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On the Cultivation of Communist Party Members and the Party-Nature Transformation of the Self-Cultivation Tradition

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Abstract

The entry of the term xiuyang (self-cultivation / moral cultivation) into the discourse of Party building is inseparable from a text that cannot be circumvented—Liu Shaoqi's 1939 work Lun Gongchandangyuan de Xiuyang (On the Cultivation of Communist Party Members). Originally delivered as a lecture at the Yan'an Marxist-Leninist Institute and subsequently revised into written form, this work was first serialized in the journal Liberation (Jiefang), then immediately printed as a separate monograph and distributed to various base areas. It subsequently underwent two revisions and republications in 1949 and 1962, and in 1981 was included in the Selected Works of Liu Shaoqi. Across these various editions, the term "xiuyang" gradually evolved from a vocabulary item carrying distinct Confucian hues into a core concept of Party spirit education. Tracing this publishing trajectory reveals that the entry of traditional self-cultivation thought into intra-Party discourse did not rely upon the simple transposition or direct transplantation of terminology. Rather, with regard to the fundamental questions of for whom cultivation is undertaken, upon what basis it is undertaken, and by what methods it is undertaken, the text made comprehensive new arrangements according to the educational objectives of the Party and the concrete requirements of revolutionary practice. The contemporary emphasis on "yan yi xiuxing" (being strict in self-cultivation / strict self-cultivation) as the foremost priority among the "Three Stricts and Three Earnests," and the characterization of Party spirit education as the "xinxue" (learning of the mind / heart-mind learning) of Communists, represents the subsequent unfolding and continuation of this transformation. In this sense, the publishing history of this seminal work itself constitutes a concrete, material pathway through which traditional self-cultivation culture reaches Party spirit cultivation in the new era.

Keywords

On the Cultivation of Communist Party Members; Publishing History; Traditional Self-Cultivation Thought; Party Spirit Cultivation; Creative Transformation

1. The Presentation of the Problem

In 2014, Xi Jinping proposed the "Three Stricts and Three Earnests" (san yan san shi), placing "yan yi xiuxing" (being strict in self-cultivation) in the foremost position. In 2015, at the National Conference on Party School Work, he quoted Wang Yangming's dictum that "one who plants trees must cultivate their roots; one who cultivates virtue must nourish the mind," stating that Party spirit education is a required course for Communists to cultivate themselves and refine their nature, and is also the "xinxue" (learning of the mind-heart) of Communists [1]. That a modern political party repeatedly employs vocabulary drawn from traditional Neo-Confucian learning of the mind-heart—such as "xiushen" (self-cultivation / cultivating the person) and "yangxin" (nourishing the mind)—to articulate its own construction is no mere accident of rhetoric or ornamentation. Behind this linguistic phenomenon lies a discursive channel extending from tradition to the contemporary period. Along this channel, Liu Shaoqi's On the Cultivation of Communist Party Members stands as an unavoidable hinge and nodal point. It was this specific work that systematically appropriated the core Confucian concept of "xiuyang" (self-cultivation) for the realm of Party member education for the first time in the Party's history, and through the institutional power of publications endowed it with normative efficacy throughout the entire Party. Existing scholarship has already offered thorough discussions of this work's thought on Party building, its writing background, and its historical status. Likewise, publishing history research has accumulated mature findings regarding the publishing enterprise led by the Party during the Yan'an period. However, at the intersection of these two lines of inquiry, space remains for further critical questions: What kind of publishing journey did this work undergo? How did the text internally handle, negotiate, and transform the Confucian origins of the term "xiuyang"? How did traditional self-cultivation thought enter the Party's educational discourse through its publication and dissemination, and how did it lay the necessary groundwork for Party spirit cultivation in the new era? This article, following the chronological sequence of publishing vicissitudes, traces the destiny curve of this work, then turns to close textual reading to analyze its triple transformation of traditional self-cultivation thought, and finally examines the continuities and correspondences between this historical transformation and the discourse of Party spirit cultivation in the new era.

2. Publishing Journey: The Destiny Curve of a Classic

The publishing history of On the Cultivation of Communist Party Members is nearly as protracted as the intellectual history of the text itself. Over a span of more than eighty years, the printing, revision, suspension of printing, and reprinting of this work have formed intriguing echoes with the fluctuations of intra-Party political life, constituting a complete specimen for observing "how publications participate in and actively shape the Party's self-construction."

2.1. From Lecture Hall to Weekly Journal: The Birth Scene of 1939

On July 8 and 12, 1939, Liu Shaoqi delivered a lecture at the Yan'an Marxist-Leninist Institute on the theme of the cultivation of Communist Party members [2]. Zhang Wentian, then Head of the Central Propaganda Department, believed that the lecture responded to the urgent needs of the broad membership of the Party, and invited the author to organize it into written form for publication in the weekly journal Liberation (Jiefang), which he edited. According to regulations then in force, the manuscript was sent to Mao Zedong for review. Three days later, the approved manuscript was returned to the editorial department, accompanied by a brief note evaluating the article as "promoting healthy tendencies and opposing unhealthy tendencies," and stating that it should be published as soon as possible. From August to September 1939, On the Cultivation of Communist Party Members was serialized in issues No. 81, No. 82, and the combined issue No. 83–84 of Liberation [3].

Three details of this birth scene merit particular attention. First, the text originated as a lecture, entering the Party with the warmth and immediacy of spoken language. This distinguishes it markedly from many subsequent Party-building documents that were transformed from formal conference reports; it naturally possesses a posture of directly addressing every ordinary Party member. Second, the speed of the review process and the high evaluation indicate that the Party Central Committee urgently needed such a work at that historical juncture. As the War of Resistance Against Japan entered the protracted stalemate phase, large numbers of new Party members with diverse social backgrounds and heterogeneous ideological conceptions were entering the Party; "how to be a Communist Party member" was a practical question confronting the entire Party. Third, the publication platform was Liberation Weekly, the theoretical mouthpiece of the Party in Yan'an. The fact that an article concerning the individual ideological tempering and moral self-discipline of Party members was published in a premier theoretical forum itself signified that "cultivation" had been formally incorporated into the Party's theoretical vision and organizational pedagogy.

2.2. From Yan'an to the Various Base Areas: The Expansion of the Separate Volume

The serialization aroused strong and widespread responses; readers wrote in requesting its immediate publication as a separate volume. In November 1939, the Yan'an Xinhua Bookstore published the separate volume, issuing three editions in succession that still could not satisfy popular demand [3]. Various anti-Japanese base areas reprinted or reproduced it successively. As early as September 1939, the Zhugou Central Plains Bureau printing house had already reproduced it. The text also crossed the boundaries of the base areas, circulating in both Nationalist-controlled regions and enemy-occupied zones. After reading it, the patriotic military officer Xu Fanting personally financed the printing of over ten thousand copies, distributing them to subordinates and friends [2]. In 1942, as the

Yan'an Rectification Movement unfolded comprehensively, this work was formally designated as a required study document. In 1943, it was included in the Rectification Documents published by the Liberation Press, and distributed together with formal Party documents as part of an integrated curriculum [2].

From weekly serialization to separate volume to rectification document, each change in the physical form of the text altered its readership and reading modalities: the weekly was for general browsing; the separate volume was convenient for carrying, copying, and collective study; inclusion in the Rectification Documents meant it had entered the designated bibliography of organized, institutionalized study. Similar to the rectification publication of Jiashen Sanbainian Ji (Three Hundred Years After the Fall of the Ming), once a publication enters the process of organized reading, its efficacy no longer depends solely on textual content but also on the reading system, study regimen, and institutional rituals established around it. What differs is that Three Hundred Years After the Fall of the Ming was first appropriated as educational material with a political identity subsequently appended that the author himself had not anticipated; whereas On the Cultivation of Communist Party Members proceeded from lecture to publication entirely within the organizational arrangements of the Party, constituting a typical "planned" or "programmatic" classic.

2.3. Revisions and Vicissitudes: 1949, 1962, and 1981

In 1949, the Liberation Press published a version revised by the author himself. By October 1951, it had been printed eight times, with a cumulative distribution of 290,000 copies [2]. In 1962, during the convocation of the Seven Thousand Cadres Conference (Qi Qian Ren Dahui), many comrades suggested republishing this work. Liu Shaoqi consented and personally undertook multiple and meticulous revisions. On August 1, 1962, the journal Red Flag (Hongqi) republished the revised manuscript; the People's Daily reprinted it in full across six entire pages on the same day. The People's Publishing House immediately released a new separate volume, distributing nearly five million copies between September and December of that year alone [2]. This edition strengthened theoretical exposition, supplemented important content regarding the Party's strategic and tactical thought, and particularly emphasized that Communist Party members needed to strengthen their ideological and consciousness cultivation even more after the Party had gained political power and entered the stage of governance. The direction of the revision precisely confronted the new tests and temptations brought by the assumption of state power.

