POLITICAL SUCCESSION IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

Rule by Purge

Eberhard Sandschneider

The study of political succession in communist systems has always been characterized by a certain mixture of academic research and crystal-ball gazing. The "Whither China" literature up to 1976 presented itself more or less as a collective attempt at advanced speculation about who was to succeed Mao Zedong. Assessing the political status and the improving or worsening health of the incumbent, and ruminating about "the unforeseeable future" in China's power contest were among the primary tasks pursued by China watchers all over the world.[1] Of course, it is tempting to speculate on "who is going to make it" when top leadership positions—especially in highly centralized and hierarchical systems—become vacant due to death or political struggles.

But what about political science and its abilities to forecast future events? As Lucian W. Pye has pointed out,

> social sciences in general are not very good at dealing with succession problems in any non-electoral context. The difficulty is that succession issues are usually resolved by the maneuvering of a few principals at the pinnacles of power, while

Eberhard Sandschneider is Research Associate at the Research Unit on Chinese and East Asian Politics, The Saar University, Saarbrücken, West Germany. This article was first presented as a paper at the workshop on Political Succession during the 1984 ECPR Joint Workshop Sessions, held at Salzburg, Austria, April 13–18, 1984. The author wishes to thank the participants of the workshop for their encouraging remarks, Johannes von Thadden for a critical reading of parts of the manuscript, and above all Professor Jürgen Domes for his critical help and many useful comments. Responsibility for the contents remains with the author.

1. Harold Hinton, "The Succession Problem in Communist China," *Current Scene*, 1:7 (July 1961); Ting Wang, "The Succession Problem," *Problems of Communism*, May-June 1973, pp. 13–24; A. Doak Barnett, *China After Mao* (Princeton, 1967) and by the same author, "Round One in China's Succession: The Shift Toward Pragmatism," *Current Scene*, 15:1 (January 1977). A critical assessment and further notes on literature are to be found in Thomas W. Robinson, "Political Succession in China," *World Politics*, 27, 1976, pp. 1–38.

> the social sciences are best only at explaining or predicting behavior at the two extremes of mass action (sociology) and individual conduct (depth psychology).[2]

Our task of forecasting future developments is further complicated by the basic hostility of communist systems toward open information on unresolved issues and the resulting lack of information on the rules of the game, on persons, policies, and procedures—not forgetting that in China interpretation of the recent past is still changing as a result of leadership conflicts. It is, however, no exaggeration to regard aspects of political succession as basic constituents of the policy process in the People's Republic of China (PRC). Thomas W. Robinson points out that

> much of the domestic politics of China since 1953, and perhaps significant elements in its foreign policy, were conducted in terms of differences between the chosen successors, Liu Shaoqi or Lin Biao, and their nominator, Mao, or in terms of jugglings for positions among the various groups and personages thought to be contending for the right to wear the mantle of leaderhsip in the post-Mao period.[3]

In other words, at stake was not only the resolution of a leadership conflict involving comparably few top cadres, but also the highly debated overall future orientation of Chinese politics between the Liuistic Scylla of material incentives and evolutionary development and the Maoistic Charybdis of mass mobilization and great leaps toward a bright communist future.

Considering this framework it is no wonder that the piecing together of Chinese succession politics mainly concentrated on answering three questions: Who will be the next dominant leader after Mao? Will the present gerontocracy continue to rule China? What will be the role of functional subsystems such as the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in future succession conflicts? At a time when everyone once again seems to be speculating on who is going to follow Deng Xiaoping, on whether the Cultural Revolutionary Left (the supporters of the so-called Gang of Four around Mao's widow Jiang Qing) is eliminated for good, and why everything will have to be as one predicts it to be, I have confined my academic interest to an analysis of the five most important case studies of political succession in China's recent past: the two unsuccessful attempts of Liu Shaoqi (1959–66) and Lin Biao (1969–71) to secure positions as personal successors to Mao Zedong with the charismatic incumbent still alive, the abortive attempt of Mao's widow Jiang Qing and her Cultural Revolutionary

2. Lucian W. Pye, "Generational Politics in a Gerontocracy: The Chinese Succession Problem," *Current Scene*, 14:7 (July 1976).

3. Robinson, p. 2.

supporters to establish themselves as Mao's heirs (September 1976), and the ensuing conflict between Hua Guofeng and Deng Xiaoping (1977–80) over supreme power in Beijing, which ended—for the time being—with Deng's victory at the 5th Plenum of the 11th Chinese Communist Party Central Committee (CCP/CC) in February 1980.

Forgoing the temptation to indulge in the elaboration of still another keen and, I would hope, correct scenario for tomorrow's development, I will look instead at yesterday's scenarios in order to learn by analysis of differences and similarities whether it is possible to work out a basic pattern for political succession in China that might prove more realistic and reliable than mere speculation on the political future of today's contenders. The basic aim of this article, therefore, is to seek to answer whether every resolution of a political succession conflict in the PRC is unique, without any comparable aspects, or whether there are basic features or even patterns of political succession that allow reasonable prognoses for future events.

The question, of course, is not new, and there have been many attempts to build models and develop new approaches to bring some light to the politics of succession in communist systems in general.[4] Analysts of Soviet politics have put forward at least three different models:

> A totalitarian model, which regards the individual leader's personal and all-encompassing rule as "paramount in determining the nature of both public policy and political structures";
>
> A conflict model, which "suggests that policy and political structures are shaped by the nature of the conflict between individuals jockeying for political power";
>
> A bureaucratic model, which "places less emphasis upon the individual leader, suggesting that the way in which a system is governed is more a function of rules and norms within the political system."[5]

For the specific context of Chinese politics, Robinson suggests a distinction between four approaches:

> An environmental approach focusing "on such matters as the stage and direction of the Chinese economy, the population-food balance, the Soviet border

4. For an overview, see *Studies in Comparative Communism*, 9:1&2 (Spring/Summer 1976), which is wholly devoted to the discussion of leadership and political succession in communist systems with some interesting attempts at model building.

