

The Dynamics of China's Transition from Totalitarianism to Post-totalitarianism, 1976-1981

by Wanlong Chen

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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I, Wanlong Chen, declare that this thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Design and Society at the University of Technology Sydney.

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Abstract

Post-Mao Chinese politics is often portrayed as a decisive rupture from Maoist rule, commonly framed as a transformation from revolution to reform. However, the resurgence of Maoist elements under Xi Jinping challenges this narrative and calls for a re-examination of China's post-Mao political transformation. This study argues that these puzzles can only be addressed by reconceptualizing the political transformation from the Mao era to the post-Mao era as a transition from totalitarianism to post-totalitarianism.

Rejecting single-turning-point and single-cause explanations, the study adopts a multi-factor analytical framework that integrates institutional structures, elite politics, social forces, and external influences, treating the transition as a dynamic process. It distinguishes between two phases: an initial phase driven by systemic decay and elite survival following the erosion of Maoist charismatic authority, and a second phase shaped by deliberate elite intervention, as rehabilitated Veteran Revolutionaries—most notably Deng Xiaoping—dismantled the Maoist totalitarian core while preserving political monism.

The study argues that China's post-totalitarian regime began to crystallize when political elites controlling dominant resources recognized that political monism constituted the ultimate boundary of tolerable de-totalitarianization. This origin logic accounts for the regime's enduring combination of political rigidity and non-political flexibility.

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1 Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 China's Re-Maoization and the Post-Mao Political Transformation

The death of Mao Zedong—a figure widely recognized as one of the most powerful and absolute dictators of the twentieth century—in 1976 brought a decisive close to an era defined by an extraordinary concentration of power. For over a quarter-century, Mao's regime was characterized by the unquestioned authority of a single leader, a political life dictated by rigid ideological orthodoxy, and a party-state that exercised all-encompassing control over every echelon of social and private existence. The ensuing transformation began with the formal and systematic repudiation of Mao's foundational doctrine of "taking class struggle as the key link," signaling the regime's retreat from its previous state of high political tension. In the decades that followed, the hallmarks of the Maoist system—large-scale political campaigns and state-sanctioned mass violence directed at designated "class enemies"—largely receded from everyday political life. For most Chinese citizens, this shift was experienced as a fundamental change in the texture of daily existence. The constant fear of political persecution and the cruelty of struggle sessions diminished, ideological demands became less intrusive, and everyday life grew more predictable. People were increasingly left alone to pursue their own livelihoods and personal interests. To both domestic observers and the international community, these changes appeared to mark a significant departure from the Maoist past.

Although the political changes after Mao's death were drastic, the post-Mao system remained fundamentally rooted in one-party rule. This coexistence of a significant retreat in state control over daily life and the rigid maintenance of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s monopoly on power became the central puzzle for observers of Chinese politics. Following the suppression of the 1989 pro-democracy movement and the subsequent collapse of communist regimes across the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, many in the academic community initially anticipated that China

would eventually follow a similar trajectory of systemic transition. However, as the Chinese economy grew rapidly in the 1990s, the Party's grip on power appeared to become more stable rather than less. The apparent durability of China's one-party system in the face of the global collapse of communist regimes became a central puzzle for observers of Chinese politics. This puzzle increasingly gave rise to forward-looking assessments and predictions concerning the regime's future trajectory.

In attempting to address this puzzle, scholarly forecasts produced from the turn of the millennium through the early Xi Jinping era coalesced into three dominant camps (Shambaugh, 2011, p. 174). The no-change group (Baum, 2004; Dickson, 2006, 2008; Fewsmith, 2010; Nathan, 2003, 2009, 2013; Perry, 2007; Shambaugh, 2011) argued that the post-Mao party-state—having institutionalized the political system and rebuilt its ruling legitimacy—had proven capable of introspection and adaptation. Proponents of this view maintained that continued economic growth allowed the Party to mobilize sufficient resources to address social problems, restrain domestic dissidents, and compete with democracies internationally. Together, these factors were seen as endowing the regime with "authoritarian resilience" (Nathan, 2003), enabling a dynamic stability over a relatively long period. The democratization group (Gilly, 2004, 2008; Goldman, 2005; Li, 2008, 2013; Naughton, 2010; Rowen, 2007; Walder, 2006) contended that as the economy developed and civil society took shape, popular demand for democratic institutions would inevitably rise. They argued that party elites would become more inclined to embrace democratization, especially when confronted with serious challenges or crises that the existing system could no longer manage. The collapse group (Chang, 2001; Diamond, 2008, 2012; Oksenberg, 2001; Pei, 2006, 2014; Shambaugh, 2016) argued that the Party had not overcome the system's inherent vulnerabilities, such as rampant corruption, non-institutionalized leadership succession, and legitimacy deficits. This view held that a rigid party-state would ultimately lack the will or capacity to initiate necessary reforms when faced with economic stagnation or severe social problems, leading to state incapacity, decay, or eventual collapse.

Surprisingly, political developments during the Xi Jinping era indicate that the post-Mao regime has embarked on an unforeseen fourth pathway: re-Maoization. This process is manifested through the recentralization of personal authority, the restoration

of ideological primacy, and the redeployment of mass-mobilizational governance techniques. Xi's consolidation of power is most visible in the abolition of presidential term limits, the elevation of "Xi Jinping Thought" into the constitutional framework, and the sweeping restructuring of Party organs to channel decision-making directly to the centre. This re-Maoization has fundamentally eroded the boundaries between the state and the individual that had expanded during the post-Mao era. By systematically tightening control over autonomous social forces—ranging from feminist and labour activists to independent NGOs, underground churches, and student Marxist groups—the regime has drastically curtailed the space for civil society. Even the private economic sector, once a bastion of relative autonomy, has seen major firms like Ant Group brought under stringent state alignment to reassert Party dominance across all sectors of society. This political recentralization was most starkly illustrated during the state's management of the COVID-19 pandemic. The revival of Mao-era governance repertoires—characterized by grid management, coercive enforcement, and patriotic mobilization—demonstrated the regime's capacity to pivot back toward totalizing forms of social control. In this sense, the pandemic functioned as both a catalyst and a mirror, exposing a regime that has moved away from the institutional regularity once predicted by scholars. By reopening the "toolbox" of the past to navigate contemporary crises, the current leadership has introduced a trajectory that defies the linear models of resilience, democratization, or collapse, manifesting instead as a powerful re-Maoizing tendency that synthesizes modern technology with a revived Maoist political logic.

The unexpected resurgence of Maoist-style political practices under Xi Jinping has generated profound consequences for China and the global system, warranting far greater scholarly attention than it has received. For observers of Chinese politics, this shift has created an intellectually awkward and even destabilizing moment, exposing the limitations of our conceptual toolkits. The prevailing analytical frameworks now seem ill-equipped to explain a present that so vividly echoes the past. One clear message is that the connection between the Maoist and post-Mao eras is far more intimate and enduring than previously understood. The post-Mao order was not a clean rupture from its revolutionary past, but rather a regime whose original structural logic was never fully excised; instead, these Maoist elements remained woven into the very fabric of the post-Mao state.

Understanding the depth of this relationship requires us to move beyond a static comparison of the two eras and look instead at the specific historical juncture of this political transformation from Maoist to post-Mao era. To grasp why the post-Mao system made a Maoist revival possible, we must return to its origins and examine the formative process through which the new order was constituted. It is in this transitional moment that the fundamental nature of the relationship was defined, as the regime navigated the complex task of dismantling Maoism while strategically preserving the core mechanisms of Party dominance. The discussion above is intended to establish the significance of the research problem rather than to resolve it. The central concern of this study is not the durability or future trajectory of the Chinese party-state, but the origin of the post-Mao political order itself.

This study explores the mechanisms and dynamics of this transformation—uncovering how specific elements of the Maoist system were intentionally preserved, modified, or suppressed. Drawing on a critical review of the conventional “from revolution to reform” narrative, the study advances a new theoretical framework to offer a more convincing account of this political transformation. By extension, such an approach may serve to further refine the conceptualization of the post-Mao political order, offering a more nuanced lens through which to interpret its internal logic.

1.2 The Conventional Paradigm: From Revolution to Reform

Existing discourse on the post-Mao political transformation is typically subsumed within an overarching narrative centered on Deng Xiaoping and the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee—a framework focused almost exclusively on the Party’s shifting “lines.” This discourse overlaps in important ways with the CCP’s own official historiography and self-positioning, often privileging a teleological narrative of economic “reform and opening up” over a closer examination of institutional change that occurred in the shadows of these policy shifts. From the perspective of historical fact, however, a wealth of newly excavated archival materials and recent interpretations have already posed formidable challenges to this orthodox “rupture” narrative. In terms of macro-theoretical frameworks, academic research that adopts these narratives without sufficient critical distance risks reproducing their

underlying assumptions, limiting its analytical purchase from a social scientific perspective. By failing to interrogate the structural metamorphosis of the state, such approaches leave the internal logic of the post-Mao order largely unexamined, treating the transition as a predetermined outcome of elite wisdom rather than a complex process of systemic reconfiguration.

1.2.1 The CCP's Official Historiography

The official narrative of China's post-Mao transformation is not a mere collection of historical facts, but a highly structured and politically consequential interpretive framework. This narrative is primarily codified in two seminal documents: the "Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party since the Founding of the People's Republic of China" (1981 Historical Resolution) and the "Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Party over the Past Century." (2021 Historical Resolution) These historical resolutions serve as the ultimate interpretive authority, framing the transition as a linear, teleological journey from the "chaos" of the late Mao era to the "order" of the reform era. A central feature of this discourse is the symbolic elevation of the Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee in December 1978 as a decisive and highly stylized rupture in the Party's historical narrative. In this telling, the Mao era is categorized as a necessary phase of "socialist revolution and construction," while the Cultural Revolution is isolated as a localized "aberrational error" that did not compromise the Party's fundamental nature. The reforms following 1978 are subsequently presented as the Party's purposeful self-correction—a return to the "correct path" of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought.

