



# LOOKING BACK TO FACE FORWARD

## THE ROLE OF SUMMATION IN THE REVOLUTIONARY PROCESS

PUBLISHED FEBRUARY 2021

BY THE  
ORGANIZATION OF COMMUNIST  
REVOLUTIONARIES (US)

The great helmsman of the Chinese Communist Revolution, Mao Zedong, elaborated a *four-step method* for guiding revolutionary practice:

1. Make a plan.
2. Carry out the plan.
3. Sum up the experience.
4. Make a new plan.

This didn't just spring from the grand intellect of Mao, but was forged through the tremendous sacrifice of millions of Chinese peasants in revolutionary struggle. It's what communists lived by when they were engaged in revolutionary warfare against feudal warlords, the Japanese imperialists, and the Guomindang comprador-bourgeoisie for two decades. It's a crucial part of what made the Chinese revolution victorious.

As simple and as obvious as this four-step method seems, communists have had tremendous difficulties consistently applying it. Yesterday's cappuccino communists and today's internet communists never get beyond step #1. Enough said on that. But among many serious revolutionaries, step #3, which is the most dynamic and transformative step, rarely gets carried out in any serious way. And thus revolutionaries are left spinning their wheels, going round and round in the same circles, and producing well-worn ruts rather than revolutionary advances. The purpose of this document is to argue for the importance of summation if we're serious about making revolution and to provide practical guidance for how to do it.

## WHY DOES SUMMATION MATTER?

Summation is not mainly or merely about reporting on events—what happened, what were the numbers, etc. Accurate data is important, and the chain of knowledge in any communist organization needs to include reporting what happened. But communist summation is principally about understanding the motion and development of things, not the things-in-themselves. Our fo-

cus must be on how to make revolutionary advances, and to do so, we need to understand the *contradictions* in our practice.

As communists, we understand that contradictions exist in and are the driving force of everything. Nothing is static and unchanging, all things contain different aspects, and the existence of these different (contradictory) aspects within anything are the basis for its transformation. Our purpose as communists is to be the dynamic force that grabs ahold of the positive aspects, contends with the negative, and thus moves those contradictory aspects from being a basis for transformation to an actual transformation.

Summations are our way of understanding the contradictions inherent in people and events, their positive and negative aspects, and how our actions affected the contradictions. Through the process of summation, we evaluate the effectiveness of our actions. What transformed the contradictions in a positive way, what just hit brick walls, and what had a negative effect? What combination of argumentation and action convinced a teenage proletarian with one foot in the illegal economy to plant both feet in a communist youth organization? Why were we unable to contend with the repression that came down on our political campaign, which resulted in arrests of our cadre and the masses stepping back from the struggle? What agitation was effective in getting the masses to take copies of our propaganda and talk to us? These are the kinds of questions that summation can answer.

In evaluating how our actions transformed (or failed to transform) contradictions, summation becomes not principally a matter of looking back, but a means to face forward: to gain a deeper understanding of the contradictions, to understand what was effective in transforming them, and to develop new methods. In this way, summation becomes a question of synthesis rather than reporting. And summation is a pivot towards step #4 of the four-step method, namely: make a new plan.

## WHAT SHOULD BE IN A SUMMATION?

The following is guidance mainly for written summations, though it also applies to oral summation.

### LOOKING BACK

While summation is principally about looking forward, we do need to look back and give some basic evaluation of steps #1 and #2 of the four-step method. Did we carry out the plan? If not, was it due to our own failings or due to circumstances beyond our control? Was the plan itself correct? These questions can be further elaborated with quantitative and qualitative data, but our basic answers are a way of holding us accountable to our strategic and tactical objectives.

### QUANTITATIVE DATA

Advances and setbacks in the revolutionary struggle are always quantifiable. Mao advocated that we should “have a head for figures,” and quantitative data provides one important means of evaluating our practice. When communists cannot account for their practice with exact numbers on how many people were reached, how many attended an event, how much propaganda was distributed, how much money was raised, or how many people were recruited into different forms of organization, it’s usually a sign of a lack of drive to make advances and a contentment to just go through the motions, or, worse yet, a refusal to confront failures.

Quantitative data needs to be accurate. All too often, in an attempt to put a positive spin on things, communists inflate the numbers or fail to report low figures. This erroneous practice factored into one substantial disaster in our history, namely the wave of starvation in revolutionary China in the late 1950s. Though natural disasters, the withdrawal of Soviet technical aid, and erroneous plans all factored into this famine, the failure of local Communist

Party committees to report accurate figures (including of agricultural production yields) compounded the calamity.

In any sphere of political work, plans should be made for regular collection of quantitative data. This means keeping records of the numbers of leaflets distributed, web traffic, the number of people who attended events, finances, etc. The more the detail that the data can be broken down into—where and when propaganda was distributed, the class and social background of people who attended events, etc.—the more useful the data. This data should then be centralized in some form at regular intervals.

