

A New Old Che Guevara Interview

WILLIAM E. RATLIFF*

EARLY in 1959 Ernesto "Che" Guevara, like most of the other leaders of the Castro revolution, willingly talked with many persons who expressed an interest in what had happened and was happening in Cuba. Some of the resulting interviews were subsequently published in sources not easily accessible to those studying Latin American affairs and thus have not been consulted by students of the revolution. One of these neglected interviews was given by Guevara to two Chinese Communist journalists in April 1959, was published in a Chinese journal several months later, and is here available for the first time in a complete English translation.¹

Although the official Chinese Communist New China News Agency did not formally open its office in Havana until June 1959, the two reporters, K'ung Mai and Ping An arrived in Cuba sometime in mid-April.² The first report sent directly from Havana to Peking was on April 16, 1959.³ According to the journalists' introduction in *World Knowledge*, this interview with Guevara was held for two hours on "the 108th evening after the victory of the revolution," that is to say

* The author is a graduate student in history at the University of Washington.

¹ I would like to thank Professor Lao Yan-shuan of the University of Washington for his help in translating parts of the interview. Needless to say I alone am responsible for both introduction and translation as they appear here. The text of this interview is found in the June 5, 1959 issue of the Chinese Communist journal, *Shih-chieh Chih-shih* (*World Knowledge*), 22-26. The only direct reference I have found to the complete interview in any western publication is in Joseph J. Lee, "Communist China's Latin American Policy," *Asian Survey* (November 1964), 1132. Lee is interested only in the opening statement referring to Mao Tse-tung, however, which he appears to accept at face value, though it is in fact still in need of considerable investigation.

² K'ung Mai and Ping An are pseudonyms for Kung O and P'an P'ing-yen respectively. I am indebted to Frank T'ao, Press Attache at the Embassy of the Republic of China in Washington, D. C., for making available to me the Chinese language study by Ming Chen-hua, *Chung Kung tui La-ting Mei-chou te Shen-t'ou* (Taipei, 1959), 37, in which the two reporters are identified. For an English translation of this study see "Penetration of Latin America by the Chinese Communists," U. S. Joint Publications Research Service, Document No. 3498.

³ *News From Hsin Hua News Agency (New China News Agency)*, London, April 17, 1959, 27. Cited hereafter as *NCNA*.

on April 18, 1959.⁴ It took place in the study of Guevara's residence outside Havana. K'ung and Ping completed their report on April 19 and wired it to Peking on April 22. A partial summary and some direct quotations from the interview were broadcast from Peking to East Asia on April 23 and released by the New China News Agency in London on the following day.⁵ The interview was not reported in any of the three leading Peking newspapers in April, however, probably because of the heavy emphasis at that time on the Second National People's Congress, which had convened in Peking on April 18, and on matters related to the "liberation" of Tibet.⁶ So far as I have been able to determine, the interview was not reported in the Cuban press either, in April or thereafter. The whole interview was published in Chinese on June 5 in *World Knowledge*.

There is little reason to question the authenticity of the interview proper, the answers attributed to Guevara in response to specific questions from the Chinese reporters. The comments on the growth of the 26th of July Movement, on land reform, on the problems and accomplishments of the revolution in the early months of 1959, and on the evaluation of the international significance of the Cuban revolutionary victory are generally in line with what Guevara is known to have said on other occasions early in 1959.⁷

The only suspect part of the interview is the opening statement. According to K'ung Mai and Ping An, prior to the first formal question of the interview Guevara expressed great admiration for the Chinese leader Mao Tse-tung and indicated considerable Cuban reliance upon Chinese guerrilla warfare tactics during the struggle against Fulgencio Batista. As far as I have been able to determine, this is the only published interview in which Guevara is quoted as expressing Cuban indebtedness to the Chinese. On the other hand, Guevara has pointedly denied any such influence on at least three

⁴ According to Tung Chi-p'ing, a Chinese diplomat who defected from the embassy of the People's Republic of China in Burundi in 1964, the first assignment of a NCNA correspondent in a new country is to interview government leaders to ascertain their views toward Communist China and to seek closer relations of all kinds between the two countries. As reported in "The New China News Agency," *Current Scene: Developments in Mainland China* (April 1, 1966), 8.