5. Carl Beck, et al., "Political Succession in Eastern Europe," *Studies in Comparative Communism*, 9:1&2 (Spring/Summer 1976), pp. 35–61, esp. p. 36.

threat, and the status of Taiwan, rather than on how political decisions themselves are made";[6]

A personality approach, particularly discussing "individuals, personalities, factions, and the generational question";[7]

A societal approach, which postulates that society (defined as the social environment, including "the set of influences that stem from Chinese culture, Chinese history, and the structure and operation of Chinese social-political familial-economic institutions") determines politics;[8]

A politics approach, which regards politics as "an atmosphere in which all political actors are immerged and which immutably conditions their every act."[9]

Pye differentiates between three perspectives on the succession question in China:

A historical perspective, which we mainly follow in our discussion below;

A psychological perspective focusing on the dominant role of Mao;

A generational perspective, which arises from the structures of clearly defined revolutionary generations within the Chinese leadership elite.[10]

However elaborate and sophisticated the approaches described above may be, the state of the art is unsatisfactory because crucial elements of political succession in communist systems remain unknown to us. From a comparative point of view, one has to take into account the following characteristic features. First of all, there is no exact procedural consensus among the ruling elite either on how to get rid of an incumbent or on exactly how to choose a new one[11]—a problem closely related to the specific feature in communist systems of life-long tenure in power positions

6. Robinson, pp. 8–12. For a general classification and a remarkable analysis of approaches used in the China field, see Harry Harding, "Competing Models of the Chinese Communist Policy Process: Toward a Sorting and Evaluation," *Issues and Studies*, 20:2 (February 1984), pp. 13–36.

7. Robinson, pp. 13–20. For a recent example, see William deB. Mills, "Generational Change in China," *Problems of Communism*, November/December 1983, pp. 16–35, and fundamentally Pye, "Generational Politics."

8. Robinson, pp. 20–27.

9. Ibid., pp. 27–35.

10. Pye, pp. 2–4.

11. In China, such constitutional rules or procedures, on the one hand, do not exist in the Western sense of regulations for a smooth and undebated transition of political power and, on the other hand, seem to make little difference to the outcome of a power contest. Lin Biao, for example, was the only one, so far, who had the "guarantee" of his designation to succeed Mao written down in the 1969 Party Constitution. Exactly two years later he was dead and his name turned into a synonym for every imaginable evil. And the CCP had to go through

(with the marked exception of Yugoslavia). As a result, succession conflicts have to be solved by elite infighting, which again necessitates the cultivation of power bases from which to start attacks and on which to fall back for political security. In a moment of crisis, however, it is not only the mere existence of a power base but above all the ability to mobilize one's constituencies that is crucial for the outcome of a power contest. Finally, we do not know the exact relevance of issues, of alternative and mutually exclusive policies, and of the aggregation of interests to the outcome of a succession struggle. In other words, are issues dealt with as they come up or are they seized upon or created for the purpose of advancing one's own cause?[12] Although we know that there must be conflicting groups behind the monolithic screen of ideologically prescribed unity, we do not know exactly who belongs to them, nor what is the respective political weight of their members until they have been unmasked and criticized by the regime.[13] These, then, are the pitfalls for analysts, leaving them with the dilemma of scant historical knowledge and the innate problem of unpredictability.

After this short excursion into the state of the art, let us return to our previously sketched approach of looking at political succession in China from a historical point of view that will take into account not only how a successor position is reached by a candidate, but also how and with what results it is defended. The actual outcome of succession conflicts in the PRC shows that three of the five contenders for Mao's mantle who succeeded in winning the position of successor with Mao's approval sooner or later lost their number two status to their opponents: Liu Shaoqi was purged during the Cultural Revolution, Lin Biao fell victim to a coalition of political enemies in September 1971, and Hua Guofeng was forced to step back by the influence of a rising Deng Xiaoping in February 1980. Some remarks on the fate of the losers will finally lead us to the question of the transition from charismatic to institutionalized rule in China and to possible scenarios for the future.

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another two years of conflicts and compromises until the 1973 Party Congress deleted the remnants of the once powerful but unsuccessful would-be successor.

12. Robinson, p. 5; Andrzej Korbonski, "Leadership Succession and Political Change in Eastern Europe," *Studies in Comparative Communism*, 9:1&2 (Spring/Summer 1976), pp. 18–19, and Myron Rush, *How Communist States Change Their Rulers* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), pp. 25–26.

13. David S. G. Goodman, "China: The Politics of Succession," *The World Today*, April 1977, p. 134.

The Making of a Successor

For any process of political succession in communist systems we may theoretically distinguish three possible *modes of initiation* that are typical of political systems where there are no clearly defined regulations for the transfer of power, and where—in contrast to systems with constitutionally defined terms of incumbency—lifelong tenure of a power position is the rule. These are: succession for political reasons, succession for natural reasons (death), and succession after voluntary resignation of the incumbent.[14]

In China, the first mode, which assumes the leader is "forced from power by the political pressures of opponents"[15] was not of great importance during Mao's tenure, although one might regard Mao's position in the period between the failure of the Great Leap Forward and the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution (1959–66) as a politically enforced as well as physically motivated semi-resignation.[16] It did, however, serve as the mode of initiation for the struggle between Hua Guofeng and Deng Xiaoping.

The second mode, succession as a result of the death of the incumbent, clearly initiated one of the major watersheds of Chinese politics after 1949, the succession crisis of September 1976. For the first time, the contest was not for the second position after Mao, but for the overall leadership of post-Mao China. The power struggle was correspondingly fierce and intense. It took the winning coalition between moderate party cadres and the military about a month to eliminate the leaders of the Cultural Revolutionary Left in Beijing's top power echelons; the effects of the ensuing mass campaign to eliminate the left's supporters in middle and lower levels of the Party and State are still felt in the present move toward Party rectification.

