



Detailed, Rigorous Thinking in a Complex Chain of Elastic Codes

Fitted images were essentially produced by codes being applied to information. With the codification being ideationally driven, the Revolution relied on a set of codes with the quality of being *highly elastic*. This quality had widespread significance to all detailed, step-by-step inferencing activities.

THEORIZING ELASTICITY: USING ELASTIC CONSTRUCTS

By the term elastic, I mean a quite distinct quality. Different codes have different attributes in terms of their *referential parameter*—the way signs could tangibly be tied, pegged, or referenced to objects.

Highly concrete concepts (codes) tend to have a narrow range of qualified referents; once institutionalized, they can be convenient tools to create unified intersubjectivity and stable standard definitions. Codes that are highly abstract may be tied to a much wider range of qualified referents, and there is more room for disagreement over the referents' qualifications, gaps, sense of arbitrariness, and so forth.

To illustrate the abstract-to-concrete spectrum, we may consider the differences between three words: “justice,” “mammals,” and “donkey.” Justice is obviously the most abstract of the three. We could not “touch” it physically. Without concrete elaboration, justice is forever a vague image, and one with fuzzy boundaries. A mammal, in contrast, is physically tangible enough to be touched. However, the touch is extremely partial.

When one touches a mammal, one does not touch all kinds of mammals—monkeys, hippopotamuses, dolphins, dogs, and so forth—all at once in a way that truly represents the referential boundary of the code. The objects that “mammal” references can thus be very concrete and discrete, unlike justice. But such objects are not singular. The qualifying referents are concrete and varied in range. Donkey is the most concrete code of the three. When one touches a donkey, one simply touches a donkey. The referent is the most singular, clear, and unified.

Elastic codes fit into the abstract-to-concrete spectrum *flexibly*. Elastic codes can potentially be more concrete or abstract, depending on their use. This is somewhat akin to elastic bands that can potentially expand or contract, depending on their use during a given moment. While there is a “normal state” or “normal shape” to which the elastic codes refer, they can be temporarily expanded or stretched beyond that normal shape, a shape that may stay in place for a while or transform.

Such stretching, however, requires work, as does the maintenance of the stretched shape. Suppose the original meaning of a code revolves around a more concrete core, the referential parameter that temporarily extends would forge more distant relations from the original core. So long as the extension is within a tolerable limit, it is still always possible to revert back to an original state, substantiated by more “classic” definitions and examples. A continual presence of forces would need to keep a stretched definition “in shape,” or else the parameters and shape would experience reversion.

Elastic Constructs Versus Visual Symbols

Visual symbols can also make the flexible crossing between the concrete and the abstract. In the context of a United Nations meeting, the concrete symbol of a flag may “represent” the idea of a legitimate national entity recognized by its peers in the meeting. But *elastic constructs*—that is to say, things encoded with elastic codes—differ from visual symbols in a few key ways.

First, in the case of elastic constructs, the fitting of abstract ideas into concrete information is only a *temporarily borrowed relation*; the acts to establish the “fitting” often require more work than visual symbols do.

Once instituted in a stable institutional environment, a Japanese flag—a visual symbol—consistently stands for the Japanese nation (rather than other peer nations within the institutional field, which have their own flag symbols to represent them). Although the envisaging of the nation may differ, the link between the symbol and the referent (the nation) remains the same. In the case of elastic constructs, elastic codes require repeated stretching activities, work, and force in order to maintain the referential relationship with a certain set of information.

This point highlights a second difference: more *effortful, continuous works are often required* to establish stabilized meanings of elastic codes and elastic constructs. This is due to the temporariness in meanings. The visual symbol of a national flag has a relatively stable referential relationship with a set of intended objects, at least within an institutional field. But consider the act of benevolence toward a person. This information must be explicitly represented (encoded) as an act of “comradeship,” with some deliberate effort invested, in order to show that it is an act of comradeship within the scene of a revolutionary battle. The relations need to be continuously specified and re-specified, with a considerable amount of renewed, deliberate effort—with the ongoing emergence of new information, within new situational contexts.

Third, elastic constructs more effectively convey specified meanings at a *conscious* level than visual symbols. Visual symbols, as well as tacit metaphors and idioms, have more embedded and tacit relations with the intended referents. However, once being forced to explicate the relations—such as questioning a citizen regarding the exact relationship of a flag and why it must stand for a set of meanings—the magical “representational” quality of the flag is often lost. Arguments and narrations would be of much more practical, representational use. Elastic constructs, already embedded in—or ready to be used in—arguments and narrations, are thus significantly more suited for meaning explication at the conscious level.

Related to the aforementioned point, elastic constructs had the unique power of *making things into equivalent statuses*, making one thing temporarily “become” another thing (or equivalent to another thing)—and thus treated as another thing. Because of such a quality, people could equate the concrete and the abstract at a *conscious* level, where the relations are *explicated in detailed*, specified terms. People could use elastic constructs to direct things in a much more precise, targeted, detailed manner than

they could use with visual symbols or metaphor constructs; bureaucracies could even “bureaucratize” these constructs into their operation.¹

From Resemblance to Equivalence

Resemblance means to “look alike.” This does not, however, mean the objects have to be exactly the same. They just need to look sufficiently alike, with some kind of overlapping features, to belong to the same “type”—the same family. But the process of resemblance is hardly automatic, or inherent, in the features of objects themselves. In many cases, they need conscious, deliberate cognitive and verbal efforts (“language games”) to make it clear what those overlapping features actually are. I, a human, could suddenly be grouped into the family of “struggling wild animals” by people playing the game of pointing out my overlapping features with other animals struggling to thrive in the wilderness.²

Equivalence does not therefore literally mean certain things being the same in every aspect. It principally means that they can be seen to belong in the same “family” or “type” that, by their identifiable overlapping features, have certain equal properties. In this sense, equivalence here differs from mathematical equivalence, where the things (represented as numbers) to be weighed and calculated are exactly identical. It is closer to the notion of *substantial equivalence* in the modern-day usage of the term—as in genetically modified crops may be substantially equivalent to their counterpart after they are incorporated into market products.

Equivalence can be in *essence* or in *function*. *Essential equivalence* means that the two may be believed to share enough *essential* properties, therefore warranting the same class of assumptions and treatments. A court may rule that the punishment issued for one murder case is the same as another because the nature of the two cases is *essentially* similar and therefore equivalent, even though the exact actors and actions differ. *Functional equivalence* implies that one can practically substitute the

¹To qualify my statement: some visual symbols embody elastic codes, and vice versa; for example, “democracy” as an elastic concept and the American flag as a visual symbol are intertwined. My effort here is to highlight the distinctiveness of elastic codes is to showcase certain distinct properties are essential to the building of elaborate, complex ideas at a conscious level within an idea system.

²For the discussion of “family resemblance” (in German *Familienähnlichkeit*), see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations. Second Edition*, trans G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1958), paragraphs 66–77.

other—such as cane sugar versus coconut sugar, even though their compositional essence could be different. Essential equivalence almost always implies functional equivalence, but functional equivalence can explicitly divorce itself from any notion of essential equivalence.

SUBSTANTIATING ELASTIC CONSTRUCTS WITH EVIDENCE: THE CASE OF PENG ZHEN

In this section I use the case against a high-level party official, Peng Zhen [彭真], to illustrate how, through stepwise inferences, the act of an official was stretched to an extreme symbolic meaning. This state of stretched meaning was in turn reinforced by more detailed research.³

It should be noted, however, that the relationship was performed in reverse. Rather than a flow of physical evidence congealing into accepted ideas, here we see that, chronologically, a set of ideas were propagated first, and subsequently research was conducted to provide proof of those ideas. Detailed equivalences were drawn at the later, research stage.

