"I Accept Your Criticism"

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William Hinton has spent many years in China as a technical advisor. This article is a chapter from *Iron Oxen, A Documentary of Revolution in Chinese Farming* in which he recounts his participation in the first 16 months of revolutionary agricultural development.

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ONE SUNDAY EVENING I dropped in on one of the mutual aid study groups. Chang Ming moved over and motioned for me to sit down. The students were sitting or lying in the straw listening intently to the speaker, Liu Kai-ming, a strongly built peasant lad who had a veritable passion for basketball.

"I don't know why," Liu said. "I can't concentrate. Whenever I try to sit down and look at my notes I get sleepy. I can't go on."

"You're never sleepy when it comes to playing basketball. You always seem to be wide awake then," said Liu Po-ying. His voice came from a dark corner. There was only one light in the room, a dim flame from a twist of cotton in a bowl of oil. It lit up the faces of those directly around it and cast grotesque moving shadows on the mud walls.

"Yes, that's right," said another. "Morning, noon, and night you're out on the threshing floor bouncing the ball around. If you can't get a game going you play by yourself. Why can't you put the same effort into study? It must be because you don't like to study."

"Well, I only had a few years of school. Studying is hard," said Liu.

"It is just as hard for the rest of us. Many of us never went to school at all. But the people sent us here to learn, not to play basketball. We are eating the people's millet. How can we face them if we don't study hard?" asked Liu Po-ying.

Liu Kai-ming sat for some moments in silence.

"Does anyone else have any suggestions for Comrade Liu?" Li, the group captain, asked.

"My idea is the same," said another voice from the darkness.

"Comrade Liu doesn't apply himself. I think it is only laziness. But if he makes an effort he can overcome it. I think we ought to help and remind him from time to time. If he will agree to it, I myself will help him to review the work, once a day, or every other day. We can't just tell him what is wrong. We have to help him."

"That's right," said Li. "How about it, Comrade? Do you want Lao Wang to help you or have you a better idea?"

"I don't know, I never was lazy when it came to field work. But books make my head swim. I think . . ."

"You don't have to decide now. You can talk it over later, but I think it would be a good idea," said Wang.

With that they passed on to the next person.

Sunday evening meetings such as this became the workshops where the new working style was hammered out.

"Working style" meant more than simply the proper way to look after machinery. "Style" reflected a whole background and point of view. Most valued was a dedicated proletarian "style," as distinct from the loose individualism of the peasant or the aristocratic feudal "style" of the landlord.

To call an action "feudal" was to level the most serious criticism, to call it "proletarian" was to give the highest praise. What people meant by a proletarian "working style" included hard work, unconditional devotion to the common task, a spirit of mutual help, concern for public property, prompt attention to problems, precision, cleanliness, and responsibility. These were the working class virtues needed to overcome the basic selfishness, slackness, and diffuseness of village life, where time was measured by how long it took to smoke a pipe or eat a bowl of millet. People believed that without some of the natural discipline and cohesion of the working class, the peasants could never free themselves from feudal bondage. It was, therefore, important for everyone to develop a proletarian style of work.

Self-and-mutual criticism was the method adopted for the cultivation of this new approach. Each person was encouraged to speak frankly of his own work and study and then to ask for criticisms and suggestions from the rest of the group. Criticism was not supposed to tear others down, but to help them over-

come shortcomings, to help them change and grow. Instead of forming cliques and gossiping behind each other's backs, the students and staff aired their views in open meetings and strove to reconcile them in a principled way.

They took seriously the words of Mao Tse-tung: "If we have shortcomings, we are not afraid to have them pointed out and criticized, because we serve the people. Anyone, no matter who, may point out our shortcomings. If he is right, we will correct them. If what he proposes will benefit the people, we will act upon it. . . . Our cadres should be concerned about every soldier, and all people in the revolutionary ranks should care for each other and love and help each other."

This was the spirit behind the meetings, even though in the heat of the moment those involved sometimes failed to live up to it. During the first weeks there were frequent quarrels. Students sometimes went to bed angry and embittered. But as the process continued week after week attitudes improved. Those who at first found criticism hard to bear learned that it really was given in a spirit of helpfulness. They found that when they accepted it and tried to overcome their mistakes their peace of mind returned and their relations with others changed rapidly. Resentment gave way to appreciation for the concern shown by others, and the warm comradeship and mutual trust that existed within the group was enlarged and strengthened.

On the Sunday evening that I visited the study group, the main criticism was directed at the group captain himself, Li, the intellectual. He brought up the question of his own short temper.

"I quarreled with Lao Chang the other day. I know that is wrong. I thought, he is always getting in the way. He is so slow. So I spoke to him sharply. That was wrong. I should have explained instead. My trouble is individualism."

