

The Masses Are the Makers of History

by Tien Chih-sung

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WHO makes history? The heroes or the slaves? This is, a basic question underlying the long-continued struggle between the idealist and the materialist conceptions of history.

To preserve their reactionary rule, the exploiting classes have for thousands of years invariably resorted to reversing history by propagating the idealist conception of history, the conception that history is made by heroes. A few heroes belonging to the exploiting classes have been referred to by them as “talents by natural endowment” or identified with “god’s will” and as makers of history. On the other hand, the masses have been branded the “mob” who can only put themselves at the mercy of the heroes, or, worse still, “inert matter” holding back historical progress.

From this reactionary fallacy it follows that, in a society under the dictatorship of the exploiting classes, the development of history is decided by the will of a handful of rulers representing the interests of the exploiting classes, whereas the exploited and oppressed working masses must succumb to the rulers, put up with slavery and do nothing but appeal to heaven and look forward to the advent of the “saviour.” This idealist conception of history is the very spiritual shackle that keeps the labouring people in bondage.

Reversing the Reversal of History

The emergence of Marxism brought to light for the first time the objective laws governing the development of mankind’s history; it scientifically proved the great truth that history is made by the slaves. Reversing the history the exploiting classes have reversed, Marxism thus brought about the utter bankruptcy of the idealist conception of history and uprooted the theoretical basis of thousands of years of reactionary rule by the exploiting classes. Chairman Mao in leading the Chinese revolution has from time to time educated all Party members and cadres, the proletariat and other working people in the basic viewpoint of historical materialism, i.e., the masses are the makers of history. He has at the same time waged a protracted struggle against historical idealism of all descriptions. In addition to the mass line he has worked out for our Party, Chairman Mao’s teachings that **“the masses have boundless creative power,”** that **“we must have faith in the masses and we must have faith in the Party”** and that **“the masses are the real heroes, while we ourselves are often childish and ignorant”** are all pointed criticisms of the idealist conception of history, which the slave-owner class, the landlord class and the capitalist class have long spread to deny the fact that history is made by slaves.

All exploiting classes, however, will by no means make their exit from the stage of history of their own accord. Nor will they easily give up their reactionary theories after being overthrown by the revolutionary people. That Liu Shao-chi and other political swindlers like

him have used idealist apriorism as their anti-Party theoretical programme and propagated the idealist conception of history, the conception that history is made by heroes, is yet another clear reflection of the struggle between the two classes and the two lines in the course of China's socialist revolution. And when this fallacy was mercilessly exposed and forcefully repudiated by the people throughout the country, they again produced another fallacy that "history is made jointly by both heroes and slaves." Their vain attempt was to use dualist sophistry to negate the basic principle of Marxism.

In philosophy dualism postulates that spirit and matter are two independent and paralleled principles of the universe; the "theory of history being made jointly by both heroes and slaves" which Liu Shao-chi and his kind propounded regards heroes and masses as two independent and paralleled motive forces in the making of history.

But does this mean that this so-called "theory" really acknowledges the role of the masses in the making of history? Not at all. In the eyes of Liu Shao-chi and those like him, the common people are only concerned about "getting rich and leading a happy life" and that all workers want is to "work less and earn more." As they see it, the masses are just money-hungry rabble who have nothing to do with the making of history. The representatives of the exploiting classes, on the other hand, are said to be "men with foresight and prescience," and, so they say, a nation "owes its existence, its revival after decline and its rebirth after ruin to them." Comparing their praise of the representatives of the exploiting classes and slander of the masses, one can see clearly that the preposterous theory of "history being made jointly by both heroes and slaves" is only the idealist conception of history in disguise.

If one denies that slaves or the masses are the makers of history, one inevitably acknowledges that heroes make history. But Liu Shao-chi and his like, in trumpeting the "theory of history being made jointly by both heroes and slaves," reconciled the two diametrically opposed viewpoints to each other so that there are both heroes and masses in the making of history. It sounds most impartial. Characteristic of all political swindlers, it is, however, plausible sophistry.

Ever since the dissolution of the primeval communal ownership of land, as Engels pointed out, all history has been a history of class struggle, **"of struggles between exploited and exploiting, between dominated and dominating classes at various stages of social development."** (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*, "Preface to the German Edition of 1883.") The mode of production of the social material means is the material basis for historical development. In all societies, the contradiction between the forces of production and the relations of production is the fundamental contradiction. The development of the productive forces brings about a change in the relations of production,

advancing the replacement of one mode of production by another and the development of a social system from lower to higher stages.