In 1966, a few months before the release of the “May 16th Notification,” high-ranking Party official Peng Zhen headed a five-person committee charged with handling a controversy surrounding a play, *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* [海瑞罢官]. The main dispute revolved around whether the play was revolutionary or anti-revolutionary. Mao took a clear side, critiquing that the play analogized Peng Dehuai [彭德怀] as Hai Rui, who was dismissed from office in 1959 after he openly attacked Mao at the Lushan Conference.⁴ Peng, representing the committee, issued a directive in February 1966. The document was consistent with the critical side, but it largely directed criticisms and debates surrounding the play to an academic discussion instead of a political discussion, or at least it could be interpreted in this way.⁵ Mao criticized the committee’s decision in April

³ Former Beijing Municipal Party Committee Mao Zedong’s Thought Red Flag Corps, et al., “Peng Zhen’s Decaying Life Crime” (September 15, 1967), CD. [原北京市委机关毛泽东思想红旗兵团等,“彭真的腐朽生活罪行”(9月15日, 1967), 光碟。]

⁴ “Outline of Various Opinions on the Issue of ‘Hai Rui Dismissed from Office,’” *People’s Daily* (Beijing), December 15, 1965. [“关于《海瑞罢官》问题各种意见的简介”, 人民日报(北京), 12月15日, 1965。]

⁵ The document is known as the February Outline [二月提纲], the full name is the Consolidated Summary and Outline Submitted to the Central Government by the Five-People Committee [五人小组向中央的汇报提纲].

1966, immediately before the Cultural Revolution went into full force.⁶ Although there was considerably more going on alongside this incident, Peng Zhen was implicated in Mao's criticism of this particular incident and then subsequently imprisoned.

Mao applied a set of codes fitting to Peng Zhen in an interview:

Even a needle cannot penetrate into Beijing; not a drop of water can drip into it. **Peng Zhen tries to shape the Party using his worldview,** objects will develop in the opposite direction to him [彭真要按他的世界观改造党, 事物是向他的反面发展的]. **He created his own conditions for a stage collapse.** It is a certain event, revealed in an accidental occasion, proceeded step by step. Not everyone learns about constraint from history's lessons. It is the rule and rhythm of class struggle, unmoved by people's consciousness and will. Every time someone in the Central Politburo **creates ghosts** [搞鬼], I call upon localities to attack them, asking **the Monkey Suan Wu Hung to create havoc in the Sky Palace** [referring to the ancient fable] and to disturb those protecting **the Ultimate Sky Emperor** [叫孙悟空大闹大宫, 并要搞那些保玉皇大帝的人]. Peng Zhen is a minor figure who has blended himself into the Party, not one with special ability, one who could be pushed down by one finger. "*The West Wind's Fallen Leaves Fall in Changan*" [西风落叶下长安]. Please ask comrades not to worry endlessly. Dust cannot be gone without being swept away, class enemies cannot fall down without bringing struggles [灰尘不扫不走, 阶级敌人不斗不倒].

...Phenomena could be seen, essence is hidden. Essence would be expressed in the phenomenal forms [现象是看得见的, 本质是隐蔽的。本质也会通过现象表现出来]. **Peng Zhen's essence has been hidden for 30 years.**⁷

Mao depicted the situation visually using image-constructs, with Peng Zhen fitting into such codes. The constructs—like *the Ultimate Sky Emperor*—did not provide details about the specifics of what he was referencing; but the depictions they form were *just concrete enough* to convey to social participants the gravity of the situation, and Peng Zhen's

⁶Prior to the committee's release of its first report regarding the controversial play, Mao reviewed a draft and expressed an ambiguous attitude—even praising Hai Rui in some occasions—which might have been interpreted as a sign of tacit approval. Yan Jiaqi and Gao Gao, *Turbulent Decade: A History of the Cultural Revolution*, trans. and ed. D.W.Y. Kwok (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1996), 24–25.

⁷Mao Zedong, "A Conversation Related to Peng Zhen" (April 29, 1966), CD. [毛泽东, "关于彭真的谈话" (4月29日, 1966), 光碟。]

acts—far from an isolated case of incompetence, cowardice, or corruption—represented a much bigger problem.

To help make better sense of the quote, some Chinese references should briefly be explained. “Even a needle cannot penetrate into Beijing” means that the Central Politburo in Beijing has become so closed off to outside influence that other actors, like the revolutionaries and himself, could no longer influence it. Peng Zhen was then depicted as symbolic of the cause of the problem—that he had, as a minor figure, attempted to change the Party according to his personal worldview. By distantly employing an historical-materialist mode of thought, “objects” or naked material conditions would eventually overwhelm subjectivities. Hence, Peng Zhen had “created his own condition for a stage collapse.” The Chinese expression of “creating ghosts” in this context roughly means conspiring or executing secretive plans. But since the supernatural reference was made, Mao further related the revolutionaries to a supernatural context. He used a popular classic Chinese novel—translated as *The Journey to the West* [西游记]—in which the main character and protagonist Monkey Suan, who had developed the utmost supernatural power, managed to cause great disruption in the Sky Palace where the supernatural emperor, officials, and various deities resided. Mao emphasized that Peng Zhen was just a minor figure—so he was not *the* ultimate sky emperor.

Mao used a sentence from a poem he had written to analogize Peng Zhen’s inevitable and impending fall—to the many leaves that fall in the city of Changan when the wind starts to blow during the autumn season. The exact intention of the poem is never clear, but we can see this usage is consistent with the theoretical perspective of historical materialism, and it also fitted Peng Zhen’s image in that a leaf was not significant in the long run, just as Peng Zhen was insignificant, and just like leaves that fall in the autumn, the Revolution, standing for the natural law and forces, would cause Peng Zhen to fall. Mao deployed another image at the end, juxtaposing class enemies and dust. Sweeping the likes of Peng Zhen from power thus resembled the sweeping away of dust—that actions should be taken in order for the problem (the dust) to go away.

In just a few sentences, Mao had fitted Peng Zhen, his actions, and the overall situations according to a rich mixture of images. Each time he evoked an image, a set of stepwise inferences was made. If Peng Zhen was dust, then it should be swept away. If he represented a figure in the Sky Palace, then the revolutionaries ought to disturb the deities high above in the same manner as the protagonist of the novel. And if Peng Zhen helped

to create a situation where even water could not penetrate the well-insulated bureaucracy in Beijing, which was keen on creating ghosts, then the revolutionaries should break it open. Such relational strategies drew a set of resemblance relationships, which then allowed an equivalence to be drawn between situations and acts. Each step of the creative use of analogy, in other words, allowed a specific set of logics and ideas to be transferred and applied to the case of Peng Zhen and to cases like that of Peng Zhen.

Aside from Mao, Lin Biao and Chen Boda had also participated. In some ways, they outdid Mao by using similar methods to draw more liberal and extreme equivalences, making Mao's original statements comparatively moderate in comparison. They also elicited more events and other "aggregated facts" to substantiate their ideas.

In an official speech delivered to a major government meeting,⁸ Lin Biao diagnosed the current political situation by citing that we lived in a time of political change, that since 1960, "within the pool Latin America capitalist countries there were 61 political changes, successful incidents numbered 56, those that involved killing the heads numbered 8, keeping them as puppets numbered 7, removing them from power 11... Altogether, within six years there were 11 incidents per year."

