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路线斗争

Line Struggle

Yoshihiro ISHIKAWA and Craig A. SMITH

Up to a certain point in time, the histories of communist parties in any country can be seen as sequences of ‘line struggles’ (*luxian douzheng*). ‘Line’ is a specialised term that indicates a specific direction or guiding principle for political activities and is directly linked to whether or not a path is deemed revolutionary. However, it must be noted that the expression’s use in politics and political movements was nowhere to be found during the time of Marx and Engels. It was not until the twentieth century that this expression became of common usage, specifically during the revolutionary activities of organisations such as the Lenin-led Communist Party and the Comintern. Moving from theory to practice, Marxist theorists saw that the success or failure of a given activity was inextricably related to its guiding principle, therefore particular political directions came to be referred to as ‘lines.’

Walking the correct line was no easy task. Taking up a radical guiding principle that had drifted too far from reality would inevitably lead to tremendous sacrifices, oppression, and conflict. Conversely, accepting the status quo and following more moderate principles would be to completely lose any possibility of revolution. Generally speaking, the official histories of communist parties would record these as leftist or rightist ‘deviations’ resulting in an incorrect line.

China is no exception to this. The 1945 ‘Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party’ not only established perspectives on the correct line according to Mao Zedong’s revolutionary policy, but also identified left and right deviating lines. This understanding of history as line struggle continued to restrain the Chinese official representation of history until the death of Mao. Since then, the term has all but disappeared as changes to Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership have gradually come to be called ‘power struggles’ (*quanli douzheng*), in which lust for power, rather

than ideological principles, appears to exert influence on the direction of the CCP. This essay outlines the appearance of the term ‘line struggle,’ its usage, and its disappearance into the shadows of history.¹

A Genealogy of Line Struggle

In China, the understanding of history as line struggle appeared in the 1930s, when the Communist Party of the Soviet Union exerted considerable influence on the CCP. Still, it was only after the establishment of the People’s Republic that this view of history became dominant, achieving a prominence that would remain until the death of Mao Zedong. With the onset of the reform era, former proponents of this discourse acknowledged the terrible force that it had exerted, and the Party deliberately and expeditiously stopped all use of line in official documents.

The Chinese term *luxian* is a translated equivalent of the English term ‘line,’ the Russian ‘линия’ (*linija*), and the German ‘linie.’ This modern Western intellectual concept is rendered into the same Sinitic characters in Japanese, in which it is pronounced *rosen*. It is well known that in many cases modern conceptual terminology—which was imported into China and Japan from the West—was first translated into Japanese and then flowed into China during the late Qing Dynasty. Key ideas from Marxist theory, as well as early Chinese socialism, also entered Chinese lexicons and conceptual frameworks through translation from Japanese. However, in the case of line, it was not a simple matter of the Chinese term *luxian* being acquired from the Japanese term *rosen*. First, we must outline the process of how line came to be a Sinitic concept.

The formulation of line into the two Sinitic characters of *luxian* did not occur in Japan, but was an effort of China’s left-wing activists. Logically, before the term line could be discussed in the context of a revolutionary movement, a large movement had to exist. Although research into Marxist theory was advancing in Japan in the 1920s, the concept remained meagre and limited in practice. Japan’s socialist movement was restricted and obscured by severe repression by government officials, and the idea of line failed to develop to any degree under this climate. However, for the CCP, it did have an impact upon, and power over, the degree to which leadership could be criticised during pivotal events. It exhibited considerable influence in determining the course of the revolutionary movement under Chen Duxiu’s leadership and the First United Front with the Nationalist Party (*guomindang*, hereafter GMD). It was also prominent shortly after this, during the period in which the Party fell under Li Lisan’s leadership, demonstrating power over the extent of the military occupation of Changsha in the summer of 1930. Due to these controversies, the Comintern then used line to discuss the appropriateness of developments in the CCP.

