

Politics and Ideology

Meetings with Kang Sheng 1966-68

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For the information of Marxist-Leninists internationally

'Kang Sheng', who was he? many might ask, with justice. Though a long time Party leader and close associate of Mao Tse-tung's he is not well-known in the West. In the days when author Han Suyin* supported Mao she called Kang Sheng an 'old and stalwart Party member'. (The Wind in the Tower, p 53). Also, she adds this footnote on the same page: 'A prestigious member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China since 1924, he took an active role in the Sino-Soviet dispute. His integrity and ideological correctness were never questioned, not even during the Cultural Revolution, when so many high officials were criticised.'

The author of this article first came to know of Kang Sheng when preparations were under way for a National Conference of the Communist Party of New Zealand. The author was at the time (and later) a member of the two leading New Zealand Party bodies, the National and the Political Committees.

The Conference was regarded as important internationally because there was still an ideological struggle in progress between the views of Mao and the Communist Party of China (CPC) and those of Khrushchev of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and with that, an inter-party struggle for support. It was anticipated that a decision on line would be made at this Conference and therefore those Communist Parties invited to send fraternal delegations selected them with some care.

Shortly after the Chinese delegation arrived, their interpreter Tang Ming-Jao, told us that the delegation's composition was considered at the highest level, which included Chairman Mao. Tang himself, an American Chinese completely fluent in both languages (he later became editor of the Peking Magazine *China Reconstructs*) informed us that initially Kang Sheng was first choice, but Mao disagreed on the grounds that it would be quite unsafe for him to travel to New Zealand by the usual route through Hong Kong. The reason was that he was very

well-known to Kuomintang agents who would do their best to assassinate him. At that time Hong Kong was awash with such people.

On checking by Mao, it was found that a previous delegation on a friendly visit to the CPNZ had been admitted to the country with no problems. For that reason its leader was chosen to lead this 1963 delegation. He was the then President of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, Liu Ning-i.

Thus, I did not get to meet Kang Sheng then, though I got to know something of him. Later I discovered he had been in a number of important Chinese Party delegations, including that which represented the CPC at the 81-Party Conference of November, 1960. I attended only the final session of that Conference, though I was able to read all the relevant documents expressing the opinions of both China and the Soviet Union, and was kept informed throughout by other delegates, including the General Secretary of the CPNZ V.G. Wilcox.

At a closed session of the CPNZ 1963 Conference it was decided that we give full support to Mao and the CPC. It was also decided we send a delegation to the CPSU strongly criticising their ideological position. This was done soon after.

My first actual encounter with Kang Sheng was at the 5th Congress of the Party of Labour of Albania (PLA) in 1966. He was leading a sizeable fraternal delegation from the CPC. I was leader of a CPNZ delegation of two. While our fundamental stand on Marxism-Leninism was correct, there were some aspects on which our Party was not well-informed, and others which the CPNZ leadership had not discussed and on which we lacked a defined Party position. We were not well-informed on the up-to-date state of international Party relations and we had not properly discussed or decided any stand on the need for a new Communist International.

For us, it was most important that we discussed our views first of all with the CPC delegation, so we arranged a meeting between us.

Of course, Kang Sheng was well-informed on our Party position. As it was not clear to us where the Korean Workers' party stood at that time, I began by asking Kang if their delegation was going to hold a discussion with the Korean representatives. Kang's reply was short and sharp, and surprised me somewhat. It was, in effect, 'Why should we talk to the Koreans? We have nothing to talk to them about'. This was one of the questions the CPNZ had little or no information on, namely, whether the fraternal relations between China and Korea which had subsisted earlier were still on the same basis. Kang's reply made it clear they were not. Only later, on a visit to Peking in January, 1968, did I get a more considered reply from Kang. In Albania, I concluded from Kang's remarks that Korea had changed its position to one of support

for the Soviet Union. Later in this article we get an account of what had happened. However, it was our basic stand that we stood with Marxism-Leninism, the CPC and Mao Tse-tung. If China was unfriendly to another Party, we felt we were aligned with the CPC even if not knowing all the facts.

I therefore did not pursue the subject of CPC-KWP relations further. Next I informed Kang there was a growing feeling – as far as we could judge – that in the circumstances of the time a new International was needed for overall guidance of the world movement. I said it would help unity. He replied: ‘We can’t even get unity amongst the Marxist-Leninists’. Again, he did not elaborate. What he said, however, gave me to think. Which Marxist-Leninists was he referring to? From his earlier remarks it seemed to me that the CPC no longer considered the Korean Party Marxist-Leninist. So who was he referring to? After a deal of thought I concluded he probably meant the Communist Party of Vietnam.

