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Chinese Political Economy: Reversing the Polarity*

Brantly Womack

In an age when the economic structure is founded on class struggle the ideal of mutual aid and the concept of morality is not obliterated even for one day, but it is constantly destroyed by the economic structure and thus never manifests itself. This is the truth contained in Marxist theory. When an age is attained in which the economic order is based on the mutual aid of humanity, the concept of ethics can no longer be destroyed by the economic system. However, in this period of transition the growth of feelings of morality and the movement for humaneness must redouble their efforts to root out the evil habits and bad characteristics developed during mankind's previous history. They cannot simply rely on material change. This is an area where the Marxist theory needs correction.

Li Dazhao, "My Marxist Views" (1919)

One of the chief characteristics of the Cultural Revolution decade was the almost exclusive reliance on political solutions to societal problems. Despite China's socialist system of ownership the leftists expected that class struggle would continue as the major engine of change, and they were suspicious of any policy initiatives which focussed on increasing production. As Professor Tang Tsou has shown, the leftists' exclusive attention to political struggle developed from an important strand of Mao Zedong's political thought and from the pre-1949 experience of the Chinese Communist Party, but Cultural Revolution leftism lost the balance and interrelationship of political and economic concerns which had characterized earlier CCP politics. The leftist position was expressed ideologically as the primacy of politics within political economy.

The Cultural Revolution had polarized political and economic

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* The first draft of this paper was presented at the Luce Seminar in American-Asian Cultural Relations held at the University of Chicago in May, 1980. The final version has benefited greatly from the comments and criticisms of Tang Tsou, Gordon Bennett, Michel Oksenberg, James Townsend, and an anonymous reviewer for this journal.

concerns, and had emphasized political struggle to the exclusion of the objective requirements of material production. The post-Mao leadership not only has rejected an exclusive concern with the political aspects of policy, it has also reversed the leftist polarity of political economy. Now the dominance of economic concerns is the premise of policy discussion. The new era of Chinese politics is defined by such material tasks as the implementation of the “four modernizations” (industry, agriculture, military, and science/technology) and the vanquishing of underdevelopment by the year 2000.

Despite the new priority of economics and the universal abhorrence of Cultural Revolution leftism, there remain significant differences of opinion concerning the relationship of politics and economics, and these differences have theoretical and practical ramifications. The most explicit post-Mao debate on this relationship within political economy has been a series of articles in Economic Research (Jingji Yanjiu) arguing the question of whether politics can play a determining role in certain circumstances or whether politics is always a secondary and fairly passive reflection of economics. Neither position is leftist, but the former is closer to Mao’s view of the interrelationship of politics and economics. The latter position is the complete reversal of the Gang of Four’s position, as it stresses the exclusive priority of economics. The task of this article is to explicate and put into perspective this current topic of Chinese ideological discussion.

Needless to say, the transformations of post-Mao Chinese politics are not the result of a general ideological decision to favor economics over politics. Such a view would have the tail wagging the dog. On the other hand, it is a mistake to view ideological discussion as merely the symptom of an underlying power struggle. Post-Mao politics is not beyond ideology. Currently some of the most significant and least inhibited discussions of socialist political economy since Soviet debates of the early 1920s are going on in China. There are a number of reasons for this theoretical activity.² First, the successors to the Chinese revolution must come to terms with their political heritage and its applicability to the problems of modernization. The new regime must make a convincing case for the legitimacy of its policies, and this requires arguments justifying new policies in terms of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought. Secondly, and more importantly, the Chinese are stepping beyond all existing models in their effort to modernize. Although they are currently shopping for policy ideas—

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² For a fuller discussion see Brantly Womack, “Politics and Epistemology in China since Mao,” China Quarterly, 80 (December 1979), pp. 768–92.
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American business management, Hungarian decentralization, the Meiji Restoration, etc.—it is evident that the basic problem of Chinese development must be solved through policy innovation rather than simply through borrowing. The challenge of current Chinese ideology lies in the uniqueness of China’s present situation; if both the Chinese political heritage and foreign models are inadequate for her aspirations, new intellectual efforts will be essential for giving shape to the future.

MAO AND POLITICAL ECONOMY

Contrary to Mao Zedong’s later approbation of the dominance of politics over economics in the Cultural Revolution, his original contribution to CCP political economy in the 1930s was the recognition that political mobilization of the peasantry must be founded on furthering their material interests. Mao’s rural revolutionary strategy assumed the interdependence of politics, economics, and military affairs. In his view, any attempt to sacrifice one of these elements for the apparent advantage of another would lead to a diminution of the whole. He was critical of the dogmatic political approach which assumed that mobilization was simply a matter of raising political consciousness through class struggle, and that the economy of communist-controlled areas could simply be squeezed for military needs. As a result, Mao and his followers (including Deng Xiaoping) were accused of overemphasizing economics by the dogmatic Stalinists running the Central Committee. In a 1934 speech, which turned out to be the swan song of the first communist government in Jiangxi, Mao stated clearly his view of the interrelationship of political success and economic tasks:

If we only mobilize the people to carry on the war and do nothing else, can we succeed in defeating the enemy? Of course not. If we want to win, we must do a great deal more. We must lead the peasants’ struggle for land and distribute the land to them, heighten their labor enthusiasm and increase agricultural production, safeguard the interests of the workers, establish cooperatives, develop trade with outside areas, and solve the problems facing the masses—food, shelter and clothing, fuel, rice, cooking oil and salt, sickness and hygiene, and marriage. In short, all the practical problems in the masses’ everyday life should claim our attention. If we attend to these problems, solve them and satisfy the needs of the masses, we shall really become organizers of the well-being of the masses, and they will truly rally round us and give us their warm support. Comrades, will we then be able to arouse them to take part in the revolutionary war? Yes, indeed we will.  

It is important to remember that in Mao's opinion economic concerns were subordinate to the political task of revolution. His position was indicative of his political pragmatism and populism rather than of a special devotion to problems of production. In the passage quoted above, Mao's emphasis on the Party's responsibility for the well-being of the masses derives from his orientation toward effective revolutionary politics and his conviction that mobilized popular support is the strongest political force. A Marxist more strongly oriented toward economic analysis would have found it difficult to fathom that the political power of the vanguard of the proletariat could be founded on peasant energies stirred up by national defense and an anti-feudal land policy. Indeed, as we shall see below, some current Chinese positions which insist on the absolute priority of economics are inadequate for explaining the CCP's own history.