While the core of this storyline has remained consistent, the 1981 and 2021 Resolutions offer distinct emphases that reflect the political imperatives of their respective eras. The 1981 Resolution, written under the immediate shadow of the transition, provided a robust and systematic repudiation of the Cultural Revolution to clear the path for Deng Xiaoping's new policy direction. In contrast, the 2021 Resolution recontextualizes past errors within a narrative of continuous national rejuvenation, thereby weakening the emphasis on the 1978 Plenum as a "corrective"

move in order to serve the current leadership's pursuit of historical continuity. The 2021 Historical Resolution offers a highly generalized formulation of this shift:

After the end of the Cultural Revolution, the Party stood at a crucial historical juncture in which it was confronted with the question of which course the Party and the country should take. The Party came to recognize that the only way forward was to launch a program of reform and opening up; otherwise, our endeavours in pursuing modernization and building socialism would be doomed to failure. In December 1978, the 11th Central Committee held its third plenary session. At the session the Party decisively abandoned the policy of taking class struggle as the key link and initiated a strategic shift in the focus of the Party and country's work, thereby ushering in a new period of reform, opening up, and socialist modernization. This marked a great turning point of far-reaching significance in the Party's history since the founding of the People's Republic of China. The Party also made the momentous decision to completely renounce the Cultural Revolution. Over the more than 40 years that have passed since then, the Party has never wavered in following the line, principles, and policies adopted at this session. (CCP, 2021)

For a more granular account of the transformation's specific process, one must look to the 1981 Resolution and the vast body of official publications that followed. In this standardized account, the years between 1976 and 1981 are presented as a dramatic sequence of overcoming internal resistance. The narrative begins with the arrest of the “Gang of Four” in October 1976, an event officially credited to the heroic resolve of the Party leadership, with Hua Guofeng acknowledged for his contribution. This moment is framed as having “saved the Party and the revolution from disaster,” effectively ending the decade of turmoil. However, from October 1976 to December 1978, the Party is portrayed as having advanced only “haltingly” (在徘徊中前进). While acknowledging that the party started to expose the crimes of the Jiang Qing clique and redress some injustices, the official account emphasizes that a total correction of Maoist errors met with systemic resistance. Hua Guofeng, as Chairman,

is the central antagonist of this phase, accused of promoting the erroneous “two whatevers” policy— "We will resolutely uphold whatever policy decisions Chairman Mao made, and unswervingly follow whatever instructions Chairman Mao gave" — while suppressing the discussion of "Criterion of Truth" (真理标准讨论) obstructing the reinstatement of veteran revolutionaries, and fostering a personality cult around himself. ((Central Committee Literature Research Office of the CCP [CCLROC], 2011b, pp.151-152)

The climax of this narrative arrives at the 1978 Third Plenum, where the "reformist" faction led by Deng Xiaoping repudiated the erroneous guideline of the "Two Whatevers" and started to comprehensively and earnestly rectify the “Leftist” errors committed during and prior to the Cultural Revolution. According to this account, the session marked the strategic decision to shift the focus from class struggle to socialist modernization and established Deng as the paramount leader. The subsequent years leading up to 1981 are portrayed as a period of economic, ideological, political, and organizational rectification. Through decades of repetition in textbooks, Party-school curricula, and state media, this storyline has been embedded into the public consciousness as an authoritative and widely internalized account. It stresses the continuity of the Party's mission and a teleological coherence that makes the rise of the post-Mao order seem both inevitable and enlightened, effectively providing a script that is familiar to every Chinese citizen but remains intellectually restrictive from a social scientific perspective.

1.2.2 The Prevailing Academic Framework

The academic narrative of China’s post-Mao transition, while striving for analytical rigor, has coalesced into a dominant explanatory framework that can be defined as the "Revolution to Reform" paradigm. This paradigm depicts the transformation as a progression where the Chinese party-state systematically shed its revolutionary identity to embrace a rational, development-oriented pragmatism. Within this framework, the transition is understood as a fundamental reorientation of the regime’s

governing logic—moving from a state of perpetual mobilization and ideological radicalism toward one of institutionalization and economic marketization.

A primary pillar of this paradigm is the re-periodization of China's contemporary history into distinct, sequential stages of political evolution. Harry Harding (1987) provides a foundational articulation of this shift, observing that the transition from "revolutionary Maoism" to "restorationism" and finally to "reform" was a surprisingly smooth and rapid affair, basically accomplished between 1976 and 1978. In this schema, the Hua Guofeng era is specifically characterized as "restorationism"—a phase where the leadership sought to "restore" the pre-Cultural Revolution order of the 1950s, characterized by centralized planning and orthodox Leninist party norms, before the "Reform" era under Deng Xiaoping took hold. This remark reflects a widely shared interpretation that the late 1970s constituted an unusually compressed period of political reorientation, during which the CCP swiftly abandoned the ideological certainties of high Maoism.

Furthermore, this paradigm constructs a highly specific causal narrative centred on the agency of reformist elites and their successful navigation of these stages. Kenneth Lieberthal (1995) treats the years from Mao's death to the Third Plenum as the "crucial preparatory phase" for the comprehensive reform program, emphasizing institutional recalibration and the consolidation of leadership. The narrative cast is clearly defined: the reformists serve as the primary engine of change, with Deng Xiaoping as the central protagonist whose strategic acumen steered the nation away from the Maoist abyss. Within this framework, Hua Guofeng's project is portrayed as a well-meaning but ultimately obstructive caretaker phase—a necessary but stagnant orthodoxy that the reformists had to transcend to usher in the new era.

Under the "Revolution to Reform" paradigm, the Third Plenary Session is cast as the singular, institutionalized event that codified this metamorphosis. As Roderick MacFarquhar (2011) argues, the session is rightly appraised as the definitive moment when the Party chose reformist pragmatism over revolutionary orthodoxy. This focus on the Plenum as a "Great Turning Point" is further amplified in Ezra Vogel's (2011) biography of Deng Xiaoping, which details how Deng navigated the "whatever faction" period to position himself as the architect of the transformation. In domestic Chinese scholarship, this paradigm remains hegemonic; Yu Keping (2014) notes that

with the 1978 Plenum, the era of revolution was "officially over," and China again embarked on the road toward modernization. By framing the transition as a linear shift from one governing logic to another, the paradigm suggests that the very nature of the CCP's relationship with society underwent a qualitative metamorphosis, presenting the post-Mao order as a system that had successfully pivoted away from its revolutionary origins. Much recent scholarship, including major works such as Westad and Chen's *The Great Transformation: China's Road from Revolution to Reform* (2025), continues to operate within this established "revolution to reform" framing, which is already evident in its very title.

1.3 Challenges to the Conventional Narrative

The official narrative of the transformation, while presented as a neutral historical record, should be more accurately understood as an extension of a long-standing political tradition within the CCP. Throughout its history, the Party has frequently utilized the retrospective reconstruction of history to consolidate new leadership and provide ideological justification for major shifts in governance. A prominent precursor to the post-Mao narrative is the Zunyi Conference of 1935, where subsequent official historiography recast a complex and contested military meeting into a singular, heroic moment of Mao Zedong "saving the Party" from a disastrously incorrect line. Similar to the Zunyi myth, the narrative of the 1978 Third Plenum serves as a "victor's history," designed by the winners of a high-level power struggle to institutionalize their authority and frame the new "Reform" era as a necessary and enlightened departure from past errors.

However, as historical documents have become more accessible, this heroic script has faced significant logical and empirical challenges. The traditional narrative's internal logic—which frames the 1976–1978 period as a struggle between a dogmatic "whateverist" faction and an enlightened reformist coalition—fails to reconcile the immense political risks taken by Hua Guofeng to dismantle the Maoist core with his subsequent portrayal as a mere obstructionist. Since the late 1990s and particularly following the 30th anniversary of the reform era in 2008, a wave of revisionist scholarship has emerged to resolve these contradictions. Research by Shi Yun and Li

Danhui (2008), for instance, provides evidence that Hua Guofeng was the undisputed architect of the arrest of the "Gang of Four," while Wang Dongxing, who was often marginalized in later accounts, developed the concrete action plan. The official attempt to belittle their roles in favour of Ye Jianying was a deliberate political recalibration, a fact only partially rectified in the Party's official evaluation of Hua after his death.

Furthermore, the accusation that Hua used the "Two Whatevers" to hinder the return of veteran cadres or suppress the "Criterion of Truth" discussion has been systematically refuted by scholars such as Han Gang (2008b, 2009). Han demonstrates that Hua utilized Maoist rhetoric primarily to secure his own tenuous legitimacy in the immediate power vacuum, while in practice initiating political and economic strategies—including large-scale modernization and opening—that departed significantly from Mao's late-stage radicalism. This suggests that the transition era reflected a much broader leadership consensus than the "line shift" narrative allows. As Teiwes and Sun (2015) argue, Hua and Deng were in substantial agreement on almost all key economic measures, a view supported by Shi Binhai's (2020) biography, which reconstructs the period from Hua's perspective to reveal a story of collaboration and systemic crisis management rather than binary opposition.

Based on these clarifications, the driving forces of the era must be reconsidered. Han Gang (2009) contends that the 1978 Third Plenum's true significance was less about a sudden shift in national focus—which was already underway—than ritualistic formalization of the power shift from Hua to Deng. This new interpretation of elite political dynamics is complemented by the broader sociopolitical perspectives of Qin Hui (2008) and Xiao Donglian (2019), who assert that the transition was driven by a collective "escape from the Cultural Revolution" triggered by systemic crisis. In this light, the entire elite and populace, having suffered under Maoism, sought any viable alternative—a collective impulse that suggests the transition was less a product of strategic design by "architects" and more a reactive "escape" from the Cultural Revolution. Westad and Chen (2025) provide a further refinement by tracing the origins of this transformation back to the Cultural Revolution, specifically emphasizing the role of the Lin Biao incident and the geopolitical relaxation following the Sino-American rapprochement, alongside the bottom-up resistance from ordinary citizens in the economic institutional transformation. This multi-dimensional

explanatory framework constitutes a significant challenge to the old narrative, as it de-emphasizes the decisive agency of reformist elites and disrupts the traditional "1978 watershed" perspective. However, their analysis ultimately remains confined within the "revolution to reform" paradigm, focusing primarily on the mechanics of how the reform occurred. Moreover, in their depiction of the political dynamics between Hua Guofeng and Deng Xiaoping, they largely reiterate the established official persuasion of a triumphant transition.

While these works have challenged traditional narratives—both in terms of specific historical facts and the interpretation of drivers of change—they have yet to transcend the underlying "revolution to reform" paradigm.

1.4 A Critical Appraisal of the "Revolution to Reform" Framework

The inadequacy of the conventional “from revolution to reform” framework stems from its fundamental nature as an extension of official political discourse rather than a neutral analytical instrument. These terms are rooted in the Party’s self-defined historical mission and its shifting strategies for maintaining political legitimacy. By elevating these mission-driven, political slogans into scholarly paradigms, the framework imposes a teleological trajectory onto complex institutional changes, where the end-state of “reform” is treated as a predetermined destination rather than a contingent outcome. These limitations manifest in three distinct conceptual and narrative failures.

First, the framework confuses "modes of change" with the "nature of the system." Linguistically, "revolution" refers to radical, disruptive upheaval, while "reform" denotes gradual, institutional adjustment. They describe the tempo and method of movement—the "how" of political action. However, the framework erroneously employs them as nouns to define the "what" of a historical period. This creates a conceptual fog: it leads researchers to focus on the shifting speed and style of governance while ignoring the underlying institutional essence that remains stable. To define a period by the manner of its change is to mistake the flickering of a shadow for the shape of the object casting it.

