The Global War on Terrorism as Meta-Narrative: An Alternative Reading of Recent Chinese History

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ABSTRACT

When we speak of the “Cultural Revolution” in China, we actually refer not to the past but to a narrative interpretation of the past, a particular organization of knowledge which has gone unquestioned for a long time. This paper attempts to develop an alternative narrative scope from which to view the final ten-plus years of politics in the People’s Republic under Mao Zedong. It looks at that same period (and queries “What happened? When and Where? Who made it happen? How? And why?”) not from a “Cold War” frame but from the still unfolding 21st century present of the so-called “Global War on Terrorism.” Narrated as Mao Zedong’s Domestic War on Revisionism, this very difficult period teaches some painful lessons that, today perhaps more than ever, concern all of us – irrespective of what our ethnicity or our politics may be.

Keywords: China, Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong, revisionism, war on terrorism

Introduction

The phrase the Cultural Revolution refers not to the past, but to a narrative interpretation of the past—one of China’s political history from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. That interpretation is not itself knowledge, but rather a particular organization of knowledge, which has gone unquestioned for a long time, been accepted by nearly everybody, and become part of ordinary language. Discarding it is surprisingly difficult, should one want to, for whatever reason. Powerful institutions—the existing literature, collective memory, university curricula, search engines, the Chinese Communist Party(CCP)—serve to prejudice all of us in favor of accepting it as the interpretative instrument of choice.

I would nonetheless like to experiment with a different organization of knowledge, an alternative to the way in which the Cultural Revolution mediates meaning. What prompts me to do this may well have something to do, on a subliminal level, with my reading one too many times the shortest of all injunctions? “Think more.”[duosi]—in Mao Zedong’s Supreme Instructions. As far as I am able to articulate what drives me, however, I like to think of it as a desire to break out of the straitjacket on the imagination posed by the hegemonic narrative interpretation of post-World War II political history known as the Cold War. I would like, in what follows, to develop an alternative narrative scope from which to view the final ten-plus years of politics in the People’s Republic under Mao Zedong, as seen from a
still unfolding 21st century present.

As a narrative interpretation, what the Cold War does extremely well is foreground “communist” and putatively “Chinese” aspects of People’s Republic of China (PRC) politics. In the process, it all but ensures—and herein, undoubtedly, lies its enduring appeal to some of us—that once a set of political events has been motifically encoded, the lessons to be learnt from it are of a kind that only communism or China need grapple with. Normal research activity and the conceptual boxes supplied by professional education allow those of us who are so inclined to narrate the Cultural Revolution as a tragedy that is all about “them”—about leftist excesses and “the Chinese sadistic laughter over the misery of others.” It is on this point that the implications of the alternative organization of knowledge attempted below could not be more different. Because, narrated as Mao Zedong’s Domestic War on Revisionism, this very difficult period of history teaches some painful lessons that, today perhaps more than ever, concern each and every one of us—irrespective of what our ethnicity or our politics may be.

This exercise in the metaphorical capture of a historical truth otherwise obscured is not as outlandish as it might at first appear. In the mid-1960s, the Chinese Communist Party under Mao’s leadership embarked upon a total war against an “-ism” (revisionism), a war which the Chinese media at the time saw fit to characterize as a far-sighted response to a security challenge that threatened to destroy the very fabric of socialist society and disrupt the PRC way of life. This war came to us, not the other way around, the Renmin ribao editorialized on 2 June 1966: “This fight is one that in all respects was picked by the representatives of the bourgeoisie... It’s simply not up to us to avoid it.” Mao’s response was, in the words of his defence minister, “the preventive deployment of forces”; in the words of one of his generals, it was “a counter-attack in the form of an all-round ‘civil war’ launched by us against them.” Mao’s war targeted an abstract noun and came with no “metrics” for victory, only the preservation and extension as far into the future as possible of a desired endstate in which revisionism no longer had the capacity to mature, metastasize, and re-emerge. Its 9th National Congress, in 1969, nearly saw the CCP go public—on April Fool’s Day—with a mission accomplished message, but at Mao’s insistence it was watered down to one that announced “indeed a very

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1 To the late Rifleman Turner whose photographs of the “Christmas Truce” appeared in The Graphic on 23 January 1915, this article is humbly dedicated. For his wonderfully helpful comments on an earlier draft-read at a China Quarterly workshop at SOAS, London, in October 2005—a big thanks to Jim Williams.


3 On motif encoding and narrativity in the representation of historical reality, see White 1973:1-42.


5 On the implications for current politics of different narrative perspectives on history, see Maier 2000:807-831.

6 Renmin ribao 2 June 1966.

great” but not quite “final... victory.” At the time, Mao had apparently concluded in private that the war was in fact going none too well: at a closed principals’ meeting he compared one of his colleagues, who had recently proposed moving the economy to the top of the agenda, to “a rat leaving the sinking ship.” In public Mao remained as confident as ever, and projected iron will and unshakable determination. And so the war continued, with episodic spikes of activity, and the occasional netting of suspected revisionists.

What follows is not a chronological narrative, but a development of the five basic issues implicated, by necessity, in any process aimed at defining a situation or act. With respect to Mao’s Domestic War on Revisionism, it seeks to provide tentative answers to the following five questions: What happened? When and where? Who made it happen? How? And why?

