Deng: Cleaning Up Mao's Mistakes

By Oriana Fallaci

Q: Yes, but since you call them mistakes, Mr. Deng, shouldn't you admit that the mistakes began almost at once, that, for instance, the Great Leap Forward was a mistake?

A: Of course. When I indicated the late Fifties as the beginning of all the mistakes, I referred to the Great Leap Forward. However, here, too, we have to distinguish between the nature of the Cultural Revolution. In the Sixties, or to be exact before the later part of the Fifties, some ideas of Chairman Mao were very correct, even if the revolution in the most critical moments. In fact, the point is that, in spite of the good purposes, the intention derived from a wrong judgment of the Chinese realities. And again Chairman Mao was mistaken. He was the first one to understand the mistake, to suggest corrections. And when the corrections were not carried out, because of negative factors, he made his self-criticism. It was 1962. But again we failed to draw lessons, and so he started to launch the Cultural Revolution.

Q: What did he really want with the Cultural Revolution?

A: To avoid the restoration of capitalism in China. Yes, this was the intention. Chairman Mao's intention, I mean, not of those who would become the Gang of Four. The point is that, in spite of the good purposes, the intention derived from a wrong judgment of the Chinese reality. And again Chairman Mao was mistaken. He was also mistaken in choosing the target to hit. He said that the target should be the capitalist roaders in the party, and by this he had a large number of the veteran revolutionaries attacked. At all levels. People who not only had excellently fought for the revolution but who also had rich experience in administration. And among them brought upon the party, the country, the people.

Q: Let me clear a point, Mr. Deng. When you say the ideas of Chairman Mao do you mean what is known as "Mao Tse-tung Thought"?

A: Yes. You know, during the revolutionary war, when the party was still in Yanan, we put all the ideas and the principles advocated by Mao Tse-tung together, we defined them as "Mao Tse-tung Thought," and we considered it as the thinking which would guide the party from then on. But of course Mao Tse-tung Thought was not created by Mao Tse-tung alone. Though the most of the ideas were his, other veteran revolutionaries contributed to the formation and development of the thought. To mention a few names only, Chou En-lai and Liu Shaoqi and Chu Teh.

Q: Don't you mention yourself?

A: I don't count, yet it's obvious that I made my part too. I wouldn't be a veteran, an old revolutionary, otherwise. (He laughs.) But going back to what I said, in the last part of his life Chairman Mao contradicted himself and the good principles he had formulated. Unhealthy thinking emerged, both by his actions and his style of work. The unhealthiest thinking of all, his ultra-leftist ideas. Well, maybe victory had made him less prudent, or maybe he had lost contact with reality. You see, because of his great contribution to the revolution, he enjoyed a tremendous prestige among the Chinese people and so he received many praises. Too many. He thus failed to institutionalize the very good principles he had set up for years, such as democratic centralism and the mass line, and this was one his shortcomings, though other revolutionaries had their part of responsibility in it. I myself included. A patriarchal behavior began to develop in him. And the life of the party, the life of the country, ceased to be normal.

Q: Yes, but since you call them mistakes, Mr. Deng, shouldn't you admit that the mistakes began almost at once, that, for instance, the Great Leap Forward was a mistake?

A: (He smiles.) Then it's imperative for me to make a clear distinction between the nature of Chairman Mao's mistakes and the crimes committed by Lin Piao and the Gang of Four. I must remind you that Chairman Mao devoted most of his life to China and saved the party and the revolution in the most critical moments. In other words, he gave such a contribution that, without him, the Chinese would have spent much more time in groping their way in the darkness. Then let's not forget that it was Chairman Mao who combined the principles of Marxism and Leninism with the realities of China, it was Chairman Mao who creatively applied those principles not only to politics but also to philosophy, art, literature, military affairs. Yes, until the Sixties, or to be exact before the later part of the Fifties, some ideas of Chairman Mao were very correct, and many of the principles through which we achieved victory. Then, unfortunately, in the last part of his life, he committed mistakes. Particularly the Cultural Revolution mistake. And as a result many misfortunes were
there was Liu Shaoqi, soon arrested and expelled from the party. As a result, all the revolutionaries had not been decimated. Chairman Mao himself acknowledged it one year or two before dying. It was when he said that the Cultural Revolution had been wrong for two things: because it had decimated the revolutionary cadres and because it had waged an all-round civil war.

Q: So it really was a civil war.

