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Rosalie Looijaard

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*The Difference Between Life and Death: Intellectual Appeasement and Ideological Remolding of
Philosophers in Mao-era China*

Rosalie A. Looijaard

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Dr. Elizabeth Lawrence

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Abstract

The Proletarian Cultural Revolution marked the near destruction of Chinese tradition and put intellectuals in China in danger – Chairman Mao Zedong stopped at nothing to ensure anything and anyone that opposed his politics would either be assimilated or removed. Some intellectuals chose to appease him – out of fear or naivete, while others stood firm in their beliefs. This paper examines the similarities and differences between the lives and fates of two philosophers during the rise and fall of Mao Zedong - Feng Youlan and Zhang Dongsun. Both philosophers were amiable towards socialism, even before Mao rose to power. After 1949, Feng took the steps to further assimilate towards communism, while Zhang tried to reconcile socialism and capitalism. Feng faithfully engaged in Mao's plans for thought reform, writing self-criticisms and critiques of Confucianism to secure his own safety. Zhang was framed for espionage and failed to promote communism. This paper takes a closer look at the lives of both philosophers, examining their choices and circumstances to conclude why Feng survived the Cultural Revolution while Zhang passed away in prison.

Introduction

When Mao Zedong rose to power with the establishment of the PRC in 1949, many prominent Chinese intellectuals sought to appease him out of necessity and for the sake of their own safety. Two of these figures were Feng Youlan (1895-1990) and Zhang Dongsun (1886 - 1973), both Chinese philosophers who up until 1949 had been critical of communism. Feng pledged to amend his views to Marxism when Mao took power, and Zhang conceded that Mao's "New Democracy" may after all be compatible with his own ideas regarding socialism. Feng had correspondence with many officials from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), while Zhang was appointed to prominent political offices by Mao himself. Despite this, Zhang was ultimately censored and persecuted by the communist government to a much greater extent than Feng ever was. Zhang would eventually pass away in confinement during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), while Feng outlived the revolution and died of old age. This paper explores why Feng and Zhang ultimately met such different fates, despite their upbringing, education, and initial political views being relatively similar. This paper argues that because Zhang occupied much more public and political spotlight during his time, he ultimately faced far greater persecution than Feng, who completely devoted himself to appeasing Maoism and primarily reserved himself to writing on largely non-political matters, such as the history of Chinese philosophy. On this basis, this paper will conclude that the contrast between the fates of these two philosophers is indicative of how and why Mao chose to deem certain dissenting voices more dangerous than others. A quick overview of both philosophers will first be given, followed by a deeper analysis and comparison of their circumstances leading up to and during the Cultural Revolution.

Feng Youlan

Feng was born in 1895 to a relatively well-off family of landlords. In the academic world, he was especially well known for his normative theories and his prolific work *A History of Chinese Philosophy* with which he aimed to put Chinese philosophy on equal footing with Western philosophy. Prior to Mao's rise to power, Feng received his Ph.D. in the United States where he studied with John Dewey, and held prestigious university positions. He had amiable views towards socialism, but was critical of communism. In 1934 he spoke positively on the merits of socialism in Poland and the Soviet Union, and was subsequently arrested by the nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek's Beiping Police.¹ In his auto-biography, he states that the Soviet Union “was neither a hell on earth nor a paradise,”² indicating his nuanced view of communism. In 1945 he became representative-elect from Henan Province, and he met several times with Chiang Kai-shek, who respected his nuance and intellect.³

When Mao took power in 1949, prominent CCP official Zhou Enlai contacted Feng to ask his opinions on “how to ... remedy shortcomings in national politics,” to which Feng responded he had no opinions.⁴ Like many other Chinese intellectuals who held favorable views of socialism, he was somewhat optimistic about China's future under the CCP.⁵ Despite his prior criticisms of Confucius and his pledge to further amend his views to Marxism, he was still criticized under Mao's regime.⁶ As he had not completely converted to Marxist philosophy to Mao's standards, he was a prime target of suppression in the CCP.⁷ Not only his political ideas, but his metaphysical and philosophical ideas that supported traditional Chinese philosophy were

¹ Lin, Xiaoqing Diana. *Feng Youlan and Twentieth Century China: an Intellectual Biography*. (Brill, 2016) 2.

