
1. The study of elite political conflict in the PRC: politics inside the ‘black box’

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This is a cautionary tale. The dominant contemporary Western scholarly assessments of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) elite politics in almost every period of the history of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) have been either dramatically wrong, or a very mixed bag, or in critical respects speculation that cannot be verified on existing evidence. Moreover, in some important cases erroneous findings have remained conventional wisdom even as new information and analysis has appeared, supporting alternative interpretations. This chapter will review the shifting circumstances and conclusions of Western scholarship as they apply to the very top leadership that operates in a ‘black box’ that is largely opaque not only to outsiders, but even to highly positioned members of the elite itself.

The focus here is on how important national decisions have been made, the contending forces in the decision process, and the nature of and extent to which power struggles or succession struggles have been key features of PRC political history. The Politburo Standing Committee has generally stood at the centre of this institutionally, but a range of other elite actors down to the top-ranking provincial Party leaders have been involved in various instances and respects. In any political system much of what goes on regarding major developments is partially obscure, but in authoritarian Leninist systems impediments to understanding are much more systematic, making the concept of a ‘black box’ more than appropriate. Norms of Party discipline are strong, restrictions on the right to know and have a voice are extensive even if varying over time, and mistrust among leaders can inhibit communication and create misperceptions. Moreover, the ability of the regime to create an official narrative that distorts reality has not only misled foreign scholars, but also affected the ongoing dynamic of Party politics itself.

Yet it has been possible to penetrate the ‘black box’ to varying degrees in different periods as new sources have become available, although the results have often been limited. While the limitations of Western studies have been broadly due to restricted information, also significant has been the decline of scholarly attention to elite politics. As Joseph Fewsmith observed more than two decades ago, ‘The study of elite politics has generally gone out of favor in recent years’ (Fewsmith 2001: xi), a development going back to the opening up of China to foreign scholars in the early 1980s. This opening up of research in a wide variety of previously closed areas, including state–society relations, institutional development and village studies, drew scholars away from the more opaque area of elite politics. More generally, there has been a relative dearth of the type of detailed, deeply researched investigation necessary to present central CCP politics in all its complexity. But this does not mean that central elite politics has been ignored. One type of study, involving some impressive work (e.g., Solinger 1991; Yang 1996; Shih 2008), focuses on specific policy sectors and provides important insights into the broader

political setting, but too often applies erroneous preconceptions concerning the nature of central leadership politics. Another approach adopts a thematic perspective, identifying key issues such as ‘old man politics’ or the relationship of informal and institutional factors; while perceptive, these studies rely on a general reading of sources rather than deeply focused research (e.g., Fewsmith 2001; Teiwes 1995; Tsou 1995).

In what follows, to both explore the evolving state of Western studies and offer concise personal assessments of different phases of CCP elite politics, I first address in broad terms problems causing misleading conclusions, and then examine five periods of PRC history, bringing in scholarly assessments of each period and how they have changed. Finally, concluding remarks will be offered on the possibilities and limits of studying elite politics going forward.

FLAWS IN WESTERN STUDIES OF CCP ELITE POLITICS

The essential problem facing analysts is the inevitable inadequacy of information for fully penetrating the ‘black box’. This does not prevent painstaking research from demonstrating the wrong-headedness of various conventional wisdoms, nor from providing persuasive analyses of particular events and broader trends. But given the gaps in data, scholarship has fallen prey to flawed approaches in attempting to create coherent narratives that are not necessarily justified. Here are five of the most significant.

The Use and Abuse of Sources

Western scholarship has not been deterred from constructing, on the basis of thin albeit genuine PRC source material, analyses that cannot be sustained as more revealing sources become available. A case in point is foreign policy in the 1970s at the end of the Maoist era, whether Lin Biao’s alleged opposition to US–China rapprochement, essentially based on a single after-the-fact assertion by Mao, or ongoing differences over the Soviet Union deduced from a close reading of public PRC sources.¹ In reality, Mao so dominated foreign policy that there was no room for genuine disputation; as one significant Ministry of Foreign Affairs figure put it, ‘What debate? It was just a matter of doing what Mao decreed’ (Teiwes and Sun 2007: 85). Beyond the problem of overreaching with the limited sources available has been the tendency to use sources that cannot be verified, and in various cases are demonstrably false. This is particularly the case with journals, books and documents published in Hong Kong and Taiwan. This is not to say that Hong Kong and Taiwan publications are inherently dubious, nor that PRC sources avoid the same uncertainties, but it is to say that there has sometimes been a cavalier acceptance of such material. Concerning documents, Taiwan publications have over many years published purported CCP documents that have on balance been credible, but flawed by fakes that have been taken up in the Western literature.² Arguably more significant has been the use of journals and books from Hong Kong providing ‘inside information’ on leadership conflict. In particular, especially in the early reform period, magazines linked to the reform perspective provided claims feeding the reform versus conservative narrative that became a key basis for influential Western analyses. While not inaccurate at one level, such studies provided an oversimplified narrative and numerous misleading details.³

Paying Attention to the Party Line

Overall, the foreign scholarly community has been sceptical of official and other PRC characterizations of internal elite politics, but with two glaring exceptions: the 17 years before the Cultural Revolution that was presented as a ‘two-line struggle’ between Mao and his alleged enemies; and the initial period following Mao’s death that was treated as a struggle between a reformist faction led by Deng Xiaoping, and neo-Maoists or ‘whateverists’ led by Hua Guofeng. The ‘two-line struggle’ motif for the pre-1966 period dominated Western studies of elite politics from the time it was raised in the Cultural Revolution through the 1970s. One version adopted the fundamental tension between two camps, whether personalized as Maoists versus Liuists, or given social science respectability as, for example, revolutionary modernizers versus managerial modernizers (Ahn 1976). Alternative versions provided more complex configurations, but the central factor was that Mao was frequently opposed, and forced into periods of retreat (e.g., Chang 1975). The ‘two-line struggle’ interpretation was only decisively overturned when the regime treated it as a distortion, tentatively at the 1978 Third Plenum, and frontally with the 1981 Historical Resolution (see *Beijing Review* 1981).⁴ Nevertheless, the literature, while no longer advancing the concept itself, still contained various analyses of a contested Mao (e.g., Huang 2000). There are similarities, but also differences, in the scholarly community’s adoption of the conflict between Hua’s neo-Maoists and Deng’s reformers. A major difference is that analysis of alleged Hua–Deng conflict along these lines appeared in Western sources based on readings of open PRC sources before the Party adopted the overview, but the authoritative endorsement in the Historical Resolution largely put the narrative beyond doubt for the field. Hence another difference: when the CCP reversed its line on the ‘two-line struggle’ and provided ample evidence in support, its full version was largely abandoned in the West; when the regime’s interest lay in maintaining the Hua–Deng conflict myth with minimal convincing evidence, there was little scholarly interest in pursuing the question.

