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Me, A Dissident? No Thanks: Interview With A Chinese Rebel

Various Authors

1999

The following interview with Mu Xidi, a former sailor, Chinese rebel, and since 1990, a refugee in Barcelona was taken from the French book, *Bureaucratie, Bagnes et Business (Bureaucracy, Prisons and Profits)*, published in Paris by L'insomniaque last year.

The editors, Hsi Hsuan-wou and Charles Reeve conducted 22 such interviews in China, Hong Kong, and Macau with Chinese individuals from different occupations and political perspectives. The views expressed below by Mu come closest to those enunciated by our publication on the subject of reform and revolution.

Although Mu's critique of Chinese dissidents seems accurate, it in no way advocates abandoning to the tender mercies of the ruling police state those calling for democratic reforms in China. The week of Sept. 29, two manifestos were issued in China calling for democratic reforms in China calling for social justice and denouncing the blatant corruption which has accompanied the spread of private capitalist ventures. As Mu asserts, these reformers want no

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more than the rule of law and fairness in government and commerce. For these dissidents, however, many of whom have previously spent time in brutal Chinese prisons, their efforts will undoubtedly be rewarded with further oppression.

This section was translated from the French by the *Fifth Estate* staff.

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Every year one hundred million pairs of shoes come out of the southern Chinese province of Fujian. Starting in 1984, the big name brand sport shoe companies installed their factories here, often administered by Taiwanese or Hong Kong firms.

More than 700,000 women work here at assembly lines in terrible conditions; the injury rate is high and the work week often exceeds 90–100 hours, six days out of seven. For the most part, the women are very young (under 26 years of age), and some are adolescent.

The dormitories they live in are adjacent to the factories and are guarded by armed security personnel who don't hesitate to take aggressive action at the first sign of complaint. An enormous proportion of the world's production of sports shoes now comes out of this region.

The same is true for toys, for plastic household items, for textiles, semi-conductors and other commodities sold on the world market. This is how China — and its “market socialism” — enters a Westerner's daily life and how China, like Malaysia, Mexico and Brazil, become integrated into the “world economy.” Entire regions are transformed into gigantic concentrations of labor to produce goods, a large part of which are consumed far away.

For more than ten years we've been fed the tranquilizing news that “the end of the proletariat” has arrived which, in fact, the proletarian condition has been imposed on vast populations all over the planet where capitalist development had remained embryonic. In its imposition of the proletarian condition, China nevertheless constitutes a unique example.

The Stalinist system in China successfully dissolved ancient social ties that inhibited the transition to modern exploitation of labor. In addition, the bureaucratic class managed to retain control of the State and seems to guide the transition without too many setbacks. Admittedly, the innumerable social contradictions brought about by current upheavals make it hard to predict who the future political leaders will be. The liberal-faced autocrats who enthusiastically praise the great benefits offered by opening China to the world market are constantly crossing swords with the chauvinists who want a powerful China that has an imperialist future.

Whatever the future brings, China now belongs to the planetary factory system. As a cog in the present-day hell, China is a part of our future.

From the Introduction to *Bureaucratie, Bagnes, et Business*

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Hsi Hsuan-wou: How does a Chinese dissident happen to be here in Barcelona?

Mu Xidi: I'll begin by telling you about my life. After that I'll return to your label of me as a "dissident."

I belong to the generation of "educated youth." I had just graduated from high school when the Cultural Revolution broke out. I joined whole-heartedly. For an unruly adolescent like myself, it was the dreamed-of opportunity to scrap everything, to leave Amoy, my native city, and travel all over China. As long as the authorities needed us, we felt invincible. Our disillusionment was painful: the army intervened and almost our whole generation was deported to rural areas. We saw the horrible living conditions in the villages and discovered how wretched the situation was for the peasants. Ten years of our lives were wasted in land-clearing projects which I still suspect were pointless. How could land that peasants never wanted be any good?