From the above discussion we can derive three theses of Mao's pre-1949 political economy—namely that political goals are primary, economic work is necessary, and both are interrelated. These theses make the question of the priority of politics or of economics impossible to answer in the abstract. Which one to prefer in a given situation is a concrete problem of correct leadership, and it must be determined according to an objective investigation of what is appropriate for that situation.

The *locus classicus* of Mao's flexible view of political economy occurs in his essay "On Contradiction." This statement lies at the center of post-Mao controversies concerning political economy.

Some people think that this is not true of certain contradictions [that the relationship between its terms can be transformed]. For instance, in the contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production, the productive forces are the principal aspect; in the contradiction between theory and practice, practice is the principal aspect; in the contradiction between the economic base and the superstructure, the economic base is the principal aspect; and there is no change in their respective positions. This is the mechanical materialist conception, not the dialectical materialist conception. True, the productive forces, practice and the economic base generally play the principal and decisive role; whoever denies this is not a materialist. *But it must also be admitted that in certain conditions, such aspects as the relations of production, theory and the superstructure in turn manifest themselves in the principal and decisive role.* When it is impossible for the productive forces to develop without a change in the relations of production, then the change in the relations of production plays the principal and decisive role. . . . When the superstructure [politics, culture, etc.] obstructs the development of the economic base, political and cultural changes become principal and decisive. [4]

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4 "On Contradiction" (1937, 1952), SW I, pp. 335–6 (emphasis added).
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As Professor Tsou has noted, this statement purposely avoids being a universal prescription for policy. Both politics and economics can be dominant, and the conditions which transform the terms of a contradiction are not specified. Mao does not give general answers or "decision rules"; he only establishes a very wide field of possibilities. But he is by no means a tolerant relativist: in any situation there is only one appropriate, correct policy. The absence of directly applicable general principles and guidelines makes the cadre that much more responsible for the fruits of his discretion.

Again, as Tsou has pointed out, in discussing the importance of social superstructure the above statement goes beyond the concessions of Engels to the autonomy of politics, because Mao speaks of a determining role of politics in certain conditions. But Mao's standpoint is that of providing correct leadership. He is not saying that the cosmic forces occasionally run in reverse, but that general truths do not solve specific problems. The central theme of both "On Practice" and "On Contradiction" is that no concrete policy can be deduced from general principles without an investigation of its appropriateness. The cadre must "seek truth from facts."

On the other hand, there is no clear dividing line between general and specific and, while Mao prevents the general from engulfing the specific, no safeguards are provided to prevent the specific from engulfing the general. "In certain conditions" can last a day, a decade—or for the entire stage of socialism. Just as no alternative is excluded a priori by Mao's formulation, any action can be justified by it. When Mao developed his flexible approach to leadership in the 1930s, he expected that revolutionary success or failure would provide an external, objective test of correct leadership. But once a group gains control of the public assignment of reward and blame, "correct leadership" can become self-defining and self-justifying.

The development of Mao's political position from that of "peasant rightist" in the 1930s to patron of the Gang of Four in 1976 is a central question of contemporary Chinese history which has not yet been sufficiently addressed. There is certainly much continuity in Mao's thinking. The 1956 thesis that agriculture and light industry must be emphasized in order to achieve industrial growth maintains Mao's emphasis on the interrelationship of tasks and his aversion to exclusive alternatives. It is evident that beginning with the shift away

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5 Tang Tsou, "Mao Tse-tung Thought."
from Soviet tutelage in 1957, Mao experimented with a Chinese road to socialism, utilizing the mobilization techniques of the base-area period. His goal was to attain both material well-being and political solidarity. But the politics which had worked in the simpler conditions of the base areas—where the alternative was extinction—failed to resolve the more complex problems of the People's Republic of China. The balance between politics and economics was lost, and from 1957 to 1976 a seesaw of radical political initiatives and moderate reconstruction economics took its place. Mao's commitment in principle to the material interests of the masses induced him to permit periods of reconstruction, but it did not provide active policy guidance. Mao's perception of a threat of capitalist restoration and, consequently, his emphasis on the primacy of politics tended in practice to reduce economics to simply another arena for political activity. Mao's radical interventions in the 1957–76 period—the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and his support for the Gang of Four—were each further removed in form and effect from Mao's initial unity of politics and economics. In the end, the post-Mao rejection of counterproductive radicalism seems closer to Mao's attitude in the 1930s than does Mao himself. And if material welfare of the masses were considered primary in politics, Mao's last twenty years could be challenged by his own criterion of effective leadership.

The primacy which Mao allowed to politics in certain conditions reached its polar extreme of political dominance with the Gang of Four. Although the most radical sayings attributed to them (for instance, "If revolution is managed well, a decline in production is not important"); "If revolution is managed well, production will rise naturally") apparently were first published in criticisms after their fall, an absolute primacy of politics is evident in their policies and writings. Attention to the economic problems of production was condemned as a bourgeois "theory of productive forces"; the principle of distribution according to work was considered a "bourgeois right." Socialist society was viewed as essentially tainted with capitalism,

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7 I have only indirect evidence for this. The important article by Lin Zili and You Lin which will be analyzed below has a careful critique of the Gang of Four which is well footnoted. Most references are to leftist articles in the Party theoretical journal Hongqi (Red Flag) and the leftist Shanghai journal Xueyi yu Pian (Studies and Criticisms) in 1975–76, but the footnotes for the pithy one-liners refer to the first time they were used in criticisms by Renmin Ribao (People's Daily). This does not disprove their authenticity, but perhaps they should be taken with caution as statements of the leftist position.

