Hua Guofeng and China’s transformation in the early years of the post-Mao era

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ABSTRACT
This article analyzes how Hua Guofeng contributed to China’s transformation in the early years of the post-Mao era. In approaching the central question, five sub-questions are discussed: What kind of transformation took place? Why did Hua initiate the transformation? How did Hua legitimize the transformation? Why was he able to initiate it? And why did he step down in such a short period? Soon after Mao’s death, Hua Guofeng pursued a new course of development and stability. Due to his early career, Hua was a consistent developmentalist as well as a balanced “political generalist.” Hua employed a strategy of “political falsification” and carried out de facto de-Maoization under Mao’s name. Institutional power, his privilege as Mao’s successor, and a broad supporting coalition gave Hua enough power and authority to lead China’s transformation. However, Hua had his limits and weaknesses. Hua’s contribution was significant, but it should not be overestimated.

KEYWORDS
Hua Guofeng; cultural revolution; Deng Xiaoping; transformation; de-Maoization

1 Introduction
In 1976, following the death of Mao Zedong, Hua Guofeng became Mao’s successor. Hua simultaneously held the three most powerful positions in China: Chairman of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP); Premier of the State Council; and Chairman of the Central Military Commission. It is uncontested that he was the supreme leader of China at the time. However, Hua soon lost his positions one after another in a rapid succession and became “Mao’s forgotten successor.”

According to the CCP’s official historical narrative, the Third Plenum of the CCP’s Eleventh Central Committee in 1978 was an epoch-making event in which Deng Xiaoping established his leadership, ousting Hua, and pioneered “reform and opening.” This narrative can be called the “1978 watershed theory.” In this storyline, Deng is the “general designer of reform and opening,” and no positive role is given to Hua. The “1978 watershed theory” has long been broadly believed by both Chinese and foreign scholars. This story is written by winning side under Deng’s leadership. In reality, however, it is hard to say this is a fair view, because it undervalues Hua’s contributions.

After 2008, the 30th anniversary of the Eleventh Third Plenum as well as the year Hua passed away, the CCP itself partly changed its attitude and gave Hua a more positive assessment. In 2021 which is the centennial anniversary of Hua’s birth, CCP held...
a meeting to commemorate Hua, and a current Politburo Standing Committee member Wang Huning gave a speech to praise Hua. Academic studies that reconsidered the “1978 watershed theory” and reassessed Hua also appeared. The works by Han Gang, Teiwes and Sun are most important. They uncovered several important facts on Hua. First, Hua and Deng’s relationship cannot be summed up as a pure power struggle; they in fact shared views on several issues, especially in regards to economic policy. Second, Hua was not incompetent or suppressive; he was highly motivated to open up a new age for China. However, as Han Gang, Teiwes and Sun focused on describing historical facts, the background of Hua’s contribution is not analyzed in detail. There is a biographical study by Weatherley. This book provides rich information on early years of Hua. However, the analysis of the most important period, 1977–1980, largely follows the traditional biased narrative.

In this article, I provide a comprehensive view of Hua’s role in Chinese history by discussing how he contributed to the transformation in the early years of post-Mao China. In approaching this central question, five sub-questions will be discussed: What kind of transformation took place? Why did Hua support and initiate the transformation? How did Hua legitimize the transformation? Why was he able to initiate it? And at last, why did Hua step down in such a short period? Each sub-question will be addressed in the following sections.

2 Bringing order out of chaos: transformation under Hua’s initiative

When Mao died in September 1976, there was no consensus among the elite on how to govern the country without the charismatic leader. Two paths existed: one was to continue with Mao’s revolution, and the other was to find a new course. In this situation filled with uncertainty, Hua, as the top leader, chose a new course of transformation while holding Mao’s revolutionary banner.

One of the purposes of this article is to explain that Hua Guofeng was the person who initiated the transformation in the initial phase of the post-Mao era. Why is it possible to say so? What kind of transformation took place under his rule? China’s transformation under Hua’s initiative was an attempt at “bringing order out of chaos.” Under Hua’s leadership, China departed from the disturbance and headed toward stability and development. More concretely, the transformation can be broken down into five components: the purge of the “Gang of Four” and their followers, the rehabilitation of veteran cadres, institutionalization, relaxation of restraint on thinking, and the transition of the party’s key task.

The post-Mao era commenced following the purge of the so-called “Gang of Four.” On October 6, 1976, about a month after Mao’s death, the four ultra-leftists were arrested in a single night under Hua’s initiative. According to several memoirs of those who participated in the operation, it was Hua who made the decision of the purge: Ye Jianying devised the tactics for its execution, and Wang Dongxing ordered the soldiers to act. Here, Hua played a key role in the operation’s implementation, and Hua himself directly declared “investigation in solitary confinement” to the “Gang of Four.” On the night of the arrest, an emergency Politburo meeting was held, and it was decided that Hua would assume the Party’s Chairmanship. The “Gang of Four” was the group most faithful to the
ideological principles of the Cultural Revolution. When they were removed, the Cultural Revolution lost a substantial supporting force, and it meant that Hua as the new top leader would have a freer hand in ideological issues.

The second thing Hua did was the rehabilitation of veteran cadres who had been purged during the Cultural Revolution. In the CCP’s traditional official narrative, Hua “procrastinated and obstructed the work of reinstating veteran cadres in their posts.”\(^\text{10}\) This is hardly true, however. A prime example is the case of Deng Xiaoping, whose treatment is said to bear the hallmarks of Hua’s supposed reluctance: Deng was rehabilitated on the Tenth Third Plenum in July 1977 with Hua’s approval.\(^\text{11}\) In the report for the CCP’s Eleventh Party Congress in 1977, Hua declared: “Cadres are invaluable assets to our party. In the work of screening the cadres some problems have been left unsettled, and they should be handled judiciously, promptly and properly. Those who are able to work but have not been given jobs should be suitably assigned as soon as possible.”\(^\text{12}\) The large-scale change in the membership of the Eleventh Central Committee in fact clearly reflected Hua’s direction, that is, the rehabilitation of the veteran cadres. Of the 68 newly elected members, more than 20 were rehabilitated cadres.\(^\text{13}\) Furthermore, in the latter half of 1977, with the cooperation of Hu Yaobang, Hua enlarged the scale of rehabilitation.\(^\text{14}\) On this issue, Hua and Hu were cooperative. They had a conversation and reached a consensus on cadre policy.\(^\text{15}\) From October 1976 to December 1978, 4600 cadres who fell during the Cultural Revolution were rehabilitated.\(^\text{16}\) Hua aimed to stabilize the party by cooperating with, rather than by suppressing, veteran cadres.\(^\text{17}\) These rehabilitated cadres would become the central force in promoting transformation in the post-Mao era.

