

Lenin in China

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‘Lenin is not very popular in China’, I was told some time ago. The reason: he was felt to provide the framework for the ‘authoritarian’ communism into which the USSR supposedly slid after his death. The last time he was popular was in the early 1950s, before the breakdown in relations between the People’s Republic and the Union of Soviet States. As evidence, I have a theatre ticket from 1952 for a film biography of Lenin for Chinese audiences. Soon after the ticket was issued, the film ceased running.

Imagine my surprise, then, when a fully-fledged conference on Lenin was announced for October 2012. ‘Lenin in the 21st Century’ it was entitled. And it was to be held at the Centre for Marxism at Wuhan University (the city itself straddles the Changjiang, or Yangtze River as it is called outside China). The centre is one of many such places across this vast country, as there should be in every country. But I was torn, for I had planned a journey on the Tran-Siberian, from Vladivostok to Moscow, and then onto Berlin – a glorious ride of eight days. In the end, Lenin proved too much of an attraction. The train would still be running next time, I reasoned, but Lenin in Wuhan was a once-off too good to miss.

To Wuhan

I arrived in Wuhan after a voyage by boat down the Changjiang. Not quite sure what to expect and a little anxious that my talks on Lenin and religion (via miracles and his veneration) would not be received so well, I was immediately struck by the massive posters of Lenin festooning the hotel, the campus, and the conference venue. Mao I had become accustomed to meet in all manner of expected and unexpected places, but Lenin not so much. Above all, in one of those gloriously vast conference halls, a massive poster of Lenin, with Chinese and English characters concerning the conference, spread right across the stage. Each speaker was to be framed with the benevolent gaze of a larger-than-life Lenin.

For three days we heard and spoke on all conceivable – and some inconceivable – matters relating to Lenin: women, corruption, tough times, the state, the NEP (New Economic Policy), revolution, the press, Lenin the political philosopher (or not), Marx, Hegel, publications of Lenin’s works, documentaries, posters at home that loomed over a child’s dinner table, anal sex (!), and of course religion.

Before and After October

In the mix of papers, I began to notice a trend. The vast majority of papers by the non-Chinese participants assumed a framework that was before October, positioning themselves in a pre-revolutionary situation. Thus, the Lenin of interest is the one who was working towards the October Revolution, working hard at organisation, at developing tactics, at rethinking the theory of revolution from the ground up. This was not merely a matter of content, of a focus on Lenin's pre-revolutionary texts, for the Chinese participants used the same texts. It was what may be called a 'structure of feeling', an assumed position with its shibboleths, ways of framing questions, of criticism and reflection. Not for nothing were the preferred touchstones, alongside Lenin, frozen in that moment – Rosa Luxemburg, Gramsci, Althusser, Trotsky. Thus, everything is still framed in terms of the revolution to come, so much so that it becomes impossible to imagine what a post-revolutionary situation might look like, that they often need to find a reason to reject the legitimacy of mature socialist societies and reposition them in a pre-revolutionary situation.

By contrast, most of the Chinese at the conference were concerned with the period after October. Once again, this was not only a matter of content, whether in terms of the 'tough times' of the early years of the new state, with the civil war, the international blockade, the devastation wreaked by the First World War, or in terms of corruption, bureaucracy, the nature of socialism, the role of women, socialist democracy, and above all the state. Much more than content, it involved a whole perspective from which Lenin was approached. What may be learned from one of the key architects of the first socialist state? What were the problems and what may we learn from his solutions and mistakes? How does the government maintain its legitimacy once the revolutionary fervour has died down? Even pre-revolutionary texts such as *The State and Revolution* were of interest from this perspective, looking forward rather than back to Lenin's relations with Marx or Hegel. This whole framework of looking at Lenin can only be described in terms of the deeper cultural, social and economic frameworks that set in after a revolution, in contrast to places where the revolution has never happened.

This difference became clearer as the conference wore on, bringing me to ponder once again the long-lasting effects of a revolution. Winning a revolution, as Lenin often pointed out, is the easy part. Far more difficult is the task of constructing communism on the ruins of the old system, of searching for the correct path to the unknown – in terms of economic relations, bureaucracy, social relations, the nature of the press, maintaining

legitimacy of the government and so on. That experience frames each question in a different way. Gone is the need to plan and scheme and organise for the revolution itself.

To be sure, some of the non-Chinese delegates were able to frame their discussions from the perspective of after October. These were more open, willing to learn, rather than dictating terms. One example was a fascinating exploration of the New Economic Policy (NEP) deployed in the early years after the Russian Revolution. The NEP was of course the deployment of certain elements of capitalist economic relations in a context where one is surrounded by capitalist states. They included among other items the tax in kind, limited private investment, concessions to international companies in the oil and coal fields and the vast Russian forests, higher pay for international specialists. In the RSFSR (later USSR) the NEP lasted less than a decade, abolished with Stalin's ascendancy. In a quiet but precise analysis full of insight, this elderly Leftie argued that perhaps the NEP had not been deployed long enough in the USSR. Thus, China becomes a far better instance of the NEP. Even now, more than six decades after the communist revolution of 1949, the NEP has a good way to go, requiring perhaps a century to run its course. He closed by wishing China all the best in its unique path.

Lenin and Confucius

Yet another feature of the conference struck me, especially in relation to the fostering of Confucian studies. Parts of a much wider 'return to the Chinese Classics', Confucius centres and institutes have cropped up all over the country and even internationally, with new and ambitious research projects. I must admit to being slightly puzzled by this phenomenon, for hierarchy is arguably the framework within which the much-vaunted Confucian harmony functions. But then it may actually be one element of a larger project of retelling the story of the past in order to open up new possibilities for the future, passing through the present by means of different path.

In that light, Lenin too has a crucial role to play. Or rather, the return to the Classics also involves Lenin – along with Marx and Mao and the rest. They too form vital perspectives and experiences and reflections, mediated by means of 'Chinese characteristics', which play a role in the multiple retellings of the past. More significantly, they provide a critical counter-weight to the Confucian focus, reminding us of the critique directed not so long ago at Confucianism by communists. Confucius, yes, for he is an inescapable part of the story, but not without incisive criticism.

So it was good to hear that the study and engagement with Lenin is taking place in a surprisingly large number of places throughout China. Indeed, our conference was

opened by the national minister for education, as well as the university president. Traditions, I know, designed in part for the official photograph after the opening ceremony (which I have come to love and have begun to institute elsewhere). But they also indicated that Lenin is far more popular in China than I was first led to expect.