This situation was used to frame the situation of China, which was also undergoing political change. It had won the Revolution and developed a party, matured through years of leadership under Mao. But Peng Zhen and another figure, Luo Ruiqing [罗瑞卿], had seized much of the political and governmental control. While Luo had taken over control of the military, Peng had seized considerable control as the Party Secretary. "While tall Luo's arms are long, Peng Zhen's are longer" [罗长子的手长, 彭真的手更长]. And this is because as Party Secretary, Peng Zhen and his group of associates working underneath him also exercised considerable control in the departments of media, propaganda, arts, films, public relations, broadcasting, and publishing—sectors which are key to winning ideological wars. For 16 years, noted Lin, they had not occupied the ideological trenches in the battlefield, and if the trend continued, "people would not vote for us, not vote for Chairman Mao, but vote for them." And if a battle were to ensue, they would pick up their gun-weapons [枪杆子] and their pen-weapons [笔杆子]. It was therefore important they

⁸ Lin Biao, "Talk at the Expansion Meeting of the Politburo" (May, 18, 1966). [林彪, "在中央政治局扩大会议上的讲话" (5月18日, 1966), 光碟。]

discover and eliminate “representatives of the capitalist class, the time bombs, the landlines” in advance, or else, when the opportunity comes—perhaps compounded by a natural disaster, a war, or the death of Chairman Mao—a counterrevolution would take place and the nation of 700 million might be in chaos; this would be a big problem.

Lin further juxtaposed Peng Zhen with certain traitors and ambitionists who were “fake revolutionaries,” “fake Marxists,” and “fake Maoists.” A noted expression was that Peng Zhen’s approaches had superseded Wong Ming’s [王明]. Wong Ming refers to a figure who had advocated following an “internationalist” direction to develop a communist revolution. Aside from differences in between Mao’s and Russia’s revolutionary visions, during the anti-Japanese war, Wong Ming had attacked Mao for not genuinely collaborating with the Nationalist Party to drive out the Japanese, a supposed priority at the time. In this evocation of Wong Ming, Peng Zhen was equated to a person who had departed from Mao’s approach and betrayed the people.

Lin cited Peng’s overt appraisal of the Nationalist Party leader Chiang Kai-shek in around 1938, saying that Chiang was “the person with the best political perspective,” that Chiang was “the firm center of the anti-Japanese war,” and it was wrong to erect barriers to the Nationalist Party. He said that Peng Zhen pretended to be anti-Wong Ming but actually supported Wong Ming in Northeast China. Refusing to listen to Chairman Mao’s instructions, Peng contemplated peace in the time of battle, hoping to make peace with Chiang, and did not think of fighting, hoping to win the battle at the negotiation table alone. At one point, perhaps as a strategy to expedite his scheme, he tried to concentrate his forces into one defining battle to fight the enemy, a reckless move that would decimate his forces. Per Lin’s accusation, Peng had used “adventurism” in the military as a cover for his “surrenderism” in politics. In the process, Peng was attempting to form his own network and power base, facilitating the development of some local forces that ended up becoming bandits, not controllable or penetrable by the Party—almost like his own private army. A very ingenious expression was that Peng Zhen had created the “Bonding of the Three in the Peach Tree Forest” [桃园三结义], an allusion to the Three Kingdoms period in China (around AD 220–280), where three

people who had formed a brotherhood bond in a peach tree forest ended up establishing Shu Han, one of the kingdoms.⁹

Chen Boda—the person later characterized as navigating the “ship of thieves” [賊船]—charged that after the “Twenty-Three Conditions” were released, Peng Zhen had protected landlords, the rich, the counterrevolutionaries, the rightists, and other bad people. And during the Socialist Education movement, Peng used the production as the “big hat” to restrict the movement, saying that the movement suppressed production, and in doing so protected against the “Four Types.” Chen used a quote from Lenin: “Just as the class that has been overthrown has not died yet, a new capitalist class is growing new counterrevolutionaries.” He further added:

During the rule of the Qianlong Emperor [乾隆] there was a publication entitled *A Biography of Two Officers* [貳臣传]. It spoke about the events revolving around the Donglin Group [东林党]. [Russian officers] Suslov, Mitin, Eugene were the “Two Officers.”¹⁰ They were nurtured by Stalin but later ran away with Khrushchev [赫鲁晓夫]. Some people forget everything when their hearts are smoked and clouded by benefits and positions. Peng Zhen has been giving these people official positions and fulfilling their wishes, working and running for them.¹¹

Peng Zhen’s identity was not only formed by informational details but also by the codes—the images—that he could be fitted into. These representations by Lin Biao and Chen Boda built a threatening image—one that stretched far beyond the “dust” image fitted by Mao. Luo Ruiqing was a powerful party cadre and Peng Zhen was equated with him—with even more extensive influence than him (his arms are longer). Nikita Khrushchev’s crime was the derailing of the Russian Revolution. Seen in the global context, if Peng Zhen is like Khrushchev, then he was an actor

⁹ Lin Biao, “Talk at the Expansion Meeting of the Politburo” (May, 18, 1966), CD. [林彪, “在中央政治局扩大会议上的讲话” (5月18日, 1966), 光碟。]

¹⁰ The “two officers” in this context is a play on words with several meanings. It could mean officers who have their own agendas independent of the emperors and who act in their own interest. It could also have the specific meaning by the Qianlong Emperor to those Ming Dynasty officers who surrendered themselves and subsequently work for the Qing Emperor.

¹¹ Chen Boda, “Chen Boda’s Speech at the Expansion Meeting of the Politburo” (May 24, 1966), CD. [陈伯达, “陈伯达在中央政治局扩大会议上的讲话” (5月24日, 1966), 光碟。]

derailing the envisioned global communist revolution. In the hands of Lin Biao and Chen Boda, Peng Zhen's identity was linked to both Luo Ruiqing and Khrushchev in a particular, temporary structure.

If we line up the images and implicated meanings, we can observe how step-by-step escalation could be performed through drawing equivalence with an increasingly criminal image, the mildest one being a corrupt sell-out disguised as a Marxist, but who is nevertheless just a minor figure. Progressively, the images could be multifarious: a hidden Chinese traitor, a sneaky Russian spy, a dangerous commander practicing adventurism to destroy his own people, an insider cadre controlling the government—even up to a significant counterrevolutionary figure of historical importance, who could derail the entire global revolutionary project. Each kind of figure has a concrete person or two representing the idea—for example, Wang Ming, the “Two Officers,” Luo Ruiqing, and Nikita Khrushchev—to which Peng Zhen could be equated.

In fact, an escalation is easy to make based on these labels. If one can envisage a “traitor,” one could imagine the context of the Russian Revolution or the Nationalist Party; one could then see the implications for the global revolution. These preestablished linkages acted as *cognitive portals*, a topic we will cover shortly.

Because the idea system was primarily driven by ideational interpretations, only minimal physical evidence was needed as the basis to form such interpretations. But it should also be noted that the characterization was not completely arbitrary or without evidence. As Lin Biao said, Peng often cited Mao in his judgments when he advocated actions different from those which Mao desired. One could find such evidence in the document regarding the *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*. Peng Zhen had also stated that the Socialist Education Movement only needed to conform to the Twenty-Three Conditions, instead of involving extensive prosecutions as they had done. Peng defended his decision of not prosecuting cadres during the Four Clean-up Movement through the use of Mao's statements:

In the past, the Chairman had talked about killing pigs. He said it in Jinci [晋绥]: it does not matter whether it is a white pig or black pig, after killing one you will learn how to kill a pig [不论白猪黑猪你杀一个就会了]. Later, it was called the dissecting the sparrow [解剖麻雀]. The sparrow is small,

but the liver and gallbladder are all there. It is not necessary to dissect all the sparrows (to understand the inner workings of the sparrow).¹²

The issue was not that Mao had never actually expressed such words. The issue was rather that if one was to judge which side Peng Zhen truly consistently took during the Mao-era Revolution, it was likely that Peng Zhen mostly sided with the established cadres instead of Mao, and one could find evidence to support such actions.

