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**CCP IDEOLOGY, 1976-1980:
FROM THE "TWO WHATEVERS,"
TO THE "CRITERION OF TRUTH," TO THE
"FOUR CARDINAL PRINCIPLES," AND
BEYOND**

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Abstract

This Working Paper is a draft chapter for a book on the poorly understood CCP elite politics of the early post-Mao period, tentatively entitled *Hua Guofeng, Deng Xiaoping, and the Dismantling of Maoism*. Nowhere is this period more misunderstood than in the area of ideology and its notional centrality to an imagined Hua-Deng power struggle. In the accepted narrative, a critical feature of this struggle is the February 1977 “two whatevers” editorial notionally requiring support for all of Mao’s decisions, that allegedly sought to prevent Deng’s return to work and to enforce a rigid ideological framework preventing significant change from Mao’s practices. In fact, Deng’s return to high office had been decided at the start of January, and more importantly, from the earliest days of Hua’s leadership, the task was to move away from Mao’s Cultural Revolution but to maintain regime stability and unity by expressing fealty to a leader still deeply worshipped in major sections of the population and respected by Party leaders, notably those of the revolutionary generation. Claims that “whateverists” engaged in an intense struggle with reformers seeking a pragmatic approach under the slogan “practice is the sole criterion of truth” beginning in May 1978 are not totally amiss, but they exaggerate the situation and do not adequately account for the fact that the conflict was largely among lower-level figures on the theoretical front who did not deeply engage the top leadership. There were nuanced differences between Hua and Deng on the “criterion of truth” question but nothing fundamental, and neither wanted ideological issues to disrupt the economic agenda of the fall 1978 pre-Third Plenum work conference. At the conference, however, arguments initiated by progressive theorists resulted in official acceptance of the criterion position, although there was high-level concern, most prominently expressed by Deng, for

proceeding with caution, particularly as it related to Mao's prestige. More broadly, in Party ranks many felt the plenum's policies had gone too far and were leading to disruption in society. At the end of March 1979, Deng reacted with his "four cardinal principles" speech that demanded adherence to the political practice of Mao's pre-Cultural Revolution period. This not only alarmed progressives but it also created leadership concern that the practical focus of the Third Plenum policies was being undermined. Deng then sought to bolster those policies, but at the time of the 30th anniversary of the PRC, he still gave priority to the "four principles" and defence of Mao. Indeed, he explicitly affirmed a lavish claim concerning Mao's essential role in the Party's successes, the same claim that had appeared in the "two whatevers" editorial more than two and a half years earlier.

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I believe talking about the "two whatevers" at last year's March [1977] central work conference was reasonable in the historical conditions of that time. As it was not long after the smashing of the "gang of four," [there was a need] to decrease speculation in foreign countries [about deMaoization]. In addition, the liberation of everyone's thinking is a process [that takes time]. At the Third Plenum of the Tenth Congress [in July 1977], Chairman Hua [and] Vice Chairman Deng proposed a comprehensive and accurate understanding of Mao Zedong Thought. Actually, this draws a line, it means this issue [of the "two whatevers"] is already resolved.

—Zhao Ziyang, on the heated question of the “two whatevers,” during the meeting of the Southwest group at the central work conference, December 7, 1978¹

We never expected such a major reaction to the [practice as the criterion of truth] article. We expected that, at most, some people would be unhappy, but nothing more than that. Nor did we foresee that the article would have ramifications for Hua Guofeng’s status as leader. At the time, he possessed a great deal of support and authority. This was accepted by us.

—Sun Changjiang, Central Party School intellectual who was the principal author of the sole criterion of truth article²

I have always supported the exercise of democratic rights under the socialist system. I hope everyone will enjoy the greatest freedoms under the protection of the constitution. Although at the [January-April 1979] central [theory] work conference and this NPC [National People’s Congress] session, many comrades, whether by name or not, have criticized me for going behind the back of the Party Center to support the so-called democratization movement that runs counter to “our [four] cardinal principles” and encourages anarchism, I must still retain my personal opinion.

—Hu Yaobang, at the Second Session of the Fifth NPC meeting, June 18, 1979³

¹ Han Gang, “‘Liangge fanshi’ de youlai ji qi zhongjie” [The Origin and End of the “Two Whatevers”], paper funded by the Shanghai Key Academic Discipline Project, Project, no. B405.

² Interview, April 1999.

The paradox of the early post-Mao period, both in the immediate phase of Hua carefully moving the ship of state away from Maoist policies and politics and after Deng's quiet coup against him by the start of 1980, was that a broad though hardly complete elite consensus existed regarding two dilemmas. In the political context, this involved recognition of the perceived necessity of upholding Mao's prestige, or "holding high Mao's banner," something not only reflected in the early 1977 "two whatevers" that demanded adherence to Mao's decisions and instructions but that was also valued by Deng well after the Third Plenum. The question, of course, is "how high," and the implications for the multi-faceted task of moving away from Mao's excesses, broader positions, and a degree of conflict was inevitable. A related dilemma existed in the theory sphere. In broad sweep, there was no leadership difference on Mao's pre-1949 principle, repeated many times since, on integrating theory with practice. Indeed, undoubtedly the most important piece advancing the "criterion of truth," the June 24, 1978, *Jiefang junbao* (*Liberation Army Daily*, hereafter *JFJB*) "special commentator's" article, began by citing Hua saying that this integration was the Party's fundamental

³ Hu Deping, "Yaobang tongzhi zai 'zhenli biao zhun' da taolun de qianqian houhou (xiapian)" [Comrade Yaobang Before and After the Great Criterion Debate, (part 3)], at Chinesenewsnet.com, May 15, 2008.

principle.⁴ But here too, tension existed between the costs of “forbidden zones” created by rigid theory and fears that excessive emphasis on practice without an adequate ideological framework could threaten regime stability. Here the tension initially was focused within theoretical circles, but it soon reached further, in part by accident. As matters proceeded, the issue became an important political marker, although conventional views of key leadership actors in this respect require nuanced analysis.

A widely accepted narrative of ideological conflict in the early post-Mao period did, and continues to, exist in both the PRC and foreign scholarly circles, albeit inevitably with variations in both cases, and between domestic and outside analysis. This narrative not only describes such conflict between relatively coherent and sharply opposed “whateverist” and practice *factions*, but it also further situates this contention as a central feature of an imagined power struggle between Hua and Deng. According to this understanding, Hua used the “two whatevers” in a failed attempt to prevent Deng’s return to work, but beyond that, it was deployed as a distinct policy line against Deng’s pragmatic approach and to undermine his position. Utilizing control of the propaganda apparatus, Hua’s

⁴ The reference to Hua is to his December 22, 1977, address at the start of a major Central Military Commission conference, the first such meeting since 1975. We use *JFJB* to identify the military paper.

“whateverists” reportedly were initially able to dominate the media and public opinion broadly while beating back against reformist tendencies. According to the story, this drastically changed from May 1978 with publication of “Practice is the Sole Criterion of Truth,” an article assertedly fostered by Deng and directed at Hua, much as Hua’s February 1977 “two whatevers” editorial allegedly sought to prevent Deng’s return. This was followed by intensified conflict between the two opposing factions, with the “whateverists” undertaking major efforts to suppress the debate, but the practice faction prevailed due to broad Party and public support, particularly among veteran leaders, and with Deng winning decisively at the 1978 work conference and Third Plenum. Indeed, in some versions, the ideological victory of the practice position was the key to Deng’s Third Plenum success.⁵

⁵ Foreign literature soon adopted power struggle analysis and the identification of Hua as leader of a “whateverist faction.” Among the most influential are Richard Baum, *Burying Mao: Chinese Politics in the Age of Deng* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), especially pp. 9-10, 46-47, 58-65, 88-92; and Roderick MacFarquhar, “The Succession to Mao and the End of Maoism, 1969-82,” in idem, ed., *The Politics of China, Second Edition: The Eras of Mao and Deng* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 312-19. The general view persists to the present despite new PRC material and outside analysis indicating the need for fundamental revision. An interesting case, which makes use of such sources and presents insightful observations suggesting the inadequacy of the conventional view, but nevertheless substantially endorses it, is Julian Gewirtz, *Unlikely Partners: Chinese Reformers, Western Economists, and the Making of Global China* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), pp. 23-29, 34-40.

The first two quotations at the head of this chapter underscore the inadequacy of this conventional narrative. Here we offer an overview of a significantly different process, including the outcome of the events at the work conference and with detailed evidence to follow. We also extend our overview to post-plenum ideological issues that were not, and could not, be settled, despite the significant enhancement of Deng's position at the 1978 work conference and plenum. To start, while there was some intense theoretical debate during the period leading up to the work conference and disruptive events occurred in May-June 1978 following publication of the criterion of truth article, bitter conflict is greatly overstated. A well-positioned Party historian assesses the general situation as involving no intense factional struggle, while the daughter of an important military official with significant ties to very high-ranking political

This, of course, was also the official CCP version during the Deng era, although a Hua-Deng "power struggle" was never explicitly stated officially. The 1981 Historical Resolution falsely accused Hua of both obstructing the reinstatement of veteran cadres such as Deng and of promoting the "two whatevers" and trying to suppress the criterion of truth; see *Beijing Review* [hereafter *BR*], no. 27 (1981), p. 26. The most notable Party history attempt to document this story is Wang Hongmo *et al.*, *Gaige kaifang de licheng* [The Course of Reform and Opening] (Henan renmin chubanshe, 1989), especially pp. 41-74, 112-13, 121-22, 126-27. In the post-Deng period there is much material, both written and oral, demonstrating the gross distortions of the narrative. Moreover, the regime quietly dropped all claims that Hua either sought to block Deng's return or tried to enforce the "two whatevers" as the CCP's guiding ideology. See, most recently, the official celebration of Hua's 100th birthday, *Renmin ribao* [People's Daily] [hereafter *RMRB*], February 21, 2021.

leaders regards both the “two whatevers” and the criterion issues as “no big deal.” in what she describes as a very safe period.⁶ Moreover, the focus on an alleged “two whatevers *faction (pai)*,” in both the literature and in the memories of many involved in the debate is misleading. One of the most authoritative Party historians on the issue has revealed that the idea of a “two whatevers *pai*” was created after the fact; during the period, those resistant to what they saw as excessive threats to Mao’s prestige were basically regarded as an orthodox or conservative tendency, and not necessarily a *pai*.⁷ Moreover, Xiong Fu, a conservative ideologue later identified as a leading member of the “whateverist faction,” claimed they did not see themselves as diametrically opposed to their critics. Indeed, Hu Yaobang would later tell his secretary that “our Party did not have any ‘whateverist’ faction!”⁸

⁶ Interviews, July 1998, and September 2009, respectively.

⁷ Interview, September 2009. Of course, since the “two whatevers” episode in February 1977 was well-known in theoretical and political circles, and substantial figures continued to believe it had been designed to prevent Deng’s return, a largely unexpressed belief in such a faction is plausible. However, apart from our regard for our source, we note the very limited documentary evidence of even private statements before the 1978 work conference that explicitly mention the “two whatevers.”

⁸ The information on Xiong Fu was provided by a well-connected Party historian; interview, July 1998. Man Mei, *Huiyi fuqin Hu Yaobang, xia* [Remembering My Father Hu Yaobang, part 2] (Hong Kong: Tiandi tushu youxian gongsi, 2016), pp. 491-92.

The February 7, 1977, *RMRB* editorial that became known as the banner of “whateverism” was misunderstood in two ways. Not only was it not designed to prevent Deng’s return to work⁹ it also did not lay down a policy direction of continuing large swathes of Mao’s Cultural Revolution politics—in fact, as we shall see, quite the opposite. The irony is that without the tail end insertion of the “two whatevers,” the editorial would hardly have registered much notice given the ongoing elevation of Mao in the press, and in any case, the specific phrase disappeared from the media within 11 days. However, the context was clear: the need to “hold high” Mao’s flag while cautiously moving away from his key policies. But this could not avoid doubts about the Party’s direction given the contradictions inherent in the task, the secrecy surrounding the deliberations of top Party bodies, and the uncertainty concerning the political color of the largely unknown Hua.¹⁰ Together with the false perception that Deng’s return was in jeopardy, the “two whatevers” retained a place in elite consciousness, although not particularly significant during the

⁹ The formal decision for Deng’s return was taken on January 6, a month before the appearance of the “two whatevers”; “Hua Guofeng tongzhi 1977 nian 1 yue 6 ri de jianghua” [Comrade Hua Guofeng’s January 6, 1977, Speech], internal Party document made available to the authors.

¹⁰ In this regard, even Ye Jianying, who had served with Hua at the Center for six years, only became convinced of his political color in spring 1976. Xiong Lei, “1976 nian, Hua Guofeng he Ye Jianying zenyang lianshoude” [In 1976, How Hua Guofeng and Ye Jianying Came to Unite], *Yanhuang chunqiu* [hereafter *YHCQ*] [Chinese Annals], no. 10 (2008), pp. 1, 4-6.

following year and a half, even as it totally disappeared from the public space and Deng's return quickly became clear.

A notional step forward came with the emergence of "comprehensive and accurate Mao Zedong Thought" in April-May, a concept raised by Deng but entirely consistent with Hua's thinking, and with already emerging Party theoretical statements. At one level, this was a needed correction to the "two whatevers" which, in its all-inclusive vagueness, left the Cultural Revolution on the table, while the new formulation suggested a policy selection which would eliminate the excesses of the past ten years, the very project Hua had already initiated. It thus created a friendlier context for liberal theory circles to advance their ideas but a context not totally satisfactory. The true essence of the concept was to cement control of ideology at the Party Center. The leadership could deploy "comprehensive and accurate Mao Zedong Thought" to justify any policy; throughout the entire period covered in this paper, this was an essential feature of the Party's ideological line. Whatever the short-term benefits of the new concept, liberal intellectuals would come to understand this and rue the consequences. Years later, the son of Hu Yaobang declared that the "comprehensive and accurate" version was no different from the "two whatevers" concerning Mao.¹¹ This was not a major concern

¹¹ Interview with Hu Deping, September 2009.

before the 1978 work conference, but the four cardinal principles, laid out by Deng in March 1979, which demanded upholding the socialist road, the dictatorship of the proletariat, Party leadership, and Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought as the prerequisite for modernization, underscored the fundamental practice, leaving much bitterness in theoretical circles.

With the “two whatevers” having disappeared from public space by March 1977 and “comprehensive and accurate Mao Zedong Thought” installed as the unchallengeable basic CCP guideline, specific personnel, and institutions (notably the revived Central Party School and parts of the central media) had scope to test the limits of “forbidden zones.” Although the earliest efforts were largely in theoretical circles, there was sympathetic backing among the broader elite. Ultimately, what was being challenged was the Cultural Revolution, something the top leadership, including both Hua and Deng, could not initially reject. Although some participants imagined ideological efforts were essential to the reversal of verdicts process,¹² in fact the influence flowed in the opposite direction. Some of Hu Yaobang’s most important initiatives at both the Party School and in

¹² For example, a major media figure claimed verdict reversals would have been impossible without the theoretical impact of the criterion debate; interview, February 2009. Also, according to a senior Party historian, Bo Yibo and An Ziwen told Party School theorist Wu Jiang that without his work on the criterion article, they would not have been able to return to work; interview, April 2007.

the Organization Department centered on reversing injustices against leading figures and lesser personnel, and this desire among the wider elite provided backing for liberal academic theorizing as the events unfolded.¹³ In any case, as reflected in the quotation by Sun Changjiang at the start of this paper, existing differences of opinion do not give the sense of an emerging sharp struggle. In addition, many, although not all, credible sources do not believe the criterion article, and further developments surrounding the debate before the 1978 work conference, were aimed at the Party Chairman.

Yet, as is well known although exaggerated, significant conflict did emerge for about seven weeks following publication of the criterion article. As at other key points—the misperception of the “two whatevers” editorial and developments at the work conference—an element of accident was present. This was an unexceptional piece that would have gone unnoticed except for unanticipated reactions, a private phone call and more importantly the harsh response from Wang Dongxing as the leader responsible for propaganda, both of which we will discuss in detail. This clearly caused concern in

¹³ For an argument on the greater significance of the *pingfan* process over the criterion of truth, together with a critique of official statements emphasizing a reversal as an effort to steal credit from Hu and give it to Deng, see “Hu Jiwei tan Hu-Zhao shinian xinzheng” [Hu Jiwei Talks on the Ten Years of Hu and Zhao’s New Politics], Hu Jiwei’s oral account, edited by Yao Jianfu, at https://2newcenturynet.blogspot.com/2008/03/blog-post_3505.html, March 11, 2008.

progressive circles, but what was ultimately telling was the ineffectiveness of Wang's efforts. There was hardly any true suppression from that point onwards; in terms of broad elite sentiment, the criterion view won out largely as commonsense. There was not, however, formal endorsement of the practice argument by the Standing Committee. Instead, a generally positive view was combined with the hope that the debate would be settled at a theory conference seeking unity and avoiding division. While the conventional narrative pictures Deng leading the charge for the criterion argument, and he was very important in the unfolding drama in terms of how he was perceived by elite observers, Deng was late in endorsing the position. As in other areas, Hua and Deng held similar broad views, but here there were notable differences in the actions each took in lead-up to the work conference.

At the work conference, the secondary role of ideological differences to the reversal of verdicts was clear—the issue of the criterion and “two whatevers” only emerged after the key *pingfan* (rehabilitation) decisions had been adopted by the Standing Committee. As we shall explain, in one sense this was the consequence of another accident, and essentially it was an afterthought. But once raised, debate became intense, with sharp comments directed at those on the orthodox side of the issue and with notional “whateverism” now openly attacked in internal

discussions. The “two whatevers” had now morphed from a misunderstanding into a political weapon that could be used against conservative theoreticians and officials. As this discussion unfolded, Hua decided to offer a limited but essentially accurate self-criticism of his involvement in the “whatever” and criterion issues. This, however, was not a consequence of an attack on him, and Deng deliberately avoided raising the “two whatevers” at the work conference or the plenum. Nevertheless, it had become a potential weapon against the Party Chairman, one Deng would later use.

The full political story of the work conference and Third Plenum awaits further analysis, but it clearly was an important step in the transition of power from Hua to Deng, although oversimplified in many conventional accounts. In terms of our focus here, despite criticism of the “two whatevers” and formal affirmation of the criterion of truth argument, as well as the theme of “emancipating the mind” that came to be regarded as the keynote for the plenum (and misleadingly overly attributed to Deng),¹⁴ in realistic terms the ideological issue was hardly settled. While senior figures returning to greater status at this juncture broadly supported Deng’s enhanced

¹⁴ The “emancipating the mind”/“liberating thought” theme was pushed by both Deng and Hua in 1978, while Deng’s December 13, 1978, speech on the last day of the work conference (see *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping [1975-1982]* [Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1983], pp. 151-65), was later touted as the keynote for the Third Plenum. At the time, however, there was no designation of any such distinction among the speeches by Hua, Ye, and Deng on the same day.

authority, many were still influenced by old structures and practices and had doubts about the emerging Third Plenum line. Stresses were soon apparent at the January-April 1979 theory conference, where there was considerable sharp criticism of the “two whatevers *pa*” to the discomfort of Hu Yaobang. But more notable and threatening to the leadership were attacks on established regime practices by liberated minds. The issue was settled on March 30, with Deng laying down the four cardinal principles to the distress of those who had pushed the envelope. As liberal theorist Su Shaozhi bitterly concludes, “while the sound of Deng Xiaoping’s assault on the ‘whateverist faction’ was still ringing in [our] ears, he himself also ‘whatevered’ Mao Zedong and Mao Zedong Thought.”¹⁵ Taking a longer view, Su has incisively observed that the direction of Party policy since the Third Plenum, and thus the ideological gloss, was a zigzag responding to events, a process ultimately guided by Deng’s “iron wrist.”¹⁶

Before turning to our detailed analysis, a brief discussion of key actors in the process is in order. At the very top, Hua, as Party Chairman, had ultimate responsibility. Several factors are crucial for

¹⁵ Su Shaozhi, *Shinian fengyu: Wenge hou de dalu lilun jie* [Ten Years of Wind and Rain: The Mainland’s Theoretical World after the Cultural Revolution] (Taipei: Shibao wenhua chuban qiye youxian gongsi, 1996), p. 106. In our view, Su’s comment is misleading in the sense that Deng’s personal actions regarding the “two whatevers,” even at the time of the four cardinal principles, fell well short of an assault.

¹⁶ Interview, September 1986.

understanding Hua's actions, none of which clash with his basic commitment to truth from facts. Arguably most important, Hua had had little experience with theoretical work, having focused on pragmatic, particularly economic, affairs during his provincial career. This was noted by Mao when he brought Hua to Beijing in 1971, chiding him for burying his head in production and not paying enough attention to politics.¹⁷ Despite involvement in significant political matters in the capital, Hua steered well clear of ideological argument and emerged as the new leader with an approach of doing things that, more often than not, moved away from the Maoist policies of the recent period, while avoiding entanglement in theoretical questions. Surely reflecting a lack of confidence in an area in which he did not feel strong, Hua was cautious and often elusive on major issues, notably the criterion of truth.¹⁸ Apart from confidence issues, we believe a major source of Hua's reticence was his belief that stability and unity were essential as was keeping conflict at a theoretical rather than political level. On more than one occasion, Hua rejected appeals from subordinates to speak out on ideological issues, arguing that debate was needed, and if he as

¹⁷ See Mao Zedong, "Zai Wuchang yu Wang Dongxing, Hua Guofeng de tanhua" [Talk with Wang Dongxing and Hua Guofeng in Wuchang], August 25, 1971, in Song Yongyi, chief ed., *The Chinese Cultural Revolution Database CD-ROM* (rev. ed. (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2006).

¹⁸ Multiple interviews with progressive intellectuals and other actors during the period as well as with informed Party historians emphasize this pattern.

Chairman were to speak, it would be nipped in the bud.¹⁹ More broadly, Hu Yaobang's son has argued that a crucial factor in the successful conclusion of the criterion debate was the restraint and tolerant attitude Hua brought to the political system.²⁰ The calumny of the Historical Resolution notwithstanding, there is no evidence Hua ever sought to suppress theoretical discussion.

Deng was no theorist either, but his experience was vastly different. Together with Kang Sheng, Deng was responsible for the polemics with the Soviet Union in the early/mid-1960s, one of Mao's most treasured ideological endeavors and, by all evidence, one Deng thoroughly agreed with. A decade later, following his return to office and his 1975 elevation to *de facto* head of the first-front leadership, Deng was assigned a new ideological task, overseeing preparation of Volume V of Mao's *Selected Works* covering the post-1949 period.²¹

¹⁹ E.g., in April 1978 before the criterion article, propaganda officials requested that Hua speak on issues discussed in theoretical circles, resulting in his rebuff because of a chilling effect on debate; Han Gang, "Huanyuan Hua Guofeng: Guanyu Hua Guofeng ruogan shishi" [Restore Hua Guofeng: Certain Historical Facts concerning Hua Guofeng], *Wangshi* [Past Events], no. 74 (November 14, 2008).

²⁰ Hu Deping, "Hua Guofeng zai 'zhenli biaozhun' taolun (zhong)" [Hua Guofeng during the "Criterion of Truth" Discussion, part 2], at <http://news.sina.com.cn/pl/2008-08-05/151816065528.shtml>, August 5, 2008.

²¹ Deng again teamed up with Kang Sheng with whom, despite conventional wisdom, he had a good political relationship. On the Deng-Kang relationship, see Frederick C. Teiwes and Warren Sun, *The End of the Maoist Era: Chinese Politics During the Twilight of the Cultural Revolution, 1972-1976* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2007), pp. 73-74.

Knowing the dangers of an ideological misstep, Deng established the Political Research Office, where a critical task was to make sure the forthcoming volume and ideology would generally reflect the Chairman's thinking. For this, Deng recruited Mao's former secretary, Hu Qiaomu, to head the body and play the leading role in drafting the *Selected Works*. The key staff included orthodox theorists from the pre-Cultural Revolution period, personally vetted by Deng, who would continue to play leading roles during the post-Mao period. Paradoxically, these figures came to be regarded as "two whatevers *pa*" leaders, yet they largely were not criticized by Deng and most retained their status or were promoted during his rule.²² In broad terms, what distinguished post-Mao Deng from Hua was a more proactive role in ideology, but one well short of the decisive force in the success of the criterion of truth as often asserted. In a more politically shrewd manner, Deng was also very cautious in dealing with Mao and his thought.

²² On the formation, tasks, and personnel of the Political Research Office in 1975, see Teiwes and Sun, *End of the Maoist Era*, pp. 269-70, 315-24.

The leading staff concerned with the more theoretical tasks of the Political Research Office were Li Xin, Wu Lengxi, Hu Sheng, and Xiong Fu; apart from Li Xin, who was demoted after the Third Plenum, Wu Lengxi retained his alternate Central Committee status until 1987 and was promoted to minister of National Radio and Television in 1982, Hu Sheng was promoted to full Central Committee status in 1982 and became a leading Party history figure, while Xiong Fu, who had taken over as editor of the conservative *Hongqi* [Red Flag] [hereafter *HQ*] in 1978, retained the editorship until 1987.

In a context in which Standing Committee members had more pressing matters to deal with than theoretical debates and with both Hua and Deng claiming they only belatedly became aware of significant problems, the remaining member central to the drama was Wang Dongxing.²³ In what might metaphorically be considered another "accident," Wang found himself the leadership figure responsible for propaganda,²⁴ inheriting the orthodox theorists assembled by Deng in 1975. Wang was particularly unsuited to his new responsibilities given his lack of theoretical knowledge and his narrow, unsophisticated performance of his duties. In a context in

²³ Of the other two members, Li Xiannian was hardly involved, with his approving reference to the criterion article at the 1978 State Council [economic] theory forum a rare exception. See Michael Schoenhals, "The 1978 Truth Criterion Controversy," *China Quarterly* [hereafter *CQ*], no. 126 (1991), p. 265; and Wang Wei, "Zhenli biao zhun wenti taolun yu jiefang sixiang" [Discussion on the Standard of Truth and Emancipating the Mind], *People's Daily* online, at <http://dangjian.people.com.cn/n/2014/0922/c117092-25705339.html>, September 22, 2014.

As discussed below, Ye Jianying was quite different, arguably the most progressive of the top leadership on theory issues. He was sympathetic to the criterion argument and he came up with the idea of a theory conference to deal with the issue in what he hoped would be a non-divisive manner.

²⁴ The context of Wang assuming these duties is not only his well-understood role in the arrest of the "gang of four" but also the fact that his predecessor in the position, Ji Dengkui, was regarded with some suspicion given his reservations about arresting Mao's wife. See Teiwes and Sun, *End of the Maoist Era*, pp. 536, 550-51.

which all top leaders were attempting to protect Mao's prestige,²⁵ Wang pushed his loyalty to extremes that could only earn disdain from his subordinates in theory circles.²⁶ Party intellectuals were dismissive of Wang's knowledge and abilities, regarding him as a simple-minded bodyguard, and privately mocking him with the nickname "eunuch." Crucially, although Wang's position and responsibilities caused concern, he did not engender great fear—the reaction more generally was not to take him too seriously and to invent ways to avoid his authority, making the net effect of his limited efforts to suppress discussion an abysmal failure.²⁷ Within the Standing Committee, moreover, Wang clearly lacked standing with his peers. Contrary to claims of a close Hua-Wang relationship, Hua generally avoided interfering in Wang's activities and his sympathies were often elsewhere; when he did intervene, he tended to provide

²⁵ A point strongly made by a Central Party School senior Party historian who includes Deng among those fully engaged; interview, July 1997.

²⁶ For example, in February 1977, Wang decreed that while the arguments in high-profile 1975 articles by "gang of four" figures Zhang Chunqiao and Yao Wenyan could be criticized, the articles could not be named because they had been read and approved by Mao. See Yu Guangyuan, *Deng Xiaoping Shakes the World: An Eyewitness Account of China's Party Work Conference and the Third Plenum (November–December 1978)*, Ezra F. Vogel and Steven I. Levine, eds (Norwalk CT: EastBridge, 2004), p. 85.

²⁷ Based on interviews with significant Party progressives, including Hu Jiwei, July 1997, and Su Shaozhi, June 1999.

support for individuals in conflict with Wang.²⁸ As for Deng, the relationship is most plausibly captured by Ye Jianying's influential nephew, Ye Xuanji: "Wang would not have dared to confront Deng in the Politburo."²⁹

As we shall argue, in the unfolding of the ideological conflict, subordinate groupings and individuals were more important than the top CCP leadership. Hu Yaobang clearly deserves his place as arguably the most prominent figure advancing the progressive cause, even if there can be doubts about his impact at major junctures. Personally, Hu took a not unique journey from worship of Mao, even finding some virtue in the Cultural Revolution, to a growing critical view, but one that still sought to protect Mao's prestige, and he was deeply concerned with stability and unity.³⁰ One of Hu's significant

²⁸ *People's Daily* editor Hu Jiwei has recalled how Hua defended him from Wang's attacks over the criterion of truth article in mid-1978; *Hu Jiwei zishu* [Hu Jiwei's Self-statement], vol. 3 (Hong Kong: Zhuoyue wenhua chubanshe, 2006), cited in Joseph Torigian, "Prestige, Manipulation, and Coercion: Elite Power Struggles and the Fate of Three Revolutions," Ph.D. dissertation, MIT, 2016, p. 327. During the same period, Hua backed Hu Yaobang in disputes with Wang over the transfer of personnel files from the Central Special Case Group to the Organization Department and over moving forward with the rehabilitation of the "61 traitors."

²⁹ Interview with Ye Xuanji, October 2009.

³⁰ Hu's worship of Mao was related to us by a source who worked closely with him during the early post-Mao period; interview, June 1996. This is consistent with reports by other oral sources. Hu's son, Hu Deping, has described the staged process of his father moving to a more critical view; interview, September 2009. For Hu's 1977 view of the Cultural Revolution as "ideologically brilliant [but] mistaken in practice," see Shen Baoxiang, *Zhenli biaozhun wenti taolun shimo*

claims, that he only sought to change thought and he was not aiming at individual people,³¹ was surely a genuine belief, but it suggests Hu's political weakness that is captured in his candid self-assessment as "sincere but 30 percent naïve."³² Yet Hu's sincerity was a major factor in drawing likeminded people to his efforts, whether a recent acquaintance like Hu Jiwei, or, crucially, a military colleague from Yan'an days, like Luo Ruiqing.³³ But the key to Hu's leading role was his efforts at the Party School, where he gathered liberal theorists, pointed them in the direction of Party history and verdict reversals, and, through short-term classes at the School, created links to the media and local units. In this, he was allowed relatively free reign by

[The Debate on the Criterion of Truth Issue from Beginning to End] (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 1997), p. 24.

³¹ See Hu Deping, "Yaobang tongzhi zai 'zhenli biao zhun' da taolun de qianqian houhou (zhongpian)" [Comrade Yaobang Before and After the Great Criterion Debate, part 2], Chinesenewsnet.com, June 8, 2008; and Shen Baoxiang, "Hu Yaobang yu Hua Guofeng (xia)" [Hu Yaobang and Hua Guofeng, part 2], *Tongzhou gongjian* [Progress Together on the Same Boat], no. 44 (2009), cited in Torigian, "Prestige, Manipulation, and Coercion," p. 395

³² Chen Liming, "Zhonggong balao bi Hu Yaobang xiatai jingguo" [The Process by Which Eight Party Elders Forced Hu Yaobang to Step Down], at <http://biweeklyarchive.hrichina.org/repost/6439.html>, April 14, 2013.

³³ In Hu Jiwei's case, Hu Yaobang became close in 1974 when they were both out of office and receiving treatment in hospital; see Teiwes and Sun, *End of the Maoist Era*, p. 319n49. In Yan'an, Hu had studied at the Anti-Japanese University where Luo was a leading figure, and they subsequently maintained a relationship of substantial mutual understanding. "Hu Yaobang tan wangshi: Bijiao Mao Zedong he Deng Xiaoping" [Hu Yaobang Talks about Past Events: Comparing Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping] (March 1, 1980), on China News network, March 6, 2011; and interview with leading Party historian on the period, October 2012.

Hua, and, at least initially, by Wang Dongxing. In a definite sense, “Hu’s network” became the main progressive protagonists to the conservative theorists at Deng’s 1975 Political Research Office who organizationally wound up under Wang.

Notwithstanding the importance of Hu Yaobang’s activities at subordinate levels, his interactions with Standing Committee members were obviously significant. Although it can be argued that during the period leading up to the Third Plenum Hu’s most intense links were to Ye Jianying,³⁴ his relations with Deng and Hua were both important but misunderstood. While the conventional view of Hu as Deng’s protégé is understandable given their substantial career links,³⁵ in 1977-78 the situation was quite different from what is generally assumed. According to one exceptionally well-positioned source, Hu did not have easy access to Deng and their usually brief contacts were reportedly quite businesslike, as per Deng’s style, and

³⁴ Although their work interactions were not extensive in this period, Hu and Ye had developed a strong and enduring relationship in the military system in Yan’an. Now, Hu reportedly kept up links to Ye on a weekly basis, even if much of that was by sending a leading assistant to brief the old Marshal; interview with Hu Deping, September 2009.

³⁵ Hu linked up with Deng’s Second Field Army forces in Sichuan at the end of the civil war in 1949 and then took up a Party post in Deng’s newly established Southwest region, developing close ties to Deng for the first time. Both Deng and Hu were transferred to Beijing in 1952, and until the Cultural Revolution they had ample opportunity for work contacts given their respective positions in the Party Secretariat and Youth League.

lacking heart-to-heart exchanges.³⁶ In contrast, Hu had more contact with Hua in their organizational roles, and, notably, two long sessions of six and nine hours each left Hu with considerable admiration for Hua. And on another occasion, Hu's son came home to find Hua and his father in an apparently relaxed discussion.³⁷ In a striking comparison, an intellectual with long involvement in propaganda work spoke of Hu and Hua as "basically the same, they spoke a common language," while for Deng, it was "only work and playing cards."³⁸ None of this indicates a decisive influence on Hu's approach to the issues, but it suggests Hu's view that the criterion debate was not aimed at Hua was not simply based on previous knowledge but rather it also reflected his considerable respect for the Party Chairman.

The final figure we review here is Hu Qiaomu, a true giant in the CCP theory/ideology world. Known as "the Party's pen" for his drafting of critical documents, due to both his mastery of Marxist-Leninist theory and his understanding of Mao's views given his role as the Chairman's secretary. Before the Cultural Revolution, Hu had achieved a status well beyond other ideologues as a member of the

³⁶ This source has had extensive access to both Hu Yaobang's family and documents. Interviews, September-October 2013.

³⁷ *Hu Yaobang sixiang nianpu* [Chronology of Hu Yaobang Thought] (Hong Kong: Tidetime Publishing Ltd., 2007), vol. 1, pp. 195-98; and interview with Hu Deping, September 2009.

³⁸ Zheng Zhongbing, "Huiyi zai xie'e de zhongxuanbu gongzuo de rizi" [Memories of Days Working in the Evil Central Propaganda Department], at <https://www.backchina.com/blog/243316/article-353455.html>, January 30, 2022.

Secretariat at the Eighth Party Congress in 1956, a status that would be restored in 1980, and he would be further elevated to the Politburo in 1982. Once Hu had been rehabilitated by Mao from his Cultural Revolution disgrace in fall 1974, Deng's step to appoint him head of the new Political Research Office was both shrewd and obvious. Apart from the more strictly theoretical duties working on Volume V of Mao's *Selected Works*, as the office expanded with Deng's Mao-determined rising status, activities turned to key policy issues with the Chairman's approval, and two more pragmatic officials—Yu Guangyuan and Deng Liqun—were recruited by Hu. Moreover, Hu turned his pen to drafting policy documents, notably the so-called "three poisonous weeds," efforts that Deng pushed to fulfil his mistaken understanding of the Chairman's overall wishes and that played a significant role in Deng's second removal from office. Hu Qiaomu fell a second time, but during the anti-Deng campaign in 1976 he showed weakness with respect to his leader.³⁹ Nevertheless, when in April 1977 Yu Guangyuan and Deng Liqun appealed on Hu's

³⁹ See Teiwes and Sun, *End of the Maoist Era*, pp. 317, 324-38, 423-26. During the attacks on Hu in 1976, it appears that the Political Research Office leaders mostly provided only restrained criticism, with the clearest exception being Li Xin (*ibid.*, pp. 424-25).

behalf to Deng, Hu's apology was accepted and he was soon restored to Deng's think-tank, the rebooted Political Research Office.⁴⁰

Hu Qiaomu was a perplexing individual; those who dealt with him described him as both an intellectual and a politician, someone who could be very generous but also could turn on people as circumstances changed, and a figure regarded by some progressives as a closet "whateverist."⁴¹ In leadership relations, this was manifest in quiet form with respect to Hu Yaobang, which also demonstrated Hu Yaobang's naïve tendencies.⁴² In any case, the evidence suggests that

⁴⁰ See *ibid.*, pp. 425-26. Ironically, efforts to close the Political Research Office in early 1977, led by Li Xin, focused on Hu's weakness in failing to adequately support Deng. Li attacked Hu Qiaomu harshly at the March 1977 work conference on these grounds, claiming that during the anti-Deng campaign, together with also Wu Lengxi, Hu Sheng, and Xiong Fu, he had entreated Hu Qiaomu to take a stronger stance, but he was rebuffed. "Li Xin zai zhongyang gongzuo huiyi beizu de fayan zhaiyao" [Summary of Li Xin's Speech at the Northern Group of the Central Work Conference] (March 18, 1977), internal Party document made available to the authors.

⁴¹ This view of Hu's character, widely held in progressive circles, is forcefully argued by Su Shaozhi. See Su, "A Decade of Crises at the Institute of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought, 1979-89," *CQ*, no. 134 (1993), pp. 336-37 and *passim*. This was further elaborated upon by Su in an extensive interview, September 1986.

⁴² Hu Qiaomu strongly supported Hu Yaobang's efforts at the Party School, and their collaboration led to the designation "two Hu's" (*erhu*, after the Chinese musical instrument). Yaobang himself, was enthusiastic that "we need a general headquarters with Hu Qiaomu as commander-in-chief." Later, in July 1979, when he was informed that Hu Qiaomu had banned discussion of a progressive theoretical view, Yaobang declared he did not believe it. Several months after that, when Hu Qiaomu disagreed with a Hu Yaobang decision as propaganda head to endorse the national discussion on the purpose of production, Hu Qiaomu did not directly argue the point, but instead he went behind Hu

Hu Qiaomu saw himself as more than a theorist, as someone who had political influence that could be used. In this, Hu Qiaomu's underlying objective was to safeguard Party unity—a central consideration for Hua, one also regarded as important by Deng, and linked to Mao's prestige by both. In terms of political loyalty, in the assessment of an acute observer, "Hu was absolutely loyal to Mao, secondarily loyal to Deng, and he felt obligated to be loyal to Hua."⁴³ Despite his absence from the post-Mao central theory group of Li Xin *et al.*, Hu's drafting assignments went well beyond Deng's think-tank and involved other leaders, but what we would emphasize is the extensive access Hu Qiaomu and Deng Liqun (along with Yu Guangyuan to a more limited degree) had to Deng during this period, in sharp contrast to Hu Yaobang's access.⁴⁴ Deng was eager to use Hu Qiaomu's talents,

Yaobang's back to lobby Hua and Deng, and after receiving their tacit consent left Yaobang with left with no option but to terminate the discussion; *Hu Yaobang sixiang nianpu*, vol. 1, pp. 397-98, 416-17.

⁴³ According to a Central Party School historian; interview, July 1999.

⁴⁴ The three figures attended some of the most significant private meetings with Deng on ideological issues in 1977-78, notably on May 24, 1977, May 30, 1978, and October 3, 1978; see *Deng Xiaoping nianpu, 1975-1997* [Chronology of Deng Xiaoping, 1975-1997], 2 vols. (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2004), vol. 1, pp. 159-61, 319-21, 394-95. The presence of the more progressive Yu was not always recorded, and Yu was sometimes excluded when Hu Qiaomu and Deng Liqun were reportedly persuading Deng that he had made liberal errors. A significant progressive intellectual has reflected on how much access Hu Qiaomu and Deng Liqun had to Deng, particularly in contrast to Hu Yaobang, "who saw him alone very few times"; interview conducted by Ezra Vogel, who generously provided us with the transcript, November 2006.

although he essentially banned him from heavy administrative duties,⁴⁵ and the evidence suggests that Deng Xiaoping was disdainful of Hu Qiaomu's weakness during the 1976 anti-right movement. Such access, we judge, went beyond utility for document drafting to appreciation of Hu Qiaomu's underlying politically conservative attitude.⁴⁶ In any case, given his exposure to Deng's thinking, Hu Qiaomu's efforts to clamp down on the criterion of truth debate in spring and summer 1978 is a major challenge to the conventional narrative.

We end this introductory section with a brief methodological note. The first point is to emphasize how, in a highly opaque political system, participants, including those of very high status, are often dramatically ignorant of the state of play. As seen most dramatically in the first episode of the perceived ideological conflict, the misunderstanding about the February 1977 "two whatevers" editorial being designed to block Deng's return to office, the Politburo chaired by Hua had decided on Deng's return a month earlier. More generally,

⁴⁵ Hu Yaobang recommended that Hu Qiaomu head the Propaganda Department after the Third Plenum, but Deng dismissed the idea. See Zhu Jiamu, *Guanyu shiyijie sanzong quanhui yixie qingkuangde huigu* [Reflections on Some Circumstances of the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee] (Beijing: Dangdai Zhongguo yanjiusuo bangongshi, August 1998), p. 60.

⁴⁶ While not strictly true, Deng Liqun claimed he and Hu Qiaomu "drafted everything [for Deng] up to the mid-1980s," as relayed by a source who had heard Deng Liqun's claim first-hand; interview, April 1999.

there were misperceptions of larger issues and smaller matters by those actively involved, given their differing ideological tendencies, personal loyalties, and specific roles. The memories of such individuals, in any case, remain important for understanding events, but they are frustrating to evaluate. Party historians engaged in the task note the paucity of documentary materials to verify such memories, at least some of that surfaced after an official line on Hua had been laid down. Concerning the overall enquiry of this book, the existence and nature of Hua-Deng differences, one of the most careful and insightful Party historians of the period has observed that there is no black and white evidence of significant Hua-Deng conflict, and all that can be done is to seek fault lines through analysis.⁴⁷

As illustrated in the case of the “two whatevers” editorial, a crucial problem for both the elite at the time and historians trying to piece together evidence on what did happen is the almost all enveloping lack of credible information on what transpired in the Standing Committee and Politburo. A few scattered and limited insights aside,⁴⁸ there is little to indicate the scope of the discussions or possible tensions among the members. Given the official narrative

⁴⁷ Based on a series of interviews with the senior historian, October 2012.

⁴⁸ E.g., November 1978 exchanges among Standing Committee members rebuking Wang Dongxing and Party theoretical journal *HQ* for attempting to prevent Tan Zhenlin from citing the criterion of truth in an essay he had prepared for *HQ*. “Hu Jiwei tan Hu-Zhao shinian xinzheng.”

of a Hua-Deng conflict, if there was any evidence during these meetings, we would expect it to surface in collections such as Deng's *nianpu*, but it does not. Beyond the lack of information concerning the principal leaders, we suggest a broader perspective. The theory and ideological differences that have become a crucial part of the accepted narrative of the period, although considered in the Standing Committee simply did not have the highest priority for China's top leaders. As the drama unfolded, events from below, while by no means creating the same pressure as the reversal of verdicts, resulted in a significant ideological shift, but a shift that hardly undercut control by the Party Center. This was firmly established by the comprehensive and accurate understanding of Mao Zedong Thought.

The Brief Life of the "Two Whatever's"

The deliberately ironic heading of this section points to a stark fact. The "two whatever's" lives in public consciousness to this day, notably persistent in foreign scholarship as a key aspect of elite division and accepted in various circles in the PRC as an important part of the struggle for reform. Yet the concept disappeared from public space in less than a fortnight after the February 1977 editorial, and it was raised for the last time as a guiding concept within Party councils by

Hua at the March central work conference, precisely one month later. What explains the quick turnaround?

The blunt answer is that the “two whatevers” was never a serious attempt to either block Deng’s return to work or to institute a neo-Maoist policy line. But the misunderstandings about its meaning created a political problem that had to be fixed. On his deathbed in August 2008, when visited by General Secretary Hu Jintao, Hua requested formal acknowledgement of two things: that he had not attempted to prevent Deng’s return and he had never used the “two whatevers” as the Party’s guiding ideology.⁴⁹ The CCP leadership accepted these requests, at least in the limited sense that the falsehoods were dropped from official statements, notably in the formal assessment of Hua’s life (*shengping*) following his death and on the February 2021 anniversary of his 100th birthday. While the 2008 *shengping* received minimal publicity, Hua’s centenary birthday reprised the assessment at a major celebration addressed by Politburo Standing Committee member Wang Huning.⁵⁰

To understand the essential lack of seriousness of the “two whatevers,” an analysis of the situation facing the new leadership after the arrest of the “gang of four” is necessary. The overall political

⁴⁹ Interview with senior Party historian, October 2009. Hua also requested, and was granted, that his secretary be treated well.

⁵⁰ Hua’s *shengping* appears in *Xinhuashe*, August 31, 2008. The 100th birthday celebrations were prominently reported in the official media, February 20, 2021.

objective of stability required a delicate process to balance two contradictory imperatives. Bringing back Deng was a widespread desire in the high-level reaches of the Party and beyond. This, of course, reflected the view that Deng had set China on the proper course in 1975, had been unjustly removed, and justice plus the need for his talents demanded his return. More broadly, Party culture was infused with reverence for “old revolutionaries” who had secured the 1949 victory and Deng was easily the most esteemed survivor of this group. Party unity clearly required his reintegration into the leadership. Yet Deng’s return would be in tension with the virtually unanimous leadership consensus on protecting Mao’s prestige. There was a palpable concern that the movement away from Mao’s positions and policies, which Hua had begun essentially from day one, if too incautious, would create social instability and division within the Party. As one insightful Party historian has observed, it is impossible to overestimate the dominance of Mao’s mystique at the time.⁵¹ Rumors of deMaoization and rightist coups had to be deflated; after having arrested Mao’s widow, a too hasty return of Deng would be considered reckless. As another well-positioned Party historian puts it, people were confused, they still believed in Mao, and they asked if

⁵¹ Interview, June 1998.

Deng were to come back, what would that mean about Chairman Mao?⁵²

“Holding high Mao’s banner,” in addition to reflecting a genuine consensus on protecting the late Chairman’s prestige, was a strategy for dealing with this conundrum, and the “two whatevers” became a somewhat accidental part of the approach, albeit quickly abandoned. Given Mao’s leftist politics during the Cultural Revolution period, propaganda had to portray the “gang of four” as occupying a polar opposite position, thus leading to the ludicrous label “ultra-right.”⁵³ This caused little problem for the elite, although it naturally added confusion among the general populace. Much more problematic was the continuation of criticism Deng (*pi Deng*), Mao’s last decision on the leadership before his passing. As we have noted, this was accepted as necessary, although not universally, by senior elite figures, most strikingly by Chen Yun, but it added to elite suspicion concerning the new leadership’s plans for Deng and it would unconsciously be used against Hua when he came under attack in 1980-81. In fact, the criticize Deng campaign was being defanged within weeks of the arrest of the “gang” and it was

⁵² Interview, April 1999.