After Mao's death, after the fall of the Gang of Four and Deng's return, we were eventually able to come back to the cities and be rehabilitated. At the time I could have resumed my studies, found a comfortable niche in the government or in some cultural fields (I've always enjoyed dabbling with a brush). But since I had been turned into an agricultural and manual worker, I decided to remain a manual laborer. I had already spent too much time with my aspiring young intellectual comrades, and had heard too many idealistic discussions about China's future. Beneath their noble rhetoric about "the people," I saw clearly that they would never be part of the people. They considered themselves distinct from them and felt they had a sacred mission to "save the country." Down deep, they were contemptuous of peasants and any poor people they associated with, even while claiming they wanted to free them from clutches of the Party's evil bureaucrats.

Having spent my childhood in a port city, I wanted to see the world. I was still young — 28 years old — and managed to get a job on a freighter.

That's when I started traveling around the vast, wide world. Chinese shipping companies manage to find cargo pretty much everywhere. Given the low wage of crew members, we have one of the world's most competitive fleets. We were super-exploited. But with the "opening up" of China, discipline on board was relaxed somewhat; the political commissars no longer made the rules as before, and as long as the captain returned home with well-filled pockets and his ship could turn a profit, they pretty much left us alone. Africa, the North Sea, Brazil... The company accepted whatever was offered. The captain even took on extra cargo on the side, and justified his action by the profit he made. I sailed around this for a good ten years.

Hsi Hsuan-wou: Weren't you pretty much cut off from everything?

Mu Xidi: Yes and no. I kept abreast of what was going on. At sea, you have time to read. I bought newspapers just about everywhere.

were no more than the military arm of a new State — a corrupt and totalitarian State — they collapsed, no match for the literate, neo-Confucian class, heirs to nearly a thousand years of authoritarian traditions.

Hsi Hsuan-wou: Don't you think Chinese revolutionaries ought to start by debunking the idea of "public good"? This confusing concept gives rise to dire consequences. *Weiguojia* means "for the country." The ambiguity stems from the term *guojia* itself which means both "country" and "State."

Mu Xidi: I agree. The dissidents are good at defying official prohibitions, and often of so with great courage when you consider the risks they run. The texts of "Shengwulian," of the trio Li Yizhe, of Wei Jiangshen, each in its own way, pinpoint what's not right within the Chinese realm. When our dissidents start speaking about remedies, they become objectionable. From all pens, there flows one word: *democracy*. Whatever meaning they attribute to this term, liberalizing the existing regime by adding a touch of legality and nominal freedom, or installing a western parliamentary-style regime (multi-parties and elections), the dissidents are hard put to conceive of anything besides better leaders. In short, they are unable to envision an end to the State.

Recall what happened to the two fervent iconoclasts who spat-tered the dead dictator's portrait with ink. They were immediately repudiated as outsiders to the movement and then were shamefully turned over to the police by Tiananmen's petty chieftains. Defending hooligans would risk the image they wanted to retain in the eyes of the authorities, that of worthy and responsible petitioners.

Hsi Hsuan-wou: Even so, "anarchy" is not absent from China's history. Taoist philosophy's libertarian approach, cultivating non-action (*wu-wei*) as a superior principle, the refusal of constraints, searching for harmony with nature,⁵ all these could provide our dissidents with food for thought.

Mu Xidi: In the meantime, Chinese radicals don't have much to expect from today's dissident intellectuals. There will be reason for hope when some individuals from the mass of a billion Chinese proletarians discover and identify with our history's most vibrant periods: with the orgiastic egalitarian rebels from the end of both the Han and Ming Dynasties, and particularly with the momentous Taiping rebellion⁶ from which the Chinese have not yet drawn all the lessons.

Taoist also gives evidence of dangers: revolutions that fail give birth to monsters. The emancipating Taoism which fed the revolt at the end of the Han Dynasty, became a religion with a celestial hierarchy that perfectly reflected the imperial ranking of the mandarins; its priests did not hesitate to serve as counselors to the ruler. The same thing happened with the Taiping: their revolt was irresistible, their troops swept aside everything along the way as long as they championed a project for social liberation. Once they

⁵ Today, the belief in harmony between man and nature becomes frighteningly relevant as the economic gangrene is translated into the ravaging of natural resources and destructive pollution. Consider the pharonic project of the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River and the stupendous ecological catastrophe it promises. See: *Forum for a Better China*, No. 2.

