Ambiguous Subject: the "Masses" (*qunzhong*) Discourse in Modern China

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Abstract: The "masses"(*qunzhong* 群众) discourse in modern China was influenced by two western intellectual traditions, i.e., mass psychology and historical materialism. The former regards the masses as a blind, impulsive, and irrational crowd, while the latter thinks that only the people are the real dynamic forces of historical development. As a result, the "masses" discourse in modern China bifurcated into a negative one of "mass psychology" and a positive one of "mass movement", both of which were employed as effective tools of political mobilization by different political parties and social elites. The concept of the "masses" was either the crystallization of the abstract "people"(*renmin* 人民) or the actualization of the ideal "citizenry"(*guomin* 国民). What is embodied in the concepts of the people, the citizenry, and the masses in modern China was actually an ambiguous image of a political subject.
Keywords: the "masses" discourse, modern China, mass psychology, mass movement

I. INTRODUCTION

In his *Psychologie des foules* (1895), Gustave Le Bon wrote the following: "While all our ancient beliefs are tottering and disappearing, while the old pillars of society are giving way one by one, the power of the crowd is the only force that nothing menaces, and of which the prestige is continually on the increase. The age we are about to enter will in truth be the era of crowds." (see Le Bon, 2002) Le Bon could not have anticipated that, many years later, his works would have a huge impact in faraway China, to become an important point of reference for intellectuals probing mass psychology and for politicians studying the techniques of leadership. Even less could he have thought of the possibility that a revolutionary party and intellectual elite of China would, under the guidance of a radical view of the masses completely different from his own, lead the masses of its people to carry out a successful revolutionary movement, and open a new era in China's history.

To understand how this process occurred, we must undertake an investigation of the discourse of "the masses" in modern China. Cong Riyun has discussed the concept of the "masses" in contemporary Chinese linguistic usage and concluded that it is a hybrid formation that married the traditional concept of "subject"(*chenmin*) to the "people"(*renmin*) of western democratic theory. To Cong, masses are the incomplete manifestation of the people, an intermediate stage in the transformation of subjects into citizens (Cong, 2005: 15-24). Chen Jianhua has analyzed the narrative of "masses" in modern Chinese fiction, positing that the masses are a political concept constantly undergoing abstraction. The discourse of the masses and its appearance in modern fiction has highlighted the historical dilemma of intellectuals' identity crisis (Chen, 2000: 259-285). Xu Ben believes that the appearance of the modern masses is the result of a dearth of public life, and of an alienation from genuine existence. Only through fostering an authentic public life, he says, could there be hope to transform the conservative and ignorant masses into awakened, self-aware citizens (Xu, 2010: 385-526). These researchers have all arrived at original and insightful analyses, but each only pays attention to the mutually discrete fields of political philosophy, literary criticism, and cultural analysis, respectively. The present article will undertake an analysis of the origins, relationships, and effects of the modern Chinese discourse of the "masses" in an attempt to discern some of the features of China's political modernity.

II. THE ORIGIN OF THE CONCEPT OF THE MASSES

The concept of the masses, rising and widely disseminated among Chinese intellectuals at the beginning of the twentieth century, can be traced to both ancient Chinese classical works as well as to modern western writings. I have undertaken a comprehensive search of the entire electronic edition of the Wenyuange *Four Treasuries* and found 468 matches. Eliminating all of the independent uses of the words "*qun*" and "*zhong*" (the two components of the word "*qunzhong*"), as well as redundancies from identical sections of text quoted in encyclopedias, "*qunzhong*" appears in over two hundred instances. These can be categorized into the following several uses. First, it can refer to ordinary folk, or average people. It can also mean subjects, or it can mean a plurality of many. These are the most common uses. Second, it can be people who are employed for

various purposes by the ruler. This type of use emphasizes the status of ordinary folk as being under the rule of others, although in the linguistic environment of the traditional monarchical system, this had no obvious negative connotations. Third, it refers to people who, unable to distinguish the true state of affairs, are easily misled or manipulated. Fourth, it can refer to people who engage in illegal gatherings, rebellions, or wanton destruction. Roughly comparing the numbers, the first two usages comprise about two thirds of the total, while those with varying types or degrees of derogatory meanings comprise the remaining third. It is worth noting that unlike the frequently negative connotations of "masses," the use of "*qun*" by itself in pre-modern works, besides the neutral sense of gatherings of large numbers of people, often carried a positive connotation of "gregarious"(*hequn*) or "being good at unity"(*shanqun*). This expressed the sense of a smooth, frictionless relationship with others, or of being appreciated and loved by large numbers of people. This was a good quality that "rulers" or "gentlemen" were enjoined to possess. Hence, "group" (*qun*) is often glossed as "ruler" (*jun*) ("the ruler is one being good at unity") in textual sources.