Remember the Discipline

Given the gaps in the sources on elite politics, it is understandable that analysts have applied concepts from the broader political science literature in an attempt to understand the workings of leadership politics. Such efforts have been particularly notable since the 1980s when, undoubtedly not coincidentally, the trend started that weakened area studies centres and privileged disciplinary departments, particularly in the USA. Of course, testing such concepts is valid; China is not a totally unique political system where broader comparative considerations of bureaucratic interests and conflict structures are irrelevant, and theory should always be considered when assessing leadership politics. The problem has been the (mis)application of such concepts and theories to elite conflict, especially concerning the Mao period. Here I address two examples, both by first-rate scholars, both making coherent and well-regarded arguments. David Bachman’s book on the origins of the Great Leap Forward, which appeared as ‘new institutionalism’, became a major trend in US political science, it provided an institutional interpretation of the emergence of the Great Leap as the victory of a ‘planning and heavy industrial coalition’ in a bureaucratic conflict, with Mao only playing a secondary role (Bachman 1991). The

problem with this analysis is not only that the absolute dominance of Mao in launching the Leap Forward has become even clearer with new evidence, but also that leaders of the ‘planning coalition’ were equally responsible, with their purported antagonists, the ‘financial coalition’, in shaping the policies Mao bitterly rejected when deciding on the Leap. The second case is Avery Goldstein’s attempt, drawing on systems theory, to explain differences between the ‘hierarchical’ elite politics of the pre-Cultural Revolution period and the ‘anarchical’ structure of 1966–76 politics, an effort that involved no primary research, but instead relied on existing secondary studies to illustrate his structural explanation (Goldstein 1991). While the result is interesting and in some respects closer to the mark than many previous Western efforts, nothing new is uncovered concerning events or the underlying dynamics of elite politics. The over-reliance on theory in these and other cases had the effect of downgrading the essential importance of empirical research.

Finding Factions

Conflict is the stuff of politics, and applying ‘faction’ to contending forces is a reasonable if slippery approach. The main problem is not simply the frequent looseness of definition, but more importantly of relating the existence (or otherwise) and roles of designated factions to actual political conflict. ‘Factions’ have been widely adopted in the literature, whether to refer to revolutionary ‘mountaintops’ binding individuals and structures in the pre-1949 period,⁵ personal networks of reciprocity organized around senior leaders (e.g., Shih 2008), organizational careers or political associations,⁶ or perceived policy orientations, as in the previously noted reform versus conservative analysis of the post-Mao period. One problem often left unclear in the literature is that while groupings or potential factions exist, when do they manifest as factional behaviour outlawed by Party rules? For the Maoist period the crucial factor was Mao himself in creating tensions that pushed matters over the line. The early 1950s Gao Gang purge was a case where Mao’s displeasure with Liu Shaoqi, as relayed to Gao, set off a factional mobilization on Gao’s part, but no counter-mobilization by Liu, and finally Mao pulled back in view of the threat to Party unity. Underlying tensions were there, but without Mao there is no reason to think they would have developed into a major crisis.⁷ Another Mao creation, the ‘Gang of Four’, illustrates a further issue: the tendency to take as given official characterizations of ‘evil’ factions. The literature almost universally treats the ‘gang’ as a unified radical group, when in fact important tensions existed among them. In the reform era there has been a related tendency to classify leaders as reformers and conservatives without any nuance. A case in point is Xi Zhongxun, a figure deserving his place in the reform pantheon, even if overlionized now. Xi did play a leading role in some but not all reform projects. His role in establishing Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in Guangdong was significant, although his main supporter in that matter was Hua Guofeng, not ‘reform faction head’ Deng Xiaoping, while Xi opposed household contracting in agriculture, an area where Deng was very late in becoming engaged.

Let’s Struggle for the Top Job

Given the history of purges or removals of top leaders including Liu Shaoqi, Lin Biao, Hua Guofeng, Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, it is hardly surprising that the literature is

replete with claims of succession struggles. None of these cases involved struggles against pre-eminent leaders Mao and Deng, while only Hua as a genuine Number 1 leader (as opposed to Hu and Zhao who only formally held the position) was the target of actual struggles, disjointedly from the Gang of Four, and decisively from Deng in a manner hardly reflecting the ferocity notionally associated with such conflicts. If there were struggles, they were over the position of successor rather than the top job itself. During Mao's time, the only such conflict was the Gao Gang affair that, as discussed above, while a genuine attempt by Gao to unseat Liu Shaoqi, was the result of Mao's meddling. After that, until the Cultural Revolution there is no evidence of any challenge to Liu, notwithstanding Mao's occasional hints of a preference for Deng. The succession seemed set with Mao, as he affirmed in 1961, ostensibly envisioning Liu's succession, most likely followed by Deng (MacFarquhar 1997: 433, 640n14). Crucially, no possible alternative leader undertook any known efforts to undermine Liu, whether due to a feeling that this was required for regime stability, or because of uncertainty as to Mao's real intent. Strikingly, Lin Biao did not want to be the successor and tried to avoid it, and given the dubious possibility that he was intending a coup against Mao in 1971, it could only have been a desperate defensive measure (see Teiwes and Sun 1996: 57–65, 152–160). As for Hua, he also did not seek the successor post, in fact attempting to position more senior colleagues for it in 1976 (see Teiwes and Sun 2007: 439–441, 582–583), and, as we shall discuss subsequently, offered no resistance to his removal in 1980–81. Following Hua's ouster, like Hua and Lin Biao before them, neither Hu Yaobang nor Zhao Ziyang sought the position, and in fact seemingly tried to avoid it.⁸ Real power lay with the Party's elders, while vulnerability accompanied the leading position on the 'first front' of managing Party and government affairs.

A PERIODIZATION, 1949–2014

The scholarly understanding of each successive period of PRC history has varied in accord with the factors discussed above and the evolving availability of sources. I address these contextual developments for each of the five periods below, and present my own summary overview of what can realistically be said about the elite politics of each period.

The Pre-Cultural Revolution Period, 1949–66⁹

During the 17 years before mid-1966 when, according to the Cultural Revolution narrative, a 'two-line struggle' existed between Mao and his alleged enemies, there was little attention to CCP elite politics in foreign scholarship. The dominant feature of this scholarship was in the Sinological tradition with historical enquiry focusing on the traditional and Republican periods, although the infusion of US government and related foundation funding in the early 1960s saw a take-off period of political and historical studies on the PRC. But little was done on elite politics, and those who did undertake such enquiries were largely limited to official public sources that naturally represented the Party line. These included the daily media, always necessary for placing politics in a hopefully precise context; major documents from key Party and state meetings or on political themes of particular salience to the leadership; and documents on some high-level

purges.¹⁰ Valuable additional sources included the Hong Kong newsletter *China News Analysis* (1953–98) that summarized and analysed PRC developments, and various compendia of meetings and personnel compiled by the US Consulate in Hong Kong. None of this, however, did much to bolster elite studies: two of the most significant books emerging from the early 1960s fundamentally avoided elite conflict (Barnett 1967; Lewis 1963),¹¹ while arguably the most influential (Schurmann 1966) addressed ‘Mao’s opponents’ based on a classic Kremlinological reading of speeches by different leaders without access to any behind-the-scenes developments, and identified a struggle between Mao and Gao Gang based on the official denunciation of Gao.

As already indicated, the Cultural Revolution reversed this situation. Now there was a surfeit of ‘inside’ materials, as well as an official line emphasizing conflict over the 17 years. Of course, the line was not as strict and consistent as before, with Red Guard publications in uncoordinated fashion presenting a vast array of (unverifiable, but in broad terms generally credible) exposés of the views and actions of assorted Mao ‘enemies’. This was bolstered by the official press along similar lines, and some extremely valuable collections of Mao’s speeches and comments largely emanating from Red Guard sources.¹² This led to the most fecund period of studies on elite politics to date; a number of major books sought to explain the origins of the Cultural Revolution and the unfolding of the movement, while monographs and articles further dealt with specific aspects of leadership politics. The problem did not so much concern the accumulation of data from the new treasure trove of Cultural Revolution sources, as fitting this information into the now dominant ‘two-line struggle’ model. A key failure was in contrasting the opinions and actions of top leaders at one point in time to Mao’s views at another as illustrating sharp conflict, ignoring that Mao almost always endorsed the offending views at the time they were raised, or at least indicated a willingness for them to be tried out, or was ambiguous, or simply made no comment.