Before Mao's death, the choices of successors presumptive were clearly motivated by the third mode, Mao's voluntary resignation from some of his leadership duties as a result of the basic dilemma he shared with other charismatic or absolute leaders. The unassailability of such leaders to a large extent stems from the absence of an obvious successor candidate and is, of course, endangered once the necessarily growing influence of a "crown prince" and the possibility of an accelerating shift of loyalties is felt. The advantage of a secure position is matched sooner or later by the need to lay the foundations for a smooth succession by a leader or a leader-

14. For a general discussion of "modes of initiation," see Rush, pp. 19ff., from where my distinction is taken.

15. Ibid., p. 20.

16. For speculations on Mao's faltering health, see Hinton, p. 1.

ship group which will follow the established political paths and fulfill the present leader's options and policies without being restricted in its actions by a marked lack of authority during the period of transition.

Before 1949 and in the following decade Mao obviously favored another option that combined elements of the two modes most relevant to his tenure. With the cultivation of Liu Shaoqi as designated—albeit never officially endorsed—successor, he pursued a leadership arrangement based on a "two front" policy. In Mao's own words:

> Originally, for the sake of the state security and in view of the lessons in connection with Stalin of the Soviet Union, we created two fronts. I was in the second front while other comrades were in the first front. . . . Since I was in the second front, I did not take charge of daily work.
>
> Many things were done by others and their prestige was thus cultivated, so that when I met with God, the State would not be thrown into great convulsions. Everybody approved this view of mine.[17]

However, the dilemma described above and the historical outcome of Mao's successor choices indicate the innate opposition between leader and successor-to-be that for Liu Shaoqi and Lin Biao was instrumental in their respective downfalls. Without reducing the dynamics of Chinese politics to the Mao-centric statement, favored especially by Taiwanese scholars,[18] his attempts to remove powerful succession candidates from their positions must be regarded as preeminent in shaping the course of Chinese politics in the 1960s and 1970s. We will have to return to this aspect of succession politics when we discuss the situation of the successor defending himself. For our present purpose it is sufficient to underline the enormous impact Mao personally had on the choice of the second man in the leadership hierarchy and the importance of Mao's role as the dominant source of legitimacy.

Legitimacy in China, again, is not defined by objectively established rules of law or procedure recognized by all parts and actors of the polity. The reference to Mao or a depersonalized Mao Zedong Thought as the one-time intellectual medium for winning power in China and the way to preserve power for the CCP today is still indispensable. To date, none of Mao's heirs has tried to establish a legitimacy of his own without continuing reference to Mao. Even Deng Xiaoping, the architect of the post-1976 de-Maoization, recently intensified the cultivation of an image of a close

17. Speech at a Central Committee Work Conference, October 25, 1966; quoted from Rush, p. 253.

18. See, e.g., Chang Chen-pang, "The Succession Problem in Communist China," *Issues and Studies*, 19:9 (September 1983), p. 10ff.; quotation from p. 10.

relationship to Mao and Mao Zedong Thought. In a countrywide study campaign, his *Selected Works*, published on July 1, 1983, were immediately praised by the national press as an outstanding contribution to the revolutionary development of Mao Zedong Thought.[19] An issue of the official *Red Flag* journal[20] pictured Deng with Mao on the front page in a position that during the 1960s was reserved for Lin Biao: a towering Mao in teacher's gesture seems to be instructing an obedient disciple half his size.

Deng's relationship to Mao may be the most problematic of all possible successors so far, but his predecessors also had to compete with Mao for political power and public prestige. From the late 1950s up until the Cultural Revolution, Liu Shaoqi built his own power base in more or less constant conflict with (at least sometimes) a publicly disapproving Mao. Lin Biao, incessantly waving the "Little Red Book," primarily relied on his image of sworn follower and humble disciple of the great helmsman. Common to both, however, was a strong power base in Party and army, respectively.

Jiang Qing, and to a considerable extent Hua Guofeng, had to rely on Mao as their more or less sole source of legitimization. The lack of a stable institutional background certainly was central to their unstable positions, and this leads us to another systemic prerequisite for securing a successor position. Although there can be no doubt about Mao's personal importance, it is somehow inconceivable that Liu Shaoqi with his towering position in the Party apparatus, and Lin Biao, the supreme leader of the army—the nation's most powerful organization at the moment of his demise—could have been purged simply because Mao chose to do so. There must have been other reasons and these most probably are to be found in some of the characteristics of political power in China.

In a remarkable analysis[21] Lowell Dittmer suggests a distinction between two types of power in China: formal power, i.e., "the power that automatically accompanies certain ranks and posts in the Party or State [or military] hierarchies" and whose bonds of loyalty are easily passed on to the next occupant, and informal power, which "consists of the long-term, diffuse, and relatively disinterested alliances that an actor collects along his recruitment path into the central decision-making area." The conceptual distinction lies in the fact that any high official in a figurehead position may have the former without the latter, or a dominant political

19. *People's Daily*, July 4, 7, and 13, 1983.

20. *Red Flag*, 23, December 1, 1983.

21. Lowell Dittmer, "Bases of Power in Chinese Politics: A Theory and an Analysis of the Fall of the 'Gang of Four,'" *World Politics*, 31:1 (1978–79), pp. 26–60, esp. pp. 28–40.

figure may base his position in large part on a system of informal power without necessarily seeking prominent posts and formal power. The two are, however, "closely interdependent, and a prudent political actor will strive to acquire both."[22] This places us at the core of a deeply entrenched factionalism that has been dubbed "the curse of Chinese politics since the dawn of recorded history"[23] and which at least since the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution seems to make up the basic network of power distribution, leadership relations, promotions, and purges in China.

