3 Recent Interpretations on Party History in the People’s Republic of China

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After the fall of the Gang of Four, many wrongs have been righted in the study of Party history. From the central to the provincial capitals and even down to certain counties, various units and institutes are actively collecting materials and conducting research on Party history, and much achievement have been made. This is true especially after the Third Plenum (of December 1978) which had adopted the new spirit and direction of liberating thoughts and ‘Seeking truth from facts’; (as a result), many ‘forbidden’ areas have been broken, (and) various problems on the Party’s history that could not be studied in the past can now be examined.¹

These words by a Chinese Communist historian in 1982 may not be taken at their face-value; for historians there are not allowed complete freedom in interpreting historical events, especially in such a highly sensitive area as Party history. As in the past, one can expect the new interpretations to play the role of legitimiser for the present leaders’ position and policies. Yet it cannot be denied that Chinese historians are making a concerted effort to rectify what they consider as non-historical in past historical research. Under the slogans of ‘Seeking truth from facts’, ‘Breaking down the “forbidden areas”’, and ‘Only when you are loyal to the facts can you be loyal to truth’, they call into being a new orientation on research into Party history. This new orientation rejects the past Mao-dominated version of history writing, which relegated all other party leaders to secondary or insignificant positions. It objects to the past attempts to subsume every event and issue under the ‘two-line struggle’ paradigm, with the result that leaders who disagreed with Mao were all branded ‘counter-revolutionary’ and their personal history were re-written to present...
them as ‘opportunists’ from the start of their careers. Instead, it calls for giving all leaders or individuals a ‘comprehensive evaluation’ (quanmian pingjia) taking into account the circumstances under which they operated and recognising their contributions as well as failings. Finally, in stark contrast to past practises, it encourages publication of debates and summary of varied opinions to show tolerance of divergent views. All these are accompanied by an unprecedented effort to collect and collate materials on Party history giving rise to a wide range of publications, which shed new and important light on the history of the Chinese Revolution. The purpose of this paper is to sum up some of the recent interpretations which are intrinsically of special interest and relevance to our understanding of the CCP’s revolutionary history, but which more importantly reflect the concerns and policy orientation of the present leadership.

THE EARLY MAO

To correct past misrepresentation of Mao as a ‘born genius’ and a ‘born Marxist’, recent interpretations have stressed the fact that Mao, like other leaders of the May Fourth Period who later became Marxist, was at first uncommitted to Marxism-Leninism. In 1979, two articles by Li Rui, the former noted biographer of the young Mao, set the trend by noting that Mao’s thought was a mixture of nationalistic, democratic and reformist ideas in the period between 1915 and 1920. The much glorified piece ‘The Great Union of the Masses’, written in July 1919, is described as un-Marxist, while the programme for the reconstruction of Hunan (June 1920) is considered a bourgeois-democratic platform. Nevertheless, this does not mean that Chinese Communist historians agree with the popular Western interpretation of Mao as primarily a nationalist who turned to Marxism as a panacea for China’s problems. Rather, it is strongly asserted that Mao, by the summer of 1920 (as Mao himself told Edgar Snow in 1936), had become a Marxist and subsequently never deviated from that belief. This is supported by a letter written by Mao to Cai Hesen dated 1 December 1920, in which he stated categorically that he was in favour of ‘changing China and the world’ and of ‘revolution of the Marxist kind’. Furthermore, in his speech delivered at the Xinmin xuehui (New Citizens Study Society) of January 1921, Mao is shown to have arrived at Marxism after some careful deliberations: