

CHINA'S OCTOBER COUP THAT ENDED THE MAOIST ERA

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From the perspective of the larger dynamics of elite politics, this paper attempts to provide a detailed fresh examination of the dramatic events of “China’s October coup” that took place immediately following the passing in 1976 of the PRC’s founding father, Mao Zedong. In this unprecedented denouement, Hua Guofeng, Mao’s newly anointed successor, unexpectedly took decisive steps to act against his late patron’s will by arresting the “gang of four” including Mao’s widow. Mao had entrusted the radical four to carry forward the great red flag of *his* Cultural Revolution. Thus Hua’s purge of the “gang of four” must be seen as a first step to move away from Mao’s legacy of radicalism by physically removing the platform for any further Cultural Revolution which had obsessed Mao but plagued the Chinese people for the entire period of Mao’s later years.

When Mao died the basic division within the Chinese polity from the Politburo to the grass roots was obvious. On one side stood the radical adherents of the Cultural Revolution, those who benefited from the movement and/or believed in its ideological message. At the apex, of course, stood the so-called “gang of four” who had been catapulted to their elevated positions from the margins of the elite in a process quite different from the Party’s traditional ladder of promotion. In opposition were a variety of individuals and groups identified with the establishment: officials who had directly suffered at the hands of rebels during the movement, others dismayed by the political and economic disruption associated with the Cultural Revolution, and a broad range of people who objected to the whole process as an inversion of proper status within the CCP. Pride of place in this oppositional coalition in both official and Western scholarly accounts has been given to the “old revolutionaries,” the leading veterans of the pre-1949 struggle who had, to varying degrees, been marginalized even when they survived the traumas of 1966-1969. Finally, as also noted throughout this study, accepted wisdom posits a third force, represented by Hua Guofeng at the top of the system, our establishment beneficiaries of the Cultural Revolution. These leaders have usually been regarded as Maoist loyalists and often as potential allies of the radicals, i.e., as a group that could have sided with either the “gang” or veteran leaders as late as September 1976, or alternatively as one forced into an alliance with the old revolutionaries only because of the radicals’ political ineptitude.

The above overview gives more form to the situation at Mao's death than was in fact the case. This relates only in part to our argument that Hua and other establishment beneficiaries, because of policy preferences, specific conflicts with the "gang" in the post-1972 period, and different socialization as members of the Party apparatus, almost certainly would not have formed a meaningful alliance with the radicals despite the accommodation they had to make while Mao lived, and might have been expected to continue for a limited period after his passing. A fundamental consideration is that none of the three broad forces were as coherent as implied. Tensions and suspicions existed within each "camp" as well as between the contending forces, and the situation was exacerbated by the tight controls in place in the period around and following Mao's death, a period perceived as a potential crisis along the lines of what happened five months earlier at Tiananmen (the Tiananmen Incident of 5 April), and by anxiety on all sides for the future of individuals and the nation. All of this inhibited or slowed down communication among presumed principal collaborators, with the particular result that discussions of possible action and especially plans for the actual coup of October 6 were kept in the narrowest circles possible. The level of fear concerning what the other side might do was palpable, as seen in Nie Rongzhen's purported warning that the radicals might attempt to place Ye Jianying under house arrest or assassinate Deng Xiaoping, and by Zhang Chunqiao's efforts to divorce his wife who represented his greatest vulnerability to charges of treason against the revolution.

While this tension-filled, fearful elite politics was part of Mao's legacy, it was also the case that all elite actors capable of influencing the situation were Mao's beneficiaries. This was even the case for the old revolutionaries despite their comparatively marginalized position: Ye Jianying remained Party and MAC Vice Chairman, other old marshals Nie Rongzhen and Xu Xiangqian had Central Committee status, and the prickly Wang Zhen possessed a certain leeway because of Mao's favoritism. By the same token, the political framework in which all forces had to operate was Mao's: his ideological line which included the campaign to criticize Deng, his succession arrangements, and his paradoxical demand for Party unity. In the weeks following Mao's death, there was little sign of anyone departing in a significant way from the contemporary orthodoxy emphasizing class struggle as the key link, the dangers posed by the bourgeoisie in the CCP, continuing the anti-Deng struggle, and consolidating the Cultural Revolution. Moreover, despite claims of plots to seize power, there is little to indicate any serious questioning of Hua as the chosen successor within the Politburo. And while it was something that could not last, at some point before his death the Chairman again emphasized unity, reportedly telling his nephew Mao Yuanxin that he wanted five people to do a good job of Party unity: "[Hua] and [Wang] Hongwen should be in charge of the overall situation, [Zhang] Chunqiao should be mainly responsible for Party affairs, and military work can be handed over to Chen Xilian and [Mao]

Yuanxin.” Mao’s repeated calls for unity were a potential restraint, or at least a complicating factor, in the calculations of all sides, yet in a further manifestation of its paradoxical nature, the potential strength this “unified” lineup could give the radical cause may have underlined the urgency of “solving the ‘gang of four’ problem.”

Clearly, the greatest assets of the Politburo radicals derived from Mao’s direct legacy. They had been the most forceful advocates of the Chairman’s Cultural Revolution ideological line, as well as having been regarded by Mao as guardians of that line, and no one was game to challenge this political orientation directly. They also held critical positions and responsibilities. In Wang Hongwen and Zhang Chunqiao they occupied half of the seats on the Politburo Standing Committee, the most authoritative body. And although the radicals were outnumbered on the larger Politburo, their opponents feared the “gang” might have a majority in the Central Committee and, like Khrushchev in the Soviet Union in 1957, be able to reverse an unfavorable vote in the higher body. In terms of responsibilities, Wang Hongwen retained a key if unclear role in Party affairs, while Yao Wenyuan oversaw the media. This did not equate with control in either case, but it provided the capacity and legitimacy for major influence. Above all this was the “special status” of Jiang Qing as Mao’s wife, something seen as an obstacle in the ruminations of old revolutionaries both during the summer and following the Chairman’s death. Even apart from her legal position as a Politburo member, how could one act against the great leader’s widow? Finally, no matter how ironic, given the actions of the “gang” and more importantly Mao himself, the dictates of Party unity argued for the radicals’ continued presence on the top body, however much their actual clout might be diluted once a new leadership was formed.

Other support for the radicals came from Cultural Revolution rebels throughout the system from the central to basic levels. These largely younger, radically-inclined cadres by and large shared the “gang’s” ideology and benefited from the same type of rapid elevation in the post-1966 period. The importance of such support, and the awareness that it was lacking at the highest level, was reflected in Yao Wenyuan’s comment on the need to recruit revolutionary intellectuals into the Politburo during the anticipated Central Committee plenum to confirm the new leadership. Moreover, despite successes in the Ministry of Culture, Shanghai, Liaoning and elsewhere, organizational control in the great majority of cases was elusive. Indeed, radical efforts to place people in effective positions in Beijing yielded such limited benefit that, in February 1976, Zhang Chunqiao instructed his Shanghai followers to refuse requests from the Central Organization Department to transfer cadres for vice ministerial and SPC appointments, on the grounds that once such people arrived in the capital they were given nothing to do. Another indication of the limited utility of the “gang’s” wider following is that, despite official efforts to paint a

nationally coordinated faction, this network was loosely integrated at best despite obvious common interests. For one thing, even the closest local followers of the Politburo radicals in Shanghai were often ignorant of the “gang’s” situation in Beijing, the interests of central and local radicals could sometimes directly clash as in the case of Wang Hongwen and the Zhejiang rebels, and there is little indication of the Politburo radicals’ hand in provincial rebel activity in 1976. This was confirmed at the trial of 1980-1981 when, for all the prosecution’s effort to make the connection, all that was demonstrated was that local radicals drew inspiration from the “gang” in Beijing.

All of the above points to the precarious nature of the radicals’ circumstances. While considerations of formal positions, the existing ideological line, Jiang Qing’s “special status,” and Party unity all argued for their continuing in office, with their essential supporter—Mao—no longer on the scene, the remaining sources of support, while not inconsiderable, were essentially scattered and not open to easy mobilization. Moreover, while organizational norms served to protect them as Party leaders, the same norms restricted their freedom of action, particularly since Hua clearly had the authority to control the agenda. In this context, the “gang” had three fundamental weaknesses. First, as often noted, the radicals lacked adequate military support, as expressed in the famous lament that they had “only the pen, but no gun.” This is somewhat overstated. As one high-ranking Party historian observed, apart from the Shanghai militia, various PLA officers who had not personally suffered during the Cultural Revolution, and who tended to worship Mao blindly, were to a degree willing to follow the radicals. But this suggests only tentative and diffuse support, and there can be no doubt of the “gang’s” fundamental military weakness, while the militia was at best a defensive instrument, vastly outgunned by the PLA, with even the Shanghai militia having only modestly increased in size compared to its pre-Cultural Revolution force.

Second, the internal tensions among the four seemingly prevented any coordinated planning, namely, the tensions within the “gang” in terms of the different backgrounds of the principals, various clashes of interest, and signs of mistrust; ample additional instances are documented below as we trace developments up to October 6. Indications that they were less than a unified “gang of four”, the term Mao apparently used only twice, can be seen in Zhang Chunqiao’s concern during this period that Yao Wenyuan improve his relations with Jiang Qing. Moreover, the establishment beneficiaries, or at least Ji Dengkui, were not entirely clear on whom to arrest, and subsequently they had to persuade the broader elite that there were indeed four, not two, deserving incarceration. And when informed of the arrests, Shanghai’s Party leader Ma Tianshui was able to accept that Jiang Qing and Wang Hongwen might have a case to answer, but resisted the notion that Zhang Chunqiao and Yao Wenyuan were guilty of anything more than “internal contradictions.”

Finally, more than anything else, the radicals were vulnerable because of their leading roles in the Cultural Revolution, and the (sometimes unnecessary) hatred they engendered in the process. The particular focus of visceral distaste was Jiang Qing, pointedly designated the “ringleader” of the “gang” at the 1980-81 trial, whether due to simple annoyance, such as over Jiang’s insistence in talking about naval uniforms at the Politburo meeting in the wake of the Tangshan earthquake, incidents of personal rudeness, such as her refusal to shake Geng Biao’s hand during ceremonies following Mao’s death, or wild charges against sitting leaders as in her claims that Ji Dengkui was a Soviet spy, Wang Dongxing was also a spy, and Wu De had been a Guomintang member. Yet as infuriating as such personal excesses may have been, it was undoubtedly the excesses of the Cultural Revolution itself that had fixed the animosity of the old revolutionaries and establishment beneficiaries alike against the radicals. While these strongly-held sentiments throughout key segments of the elite did not foreordain the specific outcome of October 6, in all likelihood they guaranteed at the very least the marginalization of the Politburo radicals.

Although this tenuous situation might arguably have encouraged the radicals, as “gamblers with only one card,” to challenge Hua, there is little evidence that this was the case. Their latent fears reflected in Zhang Chunqiao’s divorce action notwithstanding, overall they appear to have adopted an overly optimistic perspective, one centering on the late Chairman and their tentative assessment of Hua. The radicals clearly saw their duty as holding firm to Mao’s political direction, and appear to have naïvely overestimated the staying power of the still officially endorsed Cultural Revolution ideology. Perhaps this was most poignantly put by Zhang Chunqiao who, after reflecting on the strong sense of loss caused by Mao’s death, declared that “[although] Chairman Mao is no longer here, he is still everywhere..., [his] line, system and policies will all remain,” and predicted that once the loss was absorbed the future would be brighter.

As for Hua, the radicals apparently anticipated that he would be the new leader, but that collective leadership would prevail. This must be seen against the larger pattern of cooperation cum conflict which existed since Hua’s appointment as Acting Premier. Despite distortions such as the official view of Zhang Chunqiao’s February diary entry, the radicals appear to have given a modicum of support to Hua as directed by Mao. This, of course, did not mean that there were no doubts about the new leader. As Zhang Chunqiao observed, it would be necessary to see what line he took. But in the days leading up to their arrest, Zhang and Yao Wenyan still anticipated cooperation. Zhang told Yao that, his reservations about Hua’s commitment to the anti-Deng campaign notwithstanding, he was generally cooperating well with Hua, while Yao affirmed that they should help Hua, that this was the big picture. A much more skeptical view was expressed by the Liaoning model rebel Zhang Tiesheng the

day after Mao's passing: "I think this man's political color is rightist, his general line conservative, and he doesn't have a genuine understanding of the Cultural Revolution." In any case, while attacks on such policies as the Dazhai work teams and the 1975 State Council theory conference for much of 1976 could be seen as attacks on Hua and other establishment beneficiaries, and indeed they were regarded as such by the notional targets, they could also have been efforts to affirm the radical interpretation of Mao's line, to force the leadership to uphold the Chairman's course, rather than a frontal assault. The same motivation (together with fears that Deng might reemerge in the new circumstances) could be seen in continuing the anti-Deng campaign after Mao's death, even as new criticism of the "three poisonous weeds" inevitably reflected on Hua. The apparent assumption was that Hua's position was legitimate, but that he could be pressured within the new collective leadership. As with their belief in the appeal of the Cultural Revolution, this would soon be revealed as a gross miscalculation.