In addition to evidence based on Peng Zhen's stances and actions, many "crimes" detailed from Peng Zhen's lifestyle were published in a Red Army Newspaper article, consisting of around 10,000 Chinese words, in September 15, 1967.¹³

In the two opening paragraphs, Peng Zhen was described as a "leader of counterrevolutionary revisionism" [反革命修正主义的头子], "big traitor" [大叛徒], "big political ambitionist" [大政治野心家], "criminal who has committed flagrant crimes against the Party and the people" [对党、对人民犯下了滔天大罪的罪犯], and a "thoroughly rotten, obscene shameless feudal noble" [腐朽透顶、荒淫无耻的贵族老爷], who squandered the nation's resources remorselessly and lived his life like a decadent capitalist. These are all elastic codes, each with a core meaning and classic example that could be "stretched" in such a way that Peng Zhen could be equated to it.

The main body of the article involved a listing of facts, which the article depicted as an effort of "accounting" Peng's misdeeds. Unlike professional financial accounting, for which a standard of extensiveness as well as objectivity is expected, the newspaper's political accounting was highly interpretive. Complex, irrelevant, or inconvenient information was filtered out. Extensive, concrete descriptions of Peng Zhen's deeds were embellished with editorial remarks and other linguistic devices, like prefixes and suffixes, which left the damning caricatures unambiguous. In other words, information was often already coded into fitted images when they were presented. This can be seen as the subheadings of the article; the deeds

¹²Peng Zhen, "Comrade Peng Zhen's Speech on the Four Cleanups Movement in the Hebei Hall of the Great Hall of the People (January 21, 1965), CD. [彭真, "彭真同志在人民大会堂河北厅关于四清运动的讲话" (1月21日, 1965), 光碟。]

¹³Former Beijing Municipal Party Committee Mao Zedong's Thought Red Flag Corps, et al., "Peng Zhen's Decaying Life Crime" (September 15, 1967), CD. [原北京市委机关毛泽东思想红旗兵团等, "彭真的腐朽生活罪行" (9月15日, 1967), 光碟。]

(information) were already coded (“*decayed* lifestyle,” “*wasteful* renovations,” established “*palaces*,” etc.):

- (1) Three Wasteful Renovations and Moves [挥金如土三修彭公馆, 劳民伤财三移临时窝]
- (2) Establish Walking Palaces in Many Places [到处设行宫]
- (3) Seize Nation’s Expensive Plants to Decorate Private Courtyard [强占国家名贵花木, 装饰彭贼狗庭院]
- (4) Flinging Away People’s Money for Self, Renovating Interior Living Space [挥霍人民万余肥了自己, 彭贼室内设备富麓堂皇]
- (5) Decayed Lifestyle, With Choosy Eating and Drinking [生活腐化、讲究吃喝]
- (6) Holding Banquet for Lee Chung Yan [宴请李宗仁] [A Former Nationalist Party General and Vice President of Republic of China]
- (7) Ugly Form of Cat Playing with Hag Wife [彭霸天和妖婆张洁清玩猫的丑态]

Each set of information underwent skillful encoding before it became a fitted image that was at once a piece of evidence. Less inflated, extreme codes were sometimes assigned to information at first, but then such coded things could in turn be aggregated and then repurposed to fit into more inflated, extreme codes. Being “choosy” was one such earlier characterization. This deed could then be depicted as being an attribute of a “bourgeoisie,” and then this “fact” could be fitted into a more inflated code like “anti-revolutionary” (since the bourgeois class is inherently anti-revolutionary). Alternatively, it could simply stay at the less-inflated level of code; the fact could simply be used to evidence Peng Zhen’s “individualism” and personal decay. As a whole, the various forms of “evidence” listed in the document flexibly supported a range of images that could be used by Peng Zhen’s critics, as long as those critics put in the effort to draw the necessary equivalence that temporarily matched the stretched definitions.

The actual information—consisting of descriptive details of behaviors and objects—is too voluminous to reiterate here. Some details of lavish spending would not be considered a crime, nor are they necessarily even lavish by today’s standards. These include the ownership of quality sofas, curtains, private courtyards, and certain food dishes like silver fungus and ginseng. Considering the context of the 1960s China, however, even fresh milk was a rare household item; most people drank milk derived from powder. Moreover, habits such as eating fresh chicken, fish, and eggs all the time would certainly qualify as lavish for the period.

To further put things into perspective, the article described that the monthly salary for Peng Zhen was 400–500 Yuan. According to the article's account, eating alone was around 300 Yuan per month for five people (some of their children were regularly off at university), about seven to eight times higher than regular families of the same size. The article even listed some of the food his family consumed. Here, some items are rare foodstuffs that required special people to procure and used special methods to prepare, like the Chinese softshell turtle [王八, or 鳖] or aged Shaoxing wine [绍兴酒] that was a hundred years old. Even during the Three Difficult Years, these eating habits were largely maintained, and he also sent his relatives and extended family such delicacies.

There were other usually exorbitant expenses cited, at least relative to his salary. For example, one radio at his house cost 1400 Yuan, and another 2000 Yuan. His fancy wall lamps had allegedly been changed three times, four of them costing a total of 1424 Yuan. His three desks cost 1000 Yuan each. He constantly changed his furniture and interior decorations, which cost a lot more still.

Among the highlights of this lavish lifestyle were the three renovations and moves of his residence (“mansion”), likely to have been funded by public expenses. These events occurred in 1959, 1964, and 1965. The original house for seven people had 970 m² or 10,441 ft² and 48 rooms. During the innovations he built a large courtyard, added a second level to part of his house, built a conference room that could accommodate a hundred people, and so forth. These projects totaled more than 200,000 Yuan, an amount equivalent to the purchase of more than 2 million pounds of food, and they represented “the blood and sweat of a hundred-thousand laboring citizens.” While he had to live in temporary arrangements during renovations, he was often dissatisfied with them. In 1965, he had requested switching those residences three times within five months.

In 1964, Peng was moved to a national guest house. Because he felt that the second floor was too hot, he requested that the person in charge relocate a willow for him. Even though the ministry staff told him that the tree would not last long if it was planted in the wrong season, Peng insisted that they try and that “it is not a big deal if it cannot last.” “Uprooting and planting the trees required a 20-ton heavy crane and a 15-ton large truck; the process took half a month and six trees were planted.” For convenience during recreational walks, Peng also requested that several crooked paths be renovated in the apple forest, and for this reason, “several people sweated their backs and worked for more than 10 days to complete the

task.” He also requested the construction of a porch next by a fishing spot by the lake, “furnished with large rattan chairs and recliners for the whole family to enjoy.” “He also went to a Beijing hotel to acquire the foreign-made air-conditioner used to cool foreign guests and placed it in his own bedroom. Later, the air-conditioner was claimed by him and moved to Peng’s house. He is a truly ‘hard-to-satisfy old aristocratic lord’ [难伺候的贵族老爷]. As long as he says a word, see how many people are running for him. He is really an official who has been thoroughly soaked in the bourgeois stench.”

It was also cited that, during his third move in 1965, he moved from the national guest house as he thought that the hot water tank in the underground room would be too noisy. Even though the engineers and officials inspected it and thought that the soundproofing was good, he still requested that the water pump be moved out of the underground room. He only stayed there for two to three months. But among other renovations, another big porch was constructed, which took half a month and cost around 6,000 Yuan. He is ‘authentically a blood-sucking ghost’ [地地道道的吸血鬼], only cares about his own enjoyment, and has neglected the country’s interest and the people’s pain.”

There are additional descriptions of the renovations he made to his residences, including in 1959 when he renovated his pathways in his courtyard three times. For the 100-meter pathway, the first time he changed it from a flat to a stony pathway so that it would absorb less heat from the sun, the second time to rectify some minor flaws, and the third time to increase the slope. In 1965, he also renovated his front door appearance “three times.”