A further reversal inevitably occurred in the post-Mao period, with the regime changing its overview and providing an enormous range of materials in support. These included an invaluable set of officially produced Mao manuscripts (*Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao* 1987–98), chronologies of events, the *nianpu* or chronicles of specific high-ranking leaders,¹³ an official series of biographies of deceased leaders (*Zhonggong dangshi renwu zhuan* 1980–), many memoirs of leaders including some that are exceptionally revealing (e.g., Bo Yibo 1991, 1993), major books by Party historians that while constrained by official orthodoxies nevertheless present details and analysis going beyond those limits,¹⁴ and many articles in the same vein by serious scholars in Party history journals. Finally, an important additional source emerged with the PRC’s opening: access to retired elite members and excellent Party history scholars who provide both details and perspectives that are invaluable. Thus while inevitably incomplete and leaving important questions open, this array of sources has provided the basis for deep detailed research that can correct past official misrepresentations as well as those continuing to the present. Unfortunately, some good specific studies notwithstanding, with the general turn away from elite politics since the early 1980s, erroneous claims of limits on Mao’s power persist in the literature, and overall studies utilizing deep research enabling comprehensive assessments of leadership politics before 1966 are few and far between.¹⁵

What, then, utilizing the full range of sources available, can we conclude about elite politics before the Cultural Revolution? The central factor was the dominant,

unchallengeable position of Mao. Given authority to make final decisions in 1943, such formal authority was immeasurably enhanced by the fact of the victory of the revolution in 1949; a new dynasty was established, and as the leader perceived by his colleagues as the strategic genius responsible for this unimaginable victory, Mao was the new emperor in all but name. While his status and authority were never challenged, the Chairman was sensitive to his own power, most notably by assuming virtual sole control of the military, in effect revising his dictum that 'the Party controls the gun' to 'Mao controls the gun'.¹⁶ Mao was also highly judgemental, and had his personal favourites. These did not include his ranking colleagues Liu and Zhou who had comparable status in the early history of the Party, and these leaders would suffer in very different ways during the Cultural Revolution decade. The Chairman's favourites were more junior officials – Gao Gang, Lin Biao and Deng Xiaoping – presumably perceived as less of any possible threat, and in each case having qualities Mao admired.¹⁷ While Gao and Lin suffered rejection and terrible fates, all three only attained positions near the very top because of Mao's actions.

While Mao exercised absolute power during the entire 17 years to 1966, this period can be divided into two distinct periods in terms of Mao's leadership style and its impact on elite politics. Up to the first signs of the Great Leap Forward in late 1957, Mao could be considered as a very strong-minded chairman of the board, one who delegated policy formulation in areas where he felt less competent; especially the economy, where Zhou Enlai and Chen Yun played the dominant role. But Mao retained direct control of the areas where he felt most comfortable, notably foreign affairs and agriculture, and forced through measures apparently opposed by most of the Politburo, notably entry into the Korean War and stepping up the pace of agricultural collectivization in 1955. Mao's policy-setting was broadly centrist, but with a predisposition to push ahead faster, as in the transition to socialism in 1953, and the 'high tide' of collectivization in 1955. Mao not only got his way, but he also imposed career setbacks on key players, although without purges.¹⁸ Mao's colleagues apparently concluded that while they could not directly challenge the Chairman, they could try to persuade him. A telling case occurred in spring 1956 when Zhou and the bulk of the top economic leadership determined that the 'little leap forward' following the surge in collectivization was unsustainable and had to be cut back. Mao was unhappy, and at the relevant Politburo meeting instead proposed an increase in investment. Hardly anyone was supportive of this, but no one voted against it. However, several days later Zhou approached Mao to argue the case privately, and after an initial outburst of anger, the Chairman accepted the Premier's position and 'opposing rash advance' became the policy of the day (Teiwes and Sun 1999: Ch. 1). Many Western analyses treat this development as a defeat forced on Mao, and he subsequently singled it out as a major deviation. But Mao approved the policy and did not object to any specific measures at the time. He still gave leeway to Zhou and others as a matter of choice.

A new dynamic appeared with the Great Leap, a policy initiative reflecting various factors,¹⁹ but arguably driven by Mao's coming to terms with his first significant failure since becoming CCP leader: the 1957 Hundred Flowers experiment he had pushed through which resulted in sharp criticism of the Party. Now Mao sought a new personal policy initiative, and blamed his earlier failure on others, most illogically for 'opposing rash advance'. From January 1958, Mao imposed an extreme radical economic policy on the Party, sharply criticized Zhou, forced formal self-criticisms by Standing Committee members for the first time, and created an atmosphere where Zhou felt obliged to

offer his resignation. Thus the incredibly destructive Leap, which eventually cost 25 to 45 million peasant lives through starvation, was launched, with opposition within the top leadership notable by its absence, and with Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping playing key roles in pushing it forward. Of particular note is that as early signs of the disaster began to filter through, it was Mao who first called for pulling back from the extremes, with the very highest officials following cautiously. As the Lushan meeting approached in summer 1959, Mao indicated a willingness to consider further measures, but he took Peng Dehuai's critique of Great Leap excesses as a personal attack, resulting in Peng's dismissal, a new upsurge of radical policies and with it a big spike in famine deaths. But as in late 1958, it took Mao's authority in autumn 1960 to reorient policy, this time more profoundly toward ending the Leap. It also set in motion a new leadership arrangement with Mao retreating to the 'second front' to deal with overall direction and theory, leaving his colleagues on the 'first front' to run the concrete business of the party-state and clean up the Chairman's mess (see Teiwes and Sun 1999, Chs 2–4 and Epilogues 1–2).

Mao's withdrawal to the 'second front' has been treated in Western studies as another forced concession, and it is clear the Chairman's prestige within the Party had reached its nadir, as seen in his tepid self-criticism at the 7000 cadres conference in early 1962. But there is no evidence of senior leaders organizing against him; instead, Deng Xiaoping and Lin Biao made fawning speeches of support at the conference, while Liu Shaoqi tried to assume personal responsibility for what had gone wrong. Further policy adjustments occurred in the following months with Mao's tacit acceptance, until he felt matters had gone too far. He then intervened to reverse the trend in the summer, and put Chen Yun and others on the sidelines for the remainder of the Maoist era. Now Mao offered a new guideline, 'never forget class struggle', but was unable to provide a clear sense of what this meant in practice, observing that class struggle and work were two different things, and class struggle should not interfere with work. The following years up to mid-1966 saw a politics of ambiguity, with Mao on the 'second front' able to reorient policy at any time, and also capable of downgrading powerful bureaucratic institutions like the State Planning Commission in 1964. The leaders on the 'first front' sought to construct policies they believed would be acceptable to the Chairman. Differences naturally existed among these leaders, but the basic approach was cooperative rather than to compete for Mao's elusive approval. While some of the Chairman's interventions were potentially fraught, as the Cultural Revolution approached there was no sense of an impending major rupture (see Teiwes 1979 [1993]: xxxvi–xliv, Chs 10–11). Mao's motives undoubtedly included dismay at the loss of revolutionary fervour in society, fear that the revisionism he saw in the Soviet Union was China's future, an unfounded worry that he was losing control, and a particular venom concerning the perceived apostasy of some, but hardly all, of his colleagues. But none of Mao's ruminations could alert the elite to the coming onslaught.

