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Review by: Lowell Dittmer

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The Past Recaptured

Liu Shaoqi xuanji. Vol. I. [Beijing: People's Publisher, 1981.]

Liu Shaoqi: Ausgewahlte Schriften und Materialien. 2 Vols. Edited by TH. BERGMANN, U. MENZEL, and U. MENZEL-FISCHER. [Stuttgart: Edition Cordeliers, 1982.]

The rehabilitation of Liu Shaoqi at the Fifth Plenum of the 11th Central Committee (23–29 February 1980) has precipitated renewed interest in his theoretical contributions and political career in China (and among China scholars abroad), resulting *inter alia* in the publication or republication of his writings and speeches. The appearance of Liu's *Selected Works*, with the nearly concurrent publication of Deng Xiaoping's collected writings,¹ establishes the Chinese as the world's leading advocates of the Platonic concept of the leader as philosopher-prince. But what may China scholars expect to discover in such collections, which are edited and designed to serve political objectives?² They may, I think, legitimately hope to find out more of the career and character of the author/politician in question, about the historical epoch in which he (or she) was involved and the relationship to other pivotal actors in that period; and finally, they may hope to infer (or at least make informed guesses about) the motives of those responsible for the publication or republication in question. The two collections under consideration in this review do not provide sufficient information drastically to alter previous assumptions in any of these areas, but they do make some illuminating contributions.

The first volume of Liu Shaoqi's *Selected Works* contains 38 articles, only eight of which were included in previously published collections,³ covering only Liu's pre-Liberation career (from 1926 to September 1949). A second volume is planned, which will cover his writings and speeches since Liberation, though it seems unlikely to be of equivalent importance, for most of Liu's post-1949 writings were of a ceremonial

1. *Deng Xiaoping wenxuan (1975–82)* [*Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*] (Beijing: People's Publisher, 1983).

2. In this case, the editorial process appears to have been particularly difficult. The project was initiated as early as 1960, at Mao's behest, but Liu seemed reluctant either to spend the necessary time compiling and revising texts or to permit their publication in their original form, and then of course the Cultural Revolution intervened, so the project could not be completed until 22 years later. See the account by Liu's former secretary, Deng Liquan, in *Renmin ribao*, 15 January 1982, p. 5.

3. The most comprehensive previous compilations are *Collected Works of Liu Shao-ch'i*, 3 Vols. (hereafter *CW*) (Hong Kong: Union Research Institute, 1969); and *Liu Shaoqi wenti ziliao zhuanji* (*A Special Collection of Materials on Liu Shaoqi*) (hereafter *LSWZZ*) (Taipei: Institute for the Study of Chinese Communist Problems, 1970). Of the 30 pieces not found in the previous collections 23 consist of previously unpublished internal reports, speeches and telegrams. Seven appeared in journals of usually limited circulation apparently not available in the west, such as *Front Line* (*Qianxian*), published by the Hebei provincial Party committee, or *Struggle* (*Doucheng*), published by the Central Bureau of the Soviet Areas of the Chinese Communist Party. Only two journals, *Red Flag Weekly* and *Bolshevik* (both published by the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee), are available in western collections. These are available in the Ch'en Ch'eng Collection at Hoover. But the specific issues containing Liu's contributions are missing.

character and did not aspire to ground-breaking theoretical significance. Of those articles appearing here for the first time, 12 were written before the Anti-Japanese War, nine date from the Anti-Japanese War (from the July 7 Incident to Japan's surrender), and nine were written during the Liberation War (or Third Civil War). Those written during the first period are concerned primarily with the organization of the urban labour movement before dissolution of the first United Front, and with underground organization in the White Areas thereafter. The articles written during the Anti-Japanese War period broaden Liu's focus to include United Front policy, the construction of base areas, and even guerrilla tactics; the Liberation War introduces him to the problematics of general military strategy, land reform and economic construction.