⁵ *NCNA*, April 24, 1959, 39-40. For the text of this official NCNA report see note 13 below. The only reference I have found to this report in Western studies of Cuba is in Peter S. H. Tang and Joan Maloney, *The Chinese Communist Impact on Cuba* (Chestnut Hill, Mass., 1962), 21.

⁶ See *Jen-min Jih-pao*, *Kuang-ming Jih-pao* and *Ta Kung Pao*, April 18-30, 1959.

⁷ Compare, for instance, Guevara's comments in his talk to the cultural organization *Nuestro Tiempo* in Havana on January 27, 1959. See Theodore Draper, *Castroism: Theory and Practice* (New York, 1965), 60-61.

occasions, the first time being in August 1960.⁸ For the present it is impossible to decide for certain the authenticity of the opening statement. It may be: 1) exactly what Guevara said; or 2) Chinese exaggerations of some flattering comment Guevara may have made about Mao; or 3) absolutely without basis in fact. Whichever view one adopts with regard to this statement, however, there is no reason for it to be taken as calling into question the authenticity of the remainder of the interview.⁹

LAND REFORM—THE SPEARHEAD AND BANNER OF THE CUBAN REVOLUTION¹⁰

GUEVARA:

“We have always looked up to Comrade Mao Tse-tung. When we were engaged in guerrilla warfare we studied Comrade Mao Tse-tung’s theory on guerrilla warfare. Mimeographed copies published at the front lines circulated widely among our cadres; they were called ‘food from China.’ We studied this little book carefully and learned many things. We discovered that there were many problems that Comrade Mao Tse-tung had already systematically and scientifically studied and answered. This was a very great help to us. . . .”

REPORTER:

“Will you please tell us how Cuba achieved her revolutionary victory?”

GUEVARA:

“Certainly. Let us begin at the time I joined the 26th of July Movement in Mexico. Before the dangerous crossing on the *Granma* the views on society of the members of this organization were very different. I remember, in a frank discussion within our family in Mexico, I suggested we ought to propose a revolutionary program to

⁸ *Ibid.*, 25, 70.

⁹ As I hope to show in a forthcoming article, an outgrowth of my efforts to determine the validity of the remarks on Mao Tse-tung here attributed to Guevara, the possibility of significant Chinese Communist influence on the Cuban guerrillas in 1958 is perhaps greater than has been supposed by some of the leading writers on the Cuban revolution.

¹⁰ It will be immediately obvious to those acquainted with any of Guevara’s interviews in Spanish that this translation does not always “sound like” Guevara. It is my belief that a relatively literal translation of the Chinese makes possible a more accurate reproduction of Guevara’s ideas, now twice removed from their original expression in Spanish, than would a free translation that might come closer to the Guevara style.

the Cuban people. I have never forgotten how one of the participants in the attack on the Moncada army camp responded at that time. He said to me: 'Our action is very simple. What we want to do is to initiate a *coup d'état*. Batista pulled off a *coup* and in only one morning took over the government. We must make another *coup* and expel him from power. . . . Batista has made a hundred concessions to the Americans, and we will make one hundred and one.' At that time I argued with him, saying that we had to make a *coup* on the basis of principle and yet at the same time understand clearly what we would do after taking over the government. That was the thinking of a member of the first stage of the 26th of July Movement. Those who held the same view and did not change left our revolutionary movement later and adopted another path.

"From that time on, the small organization that later made the crossing on the *Granma* encountered repeated difficulties. Besides the never-ending suppression by the Mexican authorities, there was also a series of internal problems, like those people who were adventurous in the beginning but later used this pretext and that to break away from the military expedition. Finally at the time of the crossing on the *Granma* there remained only eighty-two men in the organization.

"The adventurous thought of that time was the first and only catastrophe encountered within the organization during the process of starting the uprising. We suffered from the blow. But we gathered together again in the Sierra Maestra. For many months the manner of our life in the mountains was most irregular. We climbed from one mountain peak to another, in a drought, without a drop of water. Merely to survive was extremely difficult.