Turning to the old revolutionaries, Chinese and foreign accounts have muddied the waters, placing under this label a range of usually military leaders who differed in age, rank and current responsibilities. Old revolutionaries in the context of 1976 could be most usefully categorized as very senior leaders who largely lacked operational authority. Confusion enters the picture when an officer such as Yang Chengwu is treated as one of the old leaders. Not only was he junior in age and rank to Marshals Ye Jianying, Xu Xiangqian, and his wartime leader Nie Rongzhen, but after Deng's removal he held a critical active post as Acting PLA Chief-of-Staff. To add to the complexity, in 1974 he had been Jiang Qing's nominee for Chief-of-Staff. Yet, of course, there is a rationale for including figures such as Yang. The closeness of bonds, based on shared battlefield service during the war years that were so pronounced in the military, created a degree of trust between sidelined superiors and active duty subordinates that could not be replicated between similarly sidelined civilian leaders and the establishment beneficiaries holding formal authority in Party and government bodies.

The glorification of the old revolutionaries also obscures some inconvenient facts: the very limited numbers of those involved in any significant way, and the seeming hesitation of some who were approached. As in the period before Mao's death, only about two dozen plus old revolutionaries, even under the expanded definition, have been identified as participating in discussions in September and early October concerning how to "solve the 'gang of four' problem." These were all military figures, with the exception of one civilian figure of enormous prestige, former CCP Vice Chairman and current Central Committee member Chen Yun, another former Politburo member, Tan Zhenlin, one current (but basically sidelined) Politburo member, Li Xiannian, the widows of Zhou Enlai and Zhu De, Deng Yingchao, Kang Keqing and a few

others. Also, while the information is understandably much vaguer, various senior figures who were sounded out apparently avoided any involvement. As we examine the actual unfolding of events over the four weeks after Mao's death, a greater sense will emerge of how important the contributions of these few old revolutionaries were to the outcome. In any case, there definitely was within the broader elite the hope, even the expectation, that such senior figures would somehow deal with the threatening situation.

This very hope reflected the major resources at the disposal of the true old revolutionaries: their prestige and status. This was the meat of the pre-1966 system when such status largely corresponded to formal office, and reports that people as varied as Hua, who had limited although seemingly very positive personal experience with Ye Jianying, and Wang Zhen, who also had not been close to Ye despite their common background as revolutionary army leaders, greatly respected the old marshal are completely credible. This, of course, provided influence on those who actually held legal authority, and thus served as a link between informal and formal power. The key individual in this context was obviously Marshal Ye, who had both great personal prestige and an indeterminate degree of official power. Ye retained his formal posts as a Party and MAC Vice Chairman, third in the official pecking order, yet in the summer the most that could be said was that his military power had not been "completely stripped away", and in September people placed their hopes in Ye even though he reportedly had been "excluded from the leadership core." Indeed, this seems the case since, although (like Li Xiannian) he had been attending Politburo meetings, there is no evidence that he regained any of the executive authority he gave up when he went on sick leave in February, his position as Minister of Defense being particularly opaque. How all this played out for Ye and other old revolutionaries will be explored below, but clearly their power and influence were largely informal, although Ye's high formal positions crucially enhanced his authority.

Distaste for the radicals aside, several other considerations most likely impinged on the considerations of Ye Jianying and other senior revolutionaries. For one thing, loyalty to the dead Chairman was a real consideration, notably for Ye. Whether his interpretation of his last encounter with Mao accurately relayed the Chairman's meaning or not, the very fact that he considered that interpretation as a duty to fulfill underlines that loyalty. In this context, it is hard to imagine that arresting Mao's wife would have been an easy position to come to, however much hatred existed at a personal level. Another complicating factor was Party organizational principles, principles which argued against what happened on October 6 and led the old revolutionaries to consider legal methods, and also led them, as articulated by Geng Biao and others, to understand that Hua Guofeng's cooperation would be essential for any "solution." It is clear, however, that the old revolutionaries had limited knowledge of, and less

historical connection with, Hua and the other non-radical civilians on the Politburo. Ye himself had no functional connection to Hua, although he had easy contact with Hua when he was sent to Hunan in 1969 during the war scare at the time, and subsequently Ye asked Hua to join in his reception of cadres from his native county in 1975. Although such contact seemingly bespoke of good relations, it surely was Mao's designation of Hua as the successor that guaranteed Ye's support, and later sympathy, well into the post-Mao period. Ye apparently was more uncertain concerning other establishment beneficiaries, as seen in his query to Li Xiannian concerning the attitudes of Chen Xilian, a military figure but one whose career had never been closely tied to Ye, and Wu De. Of all the relevant old revolutionaries, Li Xiannian, through his overlapping work experience on the State Council of the 1970s, had the best insight into the beneficiaries. Yet for all the personal and professional distance, the old revolutionaries clearly determined that the cooperation of Hua et al. was not only desirable and necessary, but also that they would support these younger figures as the core of the CCP's new leadership.

Hua and other establishment beneficiaries had the same broad perspective as the old revolutionaries concerning the radicals, even if they were undoubtedly more accepting of the Cultural Revolution in the broadest sense. Since their main task was the actual running of the Party and state, the disruption to concrete policies caused by radical positions, and the sheer difficulty of working with the "gang" on the top bodies, and thus in any prospective new collective leadership, would have been of great concern to Hua and his Politburo colleagues. They also had their personal tensions with the "gang," whether it was attacks on policies that Hua was identified with, clashes with Ji Dengkui in the organizational sphere, or Jiang Qing's charges concerning spying or Guomindang membership directed at Ji, Wang Dongxing and Wu De. Yet, as was the case with senior revolutionaries, there is little to indicate that plans for a final showdown were afoot at the moment of Mao's death, or that Hua anticipated a challenge to his position, even though events at the July national planning seminar would have given him cause to ponder. In any case, establishment beneficiaries like their elders had to consider loyalty to Mao, organizational principles, and the "special status" of Jiang Qing as they coped with the new situation.