**WHAT HAPPENED?**

There was nothing spectacular about the way in which the Domestic War on Revisionism began. Its rolling start did not make headlines any more than did Mao’s dinner toast on 7 May 1963 to “pulling revisionism up by its roots.” By late 1965 his assault on revisionism had escalated as Shanghai became the launch pad for a major “counter-attack by Chairman Mao... against the counter-revolutionary revisionist elements.” April 1966 saw Mao arguing the pros and cons of a number of alternative near-term scenarios with Kang Sheng, telling his intelligence czar that an actual revisionist “seizure of power in China... may happen, and may also not happen; it may happen soon, and it may also be a long time coming.” Obsessing about the need to move forward, Mao explained to Kang that “for it to happen soon... would be preferable.” His counterrevisionism strategy called for a catalytic event, one that would give everyone involved greater clarity on the challenges confronting them.

Defence minister Lin Biao was tasked with convincing the CCP Politburo and other crucially placed individuals that a build-up to a revisionist “seizure of power” had in fact occurred already and that swift pre-emptive action was needed to avert a disaster. The greater the revisionist threat, he told an enlarged session of the Politburo on 18 May 1966, the greater the risk of inaction: “We cannot turn a deaf ear, turn a blind eye, and remain indifferent.” Revisionism—in the form of a sinister network that already had penetrated the highest levels of party, government, and military—was poised to strike. Making vague references to classified, privileged information and avoiding specifics, Lin drew a frightening picture of what would happen if revisionism were to prevail: “People will be killed, political power will be...
usurped, capitalism will be restored, and the whole of socialism will be done away with. (We have) plenty of signs, plenty of material (to prove it), and I won't go into detail here...”14

In the CCP leadership, Mao and Lin found a receptive audience. By the end of the summer of 1966, it was sending a clear message, giving the war its strong endorsement and support (while disagreeing internally, it emerged later, about how it should best be managed and prosecuted on the ground). The party media machine was mobilized 24/7 behind the war effort. A massive reorganization of the party and government, begun in January 1967 and concluded in September 1968, sent a particularly powerful message, destroying as it did a revisionist infrastructure that had harboured some of the most deeply entrenched revisionist cells of all. The discovery of suspected revisionists in all of China's 29 provincial-level governments proved in the eyes of many that the Liberation Army Daily had been right when it editorialized in 1966 that the war on revisionism would prove to be a most unusual conflict, one that required a new way of thinking recognizing that socialism’s new “enemies without rifles, are even more stealthy, even more cunning, even more insidious, even more sinister than enemies with rifles.”15 On 14 August 1967, the CCP in the form of Central Document Zhongfa(1967) No.251 released the names of the war's 54 most wanted “revisionist elements”—all of them by that time, it should be noted, already safely behind bars or no longer posing a threat.16 But to the dismay of Mao in particular, it appeared as if the revisionists were being replaced quicker than it was possible to interdict their operations. It appeared as if there was always another revisionist ready to step up and undermine socialism...

A strong element of repetition characterizes Mao's Domestic War on Revisionism. Many politically significant sequences of events occurring between 1965 and 1976 were not all that different from each other. Their emplotment in the stories that the CCP itself told—in the contemporary media, in leaders' speeches—was often strikingly similar.17 Arguably the most archetypal story and one imbued with great explanatory potential for the war as a whole is the one that told of Beijing's mayor Peng Zhen—a “complete and utter revisionist and bourgeois representative who for a long time remained under cover inside our party,” according to CCP Vice-Chairman Liu Shaoqi18—planning a coup d'etat in the nation's capital in or around February 1966.

The story of the “February Mutiny,” as it was told initially, had Peng Zhen and a handful of lesser revisionist suspects attempting a coup with the help of certain military contingents located in proximity of Zhongnanhai, i.e. the normally sealed off and secure part of the Forbidden City where senior CCP and government leaders lived and worked. “Had their plot met with success,” an inquiry conducted in 1967 warned, “tens of millions of people across the country would have been

15 Jiefangjun bao 7 June 1966.
16 In addition, the list also named Marshal Peng Dehuai, the former Minister of Defence, ousted in 1959.
17 On explanation by employment, see White 1973:7-11.
beheaded, our Marxist-Leninist party would have become a revisionist party and a fascist party, and all of China would have changed its color!”\(^\text{19}\) The story of the “mutiny” had first been put out in late July 1966 by Kang Sheng, who had revealed to students at Beijing Normal University that “we have, in the course of an in-depth investigation, a careful investigation, a thorough investigation—and I'll just share one piece of fact here with you, comrades—found that in February and March of this year, Peng Zhen’s big black Beijing gang were plotting a coup...This is one thousand percent true!\(^\text{20}\) Kang had also impressed upon students at China People’s University that it was far from helpful to claim, as some people were doing, that the whole affair was simply an unsubstantiated rumor: “Objectively,” he said, “to do that is to speak in defence of Peng.”\(^\text{21}\)

As on so many other occasions in the course of the Domestic War on Revisionism, conflicting signals and mixed messages began to be heard as the story was picked up and commented upon. CCP General Secretary Deng Xiaoping suggested in August that Kang, at best, had not been entirely accurate in his portrayal of the alleged “mutiny,” announcing publicly that “there had been no such thing,” that one “should put the whole thing to rest,” and that “there is nothing to it, and that’s it.”\(^\text{22}\) Kang responded by stating his own reading of the intelligence. Rather than drop his initial charge, he argued that although the findings might suggest that a coup had not actually been under way in February, they at the same time did not prove that there hadn’t been just such an intent on the part of Peng and the other suspected revisionists. “Counter-revolutionary elements is what these revisionist elements are,” Kang insisted, “and when the time is ripe they will carry out a coup and put a bourgeois dictatorship in place. As for when, I don’t know. All I am saying is, when the time is ripe. Not necessarily in February of this year.”\(^\text{23}\)

