

Chapter Title: INTRODUCTION

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INTRODUCTION

Since the Cultural Revolution erupted on the Chinese political scene, more seems to have been written about this great upheaval than about its origins. Two main reasons probably account for this. First, the Cultural Revolution was an epic political struggle unprecedented in its dimensions and openness in the history of the regime; accordingly, it is bound to be more rewarding to researchers than the opaque political maneuverings which preceded it. More importantly, because the Cultural Revolution was a relatively open affair, it threw up reams of materials which, for all their shortcomings, enable the analyst to follow the development of the upheaval in a more direct fashion than any other episode in the annals of the Chinese People's Republic. To be sure, these materials also constitute a major source for the study of the pre-Cultural Revolution period, but they are much less revealing and reliable about this period than about the Cultural Revolution itself. Thus, it is easier to trace the course of the Cultural Revolution than to delve into the conflicts and controversies which caused it.

The difficulty of dealing with the pre-Cultural Revolution period is underlined by the fact that scholars who have studied this period are divided in their interpretations. These scholars can be grouped, perhaps somewhat simplistically, into two basically divergent schools of thought. According to Frederick Teiwes,* the first school exhibits "a widespread tendency . . . to adopt, albeit with significant variations and modifications, concepts derived from Peking's own 'two line struggle' . . . model of political conflict." Teiwes characterizes this school as follows:

The central assumption shared by proponents of this view is that Chinese politics was long marked by tension between two antithetical approaches. One, identified with Mao, sought modernization through mass mobilization and manifested a deep concern with the ideological purity of Chinese society. The opposing approach, ascribed to the grey Party bureaucracy and personified and led by

* Frederick C. Teiwes, "Chinese Politics 1949-1965: A Changing Mao." Current Scene, January 1974, vol. XII, no. 1, pp. 1-15; and February 1974, vol. XII, no. 2, pp. 1-19.

Liu Shao-ch'i, was absorbed in the prosaic tasks of production and economic growth, wedded to rational strategies in dealing with China's problems, and obsessed with orderly development of the existing system. . . . Fluctuations in Party policies are seen in terms of significant and often bitter conflict between advocates of each position in which the political balance has often been delicate, with Mao sometimes suffering losses of power.

Teiwes, as well as other scholars who share his approach to one degree or another, reject this interpretation. Teiwes objects to several basic assumptions of the "conflict" school, namely, that the Chinese leadership tended to polarize around dichotomous positions, that shifts in policies primarily reflected the continuing conflict among the leaders, and that this conflict brought about significant variations in Mao's power. While conceding that leadership differences figured in fluctuating Party policies prior to the Cultural Revolution, Teiwes maintains that "Mao himself has frequently changed his position both in terms of specific policies and by emphasizing different aspects of his intellectual outlook." Teiwes ascribes these changes of direction either to Mao's dialectical view of the world as gripped in a state of constant flux or, on a more concrete level, to the dynamic tension between a series of contradictory policy approaches, with first one than another in ascendancy. Teiwes concludes, therefore, that "divergent tendencies in Mao's thought, whether due to Mao's rigorous analysis of a given situation, his personal preoccupations of the moment or the efforts of others to apply his thought to problems at hand go a long way in explaining shifting CCP policies."

Thus, as against the "two line struggle" interpretation of the first school, the second school puts forth a "Mao in command" explanation of pre-Cultural Revolution Chinese politics. While the first school maintains that the widely held pre-1965 "consensus" view of Chinese leadership politics was demolished by the disclosures of the Cultural Revolution, and, indeed, by the Cultural Revolution itself, the second school continues to subscribe to this view. According to its interpretation, throughout the period leading up to the Cultural Revolution Mao's position within the leadership was predominant and there was no serious disagreement with Mao's concepts. In this situation, there were no grounds for the emergence of two basically opposing policy lines. When sharp shifts in policy did occur, they

occurred not because Mao's opponents gained the upper hand, but because Mao himself experienced a change of heart.

The origins of the Cultural Revolution, in short, are still shrouded in uncertainty. Crucial questions either remain unanswered or have been given answers which derive from conflicting interpretations. To what period can the direct origins of the Cultural Revolution be traced? What issues, if any, divided the leadership, and how deep were these divisions? What was the state of power relations and what was Mao's position? Why did developments in the period preceding the Cultural Revolution reach a climax in such a convulsion? These are some of the questions which have to be investigated in order to understand the origins of the Cultural Revolution.

The purpose of this short monograph, which is meant to be part of a larger study, is to examine these questions as they applied to the years 1959-1962. More specifically, it deals with the period between two Plenums of the CCP's Central Committee, the Eighth Plenum, held in August 1959, and the Tenth Plenum, held in September 1962. Its approach leans heavily toward the first interpretation, although it takes into account salient and significant points made by scholars of the second school. Basically, then, this monograph subscribes to the "conflict" rather than the "consensus" view of pre-Cultural Revolution politics. From this vantage point, the Eighth and Tenth Plenums loom in retrospect as important watersheds in the development of the intraleadership conflict which culminated in the great upheaval. The years bracketed by these Plenums constitute the formative stage of this conflict. This stage began with the Eighth Plenum, when the basic rift among the top leaders first came to the fore, and ended with the Tenth Plenum, after which this rift was played out primarily in the form of subterranean struggles, which broke through the surface in the explosion of 1966.

The monograph makes no attempt to survey the entire spectrum of developments during this stage of the intraleadership conflict, nor to provide all the available details of the events which are surveyed. Its limited purpose is to single out those threads which stretch directly to the Cultural Revolution in order to shed some light on the origins of this most dramatic chapter in the post-1949 history of the regime.