At: What else? People were divided in two factions that massacred each other. And since the old revolutionaries had been knocked down, only those who claimed to be "rebels" ran rampant. Such as Liu Piao and the members of the Gang of Four. Oh, so many people died in that war!

Q: How many?

At: It is hard to estimate because they died of all kinds of causes. Besides, China is such a vast country. But listen: So many died that, even if other times had not taken place during it, the number of the dead would be enough to say that the Cultural Revolution was the wrong thing to do. Now, to return to the question you raised in the beginning and the distinction I made, I will conclude with saying that Chairman Mao's errors were political errors. This does not diminish them, true, even less does it justify them, but it is one thing to speak about political errors and another thing to speak about crimes like the crimes of Lin Piao or the Gang. Yes, of course it was Chairman Mao who permitted Lin Piao and the Gang of Four to exploit his political errors to usurp the power, but ... 

Q: Here is the point, Mr. Deng. In fact, I understand very well that you leaders of the new China are living a terrible drama: reshuffling and possibly cancelling Mao's myth without destroying it, throwing away all while throwing away the least you can. In other words, the dilemma of defining the past to accept and the past to negate. But unless you rewrite history, burning the libraries, how will you do it? Wasn't Mao's wife the One who led the Gang? Wasn't it Mao himself who chose Lin Piao as his successor and invested him as an emperor invests the heir to the throne? Moreover, would you call it another "mistake"?

At: I call it a mistake and I put it among the other mistakes. We shall certainly affirm his merits and say that they outweigh the mistakes. Yet he, too, was already very ill and unable to meet any demands. He only saw the people belonging to the Gang of Four. He said that my mistakes were only 30 percent, my merits 70 percent. And I, of course, acknowledged his errors and assess that they are secondary, and while making them decide for the congress?

Q: In conclusion, the next congress of the Chinese Communist Party will not end as the 20th congress of the Soviet Communist Party, where Khrushchev denounced Stalin. Am I wrong?

At: We shall certainly affirm Mr. Mao's merits and mistakes which characterised his life. We shall certainly affirm his merits and say that they outweigh the mistakes. Primarily, it is the responsibility of leadership for personal errors and assess that they are secondary, while making them decide for the congress?

Q: But in addition to the congress there will be the trial of Lin Piao and the Gang of Four, so ... Because the trial will take place, right?

A: For sure. We are preparing it, and it should take place at the end of the year.

Q: I asked because it is more than three years since you announced the trial and you haven't yet held it.

A: We'll hold it. I promise you that we'll hold it. All this time has been necessary to prepare it: Their crimes are so numerous. And now we act in the socialist legality.

Q: And the Four are alive, right? Chiang Ching is alive, right?

A: She eats, very much. She sleeps, in jail of course. And this shows that she is alive. They are all alive.

Q: Good. And since they are alive, she is alive, she will talk. They will talk. And they will mention Mao, they will say many things about Mao. What if their trial ends with a moral condemnation of Mao, I mean a verdict very different from the discharge you have already decided for the congress?

A: I promise you that the trial of the Gang of Four will not soil Chairman Mao's memory at all. Of course it will help to demonstrate some of his responsibilities, for instance that he used the Gang of Four, but nothing more. The crimes committed by them are so many and so evident that we do not need to implicate Chairman Mao to prove them.

Q: I'm really surprised, Mr. Deng. Because on one side you accuse him, on the other side you defend him. You defend him even when you accuse him, yet twice you were deposed with Mao's approval.

A: Not twice, three times. And not with Chairman Mao's approval. (He laughs.) Yes, I had three deaths and three resurrections. Do you know the name of Wang Min, the one who led the Chinese Communist Party and its ultra-leftist faction in 1937? Well, my first fall took place in 1932, thanks to Wang Min. He accused me of raising against him the group of Mao Tse-tung and knocked me down. I had to wait three years before being resurrected on 1935, during the Long March, at the Zuen Yi congress of the party. In fact, at Zuen Yi the ultra-leftist opportunist, Wang Min was defeated, and I was reinstated at the post of secretary general of the party. The second fall, it's known, took place at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution when I tried to still was secretary general and a member of the standing committee of the central committee as well as vice premier. Well, this time, too, Chairman Mao tried to protect me. Without success, though, because Lin Piao and the Gang of Four hated me too much. Not as much as they hated Liu Shaoqi, yet enough to send me to Jiang Xi Province to do manual work. And when, in 1973, Chairman Mao called me back to Peking ... 