Second, because "revolution" and "reform" are conceptualized as proactive and intentional projects, the framework collapses complex institutional evolution into a narrow narrative of elite agency and artificial "ruptures." Since both terms imply a conscious, volitional choice to either "overthrow" or "restructure," the paradigm creates a chain of analytical distortions. It first fosters a "great man" view of history, where political transition is seen primarily as the result of a leader "changing their mind" or a new faction ascending to power. Consequently, this focus on elite intent compels scholars to prioritize a single, dramatic "turning point" as a clean break. To satisfy the logic of an "intentional shift," the narrative fixates on the 1978 Third Plenum as a singular, miraculous watershed—the moment when the leadership's new will was supposedly codified. By over-privileging the episodic decisions of individuals, this framework fails to account for the deeper, systemic metamorphosis of the party-state that transcends the immediate intent of any single political actor.

Third, the use of these "mission-driven" terms conflates disparate economic and political trajectories. For the CCP, "reform" is a holistic label used to signal a move toward modernization, but this label masks a significant divergence between sectors. While economic "reform" was pursued with vigor to ensure regime survival, the core political structure remained largely resistant to fundamental change. By adopting the blanket term "reform" as an analytical category, the framework falsely implies a synchronized progression across the entire system. For scholars who have focused on political transformation, this creates a significant blind spot, as it treats tactical economic flexibility as synonymous with strategic political liberalization, thereby obscuring the reality that the regime's power structure has consistently preserved its core attributes.

In summary, the "from revolution to reform" paradigm serves more as a restatement of official political narrative than as a robust analytical framework; it prioritizes the "how" of policy shifts over the "what" of regime nature, thereby obscuring the structural continuities that define the evolution of Chinese regime.

1.5 Toward an Alternative Framework: Transition from Totalitarianism to Post-totalitarianism

The dismantling of the “from revolution to reform” paradigm necessitates a fundamental shift in analytical focus: from the Party’s mission-defined tasks to the transformation of regime type. As established in the previous section, "revolution" and "reform" are not objective descriptions of institutional evolution; rather, they are strategic planning and mission-defined tasks designated by the CCP to navigate different historical crises. To study China’s transition through these labels is to mistake the Party’s self-prescribed agenda for the system's objective reality. To move beyond this ideological shell, we must ask not how the Party’s missions were recalibrated, but whether the regime’s fundamental nature underwent a substantive metamorphosis.

However, identifying a change in regime type is a complex conceptual task that requires a rigorous and multi-dimensional method of demarcation. Scholarship on the definition of China's political system across the Mao and post-Mao eras is characterized by a profound lack of consensus. For the Mao era, the once-dominant totalitarian paradigm was largely discarded by the mid-Cold War; however, no universally accepted successor emerged, leaving the regime’s fundamental nature shrouded in persistent ambiguity. The categorization of the post-Mao era is even more fragmented, descending into a state of “taxonomic anarchy” marked by a proliferation of disparate labels and protracted scholarly disputes. (Baum & Shevchenko, 1999, p.334) To find a suitable method of demarcation, it is necessary to conduct a comprehensive review of the relevant academic history. Crucially, this review cannot be confined to the field of Contemporary China Studies alone. Instead, it must extend into the broader intellectual territories of Comparative Communism and Comparative Authoritarianism.

1.5.1 The History of Regime Classification of the PRC: A Methodological Review

1.5.1.1 1950s –1960s

During the first two decades of the People’s Republic, the study of Chinese politics was characterized by a paradoxical situation. While “totalitarianism” served as the widely accepted conceptual lens for defining the regime, the direct application of its

theoretical apparatus to Chinese empirical data remained surprisingly limited. This initial definition of the Maoist regime was not an indigenous product of China Studies but a natural extension of Comparative Communism. As the PRC adopted the Soviet institutional blueprint and aligned itself with the socialist camp, it was reflexively categorized under the “totalitarian” umbrella—a model then shaped by two distinct but complementary intellectual currents.

The first was the Arendtian perspective, which emerged from the horrors of the Holocaust and Stalinism. Arendt (1951) did not see totalitarianism as a mere expansion of traditional tyranny, but as an entirely new form of government that sought to dissolve the boundary between state and society through the twin engines of ideology and systematic terror. In her view, the regime’s essence lay in its ability to render the population “atomized” and “superfluous,” using terror not just to crush enemies, but to reorganize humanity itself. The second was the more socio-scientific “syndrome” approach pioneered by Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski (1957). They provided a rigorous, six-point checklist—including an official ideology, a single mass party led typically by one man, a system of terror, and a near-complete monopoly over communication, weapons, and the economy. This framework offered a “structural MRI” of the communist state, and in Soviet Studies, it yielded foundational systemic analyses, such as Brzezinski’s (1956) examination of the “permanent purge” as a necessary technique of totalitarian rule.

However, the scholarly footprints in China Studies during this period revealed only partial and fragmented applications of these powerful theories. While foundational works utilized the vocabulary of totalitarianism, they tended to focus on specific facets rather than a holistic regime analysis. Richard L. Walker's *China under Communism: The First Five Years* (1955) was among the first scholarly works to characterize the polity of the People’s Republic of China as a “totalitarian dictatorship”. A. Doak Barnett (1964) explicitly examined “totalitarian control” in his study of the early PRC, yet his focus remained largely on the organizational penetration and bureaucratic reach of the new state. Robert Jay Lifton (1961) explored the “psychology of totalism” through China’s “thought reform” programs, but his lens was primarily psychological and social-psychological rather than a systemic political-science modelling of the state. Even Franz Schurmann’s (1966) monumental *Ideology and Organization in*

Communist China—perhaps the most sophisticated work of the era—opted to identify ideology and organization as the functional pillars of the system rather than validating the totalitarian framework in its entirety. Compared to the comprehensive systemic modelling seen in Soviet Studies, these works treated totalitarianism more as an adjective to describe the state's formidable power than as a rigorous, all-encompassing theoretical framework to explain its entire operational logic.

The reason for this hesitation and reservation was a deep-seated recognition of the fundamental differences between the Chinese and Soviet models. This was primarily due to the fact that Mao's China did not perfectly fit the "typical" image of a Stalinist state. Early totalitarian theory, heavily influenced by the Soviet experience, equated total bureaucratic control with a "Police-Terror State" (typified by the KGB). However, China under Mao presented a different and arguably more complex style of control. Instead of relying solely on a formal secret police apparatus to enforce passive compliance, the CCP followed the "mass line", emphasized ideological indoctrination and high-intensity mass mobilization. This distinction led many scholars to question the validity of the totalitarian label. (Townsend, 1974, p.15) For instance, influential China specialists such as John King Fairbank and Benjamin I. Schwartz emphasized that the Chinese revolutionary experience diverged in important ways from the Soviet model, particularly in its rural social foundations and the political practices forged through prolonged guerrilla warfare. Whereas Cold War depictions of totalitarianism often assumed an industrial-urban setting and highly bureaucratized, impersonal control, these scholars stressed that the CCP came to power through a peasant-based revolution reliant on sustained mass mobilization (Fairbank, 1958). Schwartz (1951, 1968) further argued that Maoism constituted a "non-standard" variant of communism—not because it lacked coercive Leninist organization, but because its ideological style and mobilizational repertoire did not fully conform to the bureaucratic and technocratic image derived from the Soviet case. This comparison with the Soviet "typical model" created a sense of analytical anxiety: scholars kept the "totalitarian" label as a placeholder for lack of a better term, but they firmly insisted that the Chinese regime represented a significant departure from the Soviet norm. This unresolved tension meant the half-hearted embrace of the totalitarian framework consensus was fragile from the start.

Moreover, the empirical validity of the totalitarian framework faced mounting challenges within Sovietology starting in the late 1950s. This conceptual crisis was primarily triggered by Stalin's death in 1953 and the ensuing de-Stalinization throughout the Soviet bloc. By dismantling the apparatus of mass terror and initiating the Great Release from the Gulag, the Khrushchev era rendered the classic totalitarian model seemingly obsolete in the face of a changing political reality. This wave of scepticism toward the totalitarian framework was subsequently amplified by a confluence of other factors, eventually leading to the near-total abandonment of the totalitarian model within mainstream academia.

1.5.1.2 Late 1960s -1980s

Within the field of comparative communist studies, the scepticism toward the totalitarian framework that emerged in the late 1950s coalesced into a powerful 'revisionist' wave during the 1960s and 1970s, gradually achieving academic ascendancy.(Malia, 1994; Seliktar, 2004) Stimulated by the post-Stalin change in Soviet and Eastern Europe and the backlash against McCarthyism and the Vietnam War, a new generation of Western academics sought to “normalize” the study of communist regimes by applying the same social-science tools used to analyse Western democracies. This led to a “society-centric” turn, famously championed by H. Gordon Skilling (1966, 1970), who introduced the “interest group” approach. Skilling and his contemporaries, such as Jerry Hough (1972), argued that communist polities were not monolithic machines but were composed of competing bureaucratic and social interests, leading to labels like “institutional pluralism” or even “guided democracy” (Tucker, 1963). By the mid-1970s, as Stephen Cohen (1985) critiqued the totalitarian school's “inability to imagine any authentically social dimensions,” the paradigm was effectively “banished from polite academic discourse”

The impact of this global academic shift was compounded in China Studies by the Sino-Soviet Split and the chaotic eruption of the Cultural Revolution. (Harding, 1984, p.298) The split provided definitive proof that the communist world was no longer a single, cohesive bloc governed by a universal Soviet logic. If the PRC and the USSR were antagonistic, their internal structures could no longer be assumed to be identical.

And instead of the machine-like control predicted by Friedrich and Brzezinski, scholars saw a state in apparent paralysis, characterized by factional warfare and mass rebellion in the Cultural Revolution. This sense of divergence appeared to many observers as the antithesis of totalitarian order. Perhaps the most iconic evidence of this paradigm shift can be found in the work of Franz Schurmann. When re-issuing his masterpiece, *Ideology and Organization in Communist China*, in 1968, Schurmann—having witnessed the early stages of the Cultural Revolution—added a supplement that signalled a profound conceptual retreat from his earlier framework. He wrote:

If I were to give the book a new title today, I would call it *Ideology, Organization, and Society in China*. The original title testifies to the weight I assigned ideology and organization, and to China's Communist character. However, due weight must now be given to the resurgence of the forces of Chinese society. The adjective "Communist" must also be dropped. This does not mean that China has ceased to be Communist, but that its communism has undergone a major transformation as the result of the Cultural Revolution. As is evident in the discussion, the conflict between the Soviet and Chinese conceptions of ideology and organization is so basic that we can no longer easily regard both simply as "communist." But that is only one reason for dropping the adjective Communist. China is today more its national self than ever before in the history of the People's Republic. In its stance it is proudly nationalistic, and in its internal constitution its Chinese character is more than ever evident. (Schurmann, 1968, pp.504-505)

Schurmann's admission that the adjective "Communist" had become a hindrance was a watershed moment. It reflected a growing belief that the PRC's internal constitution was driven by a unique "Chinese character" and social forces that were no longer mere objects of state engineering. This discovery of "society" and "national character" led to a proliferation of fragmented models. This move toward disaggregating the "monolithic" state was most influentially executed at the elite level by Andrew Nathan (1973). By developing a "factionalism" model to analyze the power struggles of the

Cultural Revolution, Nathan argued that Chinese elite politics was driven by informal, clientelist networks and complex hedging strategies rather than a singular, unified totalitarian command. This "factional" logic suggested that the regime's internal structure was characterized by a precarious balance of power, mirroring the pluralistic bargaining found in other political systems.

