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Review: Rectification and Purge in Chinese Politics

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# Rectification and Purge in Chinese Politics

## Review Article*

IN THESE TWO VOLUMES, the latter of which is essentially a truncated version of the first, Frederick Teiwes presents the culmination of more than a decade of research on the politics of Chinese Communist purges and rectification campaigns. Although the present work covers the same time period (1949-65) encompassed in his 1971 Columbia University dissertation, it has been extensively revised and improved. It deserves our attention on three grounds. To begin with, it is the first comprehensive narrative history of the purge as a Party disciplinary tool, and as such provides many new insights into Chinese politics from a commonly but rarely so systematically exploited perspective. Secondly, it advances a number of hypotheses about the determinants of variation among purges and seeks to test them and arrive at empirical generalizations. Its third and most ambitious claim is to present a normative model capable of explaining the dynamics of the policy process and the conduct and resolution of intra-elite conflict at the Politburo level.

As a narrative history, *Politics and Purges* is exhaustive in its examination of available source materials, always judicious and often insightful in its interpretation of fragmentary or ambiguous evidence. Teiwes sets his stage with a re-examination of the Yanan Zhengfeng rectification movement of 1942-44. This campaign marked the advent of a more moderate form of intra-Party discipline and a departure from the "ruthless struggles and merciless blows" associated with the Returned Students' leadership: it was to be followed by an unusually long and productive period of elite solidarity. Teiwes credits this new form of rectification primarily to Mao Zedong, with whose rise to power it coincided; this, however, obliges the author to exonerate

* *Politics and Purges in China: Rectification and the Decline of Party Norms, 1950-1965.* By Frederick C. Teiwes. White Plains, New York: M.E. Sharpe. Folkestone, England: Wm. Dawson & Sons. 1979. 730 pp. US$35.00.

*Elite Discipline in China: Coercive and Persuasive Approaches to Rectification, 1950-1953.* By Frederick C. Teiwes. Canberra: Australian National University, Contemporary China Centre. 1978. 216 pp. A$5.00/US$6.00, paper.



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Mao from blame for conducting the Futian purge—and here he is less than convincing. Evincing his general tendency to minimize policy differences among the leadership, Teiwes absolves Liu Shaoqi from blame for the excesses of the 1946-48 land reform movement in North China, pointing out that, although Liu had "operational control" of the campaign, Mao's contemporaneous statements betokened his support. The 1950-57 period he characterizes broadly as "rectification according to the norms," during which the main emphasis was on severing ties to old elites and establishing new institutional loyalties; although policy differences became involved in the purge of Gao Gang and Rao Shushi, they were tangential to the actual dispute, which centered around their resort to "unprincipled" appeals to a factional constituency in order to displace Liu and Zhou Enlai at a time when Mao's health was in question. In distinction to MacFarquhar, Teiwes sees no deep rift between Politburo members concerning the Hundred Flowers campaign, nor does he perceive any unusual reluctance on Mao's part to arrest its development once "poisonous weeds" started to appear. One reason for the experiment's failure was that the brutal suppression of the Polish and Hungarian uprisings in 1956 had inhibited Chinese intellectuals from expressing their views forthrightly; in consequence, Mao outdid himself somewhat in describing the tolerance the Party would display, and when the intellectuals finally rose to the occasion they often outdid themselves in their criticisms as well.

The late 1950s marked a departure from the period of elite solidarity and "normal" rectification, according to Teiwes. The transition was not sudden but gradual, to some extent even reversible. When the Soviet model was rejected as inherently flawed near the end of the first Five-Year Plan, this deprived CCP leaders of a clear conceptual framework on which all could agree; when experiments with a new model of development faltered in the Hundred Flowers and Great Leap Forward, disagreements became increasingly rancorous and difficult to reconcile. The first step in the departure from the old norms was the exclusion of Chen Yun from an active role in the policy process following Chen's advocacy of the "anti-reckless advance" policies initiated in mid-1956; although Chen's retirement was achieved smoothly, without loss of formal position, it was "the first time since the establishment of the PRC, or indeed since the adoption of the rectification approach in Yanan, [that] differences over current policy decisions apparently were the key factor in emasculating the authority of a Politburo member" (p. 344). The case of Peng Dehuai in 1959 was a more celebrated breach of the