The Cultural Revolution Decade, 1966–76

While 'the Cultural Revolution' has been variously applied to different periods in this decade, in particular two strikingly different situations existed. First, the Cultural Revolution proper from mid-1966 to mid-1968, the rebellion from below unleashed by Mao, severely attacked top leaders and the broader elite while destroying the Party organization that held the system together. Subsequently, organizational regularity was

fitfully restored and, especially from 1972, elite politics itself, while much more fractious and unpredictable, was again largely a game within the (re)established official hierarchies. The basic source material for the conflicts of the Cultural Revolution proper during the period itself were the same Red Guard publications that had so influenced scholarship's inclination to accept 'two-line struggle';²⁰ paradoxically, analyses addressing the actual events of 1966–68 rarely posited a struggle against Mao, instead focusing on presumed moderate and radical forces in the leadership. Various documentary collections at the time, and those covering political developments over the rest of the decade, supplemented these sources; they were quite limited from the PRC itself, but generally credible versions of CCP documents were collected in Taiwan and Hong Kong.²¹ Finally, copies of purported speeches by leaders over the entire decade, often handwritten, appeared in leading Western libraries. Thus source material from 1966–76 was substantial during the decade itself,²² yet very few Western monographs in the period attempted a comprehensive analysis of ongoing elite politics.

The reticence to address these questions at the time was sensible, given the polemical sources and rapidly changing events, but with the opening of China in the 1980s, much like the case for the pre-1966 period, the situation changed dramatically. The same array of new sources were now available: PRC documentary collections of considerable detail; extensive general and subject chronologies and leaders' *nianpu*; memoirs by, biographies of and remembrance collections on important leaders; serious scholarship in Party history journals and books;²³ and interviews with participants and scholars. Something of a new twist were accounts by people associated with the 'bad guys' of the official narrative, Lin Biao and the radicals dubbed the Gang of Four.²⁴ But the very explosion of accounts of the period underlined the need for discrimination; some books were aimed at popular audiences in China, some pushed a decidedly anti-Cultural Revolution agenda, and others exaggerated the roles of individual leaders. As always, the task is to determine what is credible from this large array of sources. The basis now exists for serious analyses of the tumultuous elite politics of this decade, but with the field's turn to other areas, only a few studies have been attempted.²⁵

Notwithstanding the tensions evident during the post-Great Leap 'politics of ambiguity', the launching of the Cultural Revolution astonished the top leaders and broader elite, with only a small group of conspirators recruited by Mao and led by his wife Jiang Qing having any inkling of what was in store. Mao's authority was never more obvious, in that none of his colleagues challenged him or the overall thesis of the movement even though it put them in perilous circumstances personally, and gutted the organization they had fought for over decades. Their resistance was defensive, in denying allegations made by radical forces, while the boldest steps, such as the 'February adverse current' of 1967 when seven vice-premiers and PLA marshals challenged Jiang Qing's Cultural Revolution Group, were based on hopeful readings of Mao's attitude; in that case, recent Mao criticisms of Jiang's extremism (see Teiwes and Sun 1996: 72–79). Moreover, while arguably more deeply on the 'second front' than previously, intervening from Olympian heights above the fray, the Chairman periodically altered the course of the movement between radical mobilization and curbs on excesses, until mid-1968 when he finally moved to end the movement by dispatching students to the countryside for education by the masses, and authorizing the rebuilding of institutions. Throughout all this, prominent leaders had their own objectives: Zhou Enlai to protect some established

leaders and limit institutional destruction; and Lin Biao more narrowly to protect the professional interests of his beloved PLA, but only within the scope allowed by Mao. Lin's mantra was 'do whatever the Chairman says', while, as Deng later observed, Zhou's hailed efforts to protect senior leaders were only possible because of Mao's attitude. Indeed, where Mao was relentless, Zhou joined the chorus, notably in the case of Liu Shaoqi who the Premier declared deserved death.

One of the key effects of the disruptions of the Cultural Revolution was the undermining of historical Party status that had underwritten high office before 1966. While some senior figures survived on the new 1969 Politburo and in other offices, a new injection of radicals led by Jiang Qing, military officers who, although revolutionary veterans, would never have attained such high office without the disruption of 1966–68, and comparatively junior largely provincial officials such as (somewhat later) Hua Guofeng, ended the close link of formal office and historical prestige. The type of long-accustomed working relations of people with major merit in the victory of 1949 who had unsuccessfully tried to meet the Chairman's ambiguous demands in the early 1960s no longer existed, and crucially contributed to fractious relations involving Lin Biao, and particularly the Gang of Four. While much remains obscure about the Lin Biao case, a major contextual factor was multiple disputes between the civilian radicals around Jiang Qing and military figures under Lin, in large measure due to civilian interference in military matters. These tensions came to a head at the 1970 Lushan plenum, and even though an array of forces, including Zhou Enlai, the veteran revolutionary but prominent Cultural Revolution radical Kang Sheng, and Mao's own top bodyguard Wang Dongxing, had positioned themselves against the civilian radicals, Mao decided in favour of the Gang of Four (Teiwes and Sun 1996: 134–151). Over the following year, Lin and his top military commanders were placed under growing demands until, under still mysterious circumstances, Lin and his closest family fled China in September 1971, with his flight crashing in the Mongolian desert, killing all aboard.

The Lin Biao affair was a body blow to Mao's prestige, but it did nothing to undermine his authority in orchestrating either the immediate response, or the twists and turns in overall policy over his final years. While Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping have gained much credit in both the official narrative and foreign scholarship for 'opposing ultra-leftism' in 1972 (Zhou) and the consolidation programme in 1975 (Deng), in both cases the direction was set by Mao. Particularly revealing is Deng's case in 1975 when Mao placed him with full authority at the top of the 'first front'. Rather than proceeding by building a moderate coalition against the radicals on the basis of institutional interests, as sometimes asserted, Deng spent time studying Mao's canonical works and attempted to hone measures reflecting Mao's current wishes. Deng was confident, as seen in his assured reply to Chen Yun's cautious mid-1975 query over whether he fully understood the Chairman's intent. Yet Deng had not fully understood, and was astonished when Mao began to turn against him in October. Mao was caught between the contrary desires of continuing the revolutionary impulse, and achieving a strong economy and substantially stable state. But now he became persuaded that Deng had gone too far and was not paying homage to the Cultural Revolution. In this case he was persuaded not by the largely overestimated Gang of Four, but by Mao's radical nephew, Mao Yuanxin. With Deng removed and Zhou dead by January 1976, Mao surprised everyone by choosing as his latest successor Hua Guofeng, perhaps optimistically seeing the mix of qualities he

desired in the absence of compelling alternatives. But most telling of both the immediate situation and the entire course of elite politics since 1949 was that when Mao fell into a virtual coma in early June, despite deep hatreds and anxieties within the elite, no one challenged Mao's actions since late 1975, or his Cultural Revolution project. To his last breath the Chairman could not be opposed (see Teiwes and Sun 2007: Chs 5–7).

From Hua to Deng: A Soft Transition, 1976–80

Mao had seriously misjudged Hua. Within a month of the Chairman's passing, Hua organized the arrest of the Gang of Four. While PRC sources following the Historical Resolution, echoed in the West, attempted to downgrade Hua's contribution to this defining moment of PRC history, the regime formally acknowledged his 'decisive role' in the traditional career assessment following Hua's death in 2008. The central problem facing Hua and the leadership generally was how to dismantle Mao's policies of the preceding decade while maintaining fealty to the Chairman himself; this, inevitably, became intertwined with the return of Deng, ousted (although repeatedly protected) by Mao, but widely seen within the elite as the author of the hopeful policies of 1975, and as possessor of the revolutionary status (which Hua lacked) that was required for a Party leader. The regime launched extended propaganda campaigns to attack the 'gang', and thus underline ongoing issues that had to be dealt with, while seeking to bolster Hua's prestige among the populace for whom he was largely a mystery, by making claims hardly credible to seasoned members of the elite. As events evolved over the following four years, regime media and official documents remained key sources, exposing different viewpoints and tensions within the elite. A significant additional source was the direct exposure to Chinese society by growing numbers of foreign diplomats, journalists and students since the mid-1970s, allowing such individuals to be on the scene at important events like Democracy Wall in 1978–79 (see Garside 1981). Rumours about elite conflict reached their ears, but the reality remained opaque.