⁵³ See William A. Joseph’s detailed discussion of the characterization of the “gang,” evolving from “ultra-right” to “sham left, real right” by fall 1977, and finally to “ultra-left” following the Third Plenum; *The Critique of Ultra-Leftism in China, 1958-1981* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1984), ch. 6.

essentially over by January 1977.⁵⁴ Still more complex is the heavy use of “class struggle as the key link” in official propaganda, a Maoist emphasis before the Cultural Revolution and an established Party belief in class conflict then accepted by those who would become reformists as well as by those who remained orthodox. Now, of course, after the “Cultural Revolution decade,” this emphasis added to concern, yet we should return to Mao’s 1962 clarion call to “never forget class struggle.” At that time, however, the Chairman distinguished work from class struggle, and he directed that “our work must not be jeopardized just because of class struggle.”⁵⁵ This was clearly Hua’s approach, with class struggle equated with exposing the “gang,” and his essential emphasis in a governing objective of “grasping the key link to rule the country.”⁵⁶

The true meaning of “the key link” indicates a key feature of Hua’s essential method, the separation of actual policy from heavy-handed Maoist rhetoric in public space. Yet there was ample indication in the official media of policy drifting away from Maoism, together with its theoretical implications. This could be seen in the

⁵⁴ Han Gang, “Huanyuan Hua Guofeng.”

⁵⁵ See Frederick C. Teiwes, *Politics and Purges in China: Rectification and the Decline of Party Norms, 1950–1965*, 2nd ed. (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1993), p. 385.

⁵⁶ See Han Gang, “Huanyuan Hua Guofeng”; Hua’s Dazhai December 1976 speech, *Peking Review* [hereafter *PR*], no. 1 (1977), pp. 35, 37; and Teiwes and Sun, *End of the Maoist Era*, pp. 305, 329, 338n98, 406ff.

reversal of attacks on the three “poisonous weeds” policy documents formulated under Deng’s leadership in July-October 1975, and reversals in early 1977 preceding the “two whatevers” editorial.⁵⁷ Another indication was Hua’s very early advocacy of distribution according to work (*anlao fenpei*), a subject of harsh anti-Deng criticism in 1976 and, in another ironic quasi-accidental development, an issue that became linked to Wang Dongxing’s clumsy attack on the criterion of truth in May 1978.⁵⁸ As for class struggle, while a required rhetorical prop, Hua very quickly reoriented the focus of Party work to economic reconstruction at the December 1976 Dazhai conference that defined revolution as the liberation of productive forces.⁵⁹ In short, in both practical policy measures and theoretical justifications, the movement away from radical Maoism was, or should have been, clear by the time of the so-called “two whatevers” editorial.

This brings us to the February 7, 1977, document itself. To reprise the context, Deng’s return had been formally decided by the

⁵⁷ Ma Qibin *et al.*, eds., *Zhongguo gongchandang zhizheng sishinian (1949-1989)* [The CCP’s Forty Years in Power, 1949-1989], rev. ed. (Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi chubanshe, 1991), p. 410. A basic determination was made during a January-February 1977 State Planning Commission work conference, and it was formally approved in March.

⁵⁸ Hua’s advocacy of *anlao fenpei* was clear by the end of 1976, notably in his Dazhai conference speech. Wang Dongxing’s conflation of *anlao fenpei* with the criterion of truth is covered in our analysis of events in May-June 1978.

⁵⁹ See Hua’s speech at the Dazhai conference, *PR*, no. 1 (1977), pp. 32, 33, 41-42.

Politburo a month before the editorial. It is very likely, although not certain, that Deng knew this on February 7,⁶⁰ and there is little to suggest widespread elite perception of an attempt to block Deng's return. Deng Liqun later recalled initially doubting the editorial was directed at Deng and paying no particular notice until approached by a junior official with his suspicions. Thus alarmed, Deng Liqun approached senior figure Wang Zhen, who then took the matter to Deng himself.⁶¹ While Deng would have then, or soon, known that this was not true, his later sensitivity to the "two whatevers" may suggest some suspicion of his own that the intent, if not to block him, was perhaps designed to restrict his role.⁶² And many years later, figures from both sides of the broader ideological divide, including

⁶⁰ According to an official with close links to Hua, on February 1, Hua, Ye, and Li Xiannian visited Deng, and two days later Hua and Ye met with Deng to discuss personnel matters. If accurate, it would be extremely surprising if the January 6 decision on his return to work had not been made explicit to Deng. Interview, September 2011.

⁶¹ Han Gang, "'Liangge fanshi' de youlai ji qi zhongjie."

⁶² During this period, Deng Liqun interpreted Hua's actions in these terms. Deng Xiaoping himself reportedly felt there was something wrong with the article, leading Hua to meet Deng Xiaoping with assurances it was not aimed at him. Deng Liqun, "'Guanyu jianguo yilai dang de ruogan lishi wenti de jueyi' qicao guocheng he zhuyao neirong de jieshao" [Introduction to the Drafting Process and Main Content of the "Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party since the Founding of the PRC"] (July 7-8, 1981), internal document available at the Fairbank Center Library, Harvard University, p. 39. We discuss Deng's few known critical comments on the "two whatevers" during the criterion of truth debate before the Third Plenum in our analysis of that period below.

Deng Liqun and Yu Guangyuan, continued to believe the editorial could only be explained by an anti-Deng intent.⁶³

Production of the editorial was tightly controlled by the new Party Center theoretical group (*lilunzu*), made up of veterans of Deng's 1975 State Council Political Research Office and with leading members of the propaganda apparatus, then headed by Geng Biao, only informed at the last minute. Responsibility, as Hua acknowledged at the 1978 work conference, lay with him, but only in the general sense of laying down the policy of honoring Mao's reputation and signing off on the document. Wang Dongxing, with overall Politburo responsibility for propaganda, apparently placed particular emphasis on "holding high Mao's banner." Li Xin, as the *lilunzu* leader and later characterized as the arch theorist of the "two whatevers *pai*," oversaw the editorial's preparation, while junior writers Gong Yuzhi and Zheng Bijian did the actual drafting.⁶⁴ In addition to the fact that late in the drafting process the "two

⁶³ See *Deng Liqun guoshi jiangtanlu* [Record of Deng Liqun's Lectures on National History], 5 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua renmin gongheguo shigao bianweihui, 2000), vol. 3, pp. 311-12; and Yu Guangyuan, *Wo qinli de naci lishi zhuanzhe: Shiyijie sanzong quanhui de taiqian muhou* [I Witnessed the Historic Turning Point: Front-Stage and Back-Stage at the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee] (Beijing: Zhongyang bianyi chubanshe, 1998). pp. 8-11.

⁶⁴ The two drafters reportedly were the actual authors of the "two whatevers" couplet. See Zheng Bijian, "Shenqie daonian yiyou liangshi Gong Yuzhi" [Profound Grieving for Friend, Mentor, and Good Teacher Gong Yuzhi], at <http://www.aisixiang.com/data/15311.html>, August 28, 2022.

whatevers” was an add-on to underscore a connection to Mao, “whatever” (*fanshi*) was not a dramatic innovation intended to attract attention; instead, it was simply a common phrase conveying emphasis. Indeed, after the “two whatevers” drama had passed, in summer 1979 Hu Yaobang’s Propaganda Department used *liangge fanshi* to stress that the “whatever” policies supported adoption of the Four Modernizations.⁶⁵

Li Xin would later claim that the editorial was part of an effort to facilitate Deng’s reintegration into the leadership, a claim angrily rejected at the 1979 theory conference.⁶⁶ Given the focus in both PRC and foreign discussions on the “two whatevers” phrase, this claim might understandably be dismissed as disingenuous, but a broader view is required. The key assignments of the *lilunzu* were to develop the campaign against the “gang of four” and to draft documents to indicate the intentions of the Party Center. The editorial clearly fulfilled the second task. The Center’s intent was not embodied in phraseology tacked on at the end of the piece, but it was in the editorial’s title, “Study Documents Well and Grasp the Key Link,” and its directive to Party cadres to study two specific documents. What

⁶⁵ See Schoenhals, “The 1978 Truth Criterion Controversy,” p. 267.

⁶⁶ A contrary anti-Deng interpretation of the editorial is one of many charges against Li at the theory conference, cited in “Guanyu Li Xin tongzhi de jige wenti (chugao, gong taolun yong)” [Several Questions about Comrade Li Xin (draft for discussion)], internal Party document made available to the authors.

were those documents? One was Hua's December speech to the Dazhai conference that emphasized economic development and stability and unity. The other was Mao's 1956 "Ten Great Relations," the most balanced, moderate policy approach articulated by the Chairman after 1949, one based on his consultations with over 40 State Council departments as well as being Deng's most admired Mao treatise. Li Xin's defense in late 1978-early 1979 that the aim of the editorial, in addition to upholding Mao's prestige, was to discredit the "gang," bolster stability, and, as a result, create the conditions for Deng's (already decided) return to work, is completely credible.⁶⁷ At a minimum, cadres throughout China were being told to study an esteemed document from a period when class struggle was claimed to be moderating rather than the concerns gripping Mao from the Great Leap Forward on.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ The two documents had already been published prominently in *RMRB*, see *PR*, no. 1 (1977).

⁶⁸ This is not to deny that the editorial contained rhetoric congenial to a different view; it is only to argue that the document as a whole is very much moderate and pragmatic, and the "Ten Great Relations" is a model of balanced politics. See *PR*, no. 8 (1977), pp. 6-7.

Chinese scholar Huang Yibing, *Zhuanzhe: Gaige kaifang qidong shilu* [Turning Point: The True Record of the Beginning of Reform and Opening] (Fuzhou: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 2009), pp. 2-3, 10, incisively identifies "grasp the key link to rule the country" with its governing message as the editorial's most important content, and further praises using the "Ten Great Relations" as a symbol of using the policies of the 1956 Eighth Party Congress.

Over the following weeks several things became clear: there was no attempt to launch a “two whatevers” media campaign,⁶⁹ elite concern developed to an uncertain extent,⁷⁰ and Deng’s return remained to be clarified. Although, as Li Xin explained, “holding high Mao’s banner” when preparing for Deng’s return, but not being able say the Chairman was wrong in criticizing Deng, was a big problem for document writers;⁷¹ the key task was to convey and explain to the high Party elite that Deng was returning. This was the main political feature of the March 10 to 22 Party work conference discussed below. There were other aspects as well of the meeting, such as its emphasis on the Four Modernizations, opening the economy to the outside world, and strengthening Party rule, all of which underscored moving away from recent Maoism.⁷² Tellingly, while strictly theoretical issues

⁶⁹ According to the electronic database *Renmin ribao tuwen shujuku* [RMRB Digital Archive], the couplet only reappeared in *RMRB* once, on February 18, 1977. After the March 1977 work conference to the end of 1978, *fanshi* references to Mao appeared only 11 times in the Party daily, generally linked with *fanshi* insistence on obeying the Party Center. A striking exception, which we discuss below, appeared on October 10, 1978.

⁷⁰ The Deng Liqun/Wang Zhen case and one other case of high-ranking figures aside, there are only later reports of considerable public discontent at the time, with old cadres phoning around to express their unhappiness. See, e.g., Wang Hongmo *et al.*, *Gaige kaifang de licheng*, pp. 52-53; and Yu Guangyuan, *Wo qinli de nazi lishi zhuanzhe*, p. 10. This interpretation has also been adopted in Western scholarship: e.g., MacFarquhar, “Succession,” pp. 313-14; and Baum, *Burying Mao*, pp. 45-46.

⁷¹ “Li Xin tongzhi de fayan” [Comrade Li Xin’s Speech] (February 2, 1979), internal Party document made available to the authors, p. 2.

⁷² Cf. Gewirtz, *Unlikely Partners*, p. 23.

were present,⁷³ they hardly mattered for the crucial issues of Deng's return and the related issue of the 1976 Tiananmen incident. There is little to indicate the "two whatevers" editorial was discussed in group meetings, nor did Hua's revised version at the conference produce theoretical dispute. Hua's revision, drafted by the same *lilunzu*, essentially repeated the first half of the February 7 couplet that demanded obedience to Mao's decisions, but the revision inserted a new second half: "whatever words or deeds that harm the image of Chairman Mao, we must prohibit and prevent."⁷⁴ This points to the underlying intention of Hua's strategy—protecting Mao's reputation and thus reinforcing the legitimacy of the regime. Hua clearly did not consider the "two whatevers" format too toxic to use, but it did require adjustment.

By the start of the work conference, concern over *whether* Deng would return had dissipated, as the high elite became aware the decision had already been made, although the details of his return still needed to be explained. To a certain extent, attention shifted to the Tiananmen issue, the terms of which ironically were settled on January 6 by Hua, the same day as the decision on Deng's return, and

⁷³ Notably, claims that documents for the conference prepared under Wang Dongxing and Li Xin produced considerable resistance due to Cultural Revolution language, resulting in modification.

⁷⁴ Hua Guofeng, "Zai zhongyang gongzuo huiyishang de jianghua" [Speech at the Central Work Conference] (March 14, 1977), internal Party document made available to the authors, p. 23.

they would be basically accepted by the conference. It might be argued, however, that Hua's approach to these issues was clumsy, thus leaving a residue of reservation. The agenda for the gathering stipulated the economic plan, deepening the exposure of the "gang of four," and work arrangements for the year, but it did not mention either Deng or Tiananmen. Beyond that, when these issues surfaced in the group meetings, Hua asked the group conveners to avoid them, apparently to prevent disruptive opinions. It is surely the case that Hua intended to deal with these critical matters on his own terms, but Chen Yun ignored Hua's request and raised the Deng question. Hua responded the next day, apparently based on a speech draft prepared earlier by Li Xin *et al.*, confirming Deng's return and explaining his position on the entire process. In fact, there was basically no difference between what Chen asked for and what Hua had already decided in January and confirmed at the work conference.⁷⁵

What was Hua's argument to the assembled high-ranking figures of the regime? The Party Chairman spent a fifth of his speech on Deng's return and the related Tiananmen issue. In essence, he reprised the situation facing the leadership following the dramatic arrest of the "gang of four," the fears felt in the Politburo, and the strategy adopted. Hua acknowledged that some comrades did not

⁷⁵ Interview about the work conference with leading Party historian, September 2009.

agree with his approach and that following the dispatch of the "gang," they (Hu Yaobang was one unmentioned exponent of this view) wanted Deng to quickly return to work. This, he argued, was a view that did not understand the overall situation in the struggle against the "gang's" influence or the need to first further prepare the ground by extensive criticism of their actions and views. Bringing Deng back too quickly would aid counterrevolutionary forces and help them to portray such a step as an assault on Mao's legacy. In this, Hua demonstrated his basic approach of carefully preparing the ground before acting. To resolve the Deng question, he argued, there had to be a process, with moves such as briefly continuing the *pi Deng* movement that were necessary to prevent the enemy from causing ideological confusion, and thus stabilize the country. Now, through effective steps during five months of exposing the "gang of four," Hua declared the time had arrived for Deng's return, and it was formally scheduled for the coming summer at a Party plenum and the 11th Party Congress.⁷⁶

Similarly, the Tiananmen issue was temporarily settled with Hua's affirmation, apparently identical to his January 6 declaration in the Politburo that the masses had come to the Square to honor Zhou Enlai and oppose the "gang," something practically indicated by, and

⁷⁶ Hua Guofeng, "Zai zhongyang gongzuo huiyishang de jianghua" (March 14, 1977), pp. 18-23.

referenced to, in his early actions to absolve and release those who had been arrested in the crackdown. This was very welcome to the new Chairman's influential audience, but particularly instructive was the emphasis Chen Yun placed on affirming that Deng was not involved in any way in stirring up the demonstrations at Tiananmen, something completely affirmed by Hua in his speech. Tellingly, this—not the actions of, or injustices suffered by, the masses—was Deng's crucial concern regarding the first Tiananmen incident, as strikingly indicated in the specific thanks in his April 10 letter to Hua and the Party Center.⁷⁷ Thus the important political issues had been satisfactorily dealt with more than adequately for Deng, but the theoretical questions remained.

The Comprehensive and Accurate Understanding of Mao Zedong Thought. In the official narrative, the introduction of "comprehensive and accurate" as the Party's guiding ideological line was due to Deng's initiative against the "two whatevers." As with so much else in the larger story, this is deeply misleading. The *locus classicus* of this claim is his May 24 talk with Wang Zhen, Deng Liqun, and Yu Guangyuan, presented in his *Selected Works* as his first

⁷⁷ See below, note 79.

significant statement in the new period.⁷⁸ In this talk, headlined as “The ‘Two Whatevers’ Do Not Accord with Marxism,” Deng makes the commonsense argument that one should not mechanically apply Mao’s words on a particular situation to other situations, and he goes on to quote Mao saying that he himself, like other leading figures from Marx to Stalin, had made mistakes. Deng introduced his comments about what he had told Wang Dongxing and Li Xin during a visit following his April 10 letter, in which he had proposed using “comprehensive and accurate Mao Zedong Thought” to guide the entire Party. Yet the tone was far from that of a sharp ideological struggle. Deng illustrated the absurdity of the “two whatevers” by saying it would have banned his return to work and by acknowledging that the actions of the masses at Tiananmen were reasonable. These, of course, to Deng’s delight, were actions Hua took at the March work conference.

For a nuanced understanding of what had happened, we return to early April. Matters had moved quickly after the conclusion of the work conference. At the start of April, Deng moved into State Council offices, subsequently began to consult with significant officials, and was surely playing an important political role. His April 10 letter was

⁷⁸ *Selected Works of Deng (1975-1982)*, pp. 51-52. See also *Deng nianpu*, vol. 1, pp. 159-61, which identifies Wang Zhen and Deng Liqun. Regarding Yu Guangyuan, see Yu Guangyuan, *Deng Xiaoping Shakes the World*, p. 12.

part of the ritual preparing for his formal return at the Third Plenum of the Tenth Congress in July, providing both a limited self-criticism and fulsome support for Hua's leadership. Deng further requested that the letter be circulated to the whole Party, along with his October 1976 letter following the arrest of the "gang" in which he praises Hua as a leader capable of providing China with 15 to 20 years of stability.⁷⁹ Despite some unconvincing claims of contention over Deng's proposal,⁸⁰ the two letters, with an accompanying Party Center circular of approval, were sent out on May 3 and became required reading for Party members. Other possible issues aside, what do Deng's proposal and the official reaction say about the theoretical issues raised by the "two whatevers"?

Basically, these events indicate there was little contention over the departure from the couplet. In using a modified version of the "two whatevers" at the March work conference, Hua apparently saw no major problem with presenting the altered couplet, but he had not been the personal author of the phrase and, in practice, he was developing policies that that paid little or no deference to many of Mao's recent instructions. Also, Hua apparently had come to realize

⁷⁹ "Deng Xiaoping gei Hua Guofeng Ye Jianying de xin" [Deng Xiaoping's Letter to Hua Guofeng and Ye Jianying] (April 10, 1977); and "Deng Xiaoping gei Hua Guofeng he zhonggong zhongyang de xin" [Deng Xiaoping's Letter to Hua Guofeng and the Party Center (October 10, 1976), internal Party document made available to the authors.

⁸⁰ For such claims, see Shen Baoxiang, *Zhenli biao zhun*, pp. 5-6.

the counterproductive aspects of a slogan that notionally entitled people to use any of the late Chairman's instructions to support their own preferences, regardless of the Party's interests. As for Deng, the "comprehensive and accurate" interpretation was not his new invention, it was something he reportedly had regularly used since the early 1960s.⁸¹ In strict theoretical terms, it is difficult to imagine any significant difference in this regard between these two very pragmatic men. At the time, moreover, there were no overriding political factors pushing them in conflicting directions. In one crucial aspect, there was no difference between the "two whatevers" and "comprehensive and accurate Mao Zedong Thought"—both were dedicated to protecting the prestige of the late Chairman.

We believe that in raising the "comprehensive and accurate" formula, Deng was making a helpful proposal for Party messaging, not engaging in a continuing struggle against the "two whatevers." As Michael Schoenhals has observed, at the time it was unclear to Chinese intellectuals whether Deng's formula was an alternative or a complement to the "two whatevers."⁸² Certainly, the available excerpt of Deng's May 24 talk is rather offhand on the matter, not a call for

⁸¹ According to a well-placed senior Party historian; interview, July 1999. In his May 24 talk, Deng made the same claim with specific regard to struggling with Lin Biao's early 1960s' vulgarization of Mao Zedong Thought instead of "viewing it as a system"; *Selected Works of Deng (1975-1982)*, p. 52.

⁸² Schoenhals, "The 1978 Truth Criterion Controversy," p. 251.

continuing contention on an issue that was receding.⁸³ A further suggestion about the limited political significance of the “two whatevers” at this stage, is the apparently cordial, if not without incident, earlier meeting among Deng, Wang Dongxing, and Li Xin. While the only official report is extremely brief, Li Xin’s son has provided a credible account. In this account, Wang and Li’s visit was another part of Party ritual to prepare for Deng’s formal return. Wang politely indicated the hope that Deng would make some self-criticism, and then, to the visitors’ surprise, he raised the “two whatevers.” Wang then realized there was a problem and he then defended the February editorial as seeking stability. In any case, there was no sharp exchange; indeed, after returning home, Li Xin reread the February editorial and concluded Deng had been right.⁸⁴ Additional evidence of its declining political relevance, at least for now, came in the ideological sphere itself, independent of but at the same time as Deng’s letter.

⁸³ Although there were six *fanshi* Chairman Mao references in *RMRB* from April 1 to May 20, they were all toned down. Thereafter, starting in July 1977, there were only five more references before the 1978 work conference. See above, note 69.

⁸⁴ Interview, March 2011.

Deng nianpu, vol. 1, p. 157, records the meeting as taking place “after April 10” to discuss Deng’s April 10 and October 10 letters, only noting that Deng told his visitors that the “two whatevers” were *bu xing*, which means “not quite right,” or less challengingly “outmoded.”

In his letter, Deng used *wanzhengde zhunjuede* to express “comprehensive and accurate”; the next day, a *RMRB* editorial used *quanmiande zhengjuede*, different terminology, but virtually identical in meaning. On such short notice, it would have been impossible for the Party daily to be reflecting Deng’s initiative or to be offering a linguistic alternative that, according to Pekinological methodology, might measure competing influence.⁸⁵ We have no direct knowledge of the authorship of the editorial, but we find little to suggest the author represented liberal elements within *RMRB* led by Hu Jiwei; in fact, quite the opposite.⁸⁶ It is unlikely that Hua was directly involved, given his general distance from theoretical matters and normal practice of non-interference in Wang Dongxing’s sphere. Wang, given the history of the “two whatevers,” undoubtedly had an interest, but we believe Li Xin and the *lilunzu* theorists were the most likely authors. These Party intellectuals (*xiuca*) were the same conservatives, later attacked as the “two whatevers *pai*,” who had prepared Volume V of Mao’s *Selected Works* that was published on April 15 but had been ready for final technical work by March 1. In its version of the “Ten

⁸⁵ Hypothesizing the *RMRB* version as “Hua’s slogan,” we find Hua and Deng using both slogans at various official occasions. For example, Hua used *wanzhengde* at the 1978 army political work conference, and Deng used *quanmiande* at the 11th Party Congress.

⁸⁶ On other occasions, Hu Jiwei used stratagems to avoid Wang Dongxing’s authority to the latter’s displeasure, but there is no evidence of any such conflict in this case.

Great Relations," Volume V could not have more clearly rejected a "whateverist" approach: "It would lead to a mess if every single sentence, even of Marx's, were followed."⁸⁷

One final observation emphasizes what was said earlier in this paper. In later years, some of the most outspoken critics of the "two whatevers" came to regard "comprehensive and accurate Mao Zedong Thought" as equally, if not more, pernicious. Looking back, they concluded that this *tifa*, i.e., widely used wording to indicate the direction of policy, was simply another formula that left the definition of truth in the hands of the Party leadership. It was a more formal indication of authority, telling the entire that Party "you must listen to us."⁸⁸ This is precisely the message Deng was emphasizing at the time. In his speech to the July 1977 Party plenum, when discussing his advocacy of "comprehensive and accurate Mao Zedong Thought," Deng emphasized Party discipline as well as democracy, demanding

⁸⁷ *Selected Works of Mao Tsetung*, vol. V (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1977), pp. 6, 304.

⁸⁸ "Hu Jiwei tan Hu-Zhao shinian xinzheng; Zheng Zhongbing, "Huiyi zai xie'e de zhongxuanbu gongzuo de rizi"; interview with senior Party historian, February 2000; and Vogel interview with progressive intellectual, November 2006. Zheng Zhongbing puts it particularly strongly: the "comprehensive and accurate" method meant "'I' have the final say, that is, the right to interpret and determine Mao Zedong Thought."

to know “who does not listen to the orders of Chairman Mao and the Party Center!”⁸⁹

From Theoretical Issue to Political Contention: “The Criterion of Truth”

By the time “comprehensive and accurate Mao Zedong Thought” was installed as the regime’s guiding ideology, the reason the “two whatevers” had caused a stir in elite circles—the misperception that the concept was aimed at preventing Deng from regaining his rightful place in the leadership—had disappeared. While significant figures, perhaps including Deng himself, continued to harbor suspicions, the leadership and broader elite shifted its focus to a range of practical issues. This is clearly indicated in one of the initial statements of the “comprehensive and accurate” overview, the April 11 *RMRB* editorial, which points out that the new *tifa* was designed to facilitate *luoshi* development of traditional approaches to key policy areas.⁹⁰ Naturally, in the circumstances of the moment, the “two whatevers” was not mentioned. But when the political situation changed at the 1978 work conference, Hua noted in his self-criticism that the earlier slogan was detrimental to *luoshi* implementation of the Party’s policies and it

⁸⁹ *Deng Xiaoping wenxuan (1975-1982)* [Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1983), p. 42.

⁹⁰ See Huang Yibing, *Zhuanzhe*, p. 4.

restricted creative thinking.”⁹¹ In this, Hua alluded to several dilemmas of the immediate post-Mao period. From the outset, the essential project was to reject the Cultural Revolution, but the need to honor “Mao’s banner” created slogans and messages inhibiting change in the system. At the same time, the emphasis on *luoshi* approaches was a restorationist message that advocated pre-1966 practices, albeit improved. This clearly was the predominant sentiment among the elite. But coming to terms with the Cultural Revolution created the need for something more innovative than simple restoration, even if it would take a considerable period of time to crystallize into a coherent reform program.

Where did this larger context leave ideology and the theoretical sector once the “two whatevers,” for now, had been put to bed? Despite the notional requirement of the system for coherent theoretical positions to guide policy development, the agency of intellectuals in this sphere was limited. To focus on progressive thinkers, their impact was fundamentally due to broader elite discontent with the Cultural Revolution and to the support of high-ranking figures such as Hu Yaobang and Luo Ruiqing. As Su Shaozhi

⁹¹ Hua Guofeng, “Zai zhongyang gongzuo huiyi bimu huishang de jianghua” [Closing Speech at the Central Work Conference] (December 13, 1978), internal Party document made available to the authors. While the politics of the occasion required singling out the “two whatevers,” the same problem persisted under “comprehensive and accurate Mao Zedong Thought,” albeit to a diminished degree.

explained to us, theorists like himself normally lived in a world in which the highest authorities did not take a great deal of interest in what they were doing, a matter of frustration to them.⁹² This relative lack of interest had utility for developing new ideas, but, in general, earnest theoretical discussions gave way to practical policy concerns in leadership decisions.⁹³ Indeed, to some degree, theoretical discussions were segregated from policy. During the early period of encouraging theoretical debate at the Party School in 1977, Hu Yaobang had declared “we only engage in theoretical issues, policy questions can be involved a little bit, and policy issues with a theoretical aspect a little.”⁹⁴ Of course, the School’s activities would

⁹² Interview, June 1999. Su was speaking more generally rather than only referring to the 1977-78 period, but it clearly was applicable then as well.

⁹³ A case in point concerns the interest in Yugoslav and other East European economic practices, including where they fit into socialism. As time passed, official assessments changed according to independent developments in PRC economic policy. See Nina P. Halpern, “Learning from Abroad: Chinese Views of the East European Economic Experience, January 1977-June 1981,” *Modern China*, January 1985, pp. 83-84, 103-104, and *passim*.

A different case, noted earlier, distribution according to work, also involved theoretical debate on whether the measure was socialist. On this major early policy issue, the argument in favor was advanced in a series of conferences on the issue, but as a policy matter, the issue had already been decided at the highest levels.

⁹⁴ Hu’s remarks were made to a small group at the Party School on June 4, 1977. Zhen Shi, “Hu Yaobang zai zhongyang dangxiao: Shuaixian lakai jiepi Kang Sheng de xumu” [Hu Yaobang at the Central Party School: The Prelude to Taking the Lead in Exposure and Criticism of Kang Sheng], excerpted in *Dangshi bolan* [Party History Expo], at <https://news.creaders.net/china/2010/07/28/998664.html>, July 28, 2010.

include much more significant matters, notably cadre policy, although they remained under the radar for a period of time.

The emergence of the criterion of truth clearly began at the Party School. Theorists at the School, and students sent from various official organs, faced a set of circumstances that affected the Party, intellectuals, and society more generally. One, noted above, is the lack of clarity on the ideological line, as in the initial uncertainty over whether “comprehensive and accurate Mao Zedong Thought” replaced, or merely supplemented, the “two whatevers.”⁹⁵ Uncertainty, together with the heavy presence of Mao in public space, created nervousness over possible trouble and punishment. Overall, however, from the earliest days following the arrest of the “gang of four,” the trend was one of decreasing pressure and toward a more open environment. Hu Yaobang and others felt secure enough to object to Maoist concepts in drafts prepared by the *lilunzu* for major documents, including Hua’s political report to the 11th Party Congress, and, in any case, with Hua’s approval, most were eliminated or reshaped.⁹⁶ Party progressives were unhappy with aspects of the

⁹⁵ Even as time passed, a thoughtful intellectual with a deep personal interest in knowing, recalled having no impression of what the Party line truly was during the 1977-78 period. Interview, May 2007.

⁹⁶ “Guanyu Li Xin tongzhi de jige wenti”; Shen Baoxiang, *Zhenli biao zhun*, p. 10; Zhen Shi, “Hu Yaobang zai zhongyang dangxiao” [Hu Yaobang at the Central Party School]. at <http://dangshi.people.com.cn/GB/144956/12233242.html>, September 10, 2010; and interview with senior Party School historian, July 1997.

Congress, but they were pleased with others.⁹⁷ Shortly thereafter, the National Day joint editorial declared that the oppressive environment had been eliminated.⁹⁸ Moreover, as we have indicated, Party discipline and procedures were obstacles, particularly in the person of Wang Dongxing, who not only was responsible for ideology at the Center but was also the deputy head of the Party School. While this would cause a significant conflict in spring 1978, in initial articles on cadre policy in the fall 1977 aside, there was little indication of

Although we suspect an element of exaggeration in later criticisms of such drafts as the work of the “two whatevers *pai*,” sharp controversy did exist. However, in considering claims that the drafters of Hua’s report inserted Maoist concepts such as “capitalist roaders,” “bourgeois right,” “the theory of productive forces,” and “continuing the revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat,” it is clear that the references actually used were either negative, very limited, or turned on their head, except for “continuing the revolution.” See Hua’s political report, *PR*, no. 35 (1977), pp. 31, 34-36, 48-49. While Deng reportedly expressed some private disappointment with the slogans used, regarding the dominant one then and ongoing, “continuing the revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat” that remained a staple concept well into 1978, there is no evidence of any conflict between Deng and Hua. According to a well-positioned source, Hua instructed the drafting group to consider Deng’s views, which are reflected in the document; interview with family member of a significant 1977 leader, December 2009.

⁹⁷ Apart from opposition to some ideological formulations, Hu Jiwei notes that “we” were happy with the rehabilitation of some old cadres at the Congress but disappointed that others were not. Interview, July 1997.

⁹⁸ “The oppressive atmosphere created by the ‘gang of four,’ ... has been swept away... [ideological confusion] is being cleared up and Chairman Mao’s revolutionary line and policies are being carried out comprehensively and correctly.” *PR*, no. 41 (1977), p. 17.

tension between Wang and Hu.⁹⁹ In other words, during the alleged continuing dominance of the “two whatevers” viewpoint, Hua and Wang largely allowed Hu Yaobang free range at the Party School.

In this context, Hu Yaobang led the Party School on a course that was both bold and circumspect. Hu, as noted previously, had been impatient with the continuation of the *pi Deng* campaign after the arrest of the “gang of four,” and, despite previous good relations with the Party Chairman, he remained concerned about what he perceived to be a dogmatic drift under Hua’s leadership.¹⁰⁰ But once taking up the new post that Hua had assigned him, Hu began to move forcefully without hesitation. On March 28, he ordered a radical revision of reading materials at the School that would “turn upside down” the theoretical distortions of Lin Biao and the “gang,” by focusing on fundamental issues to restore proper Marxism. Reflecting his view of the continued ideological sway of the “two whatevers”

⁹⁹ Interview with Ruan Ming, Hu Yaobang’s subordinate at the Party School, May 1996.

¹⁰⁰ Hu Deping describes his father as distressed about Cultural Revolution ideology in January 1977, with Hu subsequently participating in Chen Yun’s critical salon at the time of the March 1977 work conference. Earlier in his career, when Hu Yaobang had been dispatched to Hunan in the 1960s to participate in the “four cleans” movement, he had had a positive relationship with Hua, and in 1975 they worked together under Deng without any known conflict. See Hu Deping, “Yaobang tongzhi zai ‘zhenli biao zhun’ da taolun de qianqian houhou (shangpian)” [Comrade Yaobang before and after the Great Criterion Debate, part 1] at <http://magazine.caijing.com.cn/20080425/58407.shtml>, April 25, 2008; idem, “Hua Guofeng zai ‘zhenli biao zhun’ taolun (zhong)”]; and Teiwes and Sun, *End of the Maoist Era*, p. 327.

ideology, years later Hu Deping interpreted this as his father taking a great risk. At the time, Hu Yaobang painted a similar picture. Speaking in May to the teaching staff at the School, he told them that he was entering the political whirlpool in Beijing, asking them whether they dared to join him. The key specific task was to participate in three new journals, the most famous on theoretical research, "Theoretical Trends" (*Lilun dongtai*) [hereafter *LLDT*], for which he would encourage articles to target current debates and unclear issues, according to the needs of present theoretical struggles.¹⁰¹ In terms of courage, the outstanding example, in any case, was Hu's initiatives in the handling of arguably his highest priority in 1977, the treatment of unjust cases.

Without in any way discounting Hu Yaobang's role on the theoretical front, the above narrative again exaggerates ideological tensions, as now reflected at the Party School. The situation required circumspection, and Hu being warned against provocative language, and, as we have noted, advised not to go too deeply into policy areas. Despite Hu's concerns about Cultural Revolution theory, Party School publications did not address the movement *per se*, as it was still strongly affirmed by the Party line. The dominant perspective for Hu,

¹⁰¹ Hu Deping, "Yaobang tongzhi zai 'zhenli biaozhun' (shang)"; and Zhen Shi, "Hu Yaobang zai zhongyang dangxiao." The latter source places Hu's meeting on establishing *LLDT* in early June.

at least initially, was to affirm Mao's dictum to combine theory and practice, again the clear theoretical position of the new leadership from the outset and one reflected in serious study of classical texts at the School.¹⁰² Also, while theorists at the School were clearly aware of contention over the "two whatevers," there is little evidence of this being a driving force in their work, despite later claims to the contrary. Indeed, in a rare reference fully consistent with his claim that there never was a "two whatevers *pa!*" in the Party, while declaring the concept wrong Hu dismissed it as something hastily decided.¹⁰³ In short, what was happening at the Party School was restoration on the theoretical front, an effort to apply the declared true meaning of Marxism-Leninism, including Mao Zedong Thought, to the dilemmas left over by the Cultural Revolution.

From a broad perspective, Hu was providing what Hua asked for when he announced the reopening of the Party School at the March work conference—raising the theoretical level of Marxism and training high and mid-level cadres in this safe orientation.¹⁰⁴ For his

¹⁰² In "turning upside down" Lin Biao-"gang of four" distortions, Hu declared the first task was to find the original words of the classic Marxist writer, to determine the original meaning and to use them to dispel the confusion caused by the radicals. Zhen Shi, "Hu Yaobang zai zhongyang dangxiao."

¹⁰³ On July 9; *Hu Yaobang sixiang nianpu*, vol. 1, p. 73.

¹⁰⁴ Hua noted the intention to send such officials batch by batch to the Party School to study and raise their Marxist theoretical level; Hua Guofeng, "Zai zhongyang gongzuo huiyishang de jianghua" (March 14, 1977), pp. 3-4.

part, Hu was engaged in spreading ideas, hoping the exposure of short-term students at the School and the influence of *LLDT* would have an impact on official thinking in the coming years, something that might be effective within three to five years. *LLDT* was distributed to top Party leaders, all ministries, all military services, all provincial Party committees and Party schools, and theoretical and propaganda units. Hu was practical with respect to achieving that often-elusive objective for theorists—capturing the attention of busy leaders and officials. He advised short, targeted essays, generally limited to two pages—otherwise the intended audiences would not have time to read them. An article that did capture higher-level interest, Wu Jiang’s essay on how to understand “continuing the revolution,” appeared in *LLDT*’s first issue in July. Arguing that the concept should not be expanded to emphasize rectifying capitalist roaders, which would give license to careerists seeking to overthrow everything and that the task should include the revolution of productive forces, Wu called for fighting on two fronts against the “left” and right, as Mao had said. Although whether it occurred is contested, this argument in the “comprehensive and accurate Mao Zedong Thought” mode may have received Deng’s approval as a good article for arousing discussion.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Zhen Shi, “Hu Yaobang zai zhongyang dangxiao.” Shen Baoxiang, a Party School theoretician at the time, argues that the later claim by Wu Jiang to this

As we have argued, the relationship between the Party Center and Party School in 1977 was positive, with Hu Yaobang having considerable freedom to run the School. What can be said at a more personal level? Hua and Hu apparently interacted on a cordial basis, as indicated by Hu Deping when finding his father and the Party Chairman at the Hu Yaobang home. Despite a busy schedule and a tendency to avoid deep involvement with theory, the evidence indicates Hua was a supportive reader of *LLDT*, a view backed most importantly by Hu's comments within the School.¹⁰⁶ There is less evidence of Deng's involvement with the Party School; apart from his possible comment on Wu Jiang's July article, references by Deng are generally retrospective assertions of support for Hu, without specific examples.¹⁰⁷ Hu's close relationship with Ye Jianying is indicated by his role in drafting Ye's speech for the formal opening of the Party School in October, a speech that emphasized that theory must start from reality and came to be considered a launching pad for the

effect is very unlikely under the circumstances of the time. Shen, *Zhenli biao zhun*, pp. 44-45.

¹⁰⁶ Shen Baoxiang, "Jiemi: Hu Yaobang yu Hua Guofeng de qinmi guanxi" [Secret: Hu Yaobang and Hua Guofeng's Close Relationship], in *Tongzhou gongjin*, no. 11 (2009); *Hu Yaobang sixiang nianpu*, vol. 1, p. 105; and interview with Ruan Ming, Hu's assistant at the Party School, June 1996. A dissenting view is expressed by Hu Jiwei, who believed, without offering evidence, that Hua would only have glanced at the journal; interview, July 1997.

¹⁰⁷ These include Hu Deping, "Yaobang tongzhi zai 'zhenli biao zhun' (shang)."

criterion debate.¹⁰⁸ As of the end of 1977, there were no signs of tension between the School and any of the three most important Party leaders.

This general comity paradoxically obscures an initiative by the Center that created an opening for further liberated thinking but in the context caused some hesitation at the Party School. In March, Hua had indicated that research on Party history was another task for the School, but a more daunting task was the requirement of the 11th Congress for research to sum up the CCP's ninth, tenth, and eleventh line struggles, i.e., against Liu Shaoqi, Lin Biao, and the "gang of four." This inevitably would require analysis of the still sacred Cultural Revolution and, with it, Mao's actions at the time.¹⁰⁹ Hu asked Deng to take overall command of the project, but Deng declined, tossing it back to the School to handle. Party history, of course, would overlap with Hu's increasing and sensitive efforts to reverse the verdicts, and it was perceived as a dangerous issue by theoretical workers at the School. Hu had taken a bold position on December 10, arguing that

¹⁰⁸ See *Hu Yaobang sixiang nianpu*, vol. 1, p. 103; Shen Baoxiang, *Zhenli biao zhun*, p. 25; and Hu Deping, "Yaobang tongzhi zai 'zhenli biao zhun' (shang)."

¹⁰⁹ Hua Guofeng, "Zai zhongyang gongzuo huiyishang de jianghua" (March 14, 1977), p. 4; and Hua's political report to the Congress, *PR*, no. 35 (1977), p. 46. In September, Hu referred to this as a task set by Hua for the Party School and Ye called for the School to take on the task in his October 9 speech. See Shen Baoxiang, *Zhenli biao zhun*, pp. 23-25; and Hu Deping, "Yaobang tongzhi zai 'zhenli biao zhun' (shang)."

in evaluating the Cultural Revolution, relying on documents, or the words of authoritative individuals—meaning Mao—was insufficient; actual results had to be taken into account.¹¹⁰ Yet at the end of the year, little progress had been made in writing a Party history textbook. School theorists appeared to fear making political mistakes; one staff member admitted it was a tricky situation that no one yet dared to touch. Under Hu's encouragement and Wu Jiang's direction, however, in mid-January 1978 a first draft of a plan was produced and work on the project continued, with the issue of appropriate criteria prominent, to at least mid-April.¹¹¹ No textbook ever emerged, however.

Although Hu Yaobang was now focusing on *pingfan* matters in the Organization Department, he remained deeply involved at the Party School. According to Hu Deping, a conjunction of events led to a new understanding by his father. Six months earlier, Hu Yaobang had laid down two criteria for theoretical work—"comprehensive and accurate Mao Zedong Thought," and the importance of practice. Now, his son has claimed, Hu Yaobang placed virtually sole emphasis on practice as the main consideration, a development representing a

¹¹⁰ See Hu Deping, "Yaobang tongzhi zai 'zhenli biao zhun' (shang)"; Shen Baoxiang, *Zhenli biao zhun*, p. 27; and *Hu Yaobang sixiang nianpu*, vol. 1, pp. 119-21. Although Shen Baoxiang writes that Hu's action was pointed at the "two whatevers," it is worth noting that neither of the two other sources raise the "whatevers."

¹¹¹ See Schoenhals, "The 1978 Truth Criterion Controversy," p. 252; and Shen Baoxiang, *Zhenli biao zhun*, pp. 27-32.

“qualitative leap” in his thinking.¹¹² In any case, while work on Party history continued, further theoretical exploration led to a central role by the Party School in the May 1978 criterion of truth article. The cause was taken up by theorists who were ahead of Hu Yaobang in their thinking and operating to a notable extent independently.¹¹³

During the second half of 1977, there had been significant developments at the Party School emphasizing truth from facts and liberating thought, including some *LLDT* articles directly raising the criterion argument,¹¹⁴ but they were all safely within the “comprehensive and accurate” guideline. In arguing at the formal opening of the School that theory must be tested by practice, Ye Jianying provided the first open indication of support by a top leader. Yet, with all deference to Hu Deping’s account of his father’s epiphany, when addressing criteria for writing Party history, Hu Yaobang still approved of the same two criteria in the guidelines organized by Wu Jiang, thus endorsing “comprehensive and accurate Mao Zedong Thought.” While these criteria were not regarded as

¹¹² Hu Deping, “Yaobang tongzhi zai ‘zhenli biao zhun’ (shang).”

¹¹³ Although we accept the general picture of Hu Yaobang as a critical proponent of the “liberation of thought,” it should be noted that a variety of views exist on the developments leading to the May article by those knowledgeable of the general process. These include a leading or lesser role, or even being essentially in the dark. Our assessment is that Hu did play a significant role at important stages, but, as indicated below, others tended to be at least as important, or more important, in the final outcome.

¹¹⁴ See Zhen Shi, “Hu Yaobang zai zhongyang dangxiao.”

particularly controversial at the School, some leading theoreticians were uncomfortable with them. Sun Changjiang, ultimately the main author of the May article, felt there should only be one principle—practice. Sharing his opinion with Wu Jiang and some other colleagues, Sun found agreement: “no matter how comprehensive and accurate Mao Zedong Thought may be, it, too, has to be tested in practice.” Sun has recalled that, at first, they did not talk to Hu Yaobang about it, and they only thought it over among themselves. Sun suggested to Wu that someone should write an article about practice as the *only* criterion of truth, earning the response, “O.K. You go ahead and write one!”¹¹⁵

With Sun Changjiang accepting the task in January and starting work in February, there is considerable detailed evidence, albeit necessarily incomplete, on its drafting, authorization, and the

¹¹⁵ Schoenhals, “The 1978 Truth Criterion Controversy,” pp. 252-54. Schoenhals cites a July 1988 interview with Sun Changjiang. On the Party history guidelines, see also Shen Biao, *Zhenli biao zhun*, pp. 27-28. These guidelines cite the documents of the 11 Party Congress as pointing to the correct direction for using the practice criterion to research the recent line struggles.

Another detailed study, “Zhenli biao zhun: Luo Ruiqing zhichi Hu Yaobang duikang Maoban” [Discussion on the Standard of Truth: Luo Ruiqing Supports Hu Yaobang Against the Mao Office], *RMRB* online, at <https://news.qq.com/a/20110726/000908.htm>, July 27, 2011, presents a somewhat different picture, although not one inconsistent with the overall story. The main differences are in tracing the origins of the criterion article to a September 1977 piece by Wu Jiang that cites Lenin stating that “only” conformity with reality is the standard of theory and in Wu's emphasis in his January 1978 outline for a Party history textbook.

subsequent interactions between the Party School and *Guangming Daily* [hereafter *GMRB*] where the final version was first publicly published.¹¹⁶ It is necessary, in any case, to place these developments in the broader ongoing political process. Most important, as in 1977, theoretical developments, at the Party School and elsewhere, received limited attention at the highest levels. This would be seen not only in the completely credible claims of both Hua and Deng that after publication of the May article, they initially had little awareness of it (see below), but also in the available evidence of their respective activities during the January to early May period. Hua's apparent positive view of the Party School's theoretical efforts continued, as seen in his January praise of *LLDT*'s work to the drafters of his February work report for the Fifth NPC meeting.¹¹⁷ A few months later, in April, Hua demonstrated his tendency to avoid deep involvement in ideology by rejecting appeals from the Propaganda Department to provide guidance on disputes in theoretical circles.¹¹⁸ As for Deng, the most suggestive information is that, when the position of editor of

¹¹⁶ The two outstanding purveyors of this detailed information, both of which set out to refute misperceptions and myths surrounding preparation of the article, are Schoenhals' admirable three-decades old study, "The 1978 Truth Criterion Controversy"; and "Zhenli biao zhun: Luo Ruiqing zhichi Hu Yaobang duikang Maoban." We observe, however, that both analyses fall into the erroneous Deng-Hua struggle narrative, although mitigated by some shrewd observations on Schoenhals' part and understandable in the PRC assessment.

¹¹⁷ Shen Baoxiang, "Jiemi: Hu Yaobang yu Hua Guofeng de qinmi guanxi."

¹¹⁸ See above, note 19.

Hongqi became vacant in April, Deng suggested either Hu Sheng or Wu Lengxi, both “conservative” theorists who had worked for him in 1975, and by the end of the year would be tarred as leaders of the “two whatevers *pai*.”¹¹⁹ We are not suggesting any particular view on Deng’s part; the most we are saying is at this point he was not seeing, or using, any struggle with the “two whatevers” as a political factor, something reinforced by the overall information available on this specific period.

