The Sino-Soviet Conflict

A Global Perspective

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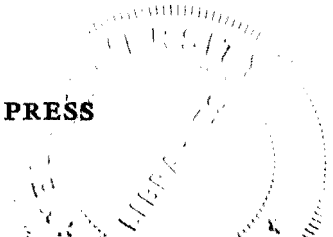

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Internal Politics: China and the Soviet Union

The Background in Chinese Politics

KENNETH LIEBERTHAL

Since the late 1960s China's domestic politics have taken a dramatic turn, abjuring the radically anarchist policies of the Cultural Revolution in favor of development-oriented priorities that have won kudos from the World Bank, among many others. During the same decade, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has emerged from its diplomatic isolation (as of 1968, China's sole ambassador posted abroad was Beijing's envoy to Cairo) to link up economically, politically, and increasingly militarily with the industrialized countries of the West and Japan along a strongly anti-Soviet axis. To what extent are the domestic and international components of this political sea change interconnected? And in what ways has China's foreign policy—Sino-Soviet relations in particular—both influenced and been shaped by the domestic political arena during the 1970s?

THE BACKGROUND

China specialists typically advise that one needs a historical perspective to fathom contemporary events in the Middle Kingdom. This caution is especially well taken when trying to understand the interaction of domestic and foreign policy. For in a fundamental sense, the international arena has posed the basic questions with which the Chinese revolution has grappled over the past one hundred years. Traditional China had held that the emperor mediated between heaven and earth, and that he therefore in theory ruled all under heaven. The Dragon Throne obviously did not directly control all the people with whom the Han Chinese came in contact, and in fact most dynasties had very active and hardheaded foreign policies to manage

As such, people of both groups should be considered "modernizers" in China. But the technology firsters have gone even farther and have been willing to give economic development such high priority that they will make any cultural sacrifices necessary to achieve it. This does not mean that technology firsters would tolerate the complete Westernization of Chinese society. Rather, they have sought some mix of Chinese and Western elements that suits the country's own conditions (including its enormous peasantry) but at the same time produces rapid economic growth. Of all three groups, the technology firsters are probably the most revolutionary in the traditional Marxist sense of the term. At the same time, they have always been the most vulnerable to the charge that they are selling out the national identity in an ill-conceived effort to secure national sovereignty. The Guang Xu emperor became one of the earliest technology firsters, and Deng Xiaoping is certainly the most prominent in China now. Zhou Enlai may well have been a technology firster, but he almost always carefully sculpted his preferences to make them reasonably compatible with those of Mao Zedong.[5]

Chinese politics from the turn of the century to 1976 were dominated by selective modernizers. Although as they advanced in age these individuals tended personally to move closer to the nativists, the center of gravity of Chinese society and politics during the course of the century seems to have been shifting inexorably in the other direction. During the 1970s China underwent a transition at the top that saw power pass from an enfeebled Mao Zedong, who had in his declining years brought uncompromising nativists into the highest councils of power,[6] to one of the most ardent technology firsters in modern Chinese history, Deng Xiaoping. This transition dominated the politics of the decade.

As the above overview indicates, all parties to this struggle conceived of domestic priorities and China's position in the international arena as one integrated set of issues. Put differently, in a country the size of China, unquestionably domestic affairs consumes the thoughts and energies of most people. But the country's history has produced such a central concern with sovereignty and security that the priority its leaders have given to different fundamental domestic goals (economic development, cultural transformation, class struggle, and so forth) has been inextricably bound up with their notions of what will produce the necessary strength internationally to protect China's integrity. These basic perspectives, moreover, often lead to quite different concrete foreign policy choices, as was clearly the case in the 1970s, when precisely these fundamental issues set the terms of reference for both domestic political conflict and debate about Soviet policy in Beijing.

5. For a similar but not identical attempt to summarize the basic twentieth-century Chinese approaches to ordering their society, see Michel Oksenberg and Steven Goldstein, "The Chinese Political Spectrum," *Problems of Communism*, 23, no. 2 (March–April 1974): 1–13.

6. Here as elsewhere, "nativists" is used interchangeably with "radicals" in discussing the late 1960s and the 1970s in China.

