CHAPTER 9

# Totality as Internal and External Coherence

Both the European witch hunts and the Revolution operated on a highly coherent set of ideas integrated with information.

This chapter specifically highlights four structural design features of the revolutionary idea system. Aside from (A) operating on *fitted images* (a form of *coded information*) based on a unified set of quintessential categories (codes), the idea system was (B) *totalistic*—ideationally and institutionally, (C) *purity-focused*, and therefore pollution-conscious, and (D) *outwardly collective and public*.

These features, in compound configuration, worked synergistically to make all codification processes and outcomes within specific localities cohere. They also brought these internally coherent ideas into harmonious alignment with "external" voices, information, and epistemic paradigms (science, economics, the arts, etc.).

The word external has been put in quotation marks because the revolutionary system was largely enclosed; it was all-encompassing, on the one hand, and it tended to either absorb anything external into the internal sphere, or, on the other, it eliminated it from public view altogether. The key to forging extraordinary coherence, however, should not be simply viewed in terms of brute acts of silencing, repression, and violence. A negative focus would dismiss over half of the picture. Rather, we should see both the positive and negative activities of idea constructions and maintenance. Doing so can help us to understand how it was possible for the idea system to forge extraordinary coherence with the proliferated

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fitting of images (and information) existing at all levels everywhere, performed by a variety of social actors on all kinds of matters in society. Since we have already discussed the first feature of fitted images at length, this chapter will explore the other three, and then consider how they might handle contradictions that emerge or could emerge.

## Totalistic: Ideationally, Spiritually, and Institutionally

As can be inferred from previous examples, the revolutionary idea system aimed at achieving totality in many senses. It exhibited an ambition in *ideational totality*—the goal of developing totalizing idea contents to comprehensively envelop and reorient social life. Entailed in this endeavor, then, is to develop an all-embracing knowledge system that could essentially encompass anything and everything by the Revolution. In theorizing "liberation," for example, the idea system became conceptually tied to culture, identity, and personal activities—not just to politics. The idea system might not explain why the sun may rise or the rain may fall, but all scientific knowledge could potentially be viewed as relevant to the agendas of the Revolution. The idea system might not explain how one should organize a family dinner, or how to fight a mountain tiger while hiking, but one could perhaps relate these seemingly disparate topics to revolutionary theory, to lessons from Chairman Mao, or to imageries in revolutionary stories.

Connected to ideational totality is *spiritual totality*. The spirit of the Revolution incorporates everything and is superior to all other spiritual forms. The nobility of revolutionary figures was placed above that of personal projects and friends and families. This can be seen in a popular saying: "爹亲娘亲不如毛主席亲, 天大地大不如党的恩情大," literally translated as "Dad dear Mom dear is not as dear as Chairman Mao; sky big earth big not as big as the Party's grace and kindness."[1] This phrase most likely originated from a song written in 1966 and was popularly circulated between 1966 and 1971.

Hand in hand with ideational totality and spiritual totality is *institutional totality*, which means that state power was activated in such a way

[1] The songwriter Li Jiefu [李劫夫] was linked with the Lin Biao incident, and the song was banned from circulation and performance after 1971. He himself was imprisoned in late 1971.

that the Revolution covered virtually all regions, in every village, in every part of the system. The state eliminated—or at least severely curbed—the autonomy or existence of civic or intermediary institutions as well as any oppositional political parties. Schools, families, factories, farms, media, science, and technology were all streamlined and instrumentalized, according to the state's revolutionary objective.

The arts arena exemplifies such a transformation. Mao had encouraged combining "revolutionary realism" and "revolutionary romanticism" in art. A new artform which featured workers, peasants, and soldiers as the main protagonists emerged; the themes involving historical heroes, legends, gods, ghosts, and love stories gradually became taboo, especially after the Cultural Revolution began in earnest. Chinese operas, usually centered on traditional tales, were deemed to be old/feudal, and refashioned to express and promote the heroism and sacrifice of past and present fighters. These "model" performance and production pieces aimed at providing model character and behavior—they were impressive, and they were highly popular.[2] The production of alternative arts and entertainment institutions—such as those connected to the "old" Chinese culture, or the hedonistic yet avant-garde entertainment scenes in Shanghai during the warlordist era—was largely halted and suppressed, or simply placed out of sight, during most of the Mao era.