Simultaneously, a series of influential "retrospective" studies in the 1980s dismantled the image of Maoist totalitarianism from the bottom up. Jean Oi (1985) and Andrew Walder (1986) discovered that even at its most radical peaks, the system relied on "clientelism" and "organized dependence" (neo-traditionalism). They proved that the Chinese state was held together by personal loyalties and social networks rather than the "atomized" mass predicted by classic totalitarian theory. This line of critique was further extended by Vivienne Shue (1988), whose analysis of rural China revealed a "honeycomb" social structure where local cadres acted as protective shells, effectively blunting the penetration of central directives. By demonstrating that the Maoist state was often "cellular" and fragmented rather than monolithic, these scholars suggested that the "totalitarian" condition had been functionally absent at both the elite and grassroots levels.

China's "reform" provided the final blow to the totalitarian paradigm. As Beijing initiated "reform and opening up" policy, the academic focus shifted toward "Bureaucratic Authoritarianism" and the "Developmental State"—models previously reserved for Latin America or the East Asian NICs (Newly Industrialized Countries). Scholars like Michel Oksenberg (1982) began to analyze the "economic bureaucracy" and the consultative nature of the policy-making process, suggesting that China was evolving into a rational-legal, technocratic regime. Harry Harding (1987), in his influential *China's Second Revolution*, characterized the era as a fundamental move away from the "revolutionary-mobilizational" past toward a more predictable, institutionalized authoritarianism. This teleological optimism—the belief that China was on a one-way street toward "normalcy" and "modernization"—rendered the "totalitarian" label a regressive Cold War relic in the eyes of the 1980s mainstream.

Despite the mainstream shift toward pluralism, a significant minority of scholars remained unconvinced that the post-Stalinist Soviet Union had undergone a fundamental metamorphosis of regime type. They argued that while mass terror had

subsided and the state had partially retreated from the economy, the Leninist skeletal structure—the Party’s monopoly on power and its totalizing organizational logic—remained intact. To these holdouts, the totalitarian model should not be discarded, but rather refined to capture a new, less "mobilizational" phase of the rule. This theoretical impulse led to a proliferation of transitional concepts designed to bridge the gap between classic totalitarianism and the new reality. Scholars proposed terms such as "totalitarianism without terror" (Kassof, 1964), the "post-mobilization phase" (Johnson, 1970), and "populist totalitarianism" (Cocks, 1970). Even those who observed the system’s decay, such as Michael Walzer (1983), used the term "failed totalitarianism" to describe a regime that still possessed totalitarian ambitions but had lost its penetrative efficiency. Crucially, Juan Linz (1975) recognized that these disparate labels were all attempting to describe the same phenomenon. He argued that they could be systematically categorized under the umbrella of "post-totalitarian authoritarianism," calling for a rigorous typology that could analyze change within the structural genus of totalitarian systems rather than assuming an inevitable transition to a different species of regime altogether.

Parallel to these Western academic debates, a separate but equally powerful conceptualization was emerging from Eastern European dissident circles. While Western scholars were largely abandoning "totalitarianism" for being too normative or Cold War-oriented, intellectuals living under communist rule—such as Václav Havel (1985) and Adam Michnik (1998)—began to refine the term for their own purposes. For them, "post-totalitarianism" (or "late totalitarianism") was not a social-scientific "model" but a lived reality. They described a system that no longer required mass violence because it had successfully institutionalized a "life within a lie," where ideological compliance was maintained through social inertia and bureaucratic pressure. This experiential perspective from the "East" would later provide a vital empirical anchor for the resurgence of the totalitarian/post-totalitarian framework in the 1990s, offering a depth of structural insight that the "pluralist" or "interest group" models of the West had failed to capture.

1.5.1.3 Post 1989

The collapse of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union between 1989 and 1991 served as the ultimate "reality test" for Western academic paradigms. The pluralist and revisionist theories of the 1970s and 1980s, which had forecasted a peaceful institutional evolution toward a "normal" society, were blindsided by the sudden disintegration of the Soviet bloc and the violent crackdown in Tiananmen Square. In the immediate aftermath, the validity of the totalitarianism model was briefly acknowledged as a necessary tool for understanding the rigid, non-pluralistic essence of Leninist structures (Malia, 1993; Lipset and Bence, 1994). Giovanni Sartori (1993, p.5), in his seminal article "Totalitarianism, Model Mania and Learning from Error," offered a scathing critique of the field's premature dismissal of the paradigm:

This article is conceived as a learning from error exercise under the assumption that unless we take stock of our past mistakes, we are bound to repeat them... it is shown (i) that totalitarianism was dismissed prematurely for wrong reasons, (ii) that its successor concepts have been wrongly conceived as "models", and (iii) that model mania had developed to a point of harming our understanding.

Sartori (1993, p.6) emphasized that despite the Soviet collapse, "Vietnam and the People's Republic of China—no insignificant entities—are still around as non-pluralistic, non-liberalized, and yet, non-repentant polities. Whether China currently is semi- or quasi- or post-totalitarian, or something else." This captured the profound conceptual uncertainty of the era. Simultaneously, Linz and Stepan (1996) formalized the typology of "post-totalitarianism" to analyse regimes that maintained a Leninist monopoly despite the erosion of ideological fervour.

However, this resurgence of totalitarian theory was remarkably short-lived. As the Cold War ended, the sub-field of Comparative Communism essentially vanished along with its primary research objects. For subsequent studies of modern non-democratic systems, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc marked a dual shift: not only did the number of non-democratic regimes decrease, but their overall level of oppression also diminished. Consequently, the general research framework naturally

tilted toward these less-repressive systems. The remaining remnants of the totalitarian movement—China, North Korea, Vietnam, Laos, and Cuba—could thus be conveniently subsumed under the broader, generic field of Comparative Authoritarianism. In this context, "authoritarianism" became essentially synonymous with the entirety of modern non-democratic regimes.

The radical conceptual expansion of "Authoritarianism" into a "residual category" meant that the term eventually became too blunt an instrument to be of any analytical use for the Chinese case; if "authoritarianism" describes everything from a loose military junta to the highly disciplined CCP, the concept loses its descriptive power. However, even when scholars moved beyond the generic label and turned to the specific sub-types offered by mainstream comparative typologies, a fundamental typological mismatch remained. These frameworks, while more granular, still failed to provide an independent and appropriate classification that could account for the specific organizational depth and the ideological and mobilizational legacy of the Chinese Communist Party. For instance, Huntington (1970) utilizes the term "one-party system" to define the regime type of the People's Republic of China. This approach has subsequently been adopted by Geddis (1999) and Hadenius and Teorell (2007) in their typologies. Yet this sub-type was fundamentally too broad. It grouped the CCP—a massive, cell-based organization embedded in every village, factory, and military unit—together with weak, opportunistic parties in Sub-Saharan Africa or the Middle East that served as mere vehicles for patronage. By focusing on the form of the party system rather than its totalizing organizational essence, this model failed to capture why the CCP possessed a level of resilience and social penetration that other "single-party" regimes lacked. Similarly, the "Institutionalized Authoritarianism" lens of Gandhi and Przeworski (2007) viewed the Party through a narrow rational-choice framework as a tool for elite rent-sharing and co-optation. This approach largely ignored the ideological and mobilizational legacy of the CCP, failing to explain why the party would periodically sacrifice economic efficiency for ideological purity—a behaviour central to the Leninist "genus" but irrational under generic authoritarian models. Finally, the "Competitive Authoritarianism" lens of Levitsky and Way (2010), which focused on regimes combining autocratic power with skewed democratic competition, created a massive "blind spot" for China. Because the PRC lacked even the pretence of competitive national elections, it was relegated to the "Closed

Authoritarian" category. This label was essentially a "black box" that grouped China with stagnant, low-capacity autocracies, failing to distinguish the Chinese party-state from other "closed" regimes. Kailitz (2013) aims to improve existing typologies by introducing a distinct category for communist regimes known as "communist ideocracy." However, "communist ideocracy" is still limited when dealing with the evolutionary complexity of countries like China, as it fails to distinguish between the political systems of the Mao era and the post-Mao era. Consequently, it is rare to find scholars in the field of Chinese politics who directly utilize these subtypes from mainstream typologies to define the PRC's political system. Without the foundation of such a systematic typology, the task of accurately and comprehensively characterizing the Chinese regime becomes even more formidable.

This theoretical vacuum led the field of China studies into two specific analytical pathologies. First, a "Conceptual incommensurability" emerged, rooted in a profound lack of conceptual consensus. This disconnect was primarily driven by two divergent approaches to the "Authoritarian" genus. On one side, a minority of scholars—those who advocated for the continued relevance of the totalitarian or post-totalitarian models—insisted on maintaining the original, rigorous definition of Authoritarianism as established by Juan Linz: a specific regime type distinct from the totalizing nature of Leninist states. On the other side, the vast majority of mainstream political scientists adopted an expanded, catch-all definition of Authoritarianism, treating it as a synonym for any and all modern non-democratic polities. This fundamental disagreement over the "genus" meant that even when researchers attempted to apply various sub-types to China, they were often operating from entirely different typological baselines. Without a shared conceptual anchor, academic debates became circular and fragmented; scholars were not merely disagreeing on findings but using un-standardized conceptual vocabulary.

Within this context, the perspective of "Authoritarian Resilience," famously proposed by Andrew Nathan (2003), became highly popular and gained the widest recognition in the field. Nathan's work proceeded from the descriptive assumption that the Chinese regime had changed from totalitarian to authoritarian, arguing that it had stabilized through a series of internal adaptations—specifically the institutionalization of power succession, the refinement of meritocratic promotion, and the establishment of "input

institutions." However, Nathan's highly influential thesis suffered from a profound conceptual and temporal ambiguity. While he labeled the post-Mao state "classical authoritarian," he never theorized the actual ontological transition between these two fundamentally different regime types. He failed to explain why or at what specific threshold "institutionalization" qualifies a regime as authoritarian rather than merely one form of a Leninist party-state. Furthermore, he offered no clear metric for the degree of institutionalization required to trigger this categorical shift. By treating the label "authoritarian" as a self-evident, yet historically undated endpoint of stability, his work bypassed the fundamental question of regime essence (regime genus). This lack of typological grounding contributed to the broader conceptual incommensurability, as "Authoritarian Resilience" became a popular but imprecise label that described the regime's survival without defining its actual species or the exact nature and timing of its alleged metamorphosis.