POLITICS OF THE 1970s: THE SETTING

China approached the 1970s with the issues defining the nature and future thrust of the revolution very much up in the air. The Cultural Revolution had by 1968 severely disrupted the civilian party and government administrative structures and had wrought havoc in the society. Virtual civil war flared in numerous locales during the hot summer months in 1967 and 1968, and even the power of arrest and detention had de facto been given to numerous self-defined political groups who used it at times with cruel zeal. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) stood as the one nationally integrated administrative apparatus capable of holding the country together, but the army never seized absolute power in Beijing. Indeed, as of 1968 zealous nativists fully shared with the army the benefits of the revolution from below that Mao Zedong had begun two years earlier. And the nativists with good reason distrusted the military hierarchy.

Within this confused and unsettled context, the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia in August 1968 and quickly thereafter proclaimed a Brezhnev Doctrine that could be used to justify follow-up military action against China (among other socialist countries). In the context of the Soviets' increasing pace of militarization of the Sino-Soviet border during 1966–68, the invasion of Czechoslovakia highlighted the degree to which China's chaos had increased her vulnerability. Internal forces had already been at work to wind down the Cultural Revolution, and indeed since January 1967 the Chinese had been trying to devise structures of political power to run the country. The looming Soviet threat now lent greater urgency to Beijing's search for a means to build new political institutions. In so doing it brought to the fore two stark questions that had bubbled beneath the surface of Chinese politics since 1966: Who will staff the new organs of power when they are formed? What priorities should these organs pursue? The two questions were interrelated, and their answers would determine the victors—and the ultimate victims—of the Cultural Revolution.

The Twelfth Plenum of the Eighth Central Committee met in this context in October 1968, and it in turn called for convening the Ninth Party Congress. The Congress met in a still more tense atmosphere in April 1969 almost directly after two major border clashes between Chinese and Soviet forces at Zhenbao island (called Damansky by the Russians) in early and mid-March. Beijing used these bloody encounters to whip up a war psy-

chosis in the country,[7] from which Lin Biao and his military establishment benefited during the Congress.

Indeed, the Ninth Congress elected a Central Committee and produced a Politburo heavily weighted with military officers.[8] The party constitution it passed set a precedent in the international communist movement by designating by name the successor to the current party chairman (Lin Biao received the nod). And the Congress stressed the need to reestablish order throughout the society.[9] This permitted the army under Lin to carry out what was possibly the bloodiest period of purging in the entire Cultural Revolution. Lin issued General Order Number One, which called for measures that included the physical removal of all people from the area of the capital who could possibly be used by the Russians as a puppet alternative leadership to the Mao-Lin group. Liu Shaoqi died as a result of the harsh conditions of his treatment during this period, as evidently did many other former high-ranking officials. On a mass level, the PLA dispatched millions of former Red Guards to the countryside to "temper themselves in revolution by learning from the poor and lower middle peasants"—which effectively removed these disruptive elements from the politically sensitive cities.

THE LIN BIAO AFFAIR

The four years after the Ninth Party Congress witnessed dramatic changes in China's domestic and foreign policy. In the domestic arena, by 1970 the general orientation toward increasing order and social discipline had spilled over into the economic and educational realms. New policies gave greater priority to economic production. Schools were reopened, and a movement toward more vigorous academic standards took hold. These initiatives in turn required relatively skilled and experienced administrators, and the politics of cadre rehabilitation quickly became one of the most central and explosive issues in the polity.

The shift in the direction of priorities that resembled those of the pre-1966 era naturally jeopardized many Cultural Revolution heroes. Thus, fittingly, the first high-level victim of the new policy drift was Chen Boda, one of the chief theorists of Mao's radical politics. Chen is alleged to have tried to restore a highly dogmatized version of Mao Zedong Thought to center stage in the political arena at a party Central Committee plenum in the late summer of 1970. He clearly felt that this measure was a necessary

7. See Thomas W. Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Dispute: Background, Development, and the March 1969 Clashes," *American Political Science Review*, 66, no. 4 (December 1972): 1175–1202.

8. See Donald W. Klein and Lois B. Hager, "The Ninth Central Committee," *China Quarterly*, no. 45 (January–March 1971), pp. 37–56.