What does this collection have to tell us about the career and character of Liu Shaoqi? By examining the dates and places of publication of the 38 articles included here it is possible to trace the itinerary of Liu's career with somewhat more precision than before; this collection does not, however, provide any answer to the old riddle of Liu's whereabouts during the Long March (the consensus of opinion is however that he was present until Zunyi). The essential character discernible behind the partisan selection of quotations published during the Cultural Revolution is still visible here: that of a circumspect, paternalistic, rigidly disciplined and intelligent Leninist. He is a consistent moderate, defined in formal and procedural rather than substantive terms, with an instinctive recourse to the middle of the road; for example, "In future economic construction, two wrong deviations must be opposed: the capitalist tendency and the adventurous inclination, that is, adopting socialist steps prematurely, excessively and without preparation."⁴

Most of his writings are concerned with the Party elite and with the challenges and difficulties of leadership; he implicitly restricts the masses to a choice between benign docility and dangerously chaotic initiative. The leadership should be in the world but not of the world. That they should be close to the masses he makes clear repeatedly, as for example in his 1932 essay, "Criticizing the Tactic of 'Withdrawing from the Yellow Trade Union'": chiding those who dislike the sort of demeaning accommodation required by such an assignment and prefer to function in a less ambiguous context, he preaches: "We should tell these people: 'You are good people, but you are not Bolsheviks. Bolsheviks should be able to go into the "mud pit" of yellow trade unions and do protracted and patient hard work to save the majority who are still trapped in the "mud put."' "⁵ That the leadership should always retain its organizational integrity and detachment from the masses he makes equally clear. His concerns are usually practically and specifically focused⁶, nowhere does he engage in the sort of broad philosophical speculation about the

4. "Regarding the principles of new China's economic construction," June 1949, in *Liu Shaoqi xuanji* (hereafter *LSX*), p. 427.

5. "Criticizing the tactic of 'withdrawing from the Yellow Trade Union,'" 18 January 1932, *LSX*, p. 18.

6. "But our comrades should not repeat this general task and general strategy everyday in all documents like the Gospel," he admonishes in a critique of "empty talk." "Instead,

relative role of theory and practice, internal and external contradiction, fear and courage that characterizes many of Mao's works.

What can be learned from Liu's writings about Chinese politics during the time when he wielded significant influence? The compelling image of a "two-line struggle" within the Party leadership that underlay the Red Guard polemics and also informs a good deal of competent secondary analysis can probably be dismissed, at least in so far as the pre-Liberation period is concerned. It is clear from these essays that Liu consistently opposed left-wing communism of the sort that would subsequently characterize the Cultural Revolution, and that he found his first major ally in this cause in Mao Zedong in the 1930s. In fact, we may infer from the publication of "Adopting new attitudes toward new labour" that Liu had moved from Shanghai to Ruijin as early as 1932, and had already taken a policy position supporting Mao Zedong and critical of Returned Student leftism.⁷ From the time this alliance was forged until 1949 there is no indication that the functional division of labour between urban worker-organizer and rural guerrilla strategist led to any substantive differences of opinion between the two, and there are numerous examples of concerted initiatives, such as their co-ordinated polemics against the Returned Students, their confluence of thinking on United Front policy, or the publication of major essays on the same topic by both men in the same year.⁸ The selection of these materials is sometimes apparently designed to rectify a Cultural Revolution-vintage impression of a divergence of opinion on specific points. For example, radical polemicists had previously published Liu's "Report on Current Political Problems" (1 February 1946), in which he supported negotiations with the Kuomintang pursuant to joint CCP-KMT-Democratic Bloc participation in electoral and parliamentary politics under a democratic constitution.⁹ But we now learn that he was at this time also acting in Mao's absence as commander-in-chief of Chinese Communist military forces, dispatching telegrams advising commanders to "completely control Rehe and Chahar, strive to control the Northeast . . . safeguard Chahar, Suiyuan, north Shanxi and part of Hebei . . . transfer 80,000 troops to Shandong

our comrades should concentrate on local issues and problems and be more practical." "Eliminating the leading style of empty talk," 15 July 1936, *LSX*, p. 43.