“The greatest productive power is the revolutionary class itself.” (Karl Marx: *The Poverty of Philosophy*.) In class society, the contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production is manifested in the struggle between the revolutionary classes standing for the development of the social productive forces and the reactionary classes which want to preserve the old relations of production; here, the masses are the decisive force in the class struggle. All social change is the outcome of revolutionary struggles by the masses. All advanced thinking and theories are the epitome of these struggles and mirror the revolutionary will of the masses; all science and technology are the crystallization of the practical experience of the masses; all progressive culture and art stem from the life of the people which is full of struggle. Without the masses’ struggle for production, a society cannot possibly exist, still less can history develop. In class society, without the class struggle of the masses, the development of history, is also out of the question. **“The people, and the people alone, are the motive force in the making of world history.”** [Mao.] This is an irrefutable truth.

The Role of Heroes

What, then, should be the proper approach to the role of heroes? Can it be that historical materialism negates their role in history? Absolutely not. Marxism has never denied this. On the contrary, it holds that their role is quite a big one. The crux of the matter is: What is meant by heroes? How to assess their role in its true light? And what should be the approach in handling the relationship between the role of heroes and the masses who make history? It is these questions on which we fundamentally differ from Liu Shao-chi and his ilk and where an acute struggle exists.

In class society, heroes have a nature pertaining to their own class; there is no such thing as a hero who transcends classes. Each class has its own conception of heroes. To the proletariat and other working masses, heroes are outstanding figures who can only emerge from the people’s revolutionary struggles, who represent the interests of the masses, and who, in line with the direction in which history develops, help propel history forward. The emergence of such heroes is exactly a manifestation of the making of history by the masses. In contrast, the exploiting classes regard those exponents who can best preserve the interests of, their own classes and the system of exploitation as “heroes.” The reactionary ruling classes certainly do not recognize the heroes of the proletariat. And the

proletariat and the masses certainly do not accept the exponents of the reactionary ruling classes as heroes. For instance, in modern Chinese history, Hung Hsiu-chuan, a leader of the Revolutionary Movement of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom ¹ who fought imperialist aggression and Ching Dynasty feudal rule, is acknowledged as a hero by the proletariat and other working people. But the reactionary ruling classes curse him, calling him a “traitor.” At the same time, they laud Tseng Kuo-fan ² who, in collaboration with imperialism, suppressed the Revolutionary Movement of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, as a “hero.” But the proletariat and the masses take him for what he was: a lackey, a traitor, who was dead set on preserving the reactionary rule of the landlord class.

In the opinion of the proletariat, as Chairman Mao has said: **“To die for the people is weightier than Mount Tai, but to work for the fascists and die for the exploiters and oppressors is lighter than a feather.”** This fundamental opposition between conceptions about heroes is determined by the fundamental opposition of interests between the exploiting and exploited classes. An exploiting class has its periods of ebb and flow; because its place in history varies in different periods, the role in history of its exponents in different periods is also not the same.

Heroes do not come from nowhere; they are the outcome of history in progress, of class struggle. Marx pointed out: **“Every social epoch needs its great men, and when it does not find them, it invents them, as Helvetius says.”** (*The Class Struggles in France 1848-1850.*) The history of mankind has fully borne out this scientific thesis. Hailed by Karl Marx as the most spectacular man in ancient history, Spartacus of ancient Rome was an ordinary slave by origin. The revolutionary storm of the slave-insurgents, however, made him a hero, who, with thousands of men under his command, made an onslaught against

¹ The Revolutionary Movement of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom took place in the mid-19th century. It was a revolutionary war waged by Chinese peasants in opposition to the Ching Dynasty feudal rule and against national oppression. In January 1851, leaders of this revolution, including Hung Hsiu-chuan and Yang Hsiu-ching, staged an uprising at Chintien Village in Kueiping County in Kwangsi and proclaimed the founding of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom. Proceeding northward from Kwangsi in 1852, the peasant army marched through Hunan, Hupeh, Kiangsi and Anhwei and captured Nanking in 1853. A part of its forces then continued the drive north and pushed to the vicinity of Tientsin. However, the Taiping Army failed to build stable base areas in places it had occupied; moreover, after establishing its capital in Nanking, the leading group in the army committed many political and military errors. This accounted for its inability to withstand the combined onslaught of the counter-revolutionary forces of the Ching government and the British, U.S. and French aggressors, and it was finally defeated in 1864.

