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Record of Conversation from Chairman Mao's Reception of French Senator François Mitterrand

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Summary:

Mao Zedong and Francois Mitterrand discussed interests and conflicts over the Algeria Revolution and sought ways to peacefully reconcile differences.

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Interview date and time: February 8, 1961, 5:20 pm to 6:50 pm
Location: Hangzhou

Mitterrand: I am very honored to meet the Chairman.

The Chairman: Welcome, when did you come to China? Have you been here for ten days?

Mitterrand: I have been here for two weeks. My friends at the Chinese People's Institute for Foreign Affairs organized many visits which I have found very helpful.

The Chairman: You come to China from afar. You can look around China and see a lot. How long will you be here?

Mitterrand: I'll be here for another week. Although France is far from China, that doesn't matter. But a barrier does separate our two countries.

The Chairman: The barrier is not high, we can cross it.

Mitterrand: That barrier can still be torn down.

The Chairman: There are different kinds of barriers: there are ideological barriers, social system barriers, diplomatic barriers, and economic barrier. These are all temporary phenomenon. The people will eventually tear down these barriers. Barriers of ideology and social systems can be removed as long as they do not interfere with internal affairs. There are differences among diplomatic barriers as well. Some have been demolished while others have only been halfway removed. We have established only semi-diplomatic relations with the United Kingdom which means that the barrier has been only halfway removed. This is because the United Kingdom recognizes both the People's Republic of China on the one hand and Chiang Kai-shek's so-called "Republic" on the other so we have only semi-official diplomatic relations with the United Kingdom. If the British removed that half-barrier, we can exchange ambassadors. We have no diplomatic relations with France but this is also temporary. But there are also people-to-people exchanges and trade relations. Many French politicians have been to China in recent years.

(Wang: As part of our trade relationship, we bought French electric locomotives.)

The Chairman: Has Edgar Faure been to China?

(Hu: Edgar Faure has been to China. The Chairman received him.)

The Chairman: Even without diplomatic relations, we can still have people-to-people exchanges and trade relations. We have trade relations with Britain, France, and West Germany. The Americans do not recognize us. Americans will not allow us to resume our status in the United Nations. We are in no hurry. Even if the United States does not recognize us for eleven years, and then for another twenty or thirty years, China will still be here.

Mitterrand: Both of our countries need to work hard to tear down diplomatic barriers. I think the problem of China's legal status in the United Nations can be resolved in a few months.

The Chairman: Really?

Mitterrand: I also want to talk about the situation in France even if the Chairman does not agree with me. De Gaulle's came to power with the support of the military. After he came to power, he is constrained by military men and so he lacks freedom of action. De Gaulle personally favors giving the people of North Africa the right to self-determination but the military opposes him on this. Therefore, De Gaulle is now caught in a dilemma. If he agrees with the military, the French people will oppose him; if he cannot solve the Algerian problem, his regime will be overthrown.

The Chairman: I think that wearing De Gaulle will not give Algeria true independence. He will give them the form but not the reality of independence.

Mitterrand: The situation is different now. Since the end of the war in Indochina, French people are increasingly oppose colonialism. Colonialism is obsolete. Only a few military men are still determined that it continue.

The Chairman: Does Jacques Soustelle represent those military men?

Mitterrand: More than Soustelle. Soustelle will not be able to come to power until De Gaulle steps down.

The Chairman: Colonialism is a bad thing. It will be eliminated.

Mitterrand: The real issue is the ethnic minority in Algeria -- the problem of what to do with the one million Europeans who live there. Many French people live in three Algerian cities. If Prime Minister [Ferhat] Abbas can guarantee their security, the problem can be solved. Naturally, Algerian independence is the precondition for giving this guarantee.

The Chairman: Won't Abbas give it?

Mitterrand: Prime Minister Abbas may do so in the future. But I think the issue should be raised now so that we can negotiate a solution. That is because starting negotiations now is to Algeria's advantage.

The Chairman: First of all, there should be negotiations. That I agree with. But negotiations must be conducted on the principle of the equality of the two parties. This is not like what De Gaulle did in the past, wanting the other side to surrender to him. If you want the other side to surrender, what is there to negotiate?

Mitterrand: Since the Melun meeting I have noticed some changes in the situation. De Gaulle has made some progress. The two sides now have a basis for negotiation. However, I believe that we should learn from the eastern revolution that the enemy should be given the necessary guarantees during the negotiations so that the enemy have a legal status in the future country. This is a valuable lesson from the revolution in the East. We should learn from the revolutionary leader of the East.