## Purity-Focused and Pollution-Conscious

One special feature of the ideationally driven idea system was an appetite for symbolic purity, clarity, exclusivity, and cleanliness. Eradicating impurities was embedded in the themes and slogans of the Revolution.

[2] The first five model Peking operas emerged in 1967; they were *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* [智取威虎山], *The Red Lantern* [红灯记], *On the Docks* [海港], *Shajiabang* [沙家浜], and *Raid on the White-Tiger Regiment*[奇袭白虎团]. As historian Paul Clark notes, these grand, refined productions, which had tremendous box-office appeal, met with audiences who were often eager to watch new reproductions and renditions of them. They crowded out the production of many other non-model prospective opera projects simply because their quality could hardly be matched. While a discernable level of autonomy and diversity still remained in the arts after 1949, 1964–1966 seemed to be a turning point. The Cultural Revolution campaigns had a lasting effect, influencing the content and style of productions well into the mid-1970s, despite the efforts to rejuvenate and restore a more open and diverse art scene at that time. See Paul Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 18–57, 197–202, 213–214.

Many societies have subtle forms of ritual around purity and impurity, especially when categories and norms are transmuted and transgressed.[3] What made the Revolution distinct was the "rational" character of the purposes of their rituals, involving explicated, systematic methods to deal with polluting elements.

In each campaign, there was intense theorization to explain the underlying causes of social ills, to identify targets, and to clean, quarantine, or get rid of the polluting targets altogether.

There were measured gradations of problems and counteractions; different cleansing (or simply cleaning) mechanisms corresponded to different kinds of violations.[4] Laziness or minor character vices could be "cleansed" by confessing in a regular study group. Borrowed from the Soviet tradition, CPC members routinely practiced vocal criticism and self-criticism in meetings.[5] This format was perceived to be useful because it drew out conflict and negative emotions from within the group, and dealt with them directly instead of letting them fester and accumulate. Impure elements were to be symbolically destroyed: the accused may confess a violation, a misunderstanding may be clarified, or a sanction—such as punishment—could be administered to settle an issue. Serious moral offenders were subjected to "study sessions" organized at various organizations and most often elaborate confession or self-examination statements[6] needed to be produced. More polluting elements were subject to quarantine after their exposure.

These classes of people were subject to programs and mechanisms of *purification*. Killing and purging were supposed to be the last resort when dealing with forms of pollution. Ideally, rule-violators should be subject to successful reeducation and reformation, and many events and records could be constructed to demonstrate the *conversion* of subjects—such as

[3] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London and New York: Routledge, 1966), 3–4.

[4] Lu Xing, *Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution: The Impact on Chinese Thought, Culture, and Communication* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 42–46.

[5] Lowell Dittmer, "The Structural Evolution of "Criticism and Self-Criticism," *The China Quarterly 56* (October–December, 1973) 708–29; Philip F. Williams and Yenna Wu, *The Great Wall of Confinement: The Chinese Prison Camp Through Contemporary Fiction and Reportage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 32, 110.

[6] These statements are commonly called 悔过书, 书面检讨 or 检查.

through a reclassification. Landlords handing over their estates to the state might also warrant reclassification.