By purging the “Gang of Four” who controlled the official media, ultra-leftists were no longer the dominant force in ideological issues. By rehabilitating veteran cadres, Hua got an experienced work team to govern the country. On this foundation, Hua initiated further changes in several spheres in the early stage of his government.

Institutionalization was another important contribution by Hua though it was in initial phase. During the Cultural Revolution, political institutions had been seriously damaged. Hua clearly recognized the flaw of China’s political institutions, repeatedly mentioned the necessity of improvement, and made efforts to build effective political institutions.\(^\text{18}\) A major change was the introduction of a new Constitution, which was declared at the First Session of the Fifth National People’s Congress. This so-called 1978 Constitution is criticized nowadays because it retained several concepts from the Cultural Revolution, such as “the continuous revolution” and “four kinds of great democracy.” However, this Constitution clearly aimed to institutionalize political organs. It restored some articles of the 1954 Constitution, and regulated effective rules of political institutions. Hua aimed to govern China more effectively by making political institutions functional. Hua’s effort was the first step of the institutionalization of Chinese politics in the post-Mao era.\(^\text{19}\)

Hua also contributed to the relaxation of restraint on thinking. In contrast with Mao who was intolerant of free thinking and severe to political rivals, Hua encouraged people to “let others speak out, and let others criticize.”\(^\text{20}\) During the Central Work Conference in 1977, several sensitive issues including the re-assessment of the April Fifth Incident were discussed,\(^\text{21}\) and it was Hua reversed the verdict on April Fifth Incident.\(^\text{22}\) Hua also allowed the debate over “the criterion for judging truth” in 1978, although it was clearly
not what he would have liked. At the Central Work Conference in 1978, Hua even accepted criticism directed toward him, and offered a self-criticism. Some people who participated in the “truth criterion controversy” assessed Hua as a democratic and open-minded leader. Hua’s moderate attitude promoted a relaxed atmosphere that allowed people to express their views honestly. This should be considered as an attempt at the liberation of thinking.

Furthermore, the transition of the party’s key task was also achieved under Hua’s leadership. During the Cultural Revolution and immediately after, the key issue for the CCP was class struggle. In the initial phase of reign, Hua also succeeded this direction. However, Hua also repeatedly revealed his enthusiasm on development. In December 1976, Hua clearly mentioned “pushing the national economy forward” as one of the missions of the following year, and touted the direction toward “great order.” From 1977 onwards, Hua continuously referred to the “Four Modernizations.” Hua sent a large number of delegates to visit Western countries as well as Japan to learn their experiences and models. In listening to the reports, “Hua was the first leader to give concrete approval to measures that would develop into the SEZ policy in 1979 […] before the Third Plenum.” The “Opening” policy was put in place by Hua.

The clear transition was made at the end of 1978 at the Central Work Conference before the Eleventh Third Plenum. In the opening session, Hua declared that the first topic of the conference was the transition of the party’s key task to the “development of socialist modernization.” Before the conference became an arena for criticizing Hua and his colleagues, the major transition had already been achieved by Hua and not by Deng. It is true that Hua’s program of modernization called the “Western Leap Forward” was a failure, but the program was a party consensus formed by a large number of policy makers including Deng Xiaoping and Hu Yaobang; it was not an arbitrary decision by Hua.

To sum up, in the early years of the post-Mao era, Hua was the key person behind China’s transformation. Immediately after Mao’s death, Hua initiated the purge of the “Gang of Four,” and supported the rehabilitation of veteran cadres. After 1977, China was no longer trapped in the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution. By rebuilding effective political institutions, encouraging democratic discussion, and declaring the switch of the party’s key task to modernization, Hua established a new direction of pursuing stability and development. These changes can be summarized as “bringing order out of chaos,” and this was the initial phase of China’s transformation. Along with Hua’s decline, the critical reassessment of Mao further advanced, and the transformation had several breakthroughs. However, the basic direction of pursuing stability and development saw consolidation and was even succeeded by Deng and his successors.

3 To be a “Political generalist”: Hua’s political tendency

Hua Guofeng was the person who initiated the transformation of China in the post-Mao era. Then, why did Hua pursue this change in course? In this section, I focus on Hua’s policy preferences and social demand to explain Hua’s motivation for reform.

Hua spent more than 20 years in Hunan province, and following this, worked in the State Council from 1971. As an administrator, Hua worked in diverse fields that included local party work, cultural and education work, united front work, and economy
management. This made him a “political generalist.” It is possible to say that Hua had a clear tendency to pursue development; compared to Mao, however, Hua had a moderate and realistic view.

Hua’s enthusiasm on development was a consistent tendency. It is natural, because as a local administrator, Hua’s primary mission was always achieving development of the area. In contrast to Mao who presided over the whole country, Hua as a local leader faced more concrete issues as a “problem solver.” After coming to Beijing, Hua kept working on the economy, especially on agriculture, finance and trade, in the State Council, under the direction of Zhou Enlai. In this sense, Hua was Zhou’s successor as well. In 1975, when Deng Xiaoping initiated “consolidation,” Hua as the Vice Premier played a central role in the “First Dazhai Conference on Agriculture” and made the key report focusing on organizational rectification and economic development.

On the other hand, other episodes show that Hua was also balanced and realistic on policy. During the “Great Leap Forward,” despite the euphoria, Hua was reluctant to follow radicalization, and stated that it was too rash to make “People’s Communes.” Even at the peak of the movement, when Hua received Mao returning in 1959, he reported to Mao candidly: “Paddy fields are more infertile, cattle are thinner, people are thinner, and the production cannot be so high.” On hearing Hua’s report, Mao praised Hua as an “honest person” in speaking the truth.