"The peasants who had to endure the persecution of Batista's military units gradually began to change their attitude toward us. They fled to us for refuge to participate in our guerrilla units. In this way our rank and file changed from city people to peasants. At that same time, as the peasants began to participate in the armed struggle for freedom of rights and social justice, we put forth a correct slogan—land reform. This slogan mobilized the oppressed Cuban masses to come forward and fight to seize the land. From this time on the first great social plan was determined, and it later became the banner and primary spearhead of our movement.

"It was at just this time that a tragedy occurred in Santiago de Cuba; our Comrade Frank País was killed. This produced a turning point in our revolutionary movement. The enraged people of Santiago on their own poured into the streets and called forth the first politically

oriented general strike. Even though the strike did not have a leader, it paralyzed the whole of Oriente Province. The dictatorial government suppressed the incident. This movement, however, caused us to understand that working class participation in the struggle to achieve freedom was absolutely essential! We then began to carry out secret work among the workers, in preparation for another general strike, to help the Rebel Army seize the government.

“The victorious and bold secret activities of the Rebel Army shook the whole country; all of the people were stirred up, leading to the general strike on April 9 last year. But the strike failed because of a lack of contact between the leaders and the working masses. Experience taught the leaders of the 26th of July Movement a valuable truth: the revolution must not belong to this or that specific clique—it must be the undertaking of the whole body of the Cuban people. This conclusion inspired the members of the movement to work their hardest, both on the plains and in the mountains.

“At this time we began to educate our forces in revolutionary theory and doctrine. This all showed that the rebel movement had already grown and was even beginning to achieve political maturity. Before long we began to construct ‘small-scale industry’ in the Sierra Maestra. We passed from a life of wandering to a stationary existence. In order to fulfill our most pressing needs, we built our own shoe factories, arsenals, and bomb conversion factories. We took the bombs Batista dropped on us, converted them to land mines, and then returned them to the dictator.

“Every person in the Rebel Army remembered his basic duties in the Sierra Maestra and other areas: to improve the status of the peasants, to participate in the struggle to seize land, and to build schools. Agrarian law was tried for the first time; using revolutionary methods we confiscated the extensive possessions of the officials of the dictatorial government and distributed to the peasants all of the state-held land in the area. At this time there rose up a peasant movement, closely connected to the land, with land reform as its banner.

“As a consequence of the failure of the April 9 strike, Batista began his barbaric suppression at the end of May. On about May 25 an enemy army of ten thousand approached our military camp and focused its attack on the first column of troops led by our Commander Castro himself. Although it is hard to believe, at that time in the Sierra Maestra we had barely three hundred ‘Freedom’ model rifles against a large ten thousand-man army. By about July 30 this cam-

paign had checked Batista's attack because of correct strategic leadership, and the Rebel Army turned from defense to the attack.

"After this campaign the Rebel Army began to prepare to move down to the plains. This attack had strategic significance and psychological influence, because at that time our weapons could in no way be compared to those of the dictatorial government either in quality or quantity. In this fight we had the best ally there is, but one that is hard to estimate—the people. None of our columns of troops could be stopped from molesting the enemy or from occupying the most advantageous military positions. This was not the result entirely of the excellent strategy of our military units; especially important was the great help of the peasants. They did all the things the Rebel Army could not do. They made secret reports, kept close watch over the enemy army, discovered the enemy's weak points, transmitted urgent correspondence, and acted as spies in the puppet army. It was no miracle that brought all of this cooperation, but our carrying out of policies that were beneficial to the peasants and ranchers. When the enemy attacked us in the Sierra Maestra and hunger overtook us, ten thousand head of cattle were chased up into the mountains from the border area of the land owners. We not only had enough cattle to supply the Rebel Army, but could also distribute some among the peasants. This was the first time especially poor *guajiros* of this region had received livestock from anyone. It was also the first time they had received any education, because the revolution provided them with schools.

"Meanwhile, the dictatorial government was still treacherously raping, looting, killing, and throwing the peasants off of their land. It used a great quantity of napalm from its northern ally, the United States, to slaughter good and innocent people.