Q: Mao or Chou En-lai?

At: Chairman Mao. Some believe that I was called back by Premier Chou En-lai. I know, but it wasn't Chou En-lai: it was Chairman Mao. Chou En-lai was seriously ill at that time, and as the government depended almost exclusively on him, Chairman Mao called me back and put me back in government as vice premier. He said that my mistakes were only 30 percent, my merits 70 percent, and he corrected me with 70 percent. Yet he, too, was already very ill and unable to meet anybody of the political bureau. He only saw the people around him. That is, the people belonging to the Gang of Four. As for the third fall, it took place in April 1976 — three months after the death of Chou En-lai and five months before the death of Chairman Mao. Then, in October, the Gang of Four was arrested, and one shouldn't marvel at my third resurrection.

Q: I marvel, instead: Three times! Deng, what's the secret to dying and being resurrected three times?

A: (He laughs, very happily.) No secret. At a certain moment they thought that I could be useful again and they took me off the grave. That's all.

Q: But during these purges weren't you afraid to be killed?

A: Of course. All through the Cultural Revolution, Lin Piao and the Gang of Four wanted to murder me. They didn't do it because Chairman Mao protected me even when I was sent to Jiang Xi Province to do manual work. Chairman Mao had something over my secretary, Foreign friends often ask me how it was possible for me (See DENG, Pg. 11-F)
Q: Well, I always heard that he could not stand you, that he always complained about you. “He is deaf but he sits far from me, as far as he can.” “He treats me as if I were dead, he never asks my advice.” “He doesn’t care to know what I think, he acts his own way.”

A: It’s true, though he didn’t say those things for me only. He always complained with everybody because, he protested, they didn’t listen to him or they did not consider him, they did not inform him. Well, it was not true for the others, it was true for me. And I did that because I did not like his patriarchal behavior. He acted as a patriarch. He never wanted to know the ideas of the others, no matter how right they could be, he never wanted to hear opinions different from his. He really behaved in an unhealthy, feudal way. If you don’t understand this, you cannot understand why there was the Cultural Revolution.

Q: The things I don’t understand are many, Mr. Deng. To begin with, the case of Chou En-lai. How do you explain that he was the only one they did not knock down during the Cultural Revolution? How do you explain that, well, being the noble person we know, he never tried to stop the infamies which happened under his reign, for instance the shameful arrest of Liu Shaoqi?

A: Let’s begin with saying what kind of man Chou En-lai was. A man who worked very hard and never complained. Listen, there were days when he worked even 12 or 16 hours out of 24. I can tell you because I knew him since France where we were together and I regarded him as my elder brother. We joined the revolution almost at the same time. Chou En-lai was much respected by all, friends and enemies, people and comrades, and this partially explains why he wasn’t wiped out by the Cultural Revolution, why he always remained at his post of premier: something which was a great fortune for many. It also explains why he could exercise his influence as moderator and act as a pillow cushion which softens the blows. Many losses could be avoided thanks to Chou En-lai, many people could be spared thanks to his role. But, in those years, he found himself in the most difficult position. And he often said things that he would have wished to have not said. This is in spite of the fact that people forgave him all. For instance, when Liu Shaoqi was expelled from the party and jailed, it was Premier Chou En-lai who read the report of Liu’s so-called crimes.

Q: Chou En-lai did that?!

A: Yes. Of course the report had been written by others. But it was Chou En-lai who read it. He hated it. He could not avoid it.

Q: Awful. Sad. Awful. It shows, once again, that revolutions do not change men and that, after a revolution, the same horrors take place as before. As a proverb says in my country: “Everything changes and remains as before.”

A: Well... I can only answer that we may prevent or try to prevent such things by establishing an effective new system. You see, a while ago I mentioned the word “feudal.” Well, some systems of our recent past have just the stigmas of feudalism: the worship of the individual, the patriarchal way of running things, the lifelong tenure for the officials. China is a country with a history of a thousand years of feudalism, and because of this our revolution has been suffering a lack of socialist democracy, of socialist legality. Now we are trying to correct all that, to finally establish a real socialist democracy, a real socialist legality and... Listen, there is no other way to avoid in the future what happened to Liu Shaoqi.

Q: My birthday? Is my birthday tomorrow?“"Yes, Mr. Deng, I read it in your biography.”

Q: Well, if you say so. I never knew when my birthday is. If tomorrow is my birthday, though, you shouldn’t congratulate: it means I am 76, and 76 is a decadent age.

