

Political History and Structure with Dr. Renqiu Yu (part 3)

John Major: Now, in a sense, the showdown between the Nationalist Party and the Communist Party was put on hold for about eight years, from 1937 to 1945. When the Japanese war in China [began], the Japanese moved from Manchuria in north China to occupying a great deal of Chinese territory during World War II. With the defeat of Japan in WWII, suddenly the way was clear for this showdown to take place. It seemed at the time to surprise the Americans, at least, very much that Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalist army lost that civil war. They [the Nationalists] seemed to occupy much more territory; they were much more heavily armed; they had modern weapons; and there was a huge army. So how did the Communist Party manage to come to power in 1949 in the face of what seemed like overwhelming force arrayed against them?

Yu: To answer this question, we can [study] how Chiang Kai-shek himself summed up the lessons. [When] Chiang Kai-shek was defeated by the Communists, he moved to Taiwan and re-established his government there. He actually had wide-ranging conversations and discussions with his advisors and began to examine the causes of his failure in Mainland China. We can see that the Nationalist Party in Taiwan launched the land-reform movement peacefully, by itself. Another aspect is that they intensified [Nationalist] Party education. Now, if they believed those were the causes of their failure, I think probably that helps us understand that perhaps it was the popular support of the Chinese farmers in the countryside and also the very intensive propaganda campaign that the Communist Party launched, which had a tremendous influence on the urban young generation, that helped the Chinese Communist Party to win the civil war.

By that time a lot of people, probably the majority of the Chinese people, were tired of the war and the incompetence and corruption of the government. Of course, Chiang Kai-shek's government had to bear all the blame for all those problems. [But] by that time, people felt that any alternative to Chiang Kai-shek's regime was welcome; on the other hand, the Communist Party in all those years had developed and consolidated their power base in the countryside.

Major: It seems that Mao, having succeeded in his revolution, was not content to rest on the successes of the revolution. He kept overturning more and more things. You get the Hundred Flowers campaign in 1956; the Anti-Rightist campaign in 1958; the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962)¹; the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). What was it about Mao that impelled him to continue to stir the fires of revolution in this way?

Yu: We can observe in the Anti-Rightist campaigns, the Great Leap Forward and eventually the Cultural Revolution, the quintessential feature of Maoism. When I reflect on this, all those campaigns involve very intensive indoctrination, forced confessions, and also physical abuse, in many cases. And you had these kinds of campaigns every year from 1950 to 1976, when Mao died. This is really the quintessential feature of Maoism. I believe that Mao Zedong himself was really tremendously influenced by the May 4th approach. He also believed in the power of the mass movement and in the appropriateness of the right means to mobilize the masses to realize those utopian goals.

However, after the Great Leap Forward movement, other Party leaders felt that these kinds of mass campaigns had lost their usefulness; they had, in fact, become counterproductive. Liu Shaoqi², Deng Xiaoping, and other leaders would very much like to develop a bureaucratic and orderly way to modernize China. By this time, Mao Zedong was out of touch with reality and was really isolated from his colleagues.

¹ For more background on the Great Leap Forward, see the BBC site:

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/static/special_report/1999/09/99/china_50/great.htm. For visuals, see Stefan Landsberger's collection of Communist era posters at <http://www.iisg.nl/~landsberger/glf.html>.

² Liu Shaoqi was the President of the People's Republic of China from April 27, 1959 to October 31, 1968.

It is in this context and at this point that the personality of one individual really affected history a lot. Probably if it were a different individual, there would have probably not been a Cultural Revolution. But Mao Zedong refused to accept that. He continued to pursue that, and that's the culmination of all those communist mass campaigns. So many people were affected by that. So many people became so disillusioned with that. The positive historical consequence of the Cultural Revolution is its total exhaustion of the Maoist approach. After that, people were so tired that they were very receptive to an alternative. And that really paved the way for the fundamental reforms and transformation of Chinese society in the 1980s and 1990s.