There were also more formal corrective institutions during the Cultural Revolution.[7] These spaces hosted the impure elements that needed to be purified. They were organized by a model known as "Re-education Through Labor"—pronounced *Laogai* [劳改] or *Laojiao* [劳教]. "Prisons" were generally known by the name of *Laogai camp* [劳改营], and a lesser version of which was the *Laojiao center* [劳教所]. There were also special study classes [学习班], which could be held at a certain time and place every day or night. The guiding philosophy of these institutions was that the harsh lifestyle of demanding manual labor in farms, mines, and factories—combined with intense study group sessions—could help people such as rightists and intellectuals eliminate anti-revolutionary thoughts and habits.[8]

Other than targeting individual "knowledge elements" and rightists, purification was imposed on whole categories of people, such as "landlords." Even cadres were not immune. Expressing the criticism that many party cadres were "three-door cadres" [三门干部]—that is to say, "leaving family door, entering school door, and entering office door [出家门进学校门, 出学校门进机关门]—Mao supported the sons and daughters of urban bureaucrats entering into "cadre schools." [9] Such schools resembled the reeducation labor camps of Chinese prisons, except with a less demanding workload and somewhat more emphasis in political study. Depending on the specific schools, they enrolled people from bad class background or normal official cadre members in the government.[10]

For the few most severe culprits, they might face immediate execution, a death sentence with a two-year reprieve, or long-term imprisonment in

[7] See Philip F. Williams and Yenna Wu, *The Great Wall of Confinement.*

[8] Philip F. Williams and Yenna Wu, *The Great Wall of Confinement*, 107–118.

[9] Mao Zedong, "Speech at the Central Working Conference" (June 6, 1964), CD. [毛泽东, "在中央工作会议上的讲话" (6月6日, 1964), 光碟。]

[10] Xing Lu, *Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution: The Impact on Chinese Thought, Culture, and Communication* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 42–46;

Lowell Dittmer, "The Structural Evolution of "Criticism and Self-Criticism." *The China Quarterly 56* (October-December 1973): 708–729; Alexander Casella, "The Nanniwan May 7th Cadre School." *The China Quarterly 53* (January-March1973): 153–157; James C. F. Wang, "The May Seventh Cadre School for Eastern Peking." *The China Quarterly 63* (September 1975): 522–527; Fen Sing-Nan, "The May 7 Cadre Schools in the People's Republic of China: 1968–1976." *Administration and Society 18*, no. 1 (May 1986): 29–43.

a labor camp.[11] Struggle sessions [批鬥大會] often entailed rough treatment, acts of humiliation, and even beatings.[12] In such instances, mass incivility might not aim to purify the individuals, but—fitting with classic anthropological conceptions—the purification was directed toward clarifying and strengthening the collective morality, partly by clarifying the boundaries, using the subjects as symbolic examples.

Lastly, purification was not only directed at people. For example, one purification treatment Mao directed at the Chinese operas in 1963 was to stop paying salaries for producers and workers who reinforced classic, traditional, "feudal" themes—the ones which revolved around "emperors and officials, talented and beautiful couples" [帝王将相, 才子佳人].[13]

## Outwardly Collective and Public

One fascinating feature of the Revolution was how things were displayed publicly, out in the open. This may be a by-product of Mao's strategic approach, one that relied on a mass movement as its basis. Thoughts were not supposed to be kept private, including confessions and corrections. Neither were people's lives! All who occupied a place within society were actors inside a revolution. Their words and deeds, whether they were conscious or not, had symbolic power and implications toward how the Revolution would progress. The Revolution relied upon them to act publicly to help fight the revolutionary battles. This is captured in a statement issued by the Party Central Committee during the onset of the Cultural Revolution:

> [We] need to fully utilize formats like big-character posters [大字报] and big debates[大辩论], carrying out big noise, big release [大鸣大放], so that the masses could clarify the correct viewpoints, criticize the wrong opinions, expose all the ox ghosts and snake spirits. Doing this can make the grand

[11] Zhang Ning. 2008. "The Political Origins of Death Penalty Exceptionalism: Mao Zedong and the Practice of Capital Punishment in Contemporary China." *Punishment and Society 10*, no. 2 (April 2008): 117–136.