8 Editorial, "Ba jingji lilun zhanxian jiepi 'si ren bang' di douzheng jinxing dao di" (Carry Through to the End the Struggle to Expose the "Gang of Four" on the Economic Theory Front), Jingji Yanjiu (JY), 1978:1 (January), pp. 2–6.
and therefore constant and strict political surveillance was the main task of proletarian leadership. In "absolutizing" politics, the Gang lost the balance of principles and the orientation toward objective, effective leadership which Mao had stressed originally. In one of their last statements before being overthrown, the leftists rejected a defense of some autonomy for production and science by saying that it "exaggerated the particularity of contradiction in order to deny the universality of contradiction." This statement is proof that its author had passed to an un-Maoist, dogmatic position. The chief theoretical contribution to Marxism which Mao implicitly claims in "On Contradiction" is his emphasis on the particularity of contradiction. Because every contradiction is particular, it must be investigated in practice—the opposite of the dogmatic shibboleth imposed by the author of this leftist critique.

Mao had used his thesis of the unity of theory and practice to argue that, contrary to classical Marxist materialism, politics and superstructure could be primary in certain conditions. His modification of Marxist theory corresponded to and developed from the practical necessities of base-area leadership, which in turn saw its justification in the promise of a better life for the masses. The Gang of Four emphasized politics to the exclusion of economic concerns, thereby moving away from Mao's call for flexible, appropriate leadership. For them, the unity of theory and practice meant the unconditional vulnerability of practical leadership to dogmatic critique. The only commonality between the Gang of Four's leftist dogmatism and classical Marxist materialism was the misleading one of terminology. And, despite Mao's patronage, they were vulnerable to criticisms of being un-Maoist as well as to more obvious criticisms of being un-Marxist.

POST-MAO POLITICAL ECONOMY

THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

The transformation of Chinese theories concerning political economy since 1977 is a part of a larger transformation of Chinese politics and thought. The problem of reorientation faced by the post-Mao leadership had two conflicting aspects: on the one hand, some legitimate continuity had to be claimed for the new leadership and, on the other, the leftist of the Gang of Four had to be condemned and new

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9 Dong Fureng, "Yige fandong di lilun tixi" (A Reactionary Theoretical System), JY, 1978:3 (March), pp. 2-5.
10 Guangming Ribao (Guangming Daily—GR) October 7, 1976, as quoted in Lin and You.
directions explored. The debate on political economy reflected these commitments: political economy must remain Chinese and Marxist, but adequate to the tasks of modernization.

Political developments within the post-Mao leadership have greatly influenced the timing, style, and content of discussions on political economy. The pendulum swung from an initial emphasis on continuity with Mao and the Cultural Revolution in early 1977 to an expansion of the critique of the Gang of Four to include all leftist policies and tendencies. The watershed of the factional struggle was the 1978 campaign, “Practice is the Only Standard for Determining Truth,” from which Deng Xiaoping’s “practice faction” emerged triumphant. Nevertheless, Chinese politics in 1979–80 has shown that the leadership is still concerned with the issue of legitimate continuity. On the anniversary of the “Practice is the Only Standard” campaign, a major policy statement reaffirmed the importance of the “four basic principles”—the socialist road, the dictatorship of the proletariat, Party leadership, and Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought—in determining acceptable politics.

These developments were in part a response to two specific constraints. First, the “practice faction,” after its victory over remaining Cultural Revolution leaders, found it necessary for the first time to distinguish itself from opponents on the right. The dissidents and “Democracy Wall” in Beijing were the most obvious victims. This was not indicative of a leftist shift on the part of Deng’s followers—pathbreaking policies continued to develop—but arguments which were especially dear to the left were used in order to draw the line between the official anti-leftist position and ideologically unacceptable ones. A second constraint favoring expressions of continuity in 1979 was that, after the victory at the center of the “practice faction,” concern for the role and morale of the Party organization required an affirmation of old verities and approval of traditional Party roles of ideological leadership and policing. It was anticipated, of course, that such tendencies would be watched with great suspicion by the non-Party modernization forces, and so attempts to consolidate the Party were matched by assurances to the united front.

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11 See Brantly Womack, “Politics and Epistemology.”
12 Guangming Ribao Teyue Pinglunyuan (Special Commentator for GR), “Fenqing liang tiao sixiang luxian, jianchi si xiang jiben yuanzi” (Distinguish Two Lines of Thought, Uphold the Four Basic Principles), GR, May 11, 1979.
13 Four days after the above statement, a modifying clarification appeared. Guangming Ribao Pinglunyuan (GR Commentator), “Fenqing zhu liu zhi liu, jixu jiefang sixiang” (Distinguish between Main Currents and Side Currents, Continue to Liberate Thought), GR, May 15, 1979.
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These political tensions and developments have had several recognizable effects on Chinese ideological writings. The initial emphasis on continuity meant that it was only in 1978 that major writings with other than Maoist themes came to the fore. And, of these, the writings before the beginning of the “Practice is the Only Standard” campaign in May 1978 tended to be more defensive about the relationship of their ideas of Mao. Beginning with the high tide of the campaign in the fall of 1978, spokesmen for the “practice faction” began to take a more aggressive attitude toward their opponents. Those who once feared—or wore—that hat of “rightist” during the Cultural Revolution began to apply the hats of “idealist” and “still imprisoned in the system of thought of the Gang of Four” more freely to their opponents. A third phase was ushered in with the conclusion of the Central Committee’s Third Plenum in December 1978; it was marked by greater openness in criticizing previous policy and Mao, but balanced by an affirmation of revolutionary values and Mao’s historical contribution. Ye Jianying’s speech at the 30th anniversary of the founding of the P.R.C. is the best example of this official attitude; and despite continued developments, such as the rehabilitation of Liu Shaoqi and the trial of the Gang of Four, I expect this attitude to be stable.

TENSIONS WITHIN THE POLITICAL ECONOMY DEBATE

Discussion concerning Chinese political economy has been responsive to general developments, but it has not simply been determined by them. Although there is unanimous criticism of the Gang of Four’s idealism and “absolutization” of politics, there is disagreement over how to conduct the criticism. First of all, there is considerable controversy regarding the substance of criticism: how to specify the critique of idealism, and how to formulate the priority of economics. In addition, there are tensions over the permissible limits—and proper tone—of debate: how much to encourage freedom of expression, how much to bend efforts toward consolidating a new orthodoxy.