7. "Adopting new attitudes towards new labour," 20 May 1934, *LSX*, pp. 19–23. Although not published until 1934, an editorial note on p. 19 explains that this article was written for workers in the revolutionary base area in the winter of 1932.

8. On the Returned Student leadership and their errors, see "Eliminating closed-doorism and adventurism," 10 April 1936, *LSX*, pp. 23–33; on United Front policy, see "Leadership is the central issue of the national United Front," 20 November 1936, "Fighting for national democratic unification and the Party's leadership in the United Front," May 1937, *LSX*, pp. 46–54 and 72–79, respectively. Compare with "The question of independence and initiative within the United Front," 5 November 1938, in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1965), Vol. II, pp. 213–19. An example of co-ordinated policy initiative may be found by comparing "On new democracy," January 1940, and "New-democratic constitutional government," 20 February 1940, in *Selected Works*, Vol. II, pp. 339–85, and 407–417; and Liu's "On anti-Japanese democratic power," December 1940, *LSX*, pp. 90–93.

9. "Report on current political problems (i.e. On the new phase of peace and democracy)," in *LSWZZ*, pp. 182–85.

and east Hebei from East China's New Fourth Army," etc.¹⁰ The fact that Mao left him in effective control for more than a month even after his return from the Chongqing negotiations is indicative of the implicit trust he then placed in Liu.¹¹

As far as the old (but still moot) question of the origins of the Chinese revolution is concerned, it would seem from the experience of Liu Shaoqi that neither nationalism nor class struggle were as decisive as effective organization and the cultivation of political constituencies through the more efficient provision of public services. The role of exoteric ideological injunctions emphasizing either nationalist or class conflict themes should be determined by instrumental considerations, as Liu makes clear in his succinct 1928 discussion, "On changing slogans." Here he draws a functional distinction between action, advocacy, and propaganda slogans, theorizing that in the course of struggle slogans inexorably evolve in sequence from propaganda to advocacy to action, but that it is disfunctional to raise a slogan suited for a different stage out of context.¹² "When our stand is acceptable to only a minority of the masses, we should follow the majority of the masses while retaining our stand, and wait until we have won over the majority," he advises elsewhere.¹³ As long as the organizational integrity of the Party is maintained, this elite corps will adapt and ultimately prevail over shifting environmental circumstances. The role of the masses is essential and they must be carefully cultivated (like Antreas, the Party derives its strength from them), but adverse political vicissitudes among them may be provisionally disregarded:

Left-leaning leadership and excessive action by the masses are different things. Ultra-leftist leadership is wrong and cannot be allowed, but excesses by the masses are often unavoidable and are nothing to fear.¹⁴

The revolution Liu envisaged had a quite restricted scope, concerning a transfer of economic ownership and a transfer of political power, followed by rapid economic growth, rather than any more grandly conceived socio-economic transformation. Thus although he had (albeit sometimes reluctantly) led strikes in the White and enemy-occupied areas, he discouraged them in the base areas:

Workers and employees in state-owned and co-operative enterprises should remember they are working for themselves now and for the ultimate emancipation of mankind. . . . It can all be justified and necessary for workers to strike, have slowdowns, and even wreck things in factories owned by capitalists in the KMT-controlled areas where they are being cruelly exploited. But under the

10. "Our task and strategic deployment at present," 19 September 1945, and "Use our main force to establish East, North and West Manchurian bases," November–December 1945, consisted of telegraphs to leading comrades in the North-east Bureau. *LSX*, pp. 373–76.

11. "Chairman Mao has rested for a month and is still resting, because of fatigue," Liu wrote on 24 December 1945. *LSX*, p. 374.

12. "On changing slogans," 5 October 1928, *LSX*, pp. 10–13.

13. "Party and mass work in the white areas," May 1937, *LSX*, pp. 59–60.