² Feng, Youlan. *The Hall of Three Pines: An Account of My Life*. (University of Hawai'i Press, 2000) 96.

³ Lin, *Feng Youlan*, 3.

⁴ Feng, 139.

⁵ Wang, Ning. *Bowing to Chairman Mao: Western-Trained Intellectuals and the State in the Early PRC*. (Journal of Contemporary China, 2018).

⁶ Lin, *Feng Youlan*, 3.

⁷ Chan, Wing-Tsit. *Chinese Philosophy in Communist China*. (Philosophy East and West, 1961) 117.

under scrutiny.⁸ As such, he amended *A History of Chinese Philosophy* to support Maoist conceptions of Chinese philosophy. Feng initiated this process - in 1949, he wrote a letter to Mao stating that he was determined to reform his thinking and study Marxism.⁹

During the Cultural Revolution, Feng was initially denounced and criticized as he had not made enough progress in reforming. However, this only served to make him even more determined to appease Mao, and he wrote articles in support of the campaign against Confucianism. These critiques would become more radical as time went on. This kept him safe during the Cultural Revolution, but he was promptly put under house arrest and made to write more self-criticisms after the death of Mao.¹⁰ He regained his political freedom after 1980 and began work on *A New History of Chinese Philosophy*. He passed away shortly after the last volume of his lifework was turned in. In the final version of this work, he devoted several sections to criticizing Mao despite half a life-time of working to appease him.¹¹

⁸ Chan, *Chinese Philosophy*, 119-120.

⁹ Feng, *The Hall*, 159.

¹⁰ Lin, *Feng Youlan*, 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 159.

Zhang Dongsun

Zhang was born in 1886, and was educated in the Confucian classics from a young age. After studying Buddhism in Japan, he was initially a journalist and a politician, before becoming a professor of philosophy in the 1920s. Before Mao's rise to power, Zhang was a leading member of the Democratic League, a more centrist party that neither agreed with the Nationalists nor the Communists. Zhang disliked communism, as well as traditional Chinese values; he was overall a moderate.

In the 1920s, Zhang had outright refused to convert to Marxism, and publicly wrote in opposition to ideas of class struggle, remaining a proponent of social harmony models of socialism while simultaneously advocating for industrialization.¹² He went on to promote capitalist ideas of labor and industrialization as a viable solution to poverty, which drew criticism from Marxists. This, combined with his opposition to class struggle, would later come back to haunt him. Up until 1949, Zhang vocally believed that production and capitalism were a necessary evil – the answer to China's poverty in combination with the equalities of a socialist state. Politically and philosophically, he thus advocated for a fusion of socialism, capitalism, and democracy for China.

When Mao took power in 1949, Zhang was optimistic, believing that Mao's ideas of "New Democracy" were compatible with his own ideas.¹³ Mao liked Zhang's initial somewhat pro-communist stance, and as a result he gave Zhang political posts and offices.¹⁴ However, only two years later he was censored by the party and removed from his university position.¹⁵ In 1952,

¹² Fung, Edmund S.K.. *Socialism, Capitalism, and Democracy in Republican China: The Political Thought of Zhang Dongsun*. (Modern China 2002), 425

¹³ Fung, *Socialism, Capitalism, and Democracy*, 405.

¹⁴ Fung, *Socialism, Capitalism, and Democracy*, 401.