Major: Now, we haven't mentioned the name Zhou Enlai³, but he seems to represent the flip side of Mao in a way – the commitment to stability and staying a level course. Zhou died several months before Mao, in the beginning of 1976, but then Deng Xiaoping appeared to be the heir, not so much of Mao Zedong, but of Zhou Enlai and the force for orderly change and long-term stability in China. Is that a fair assessment?

Yu: In the 1970s, the atmosphere and the culture were such that the Chinese people still expected their national leaders to deliver public services and public goods. There was tremendous faith in that. You might say that that was the orientation. Therefore, Zhou Enlai had a very positive image in the minds of Chinese people. Mao was really an abusive dictator; however, Zhou Enlai said he would place the national interest and the welfare of the people above everything else. I think, when we move further away from that political context and atmosphere, people will rethink the role of Zhou Enlai. In all those years he never really openly, or even privately, challenged Mao Zedong. What was his role in the shaping of the personality cult of Mao? I think people will eventually raise that kind of a question. Now, he probably did his best to mitigate the suffering of the people during Mao's dictatorship. On the other hand, we can also see that he participated in the decisions of all the Maoist programs and policies. So, the assessment of his role and his status could be very controversial and very interesting when we get further away from that period.

Now, Deng Xiaoping is different...Deng Xiaoping, by the early 1960s, began to have some doubts about the radical Maoist approach, particularly about the mass campaigns. Now, if you [consider] what he did in the 1980s, like to make a constitutional amendment to abolish the so-called *si da ziyou* ("the four great freedoms", [essentially, all related to] freedom of speech), and also opposing the big characters on the wall [public posting of "big character posters," or writing political demands on walls in public places, a form of public protest that was especially popular in the late 1970s, the period referred to as the "Democracy Wall" period], you can see that he was [also] very much convinced that that kind of approach [popular demands for Western-style democracy and individual rights] was wrong. So he decisively broke away from that approach and he introduced and initiated a new approach for China's modernization.

Major: In fact, if you look at things in retrospect, very rapidly after the death of Mao, you have a big turning away from the Maoist vision. In 1978, you have the program of the Four Modernizations⁴ and at the end of that year and into 1979, you have Democracy Wall and great public expression of desire for a new approach. And then, very rapidly, there was the devil's bargain of full-scale economic reform in return for continued political repression, or at least that is how I would read it. Deng makes an implicit bargain with the Chinese people that they can get as rich as they want and they can work as hard as they want and have a great deal of opportunity as long as they toe the line politically, and the Communist Party [remains] firmly on top.

³ Zhou Enlai was a prominent Communist Party of China leader, was the Premier of the People's Republic of China from 1949 until his death in January 1976, and was China's foreign minister from 1949 to 1958. Zhou was instrumental in the Communist Party's rise to power, and subsequently in the construction of the Chinese economy and reformation of Chinese society.

⁴ The Four Modernizations refer to the fields of agriculture, industry, science and technology, and national defense.

Yu: When we look back, we can see that Deng Xiaoping was very firmly determined to initiate reforms. He knew that the old programs totally exhausted the Chinese people and that the Chinese people were yearning for a change. Secondly, he was very keenly aware that he had to deal with the legacy of the Cultural Revolution and the Cultural Revolution activists. Those people came to power in the bureaucratic, government, and academic world in the 1950s and 1960s and followed this tremendous inertia of the Maoist approach. Therefore, by 1979, he said his top priority was to keep and maintain stability—as he said, “*wending yadao yiqie*,” or “stability and order is most important, essential for China’s modernization programs.” Then he had to deal with the Cultural Revolution activists. His theory was that the Cultural Revolution confused the people—*ba ren de sixiang gao luan*—and that these people did not know what they were talking about. In his mind, he was not dealing with those political dissidents [i.e., like the Democracy Wall activists] that really offered an alternative to his vision; rather, he was dealing with those Cultural Revolution activists who still held on to their power by asserting the old Maoist revolutionary ideologies. At the same time, he also had to deal with those people who picked up liberal ideas introduced into China when China’s door was opened. So he set stability as the priority. Then he [established] all those political principles to maintain that stability and serve as a framework for China’s modernization. So his legacy is quite interesting, and he is also quite a controversial figure in Chinese history.