The five who aspired to succeed Mao differ widely in acquaintance with and mobilization of their respective formal and informal power bases. Liu Shaoqi served as the primary representative of the Party apparatus between 1949 and 1966–67. His formal power was based on his positions as Chairman of the People's Republic of China (taken over from Mao in 1959 and in itself more a state position) and as Vice-Chairman of the CCP. These positions were almost ideally complemented by his experience as "the leading organizer of the network of Communist Party branches, labor unions, and various student and 'front' organizations" that "formed the skeleton onto which the civilian Party organization was later grafted."[24] The background of his fellow purge victims during the Cultural Revolution, many of whom had worked together with Liu in the "white" areas during the 1930s and 1940s, revealed that he must also have acquired a strong local power base in his capacity as former director of the CCP North China Bureau.[25] During his long service in official assignments within almost all important subsystems of the Chinese Communist institutional network,[26] he succeeded in establishing a web of relationships (the all-important *guanxi* in Chinese political culture) that during the Cultural Revolutionary struggle for power proved extremely resistant to attacks from outside. It even took Mao three years of hard fights to drag him down.

Lin Biao's formal power base was clearly the army, especially his loyalty group in the Fourth Field Army, the Central Military Organs (with the exception of the General Political Department), and the air force. His political career rested on a combination of factors—his close relationship to Mao, his formal command position as Minister of Defense, his status as

22. Ibid., pp. 29, 30.

23. David Bonavia, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, May 15, 1984, p. 20.

24. Dittmer, "Bases of Power in Chinese Politics," p. 30.

25. James P. Harrison, *The Long March to Power: A History of the Chinese Communist Party, 1921–1972* (London: Basingstoke, 1972), p. 505.

26. See Liu Shao-ch'i in *Who's Who in Communist China*, vol. I (Hong Kong: Union Research Institute, 1969), and Li Tien-min, *Liu Shao-ch'i: Mao's First Heir-Apparent* (Taipei, 1975), chaps. 2–7.

a member of the Politburo and Central Committee, and above all his vast network of informal relations based on the system of field army affiliations.[27] Lin Biao's personal rise to the second position in Party and State can, of course, only be understood in the overall political context of the Cultural Revolution, which catapulted the army and its predominant leader into control of the nerves of Chinese politics. His record of having made many enemies within and outside the military and his lack of a sufficient informal power base in Party and State, however, made him vulnerable to the attacks of a coalition between Mao, old Party cadres, succession contenders, and dissenting military leaders in the provinces.[28]

Given the advantage of hindsight, the Cultural Revolutionary Left's position, in comparison with that of Liu Shaoqi and Lin Biao, must be regarded as extremely weak. As the actual outcome in October 1976 shows, its sole source of legitimization was (and disappeared with) Mao. The Left's figurehead Jiang Qing, for example, lacked appreciable service experience in the pivotal positions of party, state, and military because of her highly specialized career experience in the field of culture and propaganda. The failure of the Left's efforts to establish a solid and reliable base within the military[29] and its unsuccessful reliance on the urban militia and the "revolutionary masses" were the most detrimental aspects in its attack on opponents between 1973 and 1976. Its strong position in Shanghai, in parts of the labor unions, and in the mass media sector could not overcome its unstable network of informal affiliations.

The same holds true, at least in part, for Hua Guofeng, who after the death of Mao was initially bestowed with the insignia of successorship. A typical party-administration cadre with a local base in Mao's home province, Hunan, Hua first came to prominence as Mao's chosen candidate for the position of premier in February 1976 (he was appointed acting premier on February 7, and officially inaugurated on April 7, 1976). Among his principal supporters in the central leadership were Minister of Defense Ye Qianying and Vice Premier Li Xiannian, while crucial military support came from the Beijing Military Region under its commander, Chen Xilian.[30] But as a typical "Cultural Revolutionary upstart,"[31] Hua lacked

27. William W. Whitson and Huang Chen-shia, *The Chinese High Command: A History of Communist Military Politics, 1927–1971* (New York, 1973).

28. For an analysis of the coalition behind the fall of Lin Biao, see Ellis Joffe, "The Chinese Army after the Cultural Revolution: The Effects of Intervention," *China Quarterly*, 55 (July-September 1973), pp. 427–449.

29. See Alan P. L. Liu, "The 'Gang of Four' and the Chinese People's Liberation Army," *Asian Survey*, 19:9 (September 1979), pp. 817–837.

30. Barnett, "Round One in China's Succession," p. 2.

31. For the term and its definition, see Jürgen Domes, *Politische Soziologie der VR China* (Wiesbaden, 1980) p. 205.

both a well-developed formal base in the Center (admitted only in August/September 1971) and an appreciable network of informal relations—perhaps with the exception of the public security sector and the Canton Military Region where he served as political commissar (and concurrently first political commissar of Hunan Military District). Again we have to conclude that Hua's successor position was based almost exclusively on Mao's blessing. In October 1976 the story arose, obviously deliberately fostered by Hua and his clients, that on April 28 of the same year Mao had told Hua: "With you in charge I am at ease" (*Ni banshi wo fangxin*). It is therefore no wonder that the decline of Mao's image was followed by the decline and fall of Hua Guofeng,[32] which—if the above quoted version is true—marks the third and final failure of Mao to set the course for an approved successor.

The political career of Deng Xiaoping, for the time being the last candidate for succession, once again underlines the importance of the formal/informal network system. Deng's long career path since his return to China in 1924 from studies in France almost ideally combines service in the all-important political, military, and economic subsystems.[33] With his local power base in Sichuan, he cultivated two important bases in the Second Field Army and in the Party Apparat which he headed as Secretary General of the Central Committee between 1953 and 1967. The strength of his informal relations system may be clearly shown by the fact that he was twice purged and severely attacked as the "number two capitalist roader within the Party" and twice returned with the help of his followers to the same positions with even more political power. Within a few months of his first rehabilitation in April 1973, he had collected an impressive array of important leadership posts: vice chairman of the Central Committee of the CCP, member of the Standing Committee of the Politburo, vice chairman of the CCP/CC Military Commission, and chief of the General Staff of the PLA. In his capacity as Zhou Enlai's representative at numerous official receptions between 1974 and January 1975, he was widely regarded as the most likely successor to Zhou Enlai in case of the premier's death.