Turning focus toward society, the desire for stability and development was obvious. April Fifth Incident was the explosion of social discontent against the “Gang of Four” and radical political line during the Cultural Revolution. Hua, as one of the top leaders, was a witness of the power of mass movement. The purge of the “Gang” was a part of power struggle, however, at the same time, it also reflected social demand. Then, after the purge, Hua had to show something different from the “Gang” to legitimize his rule. For Hua, it was reversing the verdict on the April Fifth Incident, institutionalization and radical development plan. It is also natural for Hua to rehabilitate veteran cadres to build a powerful team to push the plan forward. Today, we know veteran cadres defeated Hua as history. However, from Hua’s perspective in 1976, he had cooperative relationship with veteran cadres in Zhou Enlai’s State Council, thus subsequent conflict was neither inevitable nor foreseeable for Hua.

Hua was a “political generalist.” He had rich experiences as an administrator of pursuing development and resolving problems. As the new top leader, it was natural for Hua to continue his work of pursuing development. At the same time, after the purge of the “Gang of Four,” Hua had to legitimize his leadership. Initiating transformation also helped Hua to show differences from the “Gang.” In this context, it was also natural for him to cooperate with veteran cadres.

4 Political falsification: Hua’s strategy of “Partial de-Maoization”

Despite his position as Mao’s successor, Hua’s political tendency and his actual behavior were vastly different from Mao’s Cultural Revolution direction. “Bringing order out of chaos” was an attempt at “partial de-Maoization.” Even after the Mao’s death, the shadow of the founding father still enveloped the nation. Hua tried to demonstrate his loyalty toward Mao to secure continuity with Maoist politics. Soon after assuming office, Hua decided to build the Chairman Mao Memorial Hall, and to edit the Complete Works of
Mao Zedong (which actually were not published). The “Two Whatevers” – “We will resolutely uphold whatever policy decisions Chairman Mao made, and unwaveringly follow whatever instructions Chairman Mao gave” – were also brought up in this context. It was a necessary policy from Hua’s point of view. Even in the new situation where Mao was no longer present, the Chairman’s authority needed to be protected to stabilize society. Hua was faced with a dilemma: if he adhered perfectly to the “Two Whatevers,” he could do nothing new. On the other hand, if he did not mirror Mao, then he would be criticized and face serious opposition. In such a difficult situation, Hua adopted a strategy of political falsification.

The crux of this maneuver was interpreting Maoism in a way that was convenient. Mao himself was a multi-faceted leader and his policies were seriously inconsistent throughout the years. Mao repeatedly made a show of his passion on development; at the same time, he placed higher priority on political correctness and revolution. It was Mao who incited the “red guards” to rebel against the authorities at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, but it was also Mao who emphasized stability and unity during the revolution’s final phase. As the new leader, Hua never criticized Mao, nor did he declare “de-Maoization.” He always legitimized his policy with Mao’s words, but placed focus on only one side of Mao while concealing the others.

The relationship between Mao and the “Gang of Four” is a textbook example. Jiang Qing, one of the four members of the “Gang of Four,” was Mao’s wife. Three men were also promoted by Mao during the Cultural Revolution. Toward the end of his life, Mao consistently supported the “Gang of Four” and was their primary power base. When Hua was chosen as Mao’s successor, general expectation was that he would unify the party in cooperation with these leftists. However, Hua turned out to be a “wolf in sheep’s clothing,” arresting the “Gang of Four” under the “Chairman Mao’s will.” Hua covered up Mao’s support toward the “Gang of Four” and instead propagated their cleavages. In his speech at the Second Dazhai Conference on Agriculture, Hua gave a concrete explanation on Mao’s attitude toward the “Gang of Four”: according to the speech, Mao christened them the “Gang of Four,” pointed out that Jiang Qing has ambition, and prepared to solve the issue of the “Gang of Four”41. Thus, the relation between Mao and the “Gang of Four” became hostile rather than cooperative, and the story was that it was Mao who wanted to purge the “Gang of Four”–the smash of the “Gang of Four” was the victory of Maoism.

In the initial phase of the post-Mao era, although Hua held the banner of Mao’s “continuous revolution” and defined class struggle as the “key link,” Hua stated that the central point is criticizing the “Gang of Four” and their colleagues. Mao’s “continuous revolution” was no more than a slogan of criticizing the “Gang of Four.” It was the “de facto destruction of the doctrine of continuous revolution.” It however enabled Hua to limit the range of the revolution to reduce disarray. By putting all the blame on the “Gang of Four,” it became possible for Hua to push forward with a transformation of the country without damaging his predecessor’s authority.

The case of the rehabilitation of veteran cadres also shows the arts of political falsification. During the Cultural Revolution, a large number of cadres fell due to Mao’s decision. However, after the Eleventh Party Congress, People’s Daily propagated that it was in fact the “Gang of Four” who had destroyed Mao’s cadre policy and persecuted cadres. The “Gang of Four” having been smashed, these veteran cadres
should now be restored to their positions “in accordance with Chairman Mao’s policy.”

These articles of People’s Daily are written under Hu Yaobang’s initiative. During this period Hua and Hu are cooperative, and respected each other. It was Hua endorsed Hu. In his own speech, Hua Guofeng used similar logic to criticize the “Gang of Four” for overthrowing cadres, and by quoting Mao’s word, Hu justified his own cadre policy.

Deng Xiaoping was a symbolic case. In April 1976, Mao decided Deng’s dismissal. It was one of the last important decisions by Mao along with the choice of Hua as successor. But at the Tenth Third Plenum, when the CCP decided Deng’s rehabilitation, a People’s Daily editorial proclaimed that “Chairman Mao has given a comprehensive positive assessment toward Comrade Deng since previously,” and cited Hu’s words that an “attack on Comrade Deng was an attempt by the ‘Gang of Four’ to steal power.”