Major: Now, look at China in the 21st century: a world economic power, enormous manufacturing and trade capacity, huge increase in the standard of living in China. And yet the Communist Party is still in power. Is there anything communist about China in 2006?

Yu: It is quite interesting. This is a fascinating phenomenon, not only in Chinese history, but in world history. This is a brand-new reality. The Communist Party supervised, initiated, facilitated, and promoted the transformation of a communist society into a mixed society, which has both socialism and capitalism; from a planned economy to a market economy; and from a relatively closed society and an isolated country to an open society. This is a new phenomenon; scholars are still struggling to come up with new concepts and theories to understand and interpret this.

I think that in the near future, the Chinese Communist Party will continue to keep this name; however, we have to pay attention to the theories they articulate as their programs. For example, by 2000, the former Secretary General of the Communist Party, Jiang Zemin, began to articulate this new theory called Three Represents⁵: the Communist Party is no longer the vanguard party of the Chinese working class, but a party that represents the advanced mode of production, the advanced culture, and the interests of the broad masses of the Chinese people, which means that the Party would represent everybody’s interests. These ideas [differ significantly] from the original definition. Also, when we check the Chinese constitution, amended several times in the 1980s and again in 1999, it really provides constitutional protection for private property, the private ownership of property. This is amazing. Now, in reality the private ownership of property is protected by the Constitution, but if we check the classical Marxist theory, Marx and Engels said in the Communist Manifesto that all theories of Communism can be summed up as such: the obliteration of private ownership of property. It is very interesting and can sometimes be very frustrating to discuss this. Therefore, I would follow the instructions of the advisors of Deng Xiaoping: to seek the truth from the facts and not simply be confused by rhetoric.

Major: As you look at China today and as you look at the long sweep of Chinese political history, do you find anything that has survived from the past? Is there part of the Chinese tradition that still informs Chinese political culture today?

⁵ The formal statement of the theory taken from Jiang’s speech at the 16th CPC Congress: “In a word, the Party must always represent the requirements of the development of China’s advanced productive forces, the orientation of the development of China’s advanced culture, and the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the people in China.” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three_Represents)

Yu: Absolutely. The current regime in China, [President] Hu Jintao and [Premier] Wen Jiabao, came to power in 2003. They have a new national program to build a *harmonious* society – harmonious, harmony, which is the core value of Confucianism. Then they began to also [investigate] the old virtue called filial piety. Filial piety and harmony are two core values of Confucianism. Also, in 2004, China announced that it will help establish 100 “Confucius Institutes” all over the world [to promote the study of Chinese language and culture]--the name is Confucius...

Now, the Chinese [Communist] Party State in the past promised a lot of things to the people, such as job opportunities, job security, and welfare programs, but in the reform programs, a lot of [these promises] were really changed and got lost. In other words, traditionally, from the 1950s to 1970s, the state would deliver those public services through state institutions. Now a lot of people have become unemployed; they no longer have *danwei*, or work units [through which most services, such as health care, assignment of housing, children’s education, residency permits, pensions, permission to go abroad to study, etc were delivered]. They became detached from those state institutions. How do you deliver public services to these people? How do you make these people identify with the state and also contribute to the state and benefit from the state? It is really a new issue in this new era. So a lot of the Chinese scholars began to turn back to the traditional Chinese wisdom. They began to have a discussion about the *xiangyue*, [“rural pacts” or] “community pacts” – the idea initially [developed in] the Song dynasty but really discussed and practiced in the Ming and Qing dynasties.

So we have a lot of ironies and paradoxes in modern Chinese history. Indeed, the Chinese Communist Party, to a great extent, tried to reject traditional Chinese culture and always liked to make a clear-cut divide between the Chinese Communist rule – they called this the New Society – and those old things in the Old Society or *jiu shehui*. However, now I think, China’s economy has developed enormously. China has begun to enjoy more international prestige and increased respect in the world. The Chinese also have more confidence in themselves and have more confidence in tapping into their traditional, spiritual, institutional, and cultural resources.

Major: Ren, thank you very much. It was really wonderful.