It was a way of appearing to put the story to rest without actually putting it to rest, blurring as it did the distinction between faith-based and fact-based information. When Deng Xiaoping was himself outed as a suspected revisionist only a few weeks later, in October 1966, his blanket denial was re-assessed and came to be seen as incontrovertible evidence of a possible cover-up, one that bore all the hallmarks of revisionism. The story assumed a life of its own as new bits and pieces of “information” began to surface. During three days in mid-April 1967, a total of 224 dazibao (supposedly unofficial, certainly informal, grammatically challenged, slanderous, tendentious, seemingly independent yet often tediously close to the “official party line”) appeared on the premises of the Beijing municipal government administration, exposing and condemning the “February Mutiny” and calling among other things for Deng Xiaoping to put on trial for his alleged role in it and for the main culprits, such as the mayor and vice-mayor of Beijing, to be executed.\(^\text{24}\)

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20 Kang Sheng 1966b:42.
21 Kang Sheng 1966c:7/34.
22 Deng Xiaoping 1966:8/5.
to ensure that no such drastic action was taken, while at the same time again carefully avoiding to kill the story altogether, PRC Premier Zhou Enlai at a meeting on 28 April 1967 announced that “as far as I know, there was no such thing (as an attempted coup), but it is permissible for the revolutionary masses to have their doubts.”

On this occasion as on countless others, wartime sensibilities precluded the mounting of a vigorous search for truth. As traditionally perceived, truth was to be measured against reality; but early on in the war on revisionism, stakeholders found that this made pressing it into the service of Mao's counterrevisionism strategy difficult. In the typical words of a provincial newspaper headline: “People Are All Equal Before the Truth’ Is a Revisionist Anti-Party Slogan.” Hence on one memorable occasion, in a widely circulated letter to Beijing university students, Zhou Enlai explained that for the duration, “(our) one criterion of truth... is to measure everything against Mao Zedong Thought.” As history's actor in the Domestic War on Revisionism, Mao was perceived as one engaged in the constant creation of new realities for others to study and respond to, rather than as one locked in battle with a truth that refused to bend to his own will.

No less than a conventional war would have done, Mao's war on revisionism turned the lives of millions of ordinary Chinese into a nightmare. The collateral damage inflicted by his more indiscriminate strategies was staggering, yet no systematic body count was ever carried out. Every time the war saw a surge in activity, the media and the talking points distributed “for reference” within the CCP concealed and distorted the truth about what was happening. To illustrate this with but one example, selected from today's fuller historical record, we need only look at the province of Jilin, where the provincial Revolutionary Committee initiated a campaign in 1968 to “ideologically eradicate the poison of revisionism and organizationally cleanse the class ranks.” In the course of this campaign—which was as much an intelligence-gathering, law-enforcement operation as an ideological battle—according to an official assessment, “in the various localities, more than 10,000 persons failed altogether to survive interrogation[xingxun bigong zhisizhe], while more than 20,000 were injured or crippled.” And yet at the height of the Domestic War on Revisionism, a classified 1971 submission from Jilin to a National Planning Conference in Beijing asserted that, in the wake of the campaign, people in the province were “better off than ever.”

WHEN AND WHERE DID IT HAPPEN?
The context of the Domestic War on Revisionism was, of course, the scene or setting in time and space in which it occurred. Speculating about how long a particular

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26 Zhejiang ribao 19 May 1966.
engagement might last, Mao’s senior perception-management advisor Chen Boda maintained that victory in the war on revisionism depended in some sense on a victory in the war of ideas and that it was obviously “impossible to imagine that the revolution inside a person’s mind could be over in just a few months.” It might well be a long-term struggle against the enemies of socialism. Looking at it from the comparative perspective of how long it had taken “for the bourgeoisie to break the neck of the ideology of feudalism,” Chen suggested that the CCP was in the midst of what might take “maybe decades, maybe a century.”32 The same extended time-frame was adopted by Tao Zhu, in charge of the day-to-day running of the Central Party Secretariat, who also added an international element to the spatial context by charging that “If we don’t defend the socialist cause, it’ll be the end of our party, of our country, and of us. Moreover, the Chinese revolution is not merely a matter of China alone: the fate of all the peoples of the world rests with us... Should the Chinese revolution fail, the entire world would retrogress by centuries. There would be a return to the dark ages. It’s this kind of an issue.”32

A common working assumption appears to have been that the war was an open-ended enterprise of uncertain duration that would last “as long as it takes.” Mao, for one, was loath to commit to anything resembling a time-table. On two separate occasions on 4 September 1964, he produced two completely different and contradictory estimates of how long resolving the revisionist “problem” might take. His first estimate (in conversation with a Laotian Cultural Troupe) was that “if Marxism does not overcome revisionism, revisionism will overcome Marxism and capitalism will make a come-back. The signboard will say communism, the actual policies will be capitalist. You should know that this issue is not easily resolved: it may take years, it may take decades.”33 The second estimate that same day (made at a principals’ meeting to discuss counterrevisionism strategy) had Mao asserting cryptically that revisionism might well be around for the CCP to grapple with for a full ten thousand years! “(Only now) that we have revisionism,” he said, “will Leninism be able to live forever!”[youle xiuzhengzhuyi, Lieningzhuyi caineng wansui].34