Some cited behaviors blatantly violated recent political directives. These included enjoying audio recordings of forbidden, classic plays at his house—even inviting drama schools and individual performers to play at his house on a regular basis. Such acts were described as “advertising feudalist, decayed modes of thinking,” and an act that was “publicly opposed to Chairman Mao’s reform directive.” His personal conduct was also criticized. The article described how, “Sometimes he was so immersed in the films that he would re-watch the same ones two to three times; he would play Mahjong until three and four in the morning; he would take sleeping pills and then eat his late-night meal, sometimes he falls into deep sleep like a dead pig before he finishes eating it, so that public servants and comrades have to carry him to his upper-floor bedroom. During the day

Bandit Peng takes big naps, not working while every month he takes in 400-something Yuan of salary; it is truly deplorable to the extreme.”

The article cites his use of political positions to fulfill his wants. His ping-pong table, the article states, came from the 26th National Ping-Pong Competition and was acquired through the National Sports Ministry. Some of his plants were sourced from the Beijing Garden and other gardens using his political power, like his boxwood trees which came from the Summer Palace [颐和园], and were originally available for public view. Allegedly he used “inspections” as an excuse to watch forbidden movies for enjoyment. He had forced some neighbors to relocate in order to expand his house. The chandelier at his house was taken from the Great Hall of the People, and then plated with a layer of nickel. Insertion of editorial remarks and markers (prefixes and suffixes) serves to make the concrete ties explicit, fast, focused, and clear. To call service personnel, there were electric bells [电铃按手] installed all over his house, totaling about thirty. His willful insolence showed how he was “authentically a high-level parasite” [地地道道的高级寄生虫].

A particularly telling account was Peng’s family playing with their cats:

Since 1957, Bandit Peng [彭斌] and Hag Zhang Jieqing [妖婆张清清, Peng’s wife], similar to Wall Street capitalist big bosses, have been playing with a cat. Hag Zhang Jieqing said that the “cat eating mice is unsanitary,” therefore they let it drink milk and eat fish for breakfast every morning. Bandit Peng would not forget the big patterned cat when eating dinner. They even prepared a special towel for the cat’s use; the cat has a special sleeping chair covered with a silky mat. They required all the cat-related tools and its bedroom to be kept clean, often requesting special services by people to service the cat for them, to bathe it, to groom its hair, or just to take it to the cooler porch during the hot summer.... They often let the cat watch movies and television, take pictures with it, and so forth. To help the cat watch television, service personnel would bring in a tall chair. They treat the cat as intimately as if it is a son or a daughter...

... When they are not doing revisionist counterrevolutionary activities, they seek low-level, capitalist decaying forms of pleasure seeking [寻找低级下流的资产阶级寻欢作乐的腐朽方式], interacting with their cat several times a day. When the cat is gone for some time, they hurriedly inquire about it, and when the cat comes back, Hag Zhang Jieqing holds it in her arms, saying in a full demonic aura while stroking it [妖气十足地边摸边说]: “Little Flower where have you been? You must be hungry. If you are not back we will not rest assured....” Bandit Peng laughs ceaselessly at her side.

He plays with the cat even at night, saying: “Go find your Brother Yang (Bandit’s Peng’s fourth son) to play, and together sleep with your Brother Yang!” Looking at this pair of counterrevolutionary revisionist chieftains, just how shameless they are, truly makes the people vomit.

Such efforts of “accounting” did the practical work of matching information to substantiate stretched meanings that were derived from elastic codes. Information was married with descriptors (e.g., “Bandit Peng,” “Hag Zhang Jieqing”) to form coded things (fitted images). Making them *resemble* other fitted images were acts to form equivalences; in the quote, “capitalist” was the subject of resemblance. “Capitalist” was mentioned explicitly twice, once at the beginning reference to “Wall Street capitalist big bosses, and once in the phrase ‘low-level, capitalist decaying forms of pleasure seeking.’” In the second paragraph, the writers did not see playing with the cat as necessarily the same as being counterrevolutionary, as is evident in the phrase: “When they are not doing revisionist counterrevolutionary activities.” The cat-playing might just be a problem of despicably low state of spirituality—with the fitted image of a hag of a “demonic aura” serving as an associative sign. But when cat-playing was tied to the code of “Wall Street capitalist big bosses,” the act still became thematically and causally tied to other acts of the abuse of social resources and positions of power—that is to say, cat-playing could take place *because* of power and resource abuses by the whole class of Wall street capitalists, which stood in the way of the Revolution. The coded image of a revolutionary, then, was temporarily stretched to include one who condemned the disgusting act of cat-playing.

The creation of each fitted image implied a specific gradation of a crime or problem. There is a minor nuance, however. Viewing the document in full, one can find that various gradations of crimes or problems implied by various codes are evidenced by a corresponding set of attributes and data. Each item of fact could often substantiate more than one elastic code—the details of his ideologically suspect cat habits could fit into both the codes of “feudal noble” and “decadent capitalist” of which Peng Zhen was equated. Therefore, the assignment of code is inexact, allowing some room for readers to interpret the information differently and arrive at a different way to assign an appropriate code. Yet, with the information and a range of codes given, readers would most likely find that even if the severest label did not fit, a lesser one could certainly do so.

The writers of this document were clear about their own interpretation of the matter, however. They sought to fit Peng Zhen with the utmost damning, extreme characterization, and they applied effort to stretch the meanings of codes and to draw equivalences. They depicted Peng Zhen's behaviors and deeds to have enough equivalence—essentially and functionally speaking—with some of the worst counterrevolutionaries in history. This can be seen in the concluding part of the document, in which the authors declared that even “*killing by a thousand cuts, burning his corpse and flinging away the ashes*” [凌迟处死, 焚尸扬灰] would not resolve the revolutionary people's resentment toward him. They advocated: “Let us use a thousand threads of vengeance, ten thousand threads of resentment to create the most intensive bullets, turning them into the fiercest flames, shooting them at Peng and Liu's counterrevolutionary revisionist groups and their backstage supporters Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, burning them to ashes” [让我们把千条仇, 万条恨, 铸成最密集的子彈, 化成最炙烈的火焰, 射向彭、刘反革命修正主义集团及其后台刘少奇、邓小平, 把他们烧为灰烬].¹⁴

OTHER CREATIVE INFERENCING

The Peng Zhen case illustrates some typical inferencing activities afforded by the use of elastic codes. To gain a more comprehensive understanding, let us explore a few other cases, which also serve to illustrate such activities.

Forging Connections: Cognitive Portal and Chain-Like Complexes

In our exploration of the European witch hunts, we found that *cognitive portals* were being built into inferencing mechanisms. Essentially, after certain intermediary ideas were established (through pre-cultivated pathways, acting like portals), a person could blaze through them during thinking and speaking. Cognitive and discourse pathways could be institutionalized in a social population. From an outsider's point of view, *shocking leaps* were made from premises to conclusions; while from the point of view of social members who were well socialized, the step-by-step

¹⁴ Peng Zhen was not in fact killed and lived until he died in 1997 at the age of 94. However, he was removed from office and did not return to power until 1982, serving as the secretary of the CPC Central Political and Legislative Committee [中共中央政法委员会] under the Deng Xiaoping administration.