9. *Peking Review*, April 30, 1969, pp. 16–39; *Issues and Studies*, March 1970, pp. 92–93.

step in retaining his legitimacy at the top of the system, in that it would enable him to continue to act as one of the high priests who could interpret the sacred doctrine on which the political system relied. But Mao undercut Chen at the plenum, assuming a cloak of modesty and demanding that his own Thought not be blown out of all proportion. Mao asserted that he himself was not a genius and that those who insisted he was one must therefore harbor ulterior motives. Chen's position quickly eroded thereafter, and by the end of 1970 he had been purged. Mao had also clearly served notice that he was shifting the basis of legitimate authority at the top of the Chinese system. Those who had risen because they were close to the Chairman and understood his thinking would now find that they were no longer needed. They would be replaced by people with the programs necessary to fit the new historical demands. Lin Biao, who allegedly worked in league with Chen Boda at the 1970 plenum, took appropriate warning. By the end of 1970 seven of Lin's closest military associates were forced to make self-criticism. Lin began his contingency planning for a coup against Mao, and Mao began to chip away at the organizational bases of Lin's power in anticipation of a showdown in late 1971.[10]

There was substantial disagreement over Sino-Soviet relations among the key participants in this drama, and this debate over foreign policy probably got caught up with the domestic political maneuvering just discussed. In broad terms, three basic views seem to have been brought into the policy debate of the period.[11] The radicals, headed by Jiang Qing, argued against using the United States to counter the menacing Soviet situation. They contended that if given a chance, both superpowers would simply collude to pick the fruits of the Chinese revolution, much as foreign imperialists had throughout the previous century recognized their common interest in having a weak China on which all of them could impose their separate (and sometimes conflicting) demands. Indeed, the radicals adopted a relatively traditional Chinese perspective in playing down the very notion of dealing in state-oriented politics, advocating instead international revolution "from below" based on the universal validity of Mao Zedong Thought.[12]

10. *Chinese Law and Government*, 5, nos. 3–4 (1972–73): 31–42; Michael Y. M. Kau, ed., *The Lin Piao Affair* (White Plains: International Arts and Sciences Press, 1975).

11. These views are taken from the analyses in Thomas Gottlieb, *Chinese Foreign Policy Factionalism and the Origins of the Strategic Triangle* (Santa Monica: Rand R-1902-NA, 1977), and Kenneth Lieberthal, *Sino-Soviet Conflict in the 1970's: Its Evolution and Implications for the Strategic Triangle* (Santa Monica: Rand R-2342-NA, 1978). Significant parts of the radicals' and moderates' positions were not articulated in the Chinese media until 1973–75. This analysis assumes that the people concerned held similar ideas in 1969–72.

12. See Harry Harding, "The Domestic Politics of China's Global Posture,

The radicals, whose perspective was essentially nativist, believed that security from a Soviet attack would derive more from political than from objective military considerations. They held that the Soviets would never be able to conquer and occupy a politically mobilized, uncompromisingly anti-Soviet China. The only possibility for a successful Soviet action against China would be through subversion, where Moscow took advantage of the emergence of a relatively pro-Soviet national leadership in China. The radicals stressed, therefore, the critical importance of continuing political mobilization in China, using mass campaigns to heighten people's awareness of the dangers and to ferret out potentially pro-Soviet cadres before they had a chance to do their damage. The radicals affirmed that China's own economic and military backwardness meant that concentrating on those dimensions of the power equation would be self-defeating, because the country's leaders would thereby calculate their strategy based on an analytical framework that highlighted the country's weakness. This in turn would encourage the very kinds of compromises and policies that would fulfill their prophecy of national capitulation over time. Thus the radicals stressed political virtue and argued against giving priority to economic and military modernization. They believed in continuing a dual adversary strategy, where China drew a clear line between itself and both the United States and the Soviet Union in favor of championing popular revolutionary movements, especially in the Third World. The actual course of China's domestic and foreign policy during 1969–72 bears witness to how weak the radicals' position in the leadership became as the Cultural Revolution wound down. But they remained a potentially important coalition partner nevertheless, and were not completely without influence in the central leadership.