Second, a phenomenon of "Epistemological fragmentation" took hold. (Baum & Shevchenko, 1999, p.334) Since the overarching macro-typology failed to capture the system's essence, researchers derived regime-level judgments from their narrow sub-fields of expertise. This resulted in a proliferation of "Authoritarianism with Adjectives," where specialized concepts focused on specific administrative or social sectors were used in a vacuum, often without a clear overarching definition of the regime itself. For instance, "Fragmented Authoritarianism" (Lieberthal and Oksenberg, 1988), derived from the study of central-level bureaucracy and energy policy, with a focus the bargaining and "muddling through" between various ministries and levels of government. While it accurately described the lack of policy cohesion, it led to a perception of a weakened centre, overlooking the fact that the Party maintained absolute control over personnel via the Nomenklatura system. Similarly, "Decentralized Authoritarianism" (Landry, 2008), based on research into fiscal federalism and local governance, highlighted the devolution of economic power to the regions, yet failed to account for how this remained a strategic and reversible arrangement controlled by the centre. Furthermore, "Consultative Authoritarianism" (He and Thogerson, 2010), emerging from the study of local-level deliberation and public hearings, suggested a move toward a more responsive style of rule, mistaking the regime's use of "input institutions" for a genuine shift in the power structure. Even "Networked Authoritarianism" (MacKinnon, 2011), centred on digital governance,

focused on how technology allowed for limited public venting. By prioritizing the description of functional flexibility and localized adaptations over a rigorous definition of the regime's core, these "adjectival" models inadvertently obscured the non-negotiable structural rigidity of the Leninist system. The result was an academic landscape rich in localized insights but impoverished in its ability to synthesize these parts into a coherent understanding of the regime's fundamental nature.

This typological instability is further exemplified by what could be termed "Categorical Slicing". Driven by the lack of a stable conceptual genus, scholars often attempt to capture every subtle policy oscillation by multiplying adjectival sub-types. David Shambaugh (2016, p.99), for instance, divides the thirty-year span from 1985 to 2015 into five distinct micro-stages, cycling through labels such as "liberal neo-authoritarianism" (1985–1989), "neo-totalitarianism" (1989–1992), "hard authoritarianism" (1993–1997), "soft authoritarianism" (1998–2008), and a return to "hard authoritarianism" (2009–2015). While this granular approach attempts to track the shifting political "orientation" of China, it creates a fragmented mirage. By treating tactical adjustments and periodic political tightening as fundamental shifts in regime sub-type, this "Categorical Slicing" fails to provide a consistent judgment of the regime's essence. It reflects a deep-seated anxiety: the inability to find a single, robust framework capable of explaining both the CCP's flexibility and its underlying structural rigidity, leading instead to a state of conceptual over-differentiation.

Beyond typological debates, comparative research on China was further complicated by an analytical tendency to privilege economic-political synthesis over rigorous regime classification. Confronted with the tension between rapid marketization and the persistence of Leninist political control, many studies shifted attention away from specifying a mode of rule and toward constructing holistic accounts centred on governance and growth. In this literature, political authority was frequently interpreted through its functional contribution to economic performance, effectively substituting descriptions of a "mode of growth" for analyses of regime type. This tendency manifested across otherwise distinct frameworks operating at different analytical levels. At the subnational level, Oi's (1992) concept of "local state corporatism" analysed political authority primarily as a mechanism facilitating capital accumulation. From a governance perspective, Yang's (2004) regulatory-state framework

foregrounded administrative rationalization and market oversight, recasting the party-state as an increasingly institutionalized regulator rather than a political regime. At a more aggregate level, one prominent example—among others—was the application of the developmental state paradigm to China, which interpreted the CCP through the lens of technocratic coordination and growth-oriented governance, thereby framing the party-state as a developmental manager rather than a specific regime type (see Beeson, 2004). Finally, at the level of policy discourse, the notion of the “Beijing Consensus” (Ramo, 2004) advanced a holistic narrative that fused economic performance, state capacity, and political stability into a singular model of development. Despite their analytical differences, these approaches shared a common effect: by centring economic outcomes and governance capacity, they tended to obscure the continued salience of the regime’s Leninist foundations, in which economic logic remains ultimately subordinate to the party’s monopoly on political power.

Yet, a significant group of scholars refused to join this mainstream evaluation, insisting that the “Authoritarian” label failed to capture the structural essence of the PRC. Guo (2000) argued that post-Mao China retained its core totalitarian features, and Juan Linz (2000) himself cautioned: “although China is undergoing some significant processes of liberalization, in my view it is still a post-totalitarian communist regime; contrary to the hopes of many of my colleagues, the emergence of capitalism does not yet assure a transition to democracy.” Before eventually adopting the post-totalitarian framework (Xiao, 2004), Xiao Gongqin (2002) attempted to bridge the gap with the complex concept of a “post-totalitarian technocratic neo-authoritarian regime.” Xu Ben (2005) refined the timeline, arguing that while the 1978-1989 period was characterized by post-totalitarianism, the regime’s reaction to the 1989 crisis pushed it toward a state of “neo-totalitarianism.” Feng Chongyi (2008, p.681) pointed out that: “The analytical framework of post-totalitarianism developed by Linz and Stepan is of particular value in understanding the current regime in China” in 2008. Similarly, some scholars in Taiwan (Zhao, 1997; Lin, 1999; Lin and Xu, 2003) adopted post-totalitarianism to maintain a more rigorous typological distance from generic authoritarianism.

The most sophisticated efforts to utilize the "missing slot" of post-totalitarianism involved applying the specific subtypes raised by Linz and Stepan. Mark R. Thompson (2001) employed these subtypes to interpret the divergent outcomes of the 1989 pro-democracy movements, classifying China before the Tiananmen massacre as "early post-totalitarianism"—a state where the regime's core was still far more rigid than its Eastern European counterparts. In Steven Saxonberg's (2013) transition framework, China and Vietnam were categorized as cases of "surviving maturing post-totalitarian regimes," emphasizing their ability to adapt without surrendering the party-state's monopoly.

Recently, amidst the "re-Maoization" under Xi Jinping, a growing number of scholars have begun to recognize the analytical limitations of the generic authoritarianism model. This realization has prompted a renewed scholarly focus on concepts such as Stalinism, Leninism, and totalitarianism as essential tools for deciphering the post-Mao regime's trajectory. For instance, Jean-Philippe Béja (2019) and Kang Xiaoguang (2018) both contend that China under Xi Jinping is pivoting toward a form of neo-totalitarianism. Pei Minxin (2021, p.19) have described China's trajectory as a journey "from Maoism to neo-Stalinism via a three-decade trip through post-totalitarianism." As Joseph Fewsmith (2021) concludes, the over-expanded authoritarianism literature ultimately failed to provide a fitting definition for the PRC, whereas the rediscovered concept of Leninism provides the far more accurate lens required to capture the totality of the Chinese system.

1.5.1.4 Summary

The long-standing conceptual impasse in defining the Chinese party-state is not merely a result of the regime's inherent complexity, but a consequence of systemic barriers that have historically hindered a rigorous, holistic classification of the regime across its various stages.

The first major barrier concerns the conceptualization of the Mao era, where the academic treatment of China was initially a reflection of the broader shifts within Comparative Communist studies. As the field of Soviet and Eastern European studies began to move away from the "Totalitarian" model in favour of revisionist and

pluralist perspectives, the study of China followed suit. This "paradigm allergy" led to what Giovanni Sartori criticized as the premature dismissal of totalitarianism, largely because early formulations were too static to account for institutional decay or systemic evolution. In China's specific case, this general academic trend was further intensified by internal idiosyncrasies that seemed to deviate from the Soviet archetype: the peasant-based nature of the revolution, the distinct and often chaotic patterns of mass mobilization and state terror, the radical mobilization of the Cultural Revolution, and the geopolitical rupture of the Sino-Soviet split. These factors led observers to treat Maoist China as a functional anomaly within the communist world, leaving the field without a consistent structural "genus" to link the Maoist past with its future transformations.

The second major barrier involves the analysis of the post-Mao era, where a combination of typological mismatches and economic determinism has obscured the regime's political essence. As China studies was absorbed into the broader field of generic Comparative Authoritarianism, it suffered from several interrelated analytical pathologies that fragmented the scholarly landscape. A "conceptual incommensurability" emerged as a result of the profound lack of conceptual consensus, where scholars operated from entirely different typological baselines and disagreed on the regime's fundamental genus. This was compounded by a "epistemological fragmentation" approach, in which researchers derived regime-level judgments from narrow sub-fields, mistaking localized functional adaptations for the system's core nature. Furthermore, certain influential scholars adopted a form of "Categorical Slicing", an over-differentiation of the timeline that mistook tactical policy swings or periodic political tightening for fundamental shifts in regime type, thereby creating a fragmented mirage that lacked structural continuity. Simultaneously, the prioritization of a hybrid economic-political synthesis allowed performance-based labels like the "developmental state" to further bypass the question of regime type in favour of describing modes of growth.

Ultimately, these historical and methodological barriers have created a profound theoretical vacuum that generic authoritarianism has failed to fill. To move forward, the field requires a more suitable and systematic typology capable of constructing a coherent analysis of both Maoist and post-Mao China as parts of a continuous political

trajectory. This necessitates a multidimensional approach that can synthesize the regime's functional flexibility with its non-negotiable structural monopoly on power—a framework that we will find by revisiting the classic typological contributions of Juan Linz.

1.5.2 Linz and Stepan's Typology with Totalitarianism and Post-totalitarianism

A typological framework of regimes provides scholars with an approach to structure their observations on political systems theoretically, clarify the political evolvement of one unit and compare political entities in a consistent way. Various theoretical approaches have been used to classify regimes in dealing with different political entities and academic topics. (see Brooker, 2014) Based on the preceding summary of the dilemmas in classifying the Chinese regime, this study adopts Linz and Stepan's typology as its analytical framework to define the political systems of both Maoist and post-Mao China. This typology is presented in *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation* (1996), which illustrates how democratic, authoritarian, totalitarian, post-totalitarian, and sultanistic regimes differ from each other in terms of pluralism, ideology, mobilization and leadership.