While the war’s context in time was thus in a sense eternity, its domestic spatial context never quite became, but was always meant to be, non-existent in the sense that there was to be no space, real or metaphorical—a hole in the ground, in the minds of men and women, in conversation or in print—where revisionism might find sanctuary and survive. (Internationally, Kang Sheng noted in 1968, “now, one by one, the Soviets, the Eastern Europeans, the Koreans have all gone revisionist[dou xiule]” and went on to ask rhetorically whether or not “we will become isolated if we resist?” No, he insisted, but it was crucially important that “we draw a line between them and us; and struggle, resist, and not go along with them in their evil

31 Chen Boda 1966b: 10/63.
33 Mao Zedong 1964a: 179.
34 Mao Zedong 1964b: 175.
deeds!”35) Within China, there was to be nothing extraneous to the war about which history might one day say that it had been a setting rather than a part of the war itself. In Mao’s view, to dissuade, deter, and defeat the revisionist adversary required nothing less than a total, all-consuming effort: hence his toast on 26 December 1966, “to the unfolding of nationwide all-round civil war[quanguo quanmian neizhan]!”36 The war was meant to penetrate everywhere, including the body and soul possibly harboring the seed that one day might grow into revisionism fully fledged. It was to deny hostile exploitation of mental as well as physical space. The idea of an ungoverned territory where life would be able to go on unaffected by the war was incompatible with the ideal of an active, layered response to revisionism. Equally unacceptable was the continued existence of the kind of “freedoms” of the mind that had proliferated in the run-up to the war, when “gifted intellectuals... used the indirect methods of Aesopian language, allusions, and historical examples” to criticize Mao.37 Only the “self” that exercised its nominal sovereignty responsibly would be allowed to survive. Why? Because “there is no unbridgeable gap,” the Beijing Daily wrote, “separating the ‘self’[si] from ‘revisionism’[xiu]: under certain conditions, the former may change into the latter.”38

WHO MADE IT HAPPEN?

“These past ten years, the Chairman has been the anti-revisionist standard bearer,” Kang Sheng observed in a speech to the Politburo in May 1966. Quoting an anonymous professor from the United Kingdom “who has visited China many times,” Kang explained that Mao “has gone far beyond Marxism-Leninism...(in part) because in China, dialectics have never been suspended. Chinese philosophy is inseparable from warfare.”39 As his Domestic War on Revisionism heated up, Mao the standard bearer was granted exclusive use of a title he already had, but which he had up to this point shared with the heads of China’s “people’s organizations.” As if to officially confirm the already obvious, that he was indeed the commander-in-chief—our leader, the reddest red sun in our hearts—the CCP Center announced on 26 August 1966, in Central Document Zhongfa(1966) No.430, that henceforth all other “chairmen” in China would be “directors/heads”[zhuren]. Semantics and visuals were rapidly catching up with wartime reality in the sense that everyone but Mao was henceforth reduced to the status of a co-agent at best. The day after it had granted Mao exclusive use of the title “Chairman,” the CCP Centre announced in a second Central Document Zhongfa(1966) No.444 that “at this time, on all occasions” [muqian yiqie changhe] only the image of Mao was to be on display.40

Rhetoric and imagery aside, Mao also in substantial terms enjoyed complete discretion in the exercise of his authority as “the Chairman,” including in the

36 Xu Jingxian 2004:8.
38 Beijing ribao 11 October 1967.
40 Cheng Qian[n.d.]:91-92.
conduct of operations against the forces of revisionism and any known extremist organization with suspected revisionist links, e.g. the “mysterious May 16 secret organization which,” an American couple living in Beijing at the time later recalled, “had surfaced during the summer (of 1967) to direct open attacks against Premier Zhou.” Mao's war powers were not to be circumscribed. Late in life, his initial clarity about the nature of the mission may well have been reduced, as he went on record labelling as “revisionism” both “empiricism and dogmatism” and the capitulation of Song Jiang, the leader of a peasant uprising during the Song dynasty. But for as long as he remained alive, nothing and nobody infringed on his ultimate authority in matters anti-revisionist—including, should he have wished, to declare victory!

Arguably Mao's crucial co-agent in the Domestic War on Revisionism was the PRC Premier. Had it not been for Zhou Enlai's dependable readiness—as Deng Xiaoping put it in conversation with an Italian journalist in 1980—to “say ever so many things and do ever so many things that were contrary to his own convictions,” the war might have turned out very differently. The nationwide government structure on top of which Zhou sat had been identified by Mao at the start of the war as the second-worst (after the CCP itself) affected institution where “counter-revolutionary revisionist elements” were poised to strike, and every year in mid-May, from 1967 to 1976, the party's media machine reaffirmed the enduring validity of this assessment. Instead of rejecting or questioning it, Zhou played along, in his own words, “aspiring to keep closely in step with the Chairman's thinking, to immediately learn from it, be on top of it, change with it, stay with it, yet never quite managing to stay with it.” We shall never know whether Zhou through his loyalty[zhong] sought to earn not merely history's but Mao's unqualified recognition as well, and in any case it seems he did not receive the latter. In 1973, he was accused by Mao with running part of the State Council(specifically: foreign affairs) in a way that, unless some changes were made, was certain one day to see it “compromised by revision”[shibi gao xiu zheng]. Ordinary Chinese, however, in words that weren't necessarily their own, were more forgiving of the Premier's failings. The wreaths surrounding the Monument to the Revolutionary Heroes in Tiananmen Square on the first Qingming festival after his death told the late Zhou that he could expect a generational commitment from the “proletarian successors you have fostered, who shall be around for generations to come, making sure that the existence of revisionism is not tolerated.”