¹⁵ Yap, Key-chong "Zhang Dongsun" in Antonio S. Cua, ed., *Encyclopedia of Chinese Philosophy*, (Routledge, 2001), 857.

he was accused of spying for the United States government and put in confinement.¹⁶ During this time, he was also scrutinized by Mao for arguing against his foreign policy. However, Mao later reprieved Zhang.¹⁷

During the Cultural Revolution, Zhang was once again put under confinement for five years, for the same prior accusation of spying for the United States. He passed away in 1973 while still in confinement.¹⁸

¹⁶ Fung, *Socialism, Capitalism, and Democracy*, 401.

¹⁷ Yap, *Zhang Dongsun*, 857.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Feng's Appeasement, Zhang's Opposition

During the Cultural Revolution, many intellectuals were targeted, suppressed, confined, and even murdered. Feng's obituary identifies him as a rightist and counter-revolutionary - referring to the beginning of the Cultural Revolution before Feng took his appeasement further - yet focuses mainly on his academic achievements.¹⁹ It is thus apparent that Feng was primarily known as an academic, while Zhang, who occupied more public and political offices, was primarily known as a public figure, and thus a tangible threat to Mao.

Feng, rather than occupying himself with politics, withdrew himself from the political spotlight and focused on appeasing Mao by undertaking the task of rewriting *A History of Chinese Philosophy* to support Maoist views. In his autobiography, he does not outright state whether he was genuine in his letter to Mao detailing his determination to change, but he does state that he lacked humility and sought popularity.²⁰ At the start of the Cultural Revolution, Feng was quickly denounced on the basis that he had failed to truly reform into an “intellectual of the proletariat.”²¹ However, whilst struck by an illness, Feng made the choice to even further appease Mao. When criticism shifted to Confucian ideals, Feng recounts how he thought the following: “Why do I have to stand in opposition to the masses? I should trust in the Party and in the masses. If I were to go along with the masses in criticizing Confucius ... then I would not have any problems, would I?”²² Following this, he wrote two articles critical of Confucius to further appease Mao and guarantee his own safety.

Feng had always been critical of Confucius' philosophical ideas, but also credits Confucius as the father of Chinese philosophy. Feng thus found himself in an intellectual conflict

¹⁹ "Scholar Feng, 94, Dies." *South China Morning Post* (1946-), 1990.

²⁰ Feng, *The Hall*, 160.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 171

²² *Ibid.*, 189

during the Campaign against Confucius – this is visible even in his final critiques of Confucius, where he holds firm that Confucius established the first school of thought in China.²³ He succeeded in appeasing Mao by downplaying the significance of Confucius' ideas, and criticizing the way that Confucius' thought upheld unjust capitalist class hierarchies.²⁴ Much of Feng's initial critiques of Confucius ended up appropriating the historical context of the philosopher to argue that he represented the views of the landlord class, but lacked outright rejection of his philosophical ideas. However, in the 1970s, when the Cultural Revolution was reaching its height and end, Feng radicalized his critiques even more. He began using Confucius' full name, Kong Qiu, a less respectful way to address the philosopher, and denounced the way in his philosophy upheld traditional systems of filial piety and politics.²⁵ Feng had now become actively involved in Mao's quest to eradicate traditional Chinese values through the Cultural Revolution.

Feng admits that he had trust in Mao, and kept thinking that Mao and the Party must have been "more correct" than he was, but reflects that this thinking was not "sincere self-expression" on his part, stating that he was "using sensationalism to win popularity."²⁶ This shows how Feng was at least somewhat indoctrinated by Mao, partially because he wanted to remain a prominent intellectual, and partially because he sought to protect his own life in the face of turmoil and illness.

Feng also had a history of being more open towards communism than Zhang. While he initially preferred socialism over communism, after Mao took power Feng quickly convinced himself that communism may be compatible with his own political opinions and values. Zhang

²³ Lin, *Feng Youlan*, 138.

²⁴ Ibid., 132-137.

²⁵ Lin, *Feng Youlan*, 153.