[12] Xing Lu, *Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution: The Impact on Chinese Thought, Culture, and Communication* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 140–142.

[13] Mao Zedong, "Criticism about theatre" (November, 1963), CD. [毛泽东, "对戏剧界的批评" (11月, 1963), 光碟。]

masses elevate their awareness in the struggle, improve their abilities, discern the right from wrong, distinguish the enemy and ourselves."[14]

Less about punishment and violence, "going public" was instead critical of the themes of mass mobilization and mass education. Carrying a flyswatter on one's belt during the "Eradicate the Four Pests" campaign, for example, helped to replicate a depiction of a military frontline, in however minor a way this might be. There were some differences: such acts, according to the parents of a memoir writer, were more ubiquitous in the cities than they were in the rural areas. In the village, the campaign was taken less seriously; eradicating sparrows was mostly relegated to children.[15]

Going public—through "exposure"—helped to create "data" in a public symbolic system. The actors who asserted a fit of images did not necessarily have the final say, or a definitive say in the matter, or at least it was, purportedly, not meant to be so. But they created debates and discussions about the fit, enacting various local settlements, solutions, and experiences that could service the education of revolutionaries of other locations, in addition to the local revolutionaries. In other words, "publicizing" emphasized learning on a collective level, not just a private one. By encouraging a culture of exposure, and then subjecting contradictions to mass criticism, it opened up channels that might have otherwise been kept hidden by bureaucratic secrecy, corrupt organizations, or any powerful individuals behind closed doors. In summary, collective learning and exposing actual situations (data) were ostensibly two functions of the highly "public" character of the idea system.

Many behaviors were dramatic, symbolic enactments. They produced the scenes and events of a revolution. During the land reform process, a frequently enacted visualized display was a mini, do-it-yourself museum (or exhibit) of the landlord class. After a landlord's home was ransacked, local party members reorganized all the properties to create a tableau of the landlord's wealth, highlighting their decadent, counterrevolutionary lifestyle. The landlords served as purified "examples" of class enemies in the public consciousness. These acts were devised to educate the masses

[14] "Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Proletarian Cultural Revolution" (August 8, 1966). [ "中国共产党中央委员会关于无产阶级文化大革命的决定" (8月8日, 1966)。]

[15] Wang Youqin, *Victims of the Cultural Revolution: An Investigative Account of Persecution, Imprisonment, and Murder* (Hong Kong: Open Books, 2004), 99. [王友琴《文革受難者—關於迫害、監禁與殺戮的採訪實錄》(香港:開放出版社, 2004), 99。]

who had not mastered the concept and revolutionary consciousness behind the revolutionary situation.

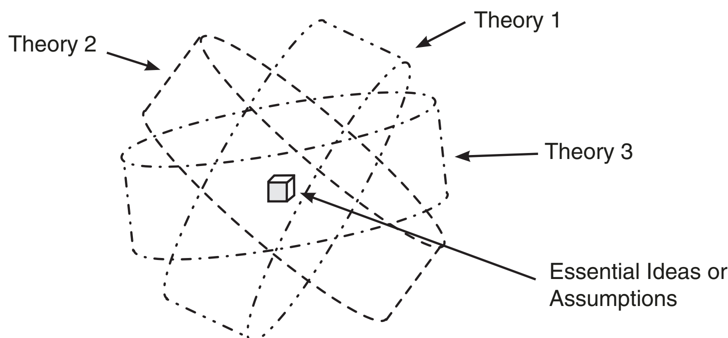
Such symbolic techniques were later institutionalized and pushed with full vigor during the Cultural Revolution. Struggle sessions [批斗大会] often involved dunce caps, placards, a "jet-plane" posture, and some kind of dirt being symbolically smeared on the transgressors. Wearing a tall cap [戴高帽] had been associated with the status of honor, part of the uniform worn by prestigious officials in past dynasties. As a form of humiliation, the dunce caps that were on the subjects were made of paper. The placards labeled the subjects' identities, like "ox ghost snake spirit" or "counter-revolutionary," along with their names. The wife of Liu Shaoqi had experienced such a session when she was forced to reenact a scene of her wearing a traditional long Chinese dress associated with the upper class [旗袍] and wearing a string of ping-pong balls on stage—ironically mimicking the pearls she used to wear.[16] Black ink, a symbol of dirtiness, was often smeared on the subjects being publicly paraded. Half-shaved haircuts called "yin-yang head" [阴阳头] were given to some subjects, producing an unpleasant and dehumanized appearance—a practice that had some deeper roots in traditional China. During denunciation, many of these subjects were forced to stand on the chair and bow to the audience, symbolizing their apology. Some had their arms held by two guards at the back, which was called a "jet-plane mode" [喷气式]. A jet-plane stance was not only uncomfortable but also signified a state of total subjugation.

