Approved for Release: 2014/07/29 C00620553

TITLE: Hu's a Reformist, Hu's a Conservative

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VOLUME: 31 ISSUE: Winter YEAR: 1987

Approved for Release: 2014/07/29 C00620553

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STUDIES IN INTELLIGENCE

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The Haos 好 *and Huais* 坏 *of Chinese political analysis**

HU'S A REFORMIST, HU'S A CONSERVATIVE

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> If names be not correct, language is not in accordance with the truth of things. If language be not in accordance with the truth of things, affairs cannot be carried on to success.
>
> —Confucius, *Analects*, Book XIII: Chapter III

The use of a "reformist" vs. "conservative" dichotomy has become common in the analysis of Chinese politics but is ultimately unsuccessful in explaining what is actually happening in China. The labels themselves are incorrect; moreover, grouping key players into two categories obscures a much more complex political landscape. So long as analysis continues in this manner, future intelligence "surprises" will become more likely.

The purpose of this article is to suggest a better approach: to focus on several factors which affect group formation and the process by which issues are resolved. Such an approach reveals several groupings of political actors, and a pattern of shifting coalitions in Chinese politics. This approach offers a better grasp of what is actually happening in China and could result in better forecasts of Chinese political developments.

Examples

Analysis of China has long been troubled by the proclivity of non-Confucian observers to impose too simple labels upon an extremely complex political landscape. As Confucius foresaw, the wrong naming of things has led to false understanding and frequently to flawed analysis.

The most serious continuing such problem is the tendency to lump Chinese officials into two categories—the "reformists" and the "conservatives." Such analytical bifurcation is not new. Mao's contribution to Marxist-Leninist ideology distinguished between "rightist" and "leftist" deviations from the correct line. During the Cultural Revolution officials were deemed to be either "revolutionaries"—those who supported the current ideological line no matter how often it changed—or "counterrevolutionaries"—those who fell afoul of that line.[1] Much political analysis accepted the Chinese categories, but used the terms "radical" instead of revolutionary" and pragmatic" instead of "counter-revolutionary." Over time the categories evolved into the present conservative-reformer dichotomy.

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* The Chinese ideograph *hao* 好 means "good"; *huai* 坏 means "bad".

[1] The mislabeling of people during the Cultural Revolution has been a key political issue in China throughout the 1980s. Thousands, if not millions, of persons have sought reversals and compensation for unjust verdicts.

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Wrong Labels

While I do not object to the term "reformer" per se, its use in the Chinese political context has become almost meaningless. It would be hard to find any leader in China today who is not a reformer, who does not want fundamental changes in the Maoist prescriptions for political, economic, and social development. Consequently, to suggest that there is somehow a group of "reformers" pitted against some other group—as most analysis now does—obscures the basic truth of Chinese politics for the past decade, which is that groups of reformers are competing with each other. A major improvement in how we think about things could begin with the assumption that just about everyone who counts in China is a reformer; this would allow us to begin to find other more useful ways to distinguish between individuals and their policy preferences.

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Also objectionable is the use of the term "conservative." I once heard an analyst characterize recent developments in China as a resurgence of the "conservatives" which meant there would be a "shift to the left in Chinese policy." The linking of leftism and conservatism—which appears altogether too often in analysis of China—must be received with a mixture of confusion and indignation by some consumers. Such links may make sense to the analysts who invoke them, but to outsiders they are vacuous.

The term "conservative" has a rich and distinguished heritage in the language of Western political philosophy and political discourse which bears no resemblance to the misguided applications to the Chinese situation today. In the Anglo-American political tradition, conservatism, like liberalism, refers to political beliefs in which the individual is considered to be historically and morally superior to any collection of people. The individual is possessed of certain natural or inalienable rights "which can never be fully abridged and which can only be compromised by voluntary contracts." [2] Conservatives differ from liberals in to what extent the social contract may be employed to secure various desirable outcomes, but both are in agreement that governments are a condition of individual consent.