² Tseng Kuo-fan (1811-1872) was leader of the Hunan Army in the late Ching Dynasty and an arch representative of the reactionaries in modern Chinese history. A mandarin at the Ching court, he organized in his native province, Hunan in 1853 a local legion which later became the main force in suppressing the Revolutionary Movement of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom. Tseng Kuo-fan was defeated again and again in his battles with the Taiping Army, and he only succeeded in putting down the revolutionary movement when he finally collaborated with the British, U.S. and French aggressors in launching a joint offensive. The Ching court regarded him highly for his service in suppressing the people.

the slave system. At the close of the Chin Dynasty, Chen Sheng and Wu Kuang came from the ranks of ordinary peasants. But aggravated class contradictions and large-scale peasant uprisings compelled them to rise in rebellion and thus became leaders of these uprisings.

Even in bourgeois revolutions, there were quite a few outstanding persons who came from the masses. Many talented generals of the French Revolution were, before the revolution, ordinary men, or an actor, a typesetter, a barber, a dyer, a pedlar, a subaltern, all of whom were looked down upon. But for the revolution, how could such people turn out to be outstanding military commanders? **“A symptom of every real revolution,”** Lenin said, **“is a rapid, tenfold and even hundredfold increase in the number of the toiling and oppressed masses ... who are capable of waging the political struggle.”** (*“Left-wing” Communism, an Infantile Disorder.*) This kind of thing is even more common and more obvious in a proletarian revolution. All this testifies to the fact that heroes in various periods are those who come to the fore to answer the needs of the struggles of the masses; that every time history presents a new task of struggle, heroes who lead the masses in it are bound to emerge.

Heroes Are Born of the Masses

Marxism holds that the reason why heroes can play an important part in history is that, in the last analysis, they represent the interests of the revolutionary classes and the progressive forces, because they mirror the people’s demands and, therefore, have their support. Whoever he is, any hero or great man draws his strength only from the masses. He who fails to reflect the demands of the masses gets nowhere. **“It is man’s social being,”** said Chairman Mao, **“that determines his thinking. Once the correct ideas characteristic of the advanced class are grasped by the masses, these ideas turn into a material force which changes society and changes the world.”**

It is imperative that a hero should represent the advanced class, rightly reflect the objective demands of social development, and engage in the concrete revolutionary practice of transforming society and the world. This is at the core of the question. The fallacy that “history is made jointly by both heroes and slaves,” however, denies this fundamental question of principle, the question of which class is to be represented. This is, of course, idealist sophistry vainly trying to combine the two classes, the revolutionary class and the reactionary class, into one.

Heroes of the proletariat and the revolutionary masses are founders of revolutionary ideas or their disseminators; they are also organizers of revolutionary struggles. Compared with the rank and file, they aim higher and are more far-sighted. Whether they are able to concentrate the wisdom of the masses or not and whether their leadership is correct or not have much to do with the success or failure of their struggles. As has often been the case in history, although there is every possibility of a struggle succeeding and winning victory, it fails in the end because its leaders are not good at making use of these possibilities. This shows that heroes exert a considerable influence on quickening or slowing down the making of history by the masses. However, they can only affect the tempo but not change the direction of historical progress. Heroes are born of revolutionary struggles, and can play their roles only when they are with the masses. Advanced ideas and theories are a reflection of the demand of the masses for revolution and an epitome of their experience in struggle; they will become a material force advancing history only when they are grasped by the masses.

In his article *The Bankruptcy of the Idealist Conception of History* [SW 4:457], Chairman Mao pointed out with penetrating insight: **“The reason why Marxism-Leninism has played such a great role in China since its introduction is that China’s social conditions call for it, that it has been linked with the actual practice of the Chinese people’s revolution and that the Chinese people have grasped it. Any ideology—even the very best, even Marxism-Leninism itself—is ineffective unless it is linked with objective realities, meets objectively existing needs and has been grasped by the masses of the people. We are historical materialists, opposed to historical idealism.”** These words have completely exploded the idealist conception of history.