While, as previously noted, at the time open sources provided a basis for speculative journalistic reports and academic articles that posited political and policy conflict between forces aligned with Hua and Deng (e.g., Lieberthal 1978b), it was only following Hua's ouster in 1980–81 that this solidified along the official narrative of Hua as a leftist endorsing 'whatever' policies Mao had approved, versus Deng as leader of the reformist coalition. In Western literature, moreover, 1976–80 was sometimes treated as the tail-end of the Cultural Revolution decade, or the preamble to Deng's reform era, with little attempt to dig deeper beyond these stereotypes. Yet as with the two preceding periods, the 1980s and beyond provided a range of the same type of sources – serious Party history accounts, chronologies, memoirs, detailed documentary collections and interviews – that provided a basis for conclusions that need not echo the Party line. In this respect, arguably most noteworthy are the reminiscences of relevant officials during the period, whether in published works in the PRC or Hong Kong, or in interviews. A much more realistic picture emerges from such recollections than the denigrated neo-Maoist Hua and the glorified Deng. This was perhaps summed up nowhere better than in a 2009 interview with a leading Guangdong official crucial in the establishment of SEZs: 'The worst thing in our Party is just to speak of one person for good things, and one person for bad things. Is this Marxism? I don't think so.'

If a struggle between neo-Maoist and reformist forces did not exist, what explains the fall of Hua and Deng's assumption of the paramount leader role? Several things have to be taken into consideration. First, the need to protect Mao was not simply a priority for alleged 'whateverists' like Hua; it was a concern for seasoned senior leaders like Deng and Chen Yun as well. The instance linking Hua to 'whateverism' was the famous 'two whatevers' editorial in February 1977, a piece that was a moderate statement emphasizing the centrist Mao of the mid-1950s, and in fact much more moderate than Deng's own inner-Party assessment of Mao offered in September 1979.²⁶ Nevertheless, the 'two whatevers' became both a stick with which to beat Hua from late 1978, and a basically unquestioned theme of Western analyses. Second, in examining the by now quite extensive information on various policy areas, it is difficult to find any areas of significant policy differences between Hua and Deng, with the possible exception of the invasion of Vietnam where Hua, as well as many civil and military leaders, apparently initially doubted Deng's venture, but in the end provided unified support. Third, Hua had no factional base despite official and scholarly efforts to claim one, the so-called 'little gang of four' of Politburo members left over from Mao's time.²⁷ These four had few career ties with Hua or among themselves, soon played reduced roles after the arrest of the actual 'gang', or in the case of the one major player in 1977–78, Wang Dongxing, was actually a detriment to Hua's cause.

Of course, consensus at the top on key issues in 1977–78 did not mean consensus within the overall elite, and both before and especially after the late 1978 Third Plenum the top leadership often found itself mediating conflicting views and interests lower down in the system. The Third Plenum was significant, but has been distorted in the literature to accord with the official narrative that, succinctly, the Third Plenum equals reform, and both equal Deng Xiaoping.²⁸ The plenum did take important steps toward more flexible policies, especially in the ideological sphere, but 'reform and opening' did not emerge as a unifying slogan for several years, and as separate concepts they were barely mentioned in the plenum communiqué. Moreover, reform measures had begun before the Third Plenum under Hua's auspices, and Hua played a more significant role on economic reform than Deng throughout 1979. Finally, both Hua and Deng were caught by surprise when Chen Yun and others raised the issue of 'reversing verdicts' on Party leaders purged in the Cultural Revolution and earlier, a matter both had addressed in preceding months in a roughly similar manner, but had placed below the economy as the priority concern for the Party meeting. But the verdict reversal issue and the now revived question of the 'two whatevers' significantly weakened Hua. The Party Chairman was not directly attacked, but his self-criticism indicated a recalibration of leadership power. So did the return of Chen Yun to the Standing Committee, and that of a number of senior cadres to the Central Committee.

Hua's decline essentially had nothing to do with policy disputes; it had everything to do with historical status in the CCP. Within days of the arrest of the Gang of Four, children of various senior revolutionaries, despite having viewed the 'gang' as personally and politically threatening to their parents, were asking privately whether Hua, a mere youth who had only joined the Party in 1938, could be the leader. In contrast, Deng, who had not only risen to become one of Mao's close comrades-in-arms, but was also considered one of the great military figures of the revolution, had enormous prestige. A telling incident occurred at a People's Liberation Army (PLA) ceremony on the eve of

Army Day in July 1977, shortly after Deng's self-criticism and formal return to work. Against all precedent, a large photo of Deng appeared on stage, to the loud applause of the assembled generals. More than a year later, the elevation of Chen Yun to the Standing Committee furthered the clout of old revolutionaries at the Party centre. While timing and mechanisms remain unclear, sometime in 1979 Deng and Chen were working together to undermine Hua, not on any policy agenda, but on the understanding that the time had come to fully restore proper status within the Party. New younger leaders, particularly Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, were installed in top positions at the February 1980 Fifth Plenum, and Hua soon had no real role. Hua did not fight, perhaps simply realizing that he could not win, but also more than plausibly because, as he claimed, he did not want to subject the Party to the struggles of the recent past. By the middle of 1980 'old man politics' had truly arrived.

Deng Ultimately in Charge Through Tumultuous Times, 1980–92

This period, which arguably could be extended to 1994,²⁹ has been characterized in the literature by a broad, and correct as far as it goes, consensus on political tension between reform and conservative wings of the Party, something often personalized as Deng versus Chen Yun. Nevertheless, this has resulted in relatively few monographs focused on elite politics, the most notable being Baum (1994) and Fewsmith (1994).³⁰ Baum approaches the presumed seesawing struggle more broadly, while Fewsmith moves from a sophisticated analysis of economic debates to claims of 'line' and power struggles at the top. Both noted the array of other approaches to the Chinese political system since the opening of the 1980s, and declared elite politics to be the key neglected piece in understanding reform. In constructing their analyses, these scholars relied heavily on PRC public media and documents, thus providing a rich discussion of different policy proposals and advocacy, often including expressions of quite sharp conflict. Yet the problem remains how much such differences can tell us about the power equation within the leadership; and supplementary sources such as Hong Kong publications and the regime's own verdicts on key cases of political conflict provide only a partial if not misleading guide to understanding what really went on. Moreover, foreign collections including ostensible internal *neibu* (restricted circulation) material on the most important events, most famously the flawed *Tiananmen Papers* (Zhang 2001), contain documents of dubious authenticity. Other promising sources exist, but the 'black box' remains formidable.

These other sources include all those mentioned for the preceding periods – serious Party history studies, chronologies and *nianpu*, memoirs and detailed revealing biographies, internal documents obtained from various sources, and interviews. As with the 1976–80 period, the insights provided by participants in the events of the 1980s are particularly rich. Many retired officials who played significant roles have had the opportunity to reflect on the past, and feel obliged to tell the truth whether or not it fits smoothly into the official narrative. Another source is former significant figures from the reform wing of the Party who have written their own 'behind the curtain' accounts of the period abroad after leaving China in 1989, or within China after suffering from the Tiananmen fallout: for example, former leading theoretician Su Shaozhi, influential advocate of rural and economic system reform Chen Yizi, and Wu Wei who worked on measured political reform for Zhao Ziyang. Their writings, and sources from within the PRC, advance the

reform perspective, as opposed to the official narrative; yet while providing important insights, such accounts carry their own biases. Relatedly, care must be taken with sources lionizing reform leaders, none more so than Hu Yaobang who has become a symbol of reform; and difficult information is often downplayed or excluded from the record.³¹ It is not only the Party's account that must be approached with scepticism. More broadly, reliable information on elite politics began to decline concerning the period after 1984, and more strikingly for the years following the Tiananmen crisis to the 14th Congress in October 1992.