The translation of line as *luxian* appeared early on. One of the first instances of the usage of this term can be found in the documents from the CCP meeting that took place on 7 August 1927, which formally dissolved the First United Front with the GMD. The meeting severely criticised the leadership of Chen Duxiu for the haphazard compromise with the GMD, labelling it as an ‘unprecedented, compromising, and opportunistic *line*.’ After this use of line as rebuke, the term came to be employed as a suffix after the name of the Party leader who was pushing for that specific kind of political strategy. An early example of this can be seen in the ‘Li Lisan Line’—a temporary

push for urban uprisings and attacks on cities by the Red Army in 1930. In November of that same year, the Comintern sent a letter to the Central Committee of the CCP. It said that the error of 'Comrade Li Lisan's political line' was in opposition with the Comintern's line for being 'non-Bolshevik, non-Leninist,' with the Russian term *linija* translated as *luxian*. Incidentally, at that time in Japan the term *rosen* was only being used to indicate routes of railways or other transportation methods. In due course, the political usage of the term line would appear even in Japan, but for a long time the Li Lisan Line was referred to as the 'Li Lisan Course' (*Ri Rissan kōsu*).²

Therefore, it could be said that *luxian* was a political concept that directly entered the Chinese lexicon from Soviet Russia. As the CCP kept up its fight through shake-ups and redesigns at every twist and turn of the revolutionary movement, whenever a new leadership group came into power, they would criticise the decisions of their predecessors as 'so-and-so's line.' This became a normal occurrence at every transfer of power and thus the line struggle historical perspective came to be, constructing a historical narrative based upon the validity of the line of successive leadership groups.

From Stalin to Mao

The formation of this unique historical perspective had a tremendous impact on communist movements worldwide, as can be seen in the so-called 'Stalinist encyclopedia,' the *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks)*, commonly known as the *Short Course*. This book's most outstanding feature was its treatment of the successive internal line struggles throughout the history of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Those occasional struggles served to validate the righteousness of Lenin and Stalin. Although this book is now seldom discussed, it influenced not only the Soviet Union, but also the global leftist socialist movement that included China. From an intellectual perspective, it was not only the guiding principle of the communist movement, but it has also exerted influence on history, political science, and other related fields. The degree of the book's extensive influence should be revisited and reappraised.

In China, Mao Zedong's admiration for the spirit of the *Short Course* led to the publication of successive texts that varied markedly, starting with the adoption of the 'Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party' in the Seventh Plenary Session of the Sixth Central Committee of April 1945. No other communist party anywhere in the world adopted its historical narrative into such a resolution. The four periods of line struggle between an incorrect line represented by the Party leadership of the time and a correct line centred upon Mao Zedong have since then become well known. The four incorrect lines that were formalised through this Resolution were: a) the right-opportunist line of Chen Duxiu; b) the left-deviationist line of Qu Qiubai; c) the left-adventurist line of Li Lisan, and d) the left-opportunist line of Wang Ming. Accepted to this day, this Resolution stipulates a Chinese historical narrative that posits these four as mistakes in Party history, in contrast to the persistent advance of Mao Zedong along the correct line. Among these, Wang Ming himself was a regular user of the term line, and he even once released a pamphlet titled: 'Two Lines: The Struggle for the Further Bolshevisation of the Chinese Communist Party.' Wang Ming and his followers, known as the '28 Bolsheviks' or the 'Returned Students' due to their studies

in the Soviet Union, were ardent followers of the dogmatism of the Soviet school. Concerning the Stalinist historical perspective on line struggle, Mao and Wang were disciples of Stalin in equal measure.

There are reports that Mao Zedong, who was effectively the author of the Resolution on History, also raised the alarm over the casual use of the term line struggle. The Resolution was being drafted at the Politburo meeting that took place in November 1943. It was the very meeting that was held to criticise the Wang Ming Line, when, according to the *Chronicle of Mao Zedong Thought*, the official chronology of Mao Zedong's thought and discourse, Mao was recorded as stating that: 'The *History of the All-Union Communist Party* seldom mentions the term "line," yet our Chinese comrades enjoy chewing over the word. It would be best if we used it sparingly.'³ It is not possible to verify either the authenticity of these words or Mao's true intentions at the time, which appear paradoxical in several ways. First, the use of line as a suffix was widely popular at that time, largely because of Mao himself, and his request for people to refrain from using the term in the future was in tremendous contradiction with his own behaviour. Secondly, the *Short Course* that Mao referred to above, was none other than the canonical text from which the term line proliferated. Finally, in the 27,000 characters of the 1945 Resolution on History, the term line appeared no fewer than 186 times.