Lin Biao's role in the Domestic War on Revisionism was, needless to say, two-fold. Prior to 1971, he played a decisive role inter alia by ensuring that the People's

44 Viz. the annual editorials commemorating the CCP Center's Notification of 16 May 1966 in which Mao had declared that the “representatives of the bourgeoisie who have sneaked into the Party, the government, the army and various spheres of culture are a bunch of counter-revolutionary revisionists. Once conditions are ripe, they will seize political power…”
Liberation Army (PLA) remained 100% committed to Mao and on message, impressing upon the senior officer corps that if they were in any way to “oppose the Chairman, oppose giving prominence to politics,” then “our military will change into a revisionist military.” 47 So “closely in step”—one of his favourite expressions—was Lin with Mao at this time that one could be forgiven for thinking that his personal motto was “I think exactly what my Chairman thinks, what he’s ever thought, what he will ever think, or whatever he thought he might think!” It was, however, not. Assuming Lin had one in the first place, his motto is far more likely to have resembled his closing remark at the end of a Politburo speech by Chen Boda, when he announced that “At the risk of being beheaded by revisionism, we intend to leave a good name for a thousand generations to come!” 48 Lin’s response to the political crisis, centered on his person, that erupted at the Lushan Central Committee plenum in 1970 was to force Mao’s hand (by doing nothing!) and his inaction provoked an unprecedented show-down over who it really was that, in Mao’s words, “practiced Marxism, not revisionism; sought unity, not division; and was aboveboard and open, not scheming and intriguing.” 49 Lin’s death the following year complicated the Domestic War on Revisionism no end. Mao himself would have to die before people began asking themselves whether or not launching the war in the first place had been the right choice. But what Lin did by dying in the way that he did was to force them very quickly to ask themselves if it had actually targeted the right enemy?

In addition to having Zhou and Lin prosecute the war with him, Mao also enjoyed the backing at one time or other of people whose names need not all be listed here, but some of whom eventually turned out, in Mao’s considered opinion, to themselves be representing revisionism. Most important among these lesser co-agents were the ones who like Kang Sheng, Chen Boda, and Tao Zhu managed intelligence and/or the media, and who in their capacity as perception managers helped convey/deny selected information and indicators to various audiences to influence their emotions, motives, and objective reasoning. Their task was to plan and control high-level leaks and public statements on the war and related issues. Mao would clear everything from a policy point of view, Zhou Enlai and Lin Biao would do the politics, while the others and their staffers would handle the spin.

**HOW WAS IT CONDUCTED?**

“Chaos” [luan], Mao remarked in the summer of 1964, “comes with the immense advantages of chaos [you luande jida haochu]. Take the fact that our party emerged victorious from all of twenty-five years of war.” 50 Confusion, disruption, untidiness—the stakeholders in the war on revisionism revelled in chaos and saw it as the primary agency with which to achieve their mission. Their intent was to disrupt, to throw revisionism off, to change the profile of what had been done so far, do something

47 Lin Biao 1966b:278.
50 Quoted in Xie Fuzhi 1965:216.
that hadn’t been done before and that no foe—real or imagined—would have planned against or counted on. There could be some untidiness as they moved forward, Zhou admitted, but “gradually, we’ll be able to figure out the rules. Through chaos, we’ll be able to find the way.” Addressing a meeting of CCP leaders in late 1966, he called on them to join him in “subjecting all that old stuff in our brains to an assault, subject each and every one of us to a tempering in the course of this movement. It’s not as if revisionism emerging isn’t a real possibility...”51 Eight years of instrumentalized chaos later, one of Mao’s junior(he had been in his early thirties when *the Domestic War on Revisionism* began) perception managers remained no less upbeat about its counterrevisionist potential. In conversation with Shanghai historians, Yao Wenyuan brought up Zhan Dabei, the prominent anti-Manchu revolutionary and supporter of Sun Yat-sen, and reminded them that “Zhan Dabei said ‘great chaos is the good medicine that will cure [zhi] China.’ Great chaos is an excellent thing [dahaoshi].”52 Zhan, of course, had been playing on the multiple meanings (not easily conveyed into English) of the verb *zhi*—to treat and cure a disease; to govern, order and administer a country; and to harness and control a raging current.

The corollary of chaos was fear. The *Domestic War on Revisionism* never succeed in targeting and striking only suspected revisionists, and on some level this failure to be “surgical” was almost certainly intentional. Chaos was an effective deterrent, precisely because of its random qualities, its arbitrariness. In a climate that saw the “nationwide suspension of the constitution and disregard of the law, the personal freedoms of everyone from the President to the common citizen being violated, people being arrested, beaten, struggled, and their homes raided,” there was widespread trawling backward in time for signs of suspected revisionism, especially among members of the nascent PRC middle class.53 The number one item on the list of charges of “implementing a counter-revolutionary revisionist line” directed in 1968 against a fifty-year-old university-educated employee(whose “buregeois view of the world has never been completely reformed”) of the Beijing municipal party organization was that, after surveying a rural People’s Commune in the early 1960s, he had put opinions like the following on paper: “grain production figures are false,” “when the communes were set up, people weren’t properly reimbursed for the private possessions they had to pool,” “commune members are dissatisfied,” and “militarization meant making old people run.”54 The war on revisionism was simply not a time for remarks like these, which gave ammunition to socialism’s enemies! The “bourgeois elements” who made them served as nothing less than *enablers* of revisionism who had to be reminded to watch what they say, watch what they do! “Why did Lenin speak of exercising dictatorship over the bourgeoisie?” Mao was to ask rhetorically in 1974: “It is essential to get this question clear. Lack of clarity on this question will lead to revisionism. The whole country should be