In English, the words corresponding to "*qunzhong*" include "mass", "crowd", "mod", and so forth, and among them, "mass" is the most commonly used. According to Raymond Williams, "mass" began to be used widely beginning in the 15th century and is derived from the French *masse* and Latin *massa*, both of which refer to a quantity of material for smelting, a usage which then evolved into meanings such as a large quantity, thick, coagulated, or without definite shape, or something unable to be isolated from other things. The societal sense of "mass" appeared at the end of the 17th or beginning of the 18th centuries, with the usages of "the mass of the people" or "the corrupted mass". Through this long period of evolution, it gradually split into two opposite meanings: for the conservatives, it referred to lower-class, ignorant, and unstable mobs; but to socialists, it often meant "the working masses" or "the toiling masses" and was seen by them as the driving force of social development (Williams, 1983: 192-7).

During the latter half of the 19th century into the early 20th century, both the positive and negative implications of mass or crowd were further explicated by the field of mass psychology as well as in Marxist thought.

In the history of Western political thought, the negative image of the masses, as people who are subjected to rule or control by others, is of long

standing. In the words of John McClellan, the very invention of Western political theory occurred in order to prove that self-management (so-called "democracy") necessarily would lead to a violent and unruly mob (see McClelland, 1989). The rise of the modern theory of the masses is closely associated with two revolutions: first, the French Revolution, which is regarded as the starting point of modernity, when the people began to play decisive roles on the political stage; and second, the Revolution of 1848, through which the masses became the central subjects of social and political theory (see McClelland, 1998). It is generally recognized that the Frenchman Gustave Le Bon's *Psychologie des foules*, published in 1895, marks the official birth of the field of mass psychology. In his view, once rational individuals coalesce into a group, they will form a unique collective psychology, such that their imagination strengthens while their judgment and powers of reasoning diminish, and can only accept simplistic views, and cannot think independently. These masses instinctively follow a leader, whose most effective tools of mobilizing them are categorical statements, repetition, and contagion (see Le Bon, 2002). His contemporary, the French sociologist Jean G. Tarde and the slightly later Austrian psychologist Sigmund Freud, were also both important founders of mass psychology. Tarde considered society to be a collective made up of people who imitated one another, such that mass action follows the rate of downward dissemination (the lower classes emulating the upper classes), the rate of geometric progression (fashions or rumors spread in a snowball effect), a preference for domestic over foreign (a liking for indigenous culture is always greater than that for foreign culture), and other basic laws (see Sahakian, 1982). Freud employed the concepts of "desire", "libido", and "instinct" to interpret the influence of the collective over individuals and integrated Le Bon's ideas into his own theoretical framework of psychoanalysis (see Freud, 1929).

If we say that mass psychology as represented by Le Bon painted a depressing, even chilling portrait of the masses, then the political economic thought and historical materialism inaugurated by Marx is the precise opposite, in regarding the masses as the motive force and symbol of a new social formation. Along with the concentration of capital and the development of industry, conflicts within the old society precipitated the birth and development of a proletariat whose strength grew steadily, in the end becoming the gravediggers of the bourgeoisie (Marx, 1972: 32). In the writings of Marx and Engels, the masses of people and the

nationalities and classes they comprised were "the true and ultimate motive force behind the forces of history", who "were not ephemeral glimmers of light that would explode only to quickly go out but were the actors that would bring about great historical changes in the long term." (Engels, 1965: 343) Lenin said that historical materialism "enabled us for the first time to apply the rigor and accuracy of natural history to examining the social conditions of mass existence and to the changes in these conditions," showing the masses of people how to "create their own history." (Lenin, 1990: 38-9) He emphasized repeatedly that while "the possession of superior spiritual or intellectual qualities may be limited to a small number, the decisive factor in determining historical outcomes is the vast masses of the people." (Lenin, 1988: 253)

III. THE MIGRATION OF MASS PSYCHOLOGY TO CHINA

At the beginning of the 20th century, mass psychology and historical materialism entered China, one after the other. When the May Fourth Movement broke out, it was quickly perceived as a model and reference for a mass movement to develop within China. The masses began to make their presence known on the political stage in a big way, which produced a tremendous stimulus to many sectors of society and aroused varying impressions and feelings toward the masses. Radicals welcomed these developments with open arms, while conservatives reacted with anxiety and fear. In this context, "mass psychology" and "mass movement" each elicited different emotions and expectations from elites and ordinary people, from conservatives and radicals, and from rulers and revolutionaries. These quickly gained wide currency and, jostling against one another, formed a unique "mass" landscape within the Chinese intellectual world.

One of the earliest Chinese translations of Le Bon's work was quite possibly the article "The Relationship Between National Psychology and Education" by Liang Qixun, published in *Xinmin congbao* in 1903 (Liang, : v. 25: 49-57; v. 30: 49-53). This article is adapted from the English translation of Le Bon's *National Psychology*, a book which contains many brilliant passages on the topic of mass psychology. In 1913, *Dongfang zazhi* (*Eastern Miscellany*) published an article that discussed "the characteristics of mass psychology", emphasizing that the masses and the individual are utterly different from one another. "If put to proper use, then it can bring

