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Enlightened or not? Notes on Liu Xiaofeng and the “Father of the Nation”

In May 2013 Chinese philosopher and theologian Liu Xiaofeng (刘小枫 b. 1956) caused quite a stir among Chinese intellectuals. In a speech at the Chinese University of Political Science and Law (中国政法大学 CUPSL) 19 April 2013, Liu called Mao Zedong “Father of the Nation” (国父). Liu’s speech dealt with the issue of “Republic” (共和) and China’s transformation in the last 100 years.¹ When the text was published online in May 2013 it quickly caught attention. The epithet “Father of the Nation” has been reserved for the first president of the Republic of China, Sun Yat-sen (孙逸仙, or Sun Zhongshan 孙中山 1866-1925), both in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and on Taiwan.

Debate with repercussions

Liu Xiaofeng immediately met much criticism, and argued that he had been fooled to take part in the “reading session” under the false pretext that it would be arranged by a publishing house, and that nothing would be put online. Phoenix Television published the text online as “Republic, China’s Toil of a Century” (共和，中国的百年之累) in the form of a dialogue between Liu and the host of the session, Professor Wang Renbo (王人博) of CUPSL. Liu was upset that he could not revise the draft before publication, and therefore later published a different and longer version in the magazine *Open Times* (开放时代), a “self proofread version” (亲校版). Liu gave it the title “How to recognize the historical meaning of hundred

¹ Liu Xiaofeng, “Gonghe, Zhongguo de bai nian zhi lei” 共和，中国的百年之累 (Republic, China’s Toil of a Century), talk at Phoenix TV Reading Session 凤凰读书会, 19 April 2013, CUPSL, Beijing, at <http://news.ifeng.com/exclusive/lecture/special/liuxiaofeng>

years of republic” (如何认识百年共和的历史含义). This article was based on a later lecture, at Tianjin Normal University (天津师范大学) 23 April 2013. The argument about Mao Zedong as “Father of the Nation” was not substantially changed, however.²

Online debaters soon decided to assign Liu’s proposal the dubious worthiness of a “theory”, namely the “Theory of Father of the Nation” (国父论). There was a lively debate with sometimes harsh comments during spring 2013. In the rash manner of Internet commenting Liu’s sanity was questioned, and his previous work on Christianity and Western classical philosophy was deemed as fake.³ However, the online “fire” abated during summer. Then suddenly, months later, in November 2013, another academic of 1980s fame, and China’s leading Kant scholar, philosophy professor Deng Xiaomang (邓晓芒 b. 1948) of Huazhong University of Science and Technology (华中科技大学 HUST), published a 25 000 characters plus criticism against Liu.⁴ At this stage the debate also reached Chinese mainstream media with interviews and articles in outlets like the newspaper *Xin Jing bao* (新京报 *The Beijing News*) and the online giant *Sina* (新浪).⁵

² Liu Xiaofeng, “Ruhe renshi bai nian gonghe de lishi hanyi” 如何认识百年共和的历史含义 (How to recognize the historical meaning of hundred years of republic), in *Open Times* 开放时代, no. 5, 2013, online at <http://www.opentimes.cn/bencandy.php?fid=371&aid=1760>

³ For a sample of brief online comments on Liu’s article please see commentary collections at e.g. *Kaidi* 凯迪 web portal, <http://club.kdnet.net/dispbbs.asp?boardid=2&id=9213932>

⁴ Deng Xiaomang, “Ping Liu Xiaofeng de ‘xueli’” 评刘小枫的“学理” (Comments on Liu Xiaofeng’s “scientific principle”), at *Xiaomang xueyuan* 晓芒学园 (Xiaomang’s Study Garden), 8 November 2013, <http://www.xiaomang.net/forum.php?mod=viewthread&tid=297&extra=page%3D1>