Zhou Enlai took an almost diametrically opposite view on both domestic and foreign policy. Zhou understood well the importance of economic and military resources in gauging a country's national strength. As one of the twentieth century's most skilled diplomats, he also believed in the efficacy of diplomatic maneuver to exploit differences among potential enemies. In 1969, therefore, Zhou argued that China should exploit differences between the United States and the Soviet Union to its own advantage. He also asserted that the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and the Sino-Soviet border clashes of March 1969 had made the Soviet Union China's main enemy. In response, the PRC should explore the possibility of détente with the United States. At the same time, Zhou believed, China should turn its attention in domestic affairs to reestablishing an administration that could run the country effectively, giving priority to rapid economic development. This would, of course, require rehabilitating many of Zhou's

1973–78," in Thomas Fingar, ed., *China's Quest for Independence: Policy Evolution in the 1970s* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1980), pp. 96–98.

former colleagues and subordinates who had been purged during the fury of the Cultural Revolution. It is not clear how Zhou proposed to handle direct relations with the Soviet Union. He may have advocated limited contacts in order to take some of the edge off Sino-Soviet tensions and decrease the chances that the Soviets would attack the PRC. Or he may have advocated a hard line.

This dilemma reflects a debate that seems to have gone on throughout the 1970s within the group that advocated a rapprochement with the United States. The debate (in many ways echoing similar polemics in the United States) concerned how to make the Soviets behave in the international arena. Some argued that the Soviets are inherently aggressive and respect only diplomatic and military strength. They felt that China's search for security must center on trying to contain Soviet expansionism by putting together an anti-Soviet united front that would confront Moscow with both diplomatic and military obstacles to expansionism in any direction. The Soviets, according to this view, understand and respect the language of power, and this containment strategy would, therefore, produce precisely the kind of reasonable Soviet response desired. Compromise, by contrast, would be misread by the Kremlin as a sign of weakness and would actually encourage Soviet aggression. "Give Moscow an inch," according to this reasoning, "and it will take a country."

An alternative view within this group argued that Moscow in fact contained both hawks and doves and that China's policy should be one that did not undercut the doves and favor the hawks. While endorsing an anti-Soviet united front and a generally hard line in bilateral relations, these people argued that Beijing should occasionally appear reasonable and willing to compromise. This would at least enable the doves in Moscow to argue that relatively friendlier people did remain in the Chinese leadership and therefore the Soviet Union should show some restraint so as to bolster the chances of these people in the political succession struggle obviously under way in Beijing. Both the hard-line approach and the somewhat more compromising view toward dealing with the Soviet Union remained in evidence among this group throughout the 1970s, and the available evidence does not make completely clear where Zhou himself stood.

Lin Biao may in many ways have embraced the priorities in domestic policy that Zhou advocated. At least, the major moves in this direction occurred while Lin still retained enormous power, and a secret document purportedly expressing his views lends further credence to this hypothesis.[13] The military procurement budget during Lin's heyday clearly reflects his own keen appreciation of the importance of weapons in gauging a country's

13. The famous "571 Document" circulated after Lin's death. For the text, Kau, *The Lin Piao Affair*, pp. 81–95.

military strength.[14] Indeed, insofar as Lin and Zhou had differences on domestic budget issues, they probably concerned the question of how much China should spend on the military as opposed to developing other sectors of the economy. Thus in theory there might have been considerable compatibility between Lin's and Zhou's positions as of 1969–70. But in fact the two men viewed each other as mortal enemies. There were two major points of disagreement between them.

First, Lin's forces participated actively in the measures that savaged Zhou's supporters during the Cultural Revolution. Although both Zhou and Lin supported the reestablishment of capable administrative systems as of 1969–70, each was anxious to capture these new systems for his own people. Lin appears to have used the Soviet threat to perpetrate additional reprisals against some of Zhou's allies, and his motivation was probably in large part to keep these people from assuming power in the new governmental and party committees being formed. In foreign affairs, Lin disagreed with Zhou's assessment that the Soviet Union had become the principal enemy and that China should exploit U.S.-Soviet differences via rapprochement with the United States. Rather, Lin seems to have argued that the United States would pose the chief national security threat to China for the foreseeable future and China must act accordingly. The Soviet Union had obviously also become a danger, but one of lesser immediacy.[15] Moscow could be handled by taking a hard line (including appropriate redeployment of Chinese military forces to the north), possibly combined with tactical compromises that would take some of the sting out of the harsh approach.