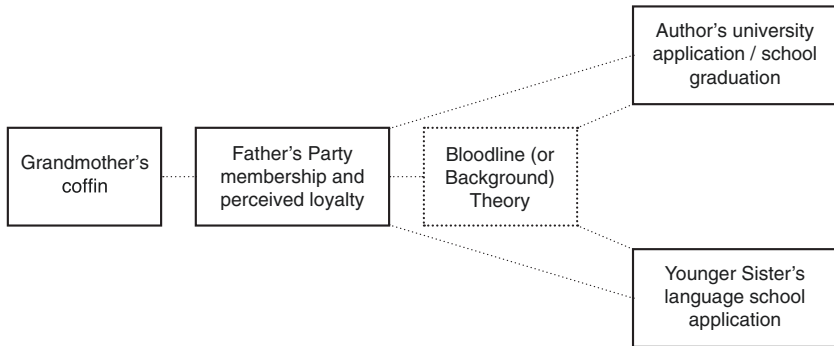


Fig. 10.1 Steps of connection between events and meaning over the coffin dilemma in *The Little Red Guards* (1992)

connections came rather naturally and intuitively. These portal-like connections could even be observed in detailed, intense argumentation.

Elastic codes made connections between ideas a relatively easy process. Because of their elastic qualities, the gap between one coded thing (which is elastically coded) could be elastically stretched to the point that at times seemed to be seamlessly connected to another elastically stretched coded thing, which could then be further stretched to connect to yet a third elastically coded thing. In the case of Peng Zhen, this point was played out in the rather seamless ideational connection between the fitted image of a “hard-to-satisfy feudal lord,” to a “blood-sucking ghost,” to a “capitalist,” and then to a “counterrevolutionary.” The autobiographies I have examined contain other memorable examples. Even though biographical and autobiographical sources are less reliable than other textual sources, they help us see how the cognitive pathways were plausibly laid out in “everyday” scenarios.

In *The Little Red Guards*, author Wenguang Huang told a story of his grandmother’s obsession with being buried in a coffin rather than being cremated. Coffins and ground burials were banned because it was considered a waste of land and other resources as well as being tied to outmoded cultural beliefs. His grandmother—or a general reader encountering the Cultural Revolution—did not understand why two girls’ applications to universities were at risk by their grandmother choosing a coffin.¹⁵ But these connections were seamless to anyone else. Figure 10.1 reconstructs the steps of connections people saw in the idea system:

¹⁵Huang Wenguang, *The Little Red Guard: A Family Memoir* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 49.

Whether the grandmother procures a coffin or not—which heavily involved the father in carrying out the act—would necessarily affect the father’s status. If policies were enforced, not only would the coffin likely be confiscated and destroyed, the father—a Party member—might face disciplinary action from within the Party. The “ordinary” act that is normal in our society had an extraordinary meaning in the context narrated in the book: it would signify an outright challenge to the state’s directive, which had incorporated it as a revolutionary plan.

The author’s sister had planned to receive a college education. *Because* there was no entrance examination, it required not only a good “family background” but also inside connections. The author was applying to the Xi’an Foreign Languages School, a boarding school supported by the state. Specifically, *because* the school dealt with foreign languages, it understandably had “stringent political requirements.”¹⁶ Therefore, while from an outsider’s perspective these cognitive linkages might seem outlandishly odd, the ideational connections—and the institutional connections they embodied—were obvious to most people described in Huang’s memoir.

Using Deep Theories: Example of a Volleyball Match Incident

Elastic codes could be stretched to encompass the domain of everyday life, penetrating into extremely microscopic details. Therefore, with appropriate activation, elastic codes can shape and regulate daily lives.

One organizing device for elastic codes was deep, yet abstract theories. These theories were “taught” to the masses in school, study sessions, and in print media. In order to educate the masses to comprehend and use such theories accurately and effectively, the theories were often taught in a manner via scenarios of real-life application. I use a 1969 article discussing a volleyball match incident as an example. What is noteworthy is that this incident was reported in a certain secondary school’s journalism unit.¹⁷

A brief summary of the volleyball match incident is as follows. A team (Team #1) of students were playing volleyball at the school entrance. A

¹⁶Huang Wenguang, *The Little Red Guard: A Family Memoir* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 53.

¹⁷Extracted from a secondary school’s journalism unit. Red Guards of Secondary School. Dagu Secondary School Reporting Group, “A Controversy Provoked by a ‘Volleyball,’” *Cultural Revolution Historical Materials Series Vol. 2(2)*, ed. Li Zhengzhong (Taiwan: Literary Times, 2016), 392. [中學紅衛兵。大沽中學報導組, “一個‘排球’引起的爭論”, 文革史料叢刊第四輯第二冊(二), 李正中輯編(台灣:蘭台出版社, 2016), 392。]

student from the second team (Team #2) took the ball and then threw it toward the head of a Team #1 classmate. The ball bounced toward the road and was then burst by a car running over it.

Theories—more precisely, “Mao Zedong Thoughts”—were applied to determine the scenario as a group exercise. The scenario of one team no longer having a ball to play with was discussed as a “contradiction” that had emerged. To find out the deep causes of the problem, an idea initially emerged and then was largely ruled out—that it was Team #1’s fault to play volleyball at the school entrance, a location situated close to the road. A counter-opinion was accepted: that the act of throwing the ball aimed at a classmate’s head was an expression of “anarchism”; this internal cause—not an external one—was indeed the problem. From this example alone, we can see how the physical events (as pre-coded information) were imbued with revolutionary significance after a series of stretched, elastic codes (e.g., contradictions, anarchism) were applied. More cognitive processes could then continue down the chain.

Proceeding from this conclusion, the ball-thrower conducted a self-criticism as well as an apology. In an internal discussion, Team #2 agreed that compensation was needed; it was part of Mao Zedong’s teaching. Giving their own ball to Team #1 was proposed as a compensative act, but it was not an ideal one, as it would deprive Team #2 of the opportunity to play. One person made an alternative proposal—to have Team #1 and Team #2 share the ball. But this solution soon experienced a challenge. The reason was that Team #2 was never properly compensated the loss of the volleyball. The “public” appearance of objective and reasonable might contradict the “private” motive of self-interest. The seeming “Oneness” being produced was superficial; it did not resolve the contradiction. One person even suggested that this idea dangerously reflected Liu Shaoqi’s poisonous theory that mentally melted the distinction between the public and the private—though this idea was soon criticized as having elevated the matter to too high a level.

The concepts that became catchphrases in these discussions were “Combine Two into One” and “Divide One into Two.” Although their exact origins were unstated, these are most likely remote, creative derivatives of Hegelian dialectical theories. Johann Fichte, an interpreter of Hegel, proffered a triadic model of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis in an attempt to explain Hegel’s ideas. This model was adopted in various ways. Mao carried a post-Hegelian style in his theorizing. The original state of a thesis was that of unity (i.e., the state of “Oneness”), but due to its

imperfection it is bound to create the other—another incubating antithesis—that contradicted the thesis (i.e., a state of “Twoness”). An anthesis—“the other”—can be temporarily suppressed, but another wave of oppositional thesis would most likely surface again due to the inherent imperfection of the first thesis. Only if a significant new idea comes forth to “resolve” the contradiction dynamic, creating a new thesis (in the form of “synthesis”) would a new and improved state of unity (“Oneness,” or “Oneness 2.0,” if we may) come about.

Using this form of language and thinking, a solution was reached between the two teams. Team #1’s representative learned of Team #2’s idea of compensating them their own volleyball, and then proceeded to offer another suggestion, citing Mao’s teaching about selflessness and Lin’s emphasis of human character. The representative stated that Team #1 decided not to play volleyball, and instead played something else—possibly something that could be played with a smaller ball—since the main purpose of playing volleyball was achieving collective health.