²⁶ Feng, *The Hall*, 192; 200.

was similarly supportive of socialism, but did not make the same jump towards communism that Feng did. Zhang also never made any critiques against the class system that went as far as Feng's later critiques of Confucius.

Zhang also had a much longer history of publicly voicing his opinions on socialism, dating all the way back to an editorial he wrote as a journalist in 1919 where he positively characterizes socialism as a sort of brotherhood, but denounces the idea of a forceful social revolution.²⁷ Zhang also kept a somewhat favorable view of Confucianism, even as the Cultural Revolution and its campaign against Confucianism waged through the country. An arrest order of communist leaders accused of treason dating from 1949 lists Zhang Dongsun as having committed crimes "engaged in rebellion and aiding the rebels" in his position as a leading member of the Democratic League.²⁸ This shows how the CCP sought to control Zhang from the very beginning of Mao's regime, using his accusation of spying as reason to persecute him time and time again. With this accusation following him, Zhang had little to no opportunity to even begin to appease Mao - even if he were to be truly devoted to the cause of intellectual reform as Feng appeared to be at various points in his life.

It is also important to note that Zhang viewed socialism more as a moral code and worldview rather than a socioeconomic system – he even explicitly stated that existing institutions should not be outright destroyed.²⁹ This view would prove to be inherently incompatible with Mao's call for a violent class struggle and economic restructuring.

²⁷ "China and Socialism: A Chinese Editor's Views." *The Shanghai Times (1914-1921)*, 1919.

²⁸ "Arrest Ordered: Former Kuomintang Officials Lefist Leaders Chengtu, Dec. 8." *South China Morning Post (1946-)*, 1949.

²⁹ Fung, *Socialism, Capitalism*, 404.

Contextualizing the Plight of Intellectuals Under Mao

Both Feng and Zhang were a part of a post-May Fourth Movement generation of intellectuals that were profoundly shaped by the political turmoil happening in twentieth century China. As such, it is important to evaluate their circumstances within the context in which they lived. Traditionally, intellectuals in China held a sort of "unwritten power to criticize and supervise the bureaucrats."³⁰ For Mao, intellectuals such as Feng and Zhang were a force to be controlled. Under Mao, one of the goals of Chinese communism was to degrade the status of intellectuals and subject them to persecution in the name of reform.³¹ They too, were a part of the bourgeois elite that needed to either be torn down or assimilated.

Mao verbally degraded the intellectuals at multiple points, accusing them of being unable to do anything that contributes to society, such as tilling the land, engaging in labor, fighting, or doing business.³² So, as part of his campaign of "thought reform" that he began in 1951, Mao stated the following: "The first thing in ideological remolding is the ideological remolding of all kinds of intellectuals; it is one of the major conditions for our country's thorough realization of democracy in all spheres and for gradual industrialization."³³ To realize this goal, Mao had intellectuals take the following steps: study Marxism, participate in social activities and class struggle, write confessions of self-criticism, and critique bourgeois idealism.³⁴ Philosophers in particular were made to take similar steps, beginning by confessing their mistakes, followed by studying Marxism, and concluded by correcting their views.³⁵ As evident from prior analysis, Feng, blinded by his trust in Mao, faithfully followed these steps by writing a self-criticism,³⁶

³⁰ Kuo, Warren. *Oppression and Persecution in Communist China*. (Issues & Studies, 1977), 14.

³¹ Ibid., 14.

³² Ibid., 15

³³ Kuo, *Oppression and Persecution*, 16.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Chan, *Chinese Philosophy*, 116.

³⁶ Kuo, *Oppression and Persecution*, 16.

studying Marxism closely, and rewriting his work on the history of Chinese philosophy to align with Maoism. However, Zhang refused to conform in this same manner and continued to voice his criticisms of Mao, which eventually led to his death.