In this larger context, Sun Changjiang’s efforts which, by chance, would wind up on the front page of *GMRB* on May 11, received Hu Yaobang’s approval in March for publication of a *LLDT* article, reportedly using *sole* (*weiyi*) in the title, for reasons that remain unclear.¹²⁰ While Sun Changjiang continued to work on what was now a fully authorized project at the Party School, quite separate developments were unfolding at *GMRB*. In April, the paper was preparing to publish a very academic theory submission by Hu Fuming, a Nanjing University philosophy teacher and a relative nobody, in its philosophy supplement. Given its title, “Practice is the Criterion of all Truths,” the responsible official, knowing editor-in-

¹¹⁹ *Deng nianpu*, vol. 1, pp. 291-92.

¹²⁰ Sun attributed it to a change of mind on Hu’s part, while Hu’s close aide Ruan Ming believes it reflected ideas he had held all along. Schoenhals, “The 1978 Truth Criterion Controversy,” p. 254. The approval resulted from a request by Wu Jiang.

chief Yang Xiguang was enthusiastic about the practice criterion concept, showed Yang a paste-up of Hu Fuming's article that had already been typeset. Although liking the effort, Yang felt the article was inadequate in not stressing the immediate political relevance of the issue, too mild in its criticism of ideological obstruction to end disorder, and not raising the need to overcome political taboos. The chief editor wanted a rewrite that would have greater impact, thus the philosophy supplement plan was cancelled, careful revision was undertaken in-house, and there was a new plan was for a prominent page one article.¹²¹

At this point, an accidental event served to link Sun Changjiang's work with the revised Hu Fuming manuscript. Yang Xiguang had a link to the Party School where he had been a short-term student in the winter of 1977-78, something which would prove useful as matters unfolded. But the immediate connection was by chance, when an individual who had personal (not work) ties to both Sun and Yang visited Sun and learned what he was working on. Days later, he visited Yang, who had then learned of Sun's project. On April 13, Yang invited both Sun and Hu Fuming to *GMRB*, where an agreement was reached on the basic approach and, after consulting with Wu Jiang, a decision was taken to combine the two manuscripts

¹²¹ See *ibid.*, pp. 254-56.

into a single article. Hu Fuming made some revisions to his version, and *GMRB* officials made further revisions to the *GMRB's* version. This version was then sent to the Party School, where neither Sun nor Wu Jiang were impressed, basically for the same reasons that had earlier concerned Yang. The final published piece was overwhelmingly Sun Changjiang's work, with Hu Fuming's contribution mostly consisting of quotations from, and commentary on, the Marxist classics.¹²²

Throughout this process, there was both a willingness to move forward and an awareness of the political sensitivity of the endeavor. The several manuscripts were reportedly revised ten times, with the article title changed two or three times, before Yang Xiguang finally became determined on April 23 to restore the version that had included *weiyi* in the title,¹²³ as other developments at the Party School reflected a similar mix of engagement and caution.¹²⁴ During this period, moreover, there is little indication of the "two whatevers"

¹²² *Ibid.*, pp. 256-58; and "Zhenli biao zhun: Luo Ruiqing zhichi Hu Yaobang duikang Maoban."

¹²³ "Zhenli biao zhun: Luo Ruiqing zhichi Hu Yaobang duikang Maoban."

¹²⁴ At the same time as these developments concerning the criterion article, during a mid-April course on the three line struggles, the "lively and candid" discussion included both bold questioning of the key official slogan of "continuing the revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat" and hesitation concerning whether the project should continue before the Party Center made a clear determination. See Shen Baoxiang, *Zhenli biao zhun*, pp. 31-34.

being explicitly raised.¹²⁵ On April 27, Hu Yaobang reportedly received the article for final approval, and he approved it with very few changes. As Schoenhals observes, this suggests Hu did not think the article went too far, something consistent with the astonishment of the Party School participants, as indicated by our interview with Sun Changjiang at the head of this paper, who never expected the political developments following its publication.¹²⁶ As for Hu Yaobang, it also leaves questions about the degree of his involvement at this point. Although Hu's role could arguably provide Yang Xiguang with backing if a backlash were to occur, a very senior historian at the Party School later reflected that, as matters moved to a conclusion, Yang appeared bolder than Hu.¹²⁷ Regardless, it is most clear that no

¹²⁵ For example, before April 13 when Yang Xiguang mentioned the "two whatevers" at a meeting, neither Hu Fuming nor the *GMRB* official who commissioned the article reportedly had heard of the expression, and thereafter the paper was careful to avoid any obvious reference; Wang Qianghua, "Zai xin de lishi qidian shang jixu jiefang sixiang: Jinian 1978 nian zhenli biao zhun taolun 30 zhou nian" [Continue to Liberate Thinking at the New Historical Turning Point: Commemorating the 30th Anniversary of the 1978 Discussion of the Truth Criterion], *Bolan qunshu* [Widely Read], no. 4 (2008), cited in Joseph Torigian, *Prestige, Manipulation, and Coercion: Elite Power Struggles in the Soviet Union and China after Stalin and Mao* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2022), pp. 152, 269. This is a condensed version of Torigian's PhD dissertation cited earlier.

¹²⁶ Schoenhals, "The 1978 Truth Criterion Controversy," p. 259; and "Zhenli biao zhun: Luo Ruiqing zhichi Hu Yaobang duikang Maoban."

¹²⁷ Interview, July 1997. Cf. Schoenhals, "The 1978 Truth Criterion Controversy," p. 259.

top central leader had any role in directing or being consulted about the article.¹²⁸

The final arrangements concerned the timing of publication and acknowledgement of the authors. There were discussions between the Party School and *GMRB* about the byline for the article, and finally it was agreed that the byline would be "Our Paper's Special Commentators." This appeared less a tactic to get around Wang Dongxing, similar to what had occurred with the cadre policy articles in fall 1977, than competition for credit and yet another indication of an absence of fear of major vulnerability. The sensible decision was to initially publish "practice is the sole criterion of truth" in *LLDT*, a journal only available within the Party, on May 10, and then in *GMRB*, a significant national paper but not of the highest stature, the following day. But the critical impact came from the reprint of the article the following day, the 12th, in the Party's official organ, *RMRB*, as well as in the *Liberation Army Daily (JFJB)*, and elsewhere through wide distribution by Xinhua. Unfortunately, little is known about any decisions behind this particular development. While it might be

¹²⁸ Ma Peiwen, "Bi de chengqing de yi zhuang zhong da shishi" [A Very Important Historical Fact That Must Be Clarified], *YHCQ*, no. 1 (2015), pp. 22-23, refutes the official claim that a "central leader" (implying Deng) was consulted concerning publication of the article.

tempting to see this as prearranged by progressives, the evidence is lacking.¹²⁹

The Emergence of Conflict: From the May-June Reaction to the Criterion Article to the Eve of the 1978 Work Conference. As stated earlier, in the context of the time, the criterion of truth article was relatively unremarkable, as reflected in Sun Changjiang's astonishment over what followed. While Sun's efforts were much more focused on political concerns than Hu Fuming's manuscript, as required by the circumstances and contrary to Sun's own views, the argument was firmly within the "comprehensive and accurate" schema. The progressive view that theory had been weakened by "gang" distortions, which required a link to factual analyses and reality to be persuasive again, was crisply made, but Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought remained a universal truth. It was a sharp weapon against revisionism, and the direction set by the 11th Congress and the Fifth NPC was to be followed. Hu Yaobang later reflected that the article was not of a high standard as well as

¹²⁹ See Schoenhals, "The 1978 Truth Criterion Controversy," pp. 258-60. We discuss below suggestive evidence concerning *JFJB* and Luo Ruiqing as events unfolded, but it does not demonstrate any pre-planning.

It is worth noting, in any case, that Xinhua's full report of the May 11 *GMRB* article was issued in the afternoon of the same day, making the reprinting by *RMRB* and *JFJB* on the 12th natural and legitimate.

considerably less impactful than the June 24 sequel.¹³⁰ As with the “two whatevers editorial,” it was the unexpected negative reaction to the piece, which likely would have been largely unnoticed outside the theoretical sphere that generated conflict.

Even with the stir caused on the ideology-theory front over the following seven weeks, it is important to recognize that the issue was slow to attract the attention of the highest Party leadership, Wang Dongxing excepted. Hua returned to Beijing on May 13 and by his own plausible testimony was quickly absorbed by many urgent matters, only becoming aware of the conflicting views on the article in June and July when “several [unnamed] Standing Committee comrades” reported various incidents.¹³¹ Deng, who was drawn in by related events, began to understand the issue earlier than Hua, yet he too paid little attention initially.¹³² Ye Jianying, who can be regarded as the top leader who was most sympathetic to the progressive position, reportedly reacted to the debate surrounding the article by

¹³⁰ On March 2, 1981; *Hu Yaobang sixiang nianpu*, vol. 1, p. 609.

¹³¹ Hua Guofeng, “Zai zhongyang gongzuo huiyi bimu huishang de jianghua” [Speech at the Closing Meeting of the Central Work Conference] (December 13, 1978), internal Party document made available to the authors.

¹³² On May 19, when receiving officials from the Ministry of Culture, Deng indicated he had not paid attention to the criterion article. Only afterwards, when he heard that some people were fiercely opposed to the article, did he take a look. Wang Hongmo *et al.*, *Gaige kaifang de licheng*, p. 69.

asking relatives and staff to gather information, but he did not propose convening a theory conference in subsequent months.¹³³

The broader picture is that the top leaders were faced with much more pressing matters than disputes among theorists during this brief period and the immediately following months. In foreign affairs, the conflict with Vietnam reached unprecedented heights in May, with the expulsion and flight of overseas Chinese, while a seminal development in Sino-U.S. normalization, the Brzezinski visit during the same month, involved significant encounters by Deng and Hua on the 21st and 22^d, respectively, with the American visitor.¹³⁴ On the economic front, May-June saw important developments in the opening process, as leading officials reported on their investigations abroad in the advanced economies, with Hua playing a leading role throughout and Deng, although less directly involved, deeply

¹³³ Cheng Guanjun, "Ye Yuanji jiangshu fensui 'sirenbang' yu Deng Xiaoping fuchu" [Ye Xuanji Discusses Smashing the "Gang of Four" and the Return of Deng Xiaoping], *Tongzhou gongjin*, no. 2 (2012), cited in Torigian, "Prestige, Manipulation, and Coercion" (PhD diss.), p. 399; Yan Ruping, "Ye shuai zai nijing zhong fuzhu Hu Yaobang" [Marshal Ye Helps Hu Yaobang in Difficult Situations], *YHCQ*, no. 11 (2003), cited in Torigian, *ibid.*, p. 400; and *Ye Jianying nianpu, 1897-1986 (xia)* [Chronology of Ye Jianying 1897-1986], (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2007), vol. 2, pp. 1144-45, 1152. As previously noted, based on the existing evidence the final Standing Committee member, Li Xiannian, only briefly referred to the criterion article at the State Council [economic] theory forum; see above, note 23.

¹³⁴ See *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980, Volume XIII: China*, ed. David P. Nickles (Washington DC: United States Government Printing Office, 2013), pp. 432-73.

interested. Then, on July 7 at the national finance and trade conference, Hua addressed the issue of improving the economic system, urging officials to “liberate thought” and pointing toward emerging reform perspectives. These perspectives would be taken up more extensively at the following State Council [economic] theory forum under Li Xiannian’s direction, with Hua in frequent attendance and delivering multiple speeches.¹³⁵ In short, contrary to the narrative of the criterion article as a key development in a Deng-Hua struggle,¹³⁶ conflict came from below, and it was not particularly welcomed by the Party Center which was coping with the heavy pressures of the affairs of state.

These factors notwithstanding, publication of the criterion article, or more accurately its reprint in *RMRB* on May 12, resulted in a significant increase in tension in theoretical circles, while also drawing in significant leaders, notably Hu Yaobang and Central Military Commission [hereafter CMC] Secretary-general Luo Ruiqing. There clearly was a sense of vulnerability and danger, as seen in reports of Hu facing great pressure and seeking to put the debate on hold.¹³⁷ As

¹³⁵ See Han Gang, “Huanyuan Hua Guofeng”; and “Chairman Hua Kuo-feng’s Speech—At the National Finance and Trade Conference On Learning From Taching and Tachai” (July 7, 1978), *PR*, no. 30 (1978).

¹³⁶ See, e.g., Baum, *Burying Mao*, pp. 58-59, 65; and Gewirtz, *Unlikely Partners*, pp. 34-35, 37-38.

¹³⁷ In early June, while appreciative of Wu Jiang’s argument that would become the basis of the *JFB* article published on June 24, Hu thought it was not the time

we have indicated, conflict began with a phone call by former *RMRB* editor Wu Lengxi to current editor-in-chief Hu Jiwei, late in the evening of May 12, expressing a sharp rebuke of the paper's action. Tension became considerably more severe beginning on May 17, when Wang Dongxing, as the Party vice chairman in charge of propaganda, took up the attack, and it intensified over the following month after progressive individuals, including Hu Yaobang, were named on June 15. These events soon intersected with developments at the PLA's General Political Department [hereafter GPD] work conference from April 28 to June 5—developments drawing Deng's ire—that seemingly were reinforced by his emerging understanding of the dispute surrounding the criterion article. When Deng spoke to the conference on June 2, his strong argument for truth from facts was taken by many as support for the practice argument, even though there is little conclusive evidence that he intended to offer a specific endorsement of the *GMRB*. In any case, by this point, based on Luo Ruiqing's initiative and close guidance, steps were underway for a new, more forceful *JFJB* article to advance the practice concept. When it appeared on June 24, it was considered decisive by many; as Wu Jiang later reflected, people believed "the gun had spoken" and

to publish the manuscript because of leftist pressure and he suggested waiting for three months. *Hu Yaobang sixiang nianpu*, vol. 1, p. 191.

they started to express their opinions.¹³⁸ At the very least, it significantly reduced the fears of the previous month and a half.

Aspects of Wu Lengxi's phone call to Hu Jiwei are contested,¹³⁹ but two things are clear. First, Wu's complaint about *RMRB* having reprinted the *GMRB* commentary was severe: the article was "very bad, very bad," it promoted a philosophy of doubting everything, and it amounted to "chopping down Mao's banner." Wu's assertion that "theoretically, it is wrong, and politically, there is an even greater problem," encapsulated his concerns as well as those of the broader conservative ideological community, which were more political than theoretical. The threat was to stability and unity: without acceptance of Mao Zedong Thought, i.e., the authority of the Party Center which

¹³⁸ Yang Jisheng, *Zhongguo dangdai mingren zhengyao fang shuping ji* [Collection of Interviews and Commentary on China's Contemporary Famous Individuals and Important Politicians], 2nd ed. (Hong Kong: Tiandi tushu youxian gongsi, 2014), p. 304.

¹³⁹ I.e., relating to the Wu-Hu relationship. Hu not only served under Wu at the Party daily before the Cultural Revolution, but he had also been recommended by Wu for the position on the paper, and Wu again recommended Hu for Deng's Political Research Office in 1975. Wu tried to present the phone call as an expression of differences to an old friend, while Hu claimed their relationship was only related to work and the call was hardly a case of goodwill. In any case, at the end of July when Hu visited Wu in hospital, Wu stated that after reading the *JFJB* article he was even more convinced that his opinion on the criterion argument was correct, with Hu replying that Wu was free to write an article defending his position. "Luo Ruiqing yu 'Makesizhuyi de yige zuijiben de yuanze'" [Luo Ruiqing and "A Basic Principle of Marxism"], *Beijing ribao*, at <http://sxzhib.gov.cn/history.asp?id=9973&owen1=%C0%ED%C2%DB%D4%B0%B5%D8>, July 21, 2008; and interview with Hu Jiwei, July 1997.

stood at the heart of the "comprehensive and accurate" concept, the unity required to implement the Party's plans was endangered. As Wu rhetorically asked, how can people support and implement the 11th Congress line if they have to wait for another 23 years of practice before it becomes the truth. Second, Wu intended his critique to be private, and he ended the call by saying, "this is just my personal opinion and it should not be revealed to anyone." But Hu demurred, telling Wu that since you are raising the issue to a political level, I will have to consult others to assess the nature of the situation.¹⁴⁰ News of the clash quickly became known in theory circles.

The next day, Hu Jiwei reported on the incident at the Party School. He apparently found Hu Yaobang in high spirits due to publication of the criterion article, a mood undoubtedly reinforced by the arrival of several thousand letters per day commenting on the article and perhaps by knowledge that 15 provincial papers had reprinted it on the 13th. Receiving Hu Jiwei's report, Hu Yaobang was upset that Wu Jiang had elevated a theoretical issue to a political level, which he saw as replicating the practice of Stalin in the Soviet Union and \developments in China during the last decade of Mao's rule. His response going forward was limited to theory, calling for

¹⁴⁰ The content of the discussion is based on Hu's notes. See Schoenhals, "The 1978 Truth Criterion Controversy," pp. 260-62; and Shen Baoxiang, *Zhenli biao zhun*, pp. 108-10.

articles that would refute Wu's views, one of which would be published in *LLDT* on June 30, a week after "the gun's" assessment, following vetting by himself—and by *Chairman Hua*.¹⁴¹ In any case, with news of the telephone call spreading within ideological circles, surprised concern resulted. Given his position in the Party hierarchy, however, Wang Dongxing's intervention was much more disturbing.

Trying to assess Wang's intervention, in terms of motivation, effect, and his basic political competence, is made more difficult by the absence of information on what may, or may not, have occurred within the Standing Committee during this period. Given the major issues facing the leadership at this juncture, was it even raised by Wang, or by Deng given his relatively early awareness of the conflict over the criterion article? Yet we can begin to make some judgments by starting with Wang's actions on May 17 and 18.

On the 17th, following his general pattern of working through a small number of individuals to convey his orders, Wang convened a small meeting of propaganda officials. He addressed two recent articles published in *RMRB* under a "special correspondent" byline—the criterion article and a May 5 piece promoting "distribution

¹⁴¹ Hu Deping, "Yaobang tongzhi zai 'zhenli biao zhun' da taolun de qianqian houhou (zhong)" [Comrade Yaobang Before and After the Great Criterion Debate, part 2], *Chinesenewsnet.com*, June 8, 2008; and *Hu Yaobang sixiang nianpu*, vol. 1, p. 181. The June 30 article, titled "The Tide of History Rolls Forward," was reportedly read five times by Hu and twice by Hua.

according to work”—both of which, particularly the practice article, he regarded as challenging Mao’s legacy. Echoing Wu Lengxi’s view that surely had influenced him, in an unsubtle and provocative statement Wang attacked the criterion piece as an article whose “spearhead is actually directed at the Chairman’s Thought.” The propaganda overlord, moreover, wanted no more such articles published, declaring the two articles in question were not prudent; theory, in general, had to be treated very cautiously; and essays had to pass higher-level scrutiny before publication. While acknowledging that livening up ideology was acceptable, Wang declared that proceeding in the manner of the criterion piece was not “holding high Mao’s banner” and lacked a Party spirit. Finally, he wanted to know what was behind this development, asking “which Center do these views represent,” and he ordered an investigation into finding out who exactly had been involved.¹⁴² The following day, Wang told Xiong Fu, the newly appointed editor of *Hongqi*, that the articles were opposed to Mao and did not reflect the thinking of the Party Center, thus emphasizing that the CCP’s authoritative political and theoretical voice should not become involved in the practice debate.¹⁴³ Also on the 18th, Wang summoned Propaganda Director Zhang Pinghua from

¹⁴² See Schoenhals, “The 1978 Truth Criterion Controversy,” p. 262; Wang Hongmo *et al.*, *Gaige kaifang de licheng*, p. 68; and Yu Guangyuan, *Deng Xiaoping Shakes the World*, p. 86.

¹⁴³ See *Hu Yaobang sixiang nianpu*, vol. 1, p. 183.

an education work conference, attended by provincial propaganda officials, and gave similar instructions. Upon his return to the conference, Zhang advised the participants not to be intimidated by the article's appearance in *RMRB* and in Xinhua dispatches. They were not to regard the criterion position as the opinion of the Party Center, and they were free to consider and criticize it. Understandably, this was regarded by some of his audience as a veiled attack on practice as the sole criterion of truth.¹⁴⁴

From these events, several points can be made, all of which point to Wang's severe political inadequacy. His intervention was rash and provocative, escalating a situation that could have been contained even after Wu Lengxi's unfortunate phone call, and was

¹⁴⁴ See Schoenhals, "The 1978 Truth Criterion Controversy," pp. 262-63; Wang Hongmo *et al.*, *Gaige kaifang de licheng*, p. 68; and Yu Guangyuan, *Deng Shakes the World*, pp. 16-17.

Zhang Pinghua played a role in the criterion debate, although a role relatively under-examined. He assumed the position as Propaganda Department head in October 1977, when the department was reestablished (after being disbanded in 1967). In the misleading opinion of progressives, Zhang was seemingly regarded as a fellow traveler of the imagined "two whatevers *pa*" (see Yu Guangyuan, *Deng Xiaoping Shakes the World*, pp. 78-79, 89). He was replaced by Hu Yaobang in December 1978. A particularly under-reported aspect concerning Zhang during this period are his interactions, if any, with Hua Guofeng. He had been Hua's boss in Hunan before the Cultural Revolution in what apparently was a highly respectful relationship, so one would assume he was brought to Beijing by the new Chairman as a reliable subordinate. But we have few details concerning what may have transpired between them. Ironically, or perhaps reflecting Hu Yaobang's tolerance and/or Hua's relationship with him historically, Zhang's new post was vice president of the Party School, the position vacated by Wang Dongxing.

unnecessary even from a conservative perspective given that the criterion article came nowhere near violating “comprehensive and accurate Mao Zedong Thought.” Indeed, if there was a true “whatervist,” it was Wang, as seen in even more rigid “whateverist” terms at a June 15 propaganda meeting, where he asserted that he still believed that “whatever (*fanshi*) Mao had said, without exception cannot be overturned.”¹⁴⁵ Moreover, his bluster notwithstanding, Wang proved unable to formulate for, or enforce upon, his alleged “whateverist” associates a message to achieve his goals. The clearest example was Zhang Pinghua when he returned to the education conference after receiving Wang’s orders. Zhang did not castigate the criterion article in anything like Wang’s claims of an assault on Mao’s banner. Instead, he said that although there were very different opinions about the article, it was still an open question whether it was right or wrong and the Party Center had not settled the issue, and he personally had not come to an understanding of the matter. The inference that can be drawn is that the practice argument was possibly dangerous, yet people were still free to make up their own minds.¹⁴⁶

Without in any way challenging the view that Wang’s actions set off a period of worry and some fear in theoretical circles, we once

¹⁴⁵ “Luo Ruiqing yu ‘Makesizhuyi de yige zuijiben de yuanze.’”

¹⁴⁶ See Schoenhals, “The 1978 Truth Criterion Controversy,” pp. 262-63.

again find exaggeration in the narrative, specifically at the onset of severe repression. Yes, progressives like Wu Jiang worried about the meaning of these developments, fearing that they might represent the end of advancing the practice argument. Yet it did not stop Wu from working on a new article, even if he kept it secret from Hu Yaobang to protect him, and limiting knowledge of the effort to Sun Changjiang until the interest of Luo Ruiqing provided a new path.¹⁴⁷ Moreover, in mid-May, a joint meeting of three government and academic bodies was convened to study and discuss the text of the article, and by the end of May, the criterion article had been reprinted in more than 30 newspapers nationwide, and in mid-May, a joint meeting of three government and academic bodies was convened to study and discuss the text of the article.¹⁴⁸ Probably because of such developments, pressure built up in June, with Hu Yaobang calling for a three-month pause. At the small propaganda meeting on the 15th, Wang repeated the demand that anti-Mao essays be dealt with, then aggressively naming Hu and others.¹⁴⁹ In June, however, Wu Jiang was working with *JFJB*, and Hu was being drawn into that effort, thus

¹⁴⁷ See "Zhenli biao zhun: Luo Ruiqing zhichi Hu Yaobang duikang Maoban"; and Shen Baoxiang, *Zhenli biao zhun*, p. 140.

¹⁴⁸ Hu Deping, "Hua Guofeng zai 'zhenli biao zhun' taolun zhong" [Hua Guofeng in Criterion of Truth Debate], at <http://www.sina.com.cn>, August 5, 2008.

¹⁴⁹ On the June 15 meeting, see Wang Hongmo *et al.*, *Gaige kaifang de licheng*, p. 70; *Hu Yaobang sixiang nianpu*, vol. 1, p. 192-93; and Yu Guangyuan, *Deng Shakes the World*, pp. 87-88.

dramatically changing the atmosphere. Indeed, even before that, on the day after the June 15 propaganda meeting that sought to increase pressure on *RMRB*, the Party's official newspaper published a pro-criterion article that was quickly distributed by Xinhua.¹⁵⁰

While fervent commitment to Mao's legacy was clearly a central motivation for Wang, his specific reactions were also driven by his organizational responsibilities as he saw them. It was not easy to oversee a vast propaganda, media, and theory apparatus, particularly when, as credibly claimed, he lacked both a deep understanding of the issues involved and a work method adequate for remaining on top of specific developments. Wang was clearly concerned that the authority of the Party Center was being circumvented by progressive theorists and their media allies. In broad concept, such concerns were shared by both Hua and Deng,¹⁵¹ but not over the criterion article

¹⁵⁰ Shen Baoxiang, "Hu Yaobang fadong he tuijin zhenli biao zhun wenti taolun jishi" [Record of Hu Yaobang Initiating and Promoting the Discussion of the Standard of Truth], at <http://m.aisixiang.com/data/108132-3.html>, January 28, 2018.

¹⁵¹ The need for the media to tread carefully was soon expressed in July by Hua concerning *RMRB* articles on Wu De's difficulties, while at the year-end work conference Deng emphasized the need to be very sensitive to the consequences when dealing with Mao and the Cultural Revolution; see Fu Yi, "Beijing shiwei yu Tiananmen shijian de pingfan" [The Beijing Municipal Committee and Vindication of the Tiananmen Incident], *Bainianchao* [hereafter *BNC*] [The Hundred Years Tide], no. 10 (2003), at http://www.21ccom.net/articles/ljsjd/article_2012112871919.html, November 28, 2012; and *Deng nianpu*, vol. 1, pp. 436-37. In the immediate context, once becoming aware of the conflict, Hua reportedly was upset with some essays going too far, even naming Wu Jiang, among others, but

which neither of them noticed initially. Yet Wang was obsessed. His rhetorical question on May 17, “which Center do these views represent?” fit his then position that because the Party Center had not taken a position on the article, the relevant audience should be very careful in addressing such sensitive matters. In his June 15 comments, moreover, Wang elevated the issue to a much higher level: by facilitating publicity on the issue, those responsible were sowing discord among members of the Standing Committee that then could be used by enemies at home and abroad.¹⁵² The paradox is striking. By not letting the discussion continue calmly in theoretical circles, a potentially divisive issue made its way to the Standing Committee’s agenda, albeit quietly and without leadership consequences, before the central work conference.

This brings us back to what was going on in the black box of the Standing Committee, which we speculatively surmise was nothing significant concerning the criterion issue.¹⁵³ Another aspect of Wang’s

he also was unhappy with Wu Lengxi for raising a theory issue to a political level. “Zhenli biao zhun: Luo Ruiqing zhichi Hu Yaobang dui kang Maoban”; Deng Liqun, *Deng Liqun guoshi jiangtanlu*, vol. 3, p. 352; and interview with senior Party historian specializing on the period, August 1997.

¹⁵² For Wang’s June 15 comments, see Yu Guangyuan, *Deng Shakes the World*, p. 87.

¹⁵³ While obviously speculative, we believe the absence of information not only about Standing Committee meetings but also about direct Wang-Deng conflict at this time suggests that, given the major items on the agenda, any emerging awareness of the conflict was simply set aside.

May 17 intervention, raising the May 5 article arguing for *anlao fenpei*, the distribution of rewards according to work, however, indicates gross incompetence and marginalization from his leadership colleagues. Even though Mao had approved the concept in 1971, Wang seemingly could not get over the Chairman's ruminations about bourgeois right in 1974-75, which allowed the policy but treated it as ideologically suspect and would ultimately contribute to post-Mao debates on the relationship between material and spiritual incentives. But politically, as previously indicated, the matter had long been settled. Deng, who cautiously oversaw efforts to revive *anlao fenpei* in 1975, was again pushing the policy in 1977-78, with his revived State Council Political Research Office, and Hu Qiaomu and Yu Guangyuan, the main drafters, writing the offending May 5 article. Even earlier, *anlao fenpei* had been endorsed at the December 1976 Dazhai conference, and it was then followed up in leading economic departments, with Hua in the lead and Li Xiannian playing a major role. This, in turn, was followed by a series of conferences in 1977-78 in which the theoretical niceties were discussed, but official approval was apparent. Indeed, two days after the article and 10 days before Wang criticized it, the State Council issued a notice on the wage system that supported the *anlao* approach. Yu Guangyuan later speculated that Wang may not have been aware that Deng and Li Xiannian had vetted the May 5 article, but he certainly should have

known Deng's (and Hua's) position on the policy. Either way, it was a matter of astonishing ineptitude.¹⁵⁴

As the above events unfolded in the propaganda and theoretical sphere, separate, but soon to be relevant, developments took place in the military at the April-June GPD political work conference. Beginning before the *GMRB* article and the criterion of truth dispute, another accidental conflict unfolded, one that reflected procedural-ideological rigidity. Before late May, it came to Deng's attention and angered him, thus shaping his June 2 conference address, in which he heavily emphasized truth from facts, a speech that arguably supported—or did not deliberately support—the criterion position. Either way, Deng's words were significant in encouraging those pushing the practice argument, and in the long-term it became a central feature of the official view that Deng took the lead in securing the victory of “practice as the sole criterion of truth” and beyond that, in the struggle against the “two whatevers.”

The problem began with the drafting of the projected conference decision. Conflict emerged over a dispute about the two formulas to be included in the document, one on the nature of the

¹⁵⁴ Yu Guangyuan, *Deng Shakes the World*, pp. 86-87; “Wei ‘anlao fenpei’ zhengming” [On the Rectification of Names concerning “Distribution According to Work”], Hebei Party History Online, at <http://dangshi.hebei.com.cn/dsb/dsbc/userobject1ai1029.html>, June 17, 2008; and Teiwes and Sun, *End of the Maoist Era*, pp. 283-85, 333-34.

army and the other, which became more famous, on the post-Mao situation. On the latter *tifa*, GPD head Wei Guoqing¹⁵⁵ proposed a phrase used by Deng and that then became the title of Wei's May 2 conference report, "Under New Historical Conditions." In contrast, drafters from the GPD propaganda department, led by department head Li Manchun, insisted on a "new developmental period," a slogan that had been used by Hua. Of course, there was little substantive distinction between the two formulas,¹⁵⁶ and absolutely no evidence Hua was aware of Li Manchun's activities, which, in any case, would hardly have been consistent with his general practice of staying aloof from such issues. After further contention in the drafting group, Wei referred the issue to Deng, who insisted on using his own terminology. In Wei's speech that had already been given, and in

¹⁵⁵ What Wei proposed, based on Deng's usage, was "the PLA's proletarian character" rather than Mao's slogan "the people's military." Ironically, given the conventional view that Deng pushed a more progressive position than Hua, the Four Cardinal Principles and the 1980 dispute over the *tifa* involving the proletarian nature of the army both promoted the dictatorship of the proletariat line that was anathema to progressive theorists.

¹⁵⁶ The distinction between the two formulas was not ideological but functional. The "new developmental period" was an overview of the basic direction of the Party across all spheres of activity, while "under new historical conditions" was used in talking about work tasks in the military.

There is a discrepancy concerning "Hua's" *tifa* in that he had used two *tifa*, "new historical period" as well as "new developmental period." In subsequent PRC literature following Deng's assumption of leadership, e.g., Shen Baoxiang, *Zhenli biao zhun*, p. 122, "new historical period" is generally used to represent the slogan in opposition to Deng's *tifa*. In fact, "new developmental period" was the *tifa* at issue on this occasion; *Deng nianpu*, vol. 1, p. 319.

those given later during the meeting by Hua, Ye, and Deng, both formulations were used by each speaker. Internally, within the small group overseeing the conference, Deng fulminated against the absurdity of restricting *tifa* to the specific words of one person, which could be considered a form of “whateverism”—although there is only questionable evidence that he referenced the “two whatevers” in the related discussions.¹⁵⁷

There can be little doubt that the main factor motivating Deng to change his prepared speech for the conference was the issue of the competing formulas. This was clear in the instructions he gave to Hu Qiaomu, the main drafter of the final speech, Deng Liqun, deputy GPD head Liang Biye, and *JFJB* editor Hua Nan on May 30 and 31. After listening to Liang’s report on the conflict over *tifa*, Deng declared that this restriction over who could be heard was a trend of thought that violated truth from facts, and thus he had to speak up. He then outlined the structure of the revision of his address, with a new first section emphasizing truth from facts. This section

¹⁵⁷ Shen Baoxiang, *Zhenli biaozhun*, pp. 121-26; Lu Zengyuan, “Wei Guoqing zai dang de shiyijie sanzong quanhui qianhou” [Wei Guoqing Before and After the Third Plenum of the 11th Congress], *BNC*, no. 12 (2015), pp. 5-7; Fu Yi, “Weirao ‘liangge fanshi’ de jiaofeng he gang de zhuanyi, fang Hua Nan tongzhi” [The Clash over the “Two Whatevers” and the Turning Point in the Program, an Interview with Comrade Hua Nan], *BNC*, no. 1 (2001), pp. 10-12; and interviews with a leading Party historian whom we regard as the most authoritative on the period, February 2009, September 2009, and October 2012.

prominently featured the two *tifa* issue, with Deng asserting they were unified and consistent.¹⁵⁸

The question central to the larger narrative is whether Deng also had in mind the criterion article, which by now he certainly was aware of, the “two whatevers,” or even a restrained challenge to Hua, all of which are noted in the general PRC literature, and even, directly or implicitly, in accounts by those involved in the redrafting of the speech.¹⁵⁹ We lay aside the possibility of a restrained challenge to Hua, which we regard as implausible at that juncture, pending further detailed research. Whether the *GMRB* article or the “two whatevers” were secondary factors is possible but unknowable. On balance, we believe that, while Deng would have been sympathetic to the practice argument, it is unlikely that it would have been more than a marginal

¹⁵⁸ The authoritative, if incomplete, source is *Deng nianpu*, vol. 1, pp. 319-21. Note that this source makes no mention of either the criterion article or the “two whatevers.”

This is not to claim that the criterion article was totally absent from Deng’s mind in these discussions. A very well-informed senior Party historian reports that, in what apparently was a long and emotional meeting, Deng asked “How can practice become a matter of dispute?”; interview, February 2009.

¹⁵⁹ The notable cases of those involved suggesting such factors are Deng Liqun and Hua Nan. Deng Liqun, writing in 1998, explicitly quotes Deng Xiaoping as reacting to Liang Biye’s report by saying “the ‘two whatevers’ violates Chairman Mao’s truth from facts,” and he also argues the speech was in opposition to Hua’s opinions, albeit without putting this in Xiaoping’s mouth; *Deng Liqun guoshi jiangtanlu*, vol. 3, p. 349. Hua Nan, in the interview by Fu Yi, “Weirao ‘liangge fanshi’ de jiaofeng,” p. 11, notes (correctly) the importance of Deng’s speech to the ongoing criterion debate, but he does not claim this was part of Deng’s motivation.

consideration in his decision to focus on truth from facts. There was no need for Deng to take a stance on the criterion article, and in the context, there was an incentive to avoid taking a position, given that, in all likelihood, it had not been discussed in the Standing Committee. Nor was there an indication of anything more than an awareness of the piece, which he may not have read and which adopted a theoretical position he did not necessarily fully support.¹⁶⁰ The June 2 address not only made no mention of the criterion article but it also framed the discussion in terms of *integrating* theory and practice and avoided use of any of the Mao quotations in the May 11 essay. As for the “two whatevers,” despite Deng's belief it was a nonsensical concept, it had been absent from the public space for over a year,

¹⁶⁰ Later PRC discussions on this precise period routinely claim Deng was taking a leading role in supporting the criterion article as well as combatting the “two whatevers,” but they provide little direct evidence of Deng pressing either matter. Even accounts by participants are dubious given other sources (see the reference to Deng Liqun's claim above, note 159) or likely misleading in their imprecision. For example, General Staff Generals Chi Haotian and Yang Yong apparently quickly reacted to the *GMRB* essay and began drawing up plans for its study throughout the General Staff Department [hereafter GSD]. Realizing this could be dangerous, Chi and Yang sent the plan to Deng, who said it was very good, and the General Staff then began the first major discussion about it in the military. We do not question the actions by the generals nor Deng's support, but lacking a clear timeline, it contributes to the narrative of early Deng engagement that we find hard to sustain. Moreover, whatever the timeline, the account shows Deng responding to a lower-level initiative rather than taking the lead. See Kong Fanjun, *Chi Haotian zhuan* [Biography of Chi Haotian] (Beijing: Jiefangjun chubanshe, 2009), pp. 229-30. We are grateful to Joseph Torigian for calling this and other relevant primary sources to our attention.

and there is limited indication that Deng particularly dwelled on it in private. The most important evidence, in any case, is that Hu Qiaomu, who should have understood Deng's thinking, approached Hu Yaobang on June 20 and 24 and urged him to curb the criterion debate.¹⁶¹

Whatever Deng's intentions concerning the criterion article, his June 2 address was significant in advancing the practice cause. Deng's speech followed speeches by Hua and Ye on May 29, and all three, as well as Wei Guoqing's report to the conference on May 2, used both *tifa* at issue, with Deng stressing there was no contradiction between the two.¹⁶² While all three speeches followed the common theme of restoring the traditional role of political work in the PLA, which was declared even more important for modern warfare conditions,¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ *Hu Yaobang sixiang nianpu*, vol. 1, pp. 193-94. On June 20, Hu Qiaomu claimed Hua was unhappy with the debate, and on the 24th he complained about that day's *JFJB* article. Hu Qiaomu, who was drafting Hua's finance and trade conference speech that would be given on July 7, certainly had access to Hua, but he was much more frequently in contact with Deng. It is implausible he would have ignored a clear indication from Deng of a desire to promote the criterion article. As for Hua's alleged critical attitude, the editors of *Hu Yaobang sixiang nianpu*, vol. 1, p. 194, dispute such a characterization of Hua's position.

¹⁶² Internal Party texts of the speeches made available to the authors. Unsurprisingly, the *Selected Works* version of Deng's speech deletes his praise of Hua. Abridged texts were distributed by Xinhua on June 3 (for Hua), June 4 (for Ye), June 5 (for Deng), and June 7 (for Wei). The shortened text of Deng's speech did not include his pointed discussion of the conflict over the two formulations.

¹⁶³ Despite various common positions, Deng's late revisions mean his final version did not receive a mutual review by Hua and Ye before delivery, which was then

Deng's address was clearly the most dynamic and consequential. Of course, this centered on his forceful exposition of truth from facts. Deng strategically used many Mao quotations, undoubtedly marshalled by Hu Qiaomu *et al.*, to make his case, which essentially was irrefutable in terms of classic pre-Cultural Revolution Mao Zedong Thought, albeit not necessarily the Chairman's actions. Tellingly, Deng addressed real problems and real officials at various levels, famously denouncing those "who talk about Mao Zedong Zedong Thought every day but often forget, abandon, or even oppose Comrade Mao's fundamental Marxist viewpoint and method of seeking truth from facts." None of this, of course, strayed from "comprehensive and accurate Mao Zedong Thought," and the speech was garnished with praise of "the great achievements of the Cultural Revolution initiated and led by Chairman Mao" and affirmation of "grasping the key link of class struggle to run the army well." These concessions to "holding high Mao's banner" notwithstanding, progressive theorists, and other open-minded figures, found hope in what they saw as the "spirit" of Deng's strong advocacy of truth from facts.

Nowhere was this more the case than with Wu Jiang, one of the critical figures in the creation of the criterion article. As noted, the

the general practice in such situations. This did not cause any known tension. Interview with senior Party historian, February 2009.

consequences of Wu Lengxi's and Wang Dongxing's respective activities left Wu Jiang fearful of the collapse of the practice initiative, but they did not stop Wu's efforts to write a new article. In his memoirs, Wu Jiang claims that he decided to go to the military after realizing Deng's speech opposed the "two whatevers" and that only the army press would dare to publish his work.¹⁶⁴ The encouragement provided to Wu by Deng's address soon coincided with his linking up with Luo Ruiqing and progressive *JFJB* editors, most likely due to solicitation by the paper of Wu's manuscript.¹⁶⁵ This, of course, led to the June 24 *JFJB* article, "A Basic Principle of Marxism," that some regarded as "the gun" speaking and, in any case, aroused nationwide discussion, providing a considerable upsurge of support for the criterion of truth. At the center of this process stood Luo Ruiqing, a figure who was much more forceful in achieving the result than Hu Yaobang and who, based on the available evidence, operated independent of Deng.

¹⁶⁴ Wu Jiang, *Shinian de lu: He Hu Yaobang xiangchu de rizi* [The Ten-Year Road: My Days with Hu Yaobang] (Hong Kong: Jingbao wenhua qiye youxian gongsi, n.d.), p. 40. Of course, Wu was writing when it was *de rigueur* to use the "two whatevers" when discussing ideological conflict.

¹⁶⁵ The initial contact and submission of the manuscript appears to have been between Wu and Yao Yuanfang, *JFJB* deputy chief editor, who had learned of Wu's effort. According to Wu, he suggested it be sent to Luo. "Zhenli biao zhun: Luo Ruiqing zhichi Hu Yaobang duikang Maoban."

Before examining the specific events leading to the June 24 article, it may be useful to examine relations among the three people generally regarded as critical to the process—Luo, Hu, and Deng. As previously noted, Luo and Hu had a strong and ongoing personal relationship going back to the Anti-Japanese University in Yan'an. Hu was the junior partner, not only nine years younger but also junior in Party status, well behind Luo, whose post-1949 career included minister of Public Security and then PLA chief-of-staff. The evidence suggests Hu's continued admiration of Luo and Luo's friendship with Hu, albeit mixed with a wish that he could be tougher.¹⁶⁶ In contrast, as also discussed above, while the Hu-Deng relationship was marked by ample work contacts and Hu's admiration for his even higher-placed senior, a close personal tie never developed.¹⁶⁷ As for the two old revolutionaries, with Deng the elder by less than two years, both became major figures in the rise of the CCP, being selected for the first Maoist Central Committee in 1945. The two had limited interactions during the revolutionary period, but both rose significantly after 1949, with Deng becoming a Standing Committee member and General Secretary in 1956 and Luo joining him on the Secretariat in 1962. Overall, there is no known history of a Deng-Luo

¹⁶⁶ See above, note 33.

¹⁶⁷ Interviews with source close to Hu's family, September-October 2013. Cf. above, notes 35, 36.

conflict, and Deng expressed reservations to Mao about Luo's 1966 purge. When both were rehabilitated in 1973-74, Deng assumed a much higher position, but there was still an opportunity for contacts between them in the CMC. In any case, during the post-Mao period Luo was not Deng's first choice for CMC secretary-general, but they obviously worked together on key military matters.¹⁶⁸ In short, Deng and Luo had several periods of significant work relations, yet their relationship appears to have lacked notable personal closeness.

The evidence indicates that throughout this short period, within the constraints of the time, Luo Ruiqing, as an active participant in post-Mao politics, consistently pushed for progressive ideological outcomes. During the late 1977 CMC plenary meeting, Luo played a significant role in overseeing the drafting of Ye Jianying's keynote speech and in discussing the speech with Deng. According to Hua Nan, who was present during the discussions, Luo responded to Deng's question about using class struggle as the key link by saying "don't mention taking class struggle as the key link anymore, it's a club for beating people." Luo realized this would be a dangerous step at the time because the concept could not be suddenly abolished, and after consulting with Ye and Deng, he organized research and

¹⁶⁸ Donald W. Klein and Anne B. Clark, *Biographic Dictionary of Chinese Communism 1921-1965*, 2 vols. (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), vol. II, pp. 642-45; Teiwes and Sun, *End of the Maoist Era*, p. 143n77; and interview with leading Party historian, February 2009.

came up with using a 1948 speech by Mao to erode the class struggle emphasis.¹⁶⁹ Luo's continuing interest in ideology was again evident in early 1978. On March 26, *RMRB* published a short item entitled "There is Only One Standard," i.e., social practice. Unexpectedly, this article came to Luo's attention and, admiring its views, he instructed Hua Nan that *JFJB* should publicize and support this point of view.¹⁷⁰ Remarkably, given his close relations with Hu Yaobang, Luo apparently had no forewarning when the criterion of truth article appeared in May, yet he quickly phoned Hua Nan, instructing *JFJB* to study and publicize this "very good article of great significance." Luo also said that this was an article addressing a very big ideological problem, and "unless this problem is solved, our cause cannot advance."¹⁷¹ Soon Luo would be playing a leading role in fighting for the cause.

As the situation heated up with the attacks by Wu Lengxi and Wang Dongxing, Luo soon began an effort to directly support the criterion of truth. About May 20, when Hua Nan and Yao Yuanfang went to Luo to discuss the political work conference, Luo spoke of

¹⁶⁹ Fu Yi, "Weirao 'liangge fanshi' de jiaofeng," pp. 7-9.

¹⁷⁰ Yu Huanchun, "Luo Ruiqing yu zhenli biao zhun da taolun" [Luo Ruiqing and the Big Discussion of the Criterion of Truth], excerpt from *Beijing ribao*, July 2, 2008.

¹⁷¹ Zhang Qi and Qian Xiaohu, "Zhenli biao zhun taolun, junbao gong bu ke mei" [Discussing the Criterion of Truth, the Military Paper Is Indispensable], at http://www.81.cn/jwgd/2014-08/20/content_6103428_2.htm, August 20, 2014.

concern about the emerging opposition to the *GMRB* article and he directed that *JFJB* should propagate the practice message. It appears that work on an *JFJB* rebuttal began about then, but more concrete measures began the day of Deng's June 2 speech. Although there is no evidence of any Deng-Luo consultation, Luo believed the Deng address created a new situation with progressive thinkers encouraged by what they saw as Deng's at least implicit support, and he ordered that *JFJB* write a strong commentary based on the "spirit" of Deng's address. Within a week, a Wu Jiang-*JFJB* link was established, seemingly without Hu Yaobang's knowledge. As Hu would later observe, for more than a month Luo personally grasped the whole process that resulted in the June 24 article.¹⁷²

Luo's personal grasp of the project had several aspects. One was close oversight of the manuscript. This involved almost daily phone contact with Hua Nan and deep engagement with all of the multiple drafts of the article. After being given Wu Jiang's initial draft, Luo raised both theoretical and political considerations. He made suggestions to improve the theoretical level of the article but more important, he offered strategic advice to bolster the argument by increasing the number of Mao quotations and also by referencing

¹⁷² Shen Baoxiang, *Zhenli biao zhun*, pp. 139-40; Hu Deping, "Yaobang tongzhi zai 'zhenli biao zhun' (zhong)"; and "Hu Yaobang tan wangshi: Bijiao Mao Zedong he Deng Xiaoping."