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same norm. Peng's criticisms of the Leap were apparently quite tactful, Peng probably held no ulterior ambitions (although he did harbor resentments), and he did not really engage in conspiratorial maneuvers with his supporters. So his criticisms should have been well taken, given the fact that the leadership had already begun to moderate its policies anyhow. The fact that Mao took umbrage at Peng's criticisms and mobilized the Central Committee to refute and downgrade him resulted willy-nilly in a revival of unrealistic economic policies, in "grossly inadequate implementation of the policy adjustments approved by the plenum, a less candid and effective policy making process, and growing demoralization of China's cadres" (p. 439). During the ensuing years (1960-62), Mao implicitly acknowledged his error to some degree by rehabilitating many of Peng's followers (but never Peng himself), and by frequently reasserting the right of Party members to criticize their superiors and to debate policy issues freely within authorized forums.

In his analysis of the Socialist Education Movement (1962-65), Teiwes concurs largely with his earlier work in collaboration with Richard Baum. Though tensions within the leadership were in rich evidence, Teiwes sees no consistent cleavage but rather an "ambivalent and shifting" (p. 493) resort to different rectification techniques and operational chiefs-of-staff. He finds Liu and Peng Zhen at opposite poles, with Liu advocating broad mass mobilization under work team control and extensive cadre purges, Peng supporting a much milder approach controlled by the existing Party hierarchy. Mao, in the meantime, shuttled indecisively between them—until finally he deserted both in his support of the Cultural Revolution. Little logical continuity is seen between the Cultural Revolution and its antecedents; indeed, Teiwes tends to deprecate the tendency to identify policy lines with personalities and search for consistency over time, turning rather to situational constraints to explain outcomes.

Although Teiwes' style inclines toward counterargument, exploding or qualifying mistaken or simplistic arguments with empirical evidence to the contrary, he does strive for broad empirical generalizations as well. Many of these are derived from his quite thoughtful discussion of the rectification process in chapter 2. Following Skinner and Winckler, he identifies "coercive, persuasive and tangible" factors influencing the effectiveness of rectification, then seeks to determine which are most appropriate under what circumstances. Tangible factors are unfortunately not dealt with systematically in the analysis, notwithstanding a few interesting *apercus*. Although the author initially hypothesizes that coercion is most appropriate during



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the "unfreezing" stage of rectification and in those campaigns that require a relatively sharp departure from old beliefs, in the course of his narrative he finds little support for either notion. Even the Cultural Revolution, which called for a drastic revision of old beliefs and practiced extensive coercion, seems in retrospect to have been ineffective. Teiwes also hypothesizes that the work team is the most appropriate organizational vehicle if coercion is emphasized, and the regular Party hierarchy is more appropriate if persuasion is emphasized. But here again, the empirical evidence is mixed: though one can infer that if work teams are sent coercive sanctions will be used, there is a wide range of variation in the coerciveness of campaigns conducted under the regular hierarchy, from the relatively mild Zhengfeng movement to the severe anti-Rightist movement. Part of this variation may be ascribed to a secular trend that Teiwes perceives, in which rectification becomes increasingly coercive and less norm-oriented after 1957, culminating in a Cultural Revolution that did not adhere to the norms at all but encouraged their violation (pp. 601-33). But even this trend seems debatable in view of the severity of the 1947-48 rectification and the "three-anti" movement.

Many of these generalizations might have been rescued by drawing more careful analytic distinctions. If one distinguishes between targets and participants in the rectification process, for example, coercion may be seen as an effective educational device for participants but ineffective or even counterproductive in its impact on targets. Thus the usual tendency is to try to narrow the targets and then eliminate or ostracize them; one of the reasons the Cultural Revolution ultimately failed was that the range of targets was unrealistically broad and most of them subsequently had to be rehabilitated. It may be more feasible to generalize about work team vs. hierarchical administration of rectification if one differentiates campaigns aimed at the Party itself (in which case work teams would be necessary) and campaigns aimed at extra-Party targets (in which case they might not). And if one distinguishes between rectification campaigns among lower-level cadres and masses and the policy-making process among top elites, Teiwes's generalization about the increasingly coercive and normless character of rectification becomes tenable with regard to the latter.