The following sections examine the process of how key figures among them moved from a probably uncertain initial position, to the decisive action of October the 6th.

Obviously, the great resource brought to the situation by Hua and other establishment beneficiaries was their formal power: a majority on the Politburo, the leader-designate in Hua, the highest authority in military affairs in Chen Xilian, backed by Yang Chengwu as Acting Chief-of-Staff and Su Zhenhua as the political commissar and effective leader of the navy, Wang Dongxing's

control of the security forces responsible for the central leadership, and a monopoly of key posts in the State Council. Overall, in the official lineup as late as National Day 1976, the leadership group was essentially unaltered from that of the previous National Day celebration when Deng Xiaoping was dominant, except of course for Deng's absence and Hua's elevation. Moreover, as we shall see, it was largely Hua's decisions that decided key issues and reversed "gang" initiatives over the month after Mao's passing. This, of course, did not mean that formal norms were rigorously adhered to, with the Politburo as such ignorant of the critical and inherently illegal decision to act against the "gang". But in the overall authority of Hua and security responsibilities of Wang Dongxing in particular, formal authority was central to the outcome. The extent to which Ye Jianying was also able to exercise direct authority will be examined in our analysis of events, but broadly speaking, from the perspective of the establishment beneficiaries, the significance of the old revolutionaries was their influence in helping frame the issue, and in serving as a barometer of wider elite views, particularly military sentiment.

While we can assume, and the evidence seems to support, that the establishment beneficiaries basically had a common attitude toward the radicals, this does not mean that there was a unified position, extensive consultation, or deep trust among these leaders. This must be understood in terms of both the limited shared working experience of this group, and the larger fragmentation and suspicion within the leadership created by the elite culture of the entire "Cultural Revolution decade." In 1976 in particular, as exemplified by Li Xiannian's comment that Politburo members did not dare to visit one another, easy private communication, even between officials with related responsibilities, would not have been easy. An intriguing, if somewhat mysterious suggestion of limited trust is the apparent fact that Ji Dengkui was excluded from direct involvement in the demise of the "gang," an involvement which might have been expected given both his history of conflicts with the radicals and his responsibility for Party organization. Ji's unawareness was indicated by his surprise at the absence of the "gang" as the Politburo met after their arrest. Ji's exclusion was possibly a reflection of unhappiness over his expressed reservations about treating the four equally, or even suspicion due to such insubstantial matters as Mao's comment that Ji should move out of Diaoyutai lest he become part of a "gang of five," or an occasion when Jiang Qing held Ji's arm. Alternatively, it may have been a case of simple prudence, the logic of keeping knowledge of the actual coup on a minimal need-to-know basis, something which apparently delayed Ye Jianying receiving concrete details of the plan. But the basic fact was that, despite presumed generalized hostility toward the radicals, the crucial act was taken without reference to the Politburo as a whole, which was only subsequently informed of the *fait accompli*.

Toward the Arrest of the Radicals, Late September-October 6, 1976

In the period up to Mao's funeral, discussions concerning "solving the 'gang of four' problem" were tentative at best. This was seen in Ye Jianying's cautious response to Li Xiannian. Ye's circumspection was further seen around the time of the funeral in his talk with fellow Politburo member and Shenyang Military Region Commander Li Desheng, a conversation that was apparently indirect, but still led the old marshal to turn up the radio to counter any listening devices. Similar caution was seen at the State Council meeting on September 16 involving Hua, Li Xiannian, Chen Xilian, Ji Dengkui, Wu De and Chen Yonggui, the meeting where Ji observed that the four radicals should be treated differently, an idea that was greeted with silence. While Ji seemingly did not stipulate what different treatment he had in mind, a senior Party historian believes that, notwithstanding his sometimes sharp conflict with Jiang Qing, his meaning was that due to her "special status" as Mao's wife, she should be treated leniently. No further exchanges on the radicals ensued, and Hua's reaction to this inconclusive discussion was that it was best to avoid the issue in such settings, restricting any consideration to individual contacts.

But once the ceremony honoring Mao was completed, the pace of events in the conflict of the radicals against the establishment beneficiaries and old revolutionaries intensified. One immediate manifestation was the resolution, over September 19-21, of the Mao documents issue discussed above. Other conflicts followed, with the final Politburo meeting before the coup on September 29 being particularly significant, albeit not quite in the way commonly understood. Meanwhile, the radicals engaged in various activities, including exchanges with their followers in Shanghai, although these were hardly the threats later claimed by official accounts. The most significant development was that the anti-radical forces quickly moved from generalized concern to concrete consideration of how to "solve the 'gang of four' problem. "

While we cannot be completely confident of the dates, over the week or so after the funeral, various actors turned their minds toward the issue of how to repel the perceived radical threat. Of course, given the general bias of PRC sources, much attention has been given to the initiatives of the old revolutionaries, but the bias does not mean that specific events did not happen. In one account, Chen Yun was summoned to Ye Jianying's residence in the Western Hills on September 19, although this could have happened as much as two weeks later. Ye revealed Mao's comments designating the radicals a "gang of four" to Chen, while perhaps on this occasion or in discussions with Wang Zhen, Chen offered his analysis of the options available. Despite a preference for legal means, Chen concluded that after a careful examination of Central Committee membership, the anti-radical forces could not be confident of a vote in the body.

Two days later, on the 21st, Nie Rongzhen famously called in Yang Chengwu, his old subordinate during the revolutionary struggle, and asked him to convey a message to Ye. While expressing alarmist concerns over Ye's possible arrest and Deng's possible assassination, Nie argued that "normal procedures for inner-Party struggle" were useless, and advocated preemptive action before the "gang" could strike.