Q: "Mr. Deng, my father is 76, and if I say to my father that 76 is a decadent age, he slaps me.”

"And he does well! You wouldn’t tell your father such a thing, would you?"

The second one was when I saw him again. On Thursday we had had a little fight over Stalin because of the remark I had made about the gigantic portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin standing in Tienanmen Square, and on Saturday morning, passing there before going to complete my interview, I had discovered that the portraits had been taken down.

Q: "Mr. Deng! Stalin isn’t there anymore! Nor Marx, nor Engels, nor Lenin! Mr. Deng, isn’t it my fault, isn’t it? You didn’t take them out because of me, did you?"

"No, no, not quite. We are simply returning to the old practice, as I told you before yesterday. When necessary, we’ll put them back.”

“Pity! I was so happy. I liked so much the idea of boasting that I had been able to take Stalin off Tienanmen Square!”

"I know it, I know it. I understood it, I understood. But I shall not give you such satisfaction.”

Yet I give it to myself.— Oriana Fallaci

Q: Well, it seems to me that also the Chiang Ching story is a feudal story. One reason why nobody dared to oppose Chiang Ching, isn’t it that Chiang Ching was the wife of Mao? A: Yes. One of the reasons was that.

Q: So, was Mao so blinded by her, so dominated by her?

A: Listen, when I say that Chairman Mao made mistakes, I also think of the mistake named Chiang Ching. She is a very, very evil woman. She is so evil that any evil thing you say about her isn’t evil enough, and if you answer that this is impossible, there are no grades for evil, isn’t it? Chiang Ching, that Chiang Ching is a thousand times a thousand times a thousand thousand times a thousand times more evil than anyone else.

Q: And to arrest her, to arrest the other three, it was necessary to await the death of Mao. A: Yes.

Q: Mr. Deng, who engineered that arrest? I mean, in what sense or until what point were you responsible for that arrest in spite of the fact that you were not in power?“"
the old standby, .45-caliber and .38-caliber pistols. The studies will be evaluated next month.

To pick a standard handgun after about two years of use, as first, the words "Gang of Four." He had also chosen his successor in Hua Guofeng, and this to avoid that Chiang Ching and the others would become hit successors. And all things had a great part in the decision to arrest the Gang. A decision which wasn't easy already tried to overthrow the new leadership led by Hua Guofeng.

Q: Then I must put to you an embarrassing question, Mr. Deng. So please forgive me. If things were as you said, how come that on Sept. 18, 1976, while pronouncing his speech at the funeral of Mao, Premier Hua Guofeng said these words: "The great Cultural Revolution that Chairman Mao himself had wanted and guided has witnessed the restoration of the spirit of China." Mr. Deng, you must not agree in changing things. Now it is there and it is not appropriate to take it off. Regarding the mausoleum I can tell you that I do not agree in changing things. Now it is there and it is not appropriate to build it, it would not be appropriate to take it off. 'Should we demolish it, many people would be hurt and there would be a lot of rumors. Yes, many people are speculating on the subject, but we don't have such ideas."

Q: Mr. Deng, of course you understood why, a while ago, some embarrassing question to you. Many think that there are differences between you and Hua Guofeng. Do differences exist or no?

A: The decision was taken collectively and knowing. This was against the will of Chairman Mao himself. In the Fifties Chairman Mao had said that at their death, all the leading comrades in China should be cremated and only their ashes maintained. No graveyards would participate in the decision to arrest the Gang of Four? Also true, though, that some of the things done before that time were not consistent with the will of Chairman Mao.

Q: For instance?

A: For instance, the Chairman Mao Memorial Building. This was against the will of Chairman Mao himself. In the Fifties Chairman Mao had said that at their death, all the leading comrades in China should be cremated and only their ashes maintained. The words of comrades Hua Guofeng were dictated by the preoccupation of maintaining stability. After all, wasn't Hua Guofeng one of the leaders who a month later would participate in the decision to arrest the Gang of Four? Also true, though, that some of the things done before that time were not consistent with the will of Chairman Mao.

Q: Does it mean that the mausoleum will be demolished?

A: Regarding the mausoleum I can tell you that I do not agree in changing things. Now it is there and it is not appropriate to take it off. 'Should we demolish it, many people would be hurt and there would be a lot of rumors. Yes, many people are speculating on the subject, but we don’t have such an idea."

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