However, with the approval of Mao and by unanimous decision of the Politburo he was again stripped of all official duties in April 1976 and fell back on his informal power network for personal and political security.[34]

32. Jürgen Domes: *Government and Politics in the People's Republic of China: A Time of Transition* (Boulder, Colorado, forthcoming,) Part III, chaps. 9 and 11.

33. Teng Hsiao-p'ing, *Who's Who in Communist China*, vol. II (Hong Kong: Union Research Institute, 1970), pp. 610–612.

34. *Current Scene*, 14:5 (May 1976), pp. 24–25.

Perhaps the most interesting and striking example of the working and effectiveness of this informal system is the technique of building up pressure on Hua Guofeng and the Party Center as it was used by Deng's long-time followers Xu Shiyou and Wei Guoqing, under whose protection he was hiding in Canton after his second removal from power. In the name of the party and military organizations of Canton, they openly demanded the rehabilitation of Deng in a letter written on February 1, 1977.[35] Their joint effort finally led to Deng's official rehabilitation by the Third Plenum of the Tenth Central Committee in July 1977. Nothing works better than firmly established *guanxi*!

The foregoing discussion of the respective power bases of contenders for succession to Mao now leads us to a closely related aspect. According to Dittmer's analysis, it is not only the mere existence of formal and informal power networks that counts, but above all the ability to mobilize one's constituencies in a period of crisis or whenever a fundamental threat to one's position is anticipated. The traditional technique of mobilizing a constituency is to convene meetings or—once already isolated and deprived of the right to convene meetings—by public self-criticism.[36] If in a situation of political antagonisms the necessity to mobilize a constituency is regarded as the last resort for political (and often personal) survival, the moment of truth for formal and informal power networks has come.[37]

As the historical data suggest, therefore, the following features of career patterns and political backgrounds strongly influence the development of a successor position:[38]

1. undisputed reference to Mao Zedong Thought as the ideological source of legitimization;
2. long-standing career experience in important subsystems;
3. membership in the inner leadership core;
4. maintenance of a strong local power base;
5. extensive network of formal and informal power affiliations;
6. ability to mobilize power bases and constituencies.

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35. See Domes, *Government and Politics*, chap. 9, for an analysis and excerpts of an English translation. The Chinese text was first published by Zhonggong Yanjiu, *Studies in Chinese Communism*, 17:4 (April 1983), pp. 82ff.

36. See Dittmer, "Bases of Power in Chinese Politics," pp. 26ff., for examples of the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution; and Kenneth Lieberthal, *Research Guide to Central Party and Government Meetings in China, 1949–1975* (White Plains, NY, 1976).

37. Dittmer, "Bases of Power in Chinese Politics," pp. 38–39.

38. See Robinson, pp. 15ff., for a somewhat different classification.

To these, one might add some personal requirements which are extremely difficult to observe objectively such as close connections to essential leadership groups within the PLA, an instinct for political self-preservation, a "record of not having made too many enemies,"[39] the ability to handle difficult situations and, finally, public approval. The circle of candidates to which one is admitted only by cooptation is limited to the ranks of the Politburo and high echelons of the CCP's Central Committee.

Defending the Claim to Succession

It has been pointed out above that a candidate who succeeds in establishing a claim to succession either by common approval (Liu Shaoqi) or explicit Party leadership decisions (Lin Biao, Hua Guofeng) immediately and almost inevitably enters a state of vulnerability that is characteristic of his position, especially if he is to follow a dominant charismatic leader. The dangers he has to face are manifold and range from systemic aspects typical of almost all successor arrangements in communist systems to specific features of Chinese communism.

The first problem he has to tackle is posed by the inherent tendency of complex organizations toward institutional self-assertion: The balance of power between factions or concurring subsystems may lead to a joint effort by high- and middle-level cadres to curb the future leader's influence in time, not only to protect themselves "from the capricious whims of a single individual but also [to] give them[selves] greater scope to exercise their own personal initiatives."[40] "Institutional jealousy" may be even further enhanced if it is probable that the appointed individual will promote not only his personal but also his institutional constituency's role in the political decision-making process. The joint effort of civilian party cadres—whether "moderate" or "leftist" in political orientation—to restrain the PLA's influence on national politics before and after 1971 may be cited as one prominent example.

The second and, in the case of China, highly important danger arises from problematic personal and political relations between ruler and heir presumptive. As the cases of Liu Shaoqi and Lin Biao, who were both accused of attempted usurpation, show, the succession candidate may never be safe against a potential change of mind by his patron by which he may lose his primary source of legitimization. In Myron Rush's words, the "heir presumptive has a thin line to walk between becoming a robot at the command of the ruler and asserting his own will in ways that may

39. Ibid., p. 15.
40. Wang, p. 15.

awaken his patron's fears and suspicions. Since heirs are chosen because they are thought to have some capacity for rule, it is no wonder that they have tended to assert themselves."[41] This relationship between patron and heir is obviously characterized by a closely woven net of political experiences, personal attitudes, and psychological incompatibilities.[42] Whatever the exact reasons may be, the dangers for a successor's position become immense the moment the ruler openly defies his former choice.

Although it is obviously much more difficult to change succession arrangements than to institute them, the combined efforts of incumbent and potential succession rivals represent a considerable destabilizing factor. Once the conflict becomes perceptible to opponents or breaks out openly, the successor's status normally comes under increasing attack and he himself is exposed to the manifold techniques of undermining and usurping his power. The following delineation of four tactical steps draws on internal documents and the observation of formal events during a power struggle.