51 Zhou Enlai 1966:343.
53 Hu Qiaomu 1999:90.
54 Beijingshi geming weiyuanhui dier xuexiban sanfenzhi sanlian dangzhibu 1972:2.
Prominent revisionist suspects were detained in facilities like Qincheng Prison in Changping county, north of Beijing. Here, suspects whose intelligence value had been exhausted by their interrogators are known to have been, in some cases, simply forgotten, left to rot away on the inside because nobody on the outside knew or dared to ask about their whereabouts. The exact number of permanent and temporary facilities nationwide into which prominent and lesser revisionist suspects were disappeared was never systematically documented and will probably never be known. A post-Mao inquiry into the involvement of the then-head of the PLA General Logistics Department in the operation of such secret facilities recorded the use, in some of them, of more than 50 different forms of torture. Intelligence relevant to the challenges and threats that revisionism might pose was sought very aggressively.

The interrogators who executed this particular aspect of Mao’s counterrevisionism strategy insisted that causing harm was not really their objective: pain was only being inflicted on suspects with the specific intent of obtaining information. As one inexperienced (and hence unusually forthcoming) interrogator explained in the course of an inquiry into the alleged 1967 beating of a suspect deemed to have been in possession of crucial background information on perhaps the most important “counter-revolutionary revisionist element” of them all, Liu Shaoqi: “I told (the suspect that) it’s not that we intended to beat you: you made us do it [shì ni bìde] (by holding back information)! Our aim was also, in beating you, to educate [jiào yu] you...” A year before this particular alleged beating had taken place, during the critical launch phase of the Domestic War on Revisionism, Mao had explained that under the prevailing circumstances, while “the policies of the party do not advocate beating people up, one also has to subject beatings (as such) to a class analysis.” “Bad people [huài rén] have it coming [huó gài],” or so Mao and others with him had argued. Mao’s words were no doubt interpreted by interrogators to mean that, pursuant to Mao’s authority as the Chairman, pre-existing statutes against torture no longer applied to the detention and interrogation of revisionist suspects. Again, in the words of the interrogator just quoted, after the suspect had admitted to being a former member of the Guomindang and to having worked as a goon for a “yellow” labor union before 1949, “I felt a sense of relief. We had, after all, not been beating up a good guy. Not to mention, that our intent had been to get to the bottom of the Liu Shaoqi issue.”

55 Renmin ribao, 22 February 1975.
56 The lessons gleaned from prisoner abuse scandals in Qincheng at the height of the war on revisionism are the subject of a recent brief memoir by a senior public security officer who, in 1973, took part in a rare inquiry into “fascist-style” PLA interrogation practices and the resulting manipulative self-injurious behaviour on the part of prisoners. See Sun Mingshan, ed. 2001:453-463.
58 Zhu X 1971:11.
59 Mao Zedong 1966:265.
60 Zhu X 1971:11.
WHY WAS IT DONE?
In the course of the Domestic War on Revisionism, Mao regularly alluded to why it was being fought. Different audiences would be presented with slightly different rationales, something Kang Sheng held up as a central component of Mao’s overall counterrevisionism strategy: “What he said in 1966 is different from what he said in 1967, which in turn is different from what he said in 1968. Mainly, what he means is that we must not lower our guard and become careless, lose our vigilance.” In conversation with his own establishment intellectuals, Mao had hinted early on at the need to do something about “alienation under socialism”; years later, in conversation with Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot, he spoke of the importance of reducing the scope, in socialist society, of “bourgeois rights.” In conversation with an Albanian delegation in 1967, Mao abandoned the conceptual apparatus of Marxism in favor of his very own set of earthy metaphors, stressing his desire to excavate and cut off the poisonous root of revisionism: to resolve the matter of the two world views! You can drag out as many persons in power walking the capitalist road as you like, but until you have resolved the matter of the two world views and the two roads, you still will not have prevented the (appearance of new) persons in power walking the capitalist road.

While certain changes in Mao’s language did mark a change of approach, it is safe to say that many simply reflected the evolving nature of the war itself.

To Kang Sheng—who had helped formulate Mao’s counterrevisionism strategy during the crucial phase in the first half of the 1960s when it changed from a concern with domestic “prevention” to active “resistance”—Mao’s “supreme instructions” were talking points to be carefully repeated, preferably verbatim. In public as well as on major intra-party occasions, Kang was always 100% on message. At the 12th Plenum of the 8th CCP Central Committee in 1968, he provided at least a tentative answer to the question that no doubt vexed many of his colleagues, namely whether or not what they had been through for the last two plus years had really targeted revisionism (as represented by, for example, Liu Shaoqi) or merely individuals like Liu Shaoqi “the person”? Kang’s explanation was that Liu Shaoqi is a representative of imperialism and modern revisionism and the reactionaries of all countries. In socialist society, given the condition that classes and class struggle persist, even if there were no Liu Shaoqi, we would still see the emergence of other representatives of the bourgeoisie, since that is a law of class struggle in socialist society, one operating independently of man’s will.

