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HONGKONG — There's an old Chinese saying: "Bitter medicine is good for disease, and sincere reproofs, though grating on the ear, are good for conduct."

The Communist rulers of China today are plagued by an illness which could be fatal. The masses lack confidence in the leaders.

Red Chairman Mao Tze-tung himself has prescribed the bitter pill which might check the disease. It is criticism, sharp and trenchant, of the Communist Party.

Mao outlined the conflict—his word was "contradictions"—and laid down a course of action in a secret speech to party chiefs last Feb. 27, only recently made public. In it he made these two statements: "We are confronted by two types of social contradictions — contradictions between ourselves and the enemy and contradictions among the people"; and, "Let all flowers bloom, let a hundred schools of thought contend."

HAVING THUS stated the difficulties and opened the door, the Party ordered its leaders to get out and work with the people so they would better understand the masses' problems.

Officials by the thousands hauled themselves out of their chairs and lumbered out into the fields, factories and roads for a stint of manual labor.

It was all good for the soul, the comrades said.

THE CAMPAIGN in behalf of more criticism started a bit more slowly. The critics had to be urged and coaxed. Party leaders had to assure them they would not be punished for their views.

True, Mao had decreed an end to indiscriminate punishment and blood-letting, of terror and harassment of the millions who disagreed but did not advocate the overthrow of the socialist system. This stand had shocked the Communist world more than anything he had said, and the Chinese people could be pardoned for reacting slowly.

For this was a nation beset with economic troubles, dissatisfied with the bureaucracy of government, still aching from the effort to convert itself from near-feudalism to socialism. Floods, drought and a disastrous 1956 typhoon had laid waste to millions of acres of land and brought suffering to 70 million people.

The country had gone into debt partly because of the heavy expense of bringing relief to ravaged areas. There were still food shortages. Officials admitted graft and corruption in newly-created agricultural producer cooperatives. Party members were increasingly arrogant and more and more concerned with their own comforts. Party cadres among the unions were inept.

This was what Mao meant when he spoke of contradictions.

When the criticism started, it was a newspaper which led off. The Shanghai Wen Hui Pao called a forum for reporters to air their grievances. They complained of "rude interference and unreasonable restrictions" in

covering the news. In some cases, they said, access to the news was restricted under the pretext of guarding state secrets.

FROM THIS start, the campaign gained speed. Soon it reached the universities, the writer's unions, labor organizations and the armed forces.

Gen. Tang Cheng, director of the General Political Department of the Chinese People's Democratic Army, called a forum of army soldiers and officers and pointed out that there were two "contradictions"—the first between the officers and men, and the second between the army and the people.

Relations between the officers and soldiers were bad in a few units, he said, and mediocre in a number of others.

One of the sources of unhappy relations between the army and the population, he said, lay in the fact that officers were wooing and winning the ladies in some areas, to the chagrin of the townsmen. He laid down three stern rules: (1) Don't take girls out of school to marry; (2) don't use your greater income to tempt them; (3) don't interfere with other people's marriages.

Though he may have anticipated outspoken criticism, it is believed that Mao himself was astonished by the vehemence and quantity of it. Faced with a nation-wide outcry against the incompetence, arrogance or dishonesty of younger Party members, he ordered recruiting for the Communist ranks halted for 1957. With 12 million members, the Chinese Communist Party is the world's biggest.

AS LONG AS the criticisms—and within a short time they numbered in the thousands—were directed at individual faults or methods of work, the well-oiled machinery Mao had set in motion ran smoothly.

But then leading members of the eight non-Communist minor parties spoke up.

Three non-party Ministers stuck their heads out so far they were in danger, at least figuratively, of having them lopped off. They were Lo Lung-chi, Minister of Timber Industry, Chan Nai-chi, Minis-

ter of Food, and Chang Po-chun, Minister of Communications. All committed the heresy of questioning the dominant position of the Communist Party in China.

Besides this, Lo dared, directly, to criticize Mao himself for the rapid conversion of farms from private ownership to cooperatives.

Lo and Chang, both vice chairmen of the Democratic League, proposed that the Communists share the leadership of the country with nonparty members.

Some non-Communists went further and personally attacked Mao and Premier Chou En-lai for failing to form a coalition. Chu An-ping, editor-in-chief of the minor parties' newspaper, Kwang ming Daily, committed this cardinal sin.

Doughty old Gen. Lung Yun hit another sensitive spot when he attacked Soviet Russia.

The Russians, said the former Yunnan warlord, were more imperialist than the United States. Furthermore, why did they insist on repayment of the loans they had made China during the Korean War? Wasn't China defending Russia's interests and those of socialism in general? He proposed postponement for 20 or 30 years of the debt.

Soon after these candid criticisms, the Party swung into action. It did not move directly but through the very organizations to which the offenders belonged. Meetings of the minor parties throughout the country denounced the heresies of Lo, Chang, Chan, Ko and company.

The protest meetings were followed by a series of long editorials in the People's Daily which attacked the "rightists" who had been guilty of questioning the sanctity of the Communist Party. It said the criticism campaign would continue, but a line of cleavage had to be drawn between those who were well-intentioned and wanted to help communism, and those who plotted to overthrow it. It called for counter-criticisms.

THE HARD-HEADED men who rule China from behind the great red walls of Peking's

Forbidden City — once the home of emperors — have themselves lived lives of criticism and hardship.

Sixty-four-year-old Mao and his close associates, Premier Chou En-lai, vice chairman Chu Teh, and the party's No. 2 man, Liu Shao-chi, help support the classic theory that men, not events, make history.

Mao had carved his niche in Chinese socialism by breaking with Moscow in the '30s over whether the revolution should be led by the peasants or the workers. He was the son of a peasant father, and mindful that China's farmers make up nearly 80 per cent of the population.

Chou, suave and persuasive, knows what it is to criticize and be criticized. He was once a believer in the "opportunism" policy of Li Li-san, who advocated direct attacks on the centers of Kuomintang power as a means of accomplishing the Red revolution. Mao, who stood for guerrilla tactics and gradual control of the countryside, opposed them. When Li went down in disgrace in 1930, Chou survived by making an abject confession of his errors.

Chu Teh was the warlord ruler of Yunnan province who late in life shook off the opium habit, got rid of his concubines and took up communism. He helped Mao form the Eighth Route Army which became the stepping stone to Mao's power.

Liu, a labor leader, got some of his revolutionary education in Moscow and became known as a follower of the Moscow line thereafter.

MAO SAYS that the bloody class conflict now is almost over. But the campaign to eliminate conflicts between the people and the leaders has only begun.

Observers here are inclined to believe that the goal of "letting all flowers bloom" is the preliminary step to a thorough housecleaning of the Communist structure.

Meanwhile, the prospects are that the world will continue to witness for a considerable length of time an unusual sight—a political party pleading for criticism.



Chinese Communist boss Mao Tze-tung (right) and Party Vice Chairman Gen. Chu Teh (center) enjoyed the Peking parade they are shown viewing. But

the AP's John Roderick says they got more criticism than they figured on when they gave the masses permission to speak out.