First step: Criticize the policies initiated by the target. The initial stage of the conflict between Mao and Lin Biao after the Ninth Party Congress was characterized by Mao's open disapproval of Lin's propagation of a "theory of genius" closely connected with the problem of how to fill the position of head of state. Further, Mao criticized the army's and thus Lin's workstyle as "bureaucratic, subjective and formalistic,"[43] and Lin's criteria for the selection of new cadres.[44] Similarly, Deng pushed ahead his preliminary attacks against Hua Guofeng at a PLA "National Political Work Conference" (April 27 through June 6, 1978) by attacking Hua's "whatever" position[45] and at the same time propagating the opposite theorem of "Practice is the sole criterion for truth." After dismantling Hua's concept

41. Rush, p. 321.

42. Lowell Dittmer, "Power and Personality in China: Mao Tse-tung, Liu Shao-ch'i, and the Politics of Charismatic Succession," *Studies in Comparative Communism* 7:1&2 (Spring/Summer 1974), pp. 21–49.

43. *People's Daily*, November 5, 1969, and *Beijing Review*, November 14, 1969.

44. In his instructions of August 10, 1966, on the question of the line of cadres, Lin had advocated the following three criteria for a loyal Maoist: (1) one who supports Mao; (2) one who gives prominence to politics; (3) one who is filled with revolutionary zeal. *Issues and Studies*, 8:5 (February 1972), pp. 107–109. In a *People's Daily* editorial of January 1, 1970, Mao's own criteria were published in clear contrast to Lin's: Communist Party members would now have to (1) be loyal to Marxism/Leninism/Mao Zedong Thought; (2) trust the masses; and (3) be willing to conduct self-criticism after having made mistakes.

45. A pejorative term used for Hua and his supporters, based on the statement, "Whatever policies Chairman Mao formulated we shall all resolutely defend; whatever instructions Chairman Mao gave we shall all steadfastly abide by." This was attributed to Hua by a joint editorial of *People's Daily*, *Liberation Army Daily*, and *Red Flag* on February 7, 1977. See also Domes, *Government and Politics*, chap. 9.

of rural policies based on the Dazhai model, Deng initiated his overall attack on Mao as Hua's primary source of legitimization.[46] Such attacks on policies may be taken as tests of the relative strength of contenders for the build-up of future coalitions, and they seem to lay the foundation for an intensification of attacks during the following stages.

Second step: Undermine the target's power network. The primary technique used at this stage of conflict is to remove identifiable supporters already in office, or to prevent them from gaining further power positions whereby the target's formal and informal network could be increased. The aim of the aggressor clearly is the removal of substantial support and the final isolation of the target. Direct attacks at this stage of confrontation—if used at all—are shrouded by esoteric allusions and the use of historical figures as fictitious objects for indirect attacks on the real target.[47] For reasons of political stability, Lin Biao was not officially mentioned by name for more than half a year after his purge, but referred to only as a "Liu Shaoqi type political swindler." During the campaign to criticize Lin Biao and Confucius, the Cultural Revolutionary Left clearly aimed at attacking Zhou Enlai by implying he was a modern Confucius. And Deng Xiaoping was referred to only as an "unrepentant capitalist roader within the party" between January and April 1976.

These examples may suffice to indicate the difficulties encountered in decoding this kind of esoteric communication and may hint at the caution with which attackers proceed as long as the outcome of their endeavor seems uncertain. In the case of Lin Biao, the filling of leadership positions in the newly created Provincial Party Committees between December 1970 and August 1971 was clearly marked by the conflicting aims of Lin and his opponents. As the final outcome shows, Lin Biao's Fourth Field Army loyalty group dominated five provinces, participated in a strong position in two, and held a weaker position in six provincial leaderships, whereas 14 provinces were under the dominant influence of his opponents and two under the domain of the Cultural Revolutionary Left.[48] The first move, against Lin's regional power base, was followed by a closing in on his position in the Center. After the purge of Chen Boda at the Second Plenum of the Ninth Central Committee (August 23 through September 6, 1970, at Lushan), the self-criticism of Lin's top military supporters for their back-

46. For a detailed analysis of Deng's tactics to remove Hua, see Domes, *Government and Politics*, chaps. 10 and 11.

47. For a description of the technique of esoteric allusions, see Peter Michael Jakobs, "Kritik an Lin Piao und Konfuzius" (Diss., Saarbrücken, 1978, publ. Köln [et al.], 1983).

48. Jürgen Domes, *China nach der Kulturrevolution: Politik zwischen zwei Parteitagen* (München, 1975), pp. 130–131.

ing of Chen Boda's position at the Plenum, and the two formal steps of reorganizing the CCP Military Affairs Commission and the Beijing Military Region, Lin Biao's position was ready to be assaulted. The removal of actual or potential supporters and the promotion of Lin's competitors among the military[49] considerably favored the process of increasing his isolation.

Again, a similar technique was used by Deng Xiaoping against Hua Guofeng. Immediately after his second comeback, Deng started to undermine Hua's stronghold in the Party Center. After the dismissal of Wu De and Chen Xilian and their replacement by Deng's supporters Lin Hujia and Qin Chiwei, he proceeded to reduce further the number of Hua's men on the Politburo Standing Committee between the Eleventh Party Congress and the Fourth Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee from seven to three or two while he himself increased the number of his supporters from seven to 13 or 14.[50] The Fifth Plenum (February 23–29, 1980) saw the completion of his endeavors and the almost total isolation of Hua Guofeng. As a result Hua was forced to hand over the position of premier to Zhao Ziyang at the Third Plenum of the Fifth National People's Congress (NPC) on September 10, 1980. Although he still held the position of chairman of the CCP/CC and of the CCP's Military Commission, his base had eroded to such an extent that the final assault was merely a question of how and when.