Many intellectuals met fates similar to Zhang. Jian Bozan, a historian at Peking University, believed in communism and was ready to embrace Marxist praxis, but due to his firm belief in historicism, could not follow through on communist class analysis. As a result, he was denounced and subsequently committed suicide.³⁷ Cases such as that of Jian showcase the thin line that intellectuals had to walk – they needed to commit fully to ideological remolding, or they would be denounced, if not worse.

Central to convictions of the Chinese communists was the idea that violence is necessary to solve social issues.³⁸ Contrary to this, Zhang advocated for a non-violent, gradual socialist democracy wherein social conflict is resolved through the democratic process.³⁹ This indicates that Zhang's beliefs were thus fundamentally incompatible with Mao's, while Feng had the opportunity to continually adjust and radicalize his beliefs in his determination to appease Mao.

³⁷ Lin, *Feng Youlan*, 127.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

³⁹ Fung, *Socialism, Capitalism, and Democracy*, 426.

Appeasement, Indoctrination, or Naivete?

A continuing debate can be held over whether Zhang Dongsun genuinely believed that his version of democracy was compatible with Mao's, and whether Feng Youlan ever truly believed in the mission of the CCP, or in communism itself. Political Scientist Ning Wang argues that while some may have acted out of self-perseverance, many Western-trained intellectuals "truly bought into the logic and norms the Party preached."⁴⁰ The time leading up to the Cultural Revolution was also marked by intellectual and spiritual overhaul for many of these academics. This seems to align with Feng's self-described inner turmoil, where he continuously swings between doubting his own intellect, trusting the potential of communism, and chasing popularity. His appeasement of the party cannot be simplified to just one of these factors.

Historian Xiaoqing Diana Lin argues that the example of Feng serves to illustrate the way that both Chinese leaders and academics attempted to synthesize Marxism and traditional Chinese values. This sort of synthesis is almost completely missing in today's mainland China, as Confucianism is seen as antithetical to Marxism.⁴¹ Zhang attempted a similar synthesis, taking it one step further by adding capitalism to the equation – this directly opposed Mao's ideology.

Scholar of Chinese History Edmund Fung points out that Zhang's downfall was in part due to his naive and mistaken belief that his conception of democracy was similar to that of Mao.⁴² This points to a struggle that both Feng and Zhang went through – the mistaken belief that their reasonable stances on socialism can be reconciled with the increasingly violent and radical communist revolution that Mao sought to invoke. While this mistaken belief led to Zhang's death, it also led to Feng's spiritual and intellectual conflicts both during and after the Cultural Revolution.

⁴⁰ Wang, *Bowing to Chairman*, 325.

⁴¹ Lin, *Feng Youlan*, 191.

⁴² Fung, *Political Thought*, 425.

Conclusion

It can be argued that under the CCP, Chinese philosophy was reduced to Maoism.⁴³ This becomes evident when one examines cases such as that of Feng and Zhang. Feng largely assimilated his Chinese philosophy to Maoism. Zhang, who refused to do so, faced much greater suppression, thus silencing the voices of Chinese philosophers who refused to let their theories be reduced to Maoism. Zhang's downfall may in part also have been due to his naivete in assuming that Mao's ideas of democracy were compatible with his own. Feng, on the other hand, was so wholly committed to his own intellectual reform that it safeguarded him all the way through the Cultural Revolution. Some may describe Feng as completely indoctrinated by Mao, yet Feng himself states the following: "I cannot claim that my mistaken adherence to the leftist road was always due to the deceptions of others."⁴⁴ Feng initially blindly trusted Mao, and was further incentivized to reform to guarantee his own safety. Zhang, on the other hand, had a long history of public political opinions, which rendered him unable to fully dedicate himself to reform from the very beginning - he was bound to be haunted by his accusation of espionage and he was bound to be scrutinized for his past public opinions regardless of the path he chose. Ultimately, these comparisons between Feng and Zhang show us how Mao sought to either suppress or assimilate Chinese philosophy to his own benefit.

⁴³ Chan, *Chinese Philosophy*,

⁴⁴ Feng, *The Hall*, 200.

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