What can be said with some confidence concerning the period from Deng's assuming the paramount leader role in 1980 to his triumph at the 14th Congress?³² The focus is inevitably on Deng Xiaoping. Clearly Deng was the decisive actor in the unfolding of reform, but key questions remain. What was the structure of elite power around Deng? What were his abiding goals and *modus operandi*? Ultimately, how much power did he have, and in what sense was he opposed? And how did all this interact with the struggles faced by his designated successors, Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang? The key structural element was the emergence of 'old man politics' that marked the fall of Hua Guofeng. By spring 1980 Chen Yun was intervening on economic policy from his hospital bed, while in the summer the formal top officials of the regime flew to Wuhan seeking authoritative guidance from Deng, a visit eerily reminiscent of officials including Deng seeking out Mao in this and other provincial capitals in 1974–75. As the 1980s moved on, Deng and Chen rarely attended Standing Committee meetings, instead delegating their secretaries to participate. Zhao Ziyang would reflect after his fall that he was no more than a 'big secretary' himself to the senior leaders in terms of power, yet considerable authority was vested in the top figures on the 'first front'. Indicative was the working out of rural reform in 1981 and beyond where, according to people involved, Deng and Chen essentially endorsed whatever proposals Zhao, Hu and Wan Li, the Party leader responsible for agriculture, could agree on. More broadly, however, the role of the Party elders is murky, including who truly counted, and how these elder figures worked out their own differences.

In assessing Deng's power, the literature has frequently adopted facile assumptions about his objectives. At the most general level, the consensus that he pursued higher growth and economic reform measures to achieve it, while being much more ambivalent about and ultimately opposed to meaningful political reform, is undeniable. But on specific issues the matter is more complicated; according to an official with long experience with Deng, he was all about tactics, with CCP power and economic growth his only constant objectives. A case in point is the SEZs, usually regarded as a jewel in Deng's reformist crown. Officials directly involved in Guangdong report not only, as previously mentioned, that Deng was less of a factor than Hua in the initial formulation of the policy, but also that he made no effort to defend the zones when they came under attack from Chen Yun and others in 1982, and when setting out on his southern tour of 1984 Deng had no clear position one way or the other. In fact, local officials were deeply worried, fearing that Deng would abandon the project. Deng apparently became convinced of the promise of the SEZs on the tour, leading to a major expansion of the open policy after he returned to Beijing, making some concessions to Chen in the process. The tactical consideration was sustaining Party unity; there is little evidence suggesting the concession was forced on him. The extent of Deng's authority was further indicated

by his more risky venture of price reform in 1988, something of concern to conservatives and economic officials generally. But according to Wu Wei, although opposed by Chen Yun, Premier Li Peng and other top officials, with Deng's imprimatur on the policy none of these leaders submitted objections to the Standing Committee or Politburo (Wu Wei 2013: 369–374).

That Deng's price reform was reversed under the threat of escalating inflation has been considered a policy defeat, but a more telling perspective is that Deng's pragmatism meant that, unlike Mao, he would not persist with measures that were clearly not working. Yet while Deng's position remained inviolable, there were significant policy divisions that inevitably spilled over to the personal position of other leaders, particularly Zhao. Thus the literature often posits a notionally nasty struggle involving Zhao and Li Peng culminating in the Tiananmen crisis, yet this was not necessarily the reality or the perception of the actors at the time. While the evidence suggests a decline in Zhao's authority from late summer 1988, again according to Wu Wei, in the run up to Tiananmen Zhao never anticipated that different views in the Party would become confrontational and acute, arguably a sign of Zhao's naiveté, but something suggesting the need for further research into the early months of 1989.

And what of Deng in this new situation? Much of the literature argues that the ultimate target of the conservatives in the demonstrable clash of different policy views was Deng himself, sometimes manifested in (implausibly) dismissive ways (e.g., Fewsmith 2008: Part I). The policy conflict was real and sharp, and conservative policies prevailed for most of the three-year consolidation period (1989–91) that was approved as Party policy in 1988 after the price reform fiasco. But raising this to level of a political attack on Deng is a massive leap. Clearly Deng became increasingly impatient that reform had stalled, and there is credible evidence that he contemplated removing yet another successor in Jiang Zemin; something suggesting confidence in his power. Of course, further investigation is necessary, but the view of a weakened Deng under threat sits oddly with his ability as a Party member with no official position to initiate a profound system shift against the majority position of both the Politburo and the surviving elders. The paramount leader remained paramount due to his revolutionary prestige.³³

From the 1990s to 2014: Analysis from the Fringes of the 'Black Box'

In an ironic way, the early 1990s mark a similar transition in elite studies to the start of the Cultural Revolution, but in reverse. Starting in 1966, the previous dearth of useful information on elite politics was overwhelmed by the new plethora of 'revelations' concerning elite conflict, and an upsurge of scholarly books and articles resulted. While the amount of scholarly attention to leadership politics was already in decline as China's opening offered other avenues for academic investigation, there has been a huge regression in reliable, useful information on the inner workings of the 'black box' since Deng's 1992 success. Much has been published in Hong Kong on the new period, but it has rarely approached the quality achieved by serious PRC scholars using Hong Kong outlets for their analysis of earlier periods, with most writers little known or, even if well connected, relying heavily on often misleading inside stories, speculation and rumour. On this theme a particularly vexing development has been the explosion of internet sources presenting unverified and often sensationalist claims that reverberate in the general PRC

public, among Western observers, and among members of the princeling class.³⁴ In this array of written sources, the voice of actual participants at the highest levels has rarely been heard.³⁵ Interviews with members of the broader elite also produce results that are often both speculative and contradictory.³⁶ Even when done to a high standard, as by John Garnaut (2012) on the purge of Bo Xilai, who skilfully utilized many undoubtedly truthful accounts by people familiar with Bo, the result is an excellent contextual picture, but it could not truly penetrate the leadership's decision on Bo's case. Fundamentally, what undoubtedly happened concerning sources for this period has been a consequence of the leadership's conclusion that the Tiananmen crisis was in large part due to divisions at the top and popular perceptions of a Party split, resulting in a determination to prevent information on conflicts within the 'black box' from leaking out – such matters are simply off limits. Speculation by those outside the 'box' inevitably sought to bridge the gap, but little of this can be treated with any confidence.

Given these problems, it is not surprising that there have been relatively few monographs on post-Deng leadership politics. Significant events like Party congresses generate analysis in articles and other forums, while the *China Leadership Monitor* (2002–) provides regular assessments of developments related to elite politics. All of this is on the fringes of the 'black box', substantially relying on open PRC media, personnel and other organizational data, and a reading of political and social trends relevant to leadership decisions and conflict. Such factors have always been an essential baseline for understanding leadership politics, but their importance has grown in the absence of convincing 'inside' sources. The question is how far they can take us. PRC media reports and documents are invaluable guides to the issues under consideration and key policy decisions, but cannot demonstrate the texture of bargaining and consensus within the leadership, or the relative power of individual leaders. Personnel data can provide overall analysis of elite composition, but attempts to use such data for factional analysis are questionable. A case in point is analyses, on the basis of career connections, claiming Jiang Zemin stacked appointments at the top, thus making his 'Shanghai gang' the most influential bloc within the leadership. But how this works in practice is not demonstrated; moreover, the fact that Shanghai leader Chen Liangyu was purged from the Politburo in 2006 and imprisoned (ostensibly) for corruption, hardly suggests the degree of clout often imputed to Jiang. And while current policies under Xi Jinping are arguably explained by perceived threats to regime legitimacy, the debate within the top leadership remains unknown. In short, while these considerations are essential for understanding CCP elite politics, they can only provide context and clues for interaction within the Standing Committee and Politburo.