Although the question had not been properly discussed in the CPNZ, it was clear to me at the 81-Parties meeting in 1960 that Vietnam tended towards a centrist role. Along with the Communist Party of India, the Vietnamese at that meeting made strenuous efforts to bring the CPSU and the CPC together so as to avoid an open split. In other words, they sought to achieve a compromise between two opposing ideologies, Marxism-Leninism and revisionism. In my speech to the Congress I named no specific party but directed my attack against any centrist position. I declared that there was no middle-ground between Marxism-Leninism and revisionism. I have never since seen any reason to change that opinion.

Before the Congress started our delegation also held discussions with the Vietnamese Party delegation which was headed by a member of their Political Committee. In our discussion I stressed our Party’s staunch support for the Vietnamese Party and people in their struggle against the US imperialist alliance. We went as far as we could by informing the Vietnamese that parties adhering to revisionism would prove false friends. Of course, we were referring to the CPSU and its satellite parties.

The leader of the Vietnamese delegation said hardly anything. He was cold and distant. It was fairly evident that the Vietnamese Central Committee, while appearing to treat the CPC and the CPSU equally, strongly favoured the CPSU. This, of course, was borne out after the defeat of the US-led interventionists in 1975.

The above was the main burden of our delegation discussions at the PLA Congress in 1966.

I would have to add that Kang’s remarks stayed in my mind. From that time I dropped support for a new International. China had all along sought unity and comradely

relations with all fraternal parties – but not at the expense of basic Marxist-Leninist principles. That had been well proven to the CPNZ from its support to Korea against the imperialist invasion in 1951 and its selfless internationalist aid to Albania against the attacks on the PLA by Khrushchev and Co. and to countries of the third world in their struggle against US imperialism.

It was also shown by their restraint in polemics with parties that had been attacking the CPC, notably (but not only) with the CPSU. Their overall ideological position was clearly based on the principle of proletarian internationalism, given publicly in their document ‘A Proposal Concerning the General Line of the International Communist Movement’ and various polemical replies to revisionist attacks on the CPC by other parties. If now China considered any attempt to form a new International to be not in the interests of the world Marxist-Leninist movement, so be it. I therefore accepted the Chinese position as correct. Later that position became much clearer to me.

Two things on which I was not well-informed in 1966 were, firstly China’s own experience earlier with the Communist International (the CI), and secondly the inner-Party two-line struggle that had developed within China itself, as a result of which there was a good deal of turmoil in the opening period of the Cultural Revolution. The CPC experience of the CI had been extremely negative from the 1930s on, with erroneous CI policies being foisted on the CPC by the CI during the revolutionary civil war between the reactionary Kuomintang armies of Chiang Kai-shek and the forces of the People’s Liberation Army (the PLA) under the leadership of Mao. These policies included the backing of an ultra-left dogmatist group under Wang Ming and the appointment of a nominee of the CI to overall command of the PLA. The nominee had almost no military experience and no knowledge whatever of China, of the people or the language or the conditions within China itself, resulting in near-defeat for the PLA.

From this experience it was evident to the CPC that an international organisation with executive power over other parties was not in the interests of the world movement.**

My second meeting with Kang Sheng took place in Peking in January, 1968 during my return to New Zealand after attending a French Marxist-Leninist Party Congress. (That Party, incidentally, did not survive 1968).

Present with Kang Sheng at this meeting was Lin Tang, a Central Committee interpreter whom I had met a number of times previously, the first when he interpreted for CC member Chen Yu on the occasion of the first fraternal visit by a Chinese Party leader.

Kang Sheng began the meeting by outlining the position in regard to North Korea. While earlier the Korean Party led by Kim Il-Sung had leaned somewhat towards the Chinese position, after the fall of Khrushchev in 1964 the CPSU began an intensive drive to win the Korean Party to its side. Kang informed me that Brezhnev, the then CPSU leader, had flown to Pyongyang with a package of bribes. These included undertaking to give Korea substantial financial assistance, and offering a wide-ranging trade agreement on very favourable terms along with essential food and military supplies. Kim accepted, signed appropriate agreements and withdrew any support for China.

I remarked to Kang that this was Korea's expression of gratitude for the massive and selfless support given by China during the Korean war – or rather, invasion. Kang added that Mao's only son was killed in action in that war while fighting with the Chinese volunteers.