After this, the identification of incorrect lines in the Party history of line struggle did not decrease. On the contrary, the usage of the term only increased after 1949, with Gao Gang, Rao Shushi, Peng Dehuai, Liu Shaoqi, and Lin Biao all falling from power due to their 'incorrect lines.' By the early 1970s, there were ten such incorrect lines.

Known as the 'ten great line struggles,' these incidents provided a summarised historical narrative of the development of the CCP.⁴ Needless to say, Mao Zedong himself was the main proponent of this discourse. During his Southern Tour in August of 1971, he explained: 'The correct or incorrect nature of the line determines everything ... The line is the guiding principle ... Problems with the line are problems of principle, and I will not allow anyone to transgress my line.' On various occasions, he declared that the line was everything.⁵

In his political report at the Tenth National Congress, held in August 1973, Zhou Enlai publicly detailed the discourse of the ten great line struggles. Identifying and criticising each of the embattled leaders—all former comrades of his—he avoided becoming the target of the eleventh line struggle. The ten great line struggles held such prominence after that Congress, but they would no longer be raised shortly following Mao's death three years later.

Into Oblivion

In order to summarise the disorder of the Cultural Revolution and to recompose Party history, at the Sixth Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee in 1981 members adopted a second resolution on Party history, entitled 'Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party since the Founding of the People's Republic of China.' In this document, the Party recognised the mistakes that Mao Zedong had made in the final years of his life, offering evaluations of both his successes and his failures. The final text totalled 33,000 characters. Although it is considerably longer than the

original 1945 Resolution, it employed the term line only 22 times. Using the previous conception of line that had long been overly stressed, the new Resolution asserted that: ‘Normal disputes between Party comrades have been recognised as errors of line.’

Concerning this remarkable change, Hu Qiaomu—who was involved in the drafting of both resolutions—explained:

That [1945] Resolution had its faults We can say that the perspective of historical change as the history of line struggles began with that Resolution. The history of the Party retreated behind the curtain, leaving only the history of line struggles on the stage. This was a tremendous mistake.⁶

Before the Comintern raised criticism of the Li Lisan Line, the CCP rarely used the term line. It did not appear in any of the documents from the Second Congress to the Sixth Congress. Beginning in the period of Wang Ming’s leadership, Party members used the term abundantly, and its usage became ever sacralised and mysterious. The [1945] Party’s Resolution on History cannot be reduced to the history of line struggles. It is difficult to estimate how many comrades have been harmed by the terms line error and line struggle.⁷

In this text by Hu Qiaomu, we can see that he made a mistake in his attribution of the first usage of the term, which, as noted above, can be found as early as 1927. Also, by asserting that Wang Ming was behind the initial popularity of line, he made no reference to Mao’s responsibility. In spite of these misrepresentations, the 1981 Resolution recognised that the concept and label of line had come to play a negative function in Party’s history. Moreover, this text is of particular significance as it was the first to frankly state that this was due to the 1945 Resolution. Thus, in accordance with the 1981 Resolution, the Party resolutely set forth policy that no longer succumbed to the discourse of line struggle or line errors, and as a consequence, although Chinese leaders continue to mention the importance of following the correct line, now the term line struggle has all but faded from vocabulary.

However, one should not forget that in order to discount this discourse and unite the entire Party’s understanding of history, the Party had to alter its historical narrative and resort to the use of yet another resolution in the post-Mao era. Once again, history was caged through a resolution of the Party. One resolution followed another, and now this history too must be locked away. To this day, what should be written about Party history, and what must not be written about Party history, remains the sole prerogative of the Party itself.

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Author/s:

Ishikawa, Y; Smith, C

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