about great things and establish great achievements. But if used improperly, it will lead to enormous crimes and villainy, which once begun cannot be stemmed." (Zhang, 1913: 4-7) In 1915, the Shanghai periodical *Fazheng zazhi* published an article entitled "The Theory of Mass Psychology" with the attribution "authored by Le Bon and translated by Chen Chengze". This is an abridged translation of Le Bon's book *Psychologie des foules* (Le Bon and Chen, 1915: 1-15). In 1918, the inaugural issue of *Wuwu* magazine published a long article of more than 30 pages entitled "*Yuan Qun*" (the origin of the masses), under the names "Lupang (France), author; Zhong Jianhong of Jiaoling, translator". In the main, it is a summary of the first half of *Psychologie des foules* (Le Bon and Zhong, 1918: 1-33). Also in 1918, Shanghai Commercial Press put out a Chinese translation of Le Bon's *Revolutionary Psychology* as a volume in its series, "*Shangzhi xuehui congshu*". In his preface to this work, Zhang Dongsun praises Le Bon's theories as "of peerless profundity" and expresses the hope that this Chinese translation would have the effect of "implanting civilization" into China (Zhang, 1918: 1-2). In 1920, a complete Chinese translation of *Psychologie des foules* was also published by Commercial Press, based on the English translation. It was reprinted multiple times, so that by March 1927 it had already reached its fifth edition. In subsequent years, the Commercial Press also came out with Chinese translations of Le Bon's *La psychologie politique* (1921), *Les opinions et les croyances* (1922), *Le déséquilibre du monde* (1930), and other works. The translator of all of these later works was the historical geographer Feng Chengjun, who had graduated with a degree from the Sorbonne. After the May Fourth Movement, the works of Le Bon's successors on the topic of mass psychology such as Edward Ross and Sigmund Freud were also introduced into China through translations. Using the words "social psychology" in their titles, multiple translated works included discussions or sections on mass psychology. Up through the 1940s, the theories and writings of Le Bon and others were very widely known among Chinese scholars of politics.

Following the translation and dissemination of the works of Le Bon and others, Chinese intellectual circles grew steadily more cognizant of mass psychology. Many scholars and writers quoted them in various different contexts, applying the concept of the masses and related theories to the analysis of Chinese society. In 1919, Fu Sinian published an article in *The Renaissance (Xinchao)* that analyzed the concepts of "masses" and "society", saying as follows: "In China, the average society is one with very

little true social substance. The great majority of society is no more than the masses. A society that is worthy of the name is one that has capability, and one with organic qualities. It must have elaborate organization, and a healthy vitality, but if it is merely a plate of loose sand, then we can only call it a 'crowd'." (Meng, 1919: 345-6) Under the influence of the translations of Le Bon's theories in *Dongfang zazhi*, Liang Shuming wrote an article entitled "Seeking the Source and Resolving Doubts", and also engaged in extensive discussions with Xiong Shili on this topic (Lin, 2009: 79-92). When Lu Xun discussed the Chinese national character, he directly quoted Le Bon's notion that "the power of the dead is greater than that of the living." Upon reading both the Japanese and English translations of *Psychologie des foules*, Zhou Zuoren remarked that they were "very interesting, provoking us to think profoundly on these topics." He also critiqued it saying that "the masses are the most fashionable idol of our present day. Whatever it is we wish to do, we can say we're responding to the demands of the masses, just as in ancient times, it was said that [the rulers] were carrying out the will of heaven...How mistaken these are! I don't believe in the masses; the masses are merely the midway point between the tyrant and the docile common folk." (Qi, 1928: 133-8)

As they were translating and introducing Westerners' writings, Chinese scholars also began to look into mass psychology from different perspectives. Based on my observations, those which were published in book form number over ten examples, among which there are both scholarly writings (see Gao, 1929) as well as published notes of lectures delivered in training sessions (see Zhang, 1934), and even small pamphlets of which the authors are unknown (see *Lectures on Mass Psychology*, 1936). What is especially noteworthy is the fact that the subject of "mass psychology" was taught in many training courses to both party and military officials. According to the testimony of Zhang Jiuru, he taught mass psychology to over 900 students in the fourth and fifth sessions of the Central Military and Political Academy, to 2400-plus students in the sixth and seventh sessions of the Central Army Officers Academy, and to over 500 students in the special training class made up of graduates of the Whampoa (*Huangpu*) Military Academy. These lectures were published under the titles *Mass Psychology*, and *Mass Psychology and Mass Leadership* (see Zhang, 1934). And in 1943 attendees of the KMT Central Political Training Course, as well as in 1945 the cadre training corps of the Central Military Committee, were still required to take courses in mass psychology

(see Wu, 1943; Xiao, 1945). The format and style of these works varied, as did the depth and breadth of their content, but mostly their content did not go beyond the scope of what had been explored by Western mass psychology. This meant that it did not stray from the characteristics of mass psychology, the nature of mass emotions, or the strategy of leading the masses. The difference was that they added analyses of the political situation and special features of the masses in China. In these various kinds of training courses, the curriculum of mass psychology was largely centered on the means to grasp and master mass psychology, to control and lead the masses. In sum, during the Republican era, the many and varied translations of and discourses about mass psychology typically regarded the masses as a "mob" that lost rationality, were easily duped, lacked moral virtue, and possessed a very destructive character. In their view, leadership groups and intellectual elites should commit themselves to the goals of understanding mass psychology and controlling and taming the masses.