Deng's June 2 address, which resulted in a long Mao quotation in the published piece. Luo's actions reflected an underlying reality of CCP politics, as sharply noted by an incisive Party historian, that it matters less what is said than who says it.¹⁷³ Another feature of Luo's grasp of the project was to make sure *RMRB*, *GMRB*, and Xinhua all carried the *JFB* essay on the same day as the army paper. Luo made the necessary contacts and he kept close watch on *RMRB* in particular, even becoming concerned with such details as the layout of the Party daily's reprint at literally the 11th hour.¹⁷⁴ Also of significance, Luo brought Hu Yaobang into the process. As we have suggested, Hu was far from exercising a determining role as sometimes asserted; instead, he felt the pressure exerted by Wang, and he became hesitant due to Hu Qiaomu's urgings to stop and his warning that Hua was unhappy and had suggested putting the project on pause. In this context, Luo engaged Hu Yaobang, apparently late in the process, reportedly exchanging six phone calls with him. Hu's actual involvement,

¹⁷³ Shen Baoxiang, *Zhenli biao zhun*, pp. 140-41; Fu Yi, "Weirao 'liangge fanshi' de jiaofeng"; and interview with Party historian, April 1999. While emphasis on Deng's speech was most important, the article also cited Hua and Ye.

¹⁷⁴ Shen Baoxiang, *Zhenli biao zhun*, pp. 141-42; and Hu Deping, "Yaobang tongzhi zai 'zhenli biao zhun' (zhong)." Organizational regulations played into the situation in several respects. While Wang Dongxing's authority over propaganda was limited to what the civilian media could do, *JFB* was in the military system and could not be under Wang's control, thus it became another factor in Wu Jiang's involvement. Another aspect, the convention of reprinting articles from another paper on the following day, was circumvented by Luo's efforts; "Zhenli biao zhun: Luo Ruiqing zhichi Hu Yaobang duikang Maoban."

however, appears fairly limited, making only a few modest suggestions on the penultimate draft and indicating he did not need to be further consulted.¹⁷⁵

“A Basic Principle of Marxism” was an impressive article in many respects. In a manner similar to the first section of Deng’s June 2 speech, but unlike Deng, he made many clear references to the *GMRB* essay.¹⁷⁶ The *JFJB* piece presented a powerful case for practice as a core concept in Mao’s ideology (at least before the Cultural Revolution). The skilful arguments should have had an impact on those uncertain about the theoretical aspects of the criterion article as well on audiences concerned about political claims of chopping down Mao’s banner. Of course, the citing of authority, most importantly Mao himself through many quotations, surely provided some solace to those uncertain or worried. Another aspect, undoubtedly influential for audiences beyond the theoretical sphere, consisted of arguments about the need for proceeding from practice to achieve satisfactory policy outcomes, whether generally in advancing the Four

¹⁷⁵ Shen Baoxiang, *Zhenli biaozhun*, p. 141. The six phone calls have become a staple of PRC accounts of events, perhaps to bolster Hu’s importance. Hu himself later referred to three such calls; “Hu Yaobang tan wangshi: Bijiao Mao Zedong he Deng Xiaoping.”

¹⁷⁶ While not citing the *GMRB* article by name, the June 24 piece repeatedly used phraseology that makes the link 100 percent clear. In contrast, Deng’s speech not only avoided any direct reference it also did not include the characters for criterion (*biaozhun*) and sole (*weiyi*), and only on four occasions did it use the character for truth (*zhenli*).

Modernizations or in various specific fields of work. Only with flexibility in dealing with the changing conditions would the masses be convinced and provide the driving force to realize the Party's objectives. All of this, as with the earlier criterion essay and Deng's speech, was well within the requirements for "comprehensive and accurate Mao Zedong Thought," an ideology declared to be an irrefutable theory to be adhered to at all times. Moreover, the article included concepts that undoubtedly irritated the sensibilities of progressive theorists, e.g., praise of Mao's "great theory of continuing the revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat," a slogan seemingly tolerated as necessary rhetoric given the essay's strong support for practice. In essence, the June 24 piece was more an argument for restoration than a harbinger of reform.¹⁷⁷

What is most striking in all the developments from the original criterion of truth article to the *JFJB* sequel is the absence of Deng in any personal sense. Clearly, his speech on June 2 was very significant, given that its "spirit" provided a considerable boost to those seeking to pursue the practice issue. Yet Deng is not present in any accounts of interactions involving Luo Ruiqing, Hu Yaobang, or any others concerning creation of the June 24 essay. The picture of Deng-era orthodoxy, such as the claim that in the overall struggle "Deng

¹⁷⁷ The full article is available at <http://www.reformdata.org/1978/0604/2188.shtml>, June 4, 1978.

Xiaoping made a great historical contribution, with Luo Ruiqing his right-hand man,"¹⁷⁸ is deeply unconvincing when it comes to this critical essay. A remarkable assessment, made over three decades later, presented a blunt yet persuasive observation about the rising pressure on the eve of publication: "Leaders such as Deng Xiaoping evaded the sharp edge, [only] on appropriate occasions expressing support for the 'criterion of truth' issue in the language of politicians."¹⁷⁹ In any case, it was only after June 24 and the significant approval the article received that Deng began to move toward clear support of the criterion article.

Another telling retrospective observation concerning this period addresses the "two whatevers," noting that none of the articles on the criterion of truth "directly expressed opposition to the 'two whatevers.'"¹⁸⁰ While this is attributed, correctly in part, to Party discipline, in our view it was profoundly due to the concept being little more than a latent issue, "no big deal" as the daughter of a high-ranking official put it. We also underscore the assessment of arguably the most thorough Party historian of the period that the "whaterverist" depiction of opposing forces was subsequently written

¹⁷⁸ "Jiangjun huoyue zai zhenli biao zhun zhong" [The General is Active in the Discussion on the Criterion of Truth], at <http://mil.news.sina.com.cn/2008-10-08/0722524280.html>, October 8, 2008.

¹⁷⁹ "Zhenli biao zhun: Luo Ruiqing zhichi Hu Yaobang duikang Maoban."

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

into PRC materials when, at the time, they were regarded as “conservative” or “orthodox.”¹⁸¹ We do not contest that progressives had a negative view of the “two whatevers,” as Deng certainly did, but this concept remained well in the background and did not dominate motivation in the theoretical dispute. As the observation concludes, “directly opposing the ‘two whatevers’ was something for later” but in circumstances that could hardly be anticipated in spring 1978.

Publication of “A Basic Principle of Marxism” coincided with a substantial change in political life in the theoretical sphere and it also influenced broader elite circles. Whatever degree of “suppression” Wang Dongxing had implemented following the criterion of truth article, which we have argued is overstated in the official narrative, pressure was then sharply reduced, even though opposition and debate remained. As indicated, significant support appeared immediately. A comparison with the *GMRB* essay is informative. According to a popular view, publication of the criterion of truth piece opened a crack and was heavily repressed, whereas the *JFJB* essay “blew a huge gap in the dyke.” In Wu Jiang’s assessment, the first article only caused controversy at the Center; the second article made the dispute public and aroused nationwide discussion. While not entirely accurate since the criterion article had been reported in the

¹⁸¹ See above, note 7.

provinces and was, to the extent known, not discussed by the top leadership, the military paper's piece attracted much more attention in elite circles nationally. As Wu goes on to note, however, the discussion was limited to the upper levels of the central and provincial establishments and it did not penetrate deeply into the cadres and masses.¹⁸²

What explains the difference and what does this tell us more broadly? The situation was both the same and different on May 11 and June 24. It was different because of the tensions created, primarily in theoretical circles, due to the actions by Wu Lengxi and Wang Dongxing, but it was the same as, at best, a marginal issue for the Standing Committee collective. Individually, Deng's "spirit" played a significant part, but by his own account he had not been clear on the issue. Wang, of course, had placed himself at the center of the emerging conflict, but his limited effectiveness was nowhere clearer than in the publication of the June 24 essay. A week earlier on the 15th, Wang railed against the media, particularly *RMRB* for its headline giving greater prominence to Deng's speech than to those by Hua and Ye at the GPD conference.¹⁸³ Yet, if anything, the propensity to find ways to ignore him had intensified. In May, more important than the *GMRB* article was its reprint in the Party's daily the next day, on

¹⁸² "Zhenli biao zhun: Luo Ruiqing zhichi Hu Yaobang duikang Maoban."

¹⁸³ See Shen Baoxiang, *Zhenli biao zhun*, pp. 117, 124-25.

page 2. What immediately drew “A Basic Principle of Marxism” to the attention of the wider elite was not publication in the purported voice of “the gun” but its reprint on the same day on the front page of *RMRB*. But without higher-level endorsement, it did give the impression of an approving attitude. And beyond that, an article thought by some to be aimed at Hua began with a quotation by the Party Chairman and ended with an affirmation of his leadership. Division at the top was not suggested.¹⁸⁴

In the official narrative, the period following the June 24 article to the start of the work conference in November is marked by a continuing sharp ideological struggle, with the progressive forces led by Deng gaining the upper hand, overcoming ongoing opposition from Wang Dongxing and abetted by Hua. Apart from being libelously false with respect to Hua, this misrepresents the situation in numerous less blatant ways. Wang Dongxing, and others in the conservative *lilunzu* to a more nuanced degree were unhappy with developments, but their influence on the practice issue was in decline

¹⁸⁴ This commonsense reading of the article’s text sits oddly with Hu Qiaomu’s complaint to Hu Yaobang on June 24 that the *JFB* article was making internal conflict worse (see above, note 161). The Party historian whom we regard as most authoritative on the period commented that he could not understand Hu Qiaomu’s actions at this point; interview, October 2012. We too are puzzled and can only speculate that Qiaomu’s view of himself as a guardian of Party unity, together with the fact that opinions of both Hua and Deng were elusive at this point, led him to believe, mistakenly, that calming the discussion was the best course.

and Wang never came close to suppressing challenges to rigid theory. The many publications supporting the practice position were significant, but more telling is the fact that works opposing the criterion of truth were rarely seen in the public press.¹⁸⁵ Where major leadership tensions appeared involving Wang, they basically did not involve theoretical issues. Hu Yaobang, who assertedly was under heavy pressure from May to October, in later recounts of significant clashes with Wang during this period, does not refer to being named at the June 15 propaganda meeting. Instead, he recalled two instances—Wang’s refusal earlier that month to turn over case files on leaders falsely accused during the Cultural Revolution, and the

¹⁸⁵ Han Gang, “Huanyuan Hua Guofeng.”

A feeble attempt to claim strong opposition in the media can be found in *HQ*, the Party’s authoritative political theory journal that was under Wang Dongxing’s direct organizational control and edited by conservative theoretician Xiong Fu. The point at issue was an order by Wang to “not become involved” in the debate, which would be characterized as a directive to become involved in opposition and even in suppression. As seen in the Tan Zhenlin case (above, note 48), an attempt to limit references to the criterion argument did take place. Yet a frontal attack did not occur. At the theory conference, Xiong Fu claimed that in the five months of his leadership of *HQ* from June to October, he never once deleted or added a reference to the criterion argument, but in November he did add one sentence expressing the same idea: Speech to the Party’s theory forum, January 22, 1979, internal Party document made available to the authors. Moreover, *HQ* carried articles friendly to truth from facts in each monthly issue from June to October. For example, a June article criticizes using individual sentences out of context; a July editorial highlights Mao’s January 1962 speech to the 7,000 cadres conference that grappled with the failures of the Great Leap; and the October National Day editorial cites Hua’s recent comments on emancipating thought and stresses truth from facts.

September dispute over Hu's position that such cases should be reviewed regardless of who, i.e., Mao, had decided them.¹⁸⁶ As throughout the entire pre-Third Plenum period, the really crucial question, about which broader audiences deeply cared, was the emerging *pingfan* issue, not how truth is measured.

In reality, theoretical and related political issues raised by the criterion debate were not settled. Many voices emphasized the need to protect Mao's reputation and people in institutions as diverse as the minor democratic parties and the military found it difficult to understand either the theoretical arguments or the political meaning of the debate.¹⁸⁷ Many officials found the best course was simply to get on with their work and ignore the conflict. Nevertheless, the direction had been set, and momentum was building for the practice argument in a context where, some spirited debate notwithstanding, the overall atmosphere was comparatively restrained—a far cry from

¹⁸⁶ On the two instances, see *Hu Yaobang sixiang nianpu*, vol. 1, pp. 190-91, 221, 224-28.

¹⁸⁷ According to United Front Work Department reports, many old intellectuals and democratic party members at the time asked what the criterion was, declaring it was unknowable and merely a question of who held power; reports made available to the authors. In the PLA, General Chen Heqiao reported that initially "a few of us" could not figure out "the political and ideological significance of this great theory (of the criterion of truth), ... and we did not dare express an opinion." Chen went on to say that they were set on the right track by Deng's June 2 speech and the June 24 article; see *Chen Heqiao huiyi wenji* [Collection of Chen Heqiao's Recollections], cited in Torigian, *Prestige, Manipulation, and Coercion* (Yale University Press, 2022) pp. 178, 274.

the ideological clashes of the Cultural Revolution. As Hu Deping has argued, much of this was undoubtedly due to Hua's restrained and tolerant approach. While never declaring himself in favor of the criterion position, Hua emphasized that debate should pursue unity and no hats should be placed on the heads of opponents—something clearly applicable to Wang's use of the anti-Mao "hat" on June 15 but also applicable to potential attacks in the other direction.¹⁸⁸ In this lower-temperature atmosphere, emerging leadership awareness of the debate and conflict led to Ye Jianying's proposal for a theoretical conference that would seek unity but would inevitably favor the practice view. In September, Li Xin commented to Wang Dongxing that the practice position was commonsense, but holding the theoretical conference would be a mistake as it was no longer possible to unify thought given the pro-criterion positions taken in the media and by provincial leaders.¹⁸⁹ We now turn to important aspects of the building of momentum while in the process correcting some commonly held inaccurate beliefs.

¹⁸⁸ Hu Deping, "Hua Guofeng zai 'zhenli biao zhun' taolun (zhong)"; interview with senior Party historian focusing on the period, October 2010. On Wang's dispensing of the "anti-Mao hat" to Party intellectual Yu Huanchun, this is reported in "Yu Huanchun tongzhi zai xiaozuhui shangde fayan" [Comrade Yu Huanchun's Speech to the Group Meeting (of the Theory Conference)] (January 26, 1979), in *Lilun gongzuo wuxuhui jianbao* [Theory Work Conference Bulletin], January 18-April 3, 1979, internal Party documents made available to the authors. Bulletin, no. 74, group 1, January 26.

¹⁸⁹ Shen Baoxiang, *Zhenli biao zhun*, p. 325.

The theory sector had never been completely cowed by Wang Dongxing, as seen at the mid-May joint meeting of government and academic bodies that discussed the criterion article and on June 20-21, when the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences [hereafter CASS] held a conference on the truth issue. This came a week after Wang's June 15 criticism of not only Hu Yaobang but also of Deng Liqun, then second in command at CASS.¹⁹⁰ Concerning the other issue Wang had raised in May, *anlao fenpei*, debate continued over the roles of material and spiritual incentives, with the fourth national conference on distribution according to work, held from October 25 to November 3, affirming *anlao* measures.¹⁹¹ The most notable development in the ideological sphere, however, was a much more significant larger CASS meeting to discuss the relationship between theory and practice, held from July 17 to 24. Here Deng Liqun played a prominent role, but the most dramatic and lasting contribution came from CASS advisor Zhou Yang, the Party's pre-Cultural Revolution literary czar.¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ Wu Jiang, *Shinian de lu*, p. 38. Significantly, however, even though policy was clearly emphasizing *anlao fenpei*, the theoretical aspect remained a concern. In August or September 1978, Deng called in several CASS theorists to emphasize the importance of making the case. But while encouraging them to hold to principle, he also emphasized, like Hua and Ye generally, the aim of achieving unity. He specifically noted that he hoped the debate would not "crop up at the central work conference." See Yu Guangyuan, *Deng Shakes the World*, pp. 176-77.

¹⁹¹ "Wei 'anlao fenpei' zhengming."

¹⁹² See Shen Baoxiang, *Zhenli biaozhun*, pp. 166-70.

This meeting of the CASS Philosophy Institute invited over 160 participants from central Party and government organs, provincial Party schools and research units, and philosophy workers, with the representation of the provincial delegates particularly important.¹⁹³ Speaking of relevant personnel, one was someone not present, CASS head Hu Qiaomu. Hu, while closely linked to Deng Liqun over the years, at this point, as seen in his June 20 and 24 warnings to Hu Yaobang, was on a different track from Deng Liqun who spoke strongly in favor of the criterion argument. Hu Qiaomu not only shunned the gathering, but he had instructed that the discussion should be confined to theory and focused on philosophical questions.¹⁹⁴ This view was strongly refuted by Zhou Yang. To fill out Zhou's history, before 1966 and his own purge, he was a noted left-wing literary theorist and an unforgiving enforcer of the left line who had purged many cultural figures. By summer 1978, however, Zhou had changed his views, supporting, among other things, reversing the verdict on the Tiananmen incident.¹⁹⁵ Zhou's new views were strongly stated at the CASS meeting and would later play a role in the formal

¹⁹³ See Wang Hongmo *et al.*, *Gaige kaifang de licheng*, pp. 71-72.

¹⁹⁴ Interview with theorist participating in the forum, June 1996. Cf. Wu Jiang, *Shinian de lu*, p. 38; and *Hu Yaobang sixiang nianpu*, pp. 193-94. The latter source has Hu Qiaomu on June 20 demanding that Hu Yaobang stop the criterion debate because it would damage Party unity and cause a Party split.

¹⁹⁵ "Yu Huanchun tongzhi zai xiaozuhui shangde fayan" (January 26, 1979), where Yu discusses Zhou Yang's support for the Tiananmen reversal.

affirmation of the criterion of truth at the central work conference in November-December.

Zhou Yang's striking argument was that the criterion question was not simply a theoretical matter but a much more serious issue of ideological and political line, one that indeed was crucial to the destiny and fate of the Party and nation. The argument had a strong influence on many of the participants who, when returning to their units after the end of the meeting, spread the word. It did not go uncontested, however, with conservative theorists such as Hu Sheng concerned about the implications for Mao's reputation and the consequences for political stability.¹⁹⁶ The irony is that raising the issue to a political level had come full circle. Wang Dongxing had done that in May-June and now Zhou Yang was doing it from the diametrically opposed position. If the first politicization had not occurred, it is likely that the theoretical argument about theory and practice would have continued, but without much political notice. But in the circumstances, important figures had to adjust their positions. While it is unclear whether events at the CASS meeting had

¹⁹⁶ Han Gang, "Quanli de zhuan yi: Guanyu shiyijie sanzong quanhui" [The Transfer of Power: Concerning the Third Plenum], available at <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/25415.html>, March 11, 2009.

a direct influence on Deng Xiaoping,¹⁹⁷ it is noteworthy that Deng's first clear endorsement of the criterion article, as we shall discuss below, came four days after the start of the meeting. But what appears clear is that it had an effect on Hu Qiaomu, whether directly or due to an understanding of Deng's altered position. Hu's attitude seemed to change from the end of July and was confirmed in an August 18 discussion with Hu Yaobang on various subjects. In that discussion, Hu Yaobang made an observation very close to what Zhou Yang had said. While it is not clear what Hu Qiaomu precisely said on this issue, Hu Yaobang declared his agreement with Hu Qiaomu's opinions during their exchange.¹⁹⁸

There is no doubt that momentum for the criterion argument developed significantly after "the gun" had notionally declared its position on June 24, not only in numerous articles published throughout the country but also in declarations of support by three provincial first secretaries.¹⁹⁹ More extensive formal declarations of

¹⁹⁷ Deng's first clear if private support came on July 21. One well-positioned source, while unspecific about the timing, claims CASS opinions about the criterion were passed on informally to Ye and Deng; interview November 2009.

¹⁹⁸ *Hu Yaobang sixiang nianpu*, vol. 1, p. 210. Nevertheless, at an August CASS meeting Hu Qiaomu claimed there were no leadership differences on the practice issue, causing considerable incredulity among his audience; interview with senior Party historian.

¹⁹⁹ Gansu's Song Ping on June 25, shortly followed by Heilongjiang's Yang Yichen and Liaoning's Ren Zhongyi. Li Yan, *Zaisheng Zhongguo: Zhonggong shiyijie sanzong quanhui de qianqian houhou* (shang) [Regenerating China: Before and

local support began in August, shortly after the conclusion of the July CASS meeting and the return of the provincial participants to their home bases, which we consider to be the most important cause of what was to follow. Without any known directive from the Party Center, from August 3 to December 6, with each province prominently reported in *RMRB*, 27 provinces and provincial-level cities declared support through speeches by provincial first or second Party secretaries, and/or organized discussions, a process commonly considered *biaotai* to express agreement with a new position. Of these, 20 had declared support before the start of the work conference.²⁰⁰ Contrary to any notion of “the gun” leading the way, the military became involved considerably later in the process, beginning on October 9, when nearly one-third of the provinces had already “spoken” and lasting to November 16. In this PLA *biaotai*—ten of the 11 military regions expressed their support in the same manner as the civilian leaders; we will examine this particular aspect of the process shortly.²⁰¹ While the official narrative that this process was

After the Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee], 2 vols. (Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi chubanshe, 1998), vol. 1, pp. 269, 272-76.

²⁰⁰ See Shen Baoxiang, *Zhenli biaozhun*, pp. 228-34. The two localities not participating were Beijing and Anhui.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 248-51. The missing military region is Tibet. Four specialized military forces also undertook *biaotai*, but the GSD and GPD, as well as the air force and navy, did not. Interestingly, while not necessarily accurate, the Wuhan Military Region declared it was implementing Chairman Hua’s directive in discussing the criterion of truth.

part of overwhelming support in the struggle against Hua's "two whatevers" can be dismissed as crude propaganda, assumptions that the timing of the *biaotai* gestures reflected reformist or conservative tendencies are misleading and deserve attention. Here we offer a more nuanced analysis of the process.

The first thing to be said is that *biaotai* is a ritual that is not taken too seriously, particularly in the civilian sector. Whether one was eager or reluctant to support the criterion position undoubtedly played some part, but there was hardly a close correspondence between overall political attitudes and engagement in *biaotai*. A case in point is Zhao Ziyang's declaration on behalf of Sichuan on October 12, over a week after that of Hebei, which had been led by the compromised Liu Zihou.²⁰² Another indication that support for the criterion of truth in the *biaotai* process beginning in August was not at the top of the provincial leaders' agendas is that while Song Ping was the first to speak out in June, quickly after the *JFB* article, he did

In the case of the navy, its Political Department had earlier declared the criterion argument was a matter for the civilian theoretical world, not for the military. This became involved in the narrative of the Deng-Su Zhenhua conflict, something which became particularly relevant in July 1979, six months after Su's death. In terms of *biaotai*, this is not persuasive in that the air force, which Deng had hailed as a model of PLA rectification in early 1978, also did not engage in the process. See the discussion below on Deng's July speech in our "Criterion Make-up" section.

²⁰² Liu Zihou was compromised by his inability to control factionalism in his province, and the strength of the radical elements there.

not declare Gansu's backing until early November, just before the start of the work conference. But the most telling indication is provided by the jurisdictions not participating—Beijing municipality and Anhui. During the period of the *biaotai* exercise, the Beijing leadership had been pushing ahead with one of the most difficult *pingfan* issues, the reversal of verdicts arising out of the 1976 Tiananmen incident.²⁰³ Even more revealing is the attitude of Anhui's Wan Li, arguably the leader most willing to challenge accepted practices. According to a close associate, Wan was disdainful of *biaotai*, considering it an empty ritual, just lip service, while the important thing was to get on with work to resolve concrete problems.²⁰⁴ In short, there was no progressive rush to endorse the criterion of truth or particular regard for the ritual.

Some provincial leaders at the time, notably Yang Yichen and Zhejiang's Tie Ying, would claim that they did not receive any pressure or hints from above, and they were simply stating their own judgment on the issue or acting on their independent reading of how

²⁰³ For an extensive analysis, see Frederick C. Teiwes and Warren Sun, "Hua Guofeng, Deng Xiaoping, and Reversing the Verdict on the 1976 'Tiananmen Incident,'" *The China Review*, November 2019.

²⁰⁴ As reported by Zhang Guangyou, Xinhua correspondent in Anhui who became close to Wan and who subsequently wrote an admiring biography of him. Zhang, *Gaige fengyun zhong de Wan Li* [Wan Li in the Midst of the Storm of Reform] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1995), pp. 164-65; and interview May 2007. Wan did, however, endorse the criterion of truth one week before the central work conference; Li Yan, *Zaisheng Zhongguo*, p. 282.

the debate would evolve.²⁰⁵ Whether or not these claims are true, leaders at this level experienced soft pressure from officials of lower status, notably in the media. According to a significant central Xinhua official, provincial Xinhua representatives were urged to distribute materials and otherwise influence local officials concerning the practice argument, apparently with some effect, albeit with a degree of hesitation at the head office.²⁰⁶ In this situation of some lobbying but no definitive position from the Party Center, some leaders adopted a wait-and-see approach. One provincial leader, apparently Hebei's compromised Liu Zihou, organized propaganda cadres to check the national newspapers; the plan reportedly being that once more than half of the provinces had signed up Hebei would then engage in *biaotai*.²⁰⁷ Given the somewhat uncertain situation, albeit one already trending in support of the criterion position, the pace of provincial support significantly increased once "the gun" did speak up by the beginning of *biaotai* from October, and the military's involvement is a plausible explanation for the acceleration.

²⁰⁵ Shen Baoxiang, *Zhenli biao zhun*, p. 239; and interview with senior Party historian, June 1999.

²⁰⁶ Interview with senior Xinhua official, February 2009. Cf. Shen Baoxiang, *Zhenli biao zhun*, pp. 238ff.

²⁰⁷ "Zhenli biao zhun: Luo Ruiqing zhichi Hu Yaobang duikang Maoban"; and interview with intellectual deeply involved in the criterion debate, May 2010. If the provincial leader concerned was Liu Zihou, in the event Hebei did not wait until half of the provinces had declared; instead, its early October *biaotai* completed the first quarter of provinces engaging in the process.

Additionally, when the *biaotai* process was underway, *JFJB* chief editor Hua Nan asked the provincial leaders why they had not taken a stand on the criterion question.²⁰⁸ But before turning to the PLA aspect of the process, an examination of the underlying reasons for general provincial willingness to participate is in order.

Arguably, the unifying factor for those signing up to publicly support practice as the criterion of truth, as Li Xin reportedly remarked in September, is simply that it was commonsense. For provincial leaders, practice meant getting on with work, and at that point, it was work centered on economic construction. In comments by provincial leaders, notably Zhao Ziyang, emphasis was placed on the importance of speeding up realization of the Four Modernizations, developing new methods, and proceeding from the actual conditions in the various localities.²⁰⁹ There was also something greater at work—a desire for restoration and a need to overcome the effects of the Cultural Revolution. At the core of this stood the more important partner in elite concerns, if rather silent in comparison to the public criterion debate—the reversal of unjust verdicts. This was clearly indicated in a detailed interview with Li Li’an, a Heilongjiang Party

²⁰⁸ Shen Baoxiang, *Zhenli biao zhun*, p. 244. While reported in terms of dealing with provincial leaders who had adopted a wait-and-see posture, Shen does not provide precise timing. Thus, it is unknown how closely this may have coincided with the military’s own *biaotai*.

²⁰⁹ See Shen Baoxiang, *Zhenli biao zhun*, pp. 237-38.

secretary who had been ousted during the Cultural Revolution. In fall 1977, as a short-term student at the Party School, he discussed the recent past with Hu Yaobang, noting various incidents in his province and asking why there could only be opposition to rightism and not opposition to leftism. For Li, truth from facts was essential, since the Cultural Revolution had been too unrealistic, particularly in the treatment of cadres.²¹⁰

At the end of 1977, with Li Xiannian the central leader apparently most familiar with this case, Li Li'an was instructed to return to Heilongjiang, one of the provinces being reorganized under Hua's leadership. The issue was in conflict with the radicals in the province, where a new leadership team, including Li Li'an, headed by Yang Yichen had been installed. When asked why Heilongjiang expressed its position very early in the criterion debate, Li cited the removal of a pre-Cultural Revolution leader as a revisionist and the entire provincial committee being condemned as a "black committee." After returning to work, at a provincial committee meeting Li raised the pre-1966 policy of cadre participation in labor, but he was criticized for mentioning an approach used by the "black committee," leading to his defense of what he argued was actually a "red committee." The best cadres had been struck down, but truth

²¹⁰ Interview, July 1999.

from facts demanded that good cadres had to be treated as good cadres. In answer to the question of Heilongjiang's early declaration of support, Li emphasized that "it all began from cadre policy." This view was reinforced by Yang Yichen, who recalled how the mid-May 1978 death of former Heilongjiang First Secretary Ouyang Qin, a Cultural Revolution victim, led to his own early endorsement of practice as the sole criterion of truth.²¹¹

The lag in the military's involvement in *biaotai*, that is, the sequential statements of support for practice as the criterion of truth by military region leaders were separate from, but inevitably related to, Deng's personal, if still private, endorsement of the position starting on July 21. We will return to that story shortly. Here we focus on the process in the army. Compared to civilian *biaotai* in the provinces, the PLA began its process two and a half months later. Equally, if not more significant, in contrast to the civilian sector where no central decision was made, in the military sector there was most likely a decision made involving Deng and the military regions, and the process was completed much more quickly—in little more than a month. Whatever steps may have been taken within the GSD

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, and *Yang Yichen huiyilu* [Memoirs of Yang Yichen] (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1996), pp. 275-77.

earlier,²¹² at the whole army level the message had not moved beyond Deng's June 2 speech. An Army Day *JFJB* editorial at the beginning of August stressed the importance of the "spirit" of the GPD's political work conference—truth from facts. But it did not go further to endorse "practice is the sole criterion of truth."²¹³ A decision to go ahead with *biaotai* seemingly took place in mid-October, most likely on or just before October 14, when Deng and Wei Guoqing discussed Ye Jianying's proposal for a theory conference. But the situation was complicated and it definitely did not result in an unabashed intent to push the criterion issue to a quick conclusion.²¹⁴

As indicated, there is an overlap between Deng's move toward support of the criterion of truth as well as quietly expressing his disdain for the "two whatevers" and the emergence of PLA *biaotai*. Here we first focus on the military aspects. It is instructive to begin

²¹² On the GSD, see the discussion between Yang Yong and Chi Haotian; see above, note 160. In addition, in August, during the rectification campaign in the General Staff that Deng considered an important undertaking, practice as the sole criterion of truth was mentioned but not dwelled upon.

²¹³ See Shen Baoxiang, *Zhenli biaozhun*, pp. 247-48.

²¹⁴ While we do not believe the October 14 date is completely convincing, the Party historian on the period whom we most highly regard considers Wei Guoqing's visit to Deng seeking a decision on circulating documents to the entire army resulted in the military region's *biaotai* that followed: interview, October 2012. Other relevant dates are Deng's October 3 meeting with Hu Qiaomu, Deng Liqun, and Yu Guangyuan, that addressed the issues more broadly, and the first *biaotai* by the Shenyang Military Region on October 9, which can be regarded as a follow-up to Li Desheng's September 27 speech after Deng's visit to the Northeast.

with comments by Shenyang Military Region Commander and Politburo member Li Desheng. On about July 25, a few days after Deng privately, and most likely unknown to Li, first clearly indicated his support of the criterion argument, Li spoke on the “spirit” of the political work conference. But in excerpts of his report to the PLA Shenyang units, Li did not even mention truth from facts; moreover, he repeated themes anathema to progressive theorists, including that the “gang of four” were “fake left, real right,” the need to combat their “counterrevolutionary revisionist line,” and “class struggle as the key link for running the army.”²¹⁵ We are not claiming Li articulated an opposition view within the PLA. Quite the contrary, we only suggest that, however often truth from facts was repeated, deeply inculcated sentiments in the army were only marginally affected. Two months later, on September 27, Li again spoke, shortly after accompanying Deng on his inspection tour of the Northeast, now clearly having a better sense of Deng’s thinking, that, as seen in the chief-of-staff’s various comments and to which we shall return, did involve support of the criterion of truth and a swipe at the “two whatevers.” Yet Li’s statement then, unlike his *biaotai* on October 9, apparently was limited to truth from facts.²¹⁶

²¹⁵ Liaoning provincial radio, July 25, 1978, in SWB, FE/5879/BII/12-14.

²¹⁶ Li Desheng, “Weida de zhuanzhe: Lishi de biran” [The Great Turning Point: History’s Inevitable Conclusion], in Yu Guangyuan, Wang Enmao, Ren Zhongyi *et*

It is important to distinguish Deng's talks to civilian and to military audiences in the Northeast. His noted, and later greatly hyped, comments on the criterion article and the "two whatevers" on September 16 were addressed to Party leaders in Jilin. The most clearly focused discussion of military matters that is known was with Li Desheng on September 17. Strikingly, there is no mention of either the criterion or the "two whatevers" in the available text. Instead, Deng called for reviving the good traditions of the army, including loyalty to the Party and the people, avoiding factionalism, repairing relations with the *laobaixing*, and improving work style.²¹⁷ Overall, during his visit to the region, Deng sent two messages to PLA leaders. One was the commonsense position, very much endorsed by the Party Center, on truth from facts, the necessary approach for effectively carrying out military tasks. The second message, something Deng had sought since late 1977, also without significant opposition in the central leadership, was to phase out the campaign to criticize the "gang of four," precisely because it was a diversion from improving military performance. Also, as he put it, it was causing discontent within the army due to the troops being worn out by

al., eds., *Gaibian Zhongguo mingyun de 41 tian: Zhongyang gongzuo huiyi, shiyijie sanzong quanhui qinliji* [41 Days that Altered China's Fate: Personal Recollections of the Central Work Conference and the Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee] (Shenzhen: Haitian chubanshe, 1998), p. 234.

²¹⁷ *Deng nianpu*, vol. 1, pp. 382-83.

repeated meetings. This fit perfectly with the plan to shift the focus of work to economic modernization, the theme of the coming central work conference. We leave to separate analysis this development, falsely credited to Deng in the official narrative. This was surely a unified Party Center position, and if anyone is to be given primary credit, it should be Hua.²¹⁸ This second objective was less problematic in Deng's mind. In contrast, pushing the criterion of truth raised concern about Party unity, a critical factor for a range of diverse leaders, including Wang Dongxing, Hu Qiaomu, and Hua.

A striking indication of this concern is Deng's comment during his October 3 meeting with Hu Qiaomu, Deng Liqun, and Yu Guangyuan: "Now lots of articles [about the 'criterion of truth'] have already been published, and lots have been written by provincial committees. The issue hasn't been cleared up, but this sort of issue has to take its time. [The debate] can come to a close for a while."²¹⁹ At this meeting, an authoritative account has Deng referring to his time in the Northeast, citing his advocacy of *anlao fenpei* and his

²¹⁸ Deng's concern in the Northeast about the need to end the campaign against the "gang of four" was discussed by a senior Party historian, who reported Deng's worry about the effect on officers and soldiers if the campaign against the "gang" were to drag on for another three to five years; interview, October 2012.

²¹⁹ Zhu Jiamu, *Wo suo zhidao de shiyijie sanzong quanhui* [What I Know about the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee] (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1998), p. 42. This is a credible source, but the quotation is not included in the *Deng nianpu* reference, in note 217 above.

argument for ending the campaign against the “gang of four,” while suggesting hesitation regarding the criterion of truth which was not mentioned.²²⁰ Although six days later, the Shenyang Military Region expressed *biaotai*, Deng’s meeting with Wei Guoqing on October 14 remains the most plausible occasion for providing the go-ahead to complete the *biaotai* process in the army over the following month. The discussion on the 14th began over Ye’s proposal for a theory conference, drawing Deng’s comments on the need for truth from facts at both the leadership level and throughout the system down to the enterprises and communes. In this, Deng affirmed the Marxist credentials of the criterion article, yet his more specific concern was to wind up the movement to criticize the “gang”; after the meeting, the GPD issued an opinion on that issue.²²¹ It may well be the case that a directive also went out to endorse the criterion of truth, but for some inexplicable reason it is not included in the account of the meeting. In any case, together with what we know about events in the Northeast, it suggests the issue of ending the anti-“gang” campaign had a higher priority for Deng than promoting the criterion argument, notwithstanding the rapid *biaotai* by the military regions that followed.

²²⁰ *Deng nianpu*, vol. 1, pp. 394-95.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 401-402.

With the above evidence of Deng's hesitancy to push the criterion of truth position too strongly in mind, it is time to examine the views of the Party Center both collectively and individually during the period from the publication of the *JFJB* article to the start of the central work conference. We start by re-emphasizing the paucity of evidence concerning what actually happened within the Standing Committee. The basic story advanced by Hua at the work conference is broadly credible: after belatedly becoming aware of the controversy, the top leadership (Wang Dongxing excepted) considered it a matter that had to be dealt with and, following Ye Jianying's proposal, seemingly in September, a consensus emerged. The criterion debate would be the subject of a theory conference at which different points of view would be welcomed for discussion in a democratic atmosphere, with the aim of achieving unity. To the extent Wang Dongxing went along with this decision, we can only speculate that he felt he had no option given the acceptance of Ye's proposal by Hua, Deng, and Li Xiannian. While it was a naïve expectation given the disputes of May-June and beyond, the claimed consensus did reflect the leadership's concern with unity and avoidance of destabilizing conflict. It also demonstrated a point we have made several times—the ideological issue was a considerably lower priority as the Party approached what was planned to be a decisive turn toward economic modernization at the work conference and plenum.

We have discussed Deng's at best secondary concern about the *GMRB* article in his June 2 political work conference address, and his lack of personal involvement in *JFJB's* "Basic Principle of Marxism" as well as his tempered support in September-October. We thus have underscored the unconvincing nature of the conventional view of Deng as the critical player in the victory of the criterion argument and its close link to the struggle with the "two whatevers." Beyond that, what can his actions in the post-June 24 period tell us? As we discuss below, Deng did become involved in pushing the basic practice perspective and along the way he did make a very small number of known dismissive comments on the "two whatevers"²²² in private conversations as well as in larger gatherings when hearing reports, particularly at the September 16 meeting with provincial officials in the Northeast. We can only offer a few interpretive statements concerning Deng's motives. He deeply wished to foster the underlying objective of the May-June criterion argument toward a more innovative, less "forbidden-zone" environment. Deng also

²²² We have located four such references from reports in *Deng nianpu*, vol. 1, pp. 345-46, 357, 359-60. Our assumption is that, given the official narrative, no known Deng reference would have been overlooked by historians at the CCP's Central Documents Research Office who, in our experience, are diligent in pursuing whatever records exist. In each of these four cases, explicit support is also given to the criterion argument, while in two other cases, including the October 14 meeting with Wei Guoqing, the criterion argument is supported without reference to the "two whatevers"; *ibid.*, pp. 345, 402.

regarded the “two whatevers” *tifa*, even though it had disappeared from public usage, as indicative of the approach blocking the way forward, but at the same time he understood this was a difficult issue to raise as it had appeared under Hua’s authority. Furthermore, like his Standing Committee colleagues, Deng had other, more important issues in mind, and he believed that unity was essential for achieving the Party’s objectives.

Deng’s first known step in pursuing his ideological objectives came on July 21, three days short of a month after the *JFJB* essay. He summoned Propaganda Director Zhang Pinghua to express his dissatisfaction with the department’s restrictive handling of the criterion issue. Zhang had only come to his post the previous October, had nothing to do with the “two whatevers.” Also, he had acted comparatively softly in implementing Wang Dongxing’s orders in May. But Deng’s demands were pointed: “Don’t issue prohibitions, no forbidden zones, and don’t turn back from the lively political situation.”²²³ This, of course, placed Zhang in a difficult position *vis-à-vis* Wang Dongxing and apparently produced only limited effect. and Zhang’s subordinate position left him vulnerable to criticism and ultimately removal at the work conference.²²⁴

²²³ *Deng nianpu*, vol. 1., p. 345.

²²⁴ While it is difficult to get a full picture of Zhang’s activities after his meeting with Deng, during a visit to the Northeast in early August, he spoke out against

In another meeting with a key figure in the ideological conflict, on August 13 Deng called in Wu Lengxi. While seemingly not directly involved in the “two whatevers” editorial, Wu was a member of the Mao Works Office at the time and, of course, he was a major figure in the blowup over the *GMRB* article. Although Wu had worked in Deng’s Political Research Office in 1975 and had been nominated by Deng as a possible editor of *Hongqi* in April just before the criterion conflict, now Wu’s recent behavior was clearly the context for the discussion, as Deng laid out what he believed were the views that the Mao Works Office should express. According to this brief account, after affirming the correct Marxist position on the criterion article, Deng said the important issue was liberation of thought; although the Party’s policy direction on the cultural, academic, and theory front was the Hundred Flowers, this was not being carried out adequately. He sharply pointed out, “do not start from the ‘two whatevers’ [position], do not establish forbidden zones, [you] must encourage

using one sentence from Mao when the whole of the Chairman’s essay “On Practice” had to be taken into consideration. But his emphasis on protecting Mao’s prestige, and enforcing Hua’s status, reportedly was considered by those present as producing an unbalanced performance. At the work conference, Zhang defended himself against attacks by saying he had no specific instructions from the Standing Committee, but he confessed to a lack of guts in failing to be more proactive; cf. below, note 282. Zhang was replaced as propaganda head by Hu Yaobang, before taking up Wang Dongxing’s position as first vice president at the Party School.

breaking through the restraints.”²²⁵ However Deng may have regarded Wu’s performance during the following three months, Wu’s position as a *lilunzu* document drafter apparently was not affected, including his working on documents for the work conference. But with the situation changing, he received major criticism at the work conference and at the following theory conference. Yet, as previously noted, similar to other members of the alleged “two whatevers *pai*,” his career was not thereafter adversely affected.²²⁶

The most important and revealing of Deng’s only known private, one-on-one, discussions on these major issues occurred on July 22, one day after his meeting with Zhang Pinghua. Deng phoned Hu Yaobang and called him in for a lengthy hour and a half discussion, which was the first significant contact between the two men in quite a while. The encounter indicated that Hu, despite Deng’s political work conference speech, had been uncertain of Deng’s fundamental attitude on the ideological question. Deng seemingly understood this and strongly supported the criterion article. This, together with the

²²⁵ *Deng nianpu*, vol. 1, p. 357. At a meeting six days later in which Deng listened to a report by Ministry of Culture leaders, he cited both the criterion article and the “two whatevers,” making similar points to what he had told Wu Lengxi. One emphasis was on avoiding excesses associated with Wang Dongxing, e.g., charges of opposing Chairman Mao and placing “hats” on people arguing new views. See *Deng nianpu*, vol. 1, pp. 359-61.

²²⁶ Wu was one of the Party *xiuca*i assigned by Hua in October to prepare conference documents; interview with senior Party historian, October 2012. On the subsequent careers of the “whateverists,” see above, note 22.

whole tenor of the exchange, was a great relief to Hu, who said he felt that then he could afford to be bolder. As for Deng's general attitude toward Hu, his recent aloofness notwithstanding, he did reveal a Party secret to his junior colleague. The "secret" in question was that in March Deng's status had changed, as he was designated, along with Ye, as an assistant to Hua for overall Party work. In fact, this may not have been a significant alteration of the status quo, but symbolically it underscored Deng's authority within the inner circle. When Deng told this to a surprised Hu, he [Deng] indicated that the news was not to be spread. Whatever calculations might have been in Deng's mind, the act of informing Hu suggests confidence in their relationship.²²⁷

On the following day, Hu spoke at length to a *LLDT* group meeting at his home about this exchange with Deng. Hu described Deng as a leader fully on board with the criterion article, someone who provided "a [huge] endorsement and encouragement" for the criterion article and the Party School. Explaining his late awareness of the article and the related conflict, but not his delay from such an awareness to this discussion nearly a month after the *JFJB* essay, Deng only then enthused about the criterion argument as Marxist, observing that contention over the issue was unavoidable and

²²⁷ Based on accounts of the July 22 exchange and Hu's discussion with Party School theorists on July 23, in *Hu Yaobang sixiang nianpu*, vol. 1, pp. 203-205; Shen Baoxiang, *Zhenli biao zhun*, pp. 126-30; and *Deng nianpu*, vol. 1, pp. 345-46.

declaring that the root of opposition was the “two whatevers.” Hu described Deng's proposal of “comprehensive and accurate Mao Zedong Thought” as a rebuke of the “two whatevers” and not only did he align with support for the criterion argument but he also spoke very highly of the work of the *LLDT* group, stating that he always paid attention to their work. In short, Deng placed himself firmly in support of Hu Yaobang and the Party School, a stance viewed with some scepticism by the editors of Hu's *sixiang nianpu*.²²⁸ Despite his hesitancy, we do not doubt Deng's sincerity in backing the criterion argument. But it was a case of tactical efforts to gather support, whether from a conflicted propaganda chief, a conservative theoretician who bore responsibility for the blowup in May, or a major, if somewhat timid, leader in the push for progressive ideology. It did not indicate an unwavering commitment either to the position or to the individuals involved. The careers of alleged “whateverists” Wu Lengxi and Xiong Fu prospered, while Wu Jiang and Sun Changjiang were marginalized.²²⁹

²²⁸ The editors, who are close to Hu's family, have inserted critical notes into the text that recounts the meeting. In one, they question subsequent claims that Deng had organized the criterion article, emphasizing instead the role of the Party School under Hu. In another, they ask why, given Deng's positive statements about *LLDT*, these were not included in the *Deng nianpu* account of the meeting. More pointedly, they report the career declines of key figures in the writing of the May article. See *Hu Yaobang sixiang nianpu*, vol. 1, pp. 203-204.

²²⁹ See *ibid.*, p. 204; and above, note 22.

Although there is little evidence beyond the events in late July and August discussed above, that a very busy Deng had significantly engaged with ideological issues, the narrative about his critical support of the criterion argument and the struggle against the “two whatevers” is highlighted in his mid-September visit to the Northeast. Returning from a state visit to North Korea, Deng conducted an inspection tour of the region from September 13 to 17, speaking at various meetings that at the time he characterized as “lighting fires” (*dianle yibahuo*), which he would later claim were essentially ideological fires.²³⁰ He did, in fact, back the criterion argument and he did criticize the “two whatevers” on one known occasion—at a September 16 report meeting with Jilin provincial leaders. Four years later, a version of this talk appeared in Deng’s *Selected Works*, beginning with an attack on the “two whatevers” as falsely “holding high Mao’s banner” while actually debasing Mao Zedong Thought.²³¹ This account, which had been already spread as the accepted story of

²³⁰ On September 17, during his discussion with Li Desheng; *Deng nianpu*, vol. 1, p. 382. Deng also referred to two earlier cases of his “lighting fires,” in Guangzhou and Chengdu in November 1977 and February 1978, respectively; see *ibid.*, pp. 237-39, 261-62. But in neither case did those fires involve major ideological issues. In June 1981, Deng asserted that he had spent the entire time in the Northeast speaking of the ideological line and practice as the sole criterion of truth; Long Pingping, “Deng Xiaoping shi zhenli biao zhun wenti da taolun de fadongzhe yu lingdao zhe” [Deng Xiaoping Was the Initiator and Leader of the Big Discussion on the Criterion of Truth], *Beijing dangshi* [Beijing Party History], no. 3 (2008), cited in Torigian, “Prestige, Manipulation, and Coercion” (PhD diss.), p. 403

²³¹ *Selected Works of Deng (1975-1982)*, p. 141.

what happened, is at best exaggerated, at worst it distorts Deng's activities in the Northeast.