If these accounts concerning the old revolutionaries are accurate, they are strikingly similar to what reportedly was considered separately by Hua. According to Wu De, on the evening of September 26 Hua met with Li Xiannian and himself to discuss the issue. Hua observed that a struggle with the radicals was unavoidable, saying, in terms like Nie Rongzhen's, that he didn't know how many people would lose their heads if they didn't act. Wu, after observing that some of the "gang's" recent activities were "abnormal" expressed support for Hua, and said there were only two ways to deal with the situation: to arrest them, or to convene a meeting of the Politburo and vote to remove them from their posts. Wu recalled that he inclined toward a meeting, and calculated that "we would have the support of the majority, [while] they had four and a half votes, [the half being alternate member] Wu Guixian." Wu De also alluded to the fundamental change in the situation: "In the past they stole Chairman Mao's name, but now they didn't have the circumstances to do that". Li Xiannian interrupted to ask if Wu knew how Khrushchev won out over the so-called "anti-Party group" in the Soviet Union in 1957 after being in the minority in the Politburo. Of course, Wu was well versed in how Khrushchev relied on the military to assemble the Central Committee and secure a majority there. The three leaders, much as Chen Yun reportedly had done, then examined the Central Committee and estimated its likely vote, similarly concluding that the outcome of such a vote would not be certain. But the difference from the Soviet situation, they decided, was that the radicals had no support among the masses or in the military. Nevertheless, they were given pause by the fact that it was still soon after Mao's death, and Jiang's status as Mao's wife remained potent, so that the radicals retained a capacity to whip up public opinion. Hua et al. felt the "gang's" activities were becoming more dramatic, and there was no telling what they might do. After discussions lasting to 5 a. m. in the morning of the 27th, Li and Wu agreed to Hua's proposal that dealing with the problem would be "better earlier than later, and the earlier the better. "Both Hua and Li subsequently told Wu that these discussions were the definitive moment when Hua decided to arrest the radicals.

This account raises the question of the role of Ye Jianying, who was not involved in the apparently decisive discussions of September 26, in reaching the ultimate determination. While we believe the glorification of Ye in CCP sources has exaggerated his contribution, and even more to the point unfairly diminished Hua's, we do not gainsay that Ye played a very important role. In

general terms, this can be seen in the simple fact that Hua's first move was to send Li Xiannian to sound out Ye, a step that undoubtedly had much to do with Ye's prestige and PLA connections, but probably more with his formal position as a Party Vice Chairman and the only member of the Politburo Standing Committee from whom Hua could expect support. Yet for all Ye's loathing of the radicals, and notwithstanding claims of the need for him to stiffen Hua's spine from the outset, as we have seen the most persuasive sources indicate that it was Hua who took the initiative. The dating of Ye's direct approaches to Hua in response, as with so much else in this period, is uncertain, but the best evidence indicates this occurred on September 21. According to Hua, this was one of only two occasions when Ye visited his home, with the other probably happening in early October, although there presumably would have been other opportunities in Zhongnanhai after Politburo meetings, although Ye apparently did not attend all of them. In Hua's memory, the exchange on the 21st involved their joint research on how to solve the "gang" issue. Ye also reportedly visited Wang Dongxing in Zhongnanhai on several unspecified occasions, as well as phoning him concerning Mao's documents and dispatching Wang Zhen, who had very good historical relations with the younger Wang. Whatever the precise accuracy of these details, Ye's counsel undoubtedly was an important factor in Hua's decision to opt for the "quick and clean" solution which drew Deng Xiaoping's praise shortly after the coup.

In the absence of truly satisfactory information on Ye's activities, it is still possible to reconstruct an overview, both as it applies to this crucial period just after Mao's funeral as well as earlier, and to early October when concrete plans to arrest the "gang" were put in place. Despite some dubious claims that Ye issued orders in specific situations, in general his role was offering advice, somewhat in the tradition of a mafia *consigliari*. This goes to the heart of the question of formal v. informal power. In the military system in particular, procedures were so highly centralized that any unit larger than a company (*lian*) could not be moved without the permission of the MAC—and Chen Xilian, with whom Hua consulted four times on the "gang" issue, had authority over that body. Indeed, as we shall see, in the critical days before October 6 it was Chen, not Ye, who authorized the decisive arrangements concerning the PLA securing the Beijing area. Ye Jianying was identified in his MAC role as Vice Chairman, as well as Minister of Defense, when meeting former US Defense Secretary James Schlesinger on September 27, a meeting specifically arranged by Hua, but it was unclear whether he was actually functioning in these roles.

As *consigliari*, Ye's contribution was to encourage and support Hua in his determination to "solve" the question of the radicals, consider various concrete measures, and reassure him of the broad support he could expect from the military and the senior generation of Party leaders generally. The old army veterans were important, but, as a senior Party historian put it, less for anything

they actually did during the process of purging the “gang” than because Hua could have confidence in their support. The outcome, in any case, relied more importantly on the actual PLA command structure, which was not in Ye’s hands, acting in a supportive manner. There were certainly enough military officers with intense loyalty to Mao who might have behaved differently under conflicting orders, but they were not put to the test. Meanwhile, with the seemingly single exception of Ye, the cream of the older generation of military leaders knew nothing of what was afoot apart from soothing words from the old marshal, such as he conveyed to Nie Rongzhen, that they should relax.

By National Day, plotting for the coup picked up momentum, while the radicals continued to blunder with inept political moves. In addition to Yao Wenyuan’s attempted compromise by restricting the “principles laid down” to media outside the People’s Daily, activities by Jiang Qing and Wang Hongwen in particular seemingly raised concern, and were certainly depicted in a sinister light following the arrest of the radicals. Jiang, as official propaganda would colorfully put it, “could not sit still, ran up and down and around to sell her ideas, ... and even told others to save their rolls of film [of her visits] and apples for her ‘extraordinary happy news’ [of becoming Party leader]. “ Indeed, Jiang did visit universities and factories, especially Qinghua University where she made five visits around National Day, attacked Deng, declared that she would not let Chairman Mao down in the fight against capitalist roaders, and approvingly referred to powerful women in Chinese history. Wang, for his part, after having an official portrait allegedly prepared for his expected appointment as head of the NPC, went to Pinggu county outside Beijing on October 3, assertedly attacked Hua by asking what people should do if revisionists seized power at the Center, observing that more Deng Xiaoping types would emerge in the future, and answered his own question by declaring such figures must be overthrown.

