

Mao's Shadow

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Nearly four decades after his death, Mao Zedong remains a controversial figure in Chinese Communist Party history, raising as he does questions of legitimacy. Over the past year the issue of how the Mao years should be evaluated in comparison to the reform years has been raised and discussed by Xi Jinping and others. This discussion apparently responds to divergent opinions in the party and seems to reflect Xi Jinping's determination to define China's ideology and its limits.

Mao Zedong (毛泽东) died some 37 years ago, but he continues to haunt the Chinese political system. Indeed, his legacy seems even more difficult to deal with today than it was 10 or 20 years ago.

It was not supposed to be this way. Coming out of the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had to deal with the legacy of Mao, particularly the Cultural Revolution, so the Sixth Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee adopted the "Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party since the Founding of the People's Republic of China" on June 27, 1981. It concluded, "Comrade Mao Zedong was a great Marxist and a great proletarian revolutionary, strategist and theorist. It is true that he made gross mistakes during the 'Cultural Revolution,' but if we judge his activities as a whole, his contributions to the Chinese revolution far outweigh his mistakes. His merits are primary and his errors secondary."¹ The later Mao, according to the Resolution, diverged from Mao Zedong Thought, which expresses the "collective wisdom of the whole party," not just Mao as an individual, and Mao had made serious mistakes, particularly in launching the Cultural Revolution, but these were the mistakes of a "great proletarian revolutionary."

This History Resolution was supposed to put the question of Mao to rest. Mao should not be repudiated in toto, as more liberal members of the party wanted, but his "leftist" errors had to be criticized harshly, both to legitimate the return to power of those purged during the Cultural Revolution and to justify the party's turn from class struggle to economic construction (a shift endorsed by the party's watershed Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee in December 1978). Tensions between the "conservative" wing of the party and the "liberal" wing persisted through the 1980s, but the History Resolution, despite its ambiguities, held firm.

The mood began to change in 1992–93 as the centenary of Mao's birth began to approach. Although Deng Xiaoping (邓小平) had relaunched his economic reforms with his trip to Shenzhen in early 1992, the political atmosphere was decidedly more conservative than it had been prior to Tiananmen. It was in this period, the early 1990s, that the "New Left" began to emerge with its critique of reform. As the anniversary of Mao's birth loomed on the horizon, a "Mao craze" began to take shape—taxi drivers

hung images of Mao in their cars to “protect” them from injury, a million Chinese visited Mao’s home village of Shaoshan, and Cultural Revolution era songs became best sellers.

The long speech Jiang Zemin (江泽民), then general secretary of the party, gave at a meeting to commemorate Mao’s birth stuck closely to the History Resolution, picturing Deng’s program as firmly correcting Mao’s mistakes, particularly the Cultural Revolution, but nevertheless growing organically out of Mao Zedong Thought. Deng Xiaoping, Jiang told the gathering, “proves himself to be Comrade Mao Zedong’s loyal comrade-in-arms, as well as the most prominent heir to and developer of Mao Zedong Thought. . . . Comrade Deng Xiaoping’s theory of building socialism with Chinese characteristics inherits, enriches, and develops Mao Zedong Thought and raises it to a new height.”²

Hu Jintao’s (胡锦涛) task in 2003, on the 110th anniversary of Mao’s birth, was made more complex because he had to argue that Jiang Zemin’s “Three Represents” (that the party represents the advanced productive forces, advanced culture, and the fundamental interests of the vast majority of the people), which legitimized entrepreneurs joining the CCP, were also part of the continuous development of Mao Zedong Thought. Hu told his listeners that Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, and the important thinking of the “Three Represents” had each emerged “in the face of different historical tasks during different historical periods” but were nevertheless “all infused with the worldview and methodology of dialectical materialism and historical materialism.” Having performed the necessary theoretical gymnastics, Hu quickly moved on to justify the party line of pursuing “economic construction as the central task.” “Today,” Hu concluded in his best bureaucratic flourish, “the baton of history has passed into our hands. The best way for us to cherish the memory of Comrade Mao Zedong is to continue to advance the great cause painstakingly pioneered by revolutionaries of the older generation and continue to compose the epic of achieving the Chinese nation’s great rejuvenation.”³