We have already discussed the misleading aspects of the official characterization of Deng's visit with regard to the military. Here we broaden the discussion with a focus on civilian issues. Fortunately, there are reasonably detailed accounts of Deng's statements during the visit in his *Nianpu*,²³² plus there is personal testimony by Li Li'an concerning his September 15 meeting in Heilongjiang. Throughout these meetings there was limited ideological content, apart from the general pragmatic approach of truth from facts, which was never a matter of leadership contention. Deng reviewed a range of issues, urging an open mind and with the overriding goal of promoting the Four Modernizations. An incisive observation, although by no means unique among the top leadership, is that the economic system was hobbled by its long adoption of Soviet methods, something that would have to be changed. Deeper engagement with foreign countries would be a priority. He presented himself as representing the Party Center rather than speaking individually and, despite his interest in economic modernization, he generally gave only vague answers. When questioned on specific matters, he avoided issuing directives and instead he referred to an economic delegation headed

²³² See *Deng nianpu*, vol. 1, pp. 373-83.

by Li Xiannian the previous month, advising his listeners to follow what Li had said. Regarding the meeting in Heilongjiang, Li Li'an could only recall that Deng had been concerned with many practical issues.²³³

What message, then, did Deng actually convey in Jilin on the following day? Here it is instructive to compare the 1982 *Selected Works* text with the *Deng nianpu* version published 22 years later.²³⁴ The *Selected Works* version, written shortly after Hua's removal and false characterization as an inveterate "whateverist," clearly sought to bolster Deng's credentials as the leading critic of the "two whatevers." The excerpt begins with an attack on the concept, similar in substance, although appearing later, in the *Nianpu* version, but here with the added claim that many people still supported the "two whatevers." The *Selected Works* text goes on to immediately tout the importance of truth from facts in the victory of the revolution, then addresses post-1949 problems with a mix of praise for Mao's theory of the three worlds and a call for policy adaptation to achieve Mao's Four

²³³ *Deng nianpu*, vol. 1, pp. 375-76; and interview with Li Li'an, July 1999.

²³⁴ See *Selected Works of Deng (1975-1982)*, pp. 141-44; and *Deng nianpu*, vol. 1, pp. 376-80. Apart from the difference in time of publication, a major distinction exists between the two types of collections concerning leaders. The *Selected Works* are oriented to using a leader's statements to convey the Party line of the moment, often with deliberate violation of the actual original statements. The *Nianpu*, on the other hand, while also subject to bureaucratic review and the Party line, are more concerned with presenting an accurate historical record.

Modernizations. Only in the last third of the text does Deng start to focus on some of the concerns typically addressed in his comments in meetings throughout the region. Interestingly, the criterion article, which by 1982 was no longer in official favor, is not mentioned. In the *Nianpu* version, Deng begins with truth from facts, immediately identifies the Four Modernizations as the critical objective, speaks on a number of significant current economic issues, including the great backwardness of Soviet-style management compared to that in capitalist countries, and then praises the criterion article as Marxist. More than halfway through the text, in reemphasizing truth from facts, a somewhat more restrained reference to the “two whatevers” appears. We can be confident that this reflects Deng’s feelings about the concept, but it by no means is an attempt to intensify ideological conflict. The “fires” Deng was igniting had more to do with pressing for truth from facts in conducting practical work than with waging a political struggle.

This interpretation is backed up by other developments during the period leading up to the work conference, none more so than Deng’s October 3 comment that the criterion debate could come to a close for a while. As noted, the available authoritative *Nianpu* version of his views on this occasion does not mention either the “two whatevers” or the criterion of truth. The nature and intent of Deng’s actions during his October 14 meeting with Wei Guoqing are more

uncertain. While the logic of the situation suggests a decision for the PLA to join the *biaotai* process despite Deng's statement on the 3rd, it was possibly a matter of going through with plans that had already been arranged by the GPD. Wei came to ask about the distribution of documents throughout the military, with apparently the proposal that Ye Jianying distribute the *GMRB* article throughout the country coming into the equation. Also at issue was whether Deng's remarks in the Northeast should be distributed, which he rather exaggeratedly regarded as his first systematic attack on the "two whatevers." Although the military *biaotai* continued, there was restraint in Deng's reaction. His statements in the Northeast were to be restricted to a small circle and handled cautiously. This is consistent with Deng's basic view that the criterion debate would continue, but it was to be downplayed in the run-up to the work conference and PLA officers were not to take up the argument at the work conference. Thus, Deng gave clear support to the criterion article, but the stronger emphasis in his remarks was on the essential need for truth from facts to solve problems, notably the Four Modernizations and revival of the traditional Party style.²³⁵

²³⁵ This interpretation of the October 14 meeting is based on *Deng nianpu*, vol. 1, pp. 401-402; and Yu Guangyuan, *Wo yi Deng Xiaoping* [Recalling Deng Xiaoping] (Hong Kong: Shidai guoji chuban youxian gongsi, 2005), cited in Torigian, "Prestige, Manipulation, and Coercion" (PhD diss.), pp. 404-405; and interview with senior Party historian, February 2013.

The overall picture is that as the work conference approached, Deng prioritized the basic agenda of shifting the focus of Party work to economic modernization over pursuing ideological trends such as the criterion of truth. This goes hand in hand with reducing conflict in pursuit of unity to support the shift. In the Northeast, Deng observed that the key theoretical issues facing the Party emerged from the two articles Wang Dongxing had attacked in May, one supporting *anlao fenpei* and the other the criterion of truth.²³⁶ He had been trying to build up backing for both views, but he increasingly came to emphasize the importance of not disrupting the work conference. As previously noted, in September Deng had urged CASS theorists to continue making the case for distribution according to work, but he also underscored the need for unity. Moreover, he specifically expressed the hope that the *anlao* debate would not “crop up at the central work conference.”²³⁷ As for the other cause of ideological disruption, in August or September Deng summoned a number of progressive theorists and expressed his sympathy for the criterion argument, but he called on them to pay attention to unity, hoping that both sides in the debate could reach a mutual understanding.²³⁸

²³⁶ Interview with senior Party historian, November 2009. Cf. *Deng nianpu*, vol. 1, pp. 359-60.

²³⁷ See above, note 190.

²³⁸ Interview with senior Party historian, February 2009.

As suggested earlier, this hope was naïve for the long term but perhaps realistic for the forthcoming meeting, barring the unanticipated events that unfolded.

In comparison, how did Hua deal with the ideological questions from July to the start of the work conference on November 10? In our view, the overall answer, in basic philosophical and, up to a point, political terms, is there is little difference between the two men. But in specific actions Deng supported the criterion of truth in a more overt way, even though that support was guarded. As for Hua, in the assessment of a close reader of the evidence, on the specific criterion issue, it is difficult to get a clear impression of his views, but there is no persuasive indication that he acted to suppress the debate.²³⁹ As we have suggested, some combination of Hua's discomfit with theoretical issues and his belief that having a genuine debate required that he avoid declaring a definitive position, left him in a relatively passive position. Yet Hua's fundamental position of seeking innovation, a true emancipation of thought, was quite similar to Deng's.

To further develop a theme we have been advancing, Hua, along with other top leaders, approached ideology in the context of other more important issues and this involved taking positions, in a

²³⁹ Han Gang, "Huanyuan Hua Guofeng."

loose theoretical sense, tied to economic development. This was clearly the case with Hua in the run-up to the work conference. During this period, particularly during the July-September State Council [economic] theory forum, Hua advanced his distinctive slogan for innovative thinking linked to the acceleration of economic growth: “liberate thought a bit more, be a bit more courageous, develop a bit more methods [to promote growth], pick up the pace a bit faster.”²⁴⁰ Three days after the start of the State Council conference, on July 9, Hua addressed the national finance and trade conference. His speech demonstrated the paradox of using Maoist language to move away from Mao’s policies. With the meeting convening under the slogan of learning from Daqing and Dazhai, Hua naturally spoke in positive terms, even though shortly beforehand he had criticized the “terrible” complacency of Daqing-style enterprises. In his speech, Hua called for “liberating thought,” looking to the outside world for managerial skills, and realizing that adhering to “objective economic laws” was essential, an approach sometimes not acknowledged by outside analysts. Concepts anathema to progressive theorists were distorted to support the new venture—“continuing the revolution under the

²⁴⁰ See Li Zhenghua, *Zhongguo gaige kaifang de yunniang yu qibu* [The Genesis of Reform and Opening in China], 2nd ed. (Beijing: Fangzhi chubanshe, 2007), ch. 13; and Frederick C. Teiwes and Warren Sun, “China’s New Economic Policy under Hua Guofeng: Party Consensus and Party Myths,” *The China Journal*, no. 66 (2011), pp. 12, 18-20.

dictatorship of the proletariat" now meant having the courage to expose ideological concepts not in harmony with the four modernizations, and "politics in command" was essential to raise the quality of economic management.²⁴¹

A broader indication of Hua's ideological tendencies came in a remarkable nine-hour meeting with Hu Yaobang on July 4, thus more than two weeks before Hu's breakthrough session with Deng. In this discussion, which deeply impressed Hu, Hua covered a wide range of topics in a manner broadly progressive but tempered by the requirements of leadership, and without taking a clear position on the criterion of truth article. The only concrete decision to come out of this meeting, although a very significant one, is Hua's directive on reversing the verdict on the "61 traitors"; the Organization Department was instructed, with the upcoming central work conference clearly in mind, to undertake a thorough review of the case and report to the Party Center.²⁴² But there was much more. In discussing the encounter with Party School staff two days and again five days later, Hu spoke of Hua as open-minded and having raised

²⁴¹ See *ibid.*

An example of misunderstanding the nature of Hua's position and the surrounding leadership politics is Gewirtz, *Unlikely Partners*, p. 37. Gewirtz cites Hu Qiaomu's July 28 speech promoting "objective economic laws" at the State Council theory forum as designed to undermine Hua in the ongoing power struggle with Deng. In fact, Hu was citing Hua as the authority for the concept.

²⁴² See *Hu Yaobang sixiang nianpu*, vol. 1, p. 195.

many important ideas. Overall, Hu reported that Hua advanced two broad themes: taking steps to accelerate national prosperity and the importance of stability and unity. Hu clearly was left with deep admiration of his leader's vision of a modernized China, and he later told many people he had been very impressed, inspired, and uplifted.²⁴³

As the length of the discussion suggests, it was a broad-ranging conversation. Hua covered many aspects of the economy, emphasized contacts with the outside world, and noted, among other topics, the need to tackle corruption and the importance of selecting young and middle-aged cadres for future roles. Hua's characteristic restraint was on display as he observed that past political campaigns had been strategically necessary and they were tactically very rough, while the more limited campaign against the followers of the "gang of four" was better than any movement since liberation. Moving closer to the current theoretical debate, Hua expressed views in tune with the criterion position. He criticized people who regarded backward things as advanced and who viewed rigid and conservative things as a firm proletarian stand, while they regarded new, vibrant

²⁴³ See *ibid.*, pp. 195-200; Han Gang, "Huanyuan Hua Guofeng"; and Xiao Donglian, "1979 nian guomin jingji tiaozheng fangzhen de tichu yu zhenglun: Da zhuanzhe jishi zhiyi" [The Proposal and Controversy of the National Economic Adjustment Policy in 1979—One Chronicle of the Great Transition], *Dangshi bolan*, no. 10 (2004), p. 4.

ideas as mistakes. Hua argued for an innovative continuing revolution, declaring that when many people “speak of continuous revolution, [in fact] it is continuous conservatism, continuous retreat, continuous rigidity.” Moreover, the young Chairman spoke out against the type of repressive atmosphere created in May, noting that, in some places, “you can only talk about achievements, and talking about shortcomings [earns the very big hat] of negating the ‘Cultural Revolution.’”²⁴⁴ Beyond that, Hua was even more pointed in warning against the type of negative response to the criterion article by Wang Dongxing and Wu Lengxi, arguing that ideological issues were a problem within the people, and a tendency existed of targeting individuals, claiming they wanted to chop down the banner.²⁴⁵

Yet Hua did not endorse the *GMRB* article on this occasion, and Hu Yaobang would later reflect that one could not say Hua supported the criterion argument but one could also not say he wanted to “suppress” it.²⁴⁶ Apart from Hua’s diffidence toward theory, his basic work style of hearing all points of view before making a decision and his belief that a position on his part would hinder genuine debate, the immediate circumstances can also be cited. In all likelihood, by the start of July Hua would only have heard informal comments from

²⁴⁴ See *Hu Yaobang sixiang nianpu*, vol. 1, p. 199.

²⁴⁵ Han Gang, “Huanyuan Hua Guofeng.”

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

colleagues about the conflict that had been brewing since May, with discussions in the Politburo or Standing Committee probably starting later that month.²⁴⁷ With his emphasis on unity, and a penchant for a collective leadership procedure, Hua would undoubtedly have been unwilling to express a view at this early point. Moreover, Hua had problems with progressives regarding going too far in their arguments, thus damaging unity and circumventing Party discipline in the media. Later, once attacks on Hua began, he was accused of naming Wu Jiang and other progressives in front of Hu Yaobang, a charge clearly designed to demonstrate major opposition to the criterion position. Assuming this did occur, the most likely occasion would have been on July 4, but the overall tenor of that meeting suggests an annoyed complaint rather than the politically aggressive action normally associated with "naming."²⁴⁸ In any case, a distinction was apparent from what Deng indicated two weeks later, when he started to make some explicit statements of support for practice as the sole criterion of truth and on a few occasions criticized the "two

²⁴⁷ According to Party historian Yan Ruping, "Ye shuai zai nijing zhong fuzhu Hu Yaobang," p. 3, Ye had spoken out against suppressing discussion at a July Politburo meeting.

²⁴⁸ See above, note 151. In addition, on the media, Wang Dongxing claimed he had spoken to Hua about the practice of using specially invited commentators to avoid Party control; Shen Baoxiang, *Zhenli biao zhun*, p. 118. On "naming" in front of Hu Yaobang, see "Zhenli biao zhun: Luo Ruiqing zhichi Hu Yaobang dui kang Maoban."

whatevers.” A significant difference, but one exaggerated in the accepted understanding of events.

By August, however, Hua had been drawn into a direct statement about the criterion of truth, although still not providing definitive backing for the argument. This was revealed by Hu Yaobang at the Party School on August 18, a day when he discussed both policy and theoretical matters with Hu Qiaomu, as previously discussed, and he addressed the School staff. In his talk to the staff, Hu Yaobang spoke of a recent exchange between Hua and Wang Renzhong, in which Wang had asked about the situation concerning the criterion article, with the Chairman replying that this was an important issue that it had to be clarified, and it was necessary to proceed from the desire for unity. Reflecting on developments at the time, Hu Deping, decades later, convincingly captured the Chairman’s perspective and actions: Hua believed that ideological differences existed in the Party, that divisions within the Party [in the past] had triggered struggles among different views, and that the criterion question was the current theoretical issue in which unity was essential, and he calmly dealt with the situation.²⁴⁹

Although Hua’s position was short of a formal endorsement, it should have encouraged Hu Yaobang, since practice as the criterion

²⁴⁹ Hu Deping, “Yaobang tongzhi zai ‘zhenli biao zhun’ (zhong); *Hu Yaobang sixiang nianpu*, vol. 1, p. 212; and Han Gang, “Huanyuan Hua Guofeng.”

of truth could only benefit from serious consideration, especially in view of the developing momentum in theoretical and broader elite circles. Yet, with some irony in view of his past and future positions, in his discussion with Hu Qiaomu on the same day, Hu Yaobang went further than Hua's theoretical designation of the problem, expressing an opinion similar to Zhou Yang's at the July CASS conference. Hu argued that the debate on the criterion position was not simply a matter restricted to theoretical circles but an issue for the Party and nation, a question of basic Marxist attitude and ideological method. Without the specifics, this was also Deng's view of the "Marxist" criterion article in his late June talk with Hu Yaobang.²⁵⁰ In terms of overall perspective at this time, and indeed through to the central work conference, Hua and Deng were heading in the same general direction, but Deng, even though his actual actions were limited, was framing the goal more aggressively. What eventuated at the work conference was not due to any fundamental differences between the two leaders.

In October, an event concerning the navy seemingly reflected, or perhaps not, differences in the concrete approaches of Hua and Deng. The issue at hand was an October 15 meeting in the navy Party committee, where Navy Political Commissar Su Zhenhua conveyed

²⁵⁰ See *Hu Yaobang sixiang nianpu*, vol. 1, pp. 202-203, 210.

Hua's six-point instructions on the truth criterion question. Based on a speech in December 1980, at a meeting designed to criticize Hua, his instructions reportedly declared the view of some that philosophical issues were also ideological and political issues was inappropriate, saying discussions should be lively, but no political hats should be used. Hua had also expressed a need to protect Mao. While Mao Zedong Thought and Marxism could not be a panacea, Mao Theory should be put first as a guide for revolutionary action. Moreover, although Mao should not be deified, his greatness should be affirmed—otherwise the Party would give the impression of denying the late Chairman. Hua had also expressed an ongoing leadership concern over lack of discipline in the media, particularly concerning *pingfan* issues, urging newspapers to say less, choose examples that could not be used by the enemy, and publish more items about economic construction. Finally, Hua's instructions foreshadowed the shift in focus, indicating criticism [of the "gang of four"] was coming to an end and people should transition to "normal work."²⁵¹ The disparity was Hua's continuing insistence on philosophical/theoretical questions rather than on the ideological and political questions that

²⁵¹ Speech by Lu Rencan, in *Zhongzhi jiguan taolun lishi jueyi (cao'an) jianbao* [Bulletin of Political Organ Discussions on the Historical Resolution (draft)], item 171 (November 1, 1980), internal Party document made available to the authors. This account of Hua's directives is plausible, despite the context of the meetings criticizing Hua.

were indicated in Deng's statements. Yet in terms of avoiding hats, and more broadly concerning pushing the ideological issue, where Deng had already called for pausing on October 3, there was little difference, as was the case with a protective albeit nuanced defense of Mao. Above all, both leaders were concerned with avoiding disruptions at the work conference.²⁵²

This basically set the stage for the conference. Regarding basic ideological direction, Hua and Deng both emphasized truth from facts, but restrained differences on how to handle the criterion article did not produce obvious tension.²⁵³ Again, this was a lower priority for both leaders, with bolstering the economy together with handling important foreign affairs issues, notably Sino-U.S. normalization,

²⁵² Other significant developments occurred at a petition conference in October, notably Zhang Yaoci's speech on the October 3 attacking Hu Yaobang. The focus was on *pingfan* issues, but Zhang also criticized the criterion of truth article. See *Hu Yaobang sixiang nianpu*, vol. 1, p. 228; and Chen Yeping's speech in *Zhongzhi jiguan taolun lishi jueyi (caogao) jianbao* (November 13, 1980).

²⁵³ The basic issue for both Hua and Deng was truth from facts; Beijing First Secretary Lin Hujia declared at the start of the work conference that Hua had many times emphasized the concept; "Lin Hujia tongzhi zai shiwei kuoda huiyishang de zongjie jianghua" [Comrade Lin Hujia's Concluding Speech at the Expanded Meeting of the Municipal Committee] (November 11, 1978), internal Party document made available to the authors, p. 13. The criterion issue was more complicated, as it involved a major argument in theoretical circles and the problem of maintaining unity. This was awkward for Hua, but we do not believe he was under much pressure before the work conference. We acknowledge claims that Ye Jianying "on many occasions" urged Hua to pay more attention to the debate, but we believe this would only have become a significant factor once the issue intensified at the work conference. See Yan Ruping, "Ye shuai zai nijing zhong fuzhu Hu Yaobang."

completing the Japanese peace treaty, and the escalating tensions with Vietnam²⁵⁴ by far the key concerns. Meanwhile, although there was no intention at the top to focus on ideological contention, on the eve of the work conference, the practice position had won a *de facto* victory among the broader elite, but theoretical conclusions and any possible official endorsement were meant to wait for the scheduled theoretical conference in early 1979. At the work conference, however, another partially accidental development brought the argument over the criterion of truth to a head and created an unanticipated threat to Hua's position.

From the 1978 Work Conference to the Four Cardinal Principles: The Consequences of Liberated Thought

As demonstrated in the preceding discussion, the highest leadership, and indeed the higher elite more broadly, did not enter the work conference expecting or intending to give priority to ideological issues. The set agenda was completely economic, and the overall theme of the shift in focus was not only toward the economy but also away from (at least a certain type) of ideological conflict. At the

²⁵⁴ Deng's foreign visits tell the tale. In October-early November, he was overseas for 18 days, from October 22 to 29 in Japan and from November 5 to 14 in Southeast Asia.

outset, progressive theorists, perhaps reflecting a combination of restraint due to the agenda, satisfaction with the theoretical debate since June, and the urging, particularly by Deng, to avoid stirring up developments at the conference, essentially accepted Deng's advice. The "losers" of the theoretical debate had even less reason to pursue contentious ideological issues. When Hua opened the conference by asking participants to take a few days in group meetings to address issues raised by the shift in focus,²⁵⁵ the energized discussions that followed did not mention the "two whatevers," and the criterion of truth did not produce significant debate. It was the reversal of verdicts, always much more important for the larger elite, that dramatically came to the fore.

This is not to say that there was no support for the criterion of truth during these early group sessions. What was missing, though, was sharp conflict. According to whom we consider the most authoritative Party history scholar on the conference and the Third Plenum, many participants spoke on the issue, but there was no controversy.²⁵⁶ An even more telling indication of the relative

²⁵⁵ See Yu Guangyuan, *Deng Shakes the World*, pp. 23-29, for a somewhat jaundiced view of Hua's November 10 speech, but one that left the participants, including himself, "fairly satisfied." In contrast, Hu Deping has emphasized Hua's democratic spirit and style when he urged everyone to speak out and brainstorm; "Yaobang tongzhi zai 'zhenli biao zhun' (zhong)."

²⁵⁶ Han Gang, "Quanli de zhuanyi." A somewhat similar view but different view came from Zhu Jiamu, a secretary to Hu Qiaomu and later Chen Yun. Zhu also did

insignificance of the theoretical conflict came nearly two weeks into the conference when the Standing Committee met with leaders of the regional groups to discuss major issues.²⁵⁷ All of the Standing Committee members spoke, covering a variety of issues, including agriculture, the economy, decentralization, and the integration of government and society. Crucially, past leadership issues, characterized by Deng as “the problem everybody has raised,” focused on the *pingfan* of key leaders, dead or living, and how to handle current leaders Chen Xilian, Wu De, and Ji Dengkui, who were under suspicion for their activities during the Cultural Revolution. Throughout the discussion, however, there is no recorded mention of the criterion of truth or any other ideological issue. This was further indicated the following day, when Hu Yaobang told the *LLDT* group at the Party School that Hua was not prepared to speak about the criterion of truth at the conference given his belief that theoretical and ideological issues should not be forced and the tone cannot be too high.²⁵⁸ While this clearly had been Hua’s position all along and

not regard the criterion as a major issue during the first stage of the work conference, reporting even less attention to “not many” speaking on the question, although some who did reportedly link it to the “two whatevers” issue. Zhu Jiamu, *Wo suo zhidao de shiyijie sanzong quanhui*, pp. 75-76.

²⁵⁷ The following is based on notes by Yu Guangyuan who attended the meeting, made available to the authors by a senior Party historian. The notes do not specify a date, but, on the basis of their content, it would have been on November 21 when such a meeting was held. Cf. *Deng nianpu*, vol. 1, p. 433.

²⁵⁸ See the entry for November 22 in *Hu Yaobang sixiang nianpu*, vol. 1, p. 246.

would create a problem for him as events unfolded, the available evidence about the Standing Committee members' responses indicates no one else would dwell on the criterion issue. The overall emphasis, particularly evident in Deng's remarks, was stability and unity.²⁵⁹

There is more than a little irony in what unfolded next. We do not have sufficient information to characterize with absolute certainty the roles of Hua and Deng in the Party Center's discussions leading to the reversal of the major unjust cases, announced by Hua on November 25.²⁶⁰ But our conclusion is that Hua and Deng were in fundamental agreement that the situation within the higher elite required such decisions, although caution was necessary in the *pingfan* process going forward and Mao's reputation had to be protected to the extent possible. In any case, contrary to the view that the reversals were a victory by Deng over Hua in their alleged power struggle, in the entire reversal of verdicts process Hua was the most proactive member of the Standing Committee whereas Deng had

²⁵⁹ Based on Yu Guangyuan's notes. While these notes are sketchy, given Yu's overall highly approving view of both Deng at the work conference and the criterion article (see *Deng Shakes the World*, pp. 15-18), we find it highly unlikely that he would not have recorded any positive remarks by Deng at the time.

²⁶⁰ With rare exceptions (see above, note 48), developments within the top leadership during the conference are opaque. Yu Guangyuan, when presenting views in this respect, notes they were "my analysis"; he further reports that when the Standing Committee met with the group conveners, the positions of the leaders were complementary. Yu Guangyuan, *Deng Shakes the World*, pp. 18, 197.

largely distanced himself from the issue. Moreover, the most sensitive issue, the 1976 Tiananmen incident, was shepherded through various stages by Hua, who played the decisive role in the full reversal of the verdict at the start of the work conference during the period when Deng was still abroad. And we should not forget Hu Yaobang's excited admiration for Hua on the evening of the 25th for having broken through the dyke, thus opening the way for a new historical trend.²⁶¹ Yet that same evening, developments began to unfold that would create a major problem for the young Chairman. What happened?

Two interrelated factors were involved. One was the decision by some progressive Party figures, not necessarily theorists, to take an unprecedented step of criticizing a Party vice chairman—Wang Dongxing. This involved discontent on the *pingfan*, ideological, and other fronts. It reflected the oft-observed opinion of participants and Party historians that Wang, not Hua, was the culprit in the mistakes by the Center and the target of the progressives at this stage, although there was tepidness in the views of some of them toward Hua.²⁶² The

²⁶¹ See Teiwes and Sun, "Hua Guofeng, Deng Xiaoping, and Reversing the Verdict on the 1976 'Tiananmen Incident,'" p. 115 and *passim*.

²⁶² Yu Guangyuan is a clear case, as reflected in his account of the work conference and plenum. While in many respects fair to Hua, the tone of his recollections is often grudging, and the contrast with Deng, pictured by Yu as "the soul of the conference," is striking. Yu also refused to believe that the "two

second factor more directly focused on the criterion of truth. Once the various issues involving Wang and others emerged beginning on the 26th, the attempt by theorist Hu Sheng on the 27th to defend the orthodox view on the criterion led to outrage, arguably forcing a decision that might otherwise have been left to the theory conference.

Notwithstanding some very positive recollections about Hua's performance earlier in the day,²⁶³ in the evening of the 25th Yu Guangyuan went to Minister of Public Health Jiang Yizhen's room to discuss the day's events. Paradoxically, while Yu and Jiang were encouraged by Hua's promotion of free discussion and the measures taken to reverse the verdicts on major historical cases, there was disappointment that Hua did not address the "two whatevers" or the criterion of truth in his formal remarks. Yu also noted the positive comments about the criterion by both Hua and Deng during the Standing Committee meeting with Beijing Municipal Committee and Communist Youth League leaders after Hua's speech on the 25th,

whatevers" could not have been anything other than an attempt to prevent Deng's return to work. *Ibid.*, pp. 166-67; and interview with Yu, July 1997.

²⁶³ Yu declares that Hua deserved praise for urging participants to speak out, noting that "I had seen almost no top Party leader who could solicit others' opinions in such a way, and I had seen no problem solved so thoroughly and explicitly." Yu Guangyuan, *Deng Shakes the World*, pp. 74-75. See also Yu Guangyuan, "Shiyijie sanzong quanhui qian de zhongyang gongzuo huiyi zhuiji" [Accounts from Memory of the Central Work Conference Before the Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee], in idem *et al.*, *Gaibian Zhongguo mingyuan de 41 tian*, pp. 107, 148, 154.

perhaps accurately giving more weight to Deng's remarks, but neither leader went beyond solving specific problems in accord with the criterion principle nor was there any clear difference between them. The issue Yu and Jiang discussed is whether or not to criticize by name Wang Dongxing, who had not been mentioned earlier by the work conference participants, despite their dissatisfaction with him. While acknowledging Wang's role in the demise of the "gang of four," they found his stance toward reversing wrong verdicts "utterly wrong" and "very bad." But their central complaint focused on Wang's behavior as overlord of propaganda, "clinging to the wording of the 'two whatevers' and resisting [discussion of] the criterion for testing truth." In this, the key fault was that Wang was hindering a reevaluation of the Tiananmen incident and the return of Deng to power. Yu and Jiang concluded that if they did not mention Wang by name, "many problems could not be explained clearly and resolved thoroughly."²⁶⁴

Yu Guangyuan and Jiang Yizhen knew that openly criticizing a Party vice chairman at a major meeting was a sensitive matter, without any known precedent in Party history. They considered asking the leadership for approval, but they felt it would be awkward for the

²⁶⁴ Yu Guangyuan, *Deng Shakes the World*, pp. 80ff; idem, *Wo qinli de naci lishi zhuanzhe*, p. 104; and idem, Yu Guangyuan, "Shiyijie sanzong quanwei qian de zhongyang gongzuo huiyi zhuiji," p. 121.

leaders to take responsibility, and so they decided to act immediately on their own. The next day, during the morning session of the Northwest group, Jiang spoke. Beginning with a statement about a favorable impression of Wang on the Long March and in Yan'an, as well as working with him subsequently, Jiang then raised a number of issues, including Wang's attitude toward Deng in a late 1976 speech and his obstruction of his [Jiang's] efforts to redress the wrong cases in the Ministry of Health. Following Jiang's speech, *GMRB* editor Yang Xiguang and Yu Guangyuan presented a joint paper to the same group, but it was tougher and more focused on the central issues of the "two whatevers" impeding Deng's return to work and obstructing discussion of the criterion of truth. Yang, having been directly involved in the criterion controversy, provided details of Wang's actions that aroused the interest of participants who had no previous knowledge. These two speeches were reported accurately in the conference bulletins regardless of their criticism of a high Party leader and with a speed suggesting instructions were not sought from those responsible for the bulletins. Yu followed the bulletins closely, noting that while other groups did not immediately respond, speeches echoing their views slowly began to appear. The most notable speech that Yu can recall came two days later by Hu Jiwei. In a long speech to the Southwest group, Hu made many references to Wang, with specific issues raised in concentrated and forceful criticism. Later

criticism appeared in all groups, with many veteran comrades offering revelations and sharp criticism. Yu observes that during the conference, no one was accused of openly criticizing a vice chairman, thus demonstrating that democracy was fully practiced at the conference. He does not, however, make the connection to Hua's role in creating the atmosphere.²⁶⁵

With Wang Dongxing criticized by name, conference participants felt freer to address the not yet fully resolved criterion issue. Now members of the alleged "two whatevers *pai*" came under attack. These conservative theoreticians had basically been silent at the conference before November 25, as Yu argues they were still unsure of the position of the Party Center but perhaps more reflecting an awareness of the weakness of their general situation among the elite. Now these people came out one by one to state their views. Some gave oral statements, others delivered written speeches, but their reactions were defensive. Li Xin spoke on the criterion issue abstractly, with the weak excuse that his political awareness was not high. Wu Lengxi tried to defend himself by arguing that Hu Jiwei had misunderstood his views during the famous May phone call when Wu criticized *RMRB* for reprinting the criterion article. Xiong Fu's attempts in the Southwest group to defend his

²⁶⁵ See Yu Guangyuan, *Deng Shakes the World*, pp. 81-83, 102-103.

opposition to discussing the article were countered by Hu Jiwei, who produced written materials to expose Xiong Fu's dishonesty. None of these efforts were well received, with audience reactions often veering away from ideological issues to personal questions, as, for example, Li Xin's historical relationship to Kang Sheng. Ironically, it was the most unlikely member of the "two whatevers *pai*" who set off a wave of speeches that were decisive in settling the criterion of truth issue.²⁶⁶

Hu Sheng was essentially a conservative theoretician, a scholar and long-time Party "pen" noted for being cautious in word and deed. Like the other leading figures of the so-called "two whatevers *pai*," he had been a top figure in Deng's State Council Political Research Office in 1975, and in 1976 he had apparently done his best to distance himself from the anti-Deng campaign. In 1977-78, Hu Sheng's primary responsibilities were as deputy director of the office responsible for editing and publishing Mao's works, an organization that came to be regarded as a key part of the "whateverist" camp. In fact, however, Hu had no role in the drafting of the February 1977 "two whatevers" editorial. Moreover, there is no material indicating that he opposed discussion of the criterion article once the debate began. More strikingly, after his November 27 speech that led to an

²⁶⁶ See *ibid.*, pp. 97-100, 102-104.

outpouring of attacks on him and the orthodox position, he soon was involved in drafting the concluding conference speech by Ye Jianying, arguably the most fundamentally liberal member of the Standing Committee. And, as we have noted, Hu's career would prosper in the Deng era, unlike the careers of the leading progressives who had written the criterion article.²⁶⁷

Hu Sheng's speech in the Northeast group on the 27th produced arguably the strongest reaction to any individual statement during the work conference, something portrayed as "a single stone igniting a thousand waves."²⁶⁸ Hu's basic problem, in contrast to the obfuscating defense of their actions by the other conservative *xiucais*, was that he actually addressed the issue and sought to refute the criterion position at a juncture when overwhelming sentiment supported the practice argument and when the verdict reversals of the 25th had emboldened willingness to push for further demands. Although acknowledging the articles in newspapers and the speeches by local and military region leaders, Hu argued that some people had exaggerated the differences over the criterion of truth. They

²⁶⁷ Han Gang, "Quanli de zhuan yi"; and above, note 40.

²⁶⁸ Similar claims were made concerning Chen Yun's November 12 group meeting speech in which he proposed reversal of the major wrong verdicts. But the evidence indicates that Hu Sheng's speech produced a much more intense response, with a senior Party historian with extensive knowledge of the work conference dismissing claims regarding any intensity of the reaction to Chen's speech as "rubbish"; interview, October 2012.

assertedly had used outdated stereotypes and they were rash in making such statements. While not attributing his central objection to anyone in particular, Hu cited the opinion that the criterion debate was more than a simple theoretical dispute. In fact, it was a question of ideological and political line that was crucial to the destiny and fate of the Party and nation. This, of course, was precisely the position taken by Zhou Yang during the CASS conference in July, one that had excited the meeting and had had a major influence in building support for the criterion of truth in national elite circles. Raising it now resulted in quick sharp rebukes in all six regional groups, which also spilled over to other orthodox theorists and intensified criticism of the “two whatevers *pai*,” going back to the February 1977 editorial.²⁶⁹

In the incisive analysis of leading Party historian Han Gang, Hu Sheng, like other conservative theorists, was worried that expansion of the criterion debate would affect Mao’s prestige and lead to political instability. But what he did not understand was that the issue could not be limited to theory, as in essence it had become a political controversy.²⁷⁰ The paradox, of course, is that concern for Mao’s reputation and stability were very much at the forefront of the minds of both Hua and Deng. On the afternoon of the 25th, while listening to

²⁶⁹ Han Gang, “Quanli de zhuanyi.”

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

reports by the Beijing Municipal Committee and the Communist Youth League Central Committee, both leaders had referred positively to the criterion position, but neither had indicated a desire to officially endorse the argument before the following year's theory conference. For Hua, this was essentially the position he had held before the work conference, although perhaps even this was a place he had not intended to go on the eve of the conference.²⁷¹ In any case, even before Hu Sheng spoke on the 27th, it appears other high-ranking figures felt more was needed. Claims that Ye Jianying had repeatedly urged Hua to take a more proactive approach to the issue become particularly plausible at this juncture.²⁷² More precisely, on the 26th, Hu Qiaomu, noting that Hua had not fully addressed the matter, reportedly expressed the view that the issue had indeed become a political question that needed to be settled quickly, a striking reversal of his June appeal to Hu Yaobang to shut down the debate.²⁷³ Whatever the shifting views among the higher elite, the explosion on

²⁷¹ According to Party historian Li Xiangqian, in early November Hua discussed his opening work conference speech with Li Xin, Wu Lengxi, and others [including Hu Sheng—the authors], instructing that the speech should focus on shifting the focus of work. When the drafters asked whether the speech should mention the criterion debate, Hua reportedly replied “don’t touch it.” Li Xiangqian, “Deng Xiaoping yu shiyijie sanzong quanhui” [Deng Xiaoping and the Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee], in Yu Guangyuan *et al.*, *Gaibian Zhongguo mingyuan de 41 tian*, p. 11.

²⁷² See above, note 253.

²⁷³ See above, note 161.

the 27th produced sharp comments on the criterion of truth that the regional group convenors reported to the Standing Committee. On the same day, the Northwest group began to propose substantial changes in the Party's central bodies, providing another challenge to the top leaders.²⁷⁴

Rather than a power struggle, the remainder of the work conference saw the leadership attempting to control developments after November 15, granting some major demands of the conference participants while toning down the overall content, with particular attention to upholding Mao's status in Party history. We leave the full story of this multifaceted process and its political implications for further analysis. Here we focus on the theoretical/ideological aspects of the story. From the start, the emphasis on protecting Mao was clear; throughout the work conference there were not many references to Mao, the tone was not assertive, and it was largely limited to asking what the Chairman knew.²⁷⁵ No voice was more prominent in sustaining this view than Deng's. When addressing Beijing Municipal and Communist Youth League leaders on the afternoon of the 25th, although speaking positively of the criterion

²⁷⁴ Yu Guangyuan, *Wo qinli de naci lishi zhuanzhe*, p. 162; and Yu Guangyuan's notes about the November 27 meeting of the six groups reporting to the Standing Committee. Made available to the authors.

²⁷⁵ Interview with senior Party historian with detailed knowledge of the conference, October 2012.

position, Deng, in emphasizing comprehensively and accurately understanding Mao Zedong Thought and "holding high Mao's banner," claimed that Mao had already proposed correcting the mistakes of the Cultural Revolution, and, if alive, he would have solved the remaining problems. In the current situation, Deng warned against mentioning unfavorable things about the Chairman.²⁷⁶ As we shall see, this emphasis continued until the end of the work conference, including in his celebrated concluding speech, "Emancipate the Mind."

During this period, as the leadership coped with various challenges, delegates pushed for both affirmation of the criterion of truth and retribution against the "two whatevers," including punishment or transfer of those leaders who stubbornly adhered to the position. Although nuanced, several prominent figures came forward to support the criterion position but in a nuanced way. Wan Li, who had been dismissive of the *biaotai* process, now declared the criterion debate, together with the "two whatevers," was a serious political struggle within the Party over how to realize the Four Modernizations. Marshal Xu Xiangqian argued that the practice standard was fundamental Marxism, and if this were not clear there would be great damage to work, which in turn would influence what

²⁷⁶ Yu Guangyuan, *Wo qinli de naci lishi zhuanzhe*, pp. 102-103.

line was carried out.²⁷⁷ Notwithstanding Wan Li's references to the "two whatevers" and political struggle, both Wan and Xu pointed to the impact on practical work. An even more significant voice was that of Zhao Ziyang.

In supporting practice as the criterion for testing truth, while also arguing it was a practical issue Zhao took the matter further. In a measured argument, he called for solving problems and stabilizing the situation: "It is necessary to correct mistakes and maintain the banner; the two aspects are consistent and cannot be opposed [to each other]." Zhao also addressed the "two whatevers" without naming them, criticizing the resultant stultifying atmosphere rather than treating it as an ongoing political struggle. To emancipate minds and solve problems, he argued, it was necessary to draw on years of practical testing, rather than first checking what Mao had said or instructed; all of this, he indicated, was necessary for restoring "the many good things" of the pre-Cultural Revolution era. Moreover, as seen in his December 7 statement cited at the head of this paper, Zhao regarded the intense criticism of the "two whatevers" at the work conference as overdone, a misunderstanding of both what happened in early 1977 and what followed. After all, he observed,

²⁷⁷ Wang Weiqun, "Gaibian lishi de 36 tian" [36 Days that Changed History], in *Zhongguo qingnianbao* [China Youth Daily], October 15, 2008. Wan had already endorsed the criterion argument shortly before the work conference; see above, note 204.

“Chairman Hua [and] Vice Chairman Deng proposed the comprehensive and accurate understanding of Mao Zedong Thought, [which] drew a line, meaning [the “two whatevers”] issue is already resolved.”²⁷⁸ In this, Zhao, then an alternate Politburo member, reflected the toned-down efforts by the Party Center. Yet in the circumstances of the moment, the “two whatevers” and the criterion issue would play out in related but different ways.

Fully understanding the process of the Party Center moving toward resolving, or dealing with, the key ideological issues at the work conference and plenum is difficult. Subsequent official records and accounts suffer from the Deng-centric bias of the later period, knowledge and recollections by participants are partial and involved significant differences, and records on the spot, notably the valuable notes by Yu Guangyuan, are sketchy and sometimes undated. Nevertheless, we believe a broadly accurate picture can be constructed of the key factors and important developments at the conference. In doing so, we necessarily focus on Deng and Hua.

When the Standing Committee heard the reports from the convenors of the regional groups on the 27th, the convenors expressed grievances about how the leading organs had handled the criterion debate, criticizing specific organs and individuals. In Yu

²⁷⁸ Zhao Ziyang’s speeches in the Southwest group at the work conference, *Dang de wenxian* [The Party’s Documents], no. 6 (1988); and above, note 1.

Guangyuan's rough notes, Hua is described as very passive. More interesting is the account of Deng's remarks. Here there is no indication of a strong endorsement of the practice position. Instead, much in the vein of his comments two days earlier, Deng is quoted as strongly defending Mao: "[his] great feats are indelible; without Chairman Mao there would be no new China." Responding to a question on whether the issue of the "two whatevers" in the Party was resolved, Deng declared it was better to talk about the issue within the Party, and he went on to mention, as he had on the 25th, that foreigners were asking if Mao would be treated in the same way that Khrushchev had treated with Stalin.

Several things are at issue in Deng's remarks. One is his awareness that, as Wang Dongxing had crudely claimed, pressing too strongly on ideological issues could pose problems for the late Chairman's reputation, while indications of differences over the criterion article could result in attention to possible inner-Party conflict, both domestically and internationally. Indeed, earlier on the 27th, Deng met with American journalist Robert Novak and fended off questions about the Chairman, correcting recent mistakes. He told Novak some people had the wrong idea that the criterion discussion was aimed at Mao and that such a discussion was a good thing in getting away from the monotonous newspaper articles of the past although still avoiding a strong affirmation of the original *GMRB*

article. Tellingly, Deng refuted the view of “some people,” based on simplification based on past events, that this meant there was a “power struggle” within the Party.²⁷⁹ Throughout the period of the work conference, the emphasis was on the importance of stability. This was manifested domestically in the efforts to affirm Mao’s greatness and deny that the criterion debate had any anti-Mao intent. Taking on the “two whatevers” was trickier, given that Mao’s Cultural Revolution activities were directly at issue, not to mention that the concept had been eliminated from public discourse since spring 1977. Regarding the international scene, any hint of division, and thus of a power struggle, was anathema. Foreigners were eager to invest in China but they could become hesitant if an unstable environment was perceived. As Deng put it to a group of provincial leaders on the evening of the 27th, “many foreigners do business with us, and we also look at the overall situation.”²⁸⁰ And, of course, the work conference overlapped with movement toward the endgame in Sino-

²⁷⁹ *Deng nianpu*, vol. 1, pp. 437-39; Robert D. Novak, *The Prince of Darkness: 50 Years Reporting in Washington* (New York: Crown Forum, 2007), pp. 329-31; and interview with Novak, June 2008.

²⁸⁰ Deng also observed, during a December 1 Standing Committee meeting with some military region commanders and provincial first secretaries, that “foreigners are not interested in other things, mainly because of China’s stability.” *Deng nianpu*, vol. 1, pp. 441, 445.

U.S. normalization. Possibly scaring off the Americans was not in the Party's interests.²⁸¹

By the start of December, the formal verdict affirming the criterion of truth, as well as reproaching those held responsible for obstructing it, was well underway. On the 3rd, three days after an abject explanation of his failures by Zhang Pinghua in a group meeting, Deng wrote to staff in the propaganda apparatus, noting that Zhang had been very ineffective in his work and calling for changes in the Propaganda Department.²⁸² Starting from December 2, Deng ordered a major revision of his speech for the closing session of the work conference. In his directions to the drafters, Deng spoke very positively about the criterion position, and it became a significant part of the overarching theme of "emancipating our minds and using our heads," providing a full endorsement of Zhou Yang's view of a debate about the ideological line, politics, and destiny of the

²⁸¹ See Zhu Jiamu, *Wo zhidaode shiyijie sanzong quanhui*, pp. 57-58. In the account of the December 1st meeting, Deng directly addressed establishing diplomatic relations with the U.S., warning against giving any impression of a power struggle at this delicate time.

²⁸² *Deng nianpu*, vol. 1, pp. 446-47. In his explanation on November 30, Zhang cited two reasons for failing to speak out on the criterion issue. First, a low theoretical level and lack of courage to seek truth from facts and, second, an unfamiliarity with central government processes, thus leaving him passive in the absence of a central document. See Shen Baoxiang, *Zhenli biao zhun*, pp.291-292.

Party and nation.²⁸³ The concluding speeches on the 13th by Ye and Hua also affirmed the argument in various ways, and it was formally endorsed in the communiqué of the Third Plenum.

The “two whatevers” was a different matter. When instructing the drafters on the content of his revised concluding speech, Deng specifically told Hu Yaobang and Yu Guangyuan not to mention the “whatevers.”²⁸⁴ In the event, his earlier comment on keeping the issue within the Party translated into abjuring a formal decision. Hua’s self-criticism concerning the “two whatevers” in his concluding speech was not made known beyond significant elite actors.²⁸⁵ Moreover, despite the definitive rebuke of the “whatevers” at the work conference, there was no reference to the issue in the Third Plenum communiqué.

Of course, there were significant differences between the criterion of truth and the “two whatevers.” The criterion debate had

²⁸³ See Yu Guangyuan, *Deng Shakes the World*, pp. 130-44; Li Xiangqian and Han Gang, “Xinjin faxian Deng Xiaoping yu Hu Yaobang deng sanci tanhua jilu” [Newly Discovered Records of Three Conversations between Deng Xiaoping and Hu Yaobang], *BNC*, December 2008, at <http://history.dwnnews.com/news/2017-01-30/59797148.html>, January 30, 2017; and *Selected Works of Deng (1975-1982)*, p. 154.

²⁸⁴ Yu Guangyuan, *Deng Shakes the World*, p. 195.