63 Handwritten transcript in a contemporary diary kept by a Nanjing resident. In the possession of the author.
64 Zhonghua renmin gongheguo guoshigao bianweihui, ed. 2000:v.1/347.
In retrospect, it stands to reason that passages like this one should be approached with a note of caution, as the possibility is very real that some, many, or even most, were little more than disinformation. That some crucial elements of what was driving Mao did not find expression in his public statements had been acknowledged by Kang in 1966 when he observed that it was very important to study the “thinking” of the CCP Chairman that had not been “put in words” [xingcheng wenzide]. “The Chairman’s thinking that has not yet been put on paper very much deserves to be studied,” he explained to his Politburo colleagues.66

Taking pre-emptive action to eliminate imminent revisionist threats was clearly but one part of Mao’s war—the acute one. It allowed party journalists to file stories of “revolutionary fighters throwing themselves into the heat of the struggle” and allowed perception managers to briefly remove the word “peace” from the active lexicon as unsuited to the articulation of Maoist core values.67 But as part of the war, Mao also sought to tackle longer-term, more fundamental issues. To invoke Kang Sheng’s not entirely felicitous metaphor, he struggled with the issue of how to “up-root the social foundation of revisionism.”68 Perhaps his most firmly held belief was that that foundation included wealth—that becoming wealthy made people increasingly prone to revisionism. In the words of a State Council vice-premier au fait with Mao’s thinking, “he said a number of times that poverty engenders change, while wealth engenders revision” [qiongze sibian, fuze xiu]. According to the same vice-premier and the public record, Mao also looked upon education as part of the revisionist problem and “said a number of times that the more books you read, the more stupid you get; the more like an intellectual you become, the easier it becomes for revisionism to develop.”69 In addition, Mao also pointed the finger at the media.70

Part of the explanation of why Mao insisted on “staying the course” in the Domestic War on Revisionism until the very end is the unsettling one that he eventually came to view agency and purpose as one and the same. The timing of his repeated appeals to the party faithful to set time aside to study philosophy suggests that he viewed a capacity to engage with “big issues” as crucial to a successfully executed counterrevisionism strategy. As spelled out by a woman who knew him intimately, anyone who spent all his/her time merely dealing with “lesser issues” was in effect “issuing an open invitation to revisionism.” Hence a struggle had to be waged, she explained to a January 1974 rally attended by carefully screened employees of the State Council and CCP Central Committee staffers, to meet the revisionist challenge head on, since “unless we struggle, it’s backward from here; and unless we struggle, we shall see a collapse” [budou zetui, budou zekua]. Chiming in, one of her close colleagues addressing the same rally promptly added that “unless we struggle, there will be revisionism” [budou zexiu].71 Here “struggle” in and of itself had emerged as

67 Cf. Schoenhals 1996.
68 Renmin ribao 4 November 1966.
69 Bo Yibo 1993:1154-1155.
70 Wang Li 1967b:3.
pivotal to Mao’s mission. When on 16 May 1976, the People’s Daily quoted the CCP Chairman as “saying at the beginning of this year that ‘without struggle there can be no progress’ and with 800 million people, is not to struggle (even) an option?!”[hayi renkou, budou xingma],” the paper was in effect suggesting that constant struggle itself had become the wars desired endstate as far as Mao was concerned.

Conclusion

How does it end?
It ends,
That’s all.
“End Zen”
by D. H. Rumsfeld.72

“Once I’m dead, you can have a meeting and celebrate,” Mao said to his personal staff, near the end of his life. “You get up there on stage and give a speech. You say, this meeting of ours today is a victorious meeting. Mao Zedong has died, and we gather to celebrate the victory of dialectics. By dying, he did the right thing.”73

Mao’s death in September 1976 may seem like the appropriate terminating motif for a narrative interpretation of the past that has claimed for itself the name of a war. It is, after all, with death that we should expect wars to end. Yet we must not allow an aesthetically driven concern with the achievement of narrative closure or furnishing of interpretative coherence blind us to the fact that Mao’s passing was both an end and a transition—in his own words, the “victory of dialectics”! Briefly, his successors stressed the importance of staying the course—some speaking in terms of acting in accordance with “principles laid down” or “past principles,” others merely insisting that one had to go with “whatever”[fanshi] Mao had decided or instructed.74 It was not until the first post-Mao spring of 1977 that Deng Xiaoping, who refused to assent to whateverism, set the process in motion that slowly, almost imperceptibly, would come to mark the end of Mao’s conception of socialism as predicated on a constant, never-ending, all-consuming war or struggle against revisionism, a faith-based conception that for well over a decade in the collective subconsciousness of millions of Chinese communists had held the answer to the questions “Who are we?” and “What are we doing?”75

For too long, the CCP had framed every problem in terms of competing “isms” and defined every solution in violent terms. “Peaceful” had been seen as a revisionist “means”[shouduan] or “slogan”[kouhao], the “objective function of which, in a post-revolutionary socialist society, is to benumb people, make them slacken their vigilance...”75 The absolute prioritization of the war against revisionism at the expense of everything else, had reduced to simplistic maxims any number of

73 Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi 2003:1780.
highly debatable complex issues, including what made actually existing socialism superior to all other social formations and hence worth the ultimate sacrifice? Not until 1979 was it possible to debate this question openly without being charged with blasphemy or treason. One older Central Committee member who in 1954 had helped draft the first constitution of the PRC and who now would serve Deng loyally by media-managing a truth-driven reform process, told a meeting of senior provincial leaders in 1980 that if one had accepted as valid the ideology or theory (“assuming,” he said, for argument’s sake, that “it qualifies as a theory”) that had informed Mao’s politics as of roughly 1966, then

such a socialism doesn’t even compare favourably to capitalism. It is fundamentally incapable of stability and doesn’t permit the development of production, since it constantly generates class and class struggle—a kind of class struggle for which the sole available means of resolution are the overthrow of everything and all-round civil war. It represents a kind of unthinkable socialism.76

Given the immense credibility that the CCP for such a long time had invested in planning for and executing this “unthinkable” socialism, it took considerable political courage to pursue analyses like this one to their logical conclusion, not to mention act on them.