By way of contrast, Marxism-Leninism, and its Maoist derivative, rest upon a concept of man that is fundamentally different from that of the Anglo-American tradition. The underlying sociopolitical philosophy of Maoism is collectivist—that is, the individual is *not* the sole and ultimate source of value, but, rather, the individual is a derivative product of his membership in some collectivity. For Marxists, this collectivity is the social class. Chinese communists accept such values or normative concepts as freedom, fulfillment, and so on, but understand and define them entirely differently than would a true conservative. The individual becomes "free" only insofar as he is willing to submit to the will or rule of the collective. Clearly, those Chinese communists who value strongly Maoist ideological concepts are not "conservatives" in any true sense, but are radical collectivists. Margaret Thatcher or Ronald Reagan are appropriately characterized as "conservative", but it is hardly conceivable that Peng Zhen or Chen Yun should be so identified.

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[2] See A. James Gregor, *Contemporary Radical Ideologies: Totalitarian Thought in the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Random House, 1968), pp. 10-14.

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Rethinking Analytical Assumptions

Chinese politics involves competition for scarce resources and there are divisions among China's leadership and challenges to authority.[3] However, instead of being sharply divided into two groups, the Chinese leadership has for years been a more fluid system of shifting coalitions. The main variables which affect the composition of the coalitions apparently are:

— *guanxi*. Probably the most pervasive characteristic of Chinese politics is the system of *guanxi*, that is, informal loyalty networks. An understanding of patron-client ties is crucial to any analysis of how the system works. The relationship between Deng and Hu is illustrative here; Deng promoted Hu because of personal loyalty even though Hu's views were often divergent from Deng's.

— *personality*. Often missing from assessments of Chinese politics is a consideration of how various leaders get along with each other on a personal basis. While some of this information is difficult to get, there often is reporting which provides interesting insights. For example, I believe that one of the principal reasons for Hu's downfall was that he was not well liked by many other leaders because of personal traits such as his bluntness.

— *position*. Our understanding would be enhanced, I believe, by a more careful consideration of the bureaucratic interests that some leaders are inclined to defend. If a leader has spent considerable time on agricultural work, for example, he may be more inclined to support agriculture during key decisions on budget allocations. Similarly, key military officers naturally want to have a person with a strong military background succeed Deng as Chairman of the Military Commission.

— *worldview*. The ideological predispositions of key players are important. All leaders are committed to a Marxist-Leninist vision, but within this civil religion are divergent faiths which prompt differing approaches to problems. The "fundamentalist" mindset of players such as Hu Qiaomu and Deng Liqun, for example, have apparently played an important role in their approach to reform.

[3] Some scholars, notably Lucian Pye, use the term "faction" to characterize the groupings which develop in Chinese politics (see Pye, *The Dynamics of Factions and Consensus in Chinese Politics: A Mode and Some Propositions*, Project AIR FORCE report by RAND, R-2566-AF, July 1980). I believe the term "faction" is too strong. It is appropriate for Japan where factions are clearly identifiable in the LDP and other parties, but less appropriate for describing Chinese groupings.

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These variables come together as various leaders take stands on policy issues. A fresh, revitalized analytical approach should try to examine more thoroughly than is now attempted how these four variables interact in the policy process, rather than trying to categorize the chief players. Initially, every effort should be made to avoid locking people into various categories. Only until there is conclusive evidence that certain individuals belong in certain categories should a label be applied, and even then analysis should continue to consider, implicitly or explicitly, why the groups have formed, what their durability is, and the derivative consequences.

Toward Potential New Categories

All this is not to say that we should avoid categorization altogether. Categories are useful as shorthand descriptions of political actors and processes so long as they are accurate. In past years, several students of Chinese politics have gone beyond the oversimplified dichotomous analytical mode by offering more diverse categorizations of Chinese leaders. In 1974, for example, Oksenberg and Goldstein presented a four-category typology.[4] Robinson, Lieberthal, and others have also explored various typologies which break free of the two-group bifurcation. These efforts have been criticized, but their example offers an approach we should consider in freeing ourselves from the present analytical snare.