The core components of the typology employed in this study are detailed in Table 1.1. To maintain focus on the pertinent regimes under discussion, sultanism—an element of Linz and Stepan's original framework—has been excluded from Table 1.1 due to its lack of applicability to the Chinese context. The framework presented in this table is fundamentally sufficient for the analytical requirements of this research; more nuanced or elaborate discussions from the work of Linz and Stepan will be incorporated as supplementary material when specific issues arise during the analysis. One crucial point that needs to be elucidated (which is not explicitly shown in Table 1.1) is that, unlike the other four types in the typology, post-totalitarianism is an evolutionary rather than a genetic type. According to Linz and Stepan (1996: 293), it must be understood as "the result of changes in a system that had once approached the totalitarian model." As previously noted, when Linz first introduced the concept in 1975, he treated the post-totalitarian regime as a sub-type of authoritarianism. However, in the updated typology utilized in this study, Linz and Stepan have elevated

Table 1.1 Major Modern Regime Ideal Types and Their Defining Characteristics

Characteristic	Democracy	Authoritarianism	Totalitarianism	Post- totalitarianism
Pluralism	Responsible political pluralism reinforced by extensive areas of pluralist autonomy in economy, society, and internal life of organizations. Legally protected pluralism consistent with “societal corporatism” but not “state corporatism”	Political system with limited, not responsible political pluralism. Often quite extensive social and economic pluralism. In authoritarian regimes most of pluralism had roots in society before the establishment of the regime. Often some space for semiopposition.	No significant economic, social, or political pluralism. Official party has <i>de jure</i> and <i>de facto</i> monopoly of power. Party has eliminated almost all pretotalitarian pluralism. No space for second economy or parallel society.	Limited, nut not responsible social, economic, and institution pluralism. Almost no political pluralism because party still formally has monopoly of power. May have “second economy,” but state still the overwhelming presence. Most manifestations of pluralism in “flattened polity” grew out of tolerated state structures or dissident groups consciously formed in opposition to totalitarian regime. In mature post-totalitarianism opposition often creates “second culture” or “parallel society.”
Ideology	Extensive intellectual commitment to citizenship and procedural rules of contestation. Not teleological. Respect for rights of minorities, state of law, and value of individualism.	Political system without elaborate and guiding ideology but with distinctive mentalities.	Elaborate and guiding ideology that articulates a reachable utopia. Leaders, individuals, and groups derive most of their sense of mission, legitimation, and often specific policies from their commitment to some holistic conception of humanity and society.	Guiding ideology still officially exists and is part if the social reality. But weakened commitment to or faith in utopia. Shift of emphasis from ideology to programmatic consensus that presumably is based in rational decision-making and limited debate without too much reference to ideology.

Mobilization

Participation via autonomously generated organization of civil society and competing parties of political society guaranteed by a system of law. Value is on low regime mobilization but high citizen participation. Diffuse effort by regime to induce good citizenship and patriotism. Toleration of peaceful and orderly opposition.

Political system without extensive or intensive political mobilization except at some points in their development.

Extensive mobilization into a vast array of regime-created obligatory organizations. Emphasis on activism of cadres and militants. Effort at mobilization of enthusiasm. Private life if decried.

Progressive loss of interest by leaders and nonleaders involved in organizing mobilization of population within state-sponsored organizations to achieve a minimum degree of conformity and compliance. Many "cadres" and "militants" are mere careerists and opportunists. Boredom, withdrawal, and ultimately privatization of population's values become an accepted fact.

Leadership

Top leadership produced by free elections and must be exercised within constitutional limits and state of law. Leadership must be periodically subjected to and produced by free elections.

Political system in which a leader or occasionally a small group exercises power group exercises power within formally ill-defined but actually quite predictable norms. Effort at cooptation of old elite group. Some autonomy in state careers and in military.

Totalitarian leadership rules with undefined limits and great unpredictability for members and nonmembers. Often charismatic. Recruitment to top leadership highly dependent on success and commitment in party organization.

Growing emphasis by post-totalitarian political elite on personal security. Checks on top leadership via party structures, procedures, and "internal democracy." Top leaders are seldom charismatic. Recruitment to top leadership restricted to official party but less dependent upon building a career within party's organization. Top leaders can come from party technocrats in state apparatus.

Source: Linz, J. J., & Stepan, A. C. (1996). *Problems of democratic transition and consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*. Johns Hopkins University Press. 44-45.

post-totalitarianism to a status equal to that of totalitarianism and authoritarianism. It can be inferred that this shift was prompted by the recognition that when analysing the evolution of totalitarian systems, post-totalitarianism serves as a critically important, standalone category. The emergence of sufficient empirical cases likely demonstrated the independent existence of such a regime type, thereby justifying its position as a primary classification in political science.

When compared to other mainstream regime typologies, this framework possesses distinct advantages for analysing Communist party-states with a totalitarian history, such as China, as manifested in the following points.

First, this is a systematic typology constructed, to a significant extent, based on the experience of Communist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Unlike models derived from disparate political contexts, its foundational logic is deeply rooted in the institutional realities of Leninist systems. Consequently, it is far more relevant and applicable to a country like China, which shares a fundamentally similar structural lineage.

Second, the dual framework of Totalitarianism and Post-Totalitarianism represents a significant sophistication and optimization over earlier, more rudimentary totalitarian theories. By accounting for the inherent diversity and vulnerability of such systems, it avoids the pitfalls of viewing regimes as rigid or static monoliths. Most notably, this framework emphasizes the centrality of mobilization rather than treating police terror as the quintessential defining feature of the system—a shift that aligns much more accurately with the Chinese experience. Above all, the inclusion of the "post-totalitarian" category provides a rigorous conceptual tool to solve the problem of defining how a totalitarian regime evolves into a "weaker version" of itself.

Third, the typology provides a robust comparative baseline through fixed indicators. Unlike ad-hoc classifications that shift their criteria based on policy swings, the Linzian framework employs four consistent dimensions (Pluralism, Ideology, Mobilization, and Leadership). This allows scholars to track regime change not as a random series of events, but as a measurable shift along a predefined conceptual continuum. This structural consistency is precisely the antidote to the "categorical slicing" observed in recent literature.

Fourth, the framework assigns an appropriate analytical weight to the economic system by situating it as a constituent component of the pluralism dimension. This approach acknowledges that while the economic structure is a vital arena for potential pluralism, it does not function as the sole or deterministic driver of regime change. By treating the economy as one part of a multidimensional matrix, the Linzian framework can account for the profound impact of market reforms without succumbing to "economic determinism." This allows for a more balanced assessment where political and social shifts are given equal weight to economic transitions.

Finally, although the typology frequently references Communist cases, it utilizes universal social science concepts and mechanisms, thereby liberating the analysis from the influence of Communist ideological discourse. By moving beyond the regime's own self-descriptions and Cold War-era rhetoric, the framework ensures that the study remains grounded in objective, academic inquiry. By applying these four dimensions, this study avoids treating the PRC as an isolated "anomaly," reintegrating it into the broader discourse of comparative political development.

Of course, these theoretical advantages will only be fully manifest when applied to the concrete analysis of the contemporary Chinese polity. Accordingly, the following sections will employ this typology to define and categorize the political regimes of both the Maoist and post-Mao eras.

1.5.3 Characterizing the Maoist Regime: A Totalitarian Model?

Applying the Linzian framework to the Maoist era, it becomes evident that the PRC during this period fundamentally aligns with the totalitarian regime type. When mapped against the four dimensions—limited pluralism, guiding ideology, intensive mobilization, and centralized leadership—the Maoist system exhibits a near-perfect fit. Specifically, the state maintained a total monopoly over all social and economic resources, enforced a highly elaborate and sacralised ideology, and utilized frequent, high-intensity mass movements as a core governance tool. Within this framework, Maoist China stands as a quintessential case of the totalitarian genus, characterized by its extraordinary capacity for state-led social penetration and political mobilization.

Adopting this systematic typology allows us to clarify several long-standing misconceptions in the field that have previously hindered a consistent classification of the Maoist regime.

First, the framework resolves the debate regarding the role of "police terror." Some earlier scholars hesitated to label Mao's China as totalitarian because it lacked a Stalinist-style secret police apparatus that relied on pervasive, clandestine terror. However, as this typology does not treat police terror as an indispensable structural feature of the totalitarian model, this "anomaly" disappears. Instead, the Maoist regime achieved its totalitarian goals through social mobilization and grassroots surveillance, which, within the Linzian criteria, are simply different mechanisms for achieving the same systemic monopoly on power.

Second, the agrarian origins of the Chinese Revolution are rendered irrelevant to its regime classification. Previous arguments often suggested that because the Chinese revolution was peasant-based rather than led by an urban proletariat, it must represent a different political species. From a typological perspective, however, the class composition of the revolutionary movement (the "genetic" aspect) is secondary to the resulting structural characteristics of the political system. Whether the path to power was rural or urban, the institutional output in the Mao era was a party-state that exercised totalitarian control over both state and society.

Third, the Sino-Soviet split must be re-evaluated through the lens of regime evolution rather than regime divergence. Earlier observers often misinterpreted the split as evidence that China had veered away from the communist "orthodoxy." Yet, drawing on recent historical research, it is clear that the conflict was primarily a struggle for leadership within the international communist movement.(Shen, 2013) In terms of regime type, the friction did not stem from a difference between "Maoism" and "Stalinism," but rather from the asynchrony between Mao's high-totalitarian system and the Soviet Union's transition into a post-totalitarian stage. Mao's insistence on maintaining radical totalitarian features put him at odds with the post-Stalinist Soviet "weaker version," a distinction this typology is uniquely equipped to categorize.

However, the most significant challenge to this totalitarian characterization arises from the internal upheavals of the Cultural Revolution. In addition to being influenced

by the evolving academic trends in comparative communism study, the quest to redefine the Maoist regime was predominantly inspired by the rebellious movements and factional conflicts that transpired between 1966 and 1969. The “group interest” theory (or “social conflict” theory) implies that these movements and conflicts serve as evidence of a significant degree of freedom or pluralism in China during these years, which would be fundamentally incongruent with the features of totalitarianism. On the contrary, during this stage, we can also observe the peak of Mao Zedong's personality cult and the compelling power of the CCP ideology.

The key to resolving this apparent contradiction lies in grasping the specific nature of mobilization under a totalitarian regime. As stated by Linz (2000, pp. 70-71):

It is this participation and the sense of participation that democratic observers of totalitarian systems often find so admirable and that make them think that they are faced with a democracy... However, the basic difference between participation in a mobilizational regime and in a democracy is that, in the former, in each realm of life for each purpose there is only one possible channel for participation and the overall purpose and direction is set by one centre, which defines the legitimate goals of those organizations and ultimately controls them.

Compared to a post-totalitarian regime, the mass participation mobilized in a totalitarian system is far more active, as it is fuelled by leadership charisma, utopian ideology, and a highly homogeneous institutional structure. To enhance the efficiency of such mobilization, top leaders may intentionally create a certain space for proactive mass participation. In the context of China from 1966 to 1969, this manifested as a form of superficial freedom or pseudo-pluralism. Pertinent historical research has demonstrated that even the actions of rebellious factions were ultimately "working toward Mao" (Guoqiang & Walder, 2011). Mao never relinquished ultimate control; whenever mass participation deviated from his intended direction, he possessed the undisputed power to redirect or suppress it. While this large-scale mobilization—orchestrated by the supreme leader to challenge his own bureaucracy—was

unparalleled in human history, it remains firmly within the spectrum of totalitarian mobilization. Consequently, this period is more accurately characterized as "hyper-mobilization totalitarianism."

