

MAOISM, MODELS AND MONEY

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During the Cultural Revolution, China made great use of learning from "models", particularly the Dazhai Production Brigade and the Daqing Oil Field. The advantages of such campaigns were several. These models were dramatic examples of Mao Zedong's economic principles put into practice. The individual peasants and workers at Dazhai and Daqing seemed to show the ordinary people of China what could be done through hard work provided that the local community was inspired by the correct political ideals. In addition, models like Dazhai and Daqing offered a solution to a problem which faces all developing countries: how to increase the productivity of the labour force without offering higher wages and bonuses. If a poor country can reduce its spending on wages and other material incentives, increased output can be used to expand investment and modernise the economy.

Since late 1978, Dazhai and Daqing have come under criticism, and they are no longer regarded as the lofty models which the whole of China's agriculture and industry should imitate. The role of models in general has been downgraded, and greater reliance has been placed on cash and other rewards for higher production by the individual peasant and worker. Both Dazhai and Daqing have been accused of having followed the "leftist" road during the Cultural Revolution; of serious mistakes by their leaderships; and of such errors in economic policy as egalitarianism.

Criticism of Daqing has been less severe. Since oil is the one industry which China has successfully built up to substantial output levels since 1949, Daqing's pioneer role could not be concealed. Furthermore, Daqing still produces almost half the country's annual oil which means that Daqing continues to play a key role in the national economy. Daqing has been too important to the rest of the country to remain in political disgrace. Dazhai's situation is very different. This production brigade is no more than a small rural community in Central China and has no economic resources to give it political influence now that Mao Zedong is dead.

While Dazhai and Daqing have been criticised on political grounds,

the decision by the Chinese leadership to demote these models has been part of a widespread effort to modernise the way in which the Chinese workforce is managed and motivated. Within the community, conflicting forces have been at work, and the Government has tried to establish a new balance between material rewards and the traditional political campaigns based on models such as Dazhai and Daqing.

THE SEARCH FOR CREDIBILITY

One weakness of both Dazhai and Daqing after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 was the nation's cynicism about Maoism and about mass political campaigns. During 1977, provincial administrations started to tackle the problem of fraud in learning from these two models. Some units, anxious to qualify as Dazhai or Daqing-type enterprises, made false claims about improvements in output.¹ The next stage was a review of the behaviour of Dazhai and Daqing during the Cultural Revolution and under the "gang of four". A review of Red Guard and other Cultural Revolution materials would show that the "ultra-leftists" originally had grave suspicions about both these models, and there is evidence to show that Jiang Qing was bitterly opposed to Dazhai's leadership till the very end. Nevertheless, both Dazhai and Daqing were regarded as major parts of the Cultural Revolution. Neither, therefore, could escape criticism when Maoism and the Cultural Revolution were denounced.

In the case of Dazhai, the criticisms were very damaging. Attacks were made on the personal integrity, political ruthlessness and personal ambitions of the production brigade's principal leader. Such criticisms were not so easily made against the Daqing leadership until the disaster in which the Bohai No 2 Rig sank. After this tragedy, the petroleum industry could be attacked for a specific public scandal, just as Dazhai had been.² Despite the confused political background, the economic considerations seem to have been the major influence on the Government's attitude towards both models. In fact, Dazhai was seen as part of an over-ambitious plan in 1977 to transform agriculture, and Daqing's real fault was its links with the massive investment programme announced in 1978, which would have created ten "Daqings" by 1985 to raise national output to 250 million tons a year.³ China remained so short of oil that Daqing's own investment plans remained extensive, and at the end of 1981, the oil field was given a partial rehabilitation as a national model.⁴

Another problem was that the two models were too advanced for the rest of the nation to catch up with very rapidly. During the height of the campaign to learn from Dazhai, only a hundred counties a year

qualified as Dazhai-type units. At that rate, China would not have raised all its counties up to Dazhai's standards before 1995.⁵ Things were no better in learning from Daqing. By 1980, out of the country's 400,000 industrial enterprises, only 10,000 had qualified as Daqing-type (although over a third of the large and medium-sized enterprises had won this distinction).⁶ Quite simply, the progress in learning from Dazhai and Daqing was too slow, which undermined their credibility as models for the country to imitate.

TIED TO THE PAST

While the Government had a variety of reasons to turn away from Dazhai and Daqing, they could not be so easily dismissed. The fundamental difficulty was that a large number of the nation's most progressive rural communities and industrial enterprises had qualified as Dazhai or Daqing-types and thus became associated with the two models now being criticised. What is to become of such advanced units? Should they be regarded as having committed errors in following Dazhai and Daqing?

An additional complication was the way the Communist Party leadership had itself been confused in its approach to Dazhai in particular. Warnings about the defects in Dazhai's experience were widely publicised in 1979.⁷ Yet learning from Dazhai was retained as part of the plans for agricultural development in a Central Party Committee Decision of September that year.⁸ More recently, the Communist Party has stated that it would be wrong and unfair either to dismiss Dazhai and Daqing as total failures or to condemn the units which learnt from them.⁹ At the provincial level, the problem is more serious and more practical. Fujian has stated that the campaign to learn from Dazhai produced agricultural progress in many areas and that Dazhai-type teams did not learn from the leftist stage of Dazhai's history.¹⁰ Hunan has followed a similar line, although it has admitted that learning from Dazhai had been a "leftist" influence.¹¹

In Daqing's case, the problem was less acute, although confusion was to be found in the way the problem was tackled. The record of China's oil industry was superior to most of the rest of the economy, and Daqing was the single biggest source of oil. Daqing had many things to teach the rest of the nation, whether "leftists" or pragmatists were in power. The confusion was illustrated by Qinghai. In 1980, this province acknowledged the value of the campaign to learn from Daqing. However, the provincial administration thought it prudent to simply drop all further reference to Daqing-type enterprises. By the end of 1981, however, other provinces were once again openly learning from Daqing.¹² In this case, practice was

being used as the criterion for truth!

AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL

In the agricultural sector, no attempt was made to find a replacement for Dazhai. Emulation and learning from models in the way favoured by Mao Zedong were abandoned. Farm output was to be increased by the agricultural reforms introduced to allow greater local management of cultivation and higher personal earnings.

Industry was treated differently. Shanghai was approved as a model and was imitated more spontaneously and more widely than Daqing. Shanghai was the natural alternative to the oil field, not surprisingly since Shanghai offers the highest living standards and most sophisticated technical levels in the whole country. Yet, Shanghai was not without its own "leftist" legacy. During the Cultural Revolution, this city had become identified as the headquarters of the most violent "leftists" (as well as being corrupted by its capitalist background before 1949).¹³

The campaign to learn from Shanghai began in 1979.¹⁴ It has been claimed, however, that the new campaign was a revival of a movement which had been important as long ago as the early 1960s.¹⁵ One reason why the movement to learn from Shanghai had such impact in the 1980s was the city's willingness to send out teams of technicians to help train staff and workers around the country. Shanghai provided direct inputs of technical skill to solve production and distribution bottlenecks in a large number of provinces.¹⁶

Equally important was Shanghai's ability to provide money and machinery for joint ventures throughout China. The city had become the investment centre of the nation. It was signing contracts and lending money to national ministries as well as to local administrations.¹⁷ The rewards from learning from Shanghai were considerable, and the easiest way of imitating Shanghai as a model was to become a partner in a joint enterprise of some kind.

THE NEED FOR MODELS

In the campaign to modernise China, education has an important role to play. Most people find it easier to learn from practical experience and concrete examples. Advanced units can thus be a great help in setting new standards and encouraging the nation to improve economic efficiency. In the current situation, China has an additional reason for seeking to establish models as a major influence in speeding up economic growth. Since 1977 and the switch away from the traditional Maoist models and emulation campaigns, higher personal earnings have been used as an

incentive to encourage increased output. But the costs of these material rewards have been very high. Indeed, the evidence suggests that the costs have been excessive, and higher incomes for workers have not resulted in equally large growth in output. One official estimate claims that from 1979 to 1981, total industrial output grew by 23%; labour productivity in industry by 6.6% over the same period. Yet, bonuses paid to industrial employees went up six times during these three years.¹⁸

One problem is that many cadres believe that political education and ideals are no longer essential because monetary rewards can be used to inspire the work force. In recent years, the importance attached to money has risen, and economic solutions are seen as being basically a question of money.¹⁹ An effort has been made to correct such ideas, and the Communist Party emphasises that money is no substitute for personal idealism in the modernisation of the country.²⁰ The Party members themselves are expected to set an example by finding the proper balance between personal interests and the need for sacrifices to transform the national economy.²¹

Models continue to have an important place in China because money cannot provide the solution to all the nation's economic problems. There is not enough money to spend in this way, and experience in recent years has proved that more bonuses do not result in substantial improvements in output.

PUBLIC RESPONSES

The Chinese authorities would like to return to emulation campaigns where individual peasants and workers are held up as models and where individual units can be hailed as advanced. After Mao Zedong's death, this sort of campaign was first tried out during 1977. Despite extensive publicity, it seems not to have been very popular. One reason was, perhaps, the community's knowledge that from 1966 to 1976, large numbers of those praised for outstanding achievements were total frauds. Some of these charlatans have been unmasked since 1976²² but the public has every reason to feel cynical about the process by which models have been selected.

In 1980, 1,230,000 advanced collectives and 11,150,000 model producers and workers were chosen across the country.²³ But nomination as a model worker was no longer a cause for congratulation or a source of prestige. In many districts, outstanding workers and units were mocked and even assaulted.²⁴ People now refuse such honours because of the trouble they will encounter in dealing with their fellow-workers and

neighbours.²⁵ The Central Party Committee was so worried about the problems facing advanced individuals "in many localities and units" that a Special Report had to be circulated this year to relieve their considerable burdens.²⁶

The Chinese authorities face a community which enthusiastically accepted models during the Cultural Revolution. In the assessment of Mao Zedong and his policies since 1976, a great number of scandals and outright frauds have been uncovered among those previously held up as examples to the whole of China. The nation, no longer finds it easy to believe in the heroes selected as models nor to accept the merits of the model units picked out for public commendation. The appropriate solution for using both political ideals and material rewards to improve economic performance has yet to be found.

CONCLUSIONS

Changes in the political climate have made criticism of Dazhai and Daqing inevitable. If Mao Zedong could be criticised, so could the models which he had urged the nation to imitate. But there were other reasons for turning away from Dazhai and Daqing. They were too advanced for China to catch up with quickly, and they were associated with economic policies after 1976 which the Communist Party repudiated in 1979. But it has not been possible to get rid of either model completely. The units which qualified as Dazhai and Daqing-types are frequently genuinely outstanding.

Where the nation can learn with profit from a model, China shows itself still willing to imitate the advanced. This is true of Daqing and also of Shanghai, which was at least as "leftist" in the Cultural Revolution as anywhere else in the country. But the public has been disillusioned by past emulation campaigns and is cynical about the new model producers and workers. For the authorities, this scepticism is unfortunate because the task of reducing reliance on wasteful material incentives is made all the more difficult. The overall impression is that the Chinese authorities are still in search of substitute for the sort of ideals and enthusiastic self-sacrifice which Mao Zedong Thought was supposed to establish in the Cultural Revolution.

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