Regarding another principal issue, the new course toward modernization was also authorized by Mao’s words. Mao himself always wished for development. During the Cultural Revolution, however, political correctness, class struggle, and revolution were the highest priorities. Nevertheless, from Hua’s point of view, “revolution means liberating the productive forces.” To push modernization forward, Hua advertised Mao’s words in a selective fashion. Mao’s 1956 speech “On Ten Great Relations” became the core theoretical basis. After several rounds of revision, on Mao’s birthday in 1976, People’s Daily finally published “On Ten Great Relations” for the first time. It was also included in the fifth volume of Selected Works of Mao Zedong. This official version of the speech was quite different from the unofficial one with the same title, which circulated during the Cultural Revolution. The official version was more balanced and development-oriented. The editing process of the official version of “On Ten Great Relations” and the fifth volume of Selected Works of Mao Zedong were largely carried out in 1975, under Deng Xiaoping’s initiative. However, it was Hua pushed a large-scale campaign to study on “On Ten Great Relations.” Luckily for Hua, the fifth volume of Selected Works of Mao Zedong included Mao’s works before the “Great Leap Forward” only. Although Hua was promoted during the Cultural Revolution, Hua rarely cited Mao’s works from that turbulent period, preferring to quote from Mao’s works before the Great Leap Forward, especially “On Ten Great Relations.” Thus, Mao’s face as the agitator was concealed; his face as a developmentalist was pushed to the front. Hua used this image to legitimate his policy toward modernization.

To recapitulate, Hua was bold and flexible, falsifying Mao’s will. Although Mao in fact supported the “Gang of Four,” Hua purged them while holding Mao’s banner because the late leader had criticized them in the past. Although Mao was the agitator who had caused the destruction and disorder of the Cultural Revolution, Hua pursued modernization using Mao’s 1956 speech as a basis. Mao was a multifaceted leader; Hua made great efforts to conceal side of Maoism inconvenient to his agenda, and propagated only one side so as to legitimate his own policies. This was a kind of political falsification that redefined Maoism; this strategy enabled Hua to push China’s transformation forward in a legitimate manner without damaging his charismatic predecessor’s authority. It should be noted that this maneuver was only a “partial” de-Maoization. Hua pursued his own interpretation of Maoism, but never rejected Maoism itself.
5 Multi-dimensional legitimacy: the sources of Hua’s power

A strategy cannot be carried out without the power to back it up. Although Hua Guofeng is generally considered to have been a weak leader, he was powerful enough to initiate his country’s transformation. In this section, I focus on his sources of power to explain how he managed to achieve this. Three factors should be mentioned: institutional power, the prestige of Chairman Mao, and political support. Hua’s power sources were multidimensional.

The first and the most foundational aspect is the power that came from formal institutions. Before Hua’s installation as the top leader, he had already become one of China’s core leaders and worked for the party as the First Vice Chairman of the CCP and the Premier of the State Council. When the arrest of the “Gang of Four” was plotted, the operation could be legitimized only under Hua’s leadership; Hua was the highest-ranked leader at the time. With his contribution to the purge of the “Gang of Four” and his institutional position, Hua’s installation as the Chairman of the party was a natural outcome.

As the top leader, Hua simultaneously held the three most powerful positions in China. He could convene several kinds of meetings of the party, the government, and the military. He could also make “important speeches” at meetings and make decisions under his institutional power. All attempts at the rehabilitation of cadres, political institutionalization, relaxing constraint on thinking, and the transition of the party’s key task were not possible without Hua’s approval. Institutionally, he could play the advocate, promoter, coordinator, decision-maker, and even the veto player. Formal institutional aspects were an important source of Hua’s power.

The second aspect—the prestige of Chairman Mao—was Hua’s most important power base despite its informality. It is well known that Hua stepped up to the throne with Mao’s words “With you in charge, I am at ease.” This phrase was publicized following the purge of the “Gang of Four” as proof of Mao’s “boundless trust” in Hua Guofeng. In reality, the meaning of the phrase is not so clear; however, the Chinese people broadly trusted the propaganda and accepted Hua as Mao’s successor. Although it was a kind of “ass in a lion’s skin,” Hua’s words could have been Chairman Mao’s will. Whatever its true meaning was, Mao’s six characters phrase proved effective enough to secure Hua’s authority in the early years of the post-Mao era.

Unlike Hua’s rivals or former candidates, there was no serious contradiction between Hua and Mao. It was Mao who purged Liu Shaoqi, Lin Biao, and Deng Xiaoping; it was also Mao who christened the four ultra-leftists the “Gang.” However, Mao never criticized Hua seriously in public. Hua built his early career in Hunan, Mao’s hometown, thus he had opportunities to demonstrate to Mao his competence as a local leader; Mao called Hua his “parent-like magistrate.” On the other hand, Hua did not spend much time working with Mao at the center, so he was able to avoid provoking the ire of the short-tempered Chairman. Hua could build a relationship that was neither too close nor too distant with Mao. A harmonious image was the sole face of Hua-Mao relations; therefore, compared to his rivals, Hua’s legitimacy as Mao’s successor was prominent.

As regards the final aspect, it is possible to say that during the initial phase of the post-Mao era, Hua’s leadership was supported by a broad political coalition. At the end of the Cultural Revolution, the CCP’s political elites were divided into several groups. They
could be categorized into four major forces: “radical revolutionaries,” “moderate Maoists,” “senior survivors of the Cultural Revolution” and “victims of the Cultural Revolution.” The “Gang of Four” and their colleagues were the “radical revolutionaries.” They faithfully pursued Mao’s radical Cultural Revolution line. The “moderate Maoists” included Hua Guofeng, Wang Dongxing, Ji Dengkui, Chen Xilian, Wu De, and Chen Yonggui. These cadres were promoted during the Cultural Revolution. In contrast to the “radical revolutionaries,” they did not pursue radical revolution, instead preferring stability. Examples of the “senior survivors of the Cultural Revolution” are Ye Jianying and Li Xiannian. They had long careers as leaders of the party and the military, and survived the upsurge of the Cultural Revolution. The “victims of the Cultural Revolution” included Deng Xiaoping, Chen Yun, and Hu Yaobang. They were a group of cadres who were either purged or treated with hostility during the Cultural Revolution. They were reluctant about the revolution and became the driving force that pushed China’s transformation forward in the post-Mao years.