## Preemptive Design and Secondary Elaboration

Many problems, wrongdoings, setbacks, inaccuracies, limitations, and other forms of contradiction had emerged. These were countered with defensive mechanisms. These mechanisms preempted, countered, or managed these contradictions.

To utilize the model we have used to analyze the European witch hunts, Figure 9.1 maps out *an orbit of potential explanations* revolving around certain core theses. The core, nucleus propositions may be put as, *on aggregate, Mao and the revolutionary project he idealized are correct*. Other secondary explanations, while they may contain insufficient evidence or

[16] Anne F. Thurston, *Enemies of the People: The Ordeal of Intellectuals in China's Great Cultural Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 123.




Explanation 1: We all make mistakes.
Explanation 2: Experiential learning and reflection help us to correct mistakes.
Explanation 3: On aggregate, the gains may be greater than the losses.
Explanation 4: Imperfection and unfortunate losses are inevitable.

**Fig. 9.1** An orbit with four potential explanations operating within parameters of acceptable contradictions (regarding shortfalls in the revolution)

contradict one another, served defensive or even reinforcing functions for the overall idea system.

The first common interpretation was that *the Revolution embraced individual mistakes.* Relatedly, a second proposition was, *learning from mistakes was a consistent, core feature of the Revolution.* True revolutionaries, unlike those who were stubborn, also actively sought to correct their mistakes. However, they did not necessarily do so by reparation or apology. Instead, they achieved this by enacting the correct actions with a proactive attitude. We have seen the emphasis on extensive reflection and correction in previous examples; even Mao himself resigned from PRC chairmanship after the Great Leap Forward, at least in part due to his admission of the mistake he had made. This is to say, not only were there theoretical ideas intended to support the points, but there were also many fitted images backing them.

The third interpretation was based in a form of cost-benefit analysis, to say that *even though there were losses, on the aggregate the gains were greater.* Such claims render more detailed calculations, of which aggregation played an important part. But the advantage was that shortfalls would be "wiped" away by the gains during the calculation. Another interpretation is that *imperfections and unfortunate losses are inevitable.* This latter

conception was bolstered by the metaphors associated with wartime situations, wherein unpredictability and imprecisions pervade decision-making. Or, if a situation involves novices learning their ropes, mistakes are expected. Given these circumstances, imperfections and shortfalls are, in a sense, understandable and forgivable.

### *The Chicken Lot Example*

One revealing example of handling imperfection can be seen in a simple story reported in the *People's Daily* in 1967, titled "The Whole Family Learns from Book of [Mao's] Quotations."[17] The story began when some privately raised chickens were observed to have wandered out of their private lots. A production team member called Luo Xian [罗仙] saw them and also let her own chickens out of her lots to be fed on the public lot. Another member of the production collective saw the behavior and complained to her husband. During dinner time, the husband recited a quotation from the book, asking his family to follow: "Comrade Bai Qiu En's selfless spirit to serve others is shown in his extreme responsible behaviors at work, as well as his extreme ardor toward comrades and the people."