14. "Adopting new attitudes," *LSX*, p. 20.

Soviet government, all enterprises are public property. Workers and employees should care about [the enterprise] and contribute their talents to production.¹⁵

In his later Tianjin speeches, he would make many of the same points to workers still working in “capitalist” enterprises (under CCP leadership).

Finally, what can be inferred from such a collection about the motives of those responsible for its publication? The Party leadership seems to have had two purposes in view. First, they were demonstrating a willingness to set history straight and even to admit and correct past mistakes, though it is undoubtedly helpful that those primarily responsible for Liu’s humiliation and death no longer hold high positions within that leadership. Secondly, as Stuart Schram and others have demonstrated with regard to Mao’s *Selected Works*, the process of editorial selection allows ample latitude to find doctrinal support for those policy programmes currently being promoted and, contrariwise, to omit reference to any policy preferences deemed inexpedient from the perspective of the current regime.

An example of the former is the apparent desire to restore Liu’s ideas about Party-building and to obviate any confusion or leftist tendencies left in the wake of the Cultural Revolution. This is evidenced by the fact that Liu’s three major essays on Party-building are included in this volume (in abridged form in the case of “On the Party”), although they had already been republished in a separate edition only shortly before.¹⁶ Another example is the relative focus on Liu’s writings and speeches dealing with the need to build and sustain indefinitely a United Front with the smaller middle-class parties, and those statements which express an openness to unorthodox economic experiments. Thus in “Concerning the principles of new China’s economic construction,” Liu is published as having said:

All five kinds of economy, except for speculators and those harming national economy and the people’s livelihood, should be encouraged to develop at present, in order to heal the wounds inflicted by war. But the state economy should be the mainstay. The socialist economy should be gradually increased in order to make the transition to socialism. . . . Because of China’s special situation, we think state capitalism may be adopted on a very large scale.¹⁷

With regard to the timing of this transition, Liu opines that “this is a matter to be accomplished in the distant future,” thereby abjuring its discussion in the Common Programme.

Whether or not to take the step to socialism will be based on the demands of the majority of the Chinese people and the actual needs of social and economic development. Before then the CCP will consult with all other democratic parties, people’s organizations, minorities and patriots and make a decision with them

15. “Adopting new attitudes,” *LSX*, pp. 21–22.

16. See Liu Shaoqi, *Three Essays on Party Building* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1980). The essays are, of course, “How to be a good communist,” “On inner-Party struggle,” and “On the Party.”

17. “Concerning the principles of new China’s economic construction,” June 1949, *LSX*, pp. 428–29.

jointly. Even when we enter socialism, the great revolutionary unity will still be needed.¹⁸

Examples of the editorial omission of inopportune items include the publication only of Liu's "Conclusion at the National Land Conference" in Pingshan (17 July–13 September 1947), issued at the outset of land reform in the old occupied areas, and the exclusion of his "Examples of land reform and Party rectification work in Pingshan" (February 1948),¹⁹ written at the conclusion of that campaign. The latter piece contains a stinging critique of the leftist tendencies that emerged in the course of the campaign, which might have discountenanced the image of Mao Zedong now being refurbished (at least for the pre-Liberation era). Also omitted are many of the speeches Liu made in Tianjin in May 1949, probably because the extraordinary solicitude he exhibited to the National Bourgeoisie and his relatively punitive stance towards the proletariat would have tarnished Liu's historical escutcheon (he subsequently made a self-criticism).²⁰

Finally, the attitude towards democracy articulated in this collection is quite Leninist, far from the liberalism imputed to Liu in Red Guard polemics and coinciding quite closely with the increasingly reserved stance taken by the regime since Democracy Wall. As previously noted, the February 1946 report in which Liu expresses his enthusiasm for "bourgeois" electoral and parliamentary arrangements is not to be found here – nor is a 1944 article, "On the expansion of democracy."²¹ Liu does recognize a distinction between thinking (including talking or writing) and acting that was not honoured during the hey-day of radical Maoism, as he indicates in a discussion of "Party and mass work in the white areas":