Team #2 was reported to be touched by the action, as Team #1 had remedied the situation by not attempting to “Combine Two into One,” but instead “Divide One into Two”—which would then “divide out” the *private* selfishness so the outcome was a harmonized state of *public* betterment. If we apply the thesis-antithesis-synthesis model, the contradictions between thesis and its antithesis—that is, the inappropriateness of the ball thrower, the lack of a ball, the inappropriateness of sharing one volleyball or giving away one’s ball as compensation—were resolved by a superior solution. The article concluded that in the process of resolving the contradictions, by applying Mao’s teaching, the participants had educated themselves about the profound process of actualizing the Revolution, a lesson about the productive use of political theory toward a classless society.

The secondary processing of revolutionary “facts” was hardly smooth sailing. There was so much room for differences in how to process these ideational facts—a point we will follow up in the next chapter. But for the moment I seek to illustrate that interpretations—resolving conflicts and stretching meanings—were not performed in an arbitrary manner. Nor was the interpretative process and outcome only mediated by power from the government or from preestablished Party positions. Instead, actors in this case sincerely tried to harvest wisdom by applying abstract theories and teachings, solving the problem in concrete and unifying ways that would be better than with the absence of such ideas.

Assessing the Great Leap Forward at a Time of Terrible Aftermath

Compared to the several autobiographical anecdotes we have reviewed, Mao's assessment of the Great Leap Forward uses information more cohesively and extensively in forging connections, using theories, and making calculative judgments.

By January 1961, the Great Leap Forward campaign had evidently failed. With Mao stepping down, Liu Shaoqi became the PRC's president in April 1959. In the following few years, several meetings were convened to assess and recalibrate the nation's economic policy. At the CPC plenary meeting in January 1961, Mao—still acting as Party chairman—produced some figures. It can be seen that these figures, as physically verifiable facts, amounted to an aggregate picture of the international situation—asserting as a forceful premise:

West Germany produced 34 million tons of steel last year, Britain 24 million tons. West Germany in 1956–60 increased production by 15%. France produced 17 million tons, Japan 22 million tons. But their productive rate was accumulated from the work of many years, and still they could only produce that much. We have only worked for a few years and have produced 18 million tons. We need to do consolidation work this, next, and the year after. Spend several slow years, in a sturdier manner, and then go up further. Target should not be too high; make the quality go up. Let imperialism say that our Great Leap Forward has experienced a stage-collapse. This is more advantageous to us. Do not go for the vanity and experience actual damage [让帝国主义说我们大跃进垮台了, 这样对我们比较有利, 不要务虚名而受实祸]. We need to increase quality, have more specifications, variety, strengthen management, increase labor efficiency rate.¹⁸

The statement assessed the international situation more broadly, stating that there was an improvement, particularly in the area of Tibet where incidents had largely ceased. The international anti-China problem [反华问题] had also eased up a little following the 1960 Moscow Conference.¹⁹ Mao advocated conducting more research and inspection on the ground [搞调查研究, 检查工作]; he later reiterated that such effortful, practical

¹⁸ Mao Zedong, "Speech at the 9th Plenary Session of the 8th CPC Central Committee (1)" (January 13, 1961), CD. [毛泽东, "在中共八届九中全会上的讲话(一)" (1月13日, 1961), 光碟。]

¹⁹ Mao Zedong, "About Anti-China Issues" (March 23, 1960), CD. [毛泽东, "关于反华问题" (3月23日, 1960), 光碟。]

research in the future could help people to learn from past mistakes.²⁰ In this particular speech, Mao emphasized that working officials “should use their own eyes” and not any others’ [要用自己的眼睛去看(不是用别人的眼睛)] to assess people’s and agricultural conditions. He assessed that the Party had lost touch with the local situation in the past few years, and he outlined how the research work could be divided and organized. Now that they have “detected the right direction, everyone should proceed accordingly.” “Do not only say bad things about other people. Where there is a mistake in their work, if they correct it then do welcome them” [不要只讲人家坏话,有的地方工作有错误,人家改了,就要欢迎人家]. Characteristic of his style, Mao’s instructions were vague yet nonetheless concrete enough to signify the general picture of things, including how things should move forward. This slightly positive representation, consisting of a series of implicit premises, diffused a grave situation.

In a similar speech delivered several days later, Mao expressed that the steep production had “exceeded expectations”; the point was that in terms of [production] *quality* there was a need for a leap [在质量上好好跃进一下], but a leap in production *quantity* was not to be pursued. Mao highlighted that imperialists and revisionists [帝国主义者、修正主义者] had characterized that the Great Leap Forward had collapsed on stage [大跃进垮台了], but “let them speak that way” because “if they said we were good then it may actually not be good.” He further projected that with a revised plan in seven years, they would be successfully chasing Britain and Japan. Mao stated that practical experiences were important, and while “we” had experience in “battles and struggling landlords,” in the area of construction more experience was needed.

The right rhythm and pattern of things always needs several attempts in order to be found. We only wish we would be different from a democratic revolution which took 28 years to be successful. Actually, 28 years is not that long. Many countries’ political parties were born in the same year as us, and they still have not succeeded yet. Is 20 years of experience enough for construction work [搞建设是不是可以二十年取得经验]? We have acted for 11 years so far. Let us see if nine more years is enough. I had once wanted to shorten the time a lot, but it looks like it is not going to work. Anything

²⁰Mao Zedong, “Speech at the Expanded Central Working Conference” (January 30, 1962), CD. [毛泽东, “在扩大的中央工作会议上的讲话”(1月30日, 1962), 光碟。]

that is not known and understood, you cannot change it [凡是没有被认识的东西, 你就没办法改造它].²¹

Going further than the last statement, Mao generated a new premise—an aggregated fact—of a *relative progress*. This point was supported by comparing China's progress to a group of similar nations—those that had become independent in recent years.²² In turn, this aggregated fact helped Mao to portray those who criticized the Great Leap Forward at this juncture—thus generating another extrapolation: “If they said we were good then it may actually not be good.” And, predominantly based on the assessment of past performance—which were largely aggregate figures, even if numbers were mentioned—Mao made the empirical projection of China surpassing Britain and Japan in seven years.

Such forms of post-hoc assessment and diagnoses were not only made by Mao but also by other officials, at least in public documents. They, too, operated in the same style of assessment using aggregated facts and general-level assessments. Liu Shaoqi, for example, opened a speech by saying, “Now that every aspect of contradictions—the contradictions in the industrial and agricultural sectors, in culture, education, and other aspects—are centrally shown in the problem of food supply. To summarize: everyone needs to eat” [现在各方面的矛盾, 工业、农业的矛盾, 文教和其他方面的矛盾, 集中表现在粮食问题上。总而言之, 人人都要吃饭]. While saying that what they have discovered is not a “one-finger problem” [一个指头的问题], they were expressing that a serious problem had indeed occurred. The one-finger reference was a repeated expression used by Mao to assess situations; Liu's refutation of which was thus an indirect disagreement with Mao, at least symbolically. Liu leaned more toward another aggregate depiction, one that was voiced by Hunan peasants [湖南农民], stating that the situation was 30% natural disaster, 70% human-made disaster [三分天灾, 七分人祸]—which the one-finger versus nine-finger depiction belittled. After addressing areas that needed to be improved, Liu summarized: “These past few years, our accomplishments

²¹ Mao Zedong, “Speech at the 9th Plenary Session of the 8th CPC Central Committee (2)” (January 18, 1961), CD. [毛泽东, “在中共八届九中全会上的讲话(二)” (1月18日, 1961), 光碟。]

²² Mao is likely referring to the couple of dozen Asian, Middle Eastern, and African nations that were newly independent and decolonialized around the 1940s and 1950s—including Indonesia, Philippines, Vietnam, Laos, India, Pakistan, Iraq, Iran, Egypt, Liberia, Libya, and other nations which were represented in the Bandung Conference of 1955.