Although he did not say so at the time, in all probability Kang was explaining to me the reasons why he was short with me on the question of Korea at the Albanian Party Congress in 1966, at which time, like most other parties, the CPNZ knew nothing of Brezhnev's bribes.

Next, Kang turned to the Cultural Revolution. Although I had not raised the question of the role of the students in that movement, no doubt others had. Kang said that Mao considered that the students had a special role to play in the Chinese revolution. Historically they had shown themselves to be a significant revolutionary force, more so than in the West. This view was based on Chinese experience, particularly their leading part in the May 4th Movement of 1919. This was the reason why Mao had allotted such a leading role to them in the Cultural Revolution. Mao felt that in order to bar the way to a revisionist takeover in China it was necessary to educate China's youth in class and political struggle and that they would learn by doing; they were the upcoming generation, and in fighting against revisionism the student youth would be a key factor.

I was content to listen to this exposition, which certainly gave me a clearer picture of the emphasis being placed on the role of the students, although a number of aspects concerning the Cultural Revolution were still unclear to the CPNZ (as they were to most Communist parties). In later years I returned to this exposition as I tried to find my way through the thicket of problems besetting the world Communist Movement, in particular why socialism had been lost in China. The more I studied the Cultural Revolution the more convinced I became that Mao's elevation of the students to the leading role in practice was a major factor in the failure of the Party to achieve the political and ideological aims of the Cultural Revolution, and therefore one of the principal factors – if not *the* principal factor – in the loss of socialism in China. I had

no doubt at the time that Kang Sheng's report of Mao's view was entirely accurate, because he was a long-time supporter of Mao's and was also a member of the Party Secretariat of five overseeing the Cultural Revolution.

Kang said that Mao now felt that Stalin may have been right in regard to his repression of class enemies. After all, while theoretically it should be possible to remould landlords, in fact a landlord always remained a landlord at heart, with which view Lin Tang expressed full agreement.

Continuing his remarks, Kang said that Mao now felt that Lenin's definition of classes*was inadequate, and that it should be extended to include the political and psychological characteristics of classes. I took this to mean something similar to Stalin's reference to what constitutes the specific features of a nation, i.e. the last feature being a summation of the five features, 'expressed in a community of psychological makeup'.

I shelved this remark in my mind. I had always considered Lenin's definition of classes masterly, and despite Mao's reported view, saw no reason to alter it. This article is the first time I have mentioned it publicly. When I returned to New Zealand soon after the meeting with Kang I went to see Wilcox to report on it. However, I did not report the question of amending Lenin's definition. The simple reason was that I was aware that Wilcox was not too well grounded in theory, and I was sure he knew nothing of Lenin's definition of classes. My view is still that no amendment is needed.

Because the subject matter of my meetings with Kang Sheng made a deep impression upon me, and because they dealt with significant political and ideological questions I have set them down in this article for consideration by other Marxist-Leninists wherever they may be. In my pamphlet *What Went Wrong in Russia and China* I reported some of Mao's views on the Cultural Revolution. Otherwise most of this article is relatively new material to Marxist-Leninists. In studying the question of why socialism was lost in China I found Kang Sheng's views of no small importance. It must be said that, in assessing the situation as it developed during and after the ideological dispute with revisionism, I reached the conclusion that Mao made some serious errors. Probably whatever the policies he followed Mao may not have been able to stop a revisionist victory in China, matters had evidently gone too far for that. Even so, Mao's errors did not outweigh his revolutionary achievements. These were immense. For this reason, while we of the Workers' Party of New Zealand reject blind, dogmatic Maoism, and with it the viewpoint described as Marxism-Leninism-Maoism, at the same time we pay tribute to Mao's theoretical contributions by adopting as our Party's ideological standpoint, 'pro-Mao, Marxism-Leninism'. We commend this to readers of this article. □

NOTES

*After the right-wing anti-Mao coup d'état of 1976 Han Suyin switched her support to Deng Xiaoping.

**A good deal of agitation among Maoist parties had taken place on the question of forming a new international Marxist-Leninist movement up to and including the 1980s, when a meeting of Maoist parties set up the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement in 1984. That meeting concluded in its published 'Declaration' that Mao had only made one error, and that was in *not* forming a new International from the 1960s on. To me at that time it was clear that this was a dogmatist error which reflected blind following (such as Mao had earlier warned about), ignored the history of the Chinese experience and took no account of the impossible conditions for holding an international meeting of Marxist-Leninist parties in China because of the existing turmoil of the Cultural Revolution.