The problem of criticizing idealism lies in the difficulty of rejecting the hypercritical utopianism of the Gang of Four without falling into a completely uncritical mode of thinking. There has been a unanimous rejection of the Gang for being non-Marxist and non-materialist in theory, and dogmatic and destructive in practice; across the whole spectrum of post-Mao discussion there seems to be no lack of sincerity in this regard. The problem is avoiding the opposite ex-
treme of complacent materialism which deduces from the public ownership of the means of production that socialism lacks serious political problems. An ideology which is self-justifying in principle would provide no conceptual framework for discussing problems or reforms. A less important but intellectually more embarrassing problem is that it cannot explain the appeal or impact of idealist systems. The accusations that the Gang of Four were "capitalists" or "feudal remnants" are substitutes for such analyses, but they have the same improbable ring as earlier Cultural Revolution discoveries of "bourgeois elements" within the Party. If the masses make history, then what have they been doing for the last twenty years? If the material base of society determines all, then how could China's national economy have been "brought to the brink of collapse" in 1976? Questions of this sort point to continuing problems of the role of will, knowledge, and subjectivity which must be encompassed by an adequate critique of idealism. But theorists attempting to make such sophisticated arguments may appear "soft on idealism" to their more partisan colleagues—and in fact they may well be closet idealists.

Another major area of tension relates to the theory of the primacy of economics. Again, there is unanimous agreement that economics is prior to politics. The material interests of the masses are held to be the goal of politics—not some ideologically pure, ascetic realm—and economics is seen as the determining force of history. Moreover, it is agreed that policy formulation must begin with the objective laws of economics and the given conditions of society. Controversy arises when the Maoist question is asked: "Cannot politics determine economics in certain conditions?" In essence, the problem is whether the role of political leadership can be reduced to that of facilitating economic development. If so, then Mao's more active theory of political leadership is abandoned. On the other hand, if political leadership is admitted to be problematic, then lurking around the corner is the question of whether the present leadership is revisionist. The problem could be posed as how to consider leadership important without drawing critical attention to it, but this formulation is more satisfying politically than intellectually.

The third controversy relates to the role and scope of ideological discussion rather than substantive questions of political economy. On the one hand, the post-Mao era is viewed as a return to normalcy—a period in which obviously correct Marxist positions are succeeding obviously incorrect ones. There is much comfort to be derived from the Marxist classics and Stalin about the importance of economics in socialism, and the Gang of Four is seen as an alien aberration. The
chief task with regard to the Gang is to root out its residual poisonous weeds, which means to expose remnants of idealism and leftist. Evidently, the Gang of Four’s error was its wrong ideas and its oppression of correct ideas—not so much its authoritarianism per se.

On the other hand, an equally legitimate attitude is to view the current period as a new era in need of innovative thinking and wide-ranging debate. The best expression of this is the return of the slogan, “Let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools of thought contend,” and the reduction of “prohibited areas” of debate. Here, concerns about the Gang of Four as a product of the Chinese political system are relevant, and these concerns focus attention on authoritarianism rather than on heresy. As a result, references to either the classics or the residual poisons of the Gang are less powerful, and the mode of argument is more concrete and less derivative from a new orthodoxy.

Either pole of these tense debates can serve as a factional rallying point to the neglect of its opposite. Since both poles are acceptable in public discourse, a field of current discussion has been defined. Defenses of idealism and the general priority of politics—as well as arguments for revisionism or capitalism—are beyond the horizons of debate. But the defined field is rather broad, and a number of conflicting views have been expressed within it.

THE DEBATE ON POLITICAL ECONOMY

The articles which are analyzed below are not the only ones relevant to political economy, but they comprise the most explicit debate on the subject. All appeared in *Economic Research*, China’s most prestigious economics journal. The first directly addresses the question of the relationship of politics and economics and is obviously an important, semi-official statement on the subject. The second is a Maoist challenge to the first which was printed a year and a half later. It was followed in the next issue by a very harsh rebuttal. But the rebuttal was answered in turn by two articles in 1980, one of which was a fairly heated response by the author of the first Maoist challenge.

*Lin Zili and You Lin: Establishing the New Orthodoxy*

“On the Relationship of Politics and Economics,” by Lin Zili and You Lin, was published in the first issue of the new series of *Eco-

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nomic Research in 1978. The task of Economic Research and its companion journal, Philosophical Research, was to produce a systematic and theoretical critique of the Gang of Four. Lin and You’s article was a key contribution. It is one of three titles listed in boldface in the table of contents of the first issue, and, in contrast to the more emotional articles, it proceeds systematically and documents every charge against the Gang with footnoted quotations.

The article’s purpose is equally to criticize the Gang of Four’s “absolutization” of politics and to propose guidelines for a new position on the relationship of politics and economics—“one of the most confused questions” of ideology. Fortunately for the cohesiveness of the article, the two tasks are almost identical in substance, because the relationship proposed is contrary to the relationship condemned. The object is to reverse the polarity of Chinese political economy rather than to balance it. The argument is made with the authority of the classics, especially Lenin. Mao is quoted several times, but the famous quotation from “On Contradiction” about the primacy of theory and superstructure “in certain conditions” is studiously avoided.

Lin and You discuss the relationship of politics and economics in three subtitled sections. The first—“Politics is the Concentrated Expression of Economics”—makes the argument that class politics is based on class material interests, and contrasts this formulation to the Gang of Four’s notion that politics is “water without a source” (wu yuan zhi shui). Economics is not only basic to politics, but under certain circumstances a specific economic task can become crucial and then that task is politics.16 The authors admit that politics has an important reciprocal effect on economics, but they deny that it can determine economics. They attempt to demonstrate this point with examples, claiming in one of them that the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union came first through the seizing of economic power by Khrushchev and Brezhnev, who were representatives of remnant capitalist forces. The Gang of Four themselves were concentrated expressions of the landlord and capitalist classes and therefore were engaged in capitalist, fascist politics.17

The second section—“Politics Commands Economics Means Politics in Service to Economics”—claims that the basic purpose of politics is to identify the interests of the working class and to realize them.