IV. HISTORICAL MATERIALISM AND MASS MOVEMENTS

If on the one hand research into "mass psychology" was often underlain by feelings of loathing and fear, on the other hand, in the discussions about "mass movements", we often find expressions of approbation and advocacy. At the end of the Qing Dynasty and beginning of the Republican Era, "masses" (*qunzhong*) became the standard translation for mass, crowd, or even mob, all of which inspired fear; by contrast, "group"(*qun*) or "gregarious"(*hequn*) were assigned positive meanings by intellectuals, and thus welcomed. On the one hand, the traditional gloss of "group" as "ruler" still lingered into the present, as in the example of "the king is one being good at gathering people and in favor with the general public." (Chen, 1884: 604) On the other hand, "group" or "the study of groups" were popular as translations of society and sociology, respectively (Jin, 2009: 180-225, 536-7). In his 1895 essay "*Yuan Qiang*"(the origins of strength), Yan Fu first used the word *qun* to translate society (Yan, 1903: 23-37), and subsequently the use of *qun* quickly spread. In the same year, Kang Youwei discussed the importance of "*hequn*"(joining with the group) as follows: "Discussing scholarship means joining together with a group. Bringing together tens or hundreds into a group is not as good as bringing together thousands or tens of

thousands, to bring results more quickly, and to make more momentous changes." (Kang, 1895: 5) In 1897, Liang Qichao expounded on Kang Youwei's proposals in his "*Shuo Qun*" (explication of groups): "We take the group as the essence, and change as the function. When these two principles are established, then bringing order to the world for thousands or even tens of thousands of years will be possible." (Liang, 1897: 1) In his creative and immensely influential translation *Tianyan Lun (On Natural Evolution)*, Yan Fu discussed "groups" and "the agility to form groups" as tied to the survival or extinction of nations: "Natural evolution enables those that can form groups to survive, and ensures that those who do not, will perish. Those good at forming groups remain, while those not skilled at grouping together will become extinct." (Huxley, 1933: 32) By the 20th century, periodicals began to appear that alluded to the praiseworthiness of "group" or "masses" (*qun*) in their titles, such as *Vernacular Report on the Group of the Wise* (*zhiqun baihua bao*, Suzhou) inaugurated in 1903, *Series Newspaper of Exhorting the Masses* (*zhenqun congbao*), launched in 1907, *Series Newspaper of Treating the Masses* (*bianqun congbao*), started in 1909, *Miscellany of the Society for Studying Masses* (*qunxuehui zazu*, Shanghai), begun in 1912, and *The Group Speak* (*qunyan*, Guangzhou) and *New Groups* (*xinqun*, Shanghai), both started in 1919.

By the time of May Fourth Movement, the early communists brought historical materialism together with the meanings of "gregarious" and "being good at unity", such that in their eyes "the union of the masses" became the unavoidable path to achieve national salvation. In his "Declaration on the Inauguration of Publication" included in the 1919 issue of *Xiangjiang Review*, the youthful Mao Zedong first used the word "masses" (*qunzhong*) in writing (Mao, 1990: 293-4). He called for a spirit of "assuming responsibility for the world" in order to realize the "great union of the masses" that could not wait a single moment longer (Mao, 1990: 390). Yun Daiying criticized intellectuals for "being at least somewhat pedantic and bookish, and unable to realize the necessity for coming together in groups." (Yun, 1920: 14) On the anniversary of the May Fourth Movement, Luo Jialun wrote an essay summing up the achievements made by the student movement. Although he recognized that the masses "were lethargic," and that a mass movement "had great use for emotion, but less use for reason", he still thought that these were not such a bad thing. To the contrary, he lamented that the masses were not numerous enough, and that mass movements were in short supply:

"May I ask, aside from us 20,000-30,000 relatively well-organized students, where are there any other masses in Beijing? Alas! It seems that for a mass movement, one first needs to have masses!" As a consequence, to raise a mass movement required first "raising the masses", and the secret of raising up the masses lay in this: "a person raising a monkey must first become a monkey himself!" (Luo, 1920: 854-6) The early Marxist Yang Yizeng wrote an article in *Xinqun* to clarify the uses of the terms masses and mass movement, saying that the reason why China had been suffering under autocratic rule for several thousand years was because "the people have not thoroughly brought into realization nor fully organized a mass movement." The May Fourth Movement was the starting point for China's mass movement, its significance comparable to the struggle of ancient Roman plebeians against the oligarchy, the English constitutional movement, and the French Revolution (Yang, 1920: 1-10).