The husband asked, by letting the chickens out into the public lot and eating the collective grains, "What kind of thinking is this? Does it conform to Chairman Mao's teaching? [这是什么思想?符合毛主席的教导吗?]" In response, the wife admitted that she thought others had let their chickens out deliberately and so she followed suit. "This shows that I still have selfish intentions, and have not learned from Comrade Bai Qiu En's selfless, altruistic spirit." The son then chimed in and said, "Mother! Your actions were not correct. Even if others do it, we still should not! This is selfishness for self-gain [自私自利]." Seeing Lo humbly accepting the son's criticism, the husband said, "Tonight we have achieved practical learning from *Chairman Mao Book of Quotations*, having learned it well and applied it well. Now let us eat dinner."

This model example illustrated how the first and second defensive explanations came to work. Initially, mistakes were committed. Individualism prevailed for a moment. But, as a result of reading Mao's quotation books and seeing a model comrade's selfless behavior, people learned to improve themselves. They also came forward to admit their

[17] "Quotations for the whole family," *People's Daily* (Beijing), January 4, 1967. ["全家学语录", 人民日报(北京), 1月4日, 1967。]

faults, having others correct their thoughts. And it was *because* of the open learning and criticism approach that greater revolutionary consciousness was achieved.

### *The Tsinghua University Example*

A brief example illustrates the third and fourth defensive explanations. In the long meeting with student leaders in 1968, at which Lin Biao and Zhou Enlai were also present, Mao had assessed the excess of the Cultural Revolution, following the "Hundred Day War" in Tsinghua University.[18] Physical confrontation had led to numerous deaths and injuries, as well as the acts of beating, torture, and interrogation. In the meeting, Mao frankly admitted that he was responsible for inventing the dunce cap and parade rituals during the early land reform process. Some approaches had been taken to further extremes by the likes of Kuai Dafu, as exemplified by his inventing and using the jet-plane mode. The following reflections then took place:

| | |
|---|---|
| MAO ZEDONG: | Jinggangshan's [井冈山, the faction headed by Kuai Dafu] methods are not good, I mean Commander Kuai's Jinggangshan. Having killed four people, injured a total of fifty—this kind of influence on society. I am not looking at one person [but the whole situation]. The damage is the least, the least, the least [我也不是看一个人, 损失就最小最小最小]. |
| LIN BIAO: | Worth it… The damage is the least. |
| ZHOU ENLAI: | Vice Chairman Lin said it well. The damage is the smallest, the smallest. The achievement is the greatest, the greatest [损失最小最小, 成绩最大最大]. |
| MAO ZEDONG: | If any worker is going to you later, you should adopt a welcoming attitude. Do not adopt Kuai Dafu's methods. |

Upon admitting the severe flaws, Mao, Lin, and Zhou all used aggregation to assess the situation, concluding that the damage was already kept to almost the minimum ("the least"), in relation to the positive effects the

[18] Mao Zedong, "Talks when meeting the 'Five Leaders' of the Red Congress" (July, 28, 1968), CD. [毛泽东, "召见首都红代会'五大领袖'时的谈话" (7月28日, 1968), 光碟。]

measures had on society. Also connected to their first two defensive propositions, Mao demonstrated that if mistakes were identified then they should to be corrected; having learned from the past errors exemplified by those committed by the Kuai Dafu.

Overall, these four propositions served preemptive functions. When problems and contradictions surfaced, they were ready to be efficiently processed. Perfections were to be strived for, from courageous experimentation, proactive learning, and self-correction. Campaigns like "Learn from Dazhai" and "Learn from Lee Feng" that fundamentally implied learning from model cases were far better than imperfect and average cases—and even these model cases were not posited to be complete, and thence extra improvement and experiments were needed. School and study sessions encompassed open criticisms and self-criticisms; even otherwise good leaders subjected themselves to these practices concessionally. The idea system, due to these mechanisms, was largely preempted from breaking, becoming incredibly resilient.

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