⁶ See Jacques Reclus, *La Revolt des Taiping (1851–1864), Prologue de la Revolution chinoise*. Paris: Le Pavillion, R. Maria, ed., 1972.

I read what was written about China. This is how I followed the events of the first democracy movement... and what happened to my brother Wei Jingshen.

Hsi Hsuan-wou: Your brother?

Mu Xidi: I call him "brother" because, despite his origins, he is one of the rare individuals who hasn't acquired the usual defects of the intelligentsia. I'll have more to say about him later on. Then came the second democratic movement and the Tiananmen massacre. Our ship put into port at Hong Kong.

On board, we followed everything on television. Really, we had front row seats because the Hong Kong reporters managed to get ordinary people right in the thick of the riot to talk to them, and they showed images that few people anywhere in the world got to see, particularly people in China. I immediately got together with some buddies I could trust and we discussed what we could do. We decided that things were too dangerous in Hong Kong. The British would have turned us over to the Chinese authorities, as they've done so often.

We decided to wait until we anchored at a port farther away from China. A few days later we set out to sea again heading for Marseilles. We intended to raise a ruckus and then ask for asylum. But as the days went by, enthusiasm waned. I realized that some in the group were having second thoughts. I had to be careful. The atmosphere on board became oppressive. I had no desire to return to China with my feet bound in irons, to be handed over to the police, so I decided to sneak away on my own. A stop in Marseilles gave me a chance to disembark on the sly and to get lost in the crowd. Then, because I had the address of someone to contact, I made my way to Catalonia. As an ex-Maoist with anarchist inclinations, I thought Barcelona would be a good place to end up. So I settled here.

Hsi Hsuan-wou: Do you plan to stay here?

Mu Xidi: Yes, unless there are major changes in China.

As for dissidence, it comes with a long history. It begins with the Maoist regime and, in the so-called liberated zones, even earlier. I won't go as far back as the Jiangxi soviets,¹ as that would take too long. So, to simplify, I can say that from the time of the Hundred Flowers,² there always were intellectuals ready to denounce quite explicitly the regime's defects and who were prepared to pay for it dearly as soon as the wind shifted.

We still don't know how many died in the camps as a result, or how many emerged from them destroyed after twenty years. Whenever the regime was in a crisis — at the beginning of the so-called Cultural Revolution, during Deng's power struggle with the Maoist fundamentalists, when Hu Yaobang died, when the students demonstrated against corruption — anyone educated enough to wield a brush seized the opportunity to cover walls with posters or to publish pamphlets against the tyrannical authorities.

Some of these texts, the more theoretical ones, are still well known. You're probably familiar with some of them: ones by Sheng-wu-lien like "Whither China?" the wall poster of the Li Yizhe group "On Democracy and Legality," Wei Jingsheng's "Democracy, the Fifth Modernization," Liu Qing's "J'accuse..." among others. Read them again.

Now, years later, looking back at them, what do you find? Even though these writers might have been very perceptive about the regime's totalitarian character which they attack, their criticism often only dealt with large principles and the various "rights" that the regime tramples on. Grievances of the "oppositionists" from the end of the 1970s were usually a lot more concrete about the day-to-day reality of oppression. With today's dissidents, ideology permeates almost everything. That's my major criticism of them.

¹ The first zones liberated by Communist guerrillas at the end of the 1920s.

² The first opposition to the Stalinist regime which Mao initiated in 1956 and which was brutally repressed the following year.

Hsi Hsuan-wou: It does make you wonder why no one else has taken that crucial step. Do you have any explanation for this?

Mu Xidi: There are many reasons: thirty years of Maoist obscurantism; an economic boom which has slightly loosened the stranglehold of puritanical Stalinist morality and which permits a huge number of people to hope for rapid change. Critical thinking has been submerged by this tidal wave. And, as always, despite the country's "opening up," we Chinese rebels constantly close ourselves off, obsessed with our uniqueness that, for years and year, prevented our seeing things from the perspective of rebels from other places and reaching out to them. Basically, I am beginning to wonder if there's any hope of revolution in China any time soon.