After the Chinese Communist Party was officially established in 1921, mobilizing the masses and developing mass movements quickly became the core of the party's work. The CCP's central platform speaks of "proletariat" and "working class", but it never uses the word "masses", instead referring to these social constituents as "laborers in industry and agriculture." (*Selected Documents of the CCP Central Committee*, 1989: 3) In November of the same year, notification issued by the central bureau mentions the "labor movement", "youth and women's movements", but it does not yet employ "mass movement" as a rubric under which to subsume these various movements (*Selected Documents of the CCP Central Committee*, 1989: 26-7). In June 1922, the CCP Central Committee issued a "Position Regarding the Present Situation", in which it addresses the "people" as "members of the peasantry, the workers, students, soldiers and police, and merchants" as well as "advocates of good governance," and "members of the KMT", in opposition to "warlords of the northern government". Nevertheless, the word "masses" never appears anywhere in the document (*Selected Documents of the CCP Central Committee*, 1989: 33-46). In the same month, in Chen Duxiu's report to the Comintern, he refers to the strikes and organizational work and other activities taking place in Shanghai, Beijing, Guangdong, Hankou, Changsha, Zhejiang and elsewhere as a "labor movement." (*Selected Documents of the CCP Central Committee*, 1989: 50-3) In 1922, the Second Congress of the CCP passed a resolution in its organizational charter that stipulates that the CCP "should be a party which organizes the masses who possess the greatest

revolutionary spirit to fight for the benefit of the proletariat, and to clearly demand 'to go into the masses', to make the party become a great 'mass party'" (*Selected Documents of the CCP Central Committee*, 1989: 90). This is the first instance that "masses" became a core concept in CCP Central Committee documents. In 1923, at the Third Congress of the CCP, under the policy of cooperating with the KMT on securing the "three greats", they regarded the "national movement" of "eradicating external pressures and warlords" as their main responsibility. They also passed multiple resolutions regarding the "labor movement", "women's movement", and "youth movement". (*Selected Documents of the CCP Central Committee*, 1989: 148-9) In the same year, Deng Zhongxia wrote an essay published in *China Youth* in which he lauds workers, peasants, and soldiers as the "three mass groups of the main force of revolution." (Zhong, 1923: 1)

From 1924 to 1925, as the KMT-CCP collaboration and the nationalist revolution proceeded, the frequency of use of masses and mass movements further increased in internal party documents as well as in various kinds of publications (Jin and Liu, 2009: 539).[1] In "Resolution on the national revolutionary movement" passed at the CCP's Fourth Congress, there are frequent references to "laboring masses", "masses of workers and peasants" (or "masses of peasants and workers"), and "peasant masses". In general, the scope of the groups these terms designate narrows over time. Among these, the "laboring masses" includes, in addition to workers and peasants, the "small-scale merchants and artisans or craftsmen on the brink of bankruptcy," "intellectuals living in insecurity", and "itinerant proletarians." Also noteworthy is that the document refers repeatedly to "all of the laboring masses of proletarians, peasants, and others," which clearly demonstrates that distinctions of status were already being made within the masses (*Selected Documents of the CCP Central Committee*, 1989: 329-41). At the same time, due to the increasingly visible disagreements and contradictions between the two parties, the CCP identified the wresting of control over the masses from the KMT as one of its major tasks. In July 1924, the CCP Central Committee issued a proclamation demanding that party members "endeavor to ensure that we gain or maintain the real power to direct civic organizations of workers, peasants, students, and that it remains fully within our grasp." (*Selected Documents of the CCP Central Committee*, 1989: 283) A resolution from the Fourth Congress of the CCCP called for "the masses of workers and peasants to rise up and resist" the conciliatory

policies that were deleterious to the workers' and peasants' movement, and expressed the urgent demand to struggle with the KMT for the support of the masses. By the end of 1925, in his famous essay "Analysis of the classes in Chinese society", Mao Zedong raised the important topic of how to distinguish between enemies and friends of the revolution, and even more importantly, brought mass theory and class analysis together, thereby making it clearer what was meant by the masses (Mao, 1991: 3-11).

From internal CCP documents, we can see that during the era of the Nationalist Revolution, the "masses" had clearly become the main source of strength as well as the object of mobilization for the party, and a "mass movement" had been identified as the focus of the party's basic strategy and work. After KMT-CCP collaboration collapsed in 1927, the CCP shifted to rural areas and fully established its strategic plan to "armed independent regime of workers and peasants". It continued to mobilize the masses, seeing the launching of mass movements as its task and responsibility, the only difference being now that it had shifted the object of mobilization from workers to peasants (Wang, 2010: 60). In subsequent party internal documents as well as in the writings of the leadership, "masses" and "mass movements" are sometimes used independently, and other times used interchangeably or together with specific classes (working class, peasant class, petit bourgeoisie, etc.), or with specific movements (workers' movements, peasants' movements, youth movements, women's movements, etc.). But in any case, their central place within the Chinese revolutionary lexicon had been firmly and fully established. Historical materialism, which regards the masses of people as the fundamental force of historical progress, had thereby found a new source of support in the Chinese revolution.