The one aspect of leadership politics that we can be quite sure of is that the initial post-Tiananmen successors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, came to the top post as a result of decisions centred on Deng,³⁷ while current leader Xi Jinping emerged from a quite different but poorly understood process. The process of selection of not only the General Secretary but also the top leadership generally is murky. While this undoubtedly is a top-down process, who has the strongest voice? The outgoing leader and Standing Committee are clearly central, and while speculation that Hu Jintao failed in efforts to anoint his successor cannot be dismissed out of hand, neither can it be verified. Party elders, whether simply retiring top leaders or true revolutionary elders,³⁸ undoubtedly have input, but the degree of influence and how it is exercised remains

opaque. There have also been occasional efforts to sample broader elite opinion, but these are unclear and have not been consistent. More broadly, while some form of bargaining surely went on, uncertainty surrounds what are considered the parameters of acceptable compromise, and which regime interests have to be represented. Once in office, the power of the leader within the proclaimed collective leadership is an issue currently under debate in the field concerning Xi (see Miller 2014). While many clues exist, they are often ambiguous, making speculation by those on the edge of the 'black box' just that. What is likely is that the position of leader imparts a considerable degree of power, particularly given that a ten-year period in office is the widely accepted norm, but we can only speculate concerning the dynamics of debates in contentious cases. In any case, leadership politics has been significantly affected by the emergence of rules, particularly term and age limits, and less formally by tacit guarantees against removal at the highest levels. Although under considerable stress as of mid-2014 due to anti-corruption measures involving high-ranking figures,³⁹ these guarantees have hitherto provided a degree of predictability and security for top leaders determined to avoid the uncertainties suffered by their predecessors under Mao and Deng. They have generally been honoured since the early 1990s, although the exceptions will be examined below, and the extent to which they will or will not be honoured in the future is uncertain.

Two broad overviews of contemporary elite politics are sustainable: one following evidence of rule-bound practices and pragmatic efforts to deal with policy issues; the other reflecting the pressures created by a system which has become a self-enrichment machine distributing vast benefits not only to vested organizational interests, but also to families and individuals connected to both the Party's history and current and recent leaders, sometimes involving spectacular corruption. Alice Miller (2011: 533–534) has provided a succinct statement of the former view: 'Increasingly, appointment to the [Politburo and Standing Committee] no longer was allocated simply on the basis of political connections . . . and factions, but also on the basis of . . . decision-making abilities. . . . factional competition continued . . . , but [now] circumscribed by still informal but increasingly binding norms and pressures for a politics of consensus'. The other overview picks up on the continuing factional competition, a process ironically involving a degree of struggle for position and benefits, but also a degree of mutual tolerance in the effort to avoid the Party split seen as central to the Tiananmen crisis. Bo Xilai's rise and fall is a case in point. Whatever Bo's administrative and political skills, it is reasonable to (speculatively) say that his rise was due to his political family background and his adoption in Chongqing of populist policies drawing on the Party's traditions. Yet it is clear that in Chongqing, Bo used brutality against enemies and ran roughshod over legal procedures, while pursuing political campaigns (most famously the singing of 'red songs') at odds with a problem-solving approach, and generally acted as a local emperor. But until late in the game Bo was seen as a rising star, and top leaders including Xi Jinping endorsed his efforts. Both types of elite politics exist. How they interact is an important but elusive question.

While not answering this large question, a necessarily speculative examination is in order for the three cases of sitting Politburo members – Chen Xitong, Chen Liangyu and Bo Xilai – where neither tolerance nor security in office persisted. While corruption was a central charge against all three leaders, it would appear that their misdeeds did

not obviously set them apart from other Politburo members in this regard. Nor is the suggestion that they were threats to the position of the then leader or, in Bo's case, the designated successor, convincing. Chen Xitong's case in 1995 can be seen in the context of Jiang Zemin emerging from the shadow of the now incapacitated Deng. Chen, where we do have his own voice, apparently did not have a particularly high regard for Jiang, regarding him as an outsider in comparison to his own experience in running Beijing municipality. Moreover, Chen thought he had Deng's trust, which would have intensified independent tendencies, and he initially would not budge on many matters. But this was not a direct challenge to the 'core of the third generation', something that would have been profoundly destabilizing. A plausible explanation of Chen's purge is simply that he had become a thorn in Jiang's side, the corruption case provided an excuse to remove him, and Deng's decline eliminated any remaining inhibition. Plausible, but clearly leaving out much of what went on in the 'black box' to achieve the outcome. A similar narrative for the Chen Liangyu case in 2006 is possible. A new leader, Hu Jintao, was attempting to consolidate his leadership; Chen was charged with a major pension fund scandal in Shanghai, and reportedly Chen had repeatedly refused to slow investment in Shanghai despite directives from the centre. Again plausible, to be sure, but with even less evidence than the Chen Xitong case. And certainly it involved no direct challenge to the position of the leader.

The Bo Xilai case was different. Bo was without doubt an ambitious politician. Beyond that he had a style that set him apart from the usually grey presentation of most top leaders. In addition to his distinctive policies in Chongqing, Bo was the leader most likely to say something unscripted. But Bo's ambition and energy could not turn into a challenge for the top job because of the rules. Four years older than Xi Jinping, Bo was simply too old to serve two full terms. Thus his objective had to be a seat on the Standing Committee. How much support Bo had in the broader elite is unclear, even granting that his appeal to (selective) Maoist values had an audience. His backing among the highest officials past and present is also uncertain, notwithstanding claims of Jiang Zemin's support. While the degree of opposition to Bo assuming a Standing Committee position cannot be gauged, it would be remarkable if there were no reservations concerning such an unpredictable politician, or fears that he would be a disruptive actor in a system relying on consensus. We simply do not know, if the events that unfolded in 2011–12 had not happened, whether Bo would have received his seat on the highest body. But the time line suggests increasing concern within the leadership over Bo's brutal treatment of his enemies in Chongqing by 2011. And the bizarre murder of a British businessman by his wife in late 2012, followed by the flight of Bo's top policeman to the US Consulate in Chengdu, in effect took the matter out of the leadership's hands. If there had been an impulse to protect Bo for considerations of regime face, or even a willingness to allow him a Standing Committee position because of factional support, the affair was now public, domestically and internationally. As usual, the matter was opaque at the leadership level, but Bo's fall appears less due to any clearly defined struggle than to concern over his disruptive potential, a situation brought to a head by events no one could have anticipated.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: A HARD TASK, A NECESSARY TASK, SOMETIMES AN IMPOSSIBLE TASK

There will always be mysteries concerning what went on inside the 'black box'. Developments at the political centre of any system are crucial for understanding the overall trajectories of nations, particularly so in Leninist authoritarian systems, even if the increasing complexities of society have diluted and made more diffuse the impact of elite politics in the contemporary PRC. As indicated in the above discussion, the sources available to foreign scholars have varied significantly over time, with CCP authorities providing misdirection that the Western literature has sometimes accepted too readily. But this need not be so, at least for the leadership politics from the establishment of the regime to the start of the 1990s. A vast array of often underutilized sources exists, but this research requires much digging, critical assessment of different claims in sources that are prone to the vagaries of human memory and biases, and an acute sensitivity to political context for the construction of convincing analyses. There is much scope for further research for this period. A particular case in point is the period between the adoption of conservative economic policies in autumn 1988 and the Tiananmen crisis, a period when Zhao Ziyang reportedly did not anticipate a confrontational struggle.