Four years later, however, the tension between the Maoist legacy and the contemporary reform period—with its attending issues of income inequality, corruption, and sense of social injustice—had become great enough that some people wanted to deal with the issue more directly, in an apparent effort to give a higher evaluation of Mao. The issue arose in 2007 as preparations for the 17th Party Congress got under way. Zhu Jiamu (朱佳木), then at the Central Documents Research Office (中共中央文献研究室), wrote an essay called “Understanding the Implications of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics from the Perspective of the Historical Essence and Mutual Relationship between the Two Periods before and after Reform and Opening” (从改革开放前后两个时期的历史性质及其相互关系上认识中国特色社会主义道路的内涵).

Zhu Jiamu’s concern was obviously with what he considered to be the growing influence of the “right.” As he put it, “Now we must resist those from the right who would negate the first 30 years of New China.” Similarly he wrote that the party must “be aware of and guard against the splitist, penetrating, and treasonist (颠覆) activities of hostile forces, domestic or foreign.”⁴ At a 2008 meeting to celebrate the publication of a book, Zhu reportedly said that domestic and foreign enemies work to overthrow socialist systems by

demonizing leaders—that’s what the Soviet Union did to Stalin, and then to Lenin—and then the party and state collapsed.⁵

It was important from Zhu’s point of view that people understand how the two 30-year periods were related. He argued, “if the first 30 years of New China had not provided the fundamental political premise, then it was unimaginable that the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics could have been opened up.” If one negated the first 30 years because of the mistakes made, then the 60-year history of the PRC would be “dismembered” and there “would be no way to understand how the 30 years prior to reform and opening had made such glorious accomplishments.”⁶ Zhu’s evaluation did two things. First, it explicitly raised the idea of the “two 30 year” periods, which previous evaluations had avoided, apparently because doing so highlighted the degree to which reform and opening were moving away from the Maoist period (even if reform remained politically and ideologically conservative). Second, in talking about the accomplishments of the Maoist period and how important it was in providing a political and material basis for reform, Zhu was obviously giving the Maoist period a more positive evaluation than had the History Resolution. Some argue that the Institute of Contemporary China Studies 当代中国研究所, to which Zhu moved as deputy director in 1999, would like to have the History Resolution revised.⁷

Zhu apparently forwarded his ideas to the party center prior to the 17th Party Congress, but Jiang Zemin opposed any tampering with the judgment the party had laid down in the History Resolution. Reportedly Jiang, who had retired at the 16th Party Congress in 2002, wrote a letter to the central leadership saying that it was still important to clearly highlight the reform period as correct. According to Jiang, “The former 30 years were up and down; the latter 30 years were ones of stable development. The former 30 years provide many experiences and lessons that needed summing up; the latter 30 years were largely successful.”⁸

Whatever debate on the history issue went on before the 17th Party Congress, there was no change in the party’s position, as reflected in the Congress report. Although Hu started by saying, “We must always remember that the great endeavor of reform and opening up is conducted on the basis of the party’s first-generation collective leadership with Comrade Mao Zedong as its core,” he quickly followed up stating bluntly, “Faced with the perilous situation caused by the 10-year-long Cultural Revolution, the party’s second-generation leadership collective adhered to emancipating the mind and seeking truth from facts; scientifically evaluated Comrade Mao Zedong and Mao Zedong Thought with tremendous political courage and theoretical courage; completely negated the erroneous theory and practice of taking class struggle as the key link; [and] made the historic decision on shifting the focus of the party’s work to economic construction and carrying out reform and opening.”⁹

A New Tone

Following more than two decades of thinking about how precisely to handle the memory of Mao and the increasingly divergent paths of the Maoist and post-Maoist eras, Xi Jinping (习近平) finally raised the issue directly. On January 5, Xi gave a talk to new

members of the Central Committee. Xi started by stating firmly that the spirit of the 18th Party Congress could be summed up in one point: the need to uphold and develop socialism with Chinese characteristics. But in reaffirming the Dengist path, Xi gave it a new twist. He pointed out,