²⁸⁵ In his closing speech, Hua directed that work conference participants who would not attend the plenum could take the three leaders’ speeches and other documents back to their central, provincial, and military region Party organs to convey the spirit of the conference, but these were to be handled cautiously and regarded as Party secrets. Hua, “Zai zhongyang gongzuo huiyi bimu huishang de jianghua” (December 13, 1978).

been visible to interested audiences since May, and increasingly so since June. Hua's position had been unclear although by no means hostile, but the position of the Standing Committee as a whole was elusive. In this regard, perceptions of Hua as lagging behind Deng created some vulnerability, but no real danger. What was required was an explanation of the Party Center's position as well as affirmation of the practice argument. The "two whatevers," however, that came on his watch as part of a strategy to handle the difficult early post-Mao situation, was deeply misunderstood at the time, and suspicions remained in various circles. As would become clear, in other situations the matter could and would be weaponized against Hua. This was not the time, however. The issue had been erased from the broader public narrative; bringing it to national attention would have caused confusion. Even emphasizing it within the work conference would have resulted in perceptions of a power struggle that Deng abhorred. In explaining Deng's ruling out of a reference to the "two whatevers," Yu Guangyuan attributes the decision to "his spirit of generosity and concern for unity." Generosity or not, it fits perfectly with Deng's late addition to his speech, "stability and unity are of prime importance."²⁸⁶ An insight into Hua's thinking has been

²⁸⁶ See Yu Guangyuan, *Deng Shakes the World*, pp. 142, 195. Moreover, on the evidence of the events, recollections by participants, and analyses by Party historians, the target of the conference attacks was Wang Dongxing, not Hua.

provided by his son. In this account, Deng approached his father [Hua Guofeng] and said, "Comrade Guofeng, criticizing [the "two whatevers"] is not criticizing you, the spearhead is not against you." Deng went on to attack Wang and Li Xin as bad people who had generated great resentment. Hua replied, "You say it is not against me; that it was drafted by someone else. But the "two whatevers" was written into my speech [to the March 1977 work conference], and I should take responsibility."²⁸⁷

This is precisely what Hua did in his December 13 closing address. While reviewing developments at the work conference and making particular note of the full play of democracy and the participants speaking their minds, Hua declared the main focus of his talk would be the "two whatevers" and practice as the sole criterion of truth. On the criterion issue, Hua offered a credible descriptive account of the events: just back from North Korea in May, he had been busy with urgent tasks and was not well informed; he only learned of the conflict over the *GMRB* article from other Standing Committee members during the following two months. When the committee met, it considered the topic of the article to be good, but it did not specifically study the issue. Subsequently, with the debate intensifying, Marshal Ye proposed, and the Standing Committee

²⁸⁷ Interview, July 2010.

unanimously agreed, that comrades in theoretical circles should be called together for a retreat to be conducted on the basis of full democratic discussion. But this forum had to be put off due to pressure from other work. Although explaining his own actions, this was not a self-criticism. Now, reflecting on developments since the 25th, Hua praised the discussion of the criterion position as very good, but he issued a warning about going too far. In words reminiscent of Deng's repeated concerns, Hua called for attention to what is appropriate and to the consequences. Specifically, some things about Mao should not be mentioned, and newspapers must avoid taking a step in which truth becomes fallacy. This, Hua concluded, was the opinion of the Party Center.²⁸⁸ It is, however, fair to say that Deng's positive remarks about the criterion most likely were notably stronger than Hua's, with Hu Deping declaring that the victory of the argument was vividly illustrated in Deng's speech.²⁸⁹

In contrast, Hua's discussion of the "two whatevers" was an explicit self-criticism. Hua accurately described the circumstances of and intention behind the concept. In the complicated situation following the arrest of the "gang of four," he observed it was

²⁸⁸ Hua Guofeng, "Zai zhongyang gongzuo huiyi bimu huishang de jianghua" (December 13, 1978).

²⁸⁹ Hu Deping, "Yaobang tongzhi zai 'zhenli biao zhun' (xia)." The issue is somewhat complicated by the unavailability of the original version of Deng's speech; see below, note 300. Moreover, a senior Party historian has questioned the reliability of Yu Guangyuan's account of the speech; interview, October 2007.

necessary to resolutely defend Mao's great banner, to strictly separate Mao from the "gang," and to mobilize the masses to expose the "gang" while not damaging the late Chairman's image. Hua noted both versions of the "two whatevers" couplet in his March 14 speech to the 1977 work conference and in the earlier February 7 editorial. In the March speech, the second part of the couplet, "whatever words and deeds that damage Chairman Mao's must be stopped," directly addressed the objective of protecting Mao's image, although Hua conceded it was unclear how such actions could be stopped. With respect to the first part, "whatever decisions made by Chairman Mao must be upheld," Hua later realized it was too absolute, and the February version, "guided by my own thinking," was even more absolute and inappropriate. Both versions had not received sufficiently comprehensive consideration, had restrained people's thinking to varying degrees, and were not conducive to the practical implementation of Party policies or to enlivening Party thinking. While noting that both the speech and the editorial had been discussed and agreed upon unanimously by the Politburo, Hua declared, "responsibility should mainly be borne by me; on this question, I should make a self-criticism and also welcome the comrades' criticism."²⁹⁰

²⁹⁰ The full February 7 couplet is "whatever decisions made by Chairman Mao must be resolutely upheld, whatever instructions given by Chairman Mao must be

Hua's speech was generally well-received, with Yu Guangyuan recalling that the conference participants were by and large satisfied. On the specific question of Hua's self-criticism, Yu, who is unreasonable in his recollections concerning the issue, still reports that the participants were "basically satisfied."²⁹¹ What of the views of the principal leaders themselves? According to normal practice for major meetings, the key speeches were circulated among the top leaders, with at least Hua's speech discussed in the Politburo, and there were efforts to coordinate their respective speeches. When preparing Deng's speech, Yu Guangyuan phoned Ye Jianying's secretary with a suggestion that would appear in the Marshal's address. Hu Yaobang played a key role in drafting Deng's speech and he was also involved in drafting Hua's and Ye's speeches. As Ye's speech evolved and late in the process became concerned with consistency, Ye took the initiative to consult both Deng Liqun and Hu Yaobang for suggestions.²⁹² In this context of mutual awareness, what

unswervingly followed."

²⁹¹ See Yu Guangyuan, *Deng Shakes the World*, pp. 157-63, especially p. 159. Yu's unreasonableness centers on the accusation that Hua had not told the whole truth, particularly that he had obstructed the return of Deng and many other veteran cadres.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 150; Han Gang, "Quanli de zhuanli"; Liu Shikun, "Wo wei Ye shuai zuo lianluoyuan" [I Worked as Liaison for Marshal Ye], *Zhongguo xinwen zhoukan* [China News Weekly], no. 775, at <https://read01.com/eAmGPe.html>, October 4, 2016; and interview with Hu Deping, September 2009.

can be understood from Ye's and Deng's speeches with regard to Hua, and the situation at the conference more generally?

Marshal Ye's speech was strikingly supportive of Hua, although all positive references to Hua would later be stripped from Ye's *Selected Works*.²⁹³ While at the closing session all three leaders promoted open thinking, when advocating emancipating the mind Ye referred not to Deng's speech in which it was the headline concept, but instead to the idea Hua had advanced earlier in the year of the "four bits more" (*sige yidian*)—liberating thought, being more courageous, adopting more methods, and advancing at a faster pace—that to be done a little bit more.²⁹⁴ But the most striking aspect is Hua's speech on the same day. The old Marshal offered high praise for the young Chairman's self-criticism on the "two whatevers," citing his initiative in taking responsibility for the issue at the work conference and thus setting an example for others. It was, Ye stated, a frank and sincere self-criticism that had moved them. Ye also lauded Hua for proposing that the title "wise leader" be set aside and that he

²⁹³ Ye Xiangzhen, "Ye Jianying zhongyang gongzuo huiyi jianghua qicao ji" [Record of the Writing of Ye Jianying's Speech at the Central Work Conference], *Caijing*, no. 16 (December 2008). For Ye's full redacted speech, which also received additional editing, see *Ye Jianying xuanji* [Collected Works of Ye Jianying] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1996), pp. 493-502. A condensed version is found in *Ye Jianying nianpu*, vol. 2, pp. 1158-62.

²⁹⁴ "Ye Jianying zai zhongyang gongzuo huiyi bimu huishang de jianghua" [Ye Jianying's Closing Speech at the Central Work Conference] (December 13, 1978), internal Party document made available to the authors.

simply be designated as “comrade” in the press. These, Ye declared, were signs of a leader with democratic sensibilities, as well-demonstrated throughout the conference, and they also showed that Party life had returned to where it should be.²⁹⁵

Apart from support for Hua, Ye’s speech had a different tone from those of either Hua or Deng. While clearly backing their general position, Ye’s address had a more progressive tilt, as seen in the conflicting reactions by Hu Yaobang and Hu Qiaomu during the drafting process.²⁹⁶ While there was nothing unique in Ye’s advocacy of democracy and the rule of law, his attention to the excesses and costs of the Cultural Revolution was quite different from that of either Hua or Deng. Hua simply ignored the topic, whereas Deng was essentially concerned with Mao’s reputation, saying his intent was to prevent revisionism, stating that serious research was required and that some time would have to pass before a correct analysis could be made.²⁹⁷ In contrast, Ye placed the ten years hated by the elite front and center in the first section of his address. His analysis placed fundamental blame for the confusion caused by the loose ideological

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁶ Hu Yaobang reportedly was “very satisfied” with Ye’s approach, while Hu Qiaomu opposed a statement linking inner-Party democracy with Xidan Democracy Wall as a model of people’s democracy, and he succeeded in having it cut from the document. Han Gang, “Quanli de zhuan yi”; and *Hu Yaobang sixiang nianpu*, vol. 1, p. 257.

²⁹⁷ *Selected Works of Deng (1975-1982)*, pp. 160-61.

categories and inciting the masses, such as the capitalist roaders, on Mao even if he was not named. The vast costs were cited, perhaps edited out in the redacted version, but even there highlighting that hundreds of millions of people, making up one-ninth of the population, were victims. Rather than something to be put off to an unclear future, Ye declared this was a very painful lesson requiring full attention.²⁹⁸

Thirty years later, Hu Yaobang's son hailed Ye's address, paying particular attention to Ye's discourse on feudalism—the first time any high leader had addressed the issue. Hu Deping's gloss on the speech, surely goes further than what the old Marshal said on the occasion, although in all likelihood reflected his meaning. Specifically, the issue was Mao's excesses during his "later years," characterized by Hu Deping as creating a proletarian dictatorship of "Marx plus the emperor"—thus feudalism.²⁹⁹ This message, however submerged by following the overall line, stood in contrast to the efforts by both Hua and particularly Deng to protect Mao. Hu Deping, in an interview, directly compared Ye's and Deng's speeches, declaring Ye's speech to be far superior because it generally avoided Mao, whereas Deng

²⁹⁸ "Ye Jianying zai zhongyang gongzuo huiyi bimu huishang de jianghua" (December 13, 1978).

²⁹⁹ See Hu Deping, "Chongwen Ye Jianying 30 nianqian jianghua" [Reviewing Ye Jianying's Speech from Years Ago], *Nanfang zhoubao* [Southern Weekend], October 2, 2008.

made frequent reference to the late Chairman. This is not entirely true since, as required by the politics of the time, Ye did make positive comments about Mao, albeit without Deng's embellishments. The old Marshal included a more telling comment about Hua—his efforts to restore normality “show that Comrade Hua Guofeng is worthy of being a good student of Comrade Mao Zedong.”³⁰⁰ Whether because of the overall tilt of the speech, the references to Hua (which of course could be redacted), or more likely Ye's broader political support of Hua, this notable address is not included in the 1982 collections of the most important post-Mao documents, a telling indication of post-Third Plenum fluctuations.³⁰¹

The 1978 work conference and the Third Plenum represent a major turning point, although not, as is often claimed, a power struggle. In concluding our book project, we will provide our own

³⁰⁰ Interview, September 2009. Knowing what Deng actually said at the time is made more difficult because the only alternative to the *Selected Works* version of his speech that we have obtained is a copy of the official text, including four basically formal references to Hua (two of which acknowledge his position as leader, that would be redacted). The official text includes a section reviewing Mao's contributions and declaring how much all comrades owed him, plus the need to help everyone recognize his great services; *Selected Works of Deng (1975-1982)*, p. 160. Whether the references to Hua were more effusive or the praise of Mao was more extreme in the given speech is not known.

³⁰¹ *Sanzhong quanwei yilai (zhongyao wenxian xuanbian)* [Since the Third Plenum (Selected Important Documents)], and *Sanzhong quanwei yilai (zhongyao wenxian huibian)* [Since the Third Plenum (Compilation of Important Documents)], compiled by the Central Documents Research Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 1982.

analysis, along the lines of the assessment by Hu Deping and others, that Deng emerged from the meetings with even more prestige, and he was regarded by the majority within the Party as its most important leader.³⁰² Hua still had some authority after the plenum but was vulnerable to the potential weaponization of the “two whatevers.” In terms of ideology, the criterion of truth, at least for the time being, was granted special status by the plenum, whereas, also for a while, the “whatevers” remained in a public void, but they were still a source of contention in theoretical circles. But what of the larger process leading to the ideological outcomes at the end of 1978? Perhaps the shrewdest assessment is offered by a senior Party historian: “It was a combination of accident and inevitability.”³⁰³ There were various accidents along the way: the clumsy formulation of the “two whatevers” couplet and the elite misunderstanding of what it meant; the overreaction by Wu Lengxi and Wang Dongxing to the criterion article, producing attention to an argument that otherwise would have caused little notice; and actions at the work conference that were not planned by the participants but that developed in the dynamics of the situation—dynamics that did not originate as theoretical conflicts. What was inevitable is that there would be a

³⁰² See Hu Deping, “Yaobang tongzhi zai ‘zhenli biao zhun’ (xia).”

³⁰³ Interview with leading Party historian at the Party School, July 1997.

reckoning with the Cultural Revolution and an impulse for restoration that would have ideological implications.

It was a question of the events, such as the “accidents” and the broader context demanding/allowing realization of the inevitable. In this, parts of the larger Party community, whether theorists, progressive media, or victims of the Cultural Revolution, were seeking a righting of historical wrongs. As Wang Dongxing feared, this put pressure on the Party Center, although hardly as blatantly as that might sound. During the critical period of the second half of 1978, the top leadership had tasks in mind that were far more than theoretical disputation—the economy above all else and increasingly foreign affairs. Ironically, Hua’s tolerant general approach and his determination to promote a democratic situation at the work conference, created a situation neither Hua nor Deng wanted going into the meeting, but one that resulted in a major, though not in all respects, sustainable step toward achieving the inevitable.

The Theory Conference and the Road to the Four Principles.

When the theory conference, or forum/retreat (*lilun wuxuhui*), convened on January 18, 1979, there were high expectations among progressive intellectuals. Moreover, within the higher reaches of the Party, Hu Yaobang, who would chair the conference, had great enthusiasm for what was to come, and, perhaps surprising given their

concern for Mao's reputation, Hua and Deng appeared optimistic that the democratic aspects of the "Third Plenum line" could be pushed forward with good results for the regime. The problem was that the situation and the possibilities were greatly exaggerated. This is not to underestimate the progress that had been made as a result of the criterion of truth debate, specifically in the sense of Hua urging officials to be "a little bit more" open-minded and courageous in practical work. Indeed, some reform-inclined officials later reflected on a palpable sense of leaders at different levels taking more innovative steps and being less hamstrung by ideological fears.³⁰⁴ Yet there were clear limitations, with hesitancy and waiting for instructions from above still widespread. Su Zhenhua, speaking as Shanghai Party leader at the end of December, criticized both the city and himself for being weak, late in the debate, and prone to passivity that prevented quickly adjusting to the opinions of the masses in concrete work.³⁰⁵ Decades

³⁰⁴ See "Yuan Shenzhen diyi shuji Wu Nansheng koushu: Qinli jingji tequ juece guocheng" [Former Shenzhen First Secretary Wu Nansheng's Oral Account: Experiencing the Special Economic Zone Decision-making Process], at <https://news.sina.cn/gn/2018-04-10/detail-ifyzeyqa1885606.d.html?from=wap>, April 10, 2018.

³⁰⁵ "Su Zhenhua zai Shanghai shiwei chuanda sanzong quanhui" [Su Zhenhua Communicating an Outline of the Third Plenum to the Shanghai Municipal Committee] (December 30, 1978), document made available to the authors. Su also spoke about not daring to touch big issues, such as the evaluation of Mao

later, Hu Deping reflected on the situation after the plenum in broader canvass: while a turning point had been reached, "the habitual and various negative forces [in politics and society] cannot be underestimated, [leaving] contradictions in an active phase."³⁰⁶

The contradictions, however, were not simply caused by larger political and social forces. They were derived from the conflicting objectives facing Hua's leadership from the outset, i.e., reversing the disaster of the Cultural Revolution but clinging to the legitimacy provided by Mao, a conundrum that remained embedded in the Third Plenum communiqué. Although emancipating thinking and truth from facts were consistent themes in the communiqué,³⁰⁷ and practice as the sole criterion of truth received a high evaluation for its "far-reaching historic significance," the gloss of the communiqué contained a paean to Mao. Not only was there no hint of criticism of the late Chairman,³⁰⁸ but virtually all of the positive developments

and the Cultural Revolution, but such excessive caution in regular work was a key part of his self-criticism.

³⁰⁶ Hu Deping, "Yaobang tongzhi zai 'zhenli biaozhun' (xia)."

³⁰⁷ Interestingly, as in Ye Jianying's speech at the work conference, the most direct link by a leader to emancipating the mind was Hua's "four little bits." The clearest praise for an existing leader, however, went to Deng for his efforts to set the Party on a proper course in 1975 and his struggle against the "gang of four," *in accord with Mao's instructions*, *PR*, no. 52 (1978), pp. 13, 16, emphasis added.

³⁰⁸ One might argue that the reference to Mao launching the Cultural Revolution (*ibid.*, p. 15) was implied criticism, but it was justified by his concern for avoiding Soviet-style revisionism. Moreover, at this precise point in time, Deng was preparing to attack Vietnam, in considerable part because of its links to Moscow,

since his death were linked to his legacy, whether inner-Party democracy, shifting the focus of work to the economy, reversing wrong verdicts, continuing but limiting class struggle, or, ironically, providing guidance for economic modernization as in his 1956 report, the “Ten Great Relations,” the very document that was a requirement for cadre study in the 1977 “two whatevers” editorial. In broad ideological terms, the Party not only remained rooted in “comprehensive and accurate Mao Zedong Thought,” but the communiqué baldly states that the “lofty task ... on the theoretical front is to lead and educate the whole Party [and people] to recognize [Mao’s] great feats.”³⁰⁹ Here this task is closely tied to linking Mao to the current modernization goals under the “new historical conditions,” yet the felt need to “hold high Mao’s banner” is clear throughout the document.³¹⁰ Moving away from Mao’s policies had made great strides under Hua’s leadership and would go further in the immediately following years, but the Third Plenum remained unable and unwilling to face the late Chairman’s full legacy.

which was still revisionist as well as hegemonist in Party consciousness. See Frederick C. Teiwes and Warren Sun, *PRC Foreign and Military Policy, 1977-81: Shades of Mao, the Imprint of Deng*, China Studies Centre Working Paper (Sydney, 2022), pp. 15n40, 292.

³⁰⁹ *PR*, no. 52 (1978), p. 15.

³¹⁰ The phrase is explicitly used only once (*ibid.*, p. 14), but is inherent in the repeated citations justifying current policies by Mao’s inferred authority.

Another aspect of the communiqué worthy of attention is the issue of class struggle, less because of any developments at the work conference or plenum than because of misperceptions about Hua on this issue, whether in the official slanders directed at him after his fall, the worries of progressives in 1977-78, or the analyses of outside observers. The communiqué and subsequent commentary were accurate in two senses. First, the then current policy that large-scale turbulent class struggle had largely come to an end and the dealing with contradictions must distinguish the very few cases of counterrevolutionaries and criminals from class struggle where appropriate and where in education of the “contradictions within the people” could justly be linked to the Mao of 1956.³¹¹ Second, the claim in the 1981 Historical Resolution that the plenum discarded the slogan “take class struggle as the key link,” a slogan that so disturbed liberal theorists, did indeed fall by the wayside at the time. However, the language of the communiqué emphasizes that no matter how few counterrevolutionaries there were, “we must not relax our class struggle against them, nor can we weaken the dictatorship of the proletariat,” something also anathema to progressive thinkers in

³¹¹ See Teiwes, *Politics and Purges*, pp. 167, 185, for relevant analyses of these issues in 1956-57.

1977-78.³¹² Most likely, progressives, who had worried about the meaning of such concepts during the uncertainties of the immediate post-Mao period but who now were buoyed by events at the work conference, simply overlooked them.

In terms of arguments picturing Hua as a leftist proponent of class struggle, these have no merit. Offending slogans, such as “class struggle as the key link” or “continuing the revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat,” were fundamentally signboards to emphasize the connection to Mao that was considered so essential during the initial period, slogans leaders including Deng had articulated on public occasions.³¹³ But the meaning of class struggle had changed dramatically since Mao’s Cultural Revolution. In narrow terms, Hua did not use class struggle widely, largely reserving it to refer to the “gang of four” and their radical followers. More broadly, meticulous Party historian Han Gang, in recounting Hua’s focus in 1977-78 on economic revival and development, has bluntly stated, regarding the reality of his basic political approach: “Apart from the

³¹² See the plenum communiqué, *PR*, no. 52 (1978), p. 11; and the CCP’s Historical Resolution, *BR*, no. 27 (1981), p. 26. Concerning the dictatorship of the proletariat, a repeated slogan drawing liberal theorists’ ire was “continuing the revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat.”

³¹³ Hua, in his position as leader, had a greater role to play in articulating the “line” at major meetings. For Deng, see his speech at the 11th Party Congress (*PR*, no. 36 [1977], pp. 39-40); his June 2 address to the PLA Political Work Conference (*PR*, no. 25 [1978], pp. 17, 19); and his October talk at the opening of the Trade Union Congress (*PR*, no. 42 [1978], p. 5).

movement against the 'gang,' [Hua] did not engage in any political movement using the 'class struggle' theme." When it came to grasping something, it was production; revolution had become liberating the forces of production. On the eve of the 1978 work conference, Hua made clear to document drafters that the shift away from class struggle as the Party's formal line would become explicit at the start of 1979, but he still hoped some link to class struggle would be included so that it could not be seen as violating Mao Zedong Thought. Han Gang concludes, "It was only on this little point that Hua's opinion was slightly different from Deng's."³¹⁴ Nevertheless, class struggle remained an issue at the end of the plenum, notwithstanding its greatly reduced weight.

In the month between the conclusion of the Third Plenum and the start of the theory conference, unresolved tensions in the plenum results and problems created by the unfolding events created concern in leadership circles. This can be seen in two meetings—, involving Hua, Hu Yaobang, and Hu Qiaomu, at the start of January. On January 2, Hua called in the two Hu's to discuss trends in political thought in society. The most notable part of the views Hua raised was his emphasis on the need to develop a well-established democracy in the Party and the country, which he declared to be a policy direction

³¹⁴ Han Gang, "Huanyuan Hua Guofeng." Cf. Torigian, *Prestige, Manipulation, and Coercion* (Yale University Press, 2022), pp. 155-57.

of the plenum, and his concern about avoiding an overreaction in dealing with political issues. This discussion came in the context of rising elite concern with social developments, particularly the emerging confrontational opinions at Xidan Democracy Wall and the widespread agitation by urban youths who had been sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution but who were then demanding that they be returned to their former residences. Realizing the potential for matters to get out of hand, Hua specifically warned against disruption such as that which had been caused by the 1957 Anti-Rightist Campaign.³¹⁵

On the next day the two Hu's addressed a regular meeting of the Propaganda Department. Hu Qiaomu undertook the task of conveying the Chairman's remarks, but he did so in a way at odds with Hua's message, albeit one reflecting the significant unresolved issues of the Third Plenum line. Reflecting on "troubles in some places," citing dissatisfaction with real life and Xidan Democracy Wall, he worried that the PRC's increasing exposure to the outside world was creating a big problem in terms of how to understand capitalism. These emerging tendencies, he said, were creating a much more

³¹⁵ *Hu Yaobang sixiang nianpu*, vol. 1, p. 282; and Zheng Zhongbing, "Shiren zhongxuanbuzhang de Hu Yaobang" [Hu Yaobang When Appointed Central Minister of Propaganda], *Yaobang yanjiu* [Research on Yaobang] electronic magazine, no. 73 (2017), pp. 84-85, <http://www.hybsl.cn/ybsxyj/shengpingyusixiang/2017-10-10/66353.html>.

complicated situation than that which existed at the beginning of May or July (when the criterion debate first began and then took hold, respectively), and even more complicated than in 1957 when bourgeois rightists were attacked wildly. The most jarring part of Hu Qiaomu's talk, however, is that he directly linked the December plenum to these dangerous developments: "It is inevitable that the Third Plenum will cause a trend, that is, a tendency or negative emotion, to completely deny Chairman Mao." He further identified winds of denying Party leadership, the socialist system, and basic Marxism and Mao Zedong Thought. Upon completion of his talk, Hu Yaobang was quick to counter his argument, citing Hua as wanting to grasp political and ideological dynamics in a less bleak fashion. Hu Yaobang declared that the situation was very good, and any misunderstandings were to be overcome, referring to Hua having placed an emphasis on "no matter what, don't oppose rightists." Although unconvinced, Hu Qiaomu accepted Hu Yaobang's criticism and made a self-criticism.³¹⁶

³¹⁶ Zheng Zhongbing, "Shiren zhongxuanbuzhang de Hu Yaobang," pp. 84-85; *Hu Yaobang sixiang nianpu*, vol. 1, p. 282-83; and "Zhongyang xuanchuanbu gongzuo lilun jilu (1979 nian 1 yue 3 ri) [Minutes of a Regular Work Meeting of the Central Propaganda Department (January 3, 1979)], *Lilun gongzuo wuxuhui* [Theoretical Work Retreat], ch. 18, internal Party document made available to the authors.

Despite his progressive inclinations, Hu Yaobang had reservations about the domestic situation. With strikes by youths, demonstrations, and many petitions and letters to the relevant authorities mounting, he became concerned, and at a propaganda work conference on January 11, he suggested that such social phenomena were a consequence of the recent period. Work had to be done to meet the reasonable demands of cadres, workers, and peasants, long overdue injustices had to be properly resolved, and government policies had to be implemented. That night, when Hu Deping returned home after witnessing large vocal demonstrations in Shanghai, his father spoke of several things that he had dealt with in his speech of that day, indicating some anxiety that “young people seem to have developed a democratic individualist tendency,” thus deviating from the legal requirements for freedom and democracy, the necessary development of production, and overall interest in social order to pursue personal interests and also departing from Marxism-Leninism in demanding emancipation of the mind. Hu Yaobang then concluded that his only goal had been to clarify issues and he had not wanted to arrest anyone.³¹⁷ A similar attitude was extended to his reaction to the intensifying Democracy Wall issue. According to Wang Ruoshui, former *RMRB* deputy editor and a noted

³¹⁷ Hu Deping, “Yaobang tongzhi zai ‘zhenli biao zhun’ (xia).”

liberal figure in the post-Maoist period, Hu was not in favor of Xidan Democracy Wall, but he did advocate a soft approach in dealing with it, causing some dissatisfaction within the Party.³¹⁸

Notwithstanding these lingering concerns, Hu Yaobang proceeded to plan for the theory forum in line with the progressive aspects of the Third Plenum as well as with Hua's unrealistic summary at the work conference that the Party Center was convinced that the theory meeting, with the spiritual guidance of the plenum, would properly resolve the theoretical issues. Hu threw himself into the preparatory work for the forum, first preparing a draft of his introductory address to the gathering, which was considered by the Standing Committee on January 9. The draft was accompanied by a letter outlining the proposed procedures for the meeting. Hu envisioned a two-stage arrangement, the first lasting 20 days, beginning from late January or early February. This stage would involve about 200 theory workers in Beijing. The aim was to encourage everyone to speak their minds in small group discussions and plenary speeches. This would be followed by a few days of rest and reporting to the Center. The second stage, to last another ten days, would be expanded to include another 200 theory workers.

³¹⁸ Wang Ruoshui, "Guanyu minzhuqiang de yiduan wangshi" [A Brief Story about Democracy Wall], *Beijing zhichun*, February 27, 1994.
at <http://www.wangruoshui.net/CHINESE/mingzhuwall.htm>, 1994.

Moreover, Hu declared his intent to invite Hua, Ye and Deng to speak, “to guide everyone to concentrate on issues ... urgently demanding resolution.” In this, Hu was articulating a classic approach from the Party’s better past—the first stage would be democratic, the latter centralized (*xian minzhu, hou jizhong*). Hu, apparently believing “misunderstandings” could be solved by open discussion and a sympathetic attitude at the Center, either consciously or inadvertently, adopted another facet of “comprehensive and accurate Mao Zedong Thought.”³¹⁹ At the Standing Committee meeting on January 9, Hua approved the draft of Hu’s speech to open the proceedings, declaring that it was very good, and at the same time he accepted the invitation to speak at the end of the conference, assigning Hu Yaobang to prepare the speech.³²⁰

Hua’s apparent enthusiasm about the theory forum can be understood in view of his remarks on January 2, the democratic approach typical of his leadership, and his positive relations with Hu Yaobang. Perhaps somewhat perplexing is the evidence that Deng was also in accord with the expansive emancipation of thought thrust of Hu’s plans. While Deng may not have attended the Standing

³¹⁹ See Shen Baoxiang, *Zhenli biaozhun*, pp. 321-25; and *Hu Yaobang sixiang nianpu*, vol. 1, p. 284-85.

³²⁰ *Lilun gongzuo wuxuhui*, ch. 18; and Shen Baoxiang, *Zhenli biaozhun*, p. 325.

Committee meeting on the 9th,³²¹ Hu did consult with him at some point. In an early session of the retreat on January 22, he reported Deng's ideas about what should be considered. Deng's view was that the criterion of truth discussion should proceed more rapidly, and he called on the participants to carry out in-depth research on how to accomplish it. Deng selected democracy, the legal system, and economic management as the key issues to be considered. He also raised matters of considerable sensitivity, including evaluating the Cultural Revolution, discussing the "continuing the revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat" concept, and class struggle in the socialist period. According to Hu, Deng even advocated a change in "holding high Mao's banner," by replacing "Chairman Mao" with "Mao Zedong Thought." On the 27th, Hu discussed with writers at the Party School how to prepare his speech notes for both Hua and Deng to be delivered during the second stage of the forum.³²² In expressing our muted surprise at the apparent degree of Deng's buying into the project, we do not question that a significant aspect of his thinking at the time included enhancing bolder thought and controlled

³²¹ *Deng nianpu*, vol. 1, pp. 467-75, does not record him at the meeting nor does it record that he was engaged in theory conference matters during the period leading up to his visit to the U.S.

³²² *Hu Yaobang sixiang nianpu*, vol. 1, pp. 304-306. Cf. Merle Goldman, "Hu Yaobang's Intellectual Network and the Theory Conference of 1979," *CQ*, no. 126 (1991), p. 235. By early February, Hu Qiaomu was involved in drafting a speech for Deng that was considered to be in an emancipation mode.

democracy.³²³ We do wonder, however, why someone who generally tailored his advocacy by accounting for realistic dangers took a position that possibly exposed Mao.

When the first stage of the conference convened on January 18, its leadership was stacked with progressives. The 160 participants at this time were organized into five groups, with three conveners for each group. The main conveners of four of the groups were prominent progressives in the criterion of truth and related activities: Hu Jiwei, Zhou Yang, Yu Guangyuan, and Wu Jiang.³²⁴ What unfolded from the outset is quite different from the implications of Ye Jianying's proposal in September. That proposal focused on the controversy surrounding the May *GMRB* article, with the stated aim of considering different theoretical views, without definitive preconceptions, and coming to a common understanding. Strictly

³²³ In particular, we note the emphasis on democracy in the preparation and execution of his December 13 speech at the work conference. See Yu Guangyuan, *Deng Shakes the World*, pp. 130-32, 144-45; and *Selected Works of Deng, (1975-1982)*, pp. 155-58.

³²⁴ The fifth convener was Tong Dalin, then vice minister of the State Science and Technology Commission (because Deng Liqun had declined to take charge). Shen Baoxiang, *Zhenli biao zhun*, p. 327. The overall leading group of the conference was less "stacked," with Hu Qiaomu as well as alleged "whateverists" Wu Lengxi and Hu Sheng, joining Hu Yaobang and the main group conveners; "Lilun gongzuo wuxuhui mingtan" [Name List of the Theory Work Conference], document made available to the authors. According to reports by Su Shaozhi and Ruan Ming, however, Hu Qiaomu was an infrequent attendee, although he clearly became alarmed when he did attend or when he read the conference bulletins. See Goldman, "Hu Yaobang's Intellectual Network," pp. 230-31.

speaking, there was a theoretical issue—the precise relationship of theory and practice that Mao had notionally unified much earlier. Yet even in September, as Li Xin told Wang Dongxing at the time, although the criterion position was commonsense and “we don’t oppose either,” the issue had become politicized and a conference had little chance of unifying understanding.³²⁵ As we have seen, the political dispute had reached a crescendo at the work conference in an onslaught against those who opposed the criterion argument, especially those associated with the “two whatevers,” and with the progressive position endorsed by the Party Center in both cases. It is hardly surprising that the initial stage of the theory retreat featured many quasi-struggle attacks on what Hu Yaobang characterized as the non-existent “two whatevers *pai*.”³²⁶ Another feature of the statements reported in the conference bulletins is frequent positive references to Deng, indicating his enhanced standing at the work conference and plenum. Hua was not directly blamed for the “two whatevers,” but he received more qualified mention.³²⁷ A third aspect,

³²⁵ See Goldman, “Hu Yaobang’s Intellectual Network,” pp. 325-26.

³²⁶ Key examples are discussed below. In addition to the sources cited, the authors have access to an apparently complete collection of the speeches of the participants in the groups and other conference documents; *Lilun gongzuo wuxuhui jianbao* [Theory Work Conference Bulletin], January 18-April 3, 1979.

³²⁷ For example, on February 3, Beijing University philosophy researcher Zhang Xianyang, in criticizing Wang Dongxing for his “two whatever” methods, commented that Wang was using such methods to make Hua a mere figurehead,

which would become decisive in altering the conference's trajectory, was the questioning of Party practices and ideology going well beyond rejection of the Cultural Revolution. This would not go unchallenged at the forum.

The first stage of the conference basically followed Hu Yaobang's plan, with an initial period from January 18 to 26 and resumption, after a short break for the spring festival, on February 1 until the middle of the month.³²⁸ From the very start, progressives, led by the same individuals who had been vocal at the work conference, renewed attacks on the "two whatevers *pai*." On January 19, Hu Jiwei read out to his group a lengthy joint statement on behalf of himself, Yang Xiguang, Zeng Tao, Hua Nan, Wang Huide, and Yu Guangyuan, tracing the origins of the criterion debate back to the February 7, 1977, "two whatevers" editorial, with heavy emphasis on the roles of Wang Dongxing and Li Xin. It was also read out to two other groups, followed by other speeches soon followed, attacking not only Wang and Li but also Wu Lengxi and Xiong Fu. The charges were essentially

hardly an endorsement of the Chairman's leadership performance. Conference Bulletin, no. 112, group 1, February 3, 1979.

³²⁸ Shen Baoxiang, *Zhenli biao zhun*, p. 327, states the first stage ended on about February 12, while the conference bulletins indicate some sessions continued over the following several days. The final bulletin was issued on the 16th. In any case, the duration largely matches Hu Yaobang's plan of about 20 days, taking about 24 days, when allowing for the spring festival break, before the scheduled pause to rest and report to the Center. As we shall see, what followed departs from Hu's plan both in timing as well as in substance.

the same as in November-December, emphasizing the alleged effort to prevent Deng's return to work, although Xinhua representative Li Feng acknowledged that Deng's return had already been approved by the Center, i.e., Hua's Center, thus making the editorial a futile effort to turn public opinion against Deng before the March work conference. Other familiar charges concerning the "whatevers" and suppression of the criterion debate were aired as well, and Li, Wu, and Xiong duly expressed contrition for their errors. Hu Sheng, who in reality had never been involved in the "two whatevers," was apparently spared the ritual, and Wang Dongxing did not attend the conference.³²⁹

While the discredited *xiucai* offered their self-criticisms, some more telling explanations of their actions were offered than those that were given at the work conference. This was nowhere more impressive than with Li Xin's February 2 speech to the fourth group led by Yu Guangyuan. Li discussed the deeply contradictory but essential task set by Hua at the start of 1977—to "stabilize the situation and solve problems." Solving problems crucially included Deng's return,³³⁰ and Li characterized his thinking at the time that

³²⁹ Shen Baoxiang, *Zhenli biaozhun*, pp. 330ff; and Conference Bulletin, no. 117, group 4, February 3, 1979.

³³⁰ Another critical problem to be solved, we would add, was to promote recovery of the economy. This, in fact, is highlighted in a document of February 7, 1977

since this had been decided by the Center, the emphasis should focus on stabilizing the situation, notably deepening exposure and criticism of the “gang of four.” But the problem was the need to hold high Mao’s banner, when it was impossible to say Mao had made mistakes or that the criticism of Deng had been wrong. Thus, the drafting work was very difficult throughout the several drafts—“no matter how you put it, it wasn’t satisfactory.” Li could not remember exactly how the “two whatevers” appeared and made its way into the editorial, but he acknowledged they reflected his thinking and he took full responsibility. His claim that he had no intention of blocking Deng’s return is completely believable, although his recollection that the negative reaction simply meant “the masses don’t understand the inside story” so he did not pay attention to it, suggests his own lack of understanding of just how poisoned was the task he had been given.³³¹ In Li’s and other “whateverist” cases, there is little indication of progressive theorists willing to accept such explanations, but higher officials were more tolerant. Late in the forum Hu Yaobang declared it was wrong to label people as part of a “whateverist”

and an editorial demanding that cadres study, notably, Mao’s “Ten Great Relations.”

³³¹ Shen Baoxiang, *Zhenli biao zhun*, pp. 347-54; and Li Xin’s February 2 speech, (Conference Bulletin, no. 102, group 4).

faction and, as previously noted, except for Li Xin, the careers of the *xiucaï* lambasted at the theory conference would prosper.³³²

As matters played out, of greater concern to liberal Party leaders such as Hu and Ye were the adventurous statements offered on a wide range of Party policies, practices, and past excesses. As much as such leaders might have approved of specific proposals and views, there was always a danger of going too far, clashing with the interests of important sections of the Party, and challenging deeply entrenched senses of proper behavior, with an unsettling cumulative effect. It is important to consider the context. As Merle Goldman's significant 1991 article elaborates, this involved both contextual factors preceding the 1978 work conference, invitations for participants to speak out from that point, and concomitant events

³³² Xiao Donglian, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo shi, di 10 juan: Lishi de zhuangui—Cong boluan fanzheng dao gaige kaifang* [History of the PRC, vol. 10: Historical Change—From Setting Things Right to Reform and Opening] (Hong Kong: Zhongwen daxue chubanshe, 2008), p. 71; and above, note 22.

While Ye Jianying's understanding of the complex situation facing the conservative *xiucaï* in early 1977 was probably sufficient to explain his tolerant view of those attacked at the forum, it may also reflect a personal role in the 1977 events. According to General Wu Zhong, Ye was the first top leader to raise the "two whatevers" concept; *Wu Zhong jiangjun koushu: Jijian dashi jinliji* [General Wu Zhong's Oral Statement: Personal Record of Several Major Events] ([Austin, TX]: Meiguo huayi chubanshe, 2021). As for Li Xin, he was particularly vulnerable as the person directly in charge of the "two whatevers" editorial as well as being Wang Dongxing's closest subordinate, but we believe perhaps more telling is his earlier career as Kang Sheng's secretary, his key position despite his junior status in Deng's 1975 State Council Political Research Office, and conflicts with Hu Qiaomu in that capacity; see above, note 40.

creating concern among the broader elite that affected attitudes toward the forum.³³³ Regarding factors encouraging boldness, the largely tolerant atmosphere created by Hua was essential, even during the early period of Wang Dongxing's alleged suppressive approach. Thus, in January 1978, Guo Luoji, certainly one of the most outspoken theoreticians, had been able to publish an article in *RMRB* that warned against the continuing danger of the Cultural Revolution's reign of fear and called for "emancipating the mind and independent thinking."³³⁴ After June 1978, for the reasons we have already discussed, open expression of even radical ideas became more feasible, with, e.g., demands in the fall for democratic elections and limited terms of office discussed in the press.³³⁵ And, of course, in the lead-up to the theory conference, the support of the work conference and plenum for the criterion of truth and the rejection of the "two whatevers," plus Deng's ambitious January agenda, surely

³³³ Regarding Goldman's study, apart from factual errors, our main reservations are two. First, in addition to overstating Hu's general impact, we believe characterizing the progressive thrust at the conference as due to "Hu's intellectual network" is misleading: much of what was said went against his views and interests, many of those who spoke out had no connection to him, and some, like Su Shaozhi, did not rate his leadership highly (interviews with Su, September 1986, and May 1996). Second, Goldman's analysis accepts the unsustainable view of Hua as part of a "Maoist 'whatever' faction" in a struggle with Deng; see "Hu Yaobang's Intellectual Network," pp. 222, 226.

³³⁴ Goldman, "Hu Yaobang's Intellectual Network," p. 234.

³³⁵ See *ibid.*, pp. 223-24. We regard Goldman's linking of such developments to Hu Yaobang as unsubstantiated.

created an unrealistic sense of how much liberated thought was feasible in an ideological system that was still ruled by “comprehensive and accurate Mao Zedong Thought.”

If progressives overinterpreted the situation leading up to the theory conference, conservatives overestimated the possible dangers, in Goldman’s terms, of a linking up of the “democratic elite” at the forum with increasingly radical “democratic activists” in society, notably those at Xidan Democracy Wall.³³⁶ While there clearly was an overlap of opinions aired at Xidan and during the forum, including some sharply challenging opinions, the assembled theorists had no appetite for the radical views of those like Wei Jingsheng who declared despotism was inherent in Marxism-Leninism and Party rule. More broadly, there was hesitancy concerning even less-challenging developments at Xidan Democracy Wall and elsewhere, despite some indications of support. Goldman identifies some support in the forum participants’ nuanced views: the elite’s commitment to Marxism, hope in the prospect for Party-led reforms, and the potential to serve as advisers in the reform project going forward.³³⁷ At the forum, Democracy Wall reportedly generated animated discussion, but even a bold progressive’s supportive view was restrained. In one of the last

³³⁶ Regarding concerns with a possible link-up, during the second stage of the theory forum progressives found it necessary to deny any such link.

³³⁷ See Goldman, “Hu Yaobang’s Intellectual Network,” pp. 226-29.

speeches during the first stage, the basic trend at Democracy Wall was declared good, in accord with Marxism, supportive of the Four Modernizations, and raising not a few issues requiring solution. Leaders of Party and government organs were urged to listen to the opinions and demands of the masses. However, the masses had to be told of the nation's difficulties, the contradictions that arose had to be dealt with appropriately, and those who made trouble had to be led back on the correct road.³³⁸

More than any theoretical or temperamental differences between the democratic "elite" and the "activists," the factor that should have eliminated any conservative worries about a notional linking up was the absence of any direct connections between the two groups. Despite their democratic positions intellectually, the elite theorists clearly understood the division between cadres like themselves and the masses. The only visits to the Wall we are aware of by significant officials or forum participants were low-key efforts to understand what was going on. During the early stages of the Wall, the actions of two different figures, Hu Qiaomu and Yu Guangyuan, are revealing. Hu reportedly went at night, presumably to avoid

³³⁸ Joint speech on Democracy Wall by *RMRB* journalists Fan Rongkang and Yu Huanchun, February 14, in Conference Bulletin, no. 252, group 1, February 16, 1979. In early June 1978, at a time of tension on the ideological front, Yu Huanchun had called for a complete *pingfan* of the 1976 Tiananmen incident, earning Wang Dongxing's accusation of being "anti-Mao"; "Yu Huanchun tongzhi zai xiaozuhui shangde fayan" (January 26, 1979).

detection, and read the wall-posters by flashlight; Yu later claimed that he had been worried about a possible physical roughing up to go. Later, once the forum had started, some participants went to observe, but few, if any, offered support. Notwithstanding concerns by some higher-level officials over perceived links, stepping outside the embrace of the system simply was not considered an option, even by self-conscious progressives.³³⁹

It is, of course, too simple to paint the views expressed at the theory conference in one hew, and claims that later reports to Deng exaggerated transgressions at the forum are credible. In any case, there were various speeches that, in different ways, grated on the sensibilities of parts of the Party elite, indeed going too far on matters that had been granted some leeway by recent leadership statements. Part of the problem was tone. The Cultural Revolution is a key example, something clearly indicated as an issue that had to be dealt with at the work conference and plenum and listed by Deng in January as a proper topic for evaluation. This was a matter for cautious treatment, yet important speakers were comprehensive and

³³⁹ On Hu Qiaomu and Yu Guangyuan, see Yu Guangyuan, *Deng Shakes the World*, p. 140; and Goldman, "Hu Yaobang's Intellectual Network," p. 229. As for the forum participants, notably the *RMRB* journalists cited in note 338, this apparently resulted from an instruction by Chen Yun to send staff to the Wall to collect information, which later resulted in increased suspicion of a *RMRB*-democratic activists connection; Wang Ruoshui, "Guanyu minzhuqiang de yiduan wangshi."

biting in their denunciations of the movement. On February 13, former *RMRB* deputy editor Wang Ruoshui declared the Cultural Revolution had been a gigantic catastrophe and he asked how it had been possible that a few people could throw a great nation into such chaos. This inevitably led Wang to Party history. In tracing the problem back to the 1957 Anti-Rightist Campaign, Wang raised an even more sensitive topic—Mao himself.³⁴⁰ Perhaps the most striking personal attack on Mao came from CASS official Sun Zhifang on February 4. In a discussion of China's backward situation that brought tears to his eyes as a Party member, Sun then asked: "For all this, should Chairman Mao be responsible? [To say] this is all Liu Shaoqi's fault is too unfair, at least these [recent] ten years have nothing to do with Liu Shaoqi."³⁴¹

Such criticism of their revolutionary leader was undoubtedly emotionally difficult for many veteran leaders, whether or not they agreed with the particulars of the arguments offered. There were other speeches, however, that surely drew a negative response from

³⁴⁰ Goldman, "Hu Yaobang's Intellectual Network," p. 233; and Wang Ruoshui's Speech, Conference Bulletin, no. 256, group 4, February 15, 1979. Another participant, Beijing University philosophy researcher Zhang Xianyang, the author of one of the most controversial speeches at the forum that attacked a series of Mao's Cultural Revolution policies, published an article in *RMRB* on February 28, tracing the origins of a "fascist dictatorship" even further back to the early 1950s; Goldman, "Hu Yaobang's Intellectual Network," p. 232.

³⁴¹ Sun Zhifang's Speech, Conference Bulletin, no. 129, group 2, February 4, 1979.

elite circles for reasons of personal interest, a desire to restore the familiar arrangements of the pre-Cultural Revolution past, or a fundamental view that any structural changes had to be guided by the Party. Key examples are proposals for limited terms of office, removal by the ballot box, and ending life tenure (including for top leaders).³⁴² These proposals, except for genuine elections, would be adopted in the not-too-distant future, and in and of themselves they did not create fundamental opposition at the forum. In some cases, ideas at the retreat would have a significant influence in the future, even though they were rejected at the time. An outstanding example, a truly innovative theoretical argument by Su Shaozhi and Feng Lanrui on the stages of socialism, argued, that contrary to the accepted view that the current system was socialist, PRC socialism was undeveloped, and only moving to an early stage in which any form of economic organization could be allowed. This, of course, was too unorthodox ideologically, and it conflicted with many interests in the system at the time. It could be debated passionately and be resisted, but it was the kind of theoretical discussion that the forum had been notionally designed for, and, in the end, it became Party doctrine in

³⁴² See Goldman, "Hu Yaobang's Intellectual Network," pp. 233-34. The notable arguments in this vein were by CASS philosophy researcher Yan Jiaqi on February 4, Conference Bulletin, no. 137, group 5, February 5, 1979; and Li Honglin, from the Museum of History, on January 25, Conference Bulletin, no. 240, group 2, February 15, 1979.

1987 at the 13th Party Congress.³⁴³ Not everything put on the table by progressive thinkers was doomed to undermine the reputation of the conference.