⁵ Wu Yashun 吴亚顺, “Duihua Deng Xiaomang: fouding qimeng? Yongxin huo hutu!” 对话邓晓芒：否定启蒙？用心或糊涂！（Dialogue with Deng Xiaomang: Deny Enlightenment? Intension or Confusion!), in *Xin Jing bao* 新京报 (*The Beijing News*), 30 November 2013, p. C5 (online at http://epaper.bjnews.com.cn/html/2013-11/30/content_481024.htm); Ku Cha 苦茶, “Liu Xiaofeng weishenme shuo Mao Zedong shi ‘guofu’?” 刘小枫为什么说毛泽东是“国父”？ (Why does Liu Xiaofeng say that Mao Zedong is “father of the nation?”), *Sina Special Column* 新浪专栏, 25 September 2013, online at <http://history.sina.com.cn/his/zl/2013-09-25/113255003.shtml>

But why bother that two more or less peripheral Chinese intellectuals argue? What about Mao as “Father of the Nation”? Is this interesting for non-Chinese? I believe so, just as much as we should take interest in what Liu Xiaofeng, Deng Xiaomang and others in their circles did in the 1980s, the 1990s and today. What topics are discussed in Chinese academia reflect the state and the trends of the country as much as reports on economy and politics. In the case of Liu Xiaofeng, I am to some extent partial, having spent a number of years studying the phenomenon of “Cultural Christians” for my PhD. Liu Xiaofeng was the primary representative of the “Cultural Christian” phenomenon in the 1980s and 1990s, and he has influenced generations of students with his works introducing Christian theology.⁶

From theologian to...?

Liu Xiaofeng is one of very few PRC citizens with a doctoral degree in theology, including the clergy, and he played a central role in re-introducing theology and Christian studies into Chinese academia. In the late 1980s, he was one of the few named as “Cultural Christian” that also used the epithet himself. Liu even envisioned “Cultural Christianity” as a “third entity” besides the established official churches and the unregistered so-called “house churches”. According to him, this would be the intellectual and “mystical” expression of faith in modernity. Liu Xiaofeng went as far as calling the book *Zou xiang shizijia shang de zhen*

⁶ It was Torbjörn Lodén who led me on to the topic of “cultural Christians”, and who also introduced me to Liu Xiaofeng and even lent me some of his books to start my research with. After getting to know Deng Xiaomang in 1996, I soon found out that Torbjörn also knew Deng, and Deng then came to visit Stockholm in 1997. Deng’s younger sister is the well-known author Can Xue (残雪, b 1953, originally Deng Xiaohua 邓小华).

(走向十字架上的真 Towards the truth on the Cross) his “credo” (我信).⁷ In his work *Zhengjiu yu xiaoyao* (拯救与逍遥, literally “Salvation and easy wandering”, book cover translation “Delivering and dallying”), first published in 1988, Liu talks about the “impossible self-transcendence of Confucianism and Daoism”, and how people need to “rely on the holy grace of God and the salvation of redemptive love”.⁸ Liu Xiaofeng was also baptized, despite his initial renouncement of church rituals and dogma. How can a person with this background now claim that Mao Zedong is “the Father of the Nation”, and also argue that the Cultural Revolution was an expression of “popular sovereignty” (人民主权)?⁹

Enlightenment and “the kingly way”

One central argument of Liu’s article on “hundred years of Republic” is how “Enlightenment discourse overturns common sense politics”. Liu also argues that “value liberty” (价值自由) destroys “common sense morality” (常识道德). The whole text shows that Liu is adopting a strong nationalistic stance, and a tendency to return to a kind of Confucian “kingly way” (王道), with a modern twist, as an alternative to Enlightenment and its after effects. Most of the argument is about China in relation to outside forces, the West, Japan, and much less about domestic affairs. Liu says that China became “the first constitutional republic in Asia” after the 1911 revolution, but there was still no “decent ruler” (像样的王者). Liu is here using Mencius’ word for an enlightened ruler following “the kingly way”. All this is quite

⁷ Liu Xiaofeng, *Zou xiang shizijia shang de zhen—20 shiji jidujiao shenxue yinlun* 走向十字架上的真—20世纪基督教神学引论 (Towards the Truth on the Cross—Introduction to 20th century Christian Theology), Shanghai: Shanghai Sanlian shudian 1995.