"It was at this time that we began to move the army toward Las Villas Province. As soon as we arrived there we issued a revolutionary proclamation, announcing the land reform. In the proclamation it was stated that small land owners did not have to pay land tax. Most surely the land reform was like the spearhead of the Rebel Army; we advanced holding high the banner of land reform. During the one year and eight months of revolutionary process, the leaders and the peasants have established harmonious relationships making it possible for the revolution to do things that before this time had been beyond the imagination. This was not of our doing, but came from the strength of the peasants. This kind of strength caused us to believe

firmly that if only we could arouse, organize, and arm the peasants, the victory would be assured.

“On November 3, the day Batista held the rigged general elections, the Law Number 3 of the Sierra Maestra was proclaimed.¹¹ It determined the carrying out of the land reform: the free distribution and granting of right of ownership to any sugar cane farmers who did not have over two caballerías of land, of the land held by the state and officials of the dictatorial government, and of the land of those people who by shameless methods forcibly occupied territory sometimes in excess of several thousand caballerías. The land reform has benefitted over two hundred thousand peasant households. But still the agrarian revolution enacted in Law Number 3 is not complete. It is necessary in the Constitution of the State to stipulate rules opposing the latifundia system, the special characteristic of our agricultural structure. This latifundia system is the cause of the national backwardness and of all the miseries of the peasant masses. This cause has not been eliminated even down to the present.

“To carry out thoroughly the law providing for the abolition of the latifundia system will be the concern of the peasant masses themselves. The present State Constitution provides for mandatory monetary compensation whenever land is taken away, and land reform under it will be both sluggish and difficult. Now after the victory of the revolution, the peasants who have achieved their freedom must rise up in collective action and democratically demand the abolition of the latifundia system and the carrying out of a true and extensive land reform.”

REPORTER:

“What problems does the Cuban revolution now face, and what are its current responsibilities?”

GUEVARA:

“The first difficulty is that our new actions must be engaged in on the old foundations. Cuba’s antipeople regime and army are already destroyed, but the dictatorial social system and economic foundations have not yet been abolished. Some of the old people are still working within the national structure. In order to protect the fruits of the revolutionary victory and to enable the unending development of the revolution we need to take another step forward in our work to rectify and strengthen the government. Second, what the new government

¹¹ According to Draper, the law was signed on October 10, 1958, *Castroism: Theory and Practice*, 16.

took over was a rundown mess. When Batista fled he cleaned out the national treasury, leaving serious difficulties in the national finances. We must work very hard in order to keep intact the balance of foreign exchange, otherwise our national currency will be depreciated. Third, Cuba's land system is one in which latifundistas hold large amounts of land, while at the same time many people are unemployed. We cannot process our underground ore reserves ourselves, but must depend upon foreign companies to ship the reserves abroad for processing. Ours is a monocultural economy in which it is essential for us to grow sugar cane. Our foreign trade is also monocultural. The United States controls Cuban trade; consequently, national industries are smothered because of United States competition. Smuggling is very serious. Commodity prices are very high. Fourth, there is still racial discrimination in our society which is not beneficial to efforts to achieve the internal unification of the people. Fifth, our house rents are the highest in the world; a family frequently has to pay over a third of its income for rent. To sum up, the reform of the foundations of the economy of the Cuban society is very difficult and will take a long time.

“In establishing the order of society and in democratizing the national life, the new government has adopted many positive measures. We have exerted great effort to restore the national economy. For example, the government has passed a law lowering rents by fifty percent. Yesterday a law regulating beaches was passed to cancel the privileges of a small number of people who occupy the land and the seashores. The price of real estate has fallen from the previous one thousand pesos per square meter to four hundred pesos, and the income from the sales goes as an investment for the collective advantage of the country. When the government took control of the buildings and real estate of the old officials, and subsequently gave it to the people, this alone accounted for an immediate income of over twenty million pesos. Smuggling has already been cut off for all practical purposes, to the great benefit of this country's national industries and above all to the development of the tobacco and cotton cloth industries.

“Other fundamental laws, such as import duties, tariff reform, and laws regulating mineral ores, are now being enacted. Most important is the land reform law, which will soon be promulgated.¹² Moreover, we will found a National Land Reform Institute. Our land reform

¹² A note by the *World Knowledge* editor indicates that this law was promulgated on May 17, between the time the interview was held in April and its publication in June.

here is not yet very penetrating; it is not as thorough as the one in China. Yet it must be considered the most progressive in Latin America.