16 Ibid., p. 27.
17 Ibid., p. 33.
Lenin’s epigram that politics should be measured by economics is quoted, and a Gang of Four claim that this quotation applied only to the emergency situation of War Communism is roundly condemned. In order for politics to serve economics correctly, economics must be properly concentrated, which means using the mass line and seeking truth from facts. In the final section Lin and You condemn the Gang’s disruptive effect on economics and cite instances of their dogmatic rejection of any legitimate autonomy for economic work. The models for combining economic and political work are Dazhai and Daqing, which at that time were still the national models.

This article is most successful in its condemnation of the primacy of politics advocated by the Gang of Four. Its attempt simply to assert the contrary position of the primacy of economics is more questionable, although the position is perhaps not so much extreme as unelaborated. The argument is insufficiently complex to incorporate a theory of the occasional importance of superstructure or of political leadership. Implicitly, therefore, it is a total refutation of Mao’s view.

Zhao Guoliang: A Maoist Challenge

The second article, “Politics and Economics are the Unity of Opposites,”18 is subtitled “A Discussion with Lin Zili and You Lin of the Relationship of Politics and Economics.” Its author, Zhao Guoliang, is an associate of the Sichuan Provincial Academy of Finance and Economics. Although it was published a year and a half after the first one, the article may well have been written much earlier and delayed in publication.19 The fact that an extensive rebuttal was published in the following issue suggests that its appearance was delayed until a reply was underway. The reason for this wary treatment is undoubtedly its leftist political implications.

Zhao’s thesis is that, although economics is ultimately the determining factor, politics can be decisive in certain conditions. For its authority the argument relies primarily on Mao; but Zhao goes further to analyze the dialectical relationship of economics and politics (the “unity of opposites”) and to specify the conditions in which politics could become dominant.

After a polite reference to Lin and You’s article, Zhao proposes to “advance the criticism of the Gang of Four” by discussing the role of

18 Zhao Guoliang, “Zhengzhi yu jingji shi duili di tongyi” (Politics and Economics are the Unity of Opposites), JY, 1979:6 (June), pp. 33-8.
19 I suspect that the article was written before May 1978 because there are several aspects of the “Practice is the Only Standard” campaign which should have affected Zhao’s argument.
politics. He does this in two sections, of which the first is the more important. The title of the first section states the problem succinctly: "With the premise of the primacy of economics, is it possible to admit that politics in certain conditions can have a reciprocal determining effect on economic development?" Zhao begins his answer by situating it between the Gang of Four's stance that politics is primary and the first article's position that politics cannot determine economic development. He then fires his big gun by quoting the entire passage from "On Contradiction" which discusses the reversal of normal priorities under certain conditions. The rest of the article thus becomes an explication of Mao's position.

Zhao's formulation of the role of politics differs from that of Lin and You in that it is expressed in a dialectical relationship, and little attention is paid to politics as the concentrated expression of economics. Zhao admits that the primacy of economics is absolute and unconditional, and that the leading role of politics does not make it primary.\(^{20}\) On the other hand, politics and economics depend on each other and in certain circumstances they can trade priority. This is not a change of status, but a dialectical change of positions. Politics comes to the fore in times of basic system change, when the existing superstructure becomes the bottleneck for further material development. Also "when the highest power in the Party or government is seized by revisionists, politics has a primary and determining role, either active or passive, vis-à-vis economic development."\(^{21}\) Although Zhao directs this last remark at analyzing the seriousness of the threat posed by the Gang of Four and Khrushchev, the mention of the possibility of revisionist leadership might have an unfriendly ring to the authorities. In any case, Zhao's less determinist, more leadership-oriented theory does allow a more realistic judgment of the danger posed by the Gang of Four.

The last section of Zhao's article treats "The reactionary essence and manifestations of the errors concerning the relationship of politics and economics propagated by the Gang of Four." He discusses two fundamental errors: first, the absolute primacy of politics, which deprives politics of the testing and correction of economics; and second, the assumption that society can advance through class struggle alone, denying the objective prerequisites of production.

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\(^{20}\) He does note that the leading role of politics is important, and claims that if politics abandons this role then particular material interests will displace common interests. "Zhengzhi yu jingji," p. 34.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., p. 37.
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Zhao’s position is considerably more sophisticated than that of Lin and You, but at some cost of comfort for the post-Mao regime. His more flexible evaluation of the role of politics allows a more precise criticism of the Gang of Four. Zhao’s dialectical formula encompasses Mao’s appreciation of the importance of leadership within a general framework emphasizing the primacy of economics. But a more flexible evaluation leads to less certainty, and a more precise criticism is a more limited one. Unlike the earlier article, Zhao does not guarantee that an orientation toward economics is correct politics. Since he does not provide unconditional, substantive criteria for politics, his theory could still be used to support the constant primacy of politics, as long as one presupposes a permanent state of emergency regarding the direction of top leadership. In this respect Zhao’s theory is similar to the Gang of Four’s position, because they justified the “all-round dictatorship” of the proletariat by pointing to the mortal danger posed by bourgeois aspects of socialism. Moreover, if the “practice faction” is at all sensitive to charges of revisionism, Zhao’s mentioning of Khrushchev and the role of politics in the restoration of capitalism (and, by implication, in the return of socialism) could be interpreted as hostile.

Duan Ruofei and Dai Cheng: Defending the New Orthodoxy

The rebuttal to Zhao Guoliang’s article is harsh and doctrinaire, considerably more partisan and un-Maoist than the original statement by Lin and You. The title itself, “Can Politics in Certain Conditions Determine Economics?” is already a challenge to Mao as well as to Zhao. The purpose is certainly more to assert an orthodoxy than to develop a sophisticated and comprehensive theory of political economy. The rather illiberal tone of the article is set in the introduction. The urgency of the question of the relationship of politics and economics is that this question must be grasped in order to smash the Gang of Four’s “theory of authoritative will” (quanli yizhi lun). Lin and You explained the relationship satisfactorily, but they were challenged by Zhao. Free discussion “can either impel us to seek truth or it can clarify truths already discovered by predecessors.” It is evident that Duan and Dai see no new truth in Zhao’s challenge.