Third step: Attack the target personally. The process of successfully eroding a target's overall power base finally leads to the lifting of the veil over his real identity when the power struggle enters a stage of almost one hundred percent irreversibility. In the case of Liu Shaoqi the transition between step two and three seems to have been marked by his demotion from rank two to eight in the Politburo name list at the Eleventh Plenum of the Eighth Central Committee in August 1966. But by confessing his "errors" and making profound self-criticism, Liu obviously was able to retain his already shaky position for another couple of months.

The best example is again provided by the Deng/Hua conflict. Deng Xiaoping's direct assault on Hua was bluntly launched during a series of nine consecutive and obviously conflict-laden Politburo sessions between November 10 and December 5, 1980.[51] Hua was forced to open self-criticism for his adherence to leftist policies, for his opposition to the rehabilitation of Deng and other veteran cadres purged during the Cultural Revolution, and for his wrong economic policies. Self-criticism, which

49. Ibid., pp. 134–135.
50. Domes, *Government and Politics*, chap. 10.
51. Ibid., chap. 11.

may sometimes be useful for political survival in early stages of conflict, now only marked the last step for Hua. Since the verdict was clear, there was no more need to cover the actual conflicts and a remarkably open diction was used in the "unanimous" resolution of the Politburo:

> Comrade Hua Guofeng eagerly produced and accepted a new cult of personality. He had himself called the wise leader, and his own pictures hung besides the pictures of comrade Mao Zedong, accepted poems and songs in his honor, and felt comfortable about this. This situation continued to exist until shortly before this year. . . .
>
> During the last four years, comrade Hua Guofeng has also done some successful work, but it is extremely clear that he lacks the political and organizational ability to be the Chairman of the Party. That he should never have been appointed chairman of the Military Commission, everybody knows. . . .
>
> Comrade Hua Guofeng suggested that he should resign his posts, and that, even before the Sixth Plenum, he wanted no longer to lead the work of the Politburo, the Politburo's Standing Commission, and the Military Commission. The Politburo holds that he indeed should concentrate his strength on deliberating his problems, and therefore accepts his opinion that he no longer wants to lead the current work. But before the Sixth Plenum makes a final decision on this, he is still officially the chairman of the Party Center, and he will have to receive foreign guests in the capacity of the Center's Chairman. . . .[52]

Thus the last step was clearly envisaged.

It remains to be said that in the periodically recurring context of highly dramatic factional infighting step three may be skipped. The conflict then immediately enters the last stage where a resolution is sought by means of physical coercion rather than by middle- or long-term power maneuvering. The purges of Lin Biao and the Cultural Revolutionary Left certainly are representative examples of this kind of escalation.

Fourth step: Purge or remove the target. Theoretically, the continuum of "rectification" methods in the broadest sense of the word ranges from mere self-criticism, demotion, and loss of power positions to expulsion from the Party, criminal prosecution, and, finally, death (including the possibility of political murder). The political outcome of the inner-party struggle over the succession to Mao clearly shows a tendency toward a clustering "at the coercive end of the continuum."[53] A speculative answer about the reasons for this "inhuman"—from a conventional point of view—character of politics in China may relate to the possibility and thus

52. Quoted in ibid., chap. 11. The Chinese text is to be found in *Zhonggong Yanjiu* (Studies in Chinese Communism), 17:4 (April 1983), pp. 82ff.

53. Frederick C. Teiwes, *Politics and Purges in China: Rectification and the Decline of Party Norms, 1950–1965* (New York, 1979), p. 12.

the danger of a "reversal of verdicts." As the political career of Deng Xiaoping demonstrates, a purge victim may come back under more favorable conditions and then start an overall revenge campaign (as Deng did with his rehabilitation policy). Even if the former opponent is now dead, his legacy and posthumous rehabilitation must be reckoned with (e.g., the rehabilitation of Liu Shaoqi at the Fifth Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee, February 23–29, 1980. Liu died in prison in 1969).

Whatever the reasons, the political fate of Mao's successors presumptive, so far, is a fate of losers. Bereft of protection by supporters, attacked and stripped of political and personal security, their downfall almost inevitably resulted in political *and* personal disaster.

In spite of this formidable threat, the successor presumptive as target for removal attempts is, at least in the initial stages, not totally helpless. The countermeasures at his disposal are, of course, most effective and his chances for survival best during the first stage of attack. The defender's tactics may aim at a diversion of criticism by blurring certain points of the attack, or by pushing ahead alternative policies in order to break up the coalition of opponents during its process of formation. The successful attempt of the Cultural Revolutionary Left in 1972 to change the verdict on Lin Biao from "ultra-leftist" to "ultra-rightist" may be quoted as an especially instructive example of efforts to save as much of the Cultural Revolutionary "leftist" policies as possible and to remove its own political orientation from the center of criticism. This more or less passive reaction to the initial tactical maneuvering of opponents may be successfully complemented by an active ideological counterattack such as that which characterized the ups and downs of the "Campaign to Criticize Lin Biao and Confucius" (1973–75).

By making public self-criticism the defender may appeal to the traditional priority for reeducation in Chinese Communist political culture, which ever since the rectification campaign of 1942 clearly stressed education, rectification, and redemption rather than punishment as long as the conflict was regarded as "non-antagonistic."[54] Once the attack proceeds to step two of our above typology, the successor's only chance for a successful defense is immediate abandonment of supporters already under direct attack. The nonchalance with which Mao used this method of abandoning former and cultivating future supporters is both noteworthy and well-documented.[55] Liu Shaoqi and Peng Zhen, Lin Biao and Chen Boda, Hua Guofeng and Wu De are others who may be cited from the

54. See Mao's 1957 article, "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People."

55. Dittmer, "Bases of Power in Chinese Politics," p. 32.

long list of possible examples. If the defender is not able to stop attacks at this critical stage of conflict development by a general mobilization of his power network, his chances of preventing the imminent direct attack are close to zero. History shows that once opponents have pushed the confrontation to the level of personal attacks, the defender's political fate is almost certainly sealed. If one assumes at least some truth in Beijing's official version of the death of Lin Biao, it was exactly this dilemma that induced him to seek his survival in a desperate last move by plotting to kill Mao and take over political power by means of a military coup.