Expand democracy inside the Party if possible. Discipline is necessary, but only as a last resort. Party discipline is demonstrated not in preventing comrades from expressing different opinions, but rather in requiring them to obey resolutions passed by a majority or by leading units despite differing opinions. . . . It is wrong to attack comrades in ideological struggle and label them opportunists and remove them from their work because of different opinions.²²

But it is perhaps significant that this discussion is within the restricted ambit of the Party, conforming to classic notions of democratic centralism. As he puts it in one of his most revealing later speeches, "To combat bureaucracy . . . you must know the method – limited democracy or extensive democracy. I think limited democracy is better. In general,

18. "Strengthen the great unity of the people of the whole country," 21 September 1949, a speech made at the First Plenary Session of the CPPCC on behalf of the Chinese Communist Party. *LSX*, pp. 434–35.

19. *LSWZZ*, pp. 188–89.

20. This episode has been however discussed with apparent candour in the press. See for example the Theoretical Research Office of the Propaganda Department of Tianjin Municipal CCP Committee, "Reread comrade Liu Shaoqi's 'Speeches in Tianjin,'" *Renmin ribao*, 21 April 1980, p. 5.

21. *LSWZZ*, pp. 134–42.

22. "Party and mass work," *LSX*, pp. 66–68.

extensive democracy is unsuitable.”²³ Liu’s views are essentially *meritocratic*, relegating democracy to decision-making within the qualified elite. Thus in a talk with journalists that had once been quoted out of context to indict him of “bourgeois liberalism,” Liu stresses that “you will learn to be professional.” But as for freedom,

Some comrades say they can write very well in Beijing, but when they write for our newspapers, they cannot write because there is no “freedom” and their “creativity” is constrained. This is not true. If you write non-Marxist stuff, of course it has to be restricted. You are now the Party’s journalists, not writing for Beijing’s wall newspapers or for *Da gong bao*. If your writing is 30 per cent Marxist in the Jiang-ruled area, that is excellent, but if our newspapers have only 30 per cent non-Marxist material, you must be chidden.²⁴

For Liu, Marxism–Leninism was the vocabulary of discourse in which journalists were expected to be proficient, and it was only within this self-enclosed compass that “freedom” was possible.

The two-volume Bergmann–Menzel–Menzel-Fischer collection is the first such to be published in German, though some useful secondary analysis of Liu has been written in that language.²⁵ The selection of writings is therefore understandably restricted to Liu’s most important and fundamental contributions, including of course the classic theoretical essays already referred to. The only piece somehow omitted from all other collections is the 1947 interview with Anna Louise Strong, in which Liu praises and dilates upon Mao’s adaptation of Marxism–Leninism to the Asian milieu.²⁶ Although the editors complain of Liu’s notoriously complicated and sometimes repetitious prose style, they are to be commended for a precise and usually felicitous translation. As in the Taipei collection, the editors also include the most telling official criticisms to be published during the Cultural Revolution (including the indictment compiled for his purge, at the 12th Plenum), Liu’s three self-criticisms, and finally some of the research materials published in 1980–81 to justify his posthumous rehabilitation. The collection concludes with the most comprehensive bibliography currently available of Liu’s collected writings and the surprisingly voluminous secondary literature about him in both Chinese and western languages, capably annotated by Ms Menzel-Fischer.

Menzel introduces the compendium with a brief foreword providing an historical overview of Liu’s political career, and Bergmann concludes with an “Attempt to place [Liu] in political-historical perspective.” Menzel’s brief encapsulation of Liu’s life is appropriately cautious concerning his ultimate historical significance and in general a quite accurate synopsis of the available biographical data, though I do think

23. “Address to the 1957-class graduates of the Peking Institute of Geology,” May 1957, *CW*, Vol. II, p. 424.