However many such activities may have alarmed Hua and others, post-Mao accusations clearly distorted their reality. When Jiang Qing spoke of a coming happy event, it apparently was the anticipated Central Committee plenum that would affirm the post-Mao leadership. She seemingly expected a place in that leadership, but her remark at Qinghua that Hua was Party Vice Chairman and Premier according to Mao’s “crystal clear” suggestion, far from indicating that she was preparing to leapfrog over Hua to the top post, suggested precisely the opposite succession arrangement. And Wang Hongwen, in reciting the standard radical warning against revisionism at the Center, pointed a finger, but not at Hua. The new Deng Xiaopings he referred to were “Tang Xiaoping and Wang Xiaoping,” i. e. , none other than the “two ladies,” Tang Wensheng and Wang Hairong—Wang Hairong being the subject of particular hatred on his part. In this light, in yet another instance of “gang” ineptitude, Wang Hongwen seemingly used the occasion not as a part of a bid to “seize power,” but to vent

his ill feelings toward relatively low-ranking, and now basically powerless figures. Settling old scores and advancing personal hobby horses, such as the role of women, added little to the radicals' cause, while their generally shrill tone heightened animosity toward them.

Charges against the radicals for military measures would be far more compelling if true. In fact, they are not true, and the actual significance of these pseudo-events is the alarm caused among the establishment beneficiaries and old revolutionaries, as well as the light shed on elite perceptions more generally. Two (perhaps conflated) incidents were reported: an alleged October 2 order from Mao Yuanxin, now back at his post in the Shenyang Military Region, to send an armored division under another rapidly promoted young officer, Sun Yuguo, to the capital, and maneuvers of tank units near Beijing, allegedly threatening a pincer movement on the city. In both instances, Ye Jianying purportedly played an important role in foiling the radicals, in the Shenyang case by countermanding Mao Yuanxin's order, and in the Beijing case through alerting Hua.

The threat from the Shenyang troops is most easily dismissed as mere rumor. According to a Party historian who questioned Shenyang Military Region Commander Li Desheng, Li denied that any such thing happened. Subsequently, however, Sun Yuguo was relieved of his command, although not expelled from the Party. What apparently was the cause of this career setback was less anything he did in the immediate post-Mao period than the contacts he had developed with the radicals over the previous few years. A hero of the Zhenbao Island clash with the Soviet Union in 1969, Sun was promoted to the Central Committee by Mao, was an activist in the PLA General Staff Department during the campaign against Lin Biao and Confucius, and subsequently participated in the study class run by Wang Hongwen. These connections were undoubtedly the source of any suspicion concerning Sun in October 1976, and arguably contributed to the rumor of the planned attack from Shenyang.

The case of the tank units near Beijing has more substance, at least in terms of causing an identifiable reaction by Ye, Hua and others. According to Wu De, Hua told him on October 3 or 4 that Ye was worried about a tank division at Changping in the suburbs of Beijing. The source of this worry was that Zhang Chunqiao's brother, Zhang Qiuqiao, who held a position in the PLA's GPD, frequently visited this unit. This was his practice going back a number of years, but in current circumstances it was enough to raise the old marshal's concern, even though investigations after the arrest of the "gang" found that this was an imaginary threat. In contrast to the false rumor concerning the Shenyang troops which claimed Ye had issued an order to stop their march, Ye did go to Hua, who in turn consulted Wu De about the capacity and reliability of the Beijing Garrison forces to repel any threat from the tank units. Wu assured Hua that Garrison Commander Wu Zhong was reliable, and undertook to check with him

concerning capacity. Ye Jianying thus only brought the matter to the attention of the formal authorities, rather than dealing with it himself.

As the “gang of four” indulged in acts that antagonized their enemies, did little to build support beyond their dedicated followers, and, rhetorical assertions of the need to be ready for class struggle notwithstanding, remained totally unprepared for the coup against them, Hua, Ye and others prepared for the decisive moment. Clearly a decision to arrest the “gang” and place them in isolation had been reached sometime in the last ten days of September after discussions between Hua and Ye on the 21st, and among Hua, Li Xiannian and Wu De on the 26th. While the precise timing, sequence and participants cannot be stated with certainty, and some improbable claims exist in the literature, by the start of October planning began among a small group of officials including Hua, Ye, probably Li Xiannian, Wang Dongxing, Wu De, Chen Xilian, Su Zhenhua, Wu Zhong, Yang Chengwu, and Wang Dongxing’s subordinates in the Center’s General Office and security forces, Li Xin and Wu Jianhua, while still others, including Geng Biao and Liang Biye, were essentially told to be on notice for something important. What is notable about this list is that while it encompassed veteran PLA officials, all held executive power rather than being old revolutionaries on the sidelines—the partial exceptions being Ye and Li who had current Politburo status as well as historical prestige.

A key arrangement was the establishment in the General Office of two groups personally chosen by Wang Dongxing, one under Li Xin to prepare relevant documents, and the other to be in charge of placing the “gang” under investigation. Another important step occurred on October 2, when Hua approached Wu De concerning the security of the capital, and asked about the radicals’ followers in the city. Wu noted Chi Qun, Xie Jingyi and others, and they agreed these people would also be seized. Hua further warned that Beijing must not fall into chaos, and assigned Wu responsibility for ensuring stability. In another discussion, Hua told Wu the Beijing Garrison would have to secure the Xinhua News Agency, the People’s Radio Station, the People’s Daily, the airport and other important units, and that he (Wu) would take charge of the Garrison Command, an order effected by Chen Xilian using his authority in the MAC. Meanwhile, Hua told Geng Biao, who had been recommended by Ye, to be ready for an important assignment and wait at home for his personal orders.

While the general planning for the arrest was kept within a narrow circle, the specific measures adopted for October 6 were kept within an even narrower group. While Ye is often given credit for moving the arrest forward during a visit to Hua following the Guangming Daily article on the 4th, the actual scenario was apparently tightly held by Hua and Wang Dongxing, with Ye—rather than personally directing the arrests as sometimes claimed—only informed very late in the piece for security reasons, and others involved in the arrest only informed at the last moment. The ruse that was used, a plan to “take

them by cunning,” was to announce on the morning of the 6th a Politburo Standing Committee meeting for that evening to examine the final proof of Volume 5 of Mao’s Selected Works, and to review plans for Mao’s memorial hall, and subsequently, after the arrest of Standing Committee members Wang Hongwen and Zhang Chunqiao, invite Yao Wenyuan to participate on the pretext of his propaganda responsibilities, then arresting him. This scheme was proposed by Li Xin, who reportedly had already made clear to Wang Dongxing his advocacy of quick action against the radicals during the vigil following Mao’s death. Li’s role is yet another suggestion of Kang Sheng’s hatred of Jiang Qing and Zhang Chunqiao in particular. Kang had told his then secretary Li in 1975 what others had now concluded in September-October 1976: That the “gang” issue could not be solved by normal means. In the event, Wang, Zhang and then Yao were lured to the meeting where the arrest was organized by Wang Dongxing, and the charges against them read by Hua, at least in the cases of Wang and Zhang. Shortly afterward Mao Yuanxin and finally Jiang Qing were arrested separately in their residences, and within the next 24 hours Chi Qun and Xie Jingyi were similarly placed in custody. Within an hour of the arrest of the four and Mao Yuanxin, Geng Biao was ordered to take control of the central media and communications organs. The decisive action had taken no more than 35 minutes.