The article is divided into four untitled sections which move gradually from substantive questions to more accusatory ones. Although

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the authors engage in some initial word-picking with Zhao, they do state their position clearly: “Economics is the goal; politics is a tool created by economics to realize its purposes.” Their reply to the argument that the superstructure can create bottlenecks which render politics the decisive factor is that if economics is the decisive force it should be even more obvious in times of sudden change. Zhao is accused of proposing a violence theory of history like that of Dühring (an invidious comparison) instead of ascribing to politics a more modest Marxist “midwife” function. Duan and Dai use the proletarian revolution as a case to prove their point, claiming that the powerful development of the socialized forces of production “determined that after the destruction of capitalism, socialism would necessarily arise to replace it, and there could definitely not be any other social system.”

In order to appreciate the enormity of this claim, we should pause and consider how it relates to other currents of post-Mao thought. A common justification for new democratic reforms in China is that China’s weak experience with democracy allowed power to be usurped by the Gang of Four. Evidently such an explanation would not be allowed by Duan and Dai, firstly because it attributes decisive importance to a characteristic of the superstructure, and secondly because it implies that the Gang of Four were a real threat to Chinese socialism. Significant questions of political leadership and direction apparently do not exist.

In the second section the authors deal with the authoritative basis of Zhao’s argument. They correctly observe that Engels sees a relatively restricted role for politics, as having a reflexive effect rather than a determining one. They then proceed to claim the same for Mao, arguing that there is an essential difference between a reflexive and a determining effect (fan versus jue) and that Mao really meant “reflexive effect.” Here the authors are using the same method of interpretive restriction on a troublesome quote from Mao that Lin and You accuse the Gang of Four of using on Lenin. Their analysis totally misses Mao’s point, which is the impossibility of stipulating in advance a paramount criterion for practical decisions. Moreover, if only the abstract primacy of politics or economics is considered, Zhao deserves to be rescued from his terminology and pronounced a material-

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23 Ibid., p. 29.
24 Ibid., p. 31.
ist as much as Mao does, for he admits that the priority of economics is absolute and unconditional.

The third section begins defensively, first considering the possible charge of mechanical materialism and then dealing with the problem of the importance of politics. "On Contradiction" says that those who do not admit the possibility of a reversal of roles in certain circumstances are mechanical materialists. The authors answer this charge by saying that eighteenth-century mechanical materialism was ahistorical, whereas they are historical materialists. In fact, though, what Mao was referring to as mechanical materialism was the materialist dogmatism in the CCP and the Comintern which was inhibiting flexible, appropriate policy. On the second matter, Duan and Dai say that politics does not have to be considered decisive in order to be considered important; reflexive effects can be very large and at times especially prominent. Politics is completely dependent on economics, but history tries to deceive us by making it look the other way around.

Duan and Dai then develop their final attack in the fourth section. They claim that from a thoroughly materialist standpoint, Zhao's position is dualistic and idealistic, and that his critique of the Gang of Four is less than adequate. Their basic charge is that thorough materialism does not allow politics any decisive effect, and that if a decisive effect is allowed under any conditions, the role of politics can be expanded indefinitely by declaring a permanent emergency. The article concludes with a condemnation of the Gang for bringing China's economy, politics and culture "to the edge of destruction," but then—regaining ideological self-control—they observe that, although the Gang of Four constituted a serious problem, over the long term they could not prevail.

What the authors of this article want is an a priori exclusion of the possibility of the primacy of politics, and they correctly perceive that Zhao does not supply it. But in pursuing this line of analysis they completely miss Zhao's theoretical point and end up with a position ideologically inferior to that of Lin and You. Zhao argues that political leadership can be decisive in historical development; he does not argue that politics occasionally becomes cosmologically prior to economics. Duan and Dai mistake one assertion for the other because their quest for certainty—what they call "thorough materialism"—requires an a priori, reductionist system. "Practice is the only standard for determining truth" is not a necessary methodology to their political economy.
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Two Responses to Duan and Dai: Establishing a Difference of Opinion

In 1980 two articles appeared in *Economic Research* which defended Zhao Guoliang’s challenge to the new orthodoxy. The first was written by Liang Xuegang and Li Jia de, two associates of the Guangxi Provincial Academy of Ethnography, and appeared in the March issue.26 Zhao Guoliang’s own answer to Duan and Dai appeared in the July issue.27 The fact that these rebuttals were published without further challenge indicates that a variety of opinions on the relationship of politics and economics can be tolerated.

Both articles make the same basic arguments against Duan and Dai. The occasionally decisive importance of politics does not imply that politics is ever primary to economics; it means only that situations can arise in which a political bottleneck can become the major problem. By not recognizing such occasional importance of politics, Duan and Dai offer nothing but a directly economic interpretation of historical developments. But economics does not suffice to explain why some developed countries are still capitalistic and some underdeveloped ones are socialistic, or why the Gang of Four became such a severe problem in the midst of China’s socialist development.

The specific weaknesses of Duan and Dai’s article do not pass unnoticed either. The charge of advocating a violence theory of history like that of Dühring is conclusively refuted and transformed into a countercharge that Duan and Dai have no place for revolutionary violence in their own view of history.28 Their facile interpretation of Mao’s famous passage from “On Contradiction” is disputed, and the centrality of Mao’s formulation for understanding the relationship of politics and economics is affirmed. Although neither rebuttal openly portrays the dispute as a confrontation between dialectical materialism and mechanical materialism, that is the general tone of their criticisms.

The two rebuttals are quite different in style despite similarities in argument. The Guangxi ethnologists are very smooth and catechetical. Although they are explicitly engaged in rebutting Duan and Dai’s article, their main technique is conceptual clarification. Zhao Guoliang, on the other hand, shows the heat of an injured author,


28 Ibid., p. 70.
making an aggressive and personal defense of his first article. Probably the published version is a calmer and abbreviated version of his first reaction to Duan and Dai, because an initial draft was submitted in July 1979, but returned for revisions. The differing approaches of the articles are particularly evident in their conclusions; while the first ends with an elegant utilization of Marx’s metaphor of politics as the midwife of history, Zhao’s reply ends with a quasi-accusation that his critics believe in the spontaneous generation of history through economic forces.