Hsi Hsuan-wou: Now you're raising a broader question.

Mu Xidi: That's right. It's not only in China that the crisis is intense. Nowhere has any challenge to the world order gone beyond an elementary stage. Can one really expect a country with the most archaic forms of domination in the world to show others the path to emancipation?

You have to understand how hard it is for intellectuals, children of mandarins and heirs to Confucian traditions, to conceive of a society without a State. When the bureaucrats complain about the current disruptions caused by introducing the market, the word they often employ is "anarchy," as if whatever the excesses of the State, absence of the State is the absolute evil. The various "democratic" movements that, since 1979, have disrupted Chinese cities simply perpetuate the feudal tradition of submitting petitions to a ruler. Appalled by his abuses, the intellectuals humbly approach him to request that he please mend his ways.

Even if, in its final days, the colossal sit-in organized by the students in Tiananmen Square eventually encouraged the appearance of an authentic proletarian insurrection *in other parts of the capital*, it did not itself deviate from the tradition of respectful entreaty. Our rebels are prepared to give their lives in order to criticize their masters, but not to fundamentally question their authority.

tion between the decisions of the world's masters and the destiny of poor China which at the time was essentially autarky. Today the country is an integrated spoke in the global capitalist machine and still they want to "Save China!"? Let it perish, their China! There's really only one among them who retained his honor. But at what a price!

Hsi Hsuan-wou: You're referring to Wei Jingshen?

Mu Xidi: Yes, his "Warning to Western Proprietors" earned him a second sentence of 15 years in a prison camp. What's happening to him is terrible, but at least he put his finger on the nub of the matter: China is completely assimilated into the world economy. I am pleased to read this from the pen of a Chinese person.

Of course, Wei calls for "a relatively equitable judicial system," "a society upheld by law," "a satisfying economic structure," and "democratic reform." He believes in the benefits of "investment" and "the market" as long as western capitalists deal with the right spokesmen, the democrats. Here, too, the same illusions about western happiness: the legal system, democracy, the economy! But at least he denounced the commercial dealings of the Chinese bureaucracy which is following in the same rut as its predecessors did between 1920–1940. At least he addressed his words to the world's real bosses, and makes it clear that China is tied to the world market. He's just one step away from saying that a revolutionary solution for China is inseparable from a more global, a world-wide, revolutionary solution.

Hsi Hsuan-wou: It's pretty hard to reproach him for failing to take that step. Don't forget that he spent more than fourteen years in labor camp and that he was just sentenced to fifteen more. This may well reinforce his hostility to despotism, but these aren't ideal conditions for someone to stay informed about the state of the world.

Mu Xidi: Of course, and I certainly don't intend to reproach him. After fourteen years of *lao-kai*, to dare to write what he did shows exceptional moral courage.

Basically, all of them are conversing with power, each in his own way. So that's why I don't call myself a dissident.

To summarize my complaints against the dissidents, I would say that they have three principal flaws: they are democrats, they are fascinated by the ruling class and they are patriots.

Hsi Hsuan-wou: Can you elaborate?

Mu Xidi: All right. I'll start with their demand for democracy. There is no more ambiguous demand than this. In Chinese, democracy is *minzhu*, sovereignty of the people. In other words, a call for democracy is to say "Down with tyranny! Power to the people!" So far, so good. I have no problem with that. But this same word is used to denote the modern idea of democracy. Namely, the western-type parliamentary regime which, as everyone knows, couldn't care less about the people's sovereignty once the magic period of elections is over. And this is what they are calling for.

Take for example, some like Fang Lizhi.³ His model of development is that of the West. After a visit to Berlin when the Wall was still standing, he criticized the Chinese regime which he called "socialist," but he could find no better alternative than to compare East Berlin's economic failure with West Berlin's achievements.⁴ He, and people like him, want nothing more than to install in China regimes similar to the ones you have here. I don't deny that this would be an improvement. But for a worker, would this change very much? Do these dissidents really know what sort of life a Japanese, Korean or Taiwanese worker leads?