With the arrests effected about 8 p.m. , an emergency Politburo meeting was convened at 10 pm at Ye’s residence at Mount Yuquan. Only some of the members filing in would have known what had happened, with Ji Dengkui, depicted by Wu De as “not understanding the circumstances of solving the ‘gang of four’ problem,” particularly in the dark. Even Li Xiannian showed signs of surprise, whether feigned or not. 97 Hua and Ye reported on what had happened, and developed the theme that would be emphasized to the wider elite in the coming days: Mao had taken several steps against the “gang of four,” but did not have time to accomplish their downfall, leaving the task for his successors to complete. In the discussion which followed, Ji asked whether the issue of the shortcomings of the Cultural Revolution that Mao had raised should be addressed in the document to explain the outcome. Ye, however, strongly opposed this idea as too dangerous at a time of instability, and also because it would touch on the question of evaluating Mao, a position he would maintain in many subsequent Politburo meetings while affirming the need to hold the Chairman’s banner even higher.

When the meeting broke up, the Politburo members were ordered to stay in Ye’s compound, where they celebrated. In the case of roommates Chen Xilian, Ji Dengkui and Chen Yonggui, their joy at the outcome was expressed in excited jumping about and punching one another. Meanwhile, Politburo members based outside of the capital were informed by phone, and measures were taken to inform important departments and selected old revolutionaries.

On the 7th, Chen Yun reportedly was told by Wang Zhen, who had himself been informed by Hua that morning, but claims of Ye immediately informing Deng are clearly false. Rather than receiving a message from Ye, according to Deng's daughter, Deng first heard of the news as a rumor from family connections on the 7th, and the Deng household retreated to the toilet for security, excitedly discussing the news over the noise of cautionary flushing. Only after ascertaining confirmation several days later was Deng completely convinced, and he then penned his first letter of fealty to Hua on October 10. Not long afterward, Deng expressed his appreciation of Hua's decisive action to Li Xiannian, Wu De and Chen Xilian: "This was a good way [to deal with the "gang of four"], quick and clean!"

The celebrations and relief could not obscure the daunting tasks ahead. Neutralizing the radicals' strongest base in Shanghai was an immediate priority. Even more fundamental was creating a coherent story to explain to the broader elite and general populace such an unprecedented event: the arrest of fully a quarter of the sitting full Politburo members, including the late Chairman's wife. However widespread and intense the distaste for the radicals as individuals and for their political program, significant segments of both the leadership at all levels and the public would be hostile, dubious, or simply confused by what had been done. It would be no easy task.

Assessing the Politics of the Coup

After a decade of radical politics, the CCP elite, or at least a decisive majority of it, entered the post-Mao period acutely aware that (whether or not the term was actually used) there was a "gang of four" problem that somehow had to be dealt with. This did not mean that the arrest of the four Politburo radicals on the evening of October 6 was foreordained, even if it had been tentatively broached in the summer and earlier. Given the gaps and contradictions in the available sources, we cannot be confident of precisely what happened over the dramatic month following Mao's death. But, on balance, we believe the account above makes more sense of that evidence than the long-accepted narrative, and is more consistent with the logic and constraints of the fractured condition in which Mao had left Chinese politics.

One aspect of the conflict in September-October is abundantly clear: There was no attempt by the radicals to seize power. In the narrow sense, skepticism concerning a radical coup has long been expressed by observers who have noted the "gang's" military weakness and the defensive nature of their activities, but the issue goes considerably beyond that. Despite the tensions of the four weeks after September 9, there is no convincing evidence that the radicals had developed any plan to challenge Hua's position as successor, or aspire to anything more than their current positions in the hierarchy, plus some concrete duties for Jiang Qing. Of course, as Zhang Chunqiao reportedly said on

September 25, it would be necessary “to see what line [Hua] follows. “But this, like proclamations of determination to oppose revisionists if they appeared in the Party Center, was a declaration of an attitude rather than an even remote indication of any plan. In addition to the absence of truly concrete preparations, the simple fact is that during this month the Politburo radicals demonstrated little fundamental solidarity, despite common positions on various issues. In contrast, the available record indicates many instances of internal bickering, as in the impatience of the other three with Jiang’s initial attempt to expel Deng from the Party, or disdain as in Zhang and Yao’s attitude toward Wang Hongwen’s leadership pretensions. Simply put, mutual suspicions and tensions meant the “gang” was too divided to contemplate any serious threat. Similarly, although lower-level radicals throughout China, and especially in Shanghai, had overlapping interests with the Politburo radicals, the bonds were loose, individual tensions existed, and there was no coherent organization that could make such forces a reliable asset. In this context, the most the “gang” could do was to attempt to promote their understanding of Mao’s Cultural Revolution line from within an emerging collective leadership, in the naïve expectation that this line would ultimately prevail.

As to who deserves credit for “solving the ‘gang’ problem,” the answer is somewhat more elusive and, in particular, complex. Our verdict, as argued in the foregoing analysis, is that primary credit must go to Hua Guofeng. This is seen in the fact that, on the most reliable evidence, rather than being an indecisive leader who had to be cajoled or pressured into acting against the radicals, Hua took the initiative to raise the issue with old revolutionaries Li Xiannian and Ye Jianying. It is also because, as the holder of the highest formal office, only Hua was in the position to issue orders that would be unquestionably accepted within the very limited circles involved in planning for the coup, and again the most reliable sources point to Hua’s decisions on the crucial steps taken. This does not denigrate the role of Ye Jianying as adviser and presumably forceful advocate of strong action. And it is necessary to acknowledge that there is divided opinion among Party historians today as to who deserves most credit for the defeat of the radicals, with a considerable body of opinion giving priority to Ye. In our view, however, historians emphasizing Hua’s role have the stronger case. To combine the observations of two senior historians: while Ye played a major role, Ye, Li Xiannian and Wang Dongxing all listened to Hua, and only Hua had the authority to order Wang’s actions. In their opinion, Hua was decisive because of his position as the number one leader, and it would have been impossible to arrest the radicals if he were opposed. But perhaps most persuasive in confirming Hua’s primary contribution to the “smashing of the ‘gang of four’ ” was the official 1981 Historical Resolution’s ranking of the heroes of the venture as Hua, Ye and Li. While arguably unfair to Wang Dongxing, the very fact that Hua retained pride of place at a time when he was being removed from the Party Chairmanship and

falsely accused on all sorts of issues suggests that denying him rightful credit for his crucial role at this seminal juncture in CCP history involved more distortion than even his enemies could countenance.