V. THE MASS LINE AND ITS POLITICAL FUNCTION

With the development of mass movements, the CCP accumulated more and more experience in revolutionary praxis, and its discourse on the masses gradually matured, in the end producing a systematic set of "mass lines". On September 28, 1929, in a letter of instruction by Zhou Enlai, he said, "In the work of raising funds, we must go through the mass line; we must not let the Red Army do this on its own." This is generally considered to be the first time "mass line" was used in a CCP document (*Selected Documents of the CCP Central Committee*, 1989: v. 5: 481). In

December of the same year, Mao Zedong directed the Red Army as follows: "In addition to fighting and destroying the military strength of the enemy, you must also take responsibility for the important tasks of propagandizing the masses, organizing the masses, arming the masses, and assisting the masses to establish a revolutionary political regime, all the way to establishing CCP organizations." (Mao, 1993: 79) In January 1934, Mao Zedong delivered a summary speech at the second National Congress of Deputies of Workers, Peasants, and Soldiers, in which he said that "concerning with the well-being of the masses" and "paying attention to methods of work" were two aspects where the content of the mass line was deepened (Mao, 1991: 136-41). During the Sino-Japanese War, especially after the rectification campaign in Yan'an, writings about the mass line by the leadership of the CCP grew more systematic and far-reaching. At the Seventh Party Congress in May 1945, Liu Shaoqi made a report on revising the party constitution, in which he devoted an entire section to discussing "the problem of the party's mass line." (*Collection of the Constitutions of the CCP*, 2007: 46) At this point, the mass line had been officially established as the position of the "basic political line" and "fundamental organizational line" for the party (Liu, 1981: 342).

In relevant discussions of the mass line, the implications of the term "masses" frequently changed based on differences in the linguistic context. In terms of its abstract significance, "masses" were more or less synonymous with "the people", or could be combined with the latter as the "masses of the people". At that time, it was a concept of an aggregation of people that could not be divided, and possessed a supreme legitimacy based both on its attributes of power and its moral judgment. In various sorts of texts about the establishment of the party, its most typical use is as "the masses of the people," in contrast to "heroic persons" (or "individual persons"), emphasizing that only the former has the true power to propel historical development. If its members do not trust in "the power of the masses of the people", or do not establish "a regime of the masses of the people", then the CCP's revolutionary cause will not be able to achieve success (Mao, 1991: 94). In concrete terms, "masses" refers to an individual or group with a particular political status. Usually this is in relation to party members or cadres, referring to those camps that belong to the CCP side, but they are not the members of the "vanguard force", nor are they the ordinary people, who do not shoulder any responsibility for leadership. At that time, the masses may have been

"backward": "In every just war the defensive not only has a lulling effect on politically alien elements, it also makes possible the rallying of the backward sections of the masses to join in the war." (Mao, 1991: 199) Some may even some "bad elements": "We must criticize and struggle with certain cadres and Party members who have committed serious mistakes and certain bad elements among the masses of workers and peasants." (Mao, 1991: v. 4: 1272)

Even more commonly, "masses" is a flexible concept that possesses both abstract and concrete characteristics, as well as both homogeneity and hierarchical distinctions. In discourses of "masses of the people", "mass line", or "the relationship between the party and the masses", the "masses" have a very strong sense of homogeneity, such that distinctions between the individual and the group are frequently overlooked. However, when it is preceded by various limiting conditions or other modifying phrases, "masses" betrays a very clear sense of both differentiation and hierarchy. In terms of the relative distance from the party organization, there are party member masses, base masses, worker and peasant masses, and ordinary masses. These are arranged hierarchically based on their class status and political position. "Party member masses" refers to ordinary party members who do not have any responsibilities as cadres; they are simultaneously members of the vanguard, but also one segment within the masses (Mao, 1991: v. 2: 610). "Base masses" are those class elements who are the very best, and hence the part of the masses who are most worthy of the party's reliance and trust. During times when class contradictions are sharp, this usually refers to the industrial workers in the city and the poor peasants or day laborers in the countryside (Mao, 1991: v. 4: 1326). In the class system of the party, they occupy a central position. However, when ethnic or other conflicts are sharp and a "united front" is emphasized, the base masses can be extended to include the entire group of workers and peasants, making it equivalent to "the masses of workers and peasants." (Mao, 1991: 160) "Ordinary masses" usually refers in general to non-party members or to ordinary people who are not cadres. It can be extended into an even broader category, to include various types of petit bourgeoisie, artisans, or "vagrant proletarians". (*Selected Documents of the CCP Central Committee*: v. 10: 628) Looking at the extent of their involvement in the revolutionary struggle, there are active elements, neutral elements, and backward elements, such that they form a hierarchy based on their political attitude and political expression. "The masses in

any given place are generally composed of three parts, the relatively active, the intermediate and the relatively backward. The leaders must therefore be skilled in uniting the small number of active elements around the leadership and must rely on them to raise the level of the intermediate elements and to win over the backward elements." (Mao, 1991: v. 3: 898)

The core of the mass line is the expression of the relationship between the party (the vanguard) and the masses. Cong Riyun has investigated how "masses" is used as the direct object of a verb or preposition in contemporary Chinese political discursive contexts. He divides these uses of masses into three categories: as the object of trust and reliance, as the object of organizing and mobilization, and as the object of concern and service (Cong, 2005: 15-24). These lexical differences in fact reflect the differing connotations and position of "masses" in the CCP mass line. Masses who are the object of reliance and trust are a subjective conceptualization, one that provides a social base, developmental momentum, and the source of legitimacy for the CCP revolution (Mao, 1991: 136). The masses as the object of mobilization and leadership are an objective conceptualization, including the true relational status of the vanguard and the masses within revolutionary praxis (Liu, 1981: 343). As the objects of concern and service, the masses are to a considerable degree a strategic conceptualization, such that the vanguard can use them to win over the support of the people, to improve the quality of work as well as the effectiveness of leadership (Mao, 1991: 137).