There have been many heroes in history who at first made revolution and indeed became quite influential; they later became divorced from the masses and eventually suffered defeat or lapsed, only to be forsaken and forgotten by the masses.

Among the bourgeois revolutionaries, such heroes are quite many. During the French Revolution Robespierre was in the limelight for a time. The Jacobins he represented, with a view to rallying the strength of the masses for their own use, tried at the beginning of the revolution somewhat firmly to satisfy some of the popular demands (the peasants’ demand for land, for instance). They were thus able to enlist popular support and, with revolutionary spirit, sent Louis XVI to the guillotine. But Robespierre was after all a bourgeois revolutionary. No sooner was the revolution won than he started to ignore the interests of the masses and, even worse, he suppressed them. The result was he lost their support and became powerless in withstanding the forces of reaction that struck back. He himself was

finally sent to the guillotine by the reactionary forces. Then there was Chang Tai-yen.³ During the Chinese Revolution of 1911⁴ he was hunted down seven times and thrice thrown into prison, but his revolutionary will never subsided. For a time, he was able to play a big role in the revolution, having a strong influence among the people. But, after the revolution, he secluded himself from the times and the people, lost his revolutionary vitality and soon faded out of the memory of the majority of the people.

This characteristic of bourgeois revolutionaries is determined by their class nature. Even during the period of struggle against feudalism, although the bourgeoisie were at one, in part and temporarily, with the working masses in opposing the feudal system, the two basically opposed each other as far as their class interests were concerned. In the course of revolution, bourgeois revolutionaries, confined to their narrow class interests, are afraid of the masses; they often waver, appease the enemy and even betray the people. Their antagonism to the masses, which is fundamental, becomes obvious daily after the seizure of political power. This accounts for the fact that, although the bourgeois revolutions in the 18th and 19th centuries were led by representatives of the bourgeoisie, the masses remained the principal forces of the revolution.

If the task of the bourgeois democratic revolution is to be fulfilled relatively completely, it is necessary to rely on the masses to overcome its leaders' proneness to conciliation which is reactionary in nature; it is also necessary to rely on the masses to wage repeated struggles and frustrate the attacks and attempts at a comeback by the reactionary forces. In the course of proletarian revolution there are also many fellow-travellers who, when the revolution develops to a certain stage, draw to a halt, drop out of the revolution and even become turncoats. These people are in essence bourgeois revolutionaries. As to those reactionary ringleaders who act counter to the historical current and set themselves

³ Chang Tai-yen (1869-1936) of Yuhang County, Chekiang Province, was a democratic revolutionary and scholar in modern China. In his early manhood, he energetically advocated and took part in the struggle against the Ching government and was often persecuted by the reactionaries. Though he published statements now and then against warlord rule after the Revolution of 1911, he gradually fell back and lost his revolutionary zeal. From 1924 on he devoted the rest of his life to academic discourses. A prolific writer, he produced many works in his lifetime.

⁴ The Revolution of 1911 was an old-type democratic revolution by the Chinese bourgeoisie. On the initiative of Dr. Sun Yat-sen and under his leadership, the revolutionary organization Tung Meng Hui was founded in the early part of this century with the call to overthrow the Ching Dynasty's feudal autocratic rule and establish a bourgeois democratic republic. There were many anti-Ching armed uprisings after its founding, but none succeeded. October 10, 1911, however, saw the victory of the Wuchang Uprising which immediately obtained nationwide response and pushed the Chinese bourgeois democratic revolution to a high tide. Crushed by this revolutionary storm, the reactionary rule of the Ching Dynasty collapsed, bringing an end to the feudal monarchial autocracy which had reigned over China for more than 2,000 years. But because the revolutionaries yielded to the pressure of imperialism and the feudal forces in China, political power was usurped by the Peiyang warlords represented by Yuan Shih-kai.

against the people, they are obstacles to the progress of history. The masses will have to topple them if history is to continue its advance.

All this speaks well for the fact that it is not the heroes who make history but the other way round, and that history, instead of being “made jointly by both heroes and slaves,” is made by the slaves alone.