In a preliminary manner, and as a basis for future discussion among analysts, I propose that some potential categories which reflect the variables presented above could be:

— *Marxist-Leninist Fundamentalists*. During the policy process some leaders seem to be most interested in the ideological implications and tend to base their stands on these issues. Such leaders usually seem to interject traditional ideological interpretations into the policy debate. Deng Liqun and Hu Qiaomu would probably fall into this category.

— *Challengers*. Some leaders seem primarily concerned with promoting change in the system, but also with maintaining their personal power. Deng, for example, wants to press forward with change even at risk to ideological or bureaucratic imperatives. He is anxious to transform the basis of party authority from charisma to performance. Peng Zhen is also determined to change the basis of authority in the party (probably because he has great influence in the legal mechanisms), but also apparently wants to challenge Deng for power.

— *Turf Defenders*. Some party bureaucrats seem primarily interested in protecting their positions and proteges by avoiding retirement. They are supportive of reform, but not at the cost of their power and prestige, and are not as enthusiastic as the challengers. Li Xiannian probably fits in this category.

[4] "The Chinese Political Spectrum," *Problems of Communism* 23 (March-April 1974), pp. 1-13. Their proposed categories were: Militant Fundamentalists, Radical Conservatives, Eclectic Modernizers, and Westernized Chinese.

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— *Bureaucratic Compromisers*. These are people who are primarily interested in securing particular bureaucratic interests, irrespective of ideological concerns or of progress in reform momentum. They differ from the Turf Defenders in that their principal interests are organizational, not personal (though the two can often become intermeshed). Zhao Ziyang and Chen Yun probably belong in this category. Hu Qili, Li Peng, and Tian Jiyun might wind up here too, at least for the time being until one or more of them is likely to join the challenger ranks.

— *Westernizers*. While there are probably few of these among the leadership, evidence suggests that some prominent persons like Fang Lizhi may belong in this unique category. These Chinese essentially want a fundamental restructuring of the political system and its underlying ideology. While these figures do not have much power now, Chinese intellectual history over the past century indicates that they could have great influence over time.

If such categories were employed, events such as the removal of Hu Yaobang could be more appropriately understood as a convergence of various interests rather than as merely a struggle between reformers and conservatives. Hu was opposed early on by fundamentalists because of his efforts to ease strictures on artistic and cultural expression. He increasingly alienated key turf defenders by trying to get his own clients placed in important leadership positions, and he alienated bureaucratic compromisers because of his headline-making and often off-the-cuff statements on questions of Party reform, military reductions, and relations with Japan. He may also have antagonized Westernizers because of his seeming pro-Soviet stance. Central Committee documents circulated in conjunction with Hu's removal and hint of most of these factors; his alleged failure to manage effectively the December student demonstrations seems to have been the final straw.

The categories listed above, however, are intended to be only exploratory. Moreover, as previously noted no categorization should be firmly established until more research has been done. Categories must remain flexible, taking into account the practical reality that some individuals will have strong stands on some issues but be unaffected by or indifferent to others. Nevertheless, these categories are suggestive of where rethinking our analytical framework might lead. By redirecting our attention to the issues and processes and more carefully examining how different personalities come down on these issues we should be able to gain greater insights into Chinese politics. These insights, in my view, will reveal not a battle between two factions, but a fluid process of shifting coalitions.

Fortunately, there are signs that some analysts are seeking to avoid the bifurcation trap by concentrating on process.

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Nevertheless, much remains to be done. Reexamining our assumptions will not be easy. The "conservative-reformist" mode of analysis has become so comfortably ensconced that perhaps only few will be willing to depart from it. But unless we do, we will continue to advance obfuscation rather than clarity, settle for darkness rather than light, and ultimately, abandon truth in favor of error.

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