There followed more than a decade of silence and proscription. This work was falsely denounced as the "Black Cultivation" (hei xiuyang) during the "Cultural Revolution," and its author was unjustly persecuted. In 1980, the unjust case was rehabilitated. In 1981, after further revision, it was included in the first volume of

the Selected Works of Liu Shaoqi. Subsequently, it was repeatedly reprinted in dozens of editions, with total printings numbering in the tens of millions [2].

Examining this historical curve, the fluctuations in print numbers and publication frequency precisely reflect the condition of intra-Party political life: when large numbers of new Party members were entering, when the governing environment was undergoing transformation, or when ideological construction needed supplementation and reinforcement, this work would return to Party members' desks in new edition forms. The publishing history of a single book thus became a mirror reflecting the process of Party construction. Moreover, each reprinting constituted a reconfirmation and reauthorization of the discourse of "cultivation"—the accumulated weight and authority of the discourse were forged through these concrete, minute, and material publishing links.

3. Textual Background: The Triple Transformation of Traditional Self-Cultivation Thought

That On the Cultivation of Communist Party Members became an indispensable hinge is not merely because it discusses cultivation in general terms, but because it carried out a systematic, deliberate, and creative transformation of the concept of "cultivation." A close reading of the text reveals that this transformation operates on three distinct but interrelated levels.

3.1. Conceptual Appropriation: Old Term, New Garment

In traditional contexts, "xiuyang" (self-cultivation / moral cultivation) was the core term of a complete and elaborate discourse of self-cultivation. The Great Learning (Daxue) states that "from the Son of Heaven down to the common people, all must regard self-cultivation as the root" [4]. The Analects (Lunyu) records Zengzi saying, "I daily examine myself on three points" (wu ri san xing wu shen) [5]. Both the Doctrine of the Mean (Zhongyong) and the Great Learning discuss "shendu" (caution when alone / vigilance in solitude); Mencius speaks of the exemplary person being "neither corrupted by wealth and honor, nor swayed by poverty and lowliness, nor subdued by force and power" [6]. Liu Shaoqi did not evade, minimize, or apologize for these classical resources; rather, he extensively and explicitly appropriated them. The text directly quotes the Analects passage on daily self-examination, directly discusses the concept of "shendu," and lays out the ancient maxims of self-cultivation one by one for Party members' reference and emulation.

Such appropriation is not the simple borrowing of isolated terminology, but rather the strategic borrowing of an entire cultural-psychological structure and semantic field. For Party members coming from the old society and for workers and peasants youth about to join the Party, "xiuyang" was a term they understood immediately upon hearing it and recognized as carrying profound moral weight. Using this term as the central title of Party member education was equivalent to installing the

Party's modern political requirements into a ready-made discursive track deeply embedded in the native cultural soil.

It is necessary to clarify a possible misreading: inheriting tradition does not equal uncritically continuing or reproducing tradition. Liu Shaoqi's On the Cultivation of Communist Party Members offers explicit and pointed criticism of the idealist nature of traditional cultivation theory, pointing out that ancient self-cultivation was largely divorced from social practice and material activity, whereas the cultivation of Communists is and can only be conducted within revolutionary practice and social struggle. This criticism precisely confirms the self-consciousness of the inheritance—the author was fully aware that he was putting new wine into old bottles, and intentionally allowed readers to see the distinction between the wine and the bottle, between the modern political content and the traditional linguistic vessel.

3.2. Triple Transformation: Subject, Goal, and Method

The first transformation lies in the subject of cultivation. Traditional self-cultivation theory presupposed that the practitioner was the scholar-official (shi junzi); its discourse circulated almost exclusively within the stratum of the literati. Ordinary laborers and common people had neither the leisure nor the cultural conditions to participate in this refined, text-based self-examination. On the Cultivation of Communist Party Members radically democratizes the subject by positing every ordinary Party member as the agent of cultivation—regardless of class background, Party seniority, or official position, everyone is required to temper and refine themselves in revolutionary practice. Cultivation thereby changed from the elite task of a minority into a compulsory, collective course for the entire membership of a political party. Hence the text repeatedly emphasizes "we Communist Party members" in its exhortations, writing cultivation as a common obligation of organizational membership rather than a private luxury.