If the harsh rhetoric about the Party's, and especially Mao's, past performance was a major vulnerability for the theory forum, another was the current developments outside of Beijing. A major organizational change to the forum from the plan Hu Yaobang had proposed and the Standing Committee had accepted in early January, was a first stage of theory workers in Beijing and a second stage bolstered by the addition of others from elsewhere. In the event, representatives from the provinces were included during the first stage, largely propaganda officials from each provincial-level jurisdiction, plus some from provincial Party schools and social science academies. This was done quite systematically, with these representatives distributed equally among the five groups, making up close to 20 percent of the total attendees. The views of the provincial participants at the forum were basically safely within the criterion of truth narrative, critical of the influence of the "two whatevers" but

³⁴³ See Goldman, "Hu Yaobang's Intellectual Network," p. 234; and Joseph Fewsmith, *Dilemmas of Reform in China: Political Conflict and Economic Debate* (Armonk NY: ME. Sharpe, 1994), pp. 69-70. The speeches by Su and Feng were on February 5, Conference Bulletin, no. 136, group 2, February 5, 1979.

moderately expressed.³⁴⁴ These local representatives presumably provided updates to the authorities in their respective places, but we have no evidence whether or not they highlighted the more extreme statements expressed at the forum. In any case, developments on the ground in the localities, which we assume had more to do with the activities of “democratic activists” than with any transgressions at the forum, had negative implications for the progressive argument in Beijing.

This was clearly demonstrated by the reactions of Zhao Ziyang in Sichuan and Peng Chong in Shanghai. According to a progressive theorist at the forum, there was significant blowback from Zhao and Peng, and perhaps one other provincial leader. The local objections conveyed the sense that the forum was making their lives difficult. The most strident comment came from Zhao Ziyang in a telegram of strong disapproval, querying the merits of the forum. Zhao saw it as turning three types of order into chaos: labor management, work order, and social order. The source, who would work under Hu Yaobang in the coming period, interpreted this as an implicit attack on Hu. While perhaps biased, many years later our source advanced a quite plausible view of Zhao, declaring he was not the progressive generally claimed and that he had not been particularly supportive of

³⁴⁴ For example, in the speeches by propaganda officials from Hebei, Zhejiang, and Guangdong; Conference Bulletin, no. 200, group 5, February 10, 1979.

the *pingfan* process for reportedly having said that in Sichuan “we have no time for that.” Zhao’s interest was in boosting the economy, with our source also claiming that he lacked interest in the criterion of truth as well.³⁴⁵ Leaving aside the larger specific claims about Zhao, the gist of this episode points to a basic irony. Theory *qua* theory was not crucial for leaders engaged in the daily running of the provinces or other large official organizations. A key factor in winning the support of the provincial leaders for the criterion of truth in the second half of 1978 was simply that it was commonsense that facilitated effective work conduct, work that formerly had been inhibited by out-of-date ideological concepts. Practical work now was perceived as being undermined by the excesses of the victors of the previous year’s debate.

The critical change in Hu Yaobang’s plan for the theory conference was the delay between the two stages. Rather than a short gap of only a few days for rest and reporting to the Center, six weeks passed before the second stage began. Undoubtedly, the controversial developments during the first phase were the main consideration, but another factor surely was the month-long Sino-Vietnamese war that had begun just after the earlier discussions had

³⁴⁵ Interview, October 2009. Another possible source of local concern might be the provincial theory meetings reportedly conducted during the same period. See Deng’s Four Cardinal Principles speech, in *Selected Works of Deng (1975-1982)*, p. 186.

ended. Indeed, at a large meeting reviewing the war on March 16, Deng addressed the ideological situation in terms more in tune with, and even exceeding, his caution at the 1978 work conference than his January agenda items for the forum:

Now there is still a lot of ideological work to do. During this period of promoting democracy, we have dealt with many issues left over from history, but many problems have also appeared, ... If you look at it carefully, many factors have unsettled stability and unity, and now these disturbances are increasing, not decreasing, day by day. [The problem of educated youth in the countryside] is indeed counterrevolutionary, using the promotion of democracy to undermine stability and unity and to undermine the Four Modernizations. Here we must resolutely safeguard Chairman Mao's great banner.

The most important thing is to achieve stability and unity....³⁴⁶

How did Deng reach this position, and what do we know about the views and interactions of other leaders at this crucial juncture?

³⁴⁶ "Deng Xiaoping zai Zhong-Yue zuozhan qingkuang baogaohuishang de jianghua" [Deng Xiaoping's Speech at the Reporting Meeting on the China-Vietnam Battle Situation] (May 16, 1979), inner Party document.

At a fundamental level, Deng's attitude is hardly surprising. Despite his interest in greater *controlled* democracy, Party rule and stability and unity, he believed, were central to his outlook, and upholding Mao's reputation, he believed, was crucial to sustain them. Although the ideological framing of his comment points to the inadequacies of propaganda and theoretical workers, the clear priority, as indicated by the harsh reference to educated youth, was social disruption, whether created simply by the problems left over from the Cultural Revolution or intensified by the activities of the "democratic activists." This is crystal clear in Deng's March 30 speech laying down the Four Cardinal Principles. In the most striking passages of the speech, Deng discusses a variety of threatening activities. The most extreme, although these were "very few," incidents provoked by a "small number" of people "in some places," were a pale reflection of the chaotic 1976 developments during Mao's last months: the raiding of Party and government organizations, the occupying of offices, the holding of sit-downs and hunger strikes, obstructing traffic, and otherwise seriously disrupting production, other work, and public order. In the current context, people were raising sensational slogans, such as "give us human rights," and seeking to engage foreigners, such as those at Xidan Democracy Wall calling on President Carter to support their cause. Other posters stating, for example, "proletarian dictatorship is the source of all

evils," or assertions that capitalism was better than socialism, and slandering of Mao, all led Deng to a clear conclusion—"If we ignore these grave problems, our Party and ... government organs will find it impossible to function, ... [so how] can we concentrate on the Four Modernizations?"³⁴⁷

Although Deng's comments on March 16 and 30 suggest a primary concern with social phenomena, the ideological framing in both cases points to the asserted inadequacies of theoretical workers, which surely reflected what had been expressed at the forum. In his Four Cardinal Principles speech, Deng evaluates ideological work in the four months since the plenum, with Hu Yaobang, now in charge of the Propaganda Department, achieving results that were a bit unsatisfactory. According to Hu Deping, his father accepted this verdict as fair given the inadequate outcomes, presumably both at the forum and in society, acknowledging that as head of propaganda

³⁴⁷ "Uphold the Four Cardinal Principles," in *Selected Works of Deng (1975-1982)*, pp. 181-82. The 1976 events were much more threatening, both because of the involvement of violent local radical elements and because of the constrained response by the authorities given Mao's "line"; see Teiwes and Sun, *End of the Maoist Era*, pp. 460-61.

Since the only version of Deng's March 30 speech we have is the official *Selected Works* document, which of course reflects conditions in 1982, we are restricted to it, as modified on a few points made in subsequent recollections; see below, notes 348, 361. Overall, based on the Conference Bulletins from the second stage of the forum, we believe the changes do not amount to a major distortion.

he was responsible and criticism was appropriate.³⁴⁸ In reaching his decision to highlight the Four Principles, some sources claim there was undue influence on Deng by Hu Qiaomu by presenting an excessively negative account of the forum and Xidan Democracy Wall.³⁴⁹ While we have little doubt that Hu Qiaomu would have aired such opinions to Deng, this surely overestimates any role he may have had in “persuading” Deng, who reportedly was closely following the conference bulletins, of the need for the four principles.³⁵⁰ Meanwhile, following the end of the first stage of the forum, Hu

³⁴⁸ *Hu Yaobang sixiang nianpu*, vol. 1, p. 346; and Hu Deping, “Yaobang tongzhi zai ‘zhenli biao zhun’ (xia).” The official version of the speech in Deng’s *Selected Works* does not contain the four-month observation. We do not have any other versions of the speech, but several comments from Hu Deping, and comments by speakers during the second stage of the conference at the end of March and the beginning of April, suggest the *Selected Works* version may have been toned down to some extent.

³⁴⁹ Su Shaozhi, “A Decade of Crises,” p. 339; Goldman, “Hu Yaobang’s Intellectual Network,” pp. 234-35; and interview with a propaganda official, October 2009. Su Shaozhi also notes that Deng Liqun exerted an influence on Deng Xiaoping with respect to Democracy Wall.

³⁵⁰ Although Hu Qiaomu played a leading role in drafting the four principles speech, he had been summoned by Deng, along with Hu Yaobang who was assigned the task of organizing the speech along the principles Deng had laid down (see below). The report that Deng had systematically read the bulletins was made by a senior Party historian, interview, February 2009.

Interestingly, while the two Hu’s had significantly different views of the situation, about a week before the second stage of the conference began, someone wrote a wall-poster attacking both Hu’s as revisionists opposing Mao and Hua; Xiao Donglian, *Lishi de zhuangui*, pp. 69-70; also reported by Hu Jiwei, Conference Bulletin Youyi, no. 22, April 1, 1979. On the organization of the second stage of the forum, see below.

Yaobang was on the defensive. In late February, he declared at a journalists' conference that while the forum had gone well and had raised many good ideas, various speeches expressed opinions that were unsatisfactory, including at least some that should be investigated.³⁵¹

This leaves the question of what we know of interactions among the leadership during the period in the immediate lead-up to the start of the second stage of the forum. Surely Hu Yaobang would have been the key figure in organizing the second stage, which began on or about March 28. But the new arrangements both did and did not fit the outline Hu had sketched in January. They did involve an expansion of the conference to something like 400 delegates, with the new participants more widely drawn than merely from Beijing theory workers, although that situation had already been altered with the systematic inclusion of some provincial representatives during the first stage. Now the second stage was divided into three separate meetings. One, held in the Friendship Hotel (*Youyi binguan*), essentially reconvened the same groups that existed in the previous stage. The second meeting, held at the Jingxi Hotel, consisted of new provincial representatives, organized into five groups that followed

³⁵¹ *Hu Yaobang sixiang nianpu*, vol. 1, p. 323; and Goldman, "Hu Yaobang's Intellectual Network," p. 237. In Goldman's version, "not all views expressed [by comrades who had not had their ideas checked before they spoke] were in accord with the Central Committee."

the existing regional arrangements. These two meetings produced 30 and 28 conference bulletins, respectively, during the seven days of discussions. The final meeting involved military units (*jundui*), not clearly identified except as the first, second, and third military systems (*xitong*), that produced 15 bulletins.³⁵²

The other aspect of Hu's January plan that turned out to be similar, but in reality was vastly different during the second stage was that the top Standing Committee leaders spoke in order to provide a common unifying theme to the forum. Work at the Party School in January had already begun on prospective speeches for Hua and Deng. The plan was that, as befitting his formal status, Hua would give the concluding speech. As with so much in our attempts to unravel the meaning of political developments at the Party Center, we know little of the degree to which there were critical interactions among the key leaders. Back in January, both Hua and Deng were naïvely optimistic about the forum, but whether there was any exchange between them in this regard is unknown. During the lead-up to the second stage, however, we have a fascinating insight. According to Hua's son, in the greatly altered March circumstances, Deng approached Hua, saying the way things were going would not work, that he had thought of four principles about which he

³⁵² The above is based on conference documents made available to the authors.

elaborated, and he asked Hua to speak along these lines at the forum. Hua asked people in theoretical circles, apparently including Hu Jiwei, about the situation because he could not figure out what these principles would do. Hua finally told Deng that he was unable to explain the principles clearly, "so you should speak if you want to."³⁵³ Whether Hua, as often was the case, simply felt uncomfortable with a theoretical issue or in fact disagreed with Deng's proposal is unclear.

While undoubtedly there was a sense, including some trepidation, about an altered tone during organization of the second stage, the most direct preparation of the message occurred on March 27, when Deng called in the two Hu's and others to discuss his speech draft. Given developments in the Party and society, Deng said it was time to talk about the four principles, which apparently had not been discussed in the Politburo.³⁵⁴ He addressed traditional complexities, starting with the current issues of democracy and the legal system, the relationships between democracy and centralism, immediate and long-term interests, and individual and national interests. Citing the activities of "several illegal organizations," Deng said it was necessary to make clear what socialist democracy was, and he rhetorically asked: "Is it not okay to take bad people in society seriously?" In terms of

³⁵³ Interview, July 2010.

³⁵⁴ According to the understanding of a senior Party historian focusing on the issue; interview, January 2011.

propaganda, Deng said there was too much vague language, it had to be more powerful and targeted to mobilize the masses. The superiority of socialism needed to be affirmed and it could be demonstrated as long as construction was carried out according to economic laws. Deng singled out young people as those most deceived due to a lack of understanding of the history of the revolution, poisoning by the “gang of four,” and personal problems—they needed to be educated to look at the big picture. Throughout, Deng emphasized that democracy must be given full play, but it had to be centralized under the leadership of the Party. Equally, he asserted, “without unity, nothing is accomplished.”³⁵⁵

More directly related to developments during the first stage of the forum, Deng argued that the central task of theoretical work was to guide people to look forward. However, there was a tendency to become obsessed with settling accounts. Although he did not refer specifically to the first stage of the forum, this was clearly what had happened. The progressive theorists devoted a considerable portion of their energy looking backward in an offensive against alleged “two whateverists.” As we have shown, this was something that was distasteful to Hu Yaobang. Whatever Deng’s precise motives in March 1979, it should be noted that his speech makes no reference to the

³⁵⁵ *Deng nianpu*, vol. 1, pp. 498-99.

“whatevers,” possibly apart from the indirect comment on settling accounts. The other troubling aspect of the first stage, according to Deng, “some specious, even extreme, formulations” were no good. The reason was they were not conducive to uniting, to mobilizing the people, or to “the single-minded pursuit of the Four Modernizations.” What was required in ideological work, Deng stated, was an emphasis on playing the propaganda game by promoting the Party’s good traditions and undertaking hard-working educational efforts to engage the masses in the modernization effort. The effort would face many difficulties, with many new questions needing to be answered. This was a task for theoretical circles, he said, although he judged that capable theorists for the task were currently lacking.³⁵⁶

Deng’s speech on the 30th, unsurprisingly, embraced the positions he had laid down three days earlier. Yet the above excerpt, from what clearly was a longer discussion, does not capture a central aspect of the speech, and thus cannot provide an accurate perspective on reactions at the time. Although Deng’s address was correctly regarded as a significant alteration of direction by participants and broader Party audiences, many observers overstated its nature. According to Hu Deping’s reflections, following the Third Plenum, voices of criticism and attacks on the plenum and

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 499-500.

emancipating thought grew, creating a "left" wind affecting local public opinion in some places. The forum, and Deng's four principles speech, resulted in a perception that the current contradiction was between the plenum and the Four Principles, and thus there was a growing market for seeing a conflict of "three" in opposition to "four."³⁵⁷ This, however, is precisely the antithesis of Deng's intent. Deng was very concerned that his argument be taken as flowing from the spirit of the December plenum and placing the Party on a forward trajectory toward achieving the basic objectives of that meeting. He began his address by noting that the holding of the forum had been a decision made at the plenum, thus placing it in the context of shifting the focus of work and pursuing the Four Modernizations. In closing, he returned to an identical theme, emphasizing the need to firmly implement the plenum's principles. The authority of the Third Plenum was repeatedly cited throughout Deng's speech, nowhere more pointedly than following his discussion of excesses in society and the inadequacy of the propaganda authorities in coping with such excesses. Deng asked, "Is there anything I have said here out of keeping with the Third [Plenum]?"³⁵⁸

Deng's answer to his own question, of course, was in the negative. While the aggressive tone of progressive figures at the pre-

³⁵⁷ Hu Deping, "Yaobang tongzhi zai 'zhenli biao zhun' (xia)."

³⁵⁸ See "Uphold the Four Cardinal Principles," pp. 166, 186, 191.

plenum work conference, as well as the decisions on rehabilitations, leadership changes, and the criterion of truth and the “two whatevers” could be seen as setting the “spirit” of the plenum, there is much to support Deng’s answer. For one thing, it is clear that the Party leadership had been, and remained, prepared to explore efforts to promote democracy inside and outside the Party, but it never intended to countenance anything that would weaken its fundamental control. Moreover, while Deng’s attention to the dictatorship of the proletariat was certainly influenced by the small number of disturbances that had taken place since January, the same justification appeared in the Third Plenum communiqué for an even smaller declared threat. In March Deng continued with the previous view that although class struggle continued to exist, no possible class enemy could emerge to threaten the regime and the Party opposed any broadening of the scope of class struggle.³⁵⁹ In short, several of the four principles were basically restatements of basic doctrines that were not facing any severe challenge, but behavior on the streets, as well as at the forum, was enough to stimulate their reassertion.

The relationship between Deng’s argument on Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought and the “spirit” of the Third Plenum was more complicated. Both the Third Plenum communiqué

³⁵⁹ See *ibid.*, pp. 176-77, 190.

and Deng's speech defined Mao Zedong Thought as an "integral, scientific system" based on reality and seeking truth from facts," i.e., the "comprehensive and accurate" corpus of Mao's ideology that, since April 1977, was solely at the discretion of the Party Center.³⁶⁰ In late 1978, however, this fundamental Party position was complicated by the criterion debate, which received official endorsement in the plenum communiqué. In Deng's speech, although the emancipation of thought theme clearly came through, there was little if any direct reference to the criterion debate, with one source claiming a positive reference was deleted before the speech was delivered.³⁶¹ What is notable, in any case, are indications of the nature and seriousness of Deng's endorsement of emancipated thinking. One feature was the strong emphasis on new practical problems in the complex realization of modernization. Specialized study had to be carried out, actual problems investigated, and flexibility and humility were required to adjust policies that did not work. Deng attributed China's backwardness to its past failures in this regard, and he declared that he was making a self-criticism on behalf of the Party Center for its

³⁶⁰See "Communiqué of the Third Plenum," *BR*, vol. 21, no. 52 (December 29, 1978), p. 14; and "Uphold the Four Cardinal Principles," p. 173.

³⁶¹ There is one passing reference in the 1982 version; "Uphold the Four Cardinal Principles," p. 187. The deletion is reported in a note in *Hu Yaobang sixiang nianpu*, vol. 1, p. 344.

responsibility.³⁶² Another feature was authorization of serious theoretical study of sensitive issues, e.g., the ideological formulations of the 11th Party Congress or a possible new interpretation of “continuing the revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat.” The stipulation, however, was that such discussions were to remain within the Party and subject to Party discipline.³⁶³

Finally, we note the connection between the primary objectives of the work conference and plenum, that is, what was set by the leadership, particularly by Hua and Deng, and Deng’s justification for the four principles, i.e., the shift in the focus of Party work to economic modernization. During the work conference, as we have argued, this new focus was significantly hijacked by *pingfan*, personnel, and ideological issues, but important economic decisions were made, with the plenum communiqué beginning by emphasizing the shift to economic modernization and ending with a call to advance courageously from a backward country to become a “great, modern, socialist power.”³⁶⁴ Three months later, the emphasis on

³⁶² See “Uphold the Four Cardinal Principles,” pp. 169, 188-89. A nuanced exposition of the necessary flexibility came during a military group meeting at the forum studying Deng’s speech. In this view, in the face of the complex problems, propaganda and theory workers were urged to have two plans, one to implement the main policies, and a second suitable plan to handle problems that might emerge. Conference Bulletin Jundui, no. 14, April 3, 1979.

³⁶³ See “Uphold the Four Cardinal Principles,” pp. 190-91.

³⁶⁴ “Communiqué of the Third [Plenum],” pp. 7, 16, and *passim*.

modernization was even clearer in a speech by Deng. Similar to the plenum communiqué, Deng began with the “grand objective” of the Four Modernizations and he ended with a call to implement the Third Plenum’s principle of shifting work and “win[ning] great victories in China’s Four Modernizations.” Throughout, modernization was stressed as a key Party goal, indeed of “supreme political importance,” although naturally there was a great deal of attention given to the ideological issues intrinsic to the four principles. There is, however, a fundamental difference in the ideology/modernization relationship from what was stated at the work conference and plenum. Then, ideology distracted attention away from the modernization focus. Now, Deng was arguing that the four principles were required for the success of the modernization project. Rather than a conflict between “three” and “four,” the “four” principles would provide the essential stability necessary for the “four” modernizations.³⁶⁵

While this explanation undoubtedly satisfied Deng, how did it sit with the relevant audiences? We have already noted the disconcerting effect on progressive theorists, as melodramatically stated in Su Shaozhi’s claim that Deng’s [alleged] 1978 work conference denunciation of the “two whatevers” was “still ringing in [our] ears, [when] he also ‘whatevered’ Mao Zedong and Mao Zedong

³⁶⁵ See “Uphold the Four Cardinal Principles,” pp. 166-67, 171, 172, 178, 180-81, 191.

Thought.”³⁶⁶ We will return to these progressives during the post-forum period as well as to those who had already been expressing doubts about the Third Plenum’s outcome. But what of “emancipated thinkers” within the Party leadership? Here the reservations appear to have concerned the actual argument, perhaps primarily the focus on the demand to adhere to the four basic principles, but there was little doubt that something had to be done. This arguably was involved in Hua’s refusal to make the case himself; in any case, he explicitly endorsed the concept, and its necessity, after the fact.³⁶⁷ As for Marshal Ye, his influential nephew Ye Xuanji, claimed he was unhappy with the outcome, but he did not express much disagreement due to concern over the criticism of Mao.³⁶⁸ The most interesting case, that of Hu Yaobang, about whom we know considerably more given the testimony by his son, is more striking but still within the scope of the view that the speech was unfortunate but still necessary. We will return to Hu shortly.

The immediate impact on forum participants deserves analysis. First, it should be acknowledged that Deng’s treatment of the

³⁶⁶ See above, note 15.

³⁶⁷ At a meeting just after the Fourth Plenum in September, Hua spoke of Deng’s efforts at the theory forum as gradually solving the chaotic ideological situation among the masses. Information conveyed by Peng Chong, “Chuanda sizhong quanhui tigang” [Communicating an Outline of the Fourth Plenum] (October 29, 1979), document made available to the authors.

³⁶⁸ Interview, October 2009.

offending theorists, at least in the only version of the speech we have, was soft. In assessing the conference's first stage, he declared the participants had spoken frankly, putting forward questions deserving of attention, and "on the whole the meeting has been fruitful." Although the wrong ideas of "some people" were criticized, they were not explicitly tied to the conference participants, and ongoing theoretical discussions were to be held in the hundred flowers spirit, with a ban on finding fault and placing labels on people.³⁶⁹ Moreover, while some significant progressives suffered later career setbacks, evidence of punishment of outspoken participants in the immediate period is limited.³⁷⁰ In any case, in the context of the altered situation, when the second stage of the forum convened at the end of March, a palpable sense of concern and uncertainty existed. In broad terms, before Deng spoke, there were appeals in the conference groups for him to clarify the theoretical issues; after his speech the overarching theme was to study his "very important report." There was only rare explicit opposition to Deng's message a, but there were implicit challenges and the emergence of differences among the three overarching groups.

³⁶⁹ See "Uphold the Four Cardinal Principles," pp. 166, 174, 179, 191.

³⁷⁰ Goldman, "Hu Yaobang's Intellectual Network," pp. 237-38, claims some participants in the first part of the forum were punished, but she only provides evidence of Guo Luoji, as "the chief victim." Guo reportedly endured a number of criticism meetings, but his only punishment was a demotion and deprivation of his status as a Party cadre in 1982.

The group meetings at the Friendship Hotel reconvened the participants from the first stage of the forum in which the progressive outlook dominated. Now the primary approach was to defend their earlier advocacy by using Deng's evaluation of the first stage as, on the whole, fruitful, providing formal acceptance of, or at least not critically engaging with, the four principles and avoiding rhetoric that could be considered excessive. As earlier, the opinions of individuals were recorded and some themes were reasserted. Most striking is the revived criticism of the "two whatevers," which Deng had not mentioned, or more precisely, a refutation of those, notably the provincial representatives, at the concurrent meetings held at the Jingxi Hotel, who claimed criticism of the "whatevers" during the first stage had been suspect or simply wrong.³⁷¹ Another defensive position addressed the possible overlap of the first stage advocacy with the developments in society more generally. On April 1, Li Feng, interestingly from the Mao Works Office, put it simply, "[theoretical] discussions [at the forum] have no direct causal relationship with social disruptions."³⁷²

³⁷¹ The "two whatevers" issue was reported in Conference Bulletins Youyi, nos. 24, 29 and 30, April 2, 1979. The main protagonist at the Jingxi Hotel was Beijing University Deputy Party Secretary Wang Xiaochuan, who made other arguments as well that provoked progressive responses. On Wang and the "two whatevers" issue, see below, note 386.

³⁷² Conference Bulletin Youyi, no. 25, April 1, 1979. It is interesting that the Guizhou delegates in the Jingxi discussions also questioned the tendency to

The first stage veterans had basically adopted a defensive posture, with some of them making arguments that pushed back on Deng's overall position. While both Deng and his restrained critics in the Friendship Hotel discussions claimed to be defending the Third Plenum, their emphases were quite different. As we have seen, Deng's prescription was that preserving the spirit of the plenum meant curbing those excesses that were threatening stability. In contrast, the progressive voices focused precisely on the claims made by those who had been uneasy with the Third Plenum line from the outset. In a striking passage, Hu Jiwei described the views of "not a few" people who were disgusted with the plenum's policies, and he attacked them "as 'rightists,' as 'revisionists,' and as 'still clinging to Liu Shaoqi', and [declaring that shifting the focus of work] was 'shifting into worry,' 'shifting into harm,' and 'shifting to the right'." The implication for Hu Jiwei and others was that these attitudes had to be suppressed in order to save the direction of the plenum.³⁷³ Various progressive figures offered views substantially critical of Deng's report as well as of the leadership's performance since the Third Plenum. Senior theorist Liao Gailong and others raised questions about how the negative attitudes about the plenum had been allowed to become so

attribute social problems to the forum; Conference Bulletin Jingxi, no. 23, April 1, 1979.

³⁷³ Conference Bulletin Youyi, no. 22, April 1, 1979.

significant.³⁷⁴ Others disputed the suitability of the *tifa* used in Deng's speech for emancipating thinking.³⁷⁵

The ultimate issue, of course, was the main danger facing the Party. Although Deng stated the leadership would continue to criticize both ultra-left and right deviations, he made it clear that now [in March] he wanted to emphasize any trend of thought that was against the four principles, and coming from the "right," now defined as attacks on the Party system.³⁷⁶ The issue of the main danger became the central focus in one group's discussions during last few days of the conference. While "everyone" supported Deng on the need to protect the four principles in society and acknowledged the shortcomings in this regard during the first stage of the forum, the other mistaken ideological trend noted by Deng was in fact an even greater danger, but he had not given it the necessary attention. This trend of thought was a consequence of the long period of ideological chaos created by Lin Biao and the "gang of four" and further influenced by the obstruction of the "two whatevers." It could not be turned around within the short period since the plenum, as seen in

³⁷⁴ Conference Bulletin Youyi, nos. 28 and 29, April 2, 1979.

³⁷⁵ Conference Bulletin Youyi, no. 29, April 2, 1979. Ma Peiwen from *GMRB*, after expressing support for the speech, argued that by claiming that only an extremely small number within the Party were insufficiently emancipated, the *tifa* was not only at odds with reality but also with what Deng had said at the work conference in December.

³⁷⁶ See "Uphold the Four Cardinal Principles," p. 174.

the insufficiently emancipated thinking of comrades from the localities who had joined the forum. The developments in society in recent months, including strong criticism of the first stage, in fact represented a counteroffensive to recover lost ground aimed at the Third Plenum. In this analysis, failing to give balanced attention to the two theoretical deviations left people even more confused about the distinction between right and wrong and left the plenum's policies even more vulnerable to savage attack.³⁷⁷

As suggested above, the provincial propaganda leaders assembled at the Jingxi Hotel had quite different perspectives and concerns. While clearly reflected in the contrast between the defensive posture of the participants and the new provincial participants' attention to the excesses at the forum and in society, the Jingxi group must be understood in temporal and structural terms. Drawn into the forum at a time of altered circumstances, the members of the Jingxi group also received an indication of the new direction from Hu Yaobang on March 28, the day after Hu Yaobang and Hu Qiaomu had received Deng's outline of that direction.³⁷⁸ Moreover, while their views were clearly framed by national developments, the provincial delegates were involved in reporting on local ideological circumstances. Unlike the Friendship Hotel group,

³⁷⁷ Conference Bulletin Youyi, no. 30, April 2, 1979.

³⁷⁸ Conference Bulletin Jingxi, no. 3, March 29, 1979.

the individual speakers were seldom identified, their opinions were presented simply as by comrades from this or that province, and they generally addressed developments in their respective places.³⁷⁹ Yet for all their local attention, the participants understood their position in the hierarchy and they asked for guidance from the Party Center, particularly from Deng, on difficult issues.³⁸⁰ Such guidance was sought not simply to be in line with central policy but also to find ways to navigate complex local problems.

What the provincial participants basically wanted from Deng and the Party leadership was clarity on ideological issues. A recurring complaint was that cadres had fallen into a confused (*hutu* or *mohu*) understanding when trying to cope with the changing policies and concepts, a phenomenon noted by the Anhui delegates as particularly

³⁷⁹ There were a variety of issues raised. E.g., the Zhejiang delegates discussed the muddled thought among local cadres on the Third Plenum's policies as moving to the right, Conference Bulletin Jingxi, no. 12, March 29, 1979; and the Jiangsu representatives reported on local problems with sent-down youth and noted provincial Party school students reflected on their worries about the current situation, Conference Bulletin Jingxi, no. 12.

³⁸⁰ For example, the Qinghai participants asked whether the 11th Party Congress slogans and "continuing the revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat" should be continued; Conference Bulletin Jingxi, no. 5, March 29, 1979; the Guangdong delegates asked how to run provincial theory forums, including whether those underway should be continued or should be brought to a conclusion; Conference Bulletin Jingxi, no. 8, March 29, 1979; and the Guangxi representatives proposed that central leading comrades speak out on major issues to avoid any negative developments in their work, Conference Bulletin Jingxi, no. 8.

serious at and below the prefecture and county levels.³⁸¹ The overriding factor in this bewildering situation involved the new, although still incomplete, messages emerging from the work conference and plenum. Both the pace and ambiguity of ideological change were involved. Delegates spoke of two *tifa* to indicate the Party's overall direction, the old pre-plenum *tifa*, and the new *tifa* that emerged in December 1978. A Fujian representative observed the plenum communiqué avoided such slogans as "class struggle as the key link" and it was a comparatively simple document, transmitted by the localities in a similar manner, with [only] some influence on work.³⁸² As we have seen, the plenum communiqué left class struggle on the table and repeatedly praised Mao, indicating the strength of the old concepts. At the lower levels, the situation was complicated. Various participants spoke of cadres who regarded the new line as the Party Center turning to the "right,"³⁸³ but a perhaps greater problem was simply the uncertainty created by the change. The Yunnan representatives cited three fears among "some basic-level

³⁸¹ Conference Bulletin Jingxi, no. 10, March 29, 1979.

³⁸² *Ibid.*

³⁸³ For example, East China delegates spoke of "some cadres" who saw the failure to complete an investigation of rightists as indicating the Center's turn to the right; Conference Bulletin Jingxi, no. 15, March 30, 1979. Inner Mongolian participants noted the muddled thinking of some public security cadres who asked if hats were to be removed from the four elements, then who would be the target of the dictatorship of the proletariat; Conference Bulletin Jingxi, no. 6, March 29, 1979.

cadres”: fear of too many policy changes, fears of chaotic thought, and fears of acting according to existing policies—only to discover they would be declared rightists later.³⁸⁴ Moreover, the provincial leaderships had their own problems with managing the new policy orientation. Emancipated thought might be desirable, but it could create governance problems. A Henan delegate acknowledged that a *RMRB* article on local work issues was correct, but it was necessary to liaise with the provincial Party committee.³⁸⁵ Participants in the Jingxi discussions wanted clearer *tifa* from the Center but also more sensitivity concerning the duties of their provincial organizations.

Although the Jingxi and Friendship Hotel groups had different concerns, the provincial delegates adopted a quite moderate stance toward the first stage participants. Although there were significant differences among those who commented, there was no sense of quasi-struggle, such as what had energized some progressives against the alleged “two whatevers *pai*” during the first stage.³⁸⁶ What might be considered the median view is that the earlier sessions of

³⁸⁴ Conference Bulletin Jingxi, no. 7, March 29, 1979.

³⁸⁵ Conference Bulletin Jingxi, no. 14, March 30, 1979.

³⁸⁶ As noted, the Friendship Hotel theorists defended themselves from Beijing University Deputy Party Secretary Wang Xiaochuan’s criticism of their attitude toward the “two whatevers.” In fact, Wang’s statement was a mild rebuke for straying a little bit from truth from facts and for being a bit metaphysical in attacking the “two whatevers *pai*,” a position, as we have seen, that was also held by Hu Yaobang. Conference Bulletin Jingxi, no. 14, March 30, 1979.

the forum had been necessary and achieved important results, but not all of the opinions were correct and there had been some errors.³⁸⁷ The errors were vaguely referred to as excessive statements or reflecting insufficient knowledge, and the prescriptions for dealing with those making mistakes were soft. The Fujian representatives directly addressed the question of how to evaluate the first stage: where the results should be approved, they must be approved; where there were defects, the best method was to speak clearly and not to put forward a one-sided understanding.³⁸⁸ Yet some viewpoints at the Jingxi Hotel went beyond tolerant treatment of erroneous views. Full-throated support surfaced the day before Deng spoke. The entire Gansu delegation declared its hope that Deng would affirm the first stage and that its arguments would be adopted, and they would declare "we consider the theory forum is correct."³⁸⁹

The message was even stronger, and more confrontational, on the penultimate day of the group discussions. The Jilin delegation submitted an opinion titled "Correctly Evaluate the Results of the First Stage of the Theory Forum." Asked about the spirit of the first stage, the document answered that it followed the spirit of the Third Plenum. Further, it pointed directly at the contradiction in Deng's position—he

³⁸⁷ This is the wording used by the Inner Mongolian representatives; Conference Bulletin Jingxi, no. 6, March 29, 1979.

³⁸⁸ Conference Bulletin Jingxi, no. 10, March 29, 1979.

³⁸⁹ Conference Bulletin Jingxi, no. 11, March 29, 1979.

had provided ample approval of the forum but also he had raised *tifa*, i.e., the four principles, that contained elements that led people to sense its faults. This, in turn, led to opposition to the reactionary atmosphere created by the four principles. This argument also stated that the plenum communiqué had prominently endorsed the criterion of truth, which was also the essence of the topics proposed by the Party Center at the start of the first stage, yet (although not explicitly stated) had barely, if at all, been mentioned in Deng's speech. The communiqué had summarized a situation of creating a type of thinking that denied the first stage of the forum as a symptom of a trend that sought to deny the whole emancipation of thought movement.³⁹⁰ While seemingly an outlier in terms of what was expressed at the Jingxi Hotel, the conflict between the spirit of the Third Plenum spirit and the four principles was an obvious problem for the leadership. As we shall see, this was something particularly difficult for Hu Yaobang.

If there did not appear to be too much focus on the defects of the first stage among the provincial representatives, a significant concern of this group was the disorder (*luan*) in society that needed to be curbed. The wall-posters were considered a key factor, becoming the focus of discussion in the East China group, with.

³⁹⁰ Conference Bulletin Jingxi, no. 25, April 2, 1979.

representatives from Shanghai, Zhejiang, and Fujian speaking out. Shanghai, whose leader Peng Chong had complained to the Center about the disruptive consequences of emancipated thought, apparently took the lead. The city's delegates referred to the demonstrations on the city's "Democracy Square" that had been significant since the start of the year, reporting that both old cadres and old workers were disgusted, leaving basic-level cadres dissatisfied with the reactionary *dazibao*, but not daring to do anything about them. A Zhejiang representative chipped in with a list of negative consequences of such posters, notably making it difficult to solve the contradictions among the people, making it easy for bad people to cause disturbances, and obstructing the key objectives of the Four Modernizations as well as stability and unity.³⁹¹ Yet the problem of ideological *luan* within the official apparatus was arguably a more significant disruption for the provinces. Delegates from Zhao Ziyang's Sichuan province expressed concern about such a disorientation, noting that some cadres and masses had "a little bit of chaotic thought" that was difficult to avoid under the circumstances but complicated their carrying out heavy practical duties.³⁹² The East China representatives pointed to the same problem, addressing the relationship between theoretical workers and cadres doing practical

³⁹¹ Conference Bulletin Jingxi, no. 13, March 30, 1979.

³⁹² Conference Bulletin Jingxi, no. 7, March 29, 1979.

work and noting their failure to achieve unified views on some issues.³⁹³

This brings us back to the desire of the provincial delegates for greater clarity on the ideological front in a situation of attacks on the new Party line and confusion that we have noted. While the striking statement by the Jilin delegation suggests a no-holds-barred defense of the Third Plenum, the dominant position was a search for balance. Although broadly sympathetic to thought emancipation and democracy, at the meeting of the East China representatives delegates complained that the national view had both insufficient and excessive aspects, and guidance from above was insufficiently specific.³⁹⁴ The Anhui representatives noted that disturbances, democracy, and emancipation had all been overdone in the recent period, yet they also cited places where there had been insufficient democracy. The Fujian delegates added that without clear explanations it would be difficult to avoid a one-sided understanding.³⁹⁵ Another conference bulletin, on a March 29 meeting, expressed concern that positions that had been articulated during the first stage and that were reflected in the media were generally unbalanced, with "some comrades" suggesting that such

³⁹³ Conference Bulletin Jingxi, no. 15, March 30, 1979.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁵ Conference Bulletin Jingxi, no. 10, March 29, 1979.

one-sided media commentary raised the danger of the old *luan* giving rise to a new *luan*.³⁹⁶ While clearly there were varying tendencies among the provincial delegates, in the end a more “balanced” position based on Deng’s speech was accepted, whether as a matter of political discipline or reflecting genuine belief it was necessary in substance.³⁹⁷ Deng’s speech, in fact, had tried to steer a course between the two conflicting positions, but the emphasis was on the four principles, thus inevitably producing reservations, whether among the chastened theorists of the first stage, the practically

³⁹⁶ Conference Bulletin Jingxi, no. 14, March 30, 1979.

³⁹⁷ The third set of meetings during the second stage, that of military participants summoned to the forum, despite some interesting comments, were much more regimented than those of either the Friendship or Jingxi Hotel groups. The 15 bulletins of the three undefined “military systems” were only about half the number for each of the other groups, no identification of speakers was provided beyond “comrades,” the bulletins were consistently brief, they appeared in a clear sequence, and the basic position was unified. While there was overlap with some opinions at the Jingxi meeting, there were distinct differences in terms of emphasis. These included: greater criticism of the first stage of the forum, notably for a lack of caution in carrying out the spirit of the Third Plenum; a strong emphasis on strengthening political work and the need to increase study of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought; emphasis on the initial goals of the 1978 work conference, the shift in focus of Party work to economic construction, to be achieved by truth from facts and concrete analysis of new problems; and full-throated support of Deng’s speech and the four principles, which were presented as the fundamental guarantee and the only correct path for realizing modernization “with Chinese characteristics.” One striking discussion compared the four principles to Mao’s “three magic weapons” (armed struggle, Party building, and the united front) for a revolutionary victory, with these new “magic weapons” capable of grasping the victory of socialist modernization; Conference Bulletin Jundui, no. 5, March 31, 1979.

inclined provincial delegates, or the high Party leaders. Hu Yaobang was the clearest case of the latter.

While Hu Yaobang had been a significant proponent of emancipated thinking in 1978, if not always a forceful one, and he was hopeful of its further development through the theory forum, in various respects he was conflicted from early in the new year, notwithstanding the "spirit" of the Third Plenum. As we have noted, he found democratic manifestations on the streets unsettling, believed attacks on an imagined "two whatevers *pa*" during the forum's first stage were excessive, and was on the defensive by late February following bold progressive statements during that stage. With the second stage looming and Hu increasingly uneasy, following his meeting with Deng, Hu Qiaomu, and others on March 27, he was placed in a position of overseeing Deng's new direction. The morning of the next day, Hu Yaobang, apparently briefly, outlined the tasks of the second stage in broadly neutral terms, but with one revealing statement expressing both hopes for and reservations about the earlier meetings: "with the bountiful harvest of the first stage as the key point, take what is enough for action, and afterwards keep [excesses] under control."³⁹⁸

³⁹⁸ *Hu Yaobang sixiang nianpu*, vol. 1, p. 341; and Conference Bulletin Jingxi, no. 1, March 29, 1979.

Hu Yaobang found himself in a difficult place, both politically and emotionally, a situation described decades later by his son, sensitively but also with a degree of criticism. According to Hu Deping, Hu Yaobang's situation was marked by the addition of a lonely mood to a passionate personality. In the immediate circumstances, part of this was due to policy tensions between his advocacy of emancipated thought and the need to counter the disruptive tendencies, which he increasingly accepted as necessary. But arguably, an even more telling aspect was the high-ranking position of the Party general secretary to which he had risen. Hu Deping describes Hu Yaobang as feeling deeply that his current task and work pressure were very heavy; he was now required to study many issues comprehensively and he could no longer consider issues as he did from the perspective of a particular department. In Hu Deping's view, his father struggled until his death with the burden of loneliness coupled with his passionate personality.³⁹⁹

The immediate political dilemma for Hu Yaobang was how to position himself with regard to the four principles. Until the day of Deng's speech Hu's role apparently had been minimal,⁴⁰⁰ but on the

³⁹⁹ Hu Deping, "Yaobang tongzhi zai 'zhenli biao zhun' (xia)."

⁴⁰⁰ Goldman, "Hu Yaobang's Intellectual Network," p. 235, reports that after a draft of the speech had been circulated Hu relayed many suggestions from delegates for changes to the speech was circulated, but there were few final

30th he adopted the inevitable decision to support the four principles. In talking with Wu Jiang on that day, Hu said that ever since Deng had highlighted the four principles, which had quite exceeded his expectations, he was concerned about conflict between these principles and the emancipation of thought, concluding it was necessary to unify the two while sticking to opposition to dogmatism. He further told Wu Jiang that, for the sake of Deng's authority and to avoid a different voice, he had decided not to hold a general discussion or to speak himself.⁴⁰¹ Four days later, on the last day of the conference, Hu did address the forum, but in a manner reflecting his concerns and situation. In contrast to his speech at the start of the first stage of the forum, which had formally been submitted to and approved by both Hua and Deng, this effort was prepared in haste, not formally submitted to the Center, and presented as a personal opinion, although reportedly it was subsequently praised by Li Xiannan and later Deng. Indeed, Hu began his talk with a self-effacing statement that he had nothing to say because Deng had already spoken. He also accepted Deng's critical comment that propaganda work had been lacking in recent months and he assumed personal

changes and Hu was ineffective in his lobbying. We question the claim that a draft had been circulated, as we have seen no indication of it in Chinese sources.

⁴⁰¹ *Hu Yaobang sixiang nianpu*, vol. 1, p. 343; and Hu Deping, "Yaobang tongzhi zai 'zhenli biao zhun' (xia)."

responsibility. But since everyone wants me to talk, "let me say a little bit."⁴⁰²

The content of Hu's talk is indicative of his inner conflict. As Hu Deping later put it, he had innumerable matters in his heart, but there was much he was not allowed to deal with. In the speech, Hu Yaobang sought to support Deng's view but in a nuanced way. He stressed his own understanding of the four principles as realizing the Four Modernizations. Although in dealing with the doubtful, Hu called for an educational approach in line with Deng's speech, but he went further by alluding to the view, expressed by Hua in their early January discussions, that an anti-rightist struggle no longer had any role. Although acknowledging his own mistakes for propaganda work that had been too one-sided in opposing rigid ideology, Hu also commented that although cadres and the masses should give due attention to the issues raised by Deng and should observe practical results, their reactions should not be excessive. In contrast to Deng's apparent failure to mention the criterion debate, Hu did cite it but not in the sharp terms of the 1978 debate; instead, he basically advocated a pragmatic approach of letting cadres and the people test policies and then, after a period of time, to look back at the results. A final

⁴⁰² Hu Deping, "Yaobang tongzhi zai 'zhenli biao zhun' (xia)." An excerpt from the speech appears in *Hu Yaobang sixiang nianpu*, vol. 1, pp. 345-47. The full speech is included in the conference documents made available to the authors.

comment is related to what Hu's speech did not address—the need to unify the four principles and the emancipation of thought that he had emphasized in his comments to Wu Jiang on the 30th. Yet, as later observed by Hu Deping, although his father was deeply concerned about a possible schism between the two ideological outlooks, he failed to address how to prevent such a possibility on April 3 nor did he support a comrade who sought to discuss the issue at the final session of the conference. Hu Deping has concluded that this reflected “certain limitations of [Hu Yaobang's] thinking at the time.”⁴⁰³

In fact, there was little Hu Yaobang, or for that matter Deng, could have done to heal the divide. Any possibility of unifying thought, the original aim of Ye Jianying's proposal for the theory forum, had long been lost. In theory circles, Wang Dongxing's crude efforts to stifle the criterion debate produced sharp contention that was exacerbated by developments at the work conference even before the beginning of the forum. The more critical factor was the wider uncertainty produced by the work conference and plenum, together with the unresolved consequences of the Cultural Revolution and questions about Mao. As we have seen, the scope and rapidity of change emerging from the Third Plenum reached well beyond the

⁴⁰³ Hu Deping, “Yaobang tongzhi zai ‘zhenli biao zhun’ (xia).”

official theorists, leaving cadres throughout the system confused about the Party's direction and many believing a rightist turn had taken place. Deng and the four principles provided some markers regarding what was unacceptable, but they could not resolve the tensions between the beneficiaries of the old "rigid" system and those pushing for innovation, or the substantial perception of opposition between "three" [the Third Plenum] and "four" [the March principles]. Nor were Deng and the broader top leadership willing to crack down on debate. Rather than unity, the forum was followed by ongoing conflict.

Despite considerable if varying pressure, the progressives who had spoken out during the first stage of the forum continued to voice their earlier opinions on emancipating thought and democracy and they gained some backing in sympathetic media outlets. Wu Jiang organized manuscripts prepared during the forum but not delivered into an article on discriminating between the two ideological lines, which was published in *RMRB* and *GMRB*. Li Honglin, a noted voice during the first stage, published an April *RMRB* article attacking "ultra-leftist socialism" and distinguishing the nation and the people from the Party and the political system. Li continued with a series of articles from May to September, developing arguments on the relationship between the "three" and the "four," all emphasizing the emancipation of thought. In Hu Deping's words, these efforts drew

brutal attacks from some inside the Party.⁴⁰⁴ Others making similar arguments, arguably as a consequence of working in less-exposed academic organizations or having taken less-challenging positions during the forum's first stage, apparently suffered few attacks.⁴⁰⁵ In contrast, having the most exposed position as organizer of the forum and having obviously conflicted views about the four principles, Hu Yaobang could not escape pressure and criticism.

Hu Yaobang's conflicted situation was reflected in several ways. Given his role and assessment of the situation, he had to support the four principles, but his reservations were evident. He largely talked about three cardinal principles, seldom mentioning the dictatorship of the proletariat and instead speaking more about democracy, the rule of law, and the "people's democratic dictatorship." At a symposium on June 15, Hu criticized negative remarks that did not conform to the emancipation of thought, noting a very bad atmosphere in the Party, including the attacks on the Third Plenum. The next day, at a meeting at the Party School, he revealed his intense internal conflicts,

⁴⁰⁴ Hu Deping, "Yaobang tongzhi zai 'zhenli biao zhun' (xia)"; and Goldman, "Hu Yaobang's Intellectual Network," p. 238.