Zhao’s position does show some development in response to criticism. At the end of his reply he makes two additions to his original argument. The first concerns different types of reflexive effects, and the second affirms that, even under the dictatorship of the proletariat, politics can have a determining influence. Zhao uses these two points to emphasize the utility of his analysis for criticizing the Gang of Four, thereby weakening the suspicions of leftist voiced at the end of Duan and Dai’s critique.

In summary, the two replies challenge the pretension of Duan and Dai that they represent a Marxist orthodoxy in opposition to Zhao’s heterodox idealism. The replies defend the ideological legitimacy of the occasional priority of politics, and they question—directly or indirectly—the theoretical underpinnings of the absolute priority of economics. Although neither side admits to being more leftist than the other, there is evidently a considerable distance between the positions.

THE FIELD OF DISCUSSION

As John Stuart Mill observed in his famous treatise on freedom of discussion, doctrines are rarely completely true or completely in error, but through their public hostility they complement each other in describing and shaping social reality. Applying this perspective to the discussion of political economy, it may be an artifact of the analyst’s convenience or predilections to assume that one or the other position will prevail, and it may well be disadvantageous to Chinese policymaking to restrict the rather broad field of discussion.

Both the general political tensions of post-Mao China and others more specific to political economy are clearly evident in the debate. The basic struggle between legitimate continuity and critical in-

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29 The published draft was resubmitted in October 1979. Internal evidence indicates that the third section was considerably shortened.
30 John Stuart Mill, On Liberty (1859), ch. II.
novation is present in each article as well as in the debate as a whole. Although each of the articles clearly favors one pole over the other, Zhao justifies critical innovation and the others argue for the revolutionary legitimacy of their positions. If we assume that Zhao’s first article was written before May 1978, the debate fits the national tempo of the legitimacy/innovation struggle. Before the “Practice is the Only Standard” campaign, Mao’s preferences in his later years still had presumptive legitimacy; therefore Lin and You are rather cautious in their innovation argument, while Zhao confidently bases his challenge on a quotation from Mao. As representatives of the victorious “practice faction” in 1979, Duan and Dai feel as liberated from Mao’s political tutelage as the Gang of Four did from the economics of Marx and Lenin. But the inclusion of Mao Zedong Thought among the “four principles” to be upheld in discussion allows Liang and Li to use “On Contradiction” to defend Zhao’s more dialectical approach.

Other issues involved in the political economy debate—related to specifying the critique of idealism and formulating the priority of economics—are more clear in the debate as a whole rather than within each article. The dialectical approaches of Zhao and his defenders are better able to analyze the importance of leadership and other features of the superstructure while still condemning the Gang as idealistic. But even the articles which see any determination by superstructure as idealistic have to deal with the origin and effects of bad leadership. Lin and You attempt a class analysis of the Gang and Khrushchev, and Duan and Dai claim that poor leaders are only a temporary problem, but the times can be long and hard. Similarly, although Duan and Dai appear to deny any autonomous role to politics, the primacy of economics is not so unproblematic with the other authors. Besides Zhao’s assertion of the determining role of politics in certain conditions, Lin and You point to the importance of the mass line and “seeking truth from facts” in correct political leadership. Moreover, the discussion concerning the purpose of economics which began in late 1979 has demonstrated that even “economics in command” does not necessarily yield clear and straightforward marching orders.

The tension between freer discussion and consolidation is not an explicit part of the political economy debate, but one of its corollaries is clearly visible. The system of the Gang of Four can be viewed in

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two different ways—as a substantive, idealistic ideology, or as political authoritarianism. It is evident that Duan and Dai are less concerned with authoritarianism than they are with combatting idealism. This is indicated by the tone of their article; but it also follows from their theory, since political leadership is treated as unproblematic. As an oppositionalist, Zhao is of course more polite and more interested in freedom of expression, but he is roused almost to name-calling in his reply. The debate as a whole shows a significant commitment to diversity of opinion on the part of major journals.

With these tensions in mind we can begin to map the current field of debate over the relationship of politics and economics.\(^{32}\) Beyond the horizon to the left is the position of the Gang of Four. Emphasis on the primacy of superstructure and politics has disappeared from Chinese ideology—hardly surprising, given that the unique “court critic in residence” role of the Gang died with Mao. (It is interesting to note that current activity emphasizing politics is directed at institutional reforms—an aspect of politics which the Gang of Four conveniently ignored.) The most difficult area to demark is that of anti-Gang-of-Four Maoism, a position represented here by Zhao Guoliang. Zhao’s emphasis on Mao’s formula of the primacy of politics “under certain conditions” would have been marginal to the right in 1976 under the Gang of Four, and now is marginal to the left with the “practice faction.” It is evident from Zhao’s apparent publication problems, as well as from the un concealed hostility of Duan and Dai, that his inclusion defines the permissible boundary on the left. But Zhao’s inclusion is perhaps not as endangered as it might appear. His position is unquestionably Maoist, and although the present leadership does not consider Mao’s policy preferences binding, it is committed to upholding his political thought. Moreover, an emphasis on the problematic importance of leadership is compatible with many post-Mao policy currents. The defenses of Zhao’s position touch upon both of these factors.

To the right of the Maoist position is the nondialectical assertion of the primacy of economics. Given current emphasis on the four modernizations, this position receives support because it is an unconditional theoretical endorsement of those policies. It has the added virtue of being close to the Stalinist position on the importance of economics, and thus it appears to be an ideological return to normalcy.

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Between the most aggressive proponents of this position and unpermitted open attacks on Mao and socialism lies the vague frontier to the right of current discussion. Since May 1979, this frontier has been determined by upholding the four principles (which include Mao Zedong Thought), but the substance of this commitment continues to be tested.

RAMIFICATIONS OF THE POLITICAL ECONOMY DEBATE

The debate on the relationship of politics and economics has affected more general discussions of dialectical materialism and of China's current historical stage. Although such discussions are not a leading factor in current politics, they do have significant political implications.