In the period following Mao’s death, most of the “victims” were not installed in their previous positions. Their power being strictly limited, getting into the core of politics was an impossible task for them. Thus, the “radicals” and a coalition of “moderates” and “seniors” fought against each other for political initiative. The power base of the “radicals” was seriously fragile. As was made clear in the April Fifth Incident, antipathy toward the “Gang of Four” and the “radicals” was strong both in and out of the party. Regionally, Shanghai was the only camp the “radicals” had, and institutionally, the propaganda system was the only institution they had under their grasp. The heyday of the “radicals” had heretofore been sustained by Mao’s consistent support, but that soon became meaningless due to Hua’s strategy of political falsification. The military was under the command of Ye Jianying, the public security sector was controlled by Hua Guofeng and Wang Dongxing, and even Mao’s writings were guarded by Wang Dongxing. There was nothing that could work in the “radicals’” favor. When Hua, Ye, Li, and Wang carried out the lightning arrest, the gang and their supporters had no means by which to counter.

The winning side was the coalition of “moderates” and “seniors.” As most of them were young and lacked revolutionary status, the “moderates” did not have a resilient power base. However, most of them were in high-rank positions. In contrast with the “radicals,” the “moderates” preferred development and stability, and this direction was shared by the “seniors.” At the time, the “moderates” and the “seniors” were bent on protecting Mao’s authority and the correctness of the Cultural Revolution so that stability would be achieved. Taking this into consideration, Hua, who was faithful to Chairman Mao but severe to the “Gang of Four,” was the best choice. Thus the “senior survivors of the Cultural Revolution” also voiced strong political support for Hua’s leadership. In particular, the most authoritative general, Ye Jianying, became the guardian of Hua’s leadership.

With regards to the “victims of the Cultural Revolution,” although they became the leading force to undermine Hua’s power base after 1978, they first had to follow Hua’s authority to make their comeback. The “victims” actually were in agreement with Hua on most policies excluding their assessment of the Cultural Revolution. Even in regards to Mao, Deng and other “victims” shared Hua’s stance of protecting Mao’s authority.
To sum up, Hua’s power came from three sources: institutional power, the privilege of Chairman Mao, and broad political support. Hua was widely recognized as Mao’s successor, so he was able to legitimize his policies under Mao’s authority. Furthermore, Hua defeated the “radical revolutionaries” and established his leadership under the support of a coalition of the “moderate Maoists” and “senior survivors of the Cultural Revolution,” the dominant force in the wake of Mao’s death. Two informal advantages strengthened Hua’s authority in implementing his institutional power as the top leader. In the immediate post-Mao years, Hua’s sources of power were multi-dimensional, and they gave him the authority and power to initiate a change in course for China. However, as the transformation progressed, the voices of the “victims” became louder and the weakness of Hua Guofeng became more prominent.

6 Power transition without fierce struggle: Hua stepping down

Hua stayed in power for only so long. He lost his positions one after another, and was finally officially dismissed from the Chairmanship in 1981. Why did Hua step down in such a short period? In this section, I explain the reasons behind Hua’s fall. Hua’s leadership had several weaknesses.

Hua’s critical weakness was his lack of historical status. Hua was a young leader who was promoted during the Cultural Revolution. He was not in Jinggangshan, nor did he participate in the “Long March”; he had made no significant contributions to the establishment of the People’s Republic. The large-scale campaign to call Hua a “wise and brilliant leader” reflected Hua’s lack of personal authority. In contrast, Deng Xiaoping and Chen Yun had been leaders of the party and the military since 1930s. They had broad connections and were respected in the party and the military. They were well known and popular with the public. Although Hua held powerful positions with his privilege as Mao’s successor, Hua could not ignore these veteran elders. In the aspect of personal authority, Deng and Chen were not inferior to Hua. Hua’s followers shared this problem; most “moderate Maoists” were promoted during the Cultural Revolution, and they also lacked historical status despite their official posts.

The change in political atmosphere also weakened Hua’s leadership. As discussed above, Hua himself allowed people to talk more freely and encouraged the debate over “the criterion for judging truth.” However, this induced a change in political atmosphere. After the comeback of the “victims of the Cultural Revolution,” they started to speak out the problems of the Cultural Revolution (but not Mao), and some required more democracy. As a beneficiary of the Cultural Revolution, reassessment of the Cultural Revolution was difficult for Hua. The more Hua let people speak out, the more complaints Hua had to face.

After the comeback of the “victims of the Cultural Revolution,” Hua’s superiority quickly diminished. Deng Xiaoping and Chen Yun both had historical status, personal authority, and connections. With the change in political atmosphere, these veteran elders started to speak out on ideological and economic issues, and thus Hua’s authority gradually eroded. In the debate over “the criterion for judging truth,” Hua’s followers—especially the “moderate Maoists”—were the targets of severe criticism, and most of them
lost substantial power. Hua himself conducted self-criticism at the Central Work Conference before the Third Plenum. Though Hua continued to hold the nation’s three most important posts, he lost many of his political supporters in the arena of elite politics.

There is little indication that Hua foresaw danger of rehabilitation of veteran cadres. Even on Deng Xiaoping issue, Hua worried about the risks of reversing Mao’s decision, not about Deng challenging him in the future. Hua Guofeng seems to have overestimated his own position and failed to recognize the dangers of Deng Xiaoping, Chen Yun and others in terms of the power struggle. Furthermore, another problem is that Hua Guofeng did not protect his own people. When the core members of the “moderate Maoists,” Wang Dongxing and Wu De were criticized at the Third Plenum, Hua did nothing for them. In this sense, Hua was naive in the power struggle.

The failure of Hua’s economic policy is also relevant. As a developmentalist, Hua pushed forward the “Ten-Year Plan,” later called the “Western Leap Forward.” This plan aimed for high-speed growth by luring in foreign investment and exporting natural resources, but the target of the plan was too ambitious, and financial imbalance quickly occurred. Chen Yun claimed the necessity for economic “readjustment.” As the top leader, Hua was forced to take responsibility, although he was not the only person who had championed the plan.