In this context, it is imperative to address the arguments that cast doubt on the applicability of the concept of totalitarianism to Mao's China. These critiques, often rooted in social conflict or interest group perspectives, were largely a response to the "classical" totalitarian models of the 1950s (such as the Friedrich-Brzezinski syndrome), which were indeed somewhat simplistic and rigid. Those early models primarily enumerated the features of a "syndrome" without providing an in-depth analysis of internal diversity, operational mechanisms, or evolutionary dynamics.

However, the field has undergone significant transformation since then. While the earlier wave of criticism was a justified reaction to the limitations of static models, the theory of totalitarianism has itself made significant advancements through decades of comparative research (Kassof, 1964; Johnson, 1970; Walzer, 1983). This evolution culminated in Linz and Stepan's (1996) comprehensive typology, which introduced "post-totalitarianism" as a distinct category. Therefore, while early skeptics were responding to the theoretical tools available at their time, continuing to dismiss the framework today by oversimplifying it as mere top-down total domination would be anachronistic.

As totalitarian systems developed and our empirical understanding deepened, it became clear that both Nazi and Communist manifestations align with the genus while exhibiting distinct features (Linz, 2000; Pauley, 2014). Various communist regimes may display unique traits due to historical legacies, geographical locations, and the personalities of their leaders (Ferdinand, 1991). By utilizing this modernized, dynamic typology, we can recognize that the characteristics of totalitarian regimes are not static; they evolve across different stages, allowing us to categorize Maoist China as a specific, highly-mobilized variant of the genus without ignoring its internal complexities.

1.5.4 Characterizing the Post-Mao Regime: A Post-totalitarian Model?

Compared to the nature of the Maoist regime, the characterization of China's political system in the post-Mao period is a far more contentious and fractured issue. Much of this scholarly debate suffers from what could be termed a "conceptual incommensurability", where researchers employ identical labels—such as "authoritarianism"—while rooting them in fundamentally different conceptual foundations. To ensure analytical clarity, it is imperative that the ensuing discussion proceeds from a shared consensus on basic definitions. Since this study is firmly situated within the framework of the Linzian typology, the concepts of totalitarianism, post-totalitarianism, and authoritarianism used here are strictly those defined by the internal logic of this specific system. Consequently, the analysis that follows will engage only with those academic perspectives and empirical findings that operate within these (or sufficiently similar) conceptual boundaries. Perspectives that rely on entirely divergent definitions of these terms fall outside the scope of this particular inquiry. By establishing these categorical boundaries, we can move beyond mere semantic disputes and focus on whether post-Mao China's institutional realities genuinely align with the post-totalitarian genus.

By establishing these categorical boundaries, the distinctions between post-totalitarianism and authoritarianism become particularly apparent when considering the dimensions of mobilization and ideology. In post-Mao China, while the role of ideology has lost its "charismatic" fervor and mobilization has retreated from the "hyper" state of the Cultural Revolution, the regime still maintains a pervasive guiding ideology and vast networks of ritualized, state-led mobilization. In stark contrast, generic authoritarian regimes typically lack a central, teleological ideology and eschew extensive political mobilization of the masses. On these two counts, the political reality of post-Mao China aligns much more closely with the attributes of post-totalitarianism than with any standard authoritarian model. However, to provide a truly comprehensive characterization, we must move beyond these clearer markers and address the more complex and potentially controversial dimensions of pluralism and leadership. It is within these two spheres that the "authoritarian" argument usually

gathers its empirical evidence, necessitating a deeper interrogation based on the Linzian criteria.

1.5.4.1 *Pluralism*

In the dimension of pluralism, the characterization of post-Mao China must begin by addressing the most fundamental structural constant of the regime. The sole fundamental commonality that post-totalitarianism shares with its totalitarian predecessor is the absolute monopoly of political power. Unlike authoritarian regimes, which are defined by "limited, non-responsible pluralism," both totalitarian and post-totalitarian systems are anchored in strict political monism. In post-Mao China, this political monism remains the non-negotiable bottom line; the CCP has never permitted the emergence of independent political centres, competing parties, or autonomous centres of power. Any perceived diversity in other spheres must be evaluated against this backdrop of total political enclosure. This unwavering monism is the primary factor that prevents the regime from slipping into the "authoritarian" category, as it maintains the same monolithic political core as the Mao era.

Once this political monism is established as the baseline, we can further clarify the regime's nature by addressing the social, cultural, and institutional dimensions. In post-Mao China, social and cultural spaces are "permitted" rather than "autonomous." While the state may tolerate a wider range of private expression or alternative lifestyles, this is a strategic concession from above rather than a recognized right from below, and the state maintains the organizational capacity to shrink or shut down these spaces whenever they threaten the centre's objectives. Similarly, the development of internal institutions—such as judicial reforms or administrative adjustments—remains strictly intra-bureaucratic. These operate within the singular hierarchy of the party-state and lack the independent legal or traditional authority that characterizes the pluralism of authoritarian regimes, where power centres often possess an independent source of legitimacy. Apart from extensive economic pluralism, an authoritarian political system should also exhibit extensive social pluralism and limited, non-responsible political pluralism. These are clearly lacking in post-Mao China.

Having addressed these dimensions, we must confront the most significant challenge to the post-totalitarian characterization: Economic Pluralism. In the post-Mao case, economic pluralism holds a central position because the rise of the private sector led many to argue that the state no longer maintains the "overwhelming presence" required by the post-totalitarian model. According to Linz and Stepan's typology, the ideal post-totalitarian regime "may have a 'second economy,' but state still the overwhelming presence". Critics such as Wu (1994) and Gao (2014) argue that the state-owned economy has ceased to be overwhelming in China's post-Mao economic system. This shift makes it closer to a "state capitalism" resembling the economic systems during the authoritarian eras of Taiwan and South Korea, rather than "market socialism" as seen in post-totalitarian Hungary. Consequently, these scholars argue the regime cannot be entirely defined as post-totalitarianism.

If the other elements of the post-Mao Chinese regime align with the criteria of post-totalitarianism, we must evaluate whether a more diversified economic structure alone prevents us from defining it as such. This depends on two specific questions: How much more? And how important is economic pluralism for categorising a post-totalitarian regime?

Regarding the extent of control, economic pluralism as an evaluative factor for political systems pertains to assessing the degree to which the state controls individuals' livelihoods. While the proportion of the state-owned economy in the overall economy is indeed a crucial indicator reflecting economic pluralism, it is not the sole metric. From the perspective of ownership, the economy in post-Mao China is indeed more diversified than in post-totalitarian Hungary. However, the balance between the state-owned sector and the private sector has never been stable. With the rapid development of the private sector, the overwhelming position of the state-owned sector has been challenged since the late 1990s. However, the phenomenon of *guo jin min tui* – the state advances, the private sector retreats – emerged in 2003 (Naughton, 2015), and its momentum has been steadily growing in recent years. Secondly, state-owned enterprises (SOEs) still maintain absolute control over up-stream industries, including financial institutions and other core industries, such as defence, petroleum, power, telecommunications, coal, and shipping, let alone all land in China is still owned by the party-state. As a result, a considerable portion of private enterprises

heavily relies on their relationships with state-owned entities. Thirdly, as noted by Huang (2008), the decision-making power of many joint-stock companies is still controlled by state-owned enterprises, even though state-owned capital only constitutes a minority of the shares in these companies. Finally, the state can also exert substantial influence on the private sector arbitrarily through non-economic means. A recent example is the “regulatory storm” targeting internet finance, education, entertainment, and real estate in 2021 (Naughton, 2023). Overall, within the economic landscape of the whole post-Mao era, while the proportion of the state-owned economy is indeed less than in other post-totalitarian systems, the state-owned sector remains predominant, and the party-state maintains firm control over the lifeline of the economy and society.

Even if the degree of economic pluralism in China is considered significant, we must evaluate its role in determining political categorization. Political scientists generally do not consider the degree of economic pluralism as a primary criterion for categorising political systems. Even when dealing with totalitarian regimes, as demonstrated by the Nazi case, not all systems uniformly advocate for complete nationalization or state ownership. Based on the ideological tenets of communism, many argue that state ownership of the economy is the most important characteristic of communist systems. However, as Janos Kornai (1992, p. 362) pointed out, the undivided power of the Marxist-Leninist party and dominant influence of the official ideology are the most significant elements for a socialist system. The dominant position of state ownership is secondary. “It’s not the property form—state ownership—that erects the political structure of classical socialism over itself. Quite the reverse: the given political structure brings about the property form it deems desirable.” In the history of communist states, economic pluralism and political conditions do not always move in tandem. For instance, Lenin, while abandoning war communism and implementing the New Economic Policy, pursued a continued totalitarianization by brutally suppressing the Kronstadt rebellion and further eliminating the forces of the Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionary Party. Another case is Czechoslovakia, which didn’t experience significant economic pluralization but was conceived as a typical post-totalitarian state in the normalization period. The share of the net material product produced by socialist sector (state-owned enterprises and cooperatives) in Czechoslovakia was 93.4% in 1960, then the number

even rose to 97.4% in 1980 (McDermott & Mejstrik, 1992). In politics, the leadership no longer possessed personal charisma and only demanded superficial obedience after the suppression of the Prague Spring. The authorities also permitted a certain degree of dissent expression by civil society (Ash, 1989). Havel's description of this situation is considered a classic work on post-totalitarianism (Popescu, 2011).

Clearly, Linz and Stepan do not take economic pluralism as one of the most important indicators in their typology. It is just one of the five indicators within one dimension of pluralism, and its impact on the political system is relatively indirect. In an updated interpretation of his theory of totalitarianism, post-totalitarianism and authoritarianism published in 2000, Linz states that: "Although China is undergoing some significant processes of liberalization, in my view it is still a post-totalitarian communist regime; contrary to the hopes of many of my colleagues, the emergence of capitalism does not yet assure a transition to democracy." And he criticizes the rise of the economic view of politics or economic determinism, which "ignores the importance of institutions and political legitimacy," encouraged by the huge success of the capitalist market economy at the end of the 20th century. It is this view of politics that has supported the official reform narrative of the CCP and led to the overoptimistic evaluation of the condition and future of China's post-Mao regime. Gao (2014) is evidently influenced by this view, when he revises Linz and Stepan's typology into a three-dimension (politics, society, and economy) framework. By collapsing the original dimensions into this triad, Gao fundamentally neglects the "autonomy of politics." This revision treats political nature as a "weighted average" of social and economic variables, implying that economic diversification automatically redefines the political genus. However, such a logic fails to recognize that in a Leninist system, political power is not a superstructure reflecting economic reality; rather, it is the primary force that dictates economic boundaries. Only by abandoning this excessive emphasis on the influence of the economy can we develop a reasonable and in-depth understanding of the political implications of the economic system.