"Yes, but you ought to examine it more deeply," said Chi Feng-ying, who was sitting next to the light. The free ends of the towel around her head cast a shadow on the wall that looked like the drooping ears of a sheep. "You are always impatient with people. Even now you want to settle everything right away. You study hard yourself. You are very bright. You have been to the university, so you ought to help others more and patiently explain

things. You ought to consider what is at the root of your thinking."

"Yes," said another. "Sometimes you act just like a landlord. One would think you thought you were better than other people. You must realize that your education was made possible by others' hard work. For every one who studies hundreds must sweat in the fields. There is no particular merit to being a student. If things had been the other way around anyone might have done the same as you. So you should really think about it. Impatience is not just a part of your character. It has to do with your outlook."

"I have thought about that before," said Li, "but I haven't overcome it yet. It is true, I thought I am a student because I am bright. I did not worry about all the hard work that others put into it. I took it for granted. But I no longer think that way. I know that there is labor in everything. There is no idleness without labor, there is no studying without labor—just as now, how could we study if there were nobody to support us, if we didn't get millet from the government?"

"Lao Li, you speak well," said Chi Feng-ying, "but when you really understand something it must show in your life. Your actions must be changed by it. I do not think you have faced the problem. Not to the bottom anyway."

"Well, I need your help. Everyone should say what they think and give me their criticism."

"It is better for you to think about it yourself," said Chang Ming, knocking the charred end off the wick so that the flame glowed suddenly brighter. "Surely there is pride behind that impatience. Until you conquer that, it will show up all the time. It is no use putting on a big hat, 'I am impatient,' 'This is individualism,' or some other ism."

"Are there any other ideas?" asked Li.

"Yes," said Liu Po-ying from the corner. "You should try to be more objective. You see something and you make up your mind right away. And then you won't hear of any other opinion —like that spark plug the other day. You said it must be the points. We took the distributor apart six times but still had the same trouble. It turned out to be the plug after all. You should keep your mind open and listen to others."

"But there was something wrong with the points," said Li.

"No there wasn't. Han Chiaoshih came along and found one of the plugs skipping. He fixed it right away."

"But the points were burned. The tractor wouldn't even start."

"That's just what I mean," said Liu Po-ying. "When you think you are right no one can tell you anything. You won't listen."

"Lao Liu is right," said another voice from the shadows. "You always know best."

Several others spoke up in agreement.

"Let's ask Han Chiaoshih," said Li, very upset. "Was there anything wrong with the points?" he asked, turning to me.

"But don't you see, Comrade Li," Chi Feng-ying put in hastily before I could answer, "it is you we are talking about, not the points. That's just one example. There are lots of others. The other day you said it wouldn't freeze. But it did freeze and Lao Kuo had to get up in the middle of the night to check the tractors. Ours still had water in it. There have been other times. Lao Liu is right. You are too hasty in your judgments. And then you won't admit you are wrong."

"I accept your criticism," said Li, "and I will surely change." But though he said the words, it was clear that in his heart he did not yet agree.

"We raised these opinions to help you, Lao Li," said Chi Feng-ying, "so you must not get upset but think them over. Perhaps there is much truth in what we say."

In this way the students challenged, changed, and strengthened each other. Slowly but steadily everyone's outlook was transformed. Peasants, students, artisans, workers, even the sons and daughters of landlords, who entered the revolutionary ranks learned to forget themselves and think in terms of what was good for the whole.

Chairman Mao had written that it took ten years for an intellectual to overcome his various conceits and illusions and really devote himself wholeheartedly to the service of the people. A laboring peasant could do it in far less time. He had fewer layers of illusion to peel off. The same was true of a worker. But everyone, regardless of origin, had in some degree to slough off the remnants of selfishness, hypocrisy, "face," and mutual antagonism

carried over from the past. On that there was general agreement.

I too came to realize the importance of all this when I saw in practice that technical knowledge alone was not enough to create a love for machines or a sense of responsibility for public property. It was those students who most thoroughly identified their interest with that of the Chinese people and who saw the tractors as levers for the liberation of the whole countryside who worked the hardest, took the greatest pains, and assumed the heaviest responsibility.

When, after a period of warm weather, the temperature suddenly fell below freezing, it was not Chang Ming, the ambitious engineer, or Wang, the would-be truck driver, who got up in the middle of the night to check all the tractor radiators and make sure they were drained. It was militiaman Kuo and Youth Corps leader Li. Their concern for public property surpassed their concern for any personal property, such as their private toothbrush or precious padded quilt.

They felt a sense of duty not only to their own people but to the working people of the whole world, for as Director Li said, "These machines were created by American working men and women. They were given to the people of China by the whole world in order to help us overcome the devastation of war. Now the people have entrusted us with their care, and they expect us to use them well and wisely for the benefit of all. Can we let down our own people? Can we let down the people of the whole world by treating the tractors carelessly? No, we must care for them as we would our own children."