The Chairman: Do you mean India?

Mitterrand (Laughter): Chairman Mao's work has a great influence. Many people use Chairman Mao's doctrines, but some bad people have distorted them.

The Chairman: Our military doctrines are used by all kinds of people. According to Prime Minister Abbas, the French soldiers also read my works on military affairs and learned our guerrilla tactics as well to deal with Algerians. The Algerians used some doctrines to oppose the French. So they are all using our doctrines to fight. But our doctrines are easier for oppressed people to use and harder for oppressors to use. When we fought a guerrilla war against the Japanese, the Japanese also studied our guerrilla tactics in order to deal with us. When we fought against Chiang Kai-shek, Chiang Kai-shek also learned from us in order to deal with us. They want to use the enemy's tactics to attack the enemy. But they did not succeed.

Mitterrand: The Algerian War has been fought to a stalemate for many years. A lot of money is spent on the war every day. Both sides have used a great deal of force all without result.

The Chairman: France will never succeed in conquering the people of Algeria. The French have fought for six years without result but the Algerians have grown stronger. The Japanese fought us for eight years and occupied China's Northeast for sixteen years, from 1931 to 1945. They occupied one-third of China. They still failed. Their attacks made us unite and drive out the Japanese. In the end, the Japanese failed completely. They had to retreat from China, Korea, the Philippines, Indochina, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Myanmar. In a word, aggressor countries will be defeated in the end. Now that Japan has become a semi-independent country, completely under the control of the United States, the US imperialists have to better control Indochina. Now it has replaced France in controlling southern Vietnam. We agreed to the Geneva Accords. That agreement also provides for a French base in Laos. However, Boun Oum - Phoumi Nosavan Group wants to take back the French base in Laos. If there is no American stood behind him, would Boun Oum dare do this?

Mitterrand: The French government supports the legitimate government of Souvanna Phouma, but it has not taken a clear stand because it fears that the United States will not support it in the United Nations on Algeria.

The Chairman: Did the proposal against France pass in the United Nations?

Mitterrand: The Asian-Africa Group's proposal did not pass. An amended resolution as passed after the United States put pressure on many Black African countries.

Today, a small number of French political parties and the overwhelming majority of French people favor of peace talks with Algeria and will respect the principle of Algerian independence in order to solve the Algerian issue. After that, although still a member of the North Atlantic Treaty, France will be able to express a different attitude on some international issues. For example, on the Laos issue, it will be free to ignore the attitude of its allies and clearly express France's own views more clearly. But now I have to be more cautious in expressing my support for the legitimate government of Souvanna Phouma.

The Chairman: First of all, you must negotiate with Algeria with sincerity. This is not only good not just for Algeria but for France as well.

Mitterrand: But I want to remind the President once again about the issue of the one million strong ethnic minority population in Algeria. On this issue, I think Prime Minister Abbas has made a mistake. He should immediately enter into negotiations on this topic.

The Chairman: My guess is that Prime Minister Abbas won't drive them all out but will allow some to stay. But the hundreds of thousands of French troops in Algeria should be withdrawn.

Mitterrand: When I was in Beijing, I saw the Cultural Palace of the Nationalities and the Central Institute for Nationalities. I got a good impression there from seeing how you are implementing your nationalities policy. So I think on this Abbas should learn from China. First of all, we should eliminate the fear and hatred of these ethnic minorities have for the Muslim people. I want to guarantee the safety of this million-strong ethnic minority along with clear provisions for their language, lives, economy and even the well-being of their children. I want to repeat to the Chairman what I said just now: we are close to a complete solution of the Algerian issue.

The Chairman: Only a very small minority of the one million Europeans are extremists. Most will be able to cooperate with the Muslims. There are two prerequisites: recognition of Algerian independence and the withdrawal of all French forces in Algeria. If this is accepted, other issues can be considered that will enable one million French people to live in peace with eight million Muslims. In China, only several percent of our population are minority people but we treat all members of minority groups the same so everybody gets along. Only a few percent of ethnic minorities, but we are equal to every minority. But in Algeria, (The Chairman put up nine fingers and then one finger). This one finger represents one million French residents. It is that one million people who have all the political, economic and military power. They have in their hands the economic lifeline of Algeria, as well as a privileged position for their culture. As I see it, the eight million Muslims are afraid of them.

Mitterrand: Among the one million French, the landlord and the plantation owners are only a small minority. Most of the French are laborers.