In summary, the degree of China's economic pluralism does not alter its regime classification for two reasons. First, while the scale of the private sector has surpassed that of post-totalitarian Hungary, it remains under the state's ultimate control and there is no ultimate legal safeguard for private property right; the proportion of private

autonomy has not shown continuous expansion but has instead been subject to fluctuations and state-led contractions. Second, the theoretical significance of economic pluralism in defining a political system is limited. As historical precedents show, property forms are secondary to the political structure that dictates them. Therefore, since the core political monism remains intact, the extent of China's economic diversification is insufficient to displace its categorization as a post-totalitarian regime.

1.5.4.2 Leadership

As Table 1.1 shows, post-totalitarian leadership may appear deceptively similar to authoritarian leadership, particularly in its departure from the absolute, unconstrained charisma of a totalitarian dictator. However, Linz and Stepan (1996, p.47) emphasize that fundamental structural differences exist between these two categories, specifically regarding the source of constraints and the methods of elite recruitment. In an authoritarian system, the top leader or a small group of leaders is typically constrained by “formally ill-defined but actually quite predictable norms”—often rooted in traditional authority, religious influence, or military collegiality. In contrast, in a post-totalitarian system, any checks on supreme power are strictly institutionalized within the party’s own structures, procedures, and the specific mechanism of “internal democracy.” This distinction is critical: in post-totalitarianism, the "constraints" are not external societal forces, but internal bureaucratic rules designed to preserve the party's collective monopoly.

Pei Minxin (2000) argues that China has been undergoing a gradual transition from a totalitarian system toward “soft authoritarianism,” having already acquired many defining attributes of the latter. One manifestation of this transition was the establishment of intra-party norms: first, the relatively moderate nature of political struggles during the Deng era, as evidenced by the lack of large-scale purges following the removals of Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang; second, the institutionalization of mandatory retirement and internal election mechanisms, which appeared to stabilize elite politics. However, this narrative of moderation is profoundly challenged by the circumstances of Zhao Ziyang’s ouster. Zhao’s downfall was inextricably linked to

the military crackdown in 1989. By leveraging his position as a military leader to strip the nominal top leader of power through martial action, Deng Xiaoping demonstrated that underneath the veneer of intra-party norms, the regime's political struggles remained fundamentally coercive and violent. (Wu, 2019) Moreover, despite formally retiring from all party and state positions by 1990, Deng Xiaoping single-handedly altered the party's fundamental strategic line through his "Southern Tour Speech" in 1992. Far from being "predictable norms" of an authoritarian nature, these intra-party rules frequently devolve into mere formalities or are bypassed by informal power dynamics.

Furthermore, the institutionalization of power succession has been a major point of debate. Andrew Nathan (2003) famously interpreted the smooth transfer of authority from Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao as a sign of "authoritarian resilience," suggesting that China had adopted the institutionalized succession norms characteristic of a classic authoritarian state. Yet, subsequent political developments have shown that this "institutionalization" was remarkably fragile. In hindsight, the orderly transition at the 16th National Congress was less a triumph of institutional norms and more an artifact of Deng Xiaoping's personal intervention in designating both Jiang and Hu as successive leaders years in advance (Gilly, 2003) Once this "pre-designated" line was exhausted, the effectiveness of internal party norms eroded. According to Joseph Fewsmith (2021), the stability observed in leadership transitions is a product of power balancing under a Leninist system rather than a result of institutional constraints.

Beyond the nature of constraints, the second major distinction lies in leadership recruitment. In both authoritarian and post-totalitarian systems, there is a tendency to value technical competence to meet the demands of a modernizing state. However, the pool from which these elites are drawn is fundamentally different. Post-totalitarian leadership is exclusively recruited from party members who have spent their entire careers developing within the system's bureaucratic hierarchy. While technical expertise is prized, the system remains closed to "skills developed in a broader range of fields such as the law, religious organizations, or independent business or labor" (Linz and Stepan, 1996, p. 47). In a true authoritarian system, the regime is often porous, successfully attracting and integrating elites from various independent societal

forces. Because the post-totalitarian system rejects these external elites, it lacks the vitality and flexibility found in authoritarianism.

This closed-loop recruitment is evident in the rise of the "technocrats" in post-Mao China. In 1980, Deng Xiaoping declared that the CCP must prioritize cadres who were "more educated" and "more technically specialized." This led to the promotion of leaders like Jiang Zemin (Electrical Engineering, Shanghai Jiao Tong University), Hu Jintao (Hydraulic Engineering, Tsinghua University), and Wen Jiabao (Geological Mechanics). However, a scrutiny of their career trajectories reveals a crucial pattern: these individuals abandoned their original technical professions at a very early stage to enter the party's administrative and political apparatus. Their expertise was harnessed not as representatives of an independent professional class, but as system-bound loyalists whose professional identity was entirely subsumed by their roles as party apparatchiks. Consequently, the recruitment of these technocrats does not represent an authoritarian opening to societal elites; rather, it reaffirms the post-totalitarian approach of "expert" cadres operating within an exclusively monistic political career path.

In summary, the nature of leadership in post-Mao China reinforces its post-totalitarian classification. The constraints on power are strictly internal and discretionary; the brief periods of orderly succession were not signs of stable institutionalization, but fragile intra-party arrangements secondary to monistic control. Furthermore, recruitment remains a closed loop. The rise of technocrats did not signal an opening to independent societal elites, as seen in authoritarian regimes, but rather the promotion of system-bound careerists whose professional identities were entirely subsumed within the Leninist bureaucracy.

Through this clarification of the dimensions of pluralism and leadership, we can conclude that post-Mao China is best characterized as a post-totalitarian regime. This allows us to establish our definitive analytical framework, identifying the Mao era as totalitarian and the post-Mao era as post-totalitarian. By doing so, the conventional narrative of "from revolution to reform" is replaced by a more analytically precise "from totalitarianism to post-totalitarianism." Having established this conceptual foundation, we will now proceed to discuss how to define and explain the dynamics of this transition from totalitarianism to post-totalitarianism.

1.6 Post-totalitarian Transition and Its Explanatory Framework

Despite decades of accumulation in the field of Transition Studies, scholarly attention has been predominantly focused on the transition from non-democratic regimes to democracy. In contrast, research concerning the transition from totalitarianism to post-totalitarianism (or post-totalitarian transition) remains extremely scarce. This academic lacuna is largely due to the fact that the classic typology of political regimes proposed by Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan has not yet received widespread recognition or in-depth application. Furthermore, it stems from a waning academic demand and interest in totalitarianism-related studies following the "Third Wave" of democratization. However, this trend does not diminish the relevance of research using China as a case study, which possesses significant practical urgency and theoretical importance.

Given the lack of direct theoretical accumulation, exploring post-totalitarian transition requires more than just a revival of regime typology; it necessitates a comparative analytical perspective. We must reference and draw upon existing research on similar political phenomena—such as de-Stalinization and democratization—to precisely define the connotations of post-totalitarian transition by analyzing its fundamental differences from these processes. Only by examining the variations in transitional dynamics and pathways across different regime logics can we absorb existing theoretical insights and construct a specialized framework for explaining the dynamics of post-totalitarian transition.

1.6.1 Defining Post-totalitarian Transition

Although literature specifically titled "post-totalitarian transition" is scarce, this does not mean that, in a broad sense, this political phenomenon has been entirely neglected by scholars. In fact, within existing political science and historical literature, a vast amount of research on this type of institutional change has been conducted with concepts such as "reform"(see Harding, 1987; Dobson, 2009) or "de-Stalinization"(see

Tucker, 1957; Paltiel, 1986; Jones, 2005; Mehilli, 2011) at its core. However, from a strict perspective, there are fundamental differences between post-totalitarian transition and these concepts. In order to establish a clear definition of post-totalitarian transition, we not only need to differentiate and analyse these three terms, but we must also introduce a vital intermediary concept—"de-totalitarianization." This concept helps us characterize the dynamic evolution from comprehensive social control to institutional loosening, and finally to the establishment of post-totalitarian logic. Only by clarifying the logical relationships between "reform," "de-Stalinization," "de-totalitarianization," and "post-totalitarian transition" can we more accurately capture the uniqueness of this transitional path.

As previously discussed, within the ideological discourse of Communist regimes, the term "reform" carries a specific meaning that intersects with the phenomenon we intend to study. While pertinent studies offer valuable historical details, as an analytical category, "reform" is significantly misleading. It fails to assist in clarifying or explaining the regime transition under investigation for several reasons. First, "reform" lacks explicit definitions for its starting and ending points; it is often used loosely to describe any intra-systemic adjustment, ignoring whether the regime's nature has undergone a typological leap. Second, its conceptual scope is overly expansive, conflating political change with structural adjustments in economic, social, and cultural spheres, which prevents researchers from isolating the core political logic of regime transition. Third, and most importantly, "reform" specifically denotes top-down changes orchestrated by the Party. This perspective assumes that changes occur as a self-refinement within the existing framework rather than a fundamental alteration of regime logic, making it inadequate for explaining dynamics that lead to a qualitative change in the regime's nature.

De-Stalinization is a concept much clearer than "reform" and closer to the essence of post-totalitarian transition, yet its meaning remains overly broad and fraught with internal tensions. Under this concept, "Stalin" can refer to the personal power of Joseph Stalin, the Soviet Union's hegemony over other communist states, the specific policies implemented during the Stalin era, or the entire political, economic, and cultural system established under his rule. While these elements are closely interconnected, they are not functionally identical. Historical experience shows that

Tito continued to implement quintessential Stalinist policies in Yugoslavia long after his 1952 break with Stalin, proving that policy models can exist independently of personal power or diplomatic affiliation (Perovic, 2007). Similarly, in dealing with the turbulence triggered by Khrushchev's "Secret Speech," Mao Zedong strategically decoupled Stalin's personality cult from the broader systemic logic, ensuring that the critique of Stalin did not undermine the foundations of the Leninist system (Shen & Xia, 2015). From a long-term perspective of political systems, Stalin's ideology and governance were not substantially different from their Leninist foundations; thus, "de-Stalinization" often amounts to little more than a correction of extreme violence. Consequently, this study treats terms like Stalinism, Maoism, de-Stalinization, and de-Maoization as historical terms rather than core analytical concepts.

To obtain a more potent explanatory tool, we must introduce and strictly define the intermediary concept of "de-totalitarianization." De-totalitarianization is understood here as a dynamic process of qualitative shift occurring within a specific totalitarian regime. According to Juan Linz's typology, totalitarianism consists of four core dimensions: power structure, ideology, social mobilization, and the nature of leadership. We contend that de-totalitarianization does not necessarily entail an instantaneous displacement of the entire regime; rