted their backsides in the seats and joined in the eating and drinking, while the venerable clan bigwigs had willy-nilly to let them do as they pleased. [p. 31/32] At another place, where poor peasants had been excluded from temple banquets, a group of them flocked in and ate and drank their fill, while the local tyrants and evil gentry and other long-gowned gentlemen all took to their heels in fright. Everywhere religious authority totters as the peasant movement develops. In many places the peasant associations have taken over the temples of the gods as their offices. Everywhere they advocate the appropriation of temple property

in order to start peasant schools and to defray the expenses of the associations, calling it "public revenue from superstition". In Liling County, prohibiting superstitious practices and smashing idols have become quite the vogue. In its northern districts the peasants have prohibited the incense-burning processions to propitiate the god of pestilence. There were many idols in the Taoist temple at Fupoling in Lukou, but when extra room was needed for the district headquarters of the Kuomintang, they were all piled up in a corner, big and small together, and no peasant raised any objection. Since then, sacrifices to the gods, the performance of religious rites and the offering of sacred lamps have rarely been practised when a death occurs in a family. Because the initiative in this matter was taken by the chairman of the peasant association, Sun Hsiao-shan, he is hated by the local Taoist priests. In the Lungfeng Nunnery in the North Third District, the peasants and primary school teachers chopped up the wooden idols and actually used the wood to cook meat. More than thirty idols in the Tungfu Monastery in the Southern District were burned by the students and peasants together, and only two small images of Lord Pao¹ were snatched up by an old peasant who said, "Don't commit a sin!" In places where the power of the peasants is predominant, only the older peasants and the women still believe in the gods, the younger peasants no longer doing so. Since the latter control the associations, the overthrow of religious authority and the eradication of superstition are going on everywhere. As to the authority of the husband, this has always been weaker among the poor peasants because, out of economic necessity, their womenfolk have to do more manual labour than the women of the richer classes and therefore have more say and greater power of decision in family matters. With the increasing bankruptcy of the rural economy in recent years, the basis for men's domination over women has already been weakened. With the rise of the peasant movement, the women in many places have now begun to organize rural women's associations; the opportunity has come for them to lift up their heads, and the authority of the husband is getting shakier every day. In a word, the whole feudal-patriarchal system and ideology is tottering with the growth of the peasants' power. At the present time, however, the peasants are concentrating on destroying the landlords' political authority. Wherever it has been wholly destroyed, they are beginning to press their attack in the three other spheres of the clan, the gods and male domination. [p. 32/33] But such attacks have only just begun, and there can be no thorough overthrow of all three until the peasants have won complete victory in the economic struggle. Therefore, our present task is to lead the peasants to put their greatest efforts into the political struggle, so that the landlords' authority is entirely overthrown. The economic struggle should follow immediately, so that the land problem and the other economic problems of the poor peasants may be funda-

1 [editorial note 21 in the original] Lord Pao (Pao Cheng) was prefect of Kaifeng, capital of the Northern Sung Dynasty (A.D. 960–1127). He was famous in popular legend as an upright official and a fearless, impartial judge with a knack of passing true verdicts in all the cases he tried.

mentally solved. As for the clan system, superstition, and inequality between men and women, their abolition will follow as a natural consequence of victory in the political and economic struggles. If too much of an effort is made, arbitrarily and prematurely, to abolish these things, the local tyrants and evil gentry will seize the pretext to put about such counter-revolutionary propaganda as “the peasant association has no piety towards ancestors”, “the peasant association is blasphemous and is destroying religion” and “the peasant association stands for the communization of wives”, all for the purpose of undermining the peasant movement. A case in point is the recent events at Hsianghsiang in Hunan and Yanghsin in Hupeh, where the landlords exploited the opposition of some peasants to smashing idols. It is the peasants who made the idols, and when the time comes they will cast the idols aside with their own hands; there is no need for anyone else to do it for them prematurely. The Communist Party’s propaganda policy in such matters should be, “Draw the bow without shooting, just indicate the motions.”² It is for the peasants themselves to cast aside the idols, pull down the temples to the martyred virgins and the arches to the chaste and faithful widows; it is wrong for anybody else to do it for them.

While I was in the countryside, I did some propaganda against superstition among the peasants. I said:

“If you believe in the Eight Characters,³ you hope for good luck; if you believe in geomancy,⁴ you hope to benefit from the location of your ancestral graves. This year within the space of a few months the local tyrants, evil gentry and corrupt officials have all toppled from their pedestals. Is it possible that until a few months ago they all had good luck and enjoyed the benefit of well-sited ancestral graves, while suddenly in the last few months their luck has turned and their ancestral graves have ceased to exert a beneficial influence? The local tyrants and evil gentry jeer at your peasant association and say, ‘How odd! Today, the world is a world of committeemen. Look, you can’t even go to pass water without bumping into a committeeman!’ Quite true, the towns and the villages, the trade unions and the peasant associations, the Kuomintang and the Communist Party, all without exception have their executive committee members—it is indeed a world of committeemen. But is this due to the Eight Characters and the location of the ancestral graves? How strange! The Eight

2 [editorial note 22 in the original] This reference to archery is taken from *Mencius*. It describes how the expert teacher of archery draws his bow with a histrionic gesture but does not release the arrow. The point is that while Communists should guide the peasants in attaining a full measure of political consciousness, they should leave it to the peasants’ own initiative to abolish superstitious and other bad practices, and should not give them orders or do it for them.

3 [editorial note 23 in the original] The Eight Characters were a method of fortune-telling in China based on the examination of the two cyclic characters each for the year, month, day and hour of a person’s birth respectively.

4 [editorial note 24 in the original] Geomancy refers to the superstition that the location of one’s ancestors’ graves influences one’s fortune. The geomancers claim to be able to tell whether a particular site and its surroundings are auspicious.

Characters of all the poor wretches in the countryside have suddenly turned auspicious! And their ancestral graves have suddenly started exerting beneficial influences! The gods? Worship them by all means. But if you had only Lord Kuan⁵ [33/34] and the Goddess of Mercy and no peasant association, could you have overthrown the local tyrants and evil gentry? The gods and goddesses are indeed miserable objects. You have worshipped them for centuries, and they have not overthrown a single one of the local tyrants or evil gentry for you! Now you want to have your rent reduced. Let me ask, how will you go about it? Will you believe in the gods or in the peasant association?"

My words made the peasants roar with laughter.

5 [editorial note 25 in the original] Lord Kuan (Kuan Yu, A.D. 160–219), a warrior in the epoch of the Three Kingdoms, was widely worshipped by the Chinese as the God of Loyalty and War.