The depth of a succession crisis is revealed by the relative strength of these attacks and countermeasures. It ranges from the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution, which involved all parts of Chinese society and heavily shook the foundations of the whole system, to the relatively "small-scale" clashes in the Party's top leadership circles in 1971 and 1976 that were normally followed by extensive criticism campaigns aimed at removing the loser's clientele and to the almost "orderly" removal of Hua Guofeng by majority decisions in the Politburo and Central Committee. But the observer should be cautious in assuming from the discussion so far that any attack on a successor almost certainly leads to a positive result. Although this is definitely true for the examples presented in this essay, the reader should bear in mind that the successors might have been able to defend themselves successfully by managing attacks in the early stages of a critical confrontation. In Lowell Dittmer's words:

> Power proves itself when contested, and the relative utility of formal and informal power depends upon the intensity of such a contest. If the issue is routine, it is usually allocated to the official in charge of the appropriate functional "system" for resolution. . . . But if the issue defies routine decision-making procedures and provokes intractable opposition, it is likely to be defined as a "contradiction between the enemy and ourselves" (*ti-wo mao-tun*), in which dissent is deemed illegitimate.[56]

Only under the circumstances of an antagonistic conflict is the vicious circle of purge or be purged entered.

From a historical point of view the question of who is going to dominate political decision making in China can certainly not be regarded as "routine" since succession has tended to assume an antagonistic character. As a result we have to conclude that political rule in China all through the 1960s and 1970s was political rule by purge. But what about the future? Will conflicts about top leadership succession continue to assume the dramatic dimensions of the past or will the ruling elite make greater efforts—

56. Ibid., pp. 32–33.

last but not least for the sake of its own security—to push ahead the process of institutionalization and regularization of politics in China? A tentative approach to answering this question may lie in a look at the stages of political rule in China.

Toward a "Transitional Conflict System"?

Attempts to describe Chinese politics in terms of periods of political rule or states of internal development are numerous.[57] From a broader perspective and in comparison to other communist systems, especially the Soviet Union, one may arrive at a three-stage model for the development of political rule in China which Jürgen Domes first proposed in the form presented below[58] with reference to Max Weber's sociology of political rule.

After a first stage of *charismatic rule*, which is dominated by the "role of that leader who led the Party to its revolutionary victory," the system enters a stage of *transitional rule* before, finally, the process of bureaucratization leads to the gradual formation of *institutionalized rule*. In China, the first stage more or less ended by 1959 when Mao's charismatic legitimization was battered once and for all by the failure of the Great Leap Forward. From the beginning of the 1960s Mao had to compete and to bargain with rival politicians and opposing subsystems for the recognition of his political ideals. Since then and until today, the PRC has seemed to have undergone the second stage of transitional rule, which Domes defines in the specific Chinese context as political rule in a *transitional crisis system* that is

> virtually based upon the interplay between the formation of opinion groups and their condensation into factions, of which one comes out as the victor in each intra-elite conflict, only to split up again, for a new crisis cycle to begin. As the former charismatic leader retires more and more to—or is pushed into—the role of legitimator, and several leaders compete on an equal footing after his death, political initiatives are questioned, parcellized, and—with regard to the long-term decisions—paralyzed.

However, if one accepts Domes's description of conflicts during this stage of rule as "mostly signalled by terminological divergencies, removals, expulsions, and occasionally the open rift within the Party," it is tempting to

57. For just one representative example, see Bjung-joon Ahn, "The Cultural Revolution and China's Search for Political Order," *China Quarterly*, 58 (April–June 1974) pp. 249ff., esp. p. 257.

58. Domes, *China nach der Kulturrevolution*, pp. 334ff.; *Politische Soziologie der VR China*, pp. 237ff.; and recently, *Government and Politics*, conclusion, from which the following quotations are taken.

argue that with the ouster of Hua Guofeng the PRC already and at least for the time being has left the pure stage of a *transitional crisis system*. For the first time, a loser was not completely purged or physically eliminated after the resolution of a successor conflict.

Because of obviously strong support among the CCP's rank and file, Hua was even able to retain his Central Committee membership and may thus be waiting in political hibernation for his hour to come. Assuming no drastic changes in his present status, we can perhaps call him the "Malenkov of China." For if one accepts that Malenkov's demise marked the initial step toward an institutionalized leadership in the USSR (now definitely proved by the succession process in recent years), one may suggest that China may have entered a similar stage where *conflicts* between concurring groups still prevail, where terms of incumbency and transition of power from incumbent to successor are not yet completely regularized, but where succession conflicts do not result in a thorough shake-up and ensuing *crises* for the whole political system. Under these circumstances and—remembering my own caveats concerning unqualified prophesies—one may now tentatively regard the PRC as a *transitional conflict system*.

The way toward further institutionalization seems open, but the somewhat erratic character of Chinese politics in the past should always remind the observer that another "reversal of verdicts" might easily lead us back to highly conflict-laden political structures and even—at least theoretically—to the emergence of a new form of charismatic leadership. On the basis of our present data the further development toward bureaucratization of Chinese politics in accordance with the Soviet experience seems highly probable. In this case, the preponderance of single individuals and the consequent importance of solving top leadership succession questions will continue to lose its relevance. Tomorrow's rule by bureaucratic self-assertion may then, finally, take the place of yesterday's rule by purge.