IDEOLOGICAL RAMIFICATIONS

Because of the implicit juxtaposition of dialectical to non-dialectical approaches in discussion of political economy, the debate quickly spilled over into the realm of philosophy. A January 1980 article in Philosophical Research conceded that the Gang of Four had completely exaggerated the influence of politics over economics, but argued that to deny Mao's dictum that politics in certain circumstances can play a determining role would destroy the basis of dialectical materialism.33 Six months later a philosophical justification of Duan and Dai's nondialectical method appeared in People's Daily, which argued that the transformation of principal and secondary aspects of a contradiction only occurs in very symmetric cases and is not true of such imbalanced contradictions as those between matter and spirit or between politics and economics.34 This article was soon the target of a long rebuttal in People's Daily, carefully defending the universality of interdependent primary and secondary aspects of contradictions.35 As one might expect, given the dialectical materialist tradition of Chinese philosophy, Zhao's more familiar and sophisti-

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cated Maoist argument found greater support than the cruder and more unusual one of Duan and Dai.

Besides having certain philosophical implications, the question of the relationship of politics and economics is clearly related to the more practical efforts to reorient Chinese policy. This can best be illustrated by considering a general policy article written by Xu Dixin, Vice-President of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and Director of its Economics Institute, entitled "On Some Problems Relating to Our Country's Implementation of Socialist Modernization." Although not explicitly a part of the series of debates on the relationship of politics and economics, some of the problems Xu discusses arise from those debates. In a nutshell, Xu uses Zhao's dialectical approach to achieve the more orthodox participants' objective of supporting an emphasis on economics.

Instead of approaching political economy in terms of the abstract relative priority of politics or economics, Xu addresses the more practical question of the relationship of productive forces and the relations of production. The problem of developing productive forces is fundamentally the contradiction between man and nature; relations of production concern social distribution of productive goods. One characteristic of the extreme leftism of the Gang of Four was to use the struggle with the relations of production to replace the struggle with nature.

Xu goes on to observe that, although historical materialism teaches that productive forces are the most active and revolutionary, under certain conditions productive forces can fall behind relations of production. Currently China is more advanced in social relations than capitalist countries, but it is behind in productive forces. Therefore China's primary task is modernization. In this formulation, Xu manages to maintain a dialectical view of leadership tasks, justify the independence from political considerations of scientific and productive work, and provide a plausible justification for a general line for the post-Mao era based on the primacy of economics. Although his interpretation of the relations of production outrunning productive forces is not uncontested, it dovetails neatly with both current criti-

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36 Xu Dixin, "You guan wo guo shehui zhuyi xindaihua jianhe di jige wenti" (Some Questions Relating to our Country's Socialist Modernization), JY, 1979:9 (September), pp. 3–9.
37 Xiao Lu, "'Xinjin di shehui zhuyi zhidu yu luohou di shehui shengchan li zhijian di maodun' di tifa shi kekue di ma?" ("The Contradiction between a Progressive Social System and Backward Productive Forces"—Is This a Scientific Way of Posing the Problem?), Zhexue Yanjiu, 1979:7 (July), pp. 19–26. Xiao argues that it is impossible for relations of production to outrun productive forces.

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cisms of economic stagnation during the 1957–76 period and with the four modernizations.

**POLITICAL RAMIFICATIONS**

The political significance of the political economy debate lies first of all in the historical importance of its theme. The political intent of the article by Lin and You was to mark ideologically the watershed between the leftist and post-Mao regimes. Since the authors attempted to establish the new orthodoxy of modernization primarily by negating the Gang of Four’s idealist political critique, it is natural that the new political economy tended toward the opposite end of the spectrum—namely, uncritical economism. For those whose sensibilities—whether political or intellectual—could not tolerate such an ideological leap, there was an immediate search for a position of maximum ideological continuity which would still be adequate to the tasks of criticizing the Gang of Four and supporting modernization. But a moderate position is bound to be on the defensive politically, because it is potentially more critical and therefore less convenient to the new regime, and is undeniably closer to the position of the deposed leftists. At the same time, the post-Mao revolution in policy and personnel has occurred within a basic continuity of institutions and ideological affirmations, so the old verities of Mao still have some claim for attention.

If the historical problem of continuity and change were the only political question involved, one might predict stubborn but decreasing resistance from the more moderate side. However, the relationship of politics and economics has another political dimension which might be expected to grow in importance as modernization progresses. Those preferring a relatively unquestioned administration of societal change through the Party and state hierarchies will find ideological support in the depoliticized political economy of Duan and Dai. As in Stalinist and neo-Stalinist theories in the Soviet Union, there are—in principle—no major political problems. By contrast, people who consider the achievement of the public good to be essentially more than a material problem must justify a continuing significance for politics. Especially those whose major concern is to modernize aspects of the superstructure—democracy, socialist legality, structural reforms in the economy, etc.—have a practical commitment to the interdependence of politics and economics. Democratic institutions, for example, are only important if politics is important and if leaders can lose touch with the masses even under
socialism. The interrelationship of politics and economics—and even the occasional primacy of politics—can be significant both to modernizers seeking to liberalize the controlling structures of Chinese society as well as to remnant traditionalists.

Another group for whom the primacy of politics under certain conditions might become important are the anti-establishment critics. The orientation of their grievances toward the entire existing system is in itself an assumption concerning the importance of politics. People alienated by the inequities of modernization will be very tempted to revive a leftist interpretation of the primacy of politics. While they would not likely call for a “reversal of verdicts” on the Gang of Four, they might demand greater political control because of chronic social entropy, and more egalitarian values at the expense of productivity values.

The field of discussion within Chinese political economy has shifted so radically that it barely overlaps with the field of discussion in the last years of Mao's life. Underlying this ideological shift has been a transformation of Chinese policy priorities as well as an abrupt change in political leadership. As a group of Chinese economists put it in 1978: “The struggle to criticize the Gang of Four has been both a major political revolution [zhengzhi da geming] and also a major fight between two systems of thought.” As a critical reaction to its predecessor, the post-Mao leadership has unleashed a revolution of practice against theory and of economics against politics. In such a situation it would be too much to expect theory and politics to take a leading role—it is enough that they preserve and develop the capacity to play a productive role.

University of Texas at Dallas, U.S.A., December 1980

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38 Hu Ruiliang, Zhao Renwei, Duan Rofei, “Ping 'si ren bang' di weixin zhuyi jingji lun tixi” (Criticize the “Gang of Four's” Idealist Economic System), JY, 1978:4 (April), pp. 33–42.