“When we propose land reform and enact revolutionary laws in order to achieve this goal quickly, we consider especially the redistribution of the land, the establishment of a vast national market, and the realization of a diversified economy. This is where the interest of the people is. As far as the land reform at the present time is concerned, the most important thing is the promotion of sugar cane production and efforts to improve production techniques. Second is to make it possible for the cultivator to have his own fields, to encourage the opening up of virgin lands, and to cultivate all cultivable land. Third is to fix output, to raise production and to decrease the import of food grains (the present import of food grains each year takes fifty million pesos in foreign exchange). Fourth is to establish people’s coffee and tobacco stores, to fix reasonable prices, and to eliminate middle exploitation. Fifth is to promote animal husbandry.

“We must work for national industrialization without neglecting any of the problems that arise therefrom. Industrialization requires the adoption of protective measures for new industries, and an internal market of consumers for the new products. For instance, if we do not open the main door of the market to the *guajiros* who have consumer needs but no buying power, there is no way to expand the internal market.

“Events do not entirely depend on us; we will meet with the opposition of the people who control over seventy five percent of our national trade. Facing this kind of danger, we must prepare to adopt countermeasures, like a doubly enlarged foreign market. We will need to establish a merchant marine fleet, to transport sugar, tobacco, and other products, because transportation expenses of a merchant marine fleet in a large degree affect the progress of backward nations like Cuba.

“What is the most important thing if we want to carry out our industrialization successfully? It is raw materials. Because of Batista’s dictatorial government, the country’s raw materials are all delivered over to the hands of his foreign co-plotters. We cannot fail to redeem our country’s raw materials, our ore reserves. Another element of industrialization is electric power. We pledge that electrical power will be returned to the people.

“Where is our power to achieve the above-mentioned plan? We have a Rebel Army. We must quickly train the worker-peasant military

units, arm them with modern techniques and doctrine, and make them able to shoulder the even greater responsibility of courageously killing the enemy. National regeneration will require the destruction of many privileges. For this reason we must immediately prepare to strike a blow against our disguised or open enemies in defense of the country. The new army must become a new style of army, formed in the fight for liberation, changed into a people's army, producing on the one hand and training on the other. This is necessary because we know that if a small country were to commit aggression against us, it would have the support of a large, strong country. At such a time we would have to resist large-scale aggression in our own territory. Thus we must prepare early."

REPORTER:

"How will Cuba struggle against domestic and foreign reactionary enemies? What are the prospects of the revolution?"

GUEVARA:

"The Cuban Revolution is not a class revolution, but a liberation movement that has overthrown a dictatorial, tyrannical government. The people detested the American-supported Batista dictatorial government from the bottoms of their hearts and so rose up and overthrew it. The revolutionary government has received the broad support of all strata of people because its economic measures have taken care of the requirements of all and have gradually improved the livelihood of the people. The only enemies remaining in the country are the latifundistas and the reactionary bourgeoisie. They oppose the land reform that goes against their own interests. These internal reactionary forces may get in league with the developing provocations of the foreign reactionary forces and attack the revolutionary government.

"The only foreign enemies who oppose the Cuban revolution are the people who monopolize capital and who have representatives in the United States State Department. The victory and continuous development of the Cuban revolution has caused these people to panic. They do not willingly accept defeat and are doing everything possible to maintain their control over the Cuban government and economy and to block the great influence of the Cuban revolution on the people's struggles in the other Latin American countries.

"I would like to take this opportunity to talk a little about the influence of the victory of the Cuban revolution on the people of the

other countries of Latin America. Today the Cuban people have all stood up to carry forward the fight. The Cuban people will retain their unity in order to prevent any miscarriage of the victory they achieved in overthrowing the dictatorial government and to make this victory the first step in the victory of all of Latin America. Our revolution has set an example for every other country in Latin America. The experience and lessons of our revolution have caused the mere talk of the coffee houses to be dispersed like smoke. We have proved that an uprising can begin even when there is only a small group of fearless men with a resolute will; that it is only necessary to gain the support of the people who can then compete with, and in the end defeat, the regular disciplined army of the government. It is also necessary to carry out a land reform. This is another experience that our Latin American brothers ought to absorb. On the economic front and in agricultural structure they are at the same stage as we are.