When economic readjustment started in 1979, the initiative of economic policy passed to Chen Yun. Deng Xiaoping and some “senior survivors of the Cultural Revolution” like Li Xianian also followed Chen. This meant that the coalition that had supported Hua’s rule began to disperse. When the reassessment of the Cultural Revolution was brought up for discussion in 1980, Deng Xiaoping also suggested political reforms for correcting personal dictatorship; this was clearly aimed at Hua. Hua resigned from Premiership in September 1980. Then, the Cultural Revolution no longer being a taboo, Hua’s power and authority confronted serious challenges, and political elites began complaining about Hua’s leadership. In October, Hua proposed his resignation from all positions. The Politburo held several meetings to discuss the problem; Hua’s suggestion was approved. Hua stepped down from the throne. Ye Jianying supported Hua until the last minute; however, as a senior leader of the party and the military, Ye accepted Hua’s resignation and supported the new leadership.

The process of Hua’s decline was a rapid affair. Hua lost his supporters at the Third Plenum, and with the reassessment of the Cultural Revolution relinquished his informal legitimacy as well. When Deng and Chen moved against Hua, he became vulnerable and lacked the power to defend his positions.

The power transition from Hua to Deng was peaceful and smooth. As the top leader, Hua had institutional power, so he could have used forces to resist Deng’s attack. However, he did not. On many political issues, Hua Guofeng accepted the views of Deng Xiaoping and Chen Yun. In this sense, Hua did not insist on his own view but showed a willingness to listen to others’ instructive opinions. At the same time, however, it was impossible for Hua to win the power struggle. After the Third Plenum, Hua lost many followers, thus the balance of power has clearly shifted. Furthermore, even as the chairman of the Central Military Commission, Hua had few real links with the military. It was impossible for him to mobilize the military to compete with Deng Xiaoping, who had extensive networks in the military.
Hua’s lack of historical status and policy failures made his leadership vulnerable. Hua also lacked a sense of defending his own power. Hua could not predict Deng and Chen’s attack. When Deng and Chen began to attack on Hua’s leadership, it was already too late for Hua to defend his throne. At this moment, Hua had the courage to give up his authority, and made the power transition peaceful and smooth. Compared to Hua Guofeng, Deng Xiaoping was more pragmatic and sensitive to changes in society. He used the “Beijing Spring” to criticize Hua Guofeng; in 1980 Deng suggested political reform; and in 1981, while defending Mao’s authority, Deng gave a negative assessment of the Cultural Revolution. In terms of power struggle and political art, Deng Xiaoping was by far superior to Hua Guofeng.

7 Conclusion

Hua Guofeng, the former top leader of China, has long been given an unfair assessment in the official historical narrative. He was considered as having been weak and incompetent. In fact, however, it was Hua who initiated China’s transformation after Mao’s death. How Hua contributed to this transformation was the primary question this article sought to address.

To answer the central question, I explained in what sense it is possible to say Hua was the first one to set China on a new path. Hua initiated “bringing order out of chaos.” Hua did not persist on the revolutionary direction with destruction and disorder, instead preferring a route of stability and development. By purging the “Gang of Four,” Hua removed the force that showed the most enthusiasm regarding the Cultural Revolution. By rehabilitating the veteran cadres, Hua acquired an experienced working team. In both cases, Hua took the decisive position. In this first phase, China under Hua departed from the tumult of the Cultural Revolution. The second phase of the transformation can be summarized by three points. First, Hua pushed for institutionalization by revising the Constitution and creating laws. Second, Hua encouraged a liberated and democratic atmosphere by encouraging discussion. This could be called a relaxation on the restraint of thinking. Third, Hua changed the key task of the party from class struggle to “developing socialist modernization.” In the early years of the post-Mao era, it was Hua, not Deng, who initiated China’s transformation. After Hua’s fall, Deng succeeded his vision and cranked it into high gear.

Why did Hua set China on this new path? Hua’s policy preferences were crucial. Hua worked for decades as an administrator who was responsible in development in Hunan and the State Council. He was a consistent developmentalist. Hua’s political career made him a “political generalist.” At the same time, after the purge of the “Gang of Four,” Hua had to show a new course to legitimize his rule. Stability and development were also the demands of society.

When initiating changes, Hua used the strategy of “political falsification.” His predecessor Mao was a multi-faceted leader who gave many contradictory instructions. Although Hua’s policies actually diverged vastly from Mao’s Cultural Revolution route, Hua placed focus on only one side of Mao and concealed what was inconvenient in order to legitimize his own endeavors, which included purging the “Gang of Four,” rehabilitating veteran cadres, and changing the key task of the party. Hua was also powerful and authoritative enough to initiate his country’s transformation. He held strong institutional
power and could be the decision-maker. At the same time, Mao’s trust and favor gave Hua a great advantage in becoming Mao’s successor. Furthermore, Hua was also supported by a broad coalition of the “moderate Maoists” and the “senior survivors of the Cultural Revolution.”

Hua had his limits and weaknesses. He lacked historical status and failed in economic policy. He was also naive at power struggle. He pushed the rehabilitation of veteran cadres, but he could not foresee that those veteran cadres would be critical of Hua. When the “victims of the Cultural Revolution” came back and Deng and Chen began speaking out, Hua’s leadership became vulnerable.

The transformation under Hua’s initiative was in the initial stage. Hua attempted to encourage a personality cult around himself as well as around Mao. Hua also preferred mass movements to push his policy forward. What is the most important is that Hua never criticized Mao. A transformation of China on a more fundamental level required that the legacy of Mao be reassessed; it was necessary to recognize that Mao also made mistakes, but Hua proved incapable of this task. Although Mao’s privilege was the strongest weapon for Hua in the early years, it in fact became his weakness as the transformation intensified. After Hua’s fall, Deng and his colleagues succeeded the reform and redoubled it. Hua was the person who pioneered China’s transformation in the post-Mao era. His contribution should not be underestimated, but at the same time, it also should not be overestimated. Both Hua and Deng made significant contributions to the transformation of their country.