⁸ Liu Xiaofeng, *Zhengjiu yu xiaoyao*, Taibei: Fengyun shidai chuban gongsi 1991, p. 215-220; Fredrik Fällman, *Salvation and Modernity: Intellectuals and Faith in Contemporary China*, Lanham: University Press of America 2008, p. 71.

⁹ Liu Xiaofeng, *Open Times*.

contradictory to Liu Xiaofeng's writings from the 1990s, for example *Zhengjiu yu xiaoyao* where Liu writes about the choice to only "kneel before the crucified God incarnated in this World", not before kings and emperors. Liu also likened "the kingly way" with "the way of people" (人道), meaning that "the Way" does nothing for human beings, while God bestows grace and we may have salvation through Jesus Christ. In the 1990s Liu even argued that there is great danger in making the state a goal and people means and tools to work for the best of the state. This is quite contradictory to seeking a "Father of the Nation", and calling the Cultural Revolution an expression of "popular sovereignty".¹⁰

Liu does not directly compare Mao Zedong with an "enlightened ruler" of "the kingly way", but he does compare Mao with Sun Yat-sen. The section where Liu discusses "the Father of the Nation" is rather short:

So, who is China's modern Father of the Nation? Sun Yat-sen sped up the birth of the Republican revolution, but could not complete it. Mao Zedong followed and completed the Republican revolution. But, Mao Zedong's ambitions were loftier, and to evaluate him is really very difficult. Compared with Mao Zedong, Sun Yat-sen is inferior, they are like poles apart, and to appraise Sun is not difficult at all.

The same section then continues to argue about Mao Zedong's positive influence on the Civil Rights movement in the USA. Liu even states that after Mao expressed support for the movement after the murder of Martin Luther King "Black people took [their] *Quotations from Chairman Mao* and attacked the police"¹¹

¹⁰ *Zhengjiu yu xiaoyao* 1991, p. 119-142.

¹¹ Liu Xiaofeng, *Open Times*. To show the enormous distance between Sun and Mao, Liu uses the expression 十万八千里 (108 000 li=54 000 km), alluding to "Monkey King" Sun Wukong 孙悟空, who could travel this distance merely by making a somersault.

Scientific principle

Liu mentions some methodological issues in his text, and argues that “media people like to use ‘universal value’ slogans that have not passed examination to rouse people”. These “apparently right but actually wrong” (似是而非) slogans have also entered Chinese academia, and Liu sees this seriously since the issue of history and the strife for a republic is “very complex”. In the academic world, argues Liu, “one must be careful to reflect with a scientific principle” (要讲究学理地思考).

Deng Xiaomang’s criticism of Liu is a fundamental attack exactly on Liu’s “scientific principle”, basically saying that Liu Xiaofeng has not really understood what a “scientific principle” is. He even calls Liu “confused” (糊涂) twice in his text. Deng points out that Liu is a “culture person, but he is also doing research” (他是个文化人, 他也做学问), and that he has chosen the path of “poeticization” (诗化).¹² “Poeticization” has a bigger market, according to Deng, while rigorous study and “textual research” (考据) gives a lasting result. In his long text Deng breaks down Liu’s text and arguments, and one after the other points out faulty arguments and the insufficient “scientific principle” that Liu is using. Deng is especially harsh on the reasoning about Mao as “Father of the Nation”, even stating mockingly that if there would be such a “father”, then Liu must be “the teacher of the nation” (国师), a title traditionally conferred by emperors. It should be noted, however, that Deng is not in principle against any kind of argument about a “Father of the Nation”, even if he strongly disagrees with Liu, and the main criticism is against Liu’s style and reasoning.¹³

¹² Wu Yashun, “Duihua Deng Xiaomang”.

¹³ Deng Xiaomang, “Ping Liu Xiaofeng de ‘xueli’”.