In an important sense, the argument over assigning individual credit misses a larger story. Whatever the precise interaction between Hua and Ye and the evolution of their views on how to deal with the “gang,” and despite signs of suspicion such as in Ye’s enquiry concerning the reliability of Chen Xilian and Wu De, there was an essential unity of attitude toward the radicals and recognition of the need to curb their influence in elite politics. While it would have been different had Hua indeed been indecisive, once Hua and Ye clearly understood one another, it was simply a matter of considering the options, and then organizing the coup. In this, formal authority was primary, not only in that Hua could give orders to those wielding the crucial instruments of power, notably Wang Dongxing and Chen Xilian, but also in the sense that, under these circumstances, there was no need to draw on the informal power of the old revolutionaries. The PLA veterans in the Western Hills and elsewhere, except for those with active responsibilities, essentially lived in a parallel universe. Like the establishment beneficiaries, they too worried about what the radicals might do, considered “legal” options, and so forth, but there is little to suggest that any of this had a major, much less decisive, input into the plotting centering on Hua, Ye and Wang. Ye served as a link between the two groups, but his concrete role seems to have been to reassure the old revolutionaries in non-specific terms, while reassuring Hua that these influential figures of enormous Party prestige would back him. More broadly, the military was a crucial part of the equation, but only in the sense that Hua could count on the support of specific units, the active high command, and these prestigious senior revolutionaries. If Hua had refused to face up to the problem, if the radicals remained on the highest bodies for an extended period and caused ongoing political disruption, it is conceivable that the informal authority of the old revolutionaries might have come into conflict with Hua’s formal authority. But since none of this transpired, the old revolutionaries were not only not called upon to exercise their informal power, they quite gratefully accepted the actions and legitimacy of the new formal leader, Hua Guofeng. The real test of formal v. informal authority would come with the return of Deng Xiaoping.

This leaves the question of the inevitability of what eventuated on October 6. As the preceding indicates, the situation would have been very different had Hua not taken the initiative since it would have been impossible to arrest the “gang” in the face of Hua’s opposition, or at the very least it would have led to a more protracted, divisive and perhaps bloody process. But since Hua did decide virtually immediately to confront the problem, some outcome involving at the very least the marginalization of the radicals became essentially inevitable. It is possible to imagine a minimum solution—the four radicals would hold their

formal positions or something similar, but be denied any real power or functions. There were precedents for this: after the 1959 Lushan conference Peng Dehuai was dismissed from his executive posts, but was not attacked by name and continued to be listed as a Politburo member, although he was never allowed to attend the body's meetings. This would have had the benefit of presenting a façade of continuity, avoiding the problem of violating the "special status" of Mao's wife, and observing in a pale form Mao's instructions for unity. But whether this was ever seriously considered, it was not practical given the unlikelihood that the radicals would have accepted such an outcome quietly, and that even their symbolic presence on the Politburo would have complicated efforts to bring order to lower levels of the Party and to the polity generally. Moreover, if there ever was a window of opportunity for such a restrained solution, it was probably lost almost immediately due to the combination of Jiang Qing's shrill demands in the Politburo, petitions demanding that Jiang become the new Party leader, and particularly Wang Hongwen's duty office. As we have argued, none of this was as sinister as later asserted, but against the background of a decade of tension, it was more than understandable that Hua and others would take these developments as signs that bold action was required.

The only viable options actually considered seem to have been calling a Central Committee meeting to remove the radicals legally, or to arrest them. The only other consideration known to have been raised, and we have no indication that this ever went beyond Ji Dengkui's tentative remark on September 16, was whether all four should receive the same treatment. While we suspect that when faced with the endorsement of Hua and a solid Politburo majority, the Central Committee would have endorsed a "legal" solution, as Hua, Li and Wu De, as well as Chen Yun independently concluded, there could be no certainty concerning the outcome, and significant conflict in a divided Party would have been a likely consequence in any case. The arrest of the "gang" was probably not strictly inevitable from the outset, but given both the long festering tensions within the elite, and the continuing mix of abrasive and inept behavior by the radicals over the weeks following Mao's death, the desirability of what Deng later praised as a "quick and clean" solution soon assumed an overwhelming logic.

Despite the irrefutable fact that the outcome was diametrically opposed to what Mao had desired, the Chairman's influence hovered over the entire process leading to the arrest of the "gang", and then over the new leadership's attempt to explain it and to chart a new course. Ultimately, the most decisive factor was that Mao had vested formal power in Hua. Over the tumultuous weeks after Mao's death, when Hua did make a decision as on the sealing of Mao's documents, it was obeyed, and as indicated, key holders of power such as Chen Xilian and Wang Dongxing looked to Hua for direction. At another level, Mao had left a time bomb of pronounced personal dislikes and conflicting political

tendencies at the heart of the system, thus creating the very problem that had to be “solved. “He also left an ideological line that could not be challenged, certainly not in any explicit manner. This probably contributed to both the radicals’ sense that they were duty bound to persist in that line, and to a naïve sense, notwithstanding trepidations concerning their own vulnerability, that somehow this line would prevail. Once Hua et al. did act, the coup had to be justified in Mao’s terms, with an essentially false story concocted to demonstrate that the “gang” had opposed Mao, that only ill health had prevented the Chairman from acting against them, and that they were rightists: indeed, the “bourgeoisie right in the Communist Party”. This in turn meant the contradiction between emerging new policy tendencies and the perceived need to justify everything in terms of the Chairman’s wishes, while all the while upholding the sanctity of the Cultural Revolution. Even as the overt endorsement of Mao’s Cultural Revolution line faded in the coming years, the contradiction would complicate leadership politics, with the need—for Deng Xiaoping as well as Hua Guofeng—to find ultimate justification in Mao never far from the surface.