Notes

1. Weatherley, Mao’s Forgotten Successor.
2. Zhonggong zhongyang dangshi yanjiushi, Zhongguo gongchandang lishi [The History of the Chinese Communist Party], Vol. 2, 1061.
3. “Hua Guofeng tongzhi shenping” [Life Story of Comrade Hua Guofeng], Renmin ribao, September 1, 2008. Zhonggong zhongyang dangshi yanjiushi “Wei dang de renmin shiyi fendou de yisheng” [A Life Dedicated to the Party and People], Renmin ribao, February 19, 2011.
4. Wang, “Zai jinian Hua Guofeng tongzhi danchen 100 zhounian zuotanhui shang de jianghua” [Speech on the Meeting of Commemorating Centennial Anniversary of the Birth of Comrade Hua Guofeng], Renmin ribao, February 21, 2021.
5. Han, “Guanyu Hua Guofeng de ruogan shishi” [Some Historical Facts on Hua Guofeng]; Han, “Guanyu Hua Guofeng de ruogan shishi (xu)” [Some Historical Facts on Hua Guofeng (Part 2)].
6. Teiwes and Sun, “China’s New Economic Policy under Hua Guofeng”; Teiwes and Sun, “China’s Economic Reorientation after the Third Plenum”; Teiwes and Sun, “Hua Guofeng, Deng Xiaoping, and Reversing the Verdict on the 1976 Tiananmen Incident.”
7. See note 1 above.
8. “Bringing order out of chaos” is usually used to describe the transformation under the initiative of Deng Xiaoping and Hu Yaobang after 1978. However, as this article discusses below, Deng and Hu actually succeeded and enlarged Hua’s political direction, and the continuity among them is important. Wang Huning also used these words to praise Hua. Wang, “Zai jinian Hua Guofeng tongzhi danchen 100 zhounian zuotanhui shang de jianghua.”
9. Wu, “Guanyu fensui ‘sirenbang’ de douzheng” [Regarding the Battle against the “Gang of Four”], 51–64; Zhang, “Hua Guofeng tan fensui ‘sirenbang’” [Hua Guofeng Talks about Smashing the “Gang of Four”]; Xiong, “1976 nian, Hua Guofeng he Ye Jianying zenyang
lianshou de” [In 1976, How Did Hua Guofeng and Ye Jianying Combine Forces?]; Han, “Guanyu Hua Guofeng de ruogan shishi”; Wu, “Ye Jianying, Wang Dongxing mitan chuzhi sirenbang” [Ye Jianying and Wang Dongxing Talked about Coping with the “Gang of Four” in Secret].

10. “Guanyu jianguo yilai de ruogan lishi wenti jueyi.” Renmin ribao, July 1, 1981.

11. According to several memoirs, it was Hua who proposed Deng’s rehabilitation following the purge of the “Gang of Four.” Cheng, “1976–1978 Zhongguo shehui de yanhua” [The Transformation of the Chinese Society in 1976–1978], 36–7; Huang, “1977 nian zhongyang gongzuu huiyi yanjiu” [A Study of the Central Work Conference in 1977], 23–6.

12. Hua, “Zai Zhongguo gongchandang di 11 ci quanguo daibiao dahui shang de baogao” [Report on the Eleventh Chinese Communist Party Congress], Renmin ribao, August 23, 1977.

13. Lee, “The Politics of Cadre Rehabilitation since the Cultural Revolution,” 952.

14. “Ba’ sirenbang’ diandaoliao de ganbu luxian shifei jiuzheng guolai [Correcting Cadre Policy Which Was Destroyed by the ‘Gang of Four’],” Renmin ribao, October 7, 1977; “Mao zhuxi de ganbu zhenge bixu renzhen luoshi” [We Must Implement Chairman Mao’s Cadre Policy Seriously], Renmin ribao, November 27, 1977; Dai, Hu Yaobang yu pingfan yuan jia cuo an [Hu Yaobang Redressing False Accusations], 4–14.

15. Shen, “Hu Yaobang yu Hua Guofeng (shang)” [Hu Yaobang and Hua Guofeng, Part 1].

16. Yang, Zhongguo gaige niandai de zhengzhi douzheng [Political Conflicts in China’s Reform Era], 120.

17. Cheng, “1976–1978 Zhongguo shehui de yanhua,” 38.

18. Hua, “Zai quanguo caimao xue Daqing, Dazhai huiyi shang de jianghua,” [Speech on the National Conference of Learning Daqing and Dazhai on Finance and Commerce], Renmin ribao, July 12, 1978; Hua, “Zhengfu gongzuu baogao” [Report on the Work of the Government], Renmin ribao, June 26, 1979.

19. In 1980, just before losing his power, on the Third Session of Fifth NPC, Hua Guofeng made a speech which is strongly linked to Deng’s famous speech on August 18, 1980. He also emphasized the importance of political institution reform. Hua, “Zai di 5 jie quanguo renmin daibiao daihui di 3 ci huiyi shang de jianghua” [Speech on the Fifth National People’s Congress Third Plenary Session] Renmin ribao, September 15, 1980.

20. Hua, “Zai Zhongguo gongchandang di 11 ci quanguo daibiao dahui shang de gaogao.”

21. Huang, “1977 nian zhongyang gongzuu huiyi yanjiu,” 22–5.

22. Teiwes and Sun, “Hua Guofeng, Deng Xiaoping, and Reversing the Verdict on the 1976 ‘Tiananmen Incident.’”

23. There is a memoir that states that Hua Guofeng said the “criterion for judging truth” “is an important issue, it must be clear.” Hu, Zhongguo weishenme yao gaige [Why China Needs a Reform?], 107.

24. Hu, Cong Hua Guofeng xiatai dao Hu Yaobang xiatai [Down Falls of Communist Tycoons, From Hua Guofeng to Hu Yaobang], 84; Hu, Zhongguo weishenme yao gaige, 108.

25. Hua, “Ba wuchan jiejie zhuzhengxia xia de jixu geming jinxing daodi” [Implement the Continuous Revolution under the Dictatorship of the Proletariat to Its End], Renmin ribao, May 1, 1977.