In his article Liu Xiaofeng draws the conclusion that “the conceptual guilt” of the Cultural Revolution is to seek in “Western Enlightenment thought”, and that the Cultural Revolution replaced “natural morality” (自然德性) with “extreme Enlightenment morality” (激进的启蒙德性). Liu also directly comments on the divided view of Mao among Chinese intellectuals, how “one cannot hate, and one cannot love”. Liu attributes this to the “spiritual internal war” (精神内战) that has been caused by “the extreme Enlightenment ideas brought by the Cultural Revolution”. This makes Liu “miserable” and he asks: “What other nation state has a Father of the Nation like this?”. Liu does not further comment on the allusion that China is actually also a “nation state” (民族国家). Maoist rhetoric and also the Chinese constitution is clearly acknowledging China as a multi-ethnic state, with special rights for ethnic minorities, even if the PRC in practice always has been a Han centred entity. In recent years the Communist Party has also increasingly been promoting the nationalistic idea of “the Chinese nation” (中华民族), presumingly embracing and unifying all ethnic groups.¹⁴

Deng Xiaomang attacks Liu’s argument that “the core of Mao Zedong thought is the justice of ‘equality’”, and then quotes Mao to show how it could not possibly be so: “Marxism consists of thousands of truths, but they all boil down to one phrase: ‘It’s right to rebel.’” (马克思主义的道理, 千条万绪, 归根结底, 就是一句话: 造反有理).¹⁵ In his conclusion Deng focuses on Liu being “miserable” because of the mixed emotions about Mao Zedong, which

¹⁴ Liu Xiaofeng, *Open Times*.

¹⁵ Deng Xiaomang, “Ping Liu Xiaofeng”; Mao Zedong, “Zai Yan’an ge jie qingzhu Sidalin liushi shouchen dahui shang de jianghua” 在延安各界庆祝斯大林六十寿辰大会上的讲话, at *Mao Zedong Extensive Reading* 毛泽东博览 <http://www.mzdbl.cn/maoxuan/huibian/1949-12-20xinhua.html>; “Speech at a Meeting of All Circles in Yanan in Celebration of Stalin’s Sixtieth Birthday”, December 21, 1939, at *From Marx to Mao* <http://www.marx2mao.com/Other/RTOC68.html>

is interesting. Deng sees two possible explanations of this expression, first that Liu is talking about how people misunderstand him and his views about Mao, and how they are all “messed up” (搞乱) by Enlightenment thought. Secondly, it could imply that Liu was actually “uncertain” (吃不准) of his own “theory”, and of Mao himself who both founded the country and also destroyed it. Deng finally decides on the interpretation that Liu is “miserable” since even a “Father of the Nation” as Mao Zedong was not thorough enough in his work, and was equally “poisoned” by Enlightenment, and therefore Liu needs to set things straight again by “thoroughly investigating the rights and wrongs of Enlightenment”.

Similar concerns – different perspectives

Deng Xiaomang was also part of the wider circle of “Cultural Christians” appearing in the late 1980s, and the two have met on many occasions. In the debate discussed here they call each other “old acquaintances” (老熟人), but both confirm that they have not met for quite a long time. Liu Xiaofeng was always the more outspoken of the two, while Deng Xiaomang kept a more philosophical and idealistic stance. Deng is known in Chinese academia for speaking up on important issues as methods of examination and academic corruption. Although very critical, Deng acknowledges Liu Xiaofeng’s achievements, his scholarship and his wide knowledge, and claims that “it is not easy to criticize Liu Xiaofeng, one must spend a lot of time”. It seems that Deng Xiaomang’s criticism of Liu was something of a cathartic experience, something he had wanted to do for a long time, and that it is like “losing a burden”. Deng also says that he has no intention to comment on a Liu Xiaofeng article again.