In carrying out the construction of socialism by our party, leaders, and people, there have been the two periods, [namely that] before reform and opening and [that] after reform and opening up. These two periods are mutually related but also have major differences, but in essence they are our party's, leaders', and people's practical explorations in carrying out the construction of socialism. Socialism with Chinese characteristics was opened up by the new period of reform and opening, but it was opened up on the foundation of the socialist fundamental system that had already been established and the more than 20 years in which construction had been carried out. Although the ideological direction, orientation, and policies of these two historical periods carrying out socialist construction had major differences, they cannot be cut apart. Even more, they are not in opposition. One cannot use the historical period following reform and opening to negate the historical period prior to reform and opening, and one cannot use the historical period prior to reform and opening to negate the historical period following reform and opening.¹⁰

Although Xi emphasized the need to continue to develop socialism with Chinese characteristics, his explicit recognition of the issue of there being two periods of socialist construction and his emphasis on the indivisibility of the two periods in PRC history was new. Indeed, Xi's exposition went beyond the 18th Party Congress in explicitly distinguishing between the two periods. The 18th Party Congress had said:¹¹

In the process of exploration, although the party experienced serious setbacks, the unique and tremendous theoretical achievements it made provided valuable experience, theoretical preparations, and material basis for pioneering socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new historical period.

The party's second generation of central collective leadership, with Comrade Deng Xiaoping as the core, led the whole party and all ethnic groups of the nation to profoundly sum up the positive and negative sides in the experience of building socialism in China. They drew on the experiences in the history of socialism in the world and made the historic policy decision of shifting the center of the party's and country's work into economic construction and implementing reform and opening up. They profoundly revealed the nature of socialism, established the basic line for the primary stage of socialism.

One cannot be certain that Xi was picking up Zhu Jiamu's thesis¹²—there may have been many people who thought addressing this issue was important—but it is important to

consider why the distinction between the two 30-year periods was not accepted by the party in 2007 when Zhu Jiamu raised it (and Jiang Zemin apparently rejected it), but now Xi has thought it important to address. Obviously the political atmosphere in China had changed since Zhu Jiamu raised his proposal in 2007.

Readers of the *China Leadership Monitor* will recall that after the *Southern Weekend* (南方周末) incident in January 2013 in which the paper had run a New Year's editorial headlined "China's Dream Is the Dream of Constitutional Government," the General Office promulgated "Document No. 9" in March to lay down clear limits on major ideological issues. Among those was "historical nihilism." According to the document, "Recently some people have seized on the occasion of Comrade Mao Zedong's 120th birthday anniversary to negate Mao Zedong Thought's scientific value and guidance role. Some people have separated the two historical periods, before and after reform and opening, and even pit one period against the other, or have used the historical period after reform and opening up to negate the historical period prior to reform and opening up, or used the historical period prior to reform and opening up to negate the historical period after reform and opening up. The crux of historical nihilism lies in the attempt to negate the history of the CPC and New China and to fundamentally negate the CPC's historical position and role, thereby further negating the legality of the CPC's prolonged governance."¹³

It was shortly after the promulgation of Document No. 9 that *Red Flag Drafts* (红旗文稿), published by *Qiushi* (求实), took the lead in attacking "constitutional government."¹⁴ In the same period, *Red Flag Drafts* also published an article by the conservative former deputy head of CASS, Li Shenming 李慎明, called "To say that Mao Zedong could only engage in class struggle is a misunderstanding" (说毛泽东只会搞阶级斗争是误解). In the early 1980's Li worked in the Research Office of the Secretariat, an organ then headed by Deng Liqun. Then for nearly a decade he worked as Wang Zhen's secretary. So his background is very similar to that of Zhu Jiamu. In any case, in that article he gave a full-throated (if poorly written) defense of Mao, and he sharply attacked critics, including especially Li Zhishui's *The Private Life of Mao Zedong* and Chang Rong, *Mao: A Biography*, both of which have been influential in China. In attacking critics of Mao, Li says their criticisms are not based on ignorance or confusion but rather on them having ulterior motives and even plots—namely to bring down the socialist system in China by first blackening its leaders.¹⁵