How did these various perspectives translate into actual coalition politics at the beginning of the 1970's? Lin and the radicals probably worked more together than at odds, even though they stood far apart on both international and domestic political issues. Zhou Enlai maneuvered against them both. That both Lin and Zhou believed in the importance of economic recovery and development meant that this basic policy would certainly be adopted even though the radicals sharply disagreed. At the same time, Lin's and Zhou's forces contended over who should take charge of this effort. Thus staffing problems remained extremely nettlesome. In foreign policy, Mao Zedong was willing to support Zhou Enlai's position against Lin and the radicals on the opening to the United States to the extent that

14. See Sydney H. Jammes, "The Chinese Defense Burden, 1965–1974," in *China: A Reassessment of the Economy: A Compendium of Papers Submitted to the Joint Economic Committee, Congress of the United States, July 10, 1975* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), pp. 463–64.

15. Richard Wich supports this assessment of the rather minimal threat the Soviet Union posed to China at this time. See his *Sino-Soviet Crisis Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Council on East Asian Studies, 1980).

Zhou could demonstrate that this policy was both feasible and potentially effective. Finally, both Lin and the radicals wanted to maintain the primacy of Mao Zedong Thought (ironically, given that Mao was clearly moving away from them), for they were widely regarded as the most authoritative interpreters of this gospel.

These crosscutting cleavages provided the context for China's policies of 1969–71, but tracing causal lines for this period remains difficult. For example, the available evidence strongly suggests that China purposely created a situation on the Sino-Soviet border at the beginning of 1969 that almost certainly would produce a major border incident within a matter of months. Beijing did this by changing the rules of patrolling, and clearly the actual incident that occurred on March 2 had all the signs of a Chinese ambush.[16] But why would China want to provoke a much stronger Soviet adversary into an armed confrontation, inviting almost certain retaliatory action in the ensuing weeks? Three explanations can be advanced. The first is strictly a foreign policy calculus. China was anxious after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia to demonstrate how aggressive the Soviets were and how untrustworthy Moscow could be. Beijing was especially concerned with this because Hanoi had endorsed the Soviet action against Czechoslovakia, thereby raising nightmares in Beijing about possible future Soviet-Vietnamese collaboration at China's expense. Thus China was willing to provoke a border conflict with Moscow—one that the Chinese were fairly confident the Soviets would prove willing to keep under control—in order to heighten worldwide concern about Soviet aggression. Richard Wich has argued this thesis in detail in his new book (see note 15).

A second explanation makes Lin Biao the strategist behind the Chinese provocation. Lin certainly benefited in the short run from the war hysteria that Beijing whipped up in the wake of the border clashes, and it was border forces under PLA control that sparked the conflict in the first place. Thus Lin may have been willing to worsen relations with the Soviet Union and risk a wider conflict in order to dramatize the need for the military under his command to take control during the transitional period of early 1969. The Ninth Congress did in fact convene in the wake of these clashes and, as noted above, greatly enhanced Lin's immediate position.

A third explanation, presented by former CIA analyst Roger Brown, has the border conflict resulting from a Mao-Zhou initiative to help them make the case that the Soviet Union had in fact become China's main enemy and that the country's entire foreign and domestic policy must now be sculpted to take this central strategic fact into account.[17] All three of these explana-

16. Neville Maxwell, "The Chinese Account of the 1969 Fighting at Chen-bao," *China Quarterly*, no. 56 (October–December 1973), pp. 734–35.

17. Roger Glenn Brown, "Chinese Politics and American Policy: A New Look at the Triangle," *Foreign Policy*, no. 23 (Summer 1976), pp. 3–23.

tions fit with all the known data, and probably one of them (or some combination of the first with one of the other two) accurately reflects the thinking in Beijing at the time.