The plethora of meanings inherent in "masses" and "mass line" enabled them to take on extremely important functions within the course of the Chinese communist revolution. Mao Zedong observed that the "question of the first importance for the revolution" must be to recognize "who are our enemies? who are our friends?"(Mao, 1991: 3) The fundamental basis for distinguishing friend from enemy is, naturally enough, the Marxist theory of class analysis and class struggle. Nevertheless, the problem lies in how the CCP defines itself as the "vanguard of the Chinese working class", as a "class party" that represents the interests of the working class (unlike the KMT's self-proclaimed role as a "party of the entire people"). The reality of modern China is that the peasants comprise the vast majority of the population, and industrial workers' numbers and strength are quite small, such that the difference between the two classes is huge. Hence, the CCP may at the same time face the practical difficulty that its social basis is weak, and also the

theoretical dilemma that it is lacking in legitimacy. The concept of masses and theory of the mass line, with their plethora of connotations and extreme elasticity, to a considerable extent aided the CCP in escaping from this predicament. Mass line must without doubt be founded on the class line, but the mass line gave the class line a much stronger flexibility and also adaptability. The scope of the masses can be either great or small, and all friends of the revolution can be found within the ranks of the masses. Hence, the enemies of the revolution can be excluded from the masses. In different stages of the revolution, the boundary of the masses can be freely redrawn to adapt to changes within and among the factions of enemies and friends, respectively. Within the boundaries of the masses, one can still distinguish different gradations of people depending on how close or friendly they are to the revolution (Mao, 1991: 9). In this way, the masses and mass line can enable the party to act quickly based on the practical needs of the revolutionary struggle, and flexibly draw lines between friendly and enemy factions or groups, expand their social base, and escape from legal predicaments to gain political advantage.

In the practical dimensions of concrete political operations and party governance, the mass line also served as the CCP's theoretical basis for opposing the ideas of "liberalism", and also as its effective weapon for overcoming "bureaucratic" styles of governance. In "Combat Liberalism" (1937), Mao Zedong analyzes the ideas of "liberalism" in terms of the relationship between the party and the masses. To combat liberalism, one must "consolidate the collective life of the Party and strengthen the ties between the Party and the masses", and "be more concerned about the Party and the masses than about any private person." (Mao, 1991: v. 2: 359-61) Even more must the mass line be an effective remedy for overcoming bureaucratism, and improving the vitality of the party. Each time the CCP initiates a rectification of its basic organization, it always appeals to the power of the masses. In 1947, during the land reforms in the party's traditional base area, the CCP Central Committee initiated a broad-based, comprehensive and far-reaching, multilevel party rectification movement, "calling on the people to take their fate into their own hands", "to oversee, judge, and select or dismiss their own personnel, namely cadres at all levels, and to oppose cadres who illegally transgress people's rights or oppress the people." (Liu, 1981: 77) Zhou Enlai stated that for rectifying the party, "the best, healthiest method" was to "open the door to rectification", that is, "through party branches, to invite nonparty masses to participate in

party meetings, and jointly investigate party members and cadres." (*Selected Important Documents Since the Foundation of the CCP*, 2011: v. 25: 172) In this way, they could together seek the assistance of the masses' strength to bring about effective surveillance and control over the political elite at the base. And, they could provide the masses with opportunities for letting off steam and exercising their power, to thereby further integrate them within the power system.

VI. AN AMBIGUOUS POLITICAL SUBJECT

At the end of the Qing and beginning of the Republican period, and especially between the defeat in the 1894-5 Sino-Japanese War and the May Fourth Movement in 1919, a large number of new nouns and new concepts began to appear and become popularized through the Chinese press and other print media. These became the basic building blocks with which modern China's intellectual edifice was constructed (see Huang, 2009). The mass theory that originated in the West was also introduced into China in this period, and began a "theoretical journey" of unparalleled dimensions. Added to this, the stimulus and momentum created by multiple mass movements during and after May Fourth led to the rise of a tidal wave of popularity for the investigation of mass psychology and mass movements that continued for decades, with no sign of ebbing. The concepts and theories related to "masses" gradually entered into the "intellectual storehouse" of modern Chinese, becoming an important intellectual resource for people in many different fields to engage in social and political practice (Pan, 2005: 137-70).