Here we should take lessons from communist parties engaged in revolutionary warfare. While it was waging people's war, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) regularly reported on how many enemy soldiers were killed, how many of their comrades were killed, and how many and what types of weapons were seized in each battle. The Communist Party of the Philippines carries out this same practice after every encounter with the enemy. Unfortunately, we cannot currently sum up military battles, but we can apply the lessons from battle reports to our own practice of summation to enunciate what political damage we inflicted on the enemy, what losses we took in the course of a political battle, and what we gained through the experience.

### QUALITATIVE DATA

While the results of our practice can and should always be quantified, numbers do not paint a complete picture. Qualitative data not only gives a feel for the experience, but crucially tells us what the masses think, how they responded to our political work, and what their questions were. Summation should paint a picture of our experiences and especially what we learned from the masses. All too often so-called communists don't care what the masses think, or, worse yet, claim that the masses think exactly what they want them to. Knowing what the masses think goes beyond learning what they thought of what we have to say. We should also learn

about what the masses read, watch, what forms of culture and artistic expression they engage in, and their social relations. With each political campaign we wage, besides quantitative results, there should be lots of qualitative lessons concerning what was effective and what wasn't, what we learned about the alignment of class forces, etc.

### DEEPENING SOCIAL INVESTIGATION

Social investigation—getting to know the masses, their class position, their antagonisms and struggles with bourgeois rule, their ways of thinking and culture, the conflicts among them, etc.—is not only a crucial starting point of all communist practice. It is also something that must be deepened as we further any sphere of practice. Summation is an important means of deepening and synthesizing our social investigation, and summations should include increasingly greater details learned through social investigation, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

### WHO ARE THE ADVANCED?

If we truly believe that “the masses are the makers of history,” then our summations should have a lot to say about who the advanced are. As Mao emphasized, among any section of people there are advanced, intermediate, and backwards (see Mao, *Some Questions Concerning Methods of Leadership*). We should have clear criteria for evaluating the masses whom we interact with. Our summations should give a clear sense of the political and ideological work we have done with the advanced in our orbit, the motion and development of individuals and groups of people, and proposals and plans for how we can bring forward the advanced, whether into recruitment tracks or something short of that. We should have a clear sense of people's strengths and weaknesses, how they can best be led to contribute to the revolution, and what kinds of training they need from us. Summing up the advanced is crucial to ongoing recruitment efforts, and no communist organization can make advances without increasing numbers of recruits.

## SYNTHESIS

Summation should not be a collection of anecdotes, but a synthesis of what we learned from the experience. Anecdotes help to give flavor and particularity, but we must extract the general, overarching lessons from that particularity (for a philosophical understanding of the relationship between the general and the particular, see Mao, *On Contradiction*). The lessons we synthesize could be eminently practical, such as “3–5pm on Sundays is the best time to go door-to-door in this housing project.” They might articulate possibilities for political struggle, such as “this college campus has a substantial presence of reactionary students, which makes the political conflicts sharper and pushes the advanced students into confrontation and struggle with the reactionary element instead of into insular, postmodernist identity politics.” Or they could concern methods and programs of class struggle, such as “when we identify a clear class enemy in the neighborhood, such as the developer who is letting the building fall into disrepair and kicking people out of their apartments, and come up with a clear list of demands and a means for the masses to exert those demands, people respond to our agitation and show up when we mobilize them.” In any event, synthesis is a crucial means by which communists go from the particular quantitative and qualitative data to a generalization of the experience, grab ahold of and develop a sharp understanding of the contradictions, and forge plans and programs for acting on them.

## THE CONTRADICTIONS

Summations that present the experience as entirely negative or positive or imagine that the path forward will be without contradiction are of little value to communists. No revolutions are made through smooth sailing. The nature of being a communist is honestly confronting the contradictions and problems involved in making revolution. As Amilcar Cabral put it, “tell no lies; claim no easy victories.”

Understanding the nature of the contradictions before us is what allows us to act to transform them. Here's a hypothetical example:

There is widespread opposition among the liberal and progressive sections of the petty-bourgeoisie to the US ruling class's plans for war on X country, but these sections of people place their faith in the Democratic Party to avert the war. Substantial numbers of high school students and a minority among the anti-war petty-bourgeoisie see that the congressional opposition is mostly talk and not a serious opposition, so recognize the need for resistance outside of official channels. We can tap into and mobilize this sentiment by pushing the resistance into more radical forms, such as high school walkouts and shutting down military recruitment centers, as well as by carrying out propaganda on how this particular war is an expression of the US's imperialist relationship with that region of the world. If we do so, X progressive congressperson is likely to come out more strongly against the war, so we will have to contend with them for leadership of the movement.

### **FUTURE PLANS AND PROPOSALS**

Since the principal purpose of summation is to face forward rather than look back, summation should always pivot to step #4 of the four-step method: make a new plan. Based on evaluation of our experience, summations should propose a way forward. This could range from "this political work is not achieving any results so we should stop doing it" to "given the success of this work, we should continue with our 6-month plan with the following adjustments." New plans should always include timetables for completion and goals with quantitative projections based on prior data.