Finally, in November, on the day before the Third Plenum opened, Beijing seemed to lay down an authoritative interpretation of the history issue when *People's Daily* published a full-page article by the CCP Central Party History Research Office (中央中共党史研究办公室) entitled, "Correctly view the two historical periods, before and after reform and opening" (正确看待改革开放前后两个时期). The article argued forcefully, "We must fully affirm the results of exploration and the tremendous achievements in the historical period before reform and opening." It was very careful not to violate the parameters of the History Resolution, saying that the Cultural Revolution "brought untold disasters to the party, state, and the people of all nationalities," but nevertheless warned against "deliberately negating Comrade Mao Zedong's mistakes in his later years, much less

completely negating Comrade Mao Zedong and Mao Zedong Thought.” On the contrary, the “two historical periods” (i.e., before and after reform) “are never separated from each other, let alone fundamentally opposed to each other.”¹⁶

The importance of correct understanding, the article said, was not just a matter of understanding history but was a “political issue in reality”—“Failure to properly handle the important political issue will create serious political consequences.” Specifically, the article invoked the specter of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, which seems to be a particular obsession of the current leadership. “One important reason for the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the CPSU [Communist Party of the Soviet Union] is the complete negation of the history of the Soviet Union and the CPSU, the negation of Lenin and other leading figures, and the practice of historical nihilism, which confused people’s minds.”¹⁷

Mass Line

The discussion on the place of Mao Zedong in history is related closely to the emphasis that Xi Jinping has placed on the mass line over the past year. Indeed for Xi, it is the mass line and the practice of “democracy” that has connected the periods before and after reform. So, as he raised the history issue, he also presided over a Politburo meeting on April 19 to make arrangements for the mass line education movement that would roll out over the next several months. Shortly thereafter, the party adopted the “Opinion Regarding the In-Depth Party-Wide Implementation of the Party’s Mass Line Education and Practice Campaign” (中共中央关于在全党深入开展党的群众路线教育实践活动的意见),¹⁸ and on June 18 Xi Jinping addressed a conference on the mass line education campaign, warning that corruption and “separation from the masses” (脱离群众) were reflected in the “four [bad] styles of formalism, bureaucratism, hedonism, and extravagance.”¹⁹

It is important to note that there was pushback from some quarters in the party. In July the *Study Times* (学习时报), published by the Central Party School, ran an article that argued that understandings of the mass line must evolve with the times. In particular, it pointed to the increasing sense of citizenship in contemporary China. “A citizen,” the author wrote, “is a constitutional and legal category,” and, as consciousness of this concept has increased, cadres can only maintain the interests of the people through the “continuous strengthening of the democratic rule of law” and “under institutional constraints.” Otherwise, “if the ‘mass line’ is just a tool used by leading bodies and leading cadres to achieve their own goals and tasks . . . then the momentum of the ‘mass line’ will be difficult to sustain.”²⁰

Needless to say, this concern with citizenship and the rule of law was not reflected in more conservative outlets, particularly the party’s theoretical journal, *Seeking Truth* (求实).

Mao’s 120th Birthday

On December 26, 2013, Xi Jinping addressed a symposium commemorating the 120th anniversary of Mao’s birth and both summed up of the discussion on party history that

had unfolded over the previous year and also reinforced his patriotic message about the “rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” The early part of his speech rehearses the themes of the “Road to Renaissance” exhibit at the Revolutionary History Museum, going from the Opium War to the Taiping Rebellion, the Reform Movement of 1898, and the 1911 Revolution until Mao Zedong and the CCP finally found the route to revolutionary success. And that success laid the foundation for China to “catch up in great strides with the trends of the development of the times.” Thus, Xi concluded, repeating one of the important themes of the previous year, “The practice and exploration of socialism before reform and opening up was the position from which our party and people grasped reality and created the future in the new historical period. Without these to provide historical experience, both positive and negative, and without the ideological achievements, material achievements, and institutional achievements they accumulated, reform and opening up could not have advanced smoothly.”²¹

Implications

The discussion of the “two periods” brought more explicit attention to the Maoist era than had been paid at any time since the passage of the History Resolution in 1981. This discussion was very careful not to go beyond the judgments of that document, yet at the same time it reemphasized in a way not previously done in the reform era the importance of the Maoist era in laying the foundation of the PRC.