“The future of every economically underdeveloped country in Latin America is closely connected with our own future. The revolution is not limited to Cuba. It has stimulated the heart of Latin America and has made the mutual enemies of the peoples of the various countries very nervous. The Cuban example has already penetrated deeply into the people’s hearts in all of Latin America and in every oppressed country and signals the imminent downfall of all the Latin American dictators. Cuba is a small country and needs the support of the people of every country, every socialist country, and especially of every Latin American country.

“We still must open up roads to get all of our underdeveloped countries to unite. We must at all times keep vigilance against the efforts to divide and rule and struggle to the end against those people who think of sowing seeds of discord among us. Such people only want to injure our country and to reap benefit for themselves from discord in our government.

“The present indications are very clear that they are now preparing to intervene in Cuba and destroy the Cuban revolution. The evil foreign enemies have an old method. First they begin a political offensive, propagandizing widely and saying that the Cuban people oppose Communism. These false democratic leaders say that the United States cannot allow a Communist country on its coastline. At the same time they intensify their economic attack and cause Cuba to fall into economic difficulties. Later they will look for a pretext to create some kind of dispute and then utilize certain international

organizations they control to carry out intervention against the Cuban people. We do not have to fear an attack from some small neighboring dictatorial country, but from a certain large country, using certain international organizations and a certain kind of pretext in order to intervene and undermine the Cuban revolution.

“But the Cuban revolution is not a movement of a small number of people or of just a few leaders. Our revolution is a liberation movement of the people; the people are the power behind this revolutionary movement. The present strength of the united people forces the enemy to put off his intervention. We will try to devise ways to avoid the plot of the enemy and to expose the conspiracy which aims at promoting conflicts, thus depriving the enemy of his opportunity to act.

“I do not doubt that the American people are in sympathy with the Cuban revolution. The American people can become good friends with the Cuban people. The American people will understand much better the dangerous nature of the policy of the United States government.¹³

¹³ The official New China News Agency summary and partial translation of the interview is as follows:

“CUBAN LEADER DENOUNCES U.S. PREPARATIONS
FOR INTERVENTION

“*HAVANA* April 22 (Hsinhua)—There are clear indications that enemies abroad are preparing intervention in Cuba, said Guevara, one of the leaders of the Cuban revolutionary forces and Commander of the Cabana [sic.] fortress, in an interview to *Hsinhua*.

“He said [that] those faked leaders of democracy had their own schemes. *First*, they launched a political offensive and propaganda campaign, saying that Communism was menacing the Cuban people and that the United States could not permit the existence of a Communist state in its vicinity. At the same time they tried to create difficulties in Cuba’s economy. Later they would try to create conflicts so that they could utilize a certain international organization under their control to carry out intervention against the Cuban people.

“Guevara pointed out that ‘attack upon us will come not from the small neighboring dictatorships but from a great neighboring country which will use certain international organizations and create some kind of pretext to intervene in Cuba and undermine the Cuban revolution.’

“However, the Commander added, the united forces of the Cuban people would not allow this. ‘We shall denounce this sort of scheme to create conflicts among us so that they can have nothing to exploit,’ he said. Guevara declared that if the enemy endeavored to invade Cuba, the entire Cuban people would unite and fight them to the end.

“Premier Castro explained clearly in the United States the attitude of Cuba, he continued. The people of the United States would get to know better the dangerous policy pursued by their government. ‘If we should be invaded,’ said Guevara, ‘the aggressors would not be the United States people but United States monopolies and trusts.’” *NCNA*, April 24, 1959, 39-40. Note that several

“We know well that countries with different political systems can have economic and cultural relations. We know that China has had many valuable experiences that are worthy of our study. Along with the advance and consolidation of the revolution, we are certain that the people of China and Cuba will have the best of contacts and relations.”

of the closing statements of this NCNA release do not appear at all in the *World Knowledge* version of the interview though they are much the same in character. The emphasis of the NCNA release on Guevara’s warning of United States intervention in Cuba is understandable when one recalls that at this time the Chinese press was filled with reports of “imperialist intervention” in Chinese “internal affairs” in Tibet. Guevara’s statements were evidently reported to emphasize the similar nature of “imperialist intervention” throughout the world.