Role of Proletarian Leaders

Proletarian leaders represent mankind’s most revolutionary and most advanced class. There is a difference in principle between them and the outstanding historical figures of other classes. Representing the fundamental interest of the proletariat and other working people, they consistently maintain the closest ties with the broad masses and penetratingly sum up the experience of the masses in struggle. Proficient in the laws of historical development, they have mastered the science of Marxism and applied it in revolutionary practice. They, therefore, are most far-sighted and most thoroughgoing in revolution, and do not have the kind of class limitations which the outstanding historical figures of other classes cannot overcome. Proletarian leaders, for these reasons, are able to bring into play, to the greatest extent possible, the role of the masses as the makers of history. They enjoy high prestige among the masses, prestige built up in prolonged revolutionary struggles. This big historical role of proletarian heroes makes all heroes of the past pale beside them.

Is it correct then to come to the conclusion that, in the period of proletarian revolution, “history is made jointly by both heroes and slaves”? The answer is still no. Proletarian leaders are leaders and organizers of the activities of the proletariat and the masses in the making of history. Their emergence and the establishment of their thought constitute a very important part of the process of history-making by the proletariat and the masses, and are the product of that process having developed to a certain stage, not something isolated from this process. Chairman Mao has pointed out explicitly in *On Practice* that Marxist theory of revolution was created at a time when practice in revolutionary struggle by the proletariat had developed into its second period, **“the period of conscious and organized economic and political struggles.”**

The Marxist viewpoint that the masses are the motive force in the making of history has, therefore, fully confirmed the great historical role of the revolutionary leaders as representatives of the advanced class. Liu Shao-chi and his like, in propounding the fallacy that “history is made jointly by both heroes and slaves,” regard “heroes” as something

outside and above “the people” so as to distort and degrade the leaders of the proletariat and build up their own image. Herein lies the essential difference between the two.

Marxism holds that the masses are the makers of history. This does not imply in the least the cult of the spontaneity of mass movements. Liu Shao-chi and his like, while propagating the idealist conception of history, the conception that history is made by heroes, also propagated the fallacy that any mass movement is “naturally rational.” This is a variation of the “theory of spontaneity” which Marxism strongly repudiated long ago. It has nothing in common with the historical materialist principle that history is made by the masses. Any mass struggle, without correct leadership and a correct line to follow, can neither last long nor achieve any result. The proletarian revolution is a great earthshaking revolution aimed at wiping out the system of exploitation. No revolution in the past can be compared with this revolutionary struggle in depth and extent. Thus it needs all the more to be armed by advanced thinking and the strong leadership of its own leaders and vanguard organization; guidance by a correct line also becomes more important. **The correctness or incorrectness of the ideological and political line decides everything.** [Mao] The history of the Chinese revolution is a history showing how Chairman Mao’s correct line has struggled against and defeated the “Left” and Right opportunist lines at different times. Without the correct line which Chairman Mao has worked out for us, there can be no victory for the Chinese revolution. To propagate the “theory of spontaneity” during the period of proletarian revolution is to oppose directly Marxist leadership over the mass movement and to deny the decisive importance of a correct ideological and political line to the success of the revolutionary cause; it is only an attempt to lead the mass movement astray.

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In making history the masses have traversed a course of gradually developing from being unaware to being aware. The founding of the Marxist materialist conception of history showed the objective laws of the development of society and history, bringing the role of the masses in making history to a new stage and opening up a broad avenue for mankind to leave the realm of necessity in which man is blindly at the disposal of history and enter the realm of freedom in which man will consciously handle history. As Chairman Mao has put it, **“The epoch of world communism will be reached when all mankind voluntarily and consciously changes itself and the world.”** So that this day will come the proletariat and revolutionary people still need to go through arduous and tortuous struggles, which must be led by a proletarian political party if it is to win victory. The mass line formulated by Chairman Mao for our Party requires us to have faith in the masses, to rely on them, respect their initiative, learn wholeheartedly from them and, at the same time, to indefatigably

educate them in Marxism-Leninism, steadily raise their level of political consciousness and lead them to forge ahead. Lenin said: **“A party is the vanguard of a class, and its duty is to lead the masses and not merely to reflect the average political level of the masses.”**

(The Extraordinary All-Russia Congress of Soviets of Peasants’ Deputies. [LCW 26:324])

Uphold the Marxist principle that the masses are the makers of history and adhere to the Party leadership—this is the only way to ensure that our revolutionary cause will continue to move ahead victoriously along the correct path.