One reason for doing so is outlined quite explicitly by the November 8 commentary, which argues that without defending the Maoist period there would be a political crisis that would threaten the basis of CCP rule. This defense reflects a palpable obsession with the demise of the Soviet Union that has been prominent throughout Xi Jinping’s first year of rule. Readers will recall Xi’s internal speech in December 2013 in which he said that the Soviet Union fell because, “In the end nobody was a real man, nobody came out to resist.”²² As noted above, concern with the fate of the Soviet Union was reflected in Document No. 9 and the criticism on “national nihilism.” This concern with the breakup of the Soviet Union was also reflected in a propaganda film that cadres were encouraged to watch that reviewed the deprivations citizens have suffered since the fall of the Soviet Union.²³ And in October 2013 a “Ren Zhongping” (short for “Important Commentary from People’s Daily” [人民日报重要评论]) said unusually bluntly, “Today, the Soviet Union, with its history of 74 years, has been gone for 22 years. For more than two decades, China has never stopped reflecting on how the communist party and nation were lost by the Soviet Communists.”²⁴

This focus on the demise of the former Soviet Union seems to reflect state-societal problems in China. As the same Ren Zhongping article put it, “Today, the style of the elder generation has been reduced to memory. Many of the new generation of leading cadres, who have grown up during a relatively favorable period of peacetime, lack an immediate sense of the close dependence between the party and the masses, the flesh and blood ties of life and death. Some people one-sidedly stress ‘elite governance of the nation’ and ‘governance of the nation by experts.’ They forget the masses are fundamental.”²⁵

Although such statements seem to reflect a party in crisis—something not to be underestimated—they also seem to reflect two other important elements, namely a leadership of “princelings” that harkens back to an earlier ideal of party purity and, at the same time, a very pragmatic leadership that is seeking to instill a renewed sense of party discipline. These two elements are interrelated. Ever since taking office, Xi has reflected the sense of entitlement of a generation that believes it has a right to rule and wants to restore a presumed sense of purpose and idealism that prevailed in the early years of the PRC. At the same time, in order to accomplish their goals, Xi seems to believe that it is necessary to shake up the party and instill a renewed sense of discipline. Emphasis on ideology, the mass line, opposing corruption, and the presumed ideals of the early republic are all tools that he and the leadership can use to strengthen the central leadership and try to impose discipline (or regain responsiveness) in the party.

Notes

¹ “Resolution on certain questions in the history of our party since the founding of the People’s Republic of China,” available in English at <http://www.marxists.org/subject/china/documents/cpc/history/01.htm>. Note that the Resolution does *not* say that Mao was 70 percent correct and 30 percent wrong. In discussing the “two whatevers” of Hua Guofeng, Deng comments that Mao had once said that he would be “very happy and satisfied” if later generations would judge him to have been 70 percent right and 30 percent wrong, but Deng does not explicitly affirm this judgment. When discussing the drafts of the history resolution, Deng says that Mao had appraised the Cultural Revolution as 70 percent correct and 30 percent wrong. Deng makes clear that he did not agree with Mao’s judgment of the Cultural Revolution. Deng says, “And when he [Mao] referred to the 30 per cent of mistakes, he meant ‘overthrowing all’ and waging a ‘full-scale civil war.’ How can anyone reconcile this with the idea of 70 per cent achievements?” See *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping (1975–1982)* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1984), pp. 51 and 287, respectively.

² “Speech by CPC General Secretary Jiang Zemin at December 26 Beijing rally to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Mao Zedong’s birth,” Xinhua, December 26, 1993.