The second transformation lies in the goal of cultivation. The traditional teleological sequence of Confucian self-cultivation was: cultivating the person, regulating the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world (xiushen, qijia, zhiguo, pingtianxia), with the ultimate endpoint being the completion of personal character as a sage or worthy person. The goal of Party spirit cultivation, by contrast, is to become "a loyal, pure, progressive, and exemplary Party member" [7]. The perfection of personal character is explicitly subordinated to the needs of the revolutionary cause and the collective good. This reordering of goals brings about a fundamental ontological change: cultivation is no longer a private matter of individual moral perfection, but an internal requirement of political identity. What the Party member "cultivates" is not abstract, universal virtue in the classical sense, but concrete Party spirit (dangxing)—a distinctly modern, organizational, and political form of moral-political subjectivity.

The third transformation lies in the method of cultivation. Traditional methods focused primarily on introspection, quiet-sitting (jingzuo), classical reading, and admonishment among teachers and friends (shiyou zhengui); they were essentially inward, solitary, and contemplative practices. On the Cultivation of Communist Party Members shifts the center of gravity of cultivation decisively to revolutionary practice: transforming the subjective world while simultaneously transforming the objective world in the heat of struggle, with theoretical study and social practice serving as the external and internal aspects of a unified process. The practice of self-reflection is retained but repositioned. The Analects' "examining oneself on three points" and the Doctrine of the Mean's "caution when alone" remain as valued practices, but what is examined is changed to loyalty to the Party and one's political stance toward the masses. The self-discipline practiced in solitude is organically connected to criticism and self-criticism in organizational life. The traditional inward-oriented, individualistic practice is thus embedded within an organizational, political, and collectivist framework.

3.3. The Significance of Publication: The Institutional Channel for Conceptual Transformation

Had this conceptual transformation remained confined to the lecture hall of the Marxist-Leninist Institute, its influence would have been limited to a single cohort of students. It was publication—the material reproduction and distribution of the text—that made "Party spirit cultivation" (dangxing xiuyang) a concept in general circulation throughout the Party. The separate volume fixed the oral lecture as a stable text capable of repeated and intensive study; inclusion in the Rectification Documents incorporated it into the designated bibliography of organized, mandatory study; successive revisions and reprintings transmitted it to generations of new Party members across vast territorial expanses. The travel of concepts requires material vehicles, and publications are precisely the institutionalized, organizational channels for such conceptual travel. Traditional self-cultivation thought was able to "enter" the discourse of Party building not primarily through abstract academic explication in philosophical journals, but through the distribution and collective study of hundreds of thousands and eventually millions of printed copies within the Party's organizational system. In this sense, publishing history is not merely a footnote or secondary illustration to intellectual history; it is itself an integral link and constitutive mechanism through which the transformation of thought was accomplished and institutionalized.

3.4. Foundation: From The Cultivation to Party Spirit Cultivation in the New Era

Placing the discourse of Party spirit cultivation in the new era alongside Liu Shaoqi's On the Cultivation of Communist Party Members, one can discern three distinct

forms of the foundational role that traditional self-cultivation thought continues to play.

First, the continuity of vocabulary. “Being strict in self-cultivation” (yan yi xiuxing) directly employs traditional vocabulary and places it at the head of the “Three Stricts.” The discourse of “xinxue” (learning of the mind / heart-mind learning) names Party spirit education using the explicit terminology of traditional Neo-Confucian learning of the mind-heart. The formulation of “living until old age, learning until old age, cultivating until old age” shares the same discursive vein as the daily-renewal effort of the Great Learning: “If one can renovate himself for one day, let him do so daily, and let him do so again and again” (gou ri xin, ri ri xin, you ri xin). That these terms can be spoken fluently in contemporary Party discourse without seeming forced or anachronistic is premised upon the fact that over more than eighty years, “xiuyang” has, through On the Cultivation of Communist Party Members and its countless editions, become a term in general circulation within the Party, normalized through repeated institutional use. Behind the apparent continuity of language lies eighty years of concrete publishing accumulation anchored in a single seminal work.