In the first half of the 20th century, the discourse of the masses that flourished in China was deeply influenced by two opposing Western traditions. One was the field of mass psychology established by Le Bon and others, which regarded the masses as a mob or crowd deficient in rationality and depraved in morality. The other was the historical materialism established by Marx, Engels, Lenin and others, who regarded the people as the only true force that propelled historical progress. Mass psychology and historical materialism entered China one after another, and very quickly collided and also merged with traditional Chinese conceptions of the masses. On the one hand, the pejorative connotations of "masses" in classical Chinese texts merged together with modern Western mass psychology, so that "masses" (*qunzhong*) turned into the

Chinese equivalent of an unruly mass or crowd. On the other hand, "group", "coming together as a group", or "the study of groups" and other such vocabulary, words with positive connotations, converged with socialist or Marxist-affiliated words like "people", "proletariat", and "the toiling masses". This enabled "masses" to accrue positive connotations, in the end turning it into a subjective force for the Chinese communist revolution. These two connotations respectively came into relation with the concepts of "mass psychology" and "mass movements", gradually forming a stereotype. When speaking of "mass psychology", masses usually conveyed a negative image of the effacement of individuality, the loss of reason, and the susceptibility to deceptive manipulation. Within the narrative of the "mass movement", however, the masses often appeared in a positive light as a deeply oppressed, but vigorously resistant and heroically sacrificing social formation. The discourse of the masses in modern China thus exhibited a bifurcation into the negative view of the masses as represented by "mass psychology", and the positive view of the masses represented by "mass movement". These two both opposed but also merged with one another, becoming an effective tool for different political parties and social elites to discuss contemporary politics, to mobilize the masses, and to realize their various political objectives.

The rise and spread of the discourse of "masses" can be viewed as one aspect of the construction of a modern Chinese political subject. The birth of political modernity is often taken to mean a fundamental reform of the political structure and a substantive transition in the political subject. Traditional politics usually exhibits a pyramid type of structure with monarchical power at the core, while modern politics, adhering to the principles of "reason" and "disenchantment", is constructed on the ruins of a monarchical despotism. The final displacement of "sovereignty invested in the sovereign" by "sovereignty rests with the people" has become the key link in the self-establishment of political modernity (Zhang, 2016: 77-90). In the political transformation of modern China and East Asia, we can also see this process of the replacement of the subject. However, compared to Western European nations, the conditions in China were more complex, and the construction of a modern state was not a primary or endogenous process. Rather, it began with the invasions by the West and Japan, and with the reaction of Chinese to these events. In the final analysis, the process of the people replacing the sovereign as political subject cannot be separated from the rise of nationalism and the

demand for ensuring national survival. Hence, the people (*renmin*) were not merely a presence standing in opposition to the sovereign, but along with the citizenry (*guomin*), masses (*qunzhong*), and other similar concepts, together comprised a conceptual cluster that represented modern political subjectivity.

In Rousseau's formulation, "the people" were the vehicle for expressing the general will, which on moral grounds possessed an indubitable legitimacy. Modern Chinese intellectuals, facing the construction of a "sovereign people", embodied a force seeking the source for a new political validity for a modern nation. Nonetheless, because of their global, abstract character, the discourse of the people was unable to translate the promised values of democracy, equality, and human rights into reality, instead applying even stricter, more intrusive and all-encompassing discipline and control over ordinary citizens (see Shen). "The people" took modern Western "citizenship" as the model, and modern intellectuals tried to think of ways to "turn subjects into citizens". They carried out criticism and reflection on traditional politics, to construct a subjective position for the individual in the political processes of the nation. However, in seeking to "save the nation from destruction" and "identifying with fellow countrymen", ever since the late Qing, the discourse of the "people" in the end has not been able to free itself from the shroud that hangs over the concept of "nation", nor has it been able to establish an autonomous universal sphere. In the end it can only signify "the powerless, childlike people of the nation" as the meanings of its component characters suggest (Shen, 2002: 685-734). "Masses" is a more ambiguous concept that can be seen as the embodiment of the abstract concept of "people", since it is an entity that cannot be broken up into constituent parts. It could also be seen as the realization of the idealized concept of "people", since the masses are not a modern citizenry with clearly delineated rights and responsibilities, educational attainments, or rational qualities. "Group" (*qun*) can be merged with "people", to become the "masses of people" who represent the vast majority of the population and propel historical progress. They can also be the "backward elements" who require the "enlightened" or the "vanguard" to educate and awaken them.

The two images of the masses represented by "mass psychology" and "mass movement", respectively, are not in fact so clearly opposed to one another as they appear to be on the surface. In fact, the masses that were fashioned by historical materialism as the modern political subject and the

force of historical progress betray symptoms of the pejorative critique leveled at them by mass psychology. "The masses need education: this implies that their intellectual level and powers of judgment are inferior. The opinions of the masses need to be concentrated and sublimated: this implies that their opinions contain errors and are found at a relatively low level of consciousness. The masses need to be led: this implies that their actions are blighted by blindness, and are easily derailed from the correct course. The masses need to be organized: this implies that they are disorderly and unfocused. The masses need to be mobilized: this implies that they are passive, and are easily manipulated into following a leader." (Cong, 2005: 15-24) Put simply, the modern Chinese discourse of the "masses" betrays none other than a vague, unclear political subjective image.

Notes

Translated by Stephen Roddy, University of San Francisco.

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