After the border clashes, the Soviets tried to bring the crisis under control by submitting it to negotiations—talks that Moscow hoped would provide a forum for working out a more far-reaching accommodation with the Chinese.[18] But China clearly had trouble achieving a consensus to participate in the talks and in fact agreed to do so only in September 1969. In addition, within a week of China's agreeing to formal negotiations, Beijing made clear that it would insist that the "first item" on the agenda be the withdrawal of all military forces from all disputed areas (so that the negotiations would take place "free from any threats").[19] But all the "disputed areas" lay on the Soviet side of the de facto border, and Moscow predictably refused to meet what amounted to a demand for unilateral withdrawal. The border talks stalled over this Chinese demand in 1969 and have never advanced beyond that stage.[20] These Chinese fits and starts during 1969, followed by Beijing's subsequent rigid intransigence, probably reflect the shifting politics of the spring and summer and the fact that the only coalition possible by late September was one based on a hard line toward the negotiations.

During 1970–71 Sino-Soviet tensions remained high and continued to impart a sharp edge to Chinese domestic politics. The conflict between Mao and Lin Biao gradually intensified, with Zhou Enlai the obvious beneficiary. Foreign policy interacted with this domestic political struggle in several concrete ways. First, during 1969–71 the PRC shifted substantial forces from the east and central-south to north China to protect against a possible Soviet invasion.[21] But information released after Lin Biao's demise in September 1971 (see note 13) indicates that by early 1971 Lin was planning a military action to seize power in China, based primarily on forces loyal to him in precisely the military regions from which these troops had been shifted during the previous two years. Mao Zedong revealed quite candidly his own strategy for securing control over the Beijing military region and its forces before any final showdown with Lin.[22] Thus either consciously or

18. Pravda, December 22, 1972, in *Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, 24, no. 51 (January 17, 1973): 11–12.

19. *Peking Review*, no. 41, October 10, 1969, p. 4.

20. A full review of the history of the border negotiations is available in Lieberthal, *Sino-Soviet Conflict* (see note 11 above).

21. See Lu Yung-shu, "Preparation for War in Mainland China," in *Collected Documents on Mainland China* (Taipei: Institute for International Relations, 1971), pp. 895–918; and appropriate annual issues of *The Military Balance*.

22. *Zhongfa* (1972), no. 12, in Kau, *The Lin Piao Affair*, pp. 55–66.

by chance the troop changes in China related to the Soviet threat had the effect of reducing the forces potentially available to Lin in a showdown.

China decided in 1971 to reduce substantially its high level of military procurement. This made sense in terms of the technological gap separating the PRC from the Soviets (why pour money into procuring large quantities of out-of-date military hardware?), but it also undercut the portion of the budget of greatest concern to Lin.[23] China's success in establishing an anti-Soviet connection with the United States, made evident in Henry Kissinger's historic visit to Beijing in July 1971, probably provided a major part of the excuse needed to justifiy the cutback in military procurement. The success of the Kissinger visit thus likely contributed to exacerbating tensions between Mao and Lin at the same time that it marked a historic turning point in the strategic triangle. Indeed, one could argue that this visit *created* the strategic triangle, or at least the possibility of triangular politics.

In sum, both Zhou and Lin evidently shared similar concepts of power—and therefore of the need to give priority to creating an economically and militarily strong China. But they disagreed about who should rule China and what foreign country posed the greatest threat to the PRC. The international arena on balance played into Lin's hands in 1969, but affected him adversely on such issues as troop dispositions and military budgets during the following two years. Thus Lin had reason to oppose the opening to the United States on more grounds than simply his conviction that the United States could not be trusted. His domestic political strategy also suffered from China's bold foreign policy course in the wake of the new wave of fear over the Soviet threat after Warsaw pact troops crushed the Prague Spring.

MODERNIZERS AGAINST NATIVISTS

In the short run, the policies already in place at the time of Lin's demise were simply continued in the wake of his fall. The domestic political system continued to focus on the problem of staffing new organs of power, and naturally the military now fared badly in this competition after being stained by its association with Lin's coup attempt.[24] Economic policy continued to evolve in the direction of restoring production systems, and China's foreign trade grew rapidly. The PRC also went on an international buying spree, signing orders for major complete plant purchases beginning in late 1972. This greater involvement with the international market had

23. Jammes, "The Chinese Defense Burden," p. 464.

24. The entire high command was implicated in the coup attempt and purged. For the continuing process of staffing the new organs of power, see Frederick C. Teiwes, *Provincial Leadership in China: The Cultural Revolution and Its Aftermath* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1973).