Second, the inheritance at the methodological level. Traditional self-cultivation grasped simultaneously both self-reflection (neisheng) and practical action (jianxing); the mutual admonishment and reminders among teachers and friends were also considered integral parts of the cultivation process. On the Cultivation of Communist Party Members took over these methodological elements but refused to allow cultivation to remain at the level of private, individual self-cultivation. Theoretical study and organizational life were both incorporated into a unified pedagogical framework; cultivation changed from a private lesson of solitary self-improvement into a standardized method by which the Party organization educates, examines, and disciplines its members. In the new era, democratic life meetings, thematic education campaigns, and inspection and supervision mechanisms have been successively embedded into the process of Party spirit tempering. The soft, daily practice of self-questioning has gradually been paired with hard institutional constraints. Xi Jinping requires cadres to “frequently examine their ideals, beliefs, thoughts, and words and deeds against the Party Constitution, Party regulations, and Party discipline” [8]. This systematic examination and self-inspection perform essentially the same operation as the Analects’ “I daily examine myself on three points”—the act of looking into a mirror. Only the content of the reflection has changed, from personal moral virtue to political stance and loyalty, and the mirror itself has changed, from the idealized personage of the Confucian sage to the concrete text of the Party Constitution and Party regulations. The practice is old; the mirror is new.

Third, the unfolding at the logical level. Traditional self-cultivation took the autonomous individual as the basic unit of analysis; how well a person cultivated

himself depended primarily on his own will and effort. On the Cultivation of Communist Party Members placed individual cultivation within the organizational education of the political party; all members were to receive education together and undergo tempering together, so that cultivation from then on acquired an irreducibly collective and organizational dimension. In the new era, a further step has been taken: Party spirit cultivation is explicitly arranged under the comprehensive framework of "comprehensive and strict Party governance" (quanmian congyan zhidang), and the imperative to "raise consciousness of Party spirit" (tigao dangxing juewu) has been written into the report of the Party's Twentieth National Congress [9]. At this point, the boundary of cultivation has expanded from individual morality to overarching Party tasks, from classroom lessons and personal reading to systemic institutional arrangements. Amid these successive expansions, one foundational judgment has never changed: the Party's advanced nature and purity will not maintain themselves naturally or automatically; they must be actively maintained through continuous education, strict discipline, and conscious self-restraint. Liu Shaoqi's discussion of cultivation in Yan'an in 1939 proceeded from this fundamental judgment; today's repeated emphasis on Party spirit cultivation as a central political topic continues and extends this very same judgment. What traditional self-cultivation thought has bequeathed to Party building, beyond several readily available classical concepts, is a deep cultural belief—that human beings can and indeed should continuously improve themselves through conscious effort. The reason the term "xiuyang" could be successfully appropriated by a Marxist political party to explain its own construction relies precisely upon this belief deeply embedded in the native cultural soil.

4. Conclusion

Looking back at the publishing vicissitudes of On the Cultivation of Communist Party Members, the foundational role of traditional self-cultivation thought for Party spirit cultivation in the new era was accomplished not through abstract philosophical speculation, but through a specific text and a complete, continuous publishing chain. Liu Shaoqi appropriated the classical concept of "xiuyang" and carried out a triple transformation upon it at the levels of subject, goal, and method; publications then distributed the transformed discourse and transmitted it to successive generations of readers through material reproduction; and the Party-building discourse of the new era has in turn continued this transformation at the levels of vocabulary, structure, and logic.

This concrete case also offers a significant implication for the field of publishing studies: the formation and stabilization of core concepts within the Party often take publications as their primary material vehicles. Every reprinting, revision, and new edition of a classic constitutes a renewal, reaffirmation, and extension of the discourse it carries. Today, when we speak of cultivating the Communist's "xinxue"

(learning of the mind), looking back at that 1939 lecture in Yan'an and the subsequent publishing journey of over eighty years, the historical thread is unmistakably clear—the wisdom of self-cultivation contained in China's excellent traditional culture has flowed, through the printing, distribution, and rereading of a single seminal work, into the self-construction and self-rectification of a Marxist political party, where it continues to function with undiminished force in the present day.

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