26. Hua, “Zhongguo gongchandang zhongyang weiyuanhui zhuxi Hua Guofeng tongzhi zai di 2 ci quanguo nongye xue Dazhai huiyi shang de jianghua” [Hua Guofeng’s Speech at the Second National Conference on Learning from Dazhai in Agriculture], Renmin ribao, December 28,1976.

27. Hua, “Hua Guofeng tongzhi zai quanguo gongye xue Daqing huiyi shang de jianghua,” [Hua Guofeng’s Speech on the Learning Daqing on Industry Conference], Renmin ribao, May 13, 1977; Hua, “Zai Zhongguo gongchandang di 11 ci quanguo daibiao dahui shang de baogao.” The concept of “Four Modernizations” was originally proposed by Zhou Enlai in 1964. It also became the main theme of the NPC in 1975. However, in the Maoist era, politics was always the first priority, and not the “Four Modernizations.”
28. Li, “Hua Guofeng yu Zhongguo gaike kaifang de faren” [Hua Guofeng and Start of China’s Reform and Opening], 4–12; Teiwes and Sun, “China’s New Economic Policy,” 14.
29. Teiwes and Sun, “China’s New Economic Policy,” 16. SEZ means Special Economic Zone.
30. Yu, “Gaibian Zhongguo lishi jincheng de 36 tian (shang)” [36 Days Changed Chinese History, Part 1].
31. Han, “Guanyu Hua Guofeng de ruogan shishi (xu),” 10–2; Teiwes and Sun, “China’s New Economic Policy,” 8–12.
32. Oksenberg and Yeung, “Hua Kuo-feng’s Pre-Cultural Revolution Hunan Years, 1949–66,” 3.
33. During most of his time in Hunan, Hua held generalist positions such as party secretary or governor of the local government, and was responsible in economic management. See Hua’s biography. Zhonggong zhongyang dangshi yanjiushi, “Wei dang he renmin shiye fendou de yisheng.”
34. Oksenberg and Yeung, “Hua Kuo-feng,” 18, 35–6, 52.
35. Li, “Chu dao zhongyang gongzuo de Hua Guofeng” [Hua Guofeng in Early Years of His Career at the Center], 13–6.
36. Teiwes and Sun, The End of the Maoist Era, 348–63, 355–6; Hua, “Quandang dongyang, daban nongye, wei puji Dazhaixian er fendou” [Mobilize the Whole Party, Make Efforts to Develop Agriculture, and Strive to Build Dazhai Counties Throughout the Country], Renmin ribao, October 21, 1975.
37. Oksenberg and Yeung, “Hua Kuo-feng,” 24; Li, “Mao Zedong weihé xuanze ta jieban” [Why Did Mao Zedong Choose Him as the Successor?], 24.
38. Zhonggong zhongyang dangshi yanjiushi, “Wei dang he renmin shiye dendou de yisheng.”
39. Li, “Mao Zedong weihé xuanze ta jieban,” 24.
40. Dittmer, “Bases of Power in Chinese Politics,” 42, 58–9.
41. Hua, “Zhongguo gongchandang zhongyang weiyuanhui zhuxi Hua Guofeng tongzhi zai di 2 ci quanguo nongye xue Dazhai huiyi shang de jianghua.”
42. See note 20 above.
43. Tokuda, “The Politics of Silent De-Maoization in China: Its Initial Phase During the Post-Mao Period,” 168.
44. “Ba ‘sirenbang’ diandao liao de ganbu luxian shifai jiuzheng guolai.”
45. “Mao zhuxi de gangbu zhengce bixu renzhen luoshi.”
46. Hu Yaogang nianpu ziliao changbian, shang [Materials for a Chronological Record of Hu Yaobang Life, Part 1], 287–95.
47. Shen, “Hu Yaobsng yu Hua Guofeng (shang)” [Hu Yaobang and Hua Guofeng (Part 1)].
48. Hua, “Tuanjie qilai, wei jianshe sheshui zhuxi de xiaandihu qiangguo er fendou” [Unite to Build a Modern and Powerful Socialist State], Renmin ribao, March 7, 1978.
49. “Lishixing de huiyi” [A Historical Conference], Renmin ribao, July 23, 1977.
50. See note 41 above.
51. Mao, “Lun shi da guanxi” [On Ten Great Relations], Renmin ribao, December 26, 1976.
52. Wang, “Lun shi da guanxi’ wenben de xingcheng yu yanbian ji qi jingdianhua” [The Formation, Evolution of the Text of “On Ten Great Relations” and Its Canonization].
53. “Zai shoudu qingzhu dahui shang Wu De tongzhi de jianghua” [Comrade Wu De’s speech on the Celebration Rally in the Capital], Renmin ribao, October 25, 1976.
54. A memoir of Zhang Yufeng, Mao’s secretary denies that the phrase was the will of Mao to choose Hua as his successor. Shi and Li, Nanyi jixu de “jixu geming” [When the “Continuous Revolution” Goes Awry], 658–9. In fact, before April 30, Hua had already been appointed to the First Vice Chairman of the party and the Premier of the State Council. Mao’s will to choose Hua as his successor was clear.
55. Xu, “Hua Guofeng: Si ren shiqu,” 41; Li, “Mao Zedong weihe xuanze ta jieban,” 22–4.
56. Hua was also Minister of Public Security since 1973 to 1977.
57. Yang, Zhongguo gaike niandai de zhengzhi douzheng, 49.
58. According to a memoir, it was Ye Jianying who began to call Hua the “wise and brilliant leader”; Xiong, “1976 nian, Hua Guofeng he Ye Jianying zenyang lianshou de,” 8.
59. Teiwes and Sun, “China’s New Economic Policy,” 23.
60. Xiao, Lishi de zhuangui, 15–82.
61. Teiwes and Sun, “China’s Economic Reorientation after the Third Plenum,” 163–87.
62. Although the blueprint of the Ten-Year Plan was made under Deng’s initiative in 1975, Deng did not take responsibility.
63. Xiao, Lishi de zhuangui, 386–7.
64. Ibid., 390–1.

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