Watching from the sidelines, I cannot but think that this debate between Deng and Liu also has its roots in two different perspectives, principles (not only scientific), even moods. In a couple of articles from the early 1990s Liu discusses “Cultural Christians” and talks about a “spiritual faction” (精神派) in Wuhan, undoubtedly pointing to Deng Xiaomang and Zhang Zhiyang (张志扬 b. 1940), professor at Hainan University but previously in Wuhan, and an important early inspirer for Liu Xiaofeng. This “faction” would stress more spiritual and metaphysical questions and less material and social concerns. While this may sound vague and unclear, such slight difference of perspective could eventually have bearing on debates such as this one. Deng Xiaomang and Zhang Zhiyang have always kept their focus on philosophy, metaphysics and faith, while Liu have changed in a way that few could have foreseen.¹⁶

“To make clear Western learning”

Liu gave a rare and interesting interview in *Shenzhen Special Zone Daily* 深圳特区报 in July 2013, which at least gives Liu’s own answers to the many questions arising from his drastic change of direction in research and thinking, from Christian theology to political philosophy today.¹⁷ The simple answer, given already in the article headline, is that his

¹⁶ Tan Xing 譚興 (Liu Xiaofeng 劉小楓), “Guanyu dangdai Zhongguo dalu ‘wenhua’ jidutu de shenxue pingzhu” 關與當代中國大陸‘文化’基督徒的神學評註 (Theological comments about the ‘Cultural Christians’ in contemporary mainland China), *Tripod 鼎 Ding* no. 6, Hong Kong 1990, p. 5–9; Liu Xiaofeng, “From Enlightenment to Exile: Issues and Trends Among Chinese Intellectuals Today”, in *China Study Journal*, vol. 7, no. 3, London: CTBI December 1992, p. 8–12.

¹⁷ Ye Hongmei 叶红梅, “Wo de xingqu shi gao qing Xifang xuwen de benlai mianmu—fang zhuming xuezhe Liu Xiaofeng” 我的兴趣是搞清西方学问的本来面目—访著名学者刘小枫 (“My interest is to make clear the original features of Western learning—interviewing famous scholar Liu Xiaofeng), *Shenzhen tequ bao*, 16 July 2013, p. B1. Liu’s first teaching position as a postgraduate was at the newly established Shenzhen University 深圳大学, where he taught at the Chinese department 1985-1988. In the article, Liu says that he only agreed to the interview because of his “old friendship” with Shenzhen University and this particular newspaper.

interest is “to make clear the original features of Western learning” (搞清楚西方学问的本来面目). Supposedly this has been his guiding line since he started his academic career by studying foreign languages in Chongqing in the late 1970s.

Would this mean that Liu’s current criticism of Enlightenment is only natural in light of his previous work on theology and modernity? It seems like an all too simple explanation, but also has some merit. What was most interesting about his writings in the 1980s was that he discussed a different modernity, with faith and religion having a prominent role, however not doing away completely with Enlightenment rationality. Liu saw this as a possible road ahead for China, that there could be a plurality of voices and several contending thought systems. Liu’s analysis of Western society was also interesting, especially in contrast to what and how Western philosophy and ideology had entered China; how Western civilisation through Enlightenment had missed the spiritual elements that in his view was its necessary core. His recent statements about Enlightenment and morality correspond rather well with this, but are much less sophisticated in both style, and “scientific principle”.

What to make of Liu’s statement of Mao Zedong as “Father of the Nation” is more difficult. It is perhaps a logical outcome in his search for a Chinese position or way out for China as he is coming closer to an understanding of the West. Already in his earlier writings he never hesitated to speak of China and “the World” as opposites or comparable entities. Maybe Liu also wants to make clear what is Western and what is Chinese? And what about the need for a “decent ruler”? Does Liu really mean that Mao was “decent”?

There are many questions still to be answered about Liu Xiaofeng and his investigations of Western thought, faith and “scientific principle”. This article poses a few more, however without bringing clear answers. The issues brought up by Liu and Deng may seem peripheral in the greater China debate, but they are also fundamental questions about how we perceive our societies and our lives, both in China and the West. Liu Xiaofeng wanted “to make clear the original features of Western learning”. Are we clear about “the features of Chinese learning”, and should we strive to be?

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