### **REPRESSION AND SECURITY BREACHES**

Given our fundamental antagonism with the bourgeoisie and the US bourgeoisie's sophisticated and experienced repressive state apparatus, our summations must also report instances of repres-

sion and our own mistakes in regards to security protocols. Security matters should be an aspect of regular written reports, and specific instances of repression and security breaches must immediately be reported up the chain of knowledge.

This serves several purposes. (1) Leadership can discern patterns from the repression directed at various segments of our organization and take the appropriate measures to combat this repression. (2) When there are breaches in our organizational security, leadership needs to assess the damage and the breaches need to be patched up immediately, as they can affect not just the organizational unit in which the breach occurred, but potentially the organization as a whole. (3) With regular reporting up the chain of knowledge, leadership can synthesize the best practices for combating repression and maintaining the security of our organization.

Repression can take many forms, from assassinations, to arrests and trials, to harassment and threats by law enforcement, to spying (evidence of possible spying includes the same car or person seen following you and your car or home being broken into). Taking note of specific details of these incidents, such as the name and badge number of the police officer who is harassing you or the license plate of a car that is frequently parked with someone inside it near a space used for public political events, and including these in security reports is crucial to developing our own forms of counterintelligence.

A crucial part of paying attention to security matters in the course of summation is paying attention to and verifying details about the identities and lives of people who are in our orbit and working under our leadership. This serves two purposes: (1) We can evaluate whether a potential recruit “checks out,” i.e., that they are who they say they are. (2) Summations from different comrades of the same person can be compared to see if there are any inconsistencies in how someone presents themselves to us. Thus summing up the advanced is a crucial means of preventing agents and opportunists from infiltrating our organization.

## SUMMATION AS LINE STRUGGLE

Line struggle—where different conceptions of how to advance the revolutionary struggle contend—is one crucial means by which communist organization stays on the revolutionary road while involving its membership in debating out the key strategic questions. Summation plays a central role in line struggle for two main reasons: (1) Diverging evaluations of our experience and practice usually concentrate up different lines. (2) Given that summation is a pivot towards making new plans, different lines on the way forward will inevitably emerge through the process of summation.

Organizational units should devote considerable time to collective summation. Ideally, before a report is written, a unit should collectively sum up their practice and struggle out differences in evaluation. Then, a person or persons should be assigned to write a summation. The written summation should then be read by everyone in the organizational unit concerned, further struggle over evaluation and new plans should take place based on that written report as needed, and the finalized report should be forwarded up the chain of knowledge.

## INTERNAL VS. PUBLIC REPORTS

Given our fundamental antagonism with the bourgeoisie, summations are mainly internal matters within a communist organization, must always be written on devices that do not connect to the internet, and security and internal communication protocols must be followed in regards to summations. Some elements of summation, such as assessing potential recruits, are particularly sensitive. Furthermore, summations principally serve our internal process of carrying out the four-step method.

However, communists also have a responsibility to the masses to present some summations publicly. Public summations by communist organizations hold us accountable to the masses, promote

a healthy practice of being honest about our successes and failures, and allow revolutionaries in other places and among subsequent generations to learn from and critically evaluate our practice. Information we do not want the bourgeoisie to know of course must be kept out of public summations. But whether in written form, in public speeches, or in meetings, regularly offering the masses summations of our practice draws them into the process of thinking about how to advance the revolution.

One of the worst practices by communist organizations has been to proclaim bold plans with much fanfare, miserably fail at carrying out those plans, never offer any public summation of the failure, and then repeat the process. The principal error in this cycle is not the failure to achieve the intended results, but the failure to sum up the failure, as it leaves us doomed to repeat the same errors over and over again and doesn't arm our comrades or the masses with the tools to succeed in the future. Besides that, failure to sum up failures leads to far more demoralization than the practical failure would have in its own right. But even when the results are mixed or overwhelmingly successful, carrying out public summation of major endeavors is a healthy practice that draws our comrades and the masses into thinking through the strategic questions of the revolution.

## INVOLVING THE MASSES IN SUMMATION

Summations should not be cooked up in the heads of a handful of communists, but should involve the masses in evaluating each political campaign and ongoing sphere of practice. Eliciting the evaluations of the masses should be done regularly in mass meetings, one-on-one and small group conversations, and the ongoing work of social investigation. It is only through carrying out the mass line in relation to summation that our summations will be rich in detail, factually accurate, and draw on the thinking of the masses. Furthermore, this process of summing up with the masses trains the masses in the four-step method and enables them to master the

science of revolution. This practice of involving the masses in summation and the overall principles of summation should be applied to communist-led mass organizations and united front efforts.

### THREE EXEMPLARY COMMUNIST SUMMATIONS

The following documents are accessible communist summations, each addressing rather different experiences and time periods. We encourage comrades to study them, discuss them in their collectivities, and use them as models for their own summations.

Mao Zedong, *Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan* [1927].

Communist Party of the Philippines, Executive Committee, *General Review of Important Events and Decisions (1980–1991)* [1992], available at <http://kites-journal.org/1980-91>.

Revolutionary Initiative, *Rectify and Reboot: A Critical Summation of Revolutionary Initiative's Ten Years of Party-Building* [2017], available at [revolutionary-initiative.com](http://revolutionary-initiative.com).