From the early 1990s a totally different situation emerged, one marked by the cutting off of virtually all detailed, apparently reliable information on contemporary conflicts inside the 'black box'. Analysts have been reduced to assessing personnel and procedural patterns and open statements of policy issues from the edges of the 'box' – an honourable and necessary undertaking – and to trying to sort out sometimes wild and generally unverifiable claims, including those of purported insiders, concerning who was doing what to whom within the elite. A better understanding must await the opening of key documents, or at least allowing serious PRC scholars access to them. Meanwhile, foreign scholars, whether dealing with earlier periods where materials exist in considerable measure, or with the comparative wasteland of the contemporary period, should avoid preconceptions, aim to eliminate errors, and seek greater realism concerning the inevitable conflicts of elite politics.

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NOTES

1. On Lin Biao, see Garver (1982). On purported differences over the Soviet Union, see Lieberthal (1978a).
2. A case in point is an alleged 1978 report by Hu Yaobang on the crimes of Kang Sheng. Byron and Pack (1992) used this fake document as a key source.
3. The influential study of the initial reform period, Baum (1994), makes significant use of these sources and very much follows their narrative of fluctuating reform-conservative struggle. Baum admits (p. xvii)

that many of these sources are questionable, but proceeds on the basis of his ability to assess the likely credibility of specific claims. The present author is not blameless in utilizing reform-oriented Hong Kong sources; see Teiwes (1984: Chs 2–3).

4. It was, however, possible to challenge the ‘two-line struggle’ interpretation on the basis of sources predating the change in the official narrative. See Teiwes (1979 [1993]).
5. Huang (2000) does a good job in highlighting this aspect, although his application of it to particular events is often questionable.
6. Notably Cheng Li (2014) in his analysis of princeling and Youth League factions in the post-Tiananmen period.
7. For overlapping but contending analyses, see Huang (2000: Ch. 4) and Teiwes (1990).
8. Hu Yaobang sought to avoid the Chairmanship in 1982, instead proposing a rotating leadership. The matter is somewhat less clear in Zhao’s case, but there are credible reports that he tried to retain the Premiership rather than become General Secretary after Hu’s removal in 1987. For an argument positing succession contention between Hu and Zhao in 1980–87, followed by similar conflict between Zhao and Li Peng in 1987–89, see Shirk (1993: 14).
9. For a relatively detailed overview covering developments in both this and the following section, see Teiwes (2014).
10. A formal verdict on the Gao Gang case was presented in 1955, but there was no such document dealing with Peng Dehuai, who formally remained on the Politburo following his removal as Minister of Defence in 1959.
11. Although largely discussing leadership techniques, Lewis referred to ‘the militant group led by Mao [Zedong] and Liu [Shaoqi]’ (Lewis 1963: 278).
12. Notably the Taiwan collection, *Mao Zedong sixiang wansui* (Mao Zedong 1967, 1969).
13. Including Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping, Chen Yun and Ye Jianying, and in 2013 Mao.
14. For example, Volumes 1 and 2 in the China 1949–1989 series: Lin Yunhui et al. (1989) covering 1949–56, and Cong Jin (1989) covering 1956–66.
15. The outstanding examples of detailed research are MacFarquhar (1983, 1997).
16. Particularly by reorganizing the CCP’s Military Commission in 1954 to exclude senior Party leaders Liu Shaoqi and Zhou Enlai; the only ‘civilian’ placed on the body was the more junior Deng Xiaoping.
17. For overviews of Mao’s notional successors of both types, see Teiwes (1988: 56–72).
18. Notably Bo Yibo in 1953 (see Bo Yibo 1991: Ch. 11) and Deng Zihui in 1955 (see Teiwes and Sun 1993).
19. Notably doubts created for a policy utilizing intellectuals and specialists given criticisms from these quarters during the Hundred Flowers movement, a slowdown in economic growth especially in the rural sector, withdrawals from collectives and urban strikes, and a complicated competitive relationship with the Soviet Union.
20. As supplemented by official media accounts of events, and wall posters reported by foreign, especially Japanese, journalists. For serious analyses using these sources, see Robinson (1971).
21. See Kau (1975), on the Lin Biao affair. While the documents in this collection appear genuine on the whole, the editor endorsed the official narrative of a planned military coup, something very dubious at the very least.
22. A comprehensive collection only appeared more than two decades later: Song Yongyi (2002).
23. Worthy of particular praise is the third volume in the China 1949–89 series, Wang Nianyi (1988). While under the normal constraints of a Party historian, Wang’s detailed discussion goes far to explode the official verdict on Lin Biao.
24. Notably Lin Biao’s secretary, Zhang Yunsheng (1988), and the early Cultural Revolution radical, Wang Li (2001).
25. The most significant overall accounts are MacFarquhar and Schoenhals (2006) and Teiwes and Sun (2007).
26. See Deng’s (1979) assertion that ‘[all] policies formulated by Chairman Mao were correct, our mistakes came from not insisting on Chairman Mao’s line’ (Deng Xiaoping guanyu qicao guoqing sanshi zhounian jianghua gao de tanhua jiyao).
27. Wang Dongxing, Ji Dengkui, Chen Xilian and Wu De.
28. For a brief critical discussion, see Buckley (2013).
29. The 14th Party Congress in 1992 clearly marks the ‘ultimate’ victory for Deng in the adoption of an expansive economic reform agenda. Deng’s subsequent role is unclear, but with the ravages of advanced age, the closure of his personal office in 1994 arguably ended his period as ‘boss’.
30. In addition, Vogel’s (2011) biography of Deng treats elite politics in some depth but from an overly positive Deng-centred perspective.
31. Notably in a centrepiece of the Hu Yaobang industry, *Hu Yaobang sixiang nianpu* (Hu Yaobang 2007). While providing very useful texts of Hu’s speeches, deliberate editing has attempted to present him as more consistent on reform issues than was actually the case.

32. Consistent with my view that deep research is required for confident statements, I must note that while I believe I have achieved such research for the preceding periods, notwithstanding considerable work on the 1980s, it has not reached the same standard. This is even more dramatically the case for the post-1992 period, where I have done little more than survey major sources and the scholarly literature.
33. Various additional factors have been cited, notably PLA support, yet surely this derived from Deng's historical status.
34. This is not to dismiss internet sources per se. Many, especially concerning earlier periods, are excerpts from publications by serious PRC scholars or former participants in elite politics. The value of others can initially be assessed by the identity of the author. The general point, however, is that a huge portion of what appears on the internet, especially as it relates to contemporary developments, is inherently unreliable.
35. A rare example published in Hong Kong is interviews with former Politburo member Chen Xitong, who had been purged and jailed for corruption (Yao Jianfu 2012).
36. While interviews with inside sources who may have some knowledge of internal elite politics can be useful, they can also result in very wrong conclusions. Particularly in the current period, there is a journalistic tendency to provide credibility for a story by citing three sources with asserted knowledge of Politburo decisions or some other claimed knowledge. The cautionary example against this tendency was a prominent May 1989 report based on three such sources that claimed moderates around Zhao Ziyang had won the debate on handling the Tiananmen demonstrations. Two days later, martial law was declared and Zhao had lost all power.
37. This does not mean they were both initially Deng's idea, although by appointing Hu to the Standing Committee at the 14th Congress Deng placed him in a position to take over from Jiang. The push for Jiang in 1989 apparently came more from Chen Yun and Li Xiannian, but surely gained the approval of Deng who dismissively rejected Li Peng, who had been implementing Chen's economic policies.
38. Particularly Bo Yibo, credited in some accounts for having smoothed the way for Jiang to remain as head of the Military Commission in 2002.
39. Especially by building a major corruption case against recently retired Standing Committee member Zhou Yongkang.