24. “A talk with journalists from North China,” 2 October 1948, *LSX*, pp. 405–406.

25. See for example Joerg-Michael Luther, *Liu Shaoqi’s umstrittenes Konzept zur Erziehung von Parteimitgliedern* (Hamburg: Mitteilungen des Instituts für Asienkunde, No. 100, 1978).

26. Originally published in *Amerasia* (New York), June 1947, pp. 161–64.

that Menzel is mistaken in imputing political opportunism to Liu in his support for Mao against Wang Ming in 1942–43.²⁷ As the avatar of the 28 Bolsheviks, Wang Ming was the leading representative of a leftist urban line in the Party after the fall of Li Lisan, a position against which Liu had been railing in his own writings since the early 1930s. Recruitment into the Politburo (in Liu's case, at the Fourth Plenum of the Sixth Central Committee in January 1931) does not necessarily establish a binding patron–client relationship,²⁸ and the fact that Wang Ming was the Party's leading specialist on urban policy before the rise of Liu placed the two in functionally competitive as well as ideologically incompatible positions. Like Zhang Guotao, Menzel tends to forget that Mao was bracketed among the rightists during this period, adopting a leftist stance (again with Liu's support) primarily on the United Front issue.²⁹

Bergmann's concluding essay is more ambitious in its quest for trans-historical generalization. He succinctly but quite cogently reduces the Liuist and Maoist “lines” as polemically characterized during the early Cultural Revolution (1966–68) to a series of propositions concerning agrarian policy, political-economic developmental strategy, industrialization and Party line, perceiving a direct parallel between Liuist positions and those adopted by the post-Mao “reform faction” of Deng Xiaoping, *et al.* Although there seems to be considerable continuity between the post-Leap and post-Mao reform platforms (no systematic scholarly comparison has yet been undertaken), my own impression is that the Deng regime has undertaken a far more drastic departure from orthodox precedent than most observers appreciate (or than Deng *et al.* publicly profess, preferring to speak in terms of “restoration”). From this perspective Liu's role might be of somewhat less fundamental historical significance than Bergmann *et al.* suggest.

The problem is not simply an excessive gullibility with regard to Cultural Revolution polemics, I think, but a tendency to reify the role Liu played during his uncharacteristically dramatic finale and to allow this to obscure the “historical” Liu Shaoqi. As the leading target of radical polemics, a role that his “self-cultivation” enabled him to play with exemplary stoicism (Lin Biao would not prove so gracious a scape-goat), Liu came to symbolize dignified and civil dissent from an elite-manipulated tyranny of the majority. Bergmann attempts to extrapolate from that role a symbolic protagonist for the “redemocratization of the Communist Party,” even going so far as to call on Liu's behalf for a pluralist system of multiple communist parties.³⁰ While the experience of Liu Shaoqi and his family with mass criticism may legitimately be used to infer a need for certain structural reforms, anything so sweeping surely transcends Bergmann's intention to formulate a “system-immanent” critique of Maoism.

27. *Liu Shaoqi: Ausgewählte Schriften und Materialien*, Vol. I, p. 24.

28. Liu was in any case probably recruited by the outgoing Li Lisan rather than by Wang Ming. He had worked closely with Li at Anyuan.

29. See Zhang Guotao's “Introduction,” in *CW*, pp. vi–viii.

30. *Liu Shaoqi*, Vol. II, p. 326.

It is perhaps precisely in order to preclude Liu's capture as an enduring symbol of legitimate dissent that his *Selected Works* were published. Notwithstanding the editorial adjustments to which we have adverted, it seems clear that the historical Liu Shaoqi was on the whole a quite orthodox Marxist-Leninist. To be more precise, he was willing to experiment on pragmatic grounds only in economic or organizational realms, while attempting to preserve the ideological purity of the Communist Party. An unresolved tension between flexibility and orthodoxy is part of his ambiguous legacy to Deng Xiaoping.

LOWELL DITTMER