As his central explanatory variable in this study Teiwes introduces a normative model of policy-making and rectification, which allegedly defined the "rules of the game" for CCP leaders according to which conflict could be conducted without disruptive consequences and indeed with generally salubrious ones. This model,



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first introduced by Mao at Yanan, permitted open discussion and vigorous debate of conflicting proposals before a decision was made and maintenance of strict discipline in its subsequent implementation. "Mistaken" viewpoints were tolerated and even allowed to persist so long as organizational discipline was maintained—i.e., no conspiratorial activity, and no mobilization of outside organizational resources or masses. So long as conflict was conducted according to these norms, elite solidarity and effective decision-making momentum could be maintained even while permitting a full airing of views.

The most telling question, given the felicitous terms in which this normative model is described, is how the decline and finally the outright revolt against it can be explained. Any social institution is an artifact of patterned compliance to its norms, and the decay of an institution is defined by deviations from these patterns. Teiwes notes two such types of deviation: "unprincipled" struggle, in which the deviant violates the formal rules of the game (by engaging in factional intrigue, mobilization of outside forces, etc.); and the tendency (which Teiwes attributes chiefly to Mao) to redefine the rules in substantive (i.e., ideological) rather than formal terms. The consequence of such a redefinition, first visible in the cases of Chen Yun and Peng Dehuai and more blatantly obvious during the Cultural Revolution, was of course either to stifle dissent or to ensure that any dissent would result in a "split" and a purge rather than a reasoned consideration of the dissenter's views on their merits. Certainly there is strong evidence that the Peng Dehuai case involved a redefinition of the norms in substantive rather than formal terms; and in the Cultural Revolution we witnessed wholesale revolt against the whole conception of formal rationality on behalf of substantive, ideological conceptions of justice.

To what extent these latter developments involved a real change from the pre-1957 period is less clear, however, for one has the impression that the Chinese did not draw as clear a distinction as does Teiwes between substantive and formal rules, and that formal rules were in fact often used to enforce ideological conformity. Thus it is arguable that the rectification process functioned well in the 1942-57 period, not because it facilitated the free expression of a wide range of views, but rather because Mao succeeded in purging most of those who differed with him by 1945, and henceforth no one (apparently including Gao and Rao) ventured to disagree with him over ideological issues. The rhetoric encouraging the free expression of a variety of views was constantly reiterated in order to prevent negative feedback to the leadership from being stifled altogether, but implicit always in



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such rhetoric was the assumption that the expression of alternate views should conform to a fairly well-defined "Party line," and anyone who did not understand this ran a high risk of criticism and purge (as in the Hundred Flowers). Yet cadres did not conform to the line merely because they feared disciplinary sanctions, but because there was overwhelming evidence that it was objectively "correct": the revolution had after all succeeded against seemingly insuperable odds, and the first Five-Year Plan was an impressive success. Only when evidence began to appear that the "line" was mistaken did leading figures begin to disagree. The sanctions against ideological disagreement (and the difficulty in distinguishing ideological from "non-antagonistic" disagreement) nevertheless remained formidable, and the purge rate at higher levels escalated accordingly. This explains Peng Dehuai's general sense of himself as a man of blunt courage and strength of character, despite the sycophantic phraseology of his memorial. It also explains the widespread resentment against the rules of the game that erupted during the Cultural Revolution, when formal rules were dismissed as so much hypocritical cant.

Whether the normative system governing intra-Party conflict that Teiwes describes so well ever really functioned as fully intended, therefore, remains for this reviewer a moot question. The norms are based on the ideologically consistent but unrealistic assumption that all participants in the rectification process are equal, exposing the norms to abuse by those with more power than others to impose their views. There is an inherent logical tension between the notions that on the one hand everyone should speak their views clearly and forthrightly and may even retain those views after the majority decides otherwise and, on the other, that some views are right and some are wrong and those holding the latter must be "rectified." A normative system permitting open discussion and the regulation of conflict, but which functions smoothly only when everyone agrees, is not so much a normative system as an agreement to agree that lasts until people begin to disagree—whereupon some must be kicked out.

While Teiwes may perhaps ascribe greater integrity and efficacy to the norms of rectification than they deserve, certainly he has focussed our attention on a key institution in contemporary Chinese politics. His study, in fact, represents the most sustained and intensive analysis of this institution to date, and as such it will be an enduring landmark in the field for a long time to come.

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