³ “Speech by CCP Central Committee General Secretary Hu Jintao at a forum commemorating late chairman Mao Zedong’s 110th birth anniversary in Beijing on December 26.” Xinhua, December 26, 2003.

⁴ Zhu Jiamu 朱佳木, “The two 30-year [periods] and socialism with Chinese characteristics” (新中国两个30年与中国特色社会主义道路), available at <http://theory.people.com.cn/GB/10242108.html>.

⁵ Gao Yu 高瑜, “How can Xi Jinping and Ezra Vogel enter a single door, part 2” (习近平与傅高义怎么进了一个们 [下]), Deutsche Welle, available at <http://www.dw.de/习近平与傅高义怎么进了一个门下/a-16904285>.

⁶ Zhu Jiamu 朱佳木, “The two 30-year [periods].”

⁷ Gao Yu 高瑜, “How can Xi Jinping and Ezra Vogel enter a single door.”

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ 胡锦涛在纪念毛泽东诞辰110周年座谈会的讲话 (Hu Jintao's talk at the symposium on the 110th birth of Mao Zedong), available at <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/69112/70190/70193/14286125.html>.

¹⁰ “毫不动摇坚持和发展中国特色社会主义在实践中不断有所发现有所创造有所前进” (Unhesitatingly uphold and develop socialism with Chinese characteristics; have some new discoveries, some new innovations, and some advances in the course of practice), 人民日报 (*People's Daily*), January 6, 2013.

¹¹ 胡锦涛在中国共产党第十八次全国代表大会上的报告 (Hu Jintao's report to the 18th Party Congress), *People's Daily*, November 18, 2012.

¹² An article in *Asia Weekly* (亚洲周刊) stated its belief that Xi was influenced by Zhu. See Li Yongfeng 李永峰, “The hidden struggle of petitions prior to the opening of Bo's trail” (薄案开审前左派上书暗斗), August 11, 2013.

¹³ Document No. 9 was carried in *Mingjing Monthly* (明镜月刊) on August 19.

¹⁴ Joseph Fewsmith, “Debating Constitutional Government,” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 42 (Fall 2013).

¹⁵ 李慎明, 说毛泽东只会搞阶级斗争是误解. In an interesting bit of censorship, the online version of *Hongqi wengao* has dropped the May issues from its website, skipping from April to June. Li's essay was reposted many times. I read the version on Liu Cunzhi's blog available at http://blog.sina.cn/dpool/blog/s/blog_4c7ed2a80102fto9.html.

¹⁶ Central Party History Research Office (中共中央党史研究室), “Correctly view the two historical periods prior to and after reform and opening up” (正确看待改革开放前后两个历史时期), *People's Daily* (人民日报), November 8, 2013.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Available at <http://qziz.people.com.cn/n/3013/0930/c365007-23090188.html>.

Although adopted in May, this document was not made public until September 30.

¹⁹ 党的群众路线教育实践活动工作会议6月18日在北京召开 (Work conference on the mass line education and practice activities held in Beijing on June 18), *People's Daily* (人民日报), June 19, 2014.

²⁰ Li Haiqing 李海青, “Looking at the Mass Line in the Course of modernization” (从现代化进程看群众路线), *Study Times* (学习时报), July 8, 2013, p. 3.

²¹ Xi Jinping 习近平, “Talk given at the symposium on the 120th anniversary of Comrade Mao Zedong's birth” (在纪念毛泽东同志诞辰120周年座谈会上的讲话), 人民日报 *People's Daily* (人民日报), December 27, 2013.

²² As quoted in Christopher Buckley, “Vows of Change Belie Private Warning,” *New York Times*, February 15, 2013.

²³ “In memory of the end of the CPSU and the Soviet Union” (苏联亡党亡国二十年祭) can be found at http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XNDE0MjI4NDEy.html.

²⁴ Ren Zhongping 任仲平, “Guarding the lifeline of a people's political party,” (守护人民政党的生命线), *People's Daily*, October 14, 2013.

²⁵ Ibid.