The Chairman: These are two different types of people who should be distinguished from one another.

Mitterrand: But most of the workers are under the influence of that handful of extremists. As a result they have a mentality characterized by racist feelings, fear and hatred towards the Muslims. These people need to be given an explanation of the true situation, to give them assurances, and to address their concerns. I am honored today to meet a world-famous leader. You have great influence and can play in helping to solve the Algerian problem. I want to tell the Chairman once again that I do not agree with what the French government is doing but France also does face real difficulties.

The Chairman: You can talk to Abbas. We can't speak for him. This is their own internal affair. The Algerian issue is your bilateral issue that can be resolved by yourselves. You in France have different factions who disagree with one another. (The Chairman shows four fingers indicating the military, De Gaulle, you and the power you represent and the French Communist Party. The Chairman said that the first two fingers said mean that the military and Charles de Gaulle are really quite similar.) As a French politician, you should have direct talks with Abbas.

Mitterrand: This is difficult. For the past twelve years I have gone to Africa once a year, especially to Black Africa. After I went to Africa last year, I felt that Chairman Mao's influence there was getting bigger and bigger, not only political but also ideological and cultural. This is not something they asked me to tell Chairman Mao on their behalf. This is what I what I came to understand through my own personal experience.

The Chairman: This is worth studying. Why are the works of Charles de Gaulle, Churchill and Macmillan not finding buyers there?

Mitterrand: (laughs) I am afraid that I taken up too much of the Chairman's time. I should say goodbye. It is a rare honor to call on the Chairman today.

The Chairman: (Looking at the table) If you want to talk, we can continue.

Mitterrand: This visit to China is not just for the sake of travel. I like traveling but I came to visit and understand China. After my arrival, I participated in some very enlightening programs arranged by the Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs. I am particularly interested in the development of agriculture. I visited a people's commune and an agricultural exhibition. I also read some very interesting books and articles. Before I left France, many right-wing newspapers were creating rumors and slandering China, saying that that China is experiencing an economic crisis and famine. But after I saw China, I realized that the Chinese people under the leadership of the President have made great efforts to overcome their difficulties. I am very admire this bold and courageous spirit.

The Chairman: We are having some difficulties but we are overcoming them. Some of the reports from the Western press service are wrong in some respect. Others, however, are deliberately creating rumors. Our industry and agriculture have made great progress but this progress takes time. We need a peaceful environment and the help of foreign friends. Even though there are Western news agencies are starting rumors that we are in a crisis say we have a crisis, we are still moving forward. Have you heard that their slander that we want war?

Mitterrand: (laugh). As I told my friends at the People's Institute of Foreign Affairs, there is a fashionable saying in the West recently -- "Good Russians and war-like Chinese". I have said to friends of the Institute of Foreign Affairs that the most fashionable phrase in the West is now: good Russians, militant Chinese.

The Chairman: If Chinese people have really done bad things, that can be criticized. But those people are slandering us and starting rumors about us. Although our two countries have no diplomatic relations, there are reporters here from AFP, and we have reporters in France so we can understand one another. People-to-people exchanges between our two countries are still going on along with economic, trade and cultural exchanges.

Mitterrand: Yes. For example, when I came to China this time, I saw a lot of things, especially those small blast furnaces. This is quite ground-breaking work.

The Chairman: We are creating something from nothing, going from small to large, from a few to many. In the course of our progress, there have been difficulties, but developments have been positive in the main. We have faith that we will overcome difficulties. The overall trend is towards progress and development. In 1900, the steel output in the United States was only 10 million tons. When Marx issued the Communist Manifesto (1848), Germany's steel output was only about 10,000 tons. When France's Alexandre Dumas fils wrote *The Lady of the Camellias* (1840), France still had no lights and cars, but people lit candles and rode in carriages. During the 120 years since 1840 down to the present, France has also been developing.

Mitterrand: Very true. But we also need cooperation between peoples. I hope that the Chinese leaders will give me the opportunity to, and to help me to make me some contribution to friendship and cooperation between our two countries.

The Chairman: In the past, our two countries have had much contact. Many of our friends have been to France. President Hu here has been to France. (Asked Hu, "Can you still speak French?" Hu answered, "I have forgotten a lot.") Our Premier Zhou Enlai, Vice Premier Chen Yi, Li Fuchun and others have been to France although they may have forgotten their French. That's enough for today.

Mitterrand: Let me thank the Chairman once again for receiving me. Our conversation has been very helpful.

The Chairman: Please come again to China again if you can. We will welcome you.