⁴⁰⁵ Goldman, "Hu Yaobang's Intellectual Network," pp. 238-40, discusses those who apparently basically avoided attack. The main case discussed is Li Shu, a distinguished historian and editor of *Lishi yanjiu* [Historical Research]. Li, in his post-forum articles, admitted to a recent change in his belief that the only way to achieve intellectual vitality was to clearly demarcate academia from politics. Now, however, he concluded that freedom of speech on academic issues was impossible if it could not be applied to political questions.

saying he had suggested to the Center that his duties be reduced to a part-time job, fearing that he could not do well, that “we even do not have a solution to tell our secretaries and children.” In another two days, as seen in one of the quotations at the head of this paper, Hu addressed a National People's Congress session, observing that “many comrades” had criticized him for supporting activities that encouraged anarchism, but he declared he would hold to his opinion. A week and a half later, however, Hu spoke to his son in more confident terms, saying that in the second half of the year he would grasp two things, light industry and youth unemployment, apparently the first economic work ever assigned to him by the Center.⁴⁰⁶ Although his positive reaction can be interpreted as Hu welcoming a respite from the ideological problems that had unnerved him, it also matches his belief that the best way forward to solve such problems was to do effective work on the major issues facing the country. This was also the general view of the Party Center.

The Criterion of Truth Make-up Lesson (zai buke). Although Deng prioritized dealing with deviations from the “right” in his four cardinal principles speech, his basic attitude during the post-Mao

⁴⁰⁶ Hu Deping, “Yaobang tongzhi zai ‘zhenli biao zhun’ (xia).” Cf. *Hu Yaobang sixiang nianpu*, vol. 1, pp. 373-75, 377, 383.

period was to “be wary of the right, but chiefly oppose the left.”⁴⁰⁷ This was also clearly the view of the Standing Committee at the time, as indicated by Hua’s NPC work report on June 18 that prominently praised the criterion of truth debate in emancipating thought.⁴⁰⁸ As with so much concerning developments in the ideological arenas, detailed information on the interactions among the top leadership is largely missing, but the general gloss of PRC sources, giving Deng primary credit for the shift back to emphasis on the criterion of truth—by mid-summer widely characterized as a “make-up lesson” in studying theory, is broadly persuasive.⁴⁰⁹ Such an adjustment was

⁴⁰⁷ Interview with former PLA propaganda official, September 2013. This was perhaps only a vague idea in mid-1979, with Deng not expressing it clearly until his January-February 1992 southern trip. See *Deng Xiaoping wenxuan* [Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping], vol. 3 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1993), pp. 370-83.

⁴⁰⁸ See *BR*, no. 27 (1979), p. 6. During this period, the spirit of the NPC session was linked to that of the Third Plenum. See, e.g., *RMRB*, July 6, 1979, citing the aim of continuing the criterion discussion. In any case, Hua’s report (p. 22) also declared that the four principles were essential for realizing modernization.

In fact, there is evidence that Hua tilted more in the direction of the criterion view than even Deng and others. According to Deng Liqun, in discussions on the work report, Hua questioned affirmation of the dictatorship of the proletariat given the diminishing role of class struggle but, in effect, he was overruled by a group consisting of Deng, Li Xiannian, Chen Yun, Yao Yilin, Hu Yaobang, Hu Qiaomu, and himself. Deng Liqun’s talk at the Sixth Plenum, June 30, 1981. Document available in the Fairbank Center Collection, Fung Library, Harvard.

⁴⁰⁹ While this can be expected from official Deng-era Party history, the more balanced general view of Hu Deping, “Yaobang tongzhi zai ‘zhenli biao zhun’ (xia),” also provides this account.

needed, and as author of the tilt in the other direction and the increasingly regarded most important Party leader, it was a natural fit.

A likely indication of Deng's leading role came in the military within two months of the four principles speech. On May 20, the GPD issued a document on deepening study of the spirit of the Third Plenum and the work conference. On the 21st, *JFJB* published a forceful commentator's article, complaining that many PLA units had not effectively carried out study of the criterion argument, leaving many comrades not understanding the importance of practice. Here, apparently for the first time, the concept of a "make-up lesson" was raised, with the key aim of newly studying the documents of the Third Plenum. The potential impact increased when the article was reprinted the following day in *RMRB*.⁴¹⁰ Moreover, according to Hu Deping, "during this period" Deng made "non-stop inspection visits" to places such as Tianjin, Shandong, and Shanghai, speaking on the Party's ideological and organizational lines and repeating the need to guard against the "two whatevers."⁴¹¹ Hu Deping's timing is off or

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*; *JFJB*, May 21, 1979; and Jiang Siyi, ed., *Zhongguo gongchandang jundui zhengzhi gongzuo qishinian shi: Zai "wenhua dageming" zhong shou sunhai, zai gaige kaifang zhong chuangzao xin jumian* [Seventy-year History of the Communist Party's Military Political Work: Suffering Damage during the "Cultural Revolution," Creating a New Situation in Reform and Opening Up], vol. 6 (Beijing: Jiefangjun chubanshe, 1991), cited in Torigian, *Prestige, Manipulation, and Coercion* (Yale University Press, 2022), pp. 180, 275. ?

⁴¹¹ Hu Deping, "Yaobang tongzhi zai 'zhenli biao zhun' (xia)."

simply vague, with Deng's month-long absence from Beijing lasting from July 10 to August 10, i.e., beginning after the NPC session, and it also included a notable tour of Anhui. The critical event in the accepted narrative is a speech on July 29 to the Party Standing Committee of the navy in Qingdao that purportedly featured an attack on the "two whatevers."⁴¹² On July 9, the day before he set out, Deng called attention to leftism in the PLA Military Academy.

It is unclear precisely how significant the PLA issue was in launching the "make-up lesson," but some influence appears certain. After reading a report on ideological problems at the academy, Deng commented that the materials provided were very important, should be distributed to the Politburo and Standing Committee members to have a look, and everyone should consider them a bit.⁴¹³ Deng reportedly had raised concern a month earlier, telling Hu Qiaomu and Deng Liqun that one-third of the people at the academy did not understand or doubted the policies of the Third Plenum. To the extent Deng placed emphasis on this perceived situation, he overreacted to accounts that one-third of the students, or even the senior officers, were not in sympathy with the plenum. Joseph

⁴¹² See *Deng nianpu*, vol. 1, pp. 534-45; and *Selected Works of Deng (1975-1982)*, pp. 196-99. On Anhui, in our book we will discuss the view that Deng finally made up his mind to move against Hua during a holiday on the scenic Yellow Mountain on July 12-15.

⁴¹³ *Deng nianpu*, vol. 1, p. 534.

Torigian ably discusses this question based on documentary sources and his interviews with senior Party historians who have deep knowledge of the situation. A memoir by someone who lived through the situation makes the case strongly. In this account, an investigator had concluded that one-third of the students completely supported the plenum, one-third basically supported it but had difficulties understanding certain questions, and the final one-third disagreed with reversing the verdicts on the Tiananmen incident but did not oppose the plenum as a whole. The memoir writer concludes, "It would be accurate to say that about one-third were resentful of the plenum, or did not understand this or that specific policy, but saying they opposed [the plenum] is an exaggeration."⁴¹⁴ In any case, the one-third figure stuck in Deng's mind. In his July 29 talk to the navy, in a section later removed from the official account Deng spoke of people still upholding the "two whatevers" as making up "about one-third of all units."⁴¹⁵

⁴¹⁴ See Torigian, *Prestige, Manipulation, and Coercion* (Yale University Press, 2022), pp. 179-80, 274-75. The memoir is Zhang Guanghua, *Zhenshi de huiyi (xuji)* [True Memory (part 2)] (Beijing: Beijing shidai nongchao wenhua fazhan gongsi, 2010).

One of our own interviews with a former PLA journalist, October 2013, portrays a deeper divide at the academy based on a discussion in May or June 1979 with a figure at the academy: one-third of senior officers supported Mao, Hua, and the Cultural Revolution, another third supported Deng, and the final third sat on the fence. While we have great faith in and admiration for our source, we regard this inside assessment as greatly exaggerated.

⁴¹⁵ As reported in Wu Jiang, *Shinian de lu*, pp. 90-91.

While Deng's concern with undermining the Third Plenum and the need for remedial action is clear, the general narrative requires a nuanced assessment. Putting aside for the moment the July 29 talk, in a manner similar to his September 1978 visit to the Northeast,⁴¹⁶ the material on his month-long trip in *Deng nianpu* is in some tension with the official (and Hu Deping's) view. In the reports on each stop of his tour, which generally are not extensive but can be expected to highlight support for the narrative, mention of the criterion of truth only appears twice, quite positively in Shandong on July 28 and somewhat in passing in Tianjin on August 9. Moreover, a negative comment in Shanghai on July 21, concerning cadres who still stuck to the "two whatevers," was the only time the concept was recorded.⁴¹⁷ In broad terms, Deng was indeed supporting the line of the Third Plenum. The basic thrust, however, was in now familiar terms—an essential link to the Four Modernizations, practice as critical for economic advance, and the importance of stability and unity. The ideological line was essential for the political line but still required more work, and the new emphasis was on the organizational line, repeatedly referred to as the question of successors. This was highly pragmatic, taking up the need for bringing in younger cadre cohorts

⁴¹⁶ See *Deng nianpu*, vol. 1, pp. 373-83.

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 537, 539, 544. Deng's criticism of cadres who stuck to the "two whatevers" was, in a sense, balanced by comments on those who worshipped the West.

and for providing trained specialists who were in very short supply.⁴¹⁸ In addition, much of Deng's recorded remarks addressed concrete matters in the various localities that he inspected, such as issues at Shanghai's Baoshan steelworks, deficiencies in Tianjin's light industry, and the potential for tourist development in Anhui and Qingdao.⁴¹⁹

How does Deng's talk on the 29th with navy leaders fit in with his other comments on his tour of selected localities? While we know of some alterations that were made between what he said in summer 1979 and publication of his *Selected Works* in 1982,⁴²⁰ we are largely restricted to the official version. In terms of the general message, there is considerable continuity with his statements throughout his mid-July to mid-August tour. Prominent themes were again raised: the primary objective of the Four Modernizations, the importance of stability and unity, the ideological line as necessary for realizing the political line, and a shift in emphasis to the organizational line, including specifications on what it meant. We have little doubt that the criterion of truth was raised, as was claimed in 1982 and that this also probably applied to the "two whatevers." The issue is one of emphasis, very possibly deliberately foreshadowing subsequent

⁴¹⁸ See *ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 537, 539-40, 544-45.

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 535, 538, 540, 545.

⁴²⁰ Under the title "The Organizational Line Guarantees the Implementation of the Ideological and Political Lines," in *Selected Works of Deng (1975-1982)*, pp. 196-99.

attacks on Hua as a “whateverist.” As with Deng’s September 16, 1978, talk in the Northeast, both official texts began with similar attacks on the “two whatevers,” although only the 1979 talk highlights the criterion of truth. In the Northeast case, as indicated by an alternate *nianpu* text showing the issue was far less prominent, there was at least an element of distortion. There possibly is a similar distortion in the *Selected Works* version of the navy talk, particularly in light of Deng’s apparently brief mention of the “whatevers” in Shanghai eight days earlier and as suggested less strongly in the *Nianpu* account of Deng’s comments.⁴²¹

The few specific changes from the actual talk that we are aware of can be explained in ways that are not essential to the overall narrative or the critical political developments at this juncture.⁴²²

⁴²¹ There are some distinctions in the relationship between the *Selected Works* versions and the *Nianpu* reports of Deng’s September 16 and July 29 remarks. In both cases, the *Nianpu* entries conclude with notes acknowledging that the *Selected Works* contain a part of the respective talks. In the September 16 case, the distortion in the official version is the prominence given to the “two whatevers” by placing the issue at the head of the text. Regarding the July 29 talk, both the 1982 and the subsequent *Nianpu* versions begin with the asserted struggle of the “two whatevers” and the criterion of truth, although the *Selected Works* pays further attention to the matter and the *Nianpu* does not. More interesting differences are what the *Nianpu* text adds to the official version and what it does not repeat. This *Nianpu* text discusses various navy issues that the *Selected Works* does not. More striking, it makes no mention of Deng’s suggestive remarks about the ability of senior revolutionaries to change successors who do not work out, which we discuss below.

⁴²² Without a complete text of the original, there are some indications of differences. We have already noted Wu Jiang’s report that the original included a

What we address briefly here, pending more comprehensive research, is the issue of whether this speech, together with other developments on Deng's summer tour, marked a specific effort on Deng's part to undermine Hua. Some significant PRC officials certainly believed it did, e.g., a navy admiral during the November 1980 Politburo meetings attacking Hua, who suggested that Deng's 1979 criticism of the navy was aimed at the Party Chairman.⁴²³ The overall context is that at some point between the middle of 1979 and the start of 1980, Deng decided to move against Hua and then he acted to effect the result.

Two aspects of Deng's comments suggest a possible foreshadowing of what was to come. First, the public airing of the "two whatevers"—that is, at a meeting with a significant group of Party officials, as opposed to a small number of private discussions where Deng had criticized the "whatevers." The only previous exception occurred in the Northeast, a situation that Deng claimed privately was a bold step, yet he restricted distribution of his

reference to one-third of navy units having people still upholding the "whatevers," but this was later deleted. Another indication of an alteration comes from Hu Deping, "Yaobang tongzhi zai 'zhenli biao zhun' (xia)," which reports Deng's original comment of "don't think China cannot mess up," citing current arguments for "another Cultural Revolution"; concern over chaos remained in the 1982 version but mention of the Cultural Revolution was eliminated.

⁴²³ Interview with senior Party historian using documents about the 1980 meetings, October 2012.

remarks.⁴²⁴ But things had changed drastically from the previous September: the “two whatevers” had come under withering attack at the work conference and then the theory forum and Hua had made a self-criticism in that regard. Yet Deng had not expressed “open” criticism of the concept, obviously aware of Hua’s inevitable vulnerability on the question, but now he did. Second, the need for attention to the organizational line. While illogical given Deng’s emphasis on the need for young leaders and the importance of successors, this was presented in a way suggestive of problems for Hua, if the available text is what was actually said on the 29th. In the *Selected Works* version only, Deng recalls Wang Hongwen’s 1975 wait-and-see comment for ten years, picking up on the need for competent successors, not radicals like Wang. Back in 1975, Deng reacted by talking of cultivating Hua as a leading candidate.⁴²⁵ Moreover, only five months earlier, during the military meeting on the eve of the war with Vietnam, Deng mused about his mortality and commented reassuringly about “our [youthful] Chairman Hua.”⁴²⁶ At

⁴²⁴ See *Deng nianpu*, vol. 1, pp. 401-402; and Yu Guangyuan, *Wo yi Deng Xiaoping*.

⁴²⁵ See Teiwes and Sun, *End of the Maoist Era*, p. 311. In discussions with Li Xiannian, they both agreed that Ji Dengkui was another worthy candidate.

⁴²⁶ Deng Xiaoping speech at the meeting of Party, government, and army cadres of the vice-ministerial level and above (February 16, 1979), internal Party document made available to the authors.

the end of July, however, the reference to Wang Hongwen took a different turn: "We must take the long view and select competent successors for our cause *while we are still around* ... [and] if we find we've chosen the wrong people, *we can still change them for others.*"⁴²⁷ While this perhaps is a reference to the successor generation broadly, the implication that the old revolutionaries would decide might have caused Hua concern if it had been said on the occasion and he had focused on it.

Whatever the political meaning of what happened in Qingdao and elsewhere on Deng's tour, his navy talk called for "make-up lessons" on the criterion of truth. In August and September, according to Deng's instructions, such lessons were introduced in eight military regions plus the air force, navy, and second artillery, with over 2,600 study groups created throughout the military by the end of November.⁴²⁸ While Deng's intent by late spring to bolster the propaganda message in support of the Third Plenum "spirit" and the criterion of truth is clear, in our analysis none of this had, on its merits, any hint of conflict with Hua who, if anything, was more inclined to

⁴²⁷ *Selected Works of Deng (1975-1982)*, p. 198 (emphasis added).

⁴²⁸ Torigian, "Prestige, Manipulation, and Coercion" (PhD diss.), pp. 428-29, 431 and personal communication from former PLA journalist, May 2013, who recalled seeing Deng's instructions at the start of August. It is possible that our PLA source is mistaken as to the timing of Deng's instructions since the call for a "make-up lesson" had already appeared in *JFJB* on May 21.

mitigate the impact of the four cardinal principles.⁴²⁹ Indeed, a contemporary Xinhua report concerning Deng's "important speech" provides a different view of the navy meeting: it studied both the Third Plenum communiqué and Hua's recent NPC work report, while conducting "a lively discussion" on the criterion issue. According to the report, the participants unified their thinking and closely united around the Party Central Committee "headed by Comrade Hua Guofeng."⁴³⁰

During this same August-September period, other indications of an increased effort to promote the "make-up lesson" unfolded. A striking case involved Wu Jiang, who had continued to promote progressive views in the wake of the four principles at the theory forum, and who, as a result, suffered, according to Hu Deping, brutal attacks within the Party. Now, however, Wu Jiang was sought out to promote lessons on the criterion. Liu Lantao and Song Renqiong, the respective heads of the Central United Front Department and Organization Department, summoned Wu to their units for informal discussions and to give lectures and reports and to participate in national conferences organized by the two departments. One of Wu's

⁴²⁹ See above, note 408. Our view is contrary to that of senior Party historian Xiao Donglian, noted in Torigian, *Prestige, Manipulation, and Coercion* (Yale University Press, 2022), pp. 181, 175 suggesting both Deng's effort to overcome Hua's resistance and a significant challenge to Deng for control of the military, neither of which we find plausible.

⁴³⁰ Xinhua News Agency, Beijing, August 17, 1979.

tasks was to organize Deng's remarks relevant to the "make-up lesson" during his provincial tour for distribution by Xinhua's internal reference reports. Meanwhile, other central departments and local provinces and municipalities organized corresponding studies and in-depth discussions.⁴³¹

While surely there was a consensus among the top leaders to repair the damage to the Third Plenum line, the constraints of the larger situation were also recognized. As one comment looking back at the time puts it, "It is the fantasy of scholars [that inertia in people's thinking can be reversed within a short period of time by theoretical articles], mature politicians do not act like this."⁴³² Indeed this "mature" approach was how the leadership behaved as the "make-up lesson" proceeded and the 30th anniversary of the PRC approached. Just before and during the Fourth Plenum on September 25-28, Hua noted that there had not really been a shift in the focus of Party work, the impact of the "gang of four" and of Mao's later years generally still lingered. Although Deng had effectively dealt with the ideological chaos among the masses in the spring, economic work remained the most important political issue.⁴³³ The anniversary was

⁴³¹ Hu Deping, "Yaobang tongzhi zai 'zhenli biao zhun' (xia)"; and "Zhenli biao zhun: Luo Ruiqing zhichi Hu Yaobang duikang Maoban." Cf. Torigian, *Prestige, Manipulation, and Coercion* (Yale University Press, 2022), pp. 181, 275.

⁴³² "Zhenli biao zhun: Luo Ruiqing zhichi Hu Yaobang duikang Maoban."

⁴³³ From summary document of the Fourth Plenum made available to the authors.

an occasion for a major speech by Ye Jianying that would lay down the CCP's broad political position "to guide the work of the whole Party, [army and country] for a long period." Preparation of this speech was a major activity involving opinions from a wide section of Party members as well as broader circles, such as leading members of the democratic parties. Most importantly, the draft speech was closely scrutinized by the top leaders, none more so than Deng. The draft was finally submitted at the top agenda item at the Fourth Plenum, approved, and then delivered by Ye on September 29.⁴³⁴

As befit the occasion, Ye's address provided an official overview of PRC history since 1949, in effect a forerunner of the 1981 Historical Resolution, albeit a limited and tepid overview, together with an account of the Party's objectives and policies going forward. It is important to emphasize that Deng was more than a close follower in the drafting of the speech, he was the decisive figure in shaping it. He met at least three times with Hu Yaobang, Hu Qiaomu, and Deng Liqun, the drafters of the document, to set themes and to make revisions.⁴³⁵ We return to Deng's personal views below after first assessing the speech as delivered by Ye. The historical narrative had to deal with both the Cultural Revolution and Mao, the inevitable

⁴³⁴ See the Communiqué of the Fourth Plenum, in *BR*, no. 40 (1979), pp. 32-34.

⁴³⁵ Deng met with the two Hu's and Deng Liqun in the latter third of August, and on September 4 and 12, to discuss the speech; *Deng nianpu*, vol. 1, pp. 549, 552-53, 554-55.

overriding issues of the entire period since the arrest of the “gang of four” and issues that Deng clearly indicated at the time of the work conference and plenum should be handled with utmost care. Respect for the late Chairman was reasserted, with Ye’s address beginning with “our great leader and teacher” who established the Republic and then proceeding with heartfelt praise of Mao’s accomplishments through to the 1956 Eighth Congress. After that, problems and mistakes were acknowledged, with a hint that Mao was not totally blameless, but with the larger claim that, much as during the revolutionary period, Mao saved the day.⁴³⁶ The Cultural Revolution was inevitably more difficult, and the treatment was essentially little different from what had preceded in official explanations, placing the entire blame on Lin Biao and the “gang”—whether for seeking to usurp power as in the initial criticism or with the addition of an ultra-leftist ideological line. Nevertheless, without naming him, Mao was inevitably responsible for the ideological premise of revisionism

⁴³⁶ See Ye’s speech in *BR*, no. 40 (1979), pp. 12-15. The text acknowledges the mistaken broadening of the attack on bourgeois Rightists in 1957, the violation of objective economic laws during the Great Leap in 1958, and the carrying out of an inept struggle against Right opportunism in 1959, then going on to note that the Chairman had engaged in a self-criticism in 1962. Yet Mao was praised for his vision at the start of the Leap in emancipating minds and giving scope to the people’s creative energy, and for quickly perceiving errors and putting forward the guiding ideas to correct the situation.

threatening the Party, which had led to the subsequent chaos.⁴³⁷ Arguably, the most important statement was that this was only a preliminary assessment of history and that a formal summing up, especially of the Cultural Revolution, would be made at a serious meeting.⁴³⁸

The unavoidable concessions, especially the attempt to provide a plausible account of the still raw sore of the “ten years of chaos,” were overwhelmed by obeisance to the “great leader and teacher,” without whom the People’s Republic would have been impossible and whose thought had guided all the Party’s victories; with the original spirit of Mao Zedong Thought revived, current and future successes were made possible. Where does this leave the question of ideological direction, especially at a time of implementing criterion “make-up lessons” in many organizations throughout the country? The answer is well short of the significance of the four cardinal principles. This does not negate the support for emancipating thought in Ye’s address, including an acknowledgment of the significance of the original criterion of truth article in May 1978 and the need to conduct deep-going and ongoing study and discussion

⁴³⁷ See *ibid.*, p. 15. The relevant passage in the speech has been cited by others, sometimes with different interpretations. E.g., Gewirtz, *Unlikely Partners*, p. 53, regards the argument as part of Deng’s forceful attack on the “two whatevers”; Joseph, *Critique of Ultra-Leftism*, p. 240, describes the same passage as a cautious observation that “barely maintained the legitimacy” of the movement.

⁴³⁸ Ye’s speech in *BR*, no. 40 (1979), p. 12.

of the criterion of truth on a national scale. But what Ye's speech does emphasize is the priority of the four principles. Not only do they appear well before the criterion in his speech but they are fundamentally more important. The four principles are presented as being essential for the Party's successes throughout PRC history, whether during the initial years of consolidating power and the smooth socialist transition or over the entire 17 years before the Cultural Revolution as a whole. The failures of the 1966-76 period are attributed to an inability to enforce the principles and the essence of the ten years "was a struggle over whether to uphold or destroy the four [cardinal] principles." The successes of the post-Mao period, moreover, are attributed to the Party's understanding of the four principles as being not only incomparably better than the ten years but also clearly surpassing even the 17 years.⁴³⁹

Despite the call for continuing in-depth study of the criterion—albeit not referred to as a "make-up lesson"—emancipated thought was essentially expressed in the pared-down version favored in Deng's March speech. Social practice as the criterion of truth was traced to Mao's 1937 essay *On Practice*, and this ideological line was solidified during the Yan'an rectification movement, with the core principles of seeking truth from facts and linking theory *and* practice.

⁴³⁹ See *ibid.*, pp. 12, 15, 16, 20.

In the post-Mao period, without any reference to the “two whatevers,” restoration of the facts-based approach went through stages. A telling significance was given to the 1977 introduction of “comprehensive and accurate Mao Zedong Thought” as the official ideology, a guideline that gave progressive theorists pause at the time and produced strong negative reaction in subsequent years.⁴⁴⁰ While the May 1978 criterion discussion from was given credit for preparing the way to the Third Plenum, practice was not presented as the *only* criterion of truth. Following the plenum, the new crucial Marxist theses and decisions included the shift in the focus of work and various prosaic policies in economic and cultural construction. The ultimate purpose of the ideological line was to support the Four Modernizations, and truth from facts meant a pragmatic approach that avoided blind and reckless behavior, respected objective laws, and systematically studied experiences, including foreign experiences, in a wide range of construction work.⁴⁴¹ It goes without saying that both specific facts and overall truths would ultimately be determined by the central leadership.

⁴⁴⁰ On these reactions, see Schoenhals, “The 1978 Truth Criterion Controversy,” pp. 252-54; and “Hu Jiwei tan Hu-Zhao shinian xinzheng.”

⁴⁴¹ See Ye’s speech in *BR*, no. 40 (1979), pp. 24-27. The English translation has been checked against the full Chinese text in *Sanzhong quanhui yilai: Zhongyao wenxian xuanbian (shang)* [Since the Third Plenum: Compilation of Important Documents, vol. 1] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1982), pp. 193-231.

The true author of Ye's speech was Deng Xiaoping; indeed, it can be said that the infirm Ye, who was only able to read the introductory and concluding sections, was in effect forced to deliver the address.⁴⁴² As indicated, in his meetings with Hu Yaobang, Hu Qiaomu, and Deng Liqun in late August and the first part of September, the key themes stressed by Deng were the four principles, Mao's great historical role, truth from facts, and the Four Modernizations, and with no mention of the criterion of truth in the provided excerpts.⁴⁴³ The most revealing indication of Deng's views came in a September 4 document, the day of one of his meetings with the two Hu's and Deng Liqun. As indicated in Ye's delivered speech, Deng began by declaring that a main feature of the last 30 years' struggle was between those who stuck to and those who deviated from the four principles. According to Deng, such principles should be the central theme of the speech. The main problem with the draft was that it did not say enough about Mao's achievements, and Deng expressed an awareness of those who did not go along with the opinion in the draft. There were various comments on the major events in Party history: the 1957 Anti-Rightist Campaign was

⁴⁴² In the absence of a head of state, as NPC Chairman Ye was the logical person to deliver the address. We have no information that he attempted to avoid this task, but the speech was clearly at variance with his position at the 1978 work conference (see Hu Deping, "Chongwen Ye Jianying 30 nianqian jianghua.")

⁴⁴³ See above, note 435, for the sources.

justified, the only problem was its excesses; the Great Leap still had to be affirmed, and the 1959 Lushan conference that led to a huge spike in famine deaths was “a small setback.” Deng had nothing critical to say about the Cultural Revolution, stating that the 1975 consolidation measures, for which he had gained so much credit, were all due to Mao, as was his own survival, observing that Zhou Enlai’s efforts to protect old cadres were powerless if the Chairman did not speak. Speaking of himself, Deng declared that without Mao’s protection “I wouldn’t be alive.”⁴⁴⁴

The most striking aspect of Deng’s statement came in his overall assessment of the relationship between Mao’s leadership to the Party’s achievements and failures: “[All] policies formulated by Chairman Mao were correct, our mistakes came from not insisting on Chairman Mao’s line.” More dangerous than the essential meaning of the “two whatevers,” with the couplet expressing everlasting obeisance to the late leader, Deng in effect was asserting that the disasters China had suffered under Mao were due to those whose thoughts were insufficiently emancipated to actually consider reality. The double irony is that this same position had appeared earlier in

⁴⁴⁴ “Deng Xiaoping guanyu qicao guoqing sanshi zhounian jianghua gao de tanhua jiyao” [Summary of Deng Xiaoping’s Talk on the Draft Speech for the 30th Anniversary National Day Celebration] (September 4, 1979), in Song Yongyi, ed., *The Chinese Cultural Revolution Database CD-ROM* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2002).

the February 1977 “two whatevers” editorial,⁴⁴⁵ but it was overlooked in the misguided belief that the couplet was declaration of an effort to prevent Deng’s return to work. We are not claiming Deng strictly believed this statement nor are we questioning Deng’s desire to mitigate attacks on Third Plenum policies. But we conclude that nine months after the plenum, his basic position was better represented by the four cardinal principles, that theoretical explorations that threatened Mao’s prestige had to be contained, and that the soundest ideological position was comprehensive and accurate Mao Zedong Thought that would be firmly grasped by the Party Center. Events from February 1977 to October 1979 produced many unanticipated theoretical developments and shifts in Deng’s ideological positions, but little of that fed into a Deng-Hua conflict, with the exception of a possible foreshadowing at Deng’s July navy meeting. But this would change in 1980.

Opposing Feudalism: A Progressive Theoretical Argument, and the Final Political Weapon against Hua

Although feudalism was one of the issues addressed in early post-Mao theoretical discourse, it ranked far below contention over rightist

⁴⁴⁵ See the February 7, 1977, *RMRB* editorial in *PR*, no. 8 (1977), p. 7.

or ultra-leftist distortions of Marxism in ideological debates and political consequences. Undoubtedly, the most striking discussion of the issue was Ye Jianying's December 13, 1978, speech at the end of the work conference that differed significantly from the speeches by Hua and especially Deng on the same day. As discussed earlier, in his talk Ye addressed the negative legacy of China's feudal past and the authoritarian culture it had created. While clearly going beyond his actual words, Hu Deping later summarized Ye's discussion of the consequences of feudalism as a proletarian dictatorship of "Marx plus the emperor," something that could only apply to Mao, especially in his "later years" of the Cultural Revolution.⁴⁴⁶ Just short of ten months later, in the 30th anniversary address that Ye was required to give, feudalism received a passing reference as a long social history that inevitably left vestiges detrimental to socialism but there was with no implied reference to Mao.⁴⁴⁷ But what did this issue have to do with any Deng-Hua conflict?

In truth, there were no genuine theoretical problems between Deng and Hua following Mao's death; there were only complicated political circumstances, and from the time of the 1978 work conference and the Third Plenum Hua's vulnerability over the "two whatevers." This more famous matter that allegedly sought to block

⁴⁴⁶ Hu Deping, "Chongwen Ye Jianying 30 nianqian jianghua."

⁴⁴⁷ Ye's speech, in *BR*, no. 40 (1979), p. 16.

Deng's return to work would become a key part of the fraudulent attack on Hua at nine Politburo meetings in November-December 1980. Before that, however, feudalism was depicted as being involved in an ostensible struggle between the two leaders beginning in spring 1980, even though Hua's power had already been neutered at the start of the year. This drama culminated in a noted speech by Deng in mid-August that purported to advocate a more institutionalized approach than, allegedly, Hua's. As Deng stated a few days later, "for a leader [Mao] to pick his own successor [Hua] is a feudal practice."⁴⁴⁸ Some scholarly analysis adopts this overview, arguing that Hua's late April address to a GPD political work conference was a last-ditch effort to seek military support in his struggle with Deng, an effort in which he adopted an "anti-rightist banner" to attack from the left.⁴⁴⁹ There is no evidence to support this, and Hua actually criticized feudalism on the occasion during a period when the issue arose on its merits. In fact, the unfolding of the matter underscores the vagaries in Deng's position.

The issue emerged out of the April 28-30 GPD conference, but it began with another better-known ideological issue—the slogan "foster proletarian ideology, eliminate bourgeois ideology." In fact, Hua, already a lame duck but still formally CMC chairman, dutifully

⁴⁴⁸ Interview with Fallaci, in *Selected Works of Deng (1975-1982)*, p. 328.

⁴⁴⁹ Notably, Baum, *Burying Mao*, pp. 92-93.

repeated the slogan in his speech, apparently prepared by GPD head Wei Guoqing, a slogan essentially ignored by Hua throughout the period of his leadership.⁴⁵⁰ Debate over the slogan had emerged in 1979, but and it was reignited by the April 1980 conference. It had two aspects. First, political/theoretical conflict between those wishing to promote the liberal currents of the Third Plenum, predominately intellectuals, with Hu Yaobang the most supportive leadership figure, and those concerned with emerging bourgeois liberalization, with Hu Qiaomu the most notable protagonist in the civilian sphere and Wei Guoqing in the military. The second aspect had broader elite and societal ramifications, with wide concern over foreign cultural influences such as clothing and particularly music.⁴⁵¹ It is important to note that neither Hu Qiaomu nor Wei Guoqing were pushing Cultural Revolution ideology; quite the contrary, at most they sought a (modified) pre-1966 orthodox Maoism. As reflected in Hu Qiaomu's statements in particular, they were worried about the destabilizing consequences of too much relaxation—precisely Deng's concern over the danger to Mao's reputation at the 1978 work conference, in his

⁴⁵⁰ Although falsely claimed to be the author of the slogan, Hua only used it two times in a major meeting. The first was his February 1978 NPC work report, the second at the April 1980 GPD conference.

⁴⁵¹ For a discussion of these aspects, see Deng Liqun, *Shierge chunqiu (1975-1987): Deng Liqun zishu* [Twelve Springs and Autumns (1975-1987): Deng Liqun's Autobiographical Account] (Hong Kong: Bozhi chubanshe, 2005), pp. 178-82; and Xiao Donglian, *Lishi de zhuangui*, pp. 356-68.

declaration of the Four Cardinal Principles in March 1979, and his views at the time of the 30th anniversary. Moreover, there is no evidence that Deng took a stand on the slogan in 1979; the underlying factor in Wei's confidence to proceed was that the author of the slogan had in fact been Deng—during the harsh Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1957.

Without the slogan, Hua's April speech would have hardly been noticed. He essentially read from the GPD script, noting that in the new period political work remained the "lifeblood of army work" and emphasizing the need to strengthen it, which, after all, was the role of Wei's department. The most interesting aspect of this sparsely publicized and condensed speech, however, concerns the circumstances of the slogan. According to Deng Liqun, who played an important role on the liberal side of the debate and who had direct access to Deng at critical points in the unfolding drama, the slogan, most likely written into Hua's speech by the GPD, was a Cultural Revolution relic. Wei Guoqing angrily rejected Deng Liqun's criticism, noting that propagation of the slogan had been approved by Deng Xiaoping. In any case, Hua went on to say that while *steadily* expanding proletarian ideology and *gradually* reducing the influence of bourgeois ideology, it was also necessary to reduce *feudal* ideology. We do not know if Hua had a role in inserting these phrases, but the dire consequences of centuries of feudalism had

been a significant part of the liberal argument since the Third Plenum. It would continue in intellectual and broader elite circles, even within Deng's personal circle, following the GPD conference, essentially with little if any reference to Hua. Yet Deng mobilized the issue against Hua in his oft-lauded August 18 speech on reforming the system of Party and state leadership.⁴⁵²

While we will not discuss in detail the substantive and political aspects of the emerging discussions on feudalism, we will outline the involved forces while focusing on Deng's in effect about-face on the proletarian/bourgeois slogan and the larger feudal issue. Although Hua's involvement apparently was rarely if at all raised, the slogan itself resulted in considerable debate and criticism. In a May Propaganda Department theoretical work conference, participants argued that the slogan was leftist and should be abolished. Propaganda head Wang Renzhong affirmed the slogan, but he was open-minded and let everyone speak. After the meeting, the department's theoretical section produced a briefing paper that presented the problems with the slogan, including a lament on the failure to clear up feudalism's detrimental impacts. The document was

⁴⁵² Summary of Hua's speech, *BR*, no. 20 (1980), pp. 7-8; and Deng Liqun, *Shierge chungju*, pp. 178-82. On the marginal involvement of Hua, Deng Liqun's detailed account only mentions him four times, essentially in his formal roles. In any case, the criticism of feudalism could have been part of Wei's outline, since it had routinely been part of leadership statements, including Hua's 1978 work report and Ye's 30th anniversary speech.

sent to the Party Center, but it was not issued. Meanwhile, from May 21 to June 2, the political work conference of the Guangzhou Military Region reflected on the differing opinions within the army. Guangzhou Military Region Political Commissar Xi Zhongxun, more notably Guangdong first Party secretary, felt the slogan was not scientific enough, but others disagreed, and the military region's Standing Committee was divided. This would lead to Wei Guoqing when Xi requested clarification from the GPD on June 25 and ultimately to Deng.⁴⁵³

Wei went to see Deng for instructions, and he reported several days later to the military region leadership that Deng had said the slogan was incomplete and it was not necessary for *RMRB* and *GMRB* to print it. Although *JFJB*, as a PLA organ, would continue to use the slogan, at the same time it had to explain it properly, including paying attention to feudalism (note: Hua's speech two months earlier had added feudalism to the slogan, whether at the initiative of Hua or Wei). Deng, subsequently in his major August speech, acknowledged that he had read the documents from the April GPD conference and had not found anything wrong at the time, but in June he was clearly concerned about its shortcomings. Where did Deng's new understanding come from? Obviously not from Hua. And although

⁴⁵³ Xiao Donglian, *Lishi de zhuangui*, p. 359; and Deng Liqun, *Shierge chungiu*, p. 179.

Hu Yaobang and Deng Liqun clearly supported the critical view, in opposition to Hu Qiaomu, the key influence came during a lengthy meeting on May 24 between Deng and then age 83 Li Weihan, a very senior Party figure and one who, in elite circles, was rumored to be highly disliked by Deng. On this occasion, in any case, Deng found much that was compelling in Li Weihan's arguments. Li began by criticizing the proletarian/bourgeois slogan, but he then moved on to discuss the danger of the patriarchal system born of feudalism that had reached its destructive apex during the Cultural Revolution. According to Deng Liqun, Li urged Deng to take the lead in opposing feudalism, arguing "there must be a leader and an authority," and you are most appropriate. This clearly suited Deng's ego, his actual status in the Party, and his plans for dealing with Hua, but he was reluctant to come forward strongly on the issue.⁴⁵⁴

On May 31, Deng called in Hu Qiaomu and Deng Liqun, his closest collaborators on theoretical matters, to discuss his meeting with Li Weihan. Actually, this was not the main topic of discussion, and Hu Qiaomu and Deng Liqun would later prepare two entries for Deng's *Selected Works* on that day that did not include the issues

⁴⁵⁴ Xiao Donglian, *Lishi de zhuangui*, pp. 359-62; and *Deng nianpu*, vol. 1, pp. 638, 642.

raised by Li.⁴⁵⁵ On the theoretical question, Deng noted that he had not asked questions about the slogan during the political work conference and he had tasked Deng Liqun with instructing Hua Nan, the official responsible for PLA media, to correctly interpret but not excessively publicize the slogan. Deng clearly was proceeding cautiously, reflecting on what he had told Li Weihan a week earlier—“I agree with you, I can only take it slowly and cannot be impatient, even though I am an impatient person.” That Deng had not been overly forceful on May 31 and during the following months can be seen in Hu Qiaomu’s ongoing efforts to tamp down the issue, as in writing to an enthusiastic Hu Yaobang on the need for careful preparation to avoid an explosion. In our analysis, Deng’s hesitancy had little to do with concerns about his leadership, which had truly already reached the “paramount leader” status and was under no threat from Hua but rather reflected the type of concern with stability that typically motivated Hu Qiaomu. However, in August Deng did follow Li Weihan’s urging stepping forward with a substantial attack on feudalism in his noted speech on reforming the political system.

⁴⁵⁵ *Deng nianpu*, vol. 1, pp. 641-43, records attention to Li’s theoretical views coming after a discussion on rural policy. Deng also commented on relations with fraternal communist parties, both issues presented in *Selected Works of Deng (1975-1982)*, pp. 297-301. Of course, the feudal issue raised by Li Weihan is covered in the *Selected Works* version of his August 18 speech, but it is revealing that priority and much more space in the May 31 *Nianpu* account is devoted to rural issues.

Although Hua is not mentioned in the substantial criticism of feudalism, at least in the *Selected Works* version, as Deng Liqun later put it, the essence of Deng's August 18 speech was directed at Hua to prepare for his resignation and to find a theoretical basis for it. The ultimate paradox is that such anti-feudal rhetoric was used to attack a leader, who had worked collectively and had had minimal claims of patriarchal authority, and to complete the transition to a leader [Deng] who had such authority in spades.⁴⁵⁶

The irony of Deng's address is that it was his first unambiguous weaponization of a theoretical issue against Hua, yet it came at a time when Hua had already decided to resign. Arguably more significant, it represented a shift in Deng's expressed views of Mao, now reaching a level of explicit criticism. It was relatively muted in the August 18 speech,⁴⁵⁷ but it reached a considerably sharper level in Deng's two-part interview with Oriana Fallaci on August 21 and 23, an interview that quickly became available internationally and thus within the Party

⁴⁵⁶ Xiao Donglian, *Lishi de zhuangui*, pp. 363-64, 368. For the only available full version of the speech, see *Selected Works of Deng (1975-1982)*, pp. 302-25. The argument against feudalism, notably that it impaired collective leadership and democratic centralism and posed problems like life tenure that had to be overcome, is found on pp. 311-21. Hua is mentioned only once, in a factual statement about personnel changes, i.e., that he would no longer concurrently serve as premier.

⁴⁵⁷ In this speech, Deng offers a mix of claims that Mao, or at least Mao Zedong Thought, opposed feudalism but also instances of how Mao was surrounded and influenced by feudal phenomena. See *Selected Works of Deng (1975-1982)*, pp. 312-14, 316-17, 318.

through internal reference materials. In this interview, Deng held to the position that Mao had been a great leader who would never be rejected by the Party or nation, but he was a leader who had made serious mistakes and would soon receive an objective assessment. Leaving specific mistakes aside, the general complaint was Mao's patriarchal behavior born of feudalism. Apart from choosing his own successor, Mao went counter to his own ideas, lost touch with reality, did not consistently practice democratic centralism, nor did he readily listen to different opinions.⁴⁵⁸ This shift in Deng's position underscored how Mao's political legacy stood at the center of the CCP's ideological dilemma and the country's ongoing trajectory.

Deng had gone from advocating comprehensive and accurate Mao Zedong Thought that paid homage to Mao, while seeking to keep control of ideology at the Party Center, to somewhat hesitant support of the criterion of truth that supported Mao's pragmatic truth-from-facts approach, but raised problems for the Chairman's prestige, to the four cardinal principles that sought to sustain Mao's prestige. As we have seen, despite efforts to alter the ideological balance by reemphasizing an innovative approach to work through "make-up lessons" on the criterion, by the time of the PRC's 30th anniversary Deng's fundamental position still centered on the four

⁴⁵⁸ See *ibid.*, pp. 327-29; and Oriana Fallaci, "Deng: Cleaning Up Mao's 'Feudal Mistakes,'" *Washington Post*, August 31, 1980.

principles. Yet 11-plus months later, while using the banner of feudalism that he aimed at Hua, Deng made a significant adjustment in his position on the late Chairman. In another irony, Deng was faced with the same overarching problem that Hua had faced from the start of the post-Mao period—how to move away from Maoist policies while retaining fealty to Mao, albeit under vastly different circumstances. During the initial period, Mao's imprint on the Party and society was so strong that, as Li Xin claimed, it was impossible to say Mao had made mistakes,⁴⁵⁹ which resulted in the crude "two whatevers" slogan that was never meant to prevent Deng's return to work or to set an inflexible, restrictive framework for practical work. Now, with the benefit of lowered tensions and the focus on economic work that Hua had begun, the need to deal with the negative aspects of Mao's legacy, especially the Cultural Revolution, could be dealt with. While Deng remained the strongest advocate of the great leader, Mao's mistakes had to be addressed.

Given the importance of ideology for guiding the direction of Marxist-Leninist systems and influencing elite conflict, the development of theoretical issues always had political ramifications. Yet paradoxically, such issues were fundamentally irrelevant to the

⁴⁵⁹ "Li Xin tongzhi de fayan" (February 2, 1979), internal Party document made available to the authors.

transition of power from Hua to Deng. As we have argued, the only unambiguous use of theory by Deng against Hua was the feudal issue, well after Hua's *de facto* loss of authority. While much remains opaque due to the lack of information concerning what actually transpired in the Standing Committee, there is little to indicate sharp clashes on ideology within the top body⁴⁶⁰ and certainly nothing resembling a power struggle between Hua and Deng. The main differences that can be deduced are that Hua was more reluctant to become involved in theoretical questions and he had reservations about the four cardinal principles, although he was willing to accept their necessity.⁴⁶¹ In this regard, Deng was more proactive in terms of ideological matters, quite different from the reversal-of-verdicts issues about which Hua clearly was much more proactive, if cautious.⁴⁶² Deng's greater theoretical involvement was relatively limited with respect to the progressive criterion of truth debate in 1978 but dominant regarding retreat from the four principles. Crucially, throughout all of Deng's gyrations, there were no signs of a

⁴⁶⁰ Strikingly, even though Wang Dongxing was clearly out of tune with his fellow Standing Committee members, in references to formal top leadership meetings there is no mention of a clash involving Wang and others, even in *Deng nianpu*, a source one would expect to report such clashes. An exception occurred during the November 1978 work conference, presumably after Wang Dongxing was attacked from below. See above, note 48.

⁴⁶¹ On the latter point, see above, notes 367, 408.

⁴⁶² See, e.g., Teiwes and Sun, "Hua Guofeng, Deng Xiaoping, and Reversing the Verdict on the 1976 'Tiananmen Incident.'"

threat to Deng's authority, regardless of whatever individual leaders may have thought about his specific positions and actions.

A final paradox is that while ideology writ large was critical, specific theoretical arguments generally had difficulties attracting the attention of the top leadership, notably in 1978 when economic and foreign policy issues dominated the agenda. In the context of the looser process created by the relaxed atmosphere under Hua, the activities of subordinate levels were able to alter the national agenda. This involved both accident and inevitability, as we discussed earlier, with critical relevance to the emergence and adoption of the criterion of truth at the Third Plenum.⁴⁶³ To briefly recapitulate, the criterion article, written with no top-level foreknowledge, was intended to be a theoretical piece that the authors did not believe would produce much controversy. But due to the crude reaction by Wang Dongxing, it became a *cause célèbre* in theory circles, attracting attention in broader Party circles and resonating with more emotional issues derived from the Cultural Revolution, notably the *pingfan* process for the movement's victims.

An atmosphere of struggle did emerge in theory circles—not leadership circles and sometimes with little relevance to actual

⁴⁶³ As argued by a senior Party historian cited above, note 303.

views⁴⁶⁴—and culminated in the sharp progressive attacks on alleged “whateverists” that Hu Yaobang considered inaccurate and excessive at the 1978 work conference and again at the 1979 theory forum. In the circumstances of the work conference, fuelled by the passions of the reversal of verdicts, the criterion position was formally approved, but it created significant resistance and soon resulted in Deng’s four principles. In the end, Hua’s tolerant atmosphere, ironically compounded by Wang Dongxing’s excesses, facilitated adoption of a progressive theoretical position that would have been unlikely otherwise, and then influenced the quasi-reversal of Deng’s four principles. Ultimately, the regime settled on a pragmatic truth-from-facts policy orientation that from the outset had been uncontroversial among the top leadership.

⁴⁶⁴ For example, a bitter relationship existed between Hu Qiaomu and Li Xin, even though both were fundamentally conservative with respect to the criterion article; see above, note 40. More broadly, in composing the famous February 1977 editorial those orthodox Party *xiucaj*, unjustly characterized as “whateverists,” advocated the study of Mao’s 1956 “Ten Great Relations,” Deng’s favorite Mao essay, and they had edited Volume V of Mao’s *Selected Works* that referred to Deng positively, citing Mao’s words that “It would lead to a mess if every single sentence, even of Marx’s, were followed”; vol. V, p. 304.