To attribute the decision of Mao’s successors to no longer “stay the course” solely to political factors would, however, be a mistake. Economic realities probably changed a few minds as well, in that the war proved far more costly than the CCP had anticipated. In two particularly memorable speeches in August 1967 and October 1968, Lin Biao had come close to describing “chaos, destruction, and revolution[ge]” under Mao’s correct stewardship as one giant economic stimulus package; after 1971, nothing was again heard of such views, and in 1979 they were systematically refuted by the party’s most prominent economists.77 Already in 1973, Zhou Enlai had begun using the c-word to discuss what was in store for China if things were allowed to just go on the way they were: “This is none too comfortable. Capitalism experiences economic crises, and even though we are fundamentally different from them, this is still not very comfortable.”78 Difficult to calculate even under the best of circumstances, the comparative advantages that the socialist PRC had once enjoyed over neighboring economies (e.g. Japan, South Korea, Taiwan) eroded steadily in the course of the Domestic War on Revisionism and Chinese macro-economists would eventually estimate the cost of Mao’s final decade in power at 279.3 billion Yuan.79

76 Hu Qiaomu 1999:118.
78 Dangdai Zhongguo shangye bianjibu, ed. 1990:698.
79 Wu Li, ed. 1999:v.2/741.
81 Hobsbawm 1997:27.
By prosecuting a war on something that ultimately proved indistinguishable from the self, Mao and his stakeholders had committed pre-emptive political suicide. China’s population survived what so far has not, but—as I have tried to show in this paper—can be narrated as a pre-enactment, on a limited scale, of the “war on a ‘what’” (to use David Frum’s characterization) that on a global scale may still come to define the 21st century. While I hesitate to advertise this alternative organization of knowledge about a “very difficult period” as somehow able to teach new lessons to those who experienced the reality it concerns first hand, I hope it will convey something new in terms of meaning and implications to those who did not. A historian old enough to know once observed that it “takes two to learn the lessons of history or anything else: one to give the information, the other to listen.” Perhaps, just perhaps, the lessons of history that the Cultural Revolution rendered inaudible may in this way be heard.

ABBRÉVIATIONS

| PRC | People’s Republic of China |
| CCP | Chinese Communist Party |
| PLA | People’s Liberation Army |

GLOSSARY

| bayi renkou, budou xingma | 八億人口，不鬪行嗎 |
| budou zetui, budou zekua | 不鬪則退，不鬪則垮 |
| budou zexiu | 不鬪則修 |
| Changping | 昌平 |
| Chen Boda | 陳伯達 |
| dahaoshi | 大好事 |
| dazibao | 大字報 |
| Deng Xiaoping | 鄧小平 |
| dou xiule | 都修了 |
| duosi | 多思 |
| fangxu | 防修 |
| fanshi | 凡是 |
| fanxiu | 反修 |
| ge | 革 |
| Guomindang | 國民黨 |
| huairen | 壞人 |
| huogai | 活該 |
| jiaoyu jiaoyu | 教育教育 |
| Jiguan | 機關 |
| Jilin | 吉林 |
| Kang Sheng | 康生 |
| kouhao | 口號 |
| Lieningzhuyi | 列寧主義 |
| Lin Biao | 林彪 |
| Liu Shaoqi | 劉少奇 |
| iuan | 亂 |
| Lushan | 盧山 |
| Manchur | 滿洲 |
| Mao Zedong | 毛澤東 |
| muqian yiqie changhe | 目前一切場合 |
| Nanjing | 南京 |
| Peng Dehuai | 彭德懷 |
| Peng Zhen | 彭真 |
| qianzhen wanque | 千真萬確 |
| QinCheng | 秦城 |
| Qingsheng | 清明 |
| qiongze sibian, fuze xiu | 窮則思變，富則修 |
| quanguo quanmian neizhan | 全國全面內戰 |
Shanghai 上海
shibigao xiuzheng 勢必修正
shini bide 是你逼的
shiwei 市委
shouduan 手段
shoudujixiechang 首都機械廠
si 私
Song 宋
SongJiang 宋江
Sun Yat-sen 孫逸仙(孫中山)
Tao Zhu 陶鑄
xingcheng wenzide 形成文字的
xingxun bigong zhisizhe 刑訊逼供致死者
xiu 修
xiuzhengzhuyi 修正主義
Yao Wenyuan 姚文元
youluande jida haochu 有亂的極大好處
youle xiuzhengzhuyi, Lieningzhuyi cineng wansui 有了修正主義, 列寧主義才能萬歲
yuan 元
Zhan Dabei 詹大悲
zhong 忠
Zhongfa 中發
Zhongnanhai 中南海
Zhou Enlai 周恩來
zhuren 主任

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