This democratic project of theirs is a double illusion. First, the democratic "happiness" you experience here in the West has

³ The astrophysicist whom the media called "the Chinese Sakharov." An eclectic thinker, he wrote a variety of pamphlets in the 1980s which caused him to be excluded from the Party in the 1986. Immediately following the Tiananmen Square massacre, he took refuge in the U.S. Embassy where he and his wife stayed for one year until they were both allowed to go into exile.

⁴ Fang Lizhi, *Bringing Down the Great Wall, Writing in Science, Culture and Democracy in China*, New York: Knopf 1990.

numerous negative aspects, an emotional poverty they pretend not to see. Second, this relative happiness is possible only because Third World populations, the Chinese included, are kept in relative distress. The special economic zones are held up as examples of westernization because the workers there are subject to competitive relationships, as in the West. Admittedly, these places exist so as to modernize China, but you can be sure it's on capitalist terms. But I maintain that modernization is their secondary function. Their principal role is to furnish western capitalism with an inexhaustible, docile and super-exploited work force. Do you realize that of those billions of running shoes and other footwear shipped to every corner of the planet that your kids are so crazy about, not a single one is made in the West? They all come out of the labor camps of Asia where, day in and day out, millions of young workers poison themselves with benzene so as to glue everything just right, assuming they don't perish in hideous fires! Really now, what sort of democracy are our dissidents talking about? Their democracy is a myth that can serve to arouse the Asian masses against the ruling tyrants, but to what end?

Hsi Hsuan-wou: I'll let you answer that.

Mu Xidi: Replace the tyrant Chaing Kai-shek with the democrat Li Denghui; the tyrant Marcos with the democrat Aquino; the tyrant Ne Win with the democrat Aung San Suu Kyi. One ruling class with another. Does anything change for the lowly gluer of Nike or Reebok tennis shoes who will die at 30 because of benzene-burned lungs?

Hsi Hsuan-wou: No, of course not.

Mu Xidi: This brings me to my second objection: they are fascinated by the ruling class. It's the same objection I had regarded my former "educated youth" buddies. Chinese dissidents belong to the intelligentsia and they can't conceive of themselves as other than part of the ruling class. Not the present one, of course. This one is too discredited after 30 years of terror and several massacres from which they also suffered, but they aspire to be the successors,

the next generation, and already picture themselves in important posts where their talents will at last be recognized. Just look at how proud they are to be acquainted with certain enlightened bureaucrats who will listen to their humble suggestions, to their concrete proposals that could lead to reforms in the regime. Note how well they fathom the mysteries of the bureaucracy, how familiar they are with its warring clans, the names of hundreds of officials. They savor all leaks concerning the great scandals which are shaking up the regime; they rail against all the corrupt deals before participating in them themselves. Yes, they're really cut off from the population whose happiness they seek, from the China they hope to rescue from backwardness, from the "country" they want to "save!"

Hsi Hsuan-wou: Here you touch on a third complaint — their patriotism.

Mu Xidi: Precisely! Their motto is "Save China!" But do they have anything concrete to offer 800 million peasants who are barely emerging from the Middle Ages and whose aspirations come from pre-industrial society? Democratic elections won't turn them into modern citizens overnight. If they don't deal with this question, it's because the only status they can conceive for peasants is as a servile workforce, an unlimited source of surplus value for their modernization projects. Their patriotism is just a pious sentiment. They want to "Save China!" so they themselves can prosper from the efforts of the toiling masses whom they expect to relegate to the fringes of a long time yet.

Of course, the idea of "saving China" is itself a trap.

Hsi Hsuan-wou: Would you clarify that statement?

Mu Xidi: There's no possibility of saving China without saving all of humanity. Economically, China is so intertwined with the rest of the world that the future of one is necessarily linked to that of the other. Rebels in the 1920s were more clear-headed than their descendants in the 1990s. When Deng Xiaoping and his friends occupied the Chinese embassy in Paris to protest against terms of the Versailles treaty, they were making a direct connec-