are still great; problems are not few, and some places have piles of problems. But if we are determined, we can solve the problems, and I think our future is still bright. Therefore, three sentences can be summarized as: ‘Accomplishment is great; problems are not few; future is bright’ [成绩很大, 问题不少, 前途光明].²³

Liu attributed the problem not to Mao or to the Great Leap Forward policy idea, but instead to the lack of experience [经验不够]. He advocated that “decreasing production” was a solution, and he compared it with Soviet Union: “The Soviet Union decreased production after the land reform, we did not do so after our land reform. Their cooperative reform led to decreased production; ours did not.” Here, Liu expresses that the Soviet Union had their experience—experience of a setback. The decreased production in this particular instance was then depicted as comparatively normal—if not better—than the Soviet Union. He advocated that, due to the “experience” of starvation (no rice) that comrades had generally found, several kinds of plans needed to be stopped, including building railroads that are “tens of thousands of kilometers,” and the many production factories, facilities, and hostels that had opened.²⁴

In another meeting,²⁵ Liu said that a socialist country, according to Mao and to Marx, was already a leap from capitalism in terms of historical stages. Liu calculated that if China could produce 14 million tons of steel by 1970, then it would surpass the pace of progress achieved by the Soviet Union. Liu stated that the slogan Great Leap Forward should be retained, since it was a good spiritual target to strive for [奋斗目标]—and one should know by 1970 whether such a leap is achieved. Overall, Liu offered a significantly more moderate projection than Mao, and he stretched the positive horizon to a considerably longer term.

In a meeting,²⁶ Deng Xiaoping reinforced Liu’s and Mao’s points summarized earlier. Deng elaborated that “we” had received plenty of positive and negative experiences for three years, and that it was now time to adjust. “People have scolded mother internationally. Let them scold [国际上骂娘, 就让他骂]. Quantity is not important... the key is to actualize the

²³Liu Shaoqi, “Speech by Liu Shaoqi at the Central Working Conference” (May 31, 1961), CD. [刘少奇, “刘少奇在中央工作会议上的讲话” (5月31日, 1961), 光碟。]

²⁴Liu Shaoqi, “Speech by Liu Shaoqi at the Central Working Conference” (May 31, 1961), CD. [刘少奇, “刘少奇在中央工作会议上的讲话” (5月31日, 1961), 光碟。]

²⁵Liu Shaoqi, “Speech by Liu Shaoqi at the 18th Supreme State Council” (March 21, 1962), CD. [刘少奇, “刘少奇在第十八次最高国务会议上的讲话” (3月21日, 1962), 光碟。]

²⁶Deng Xiaoping, “Deng Xiaoping’s Remarks When He Met with all the People participating in the Central Working Conference” (October 23, 1961), CD. [邓小平, “邓小平在接见参加团中央工作会议全体人员时的谈话” (10月23日, 1961), 光碟。]

Three Red Flags [三面红旗]²⁷ in the long term.” We see here that Deng, as well as Liu, was, to some extent, “parroting” some aspects of Mao’s speech, while also elaborating and putting in their own style, their own little creativity. Deng further added: “The facts have proven: our leap is correct; the Great Leap Forward is also correct. A growth of 25% is a great leap forward! [增长百分之二十五就是大跃进嘛!] Our problem is that we have moved a bit too fast. The Great Leap Forward is possible... Our target still cannot be too high... This and next year our agriculture still cannot go up, but hopefully there is an average year when we no longer need to import food. Currently, labor production rate has continuously improved, and the masses’ activeness has largely increased. Now we are experimenting using production teams to calculate production, and the result is good” [现在正在试验以生产队为基本核算单位, 效果很好]. Deng further sets a hypothetical target to seven years—completing twenty years’ worth of tasks within seven years, and by the end of it resolving all basic problems with food and clothing, while developing heavy industry.

To conclude, although there were variants to Mao’s depictions, the style and approaches were very similar. To boost morale, the political officials operating within the idea system often cited figures that might not be very detailed in public meetings. The pre-coded information itself could flexibly be transformed into aggregated facts; sometimes, such information was aggregated and then aggregated again. Combining these “aggregated facts” with the use of elastic codes, these officials also constructed various “coded things”—some of which are highly visualizable—which together supported ideas derived from further secondary processing.

Upon receiving officials visiting from Guinea²⁸ in August 1965, one Guinean official mentioned that he was impressed the last time he visited China in 1960, and between 1960 and 1965, China further acquired a great leap forward [中国在一九六零年至一九六五年又获得了大跃进]. Mao responded, “There was no great leap forward, only a small improvement

²⁷The Three Red Flags [三面红旗] was part of the second Five-Year Plan. It was an umbrella plan of socialist construction that encompasses three elements. The first is the General Route [总路线]—which Mao characterized as “and lots, and fast, and good, and efficient” [又多、又快、又好、又省]. The second element was Great Leap Forward [大跃进], and the third was People’s Commune [人民公社].

²⁸The visit included the education minister and the attorney general, named 贡代塞杜 and 法迪亚拉, respectively. I am unable to find an appropriate translation of their names in English. Mao was primarily in dialogue with the attorney general in the document. Note also that, by 1965, the worst problems had subsided and agricultural productivity had recovered.

[or a tiny step ahead] [没有大跃进小小的进步].”²⁹ Another degree of aggregate depiction was expressed in this instance. The difference between a great leap forward or a tiny step ahead was a matter of aggregated fact, one stretched to fit into an image, not a specific figure—especially if the Great Leap Forward could be modified to a project with an indefinite time horizon. Just like “approximately correct” and “approximately incorrect” could be hard to delineate, the lines between a “great leap forward,” a “tiny step forward,” a “tiny step backward,” and a “great leap backward” have no obvious definitions.

But when definitive definitions were not forthcoming—due to the way aggregate depictions merged with revolutionary codes—criticizing the Great Leap Forward became an interpretive choice. Given the way in which the idea system worked, this choice could have dangerous implications for the critics. In one case, a high-level Party official Chen Yun [陈云] who had criticized the Great Leap Forward was himself criticized several years later as—among a long list of other misdeeds—“having crazily attacked Three Red Flags, having become a hurried pioneer [or vanguard] to revive capitalism.” He was described as having “splashed cold water” on the Great Leap Forward. Chen was then linked to Peng Dehuai, the most vocal and symbolic critic of Mao over the Great Leap Forward, for his “right-leaning opportunism”—that when “we” experience trouble, “he deemed it was the right time to become anti-Party, anti-socialist, and then worked together with Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping, and other domestic class enemies to attack the Three Red Flags, the socialist system, and enacted a crazy counterattack toward the revolutionary route-line represented by Chairman Mao.”³⁰ His attack on the Great Leap Forward became an act being fitted into an elastic code (“right-leaning opportunism”)—which in turn was transmitted into a cognitive portal; from then on its significance was escalated quickly, ultimately being equated with the highest form of crime.

²⁹ The Chinese phrase “进步” means “improvement,” but in literal terms means “progress in a step.” Mao was likely to be expressing a pun intentionally. Mao Zedong, “Remarks during a Meeting with the Guinea Education Delegation, the Attorney General and His Wife” (August 8, 1965), CD. [毛泽东, “接见几内亚教育代表团、总检察长及夫人时的谈话” (8月8日, 1965), 光碟。]

³⁰ Beijing University of Political Science and Law, Commune of politics and law’s main guard of Mao Zedong’s Red Guard, bombing Chen Yun team, “Complete Reckoning of Counter-Revolutionary Revisionist Chen Yun’s Heinous Crimes” (February, 1967), CD. [北京政法学院, 政法公社毛泽东主红卫兵, 炮轰陈云战斗队, “彻底清算反革命修正主义分子陈云的滔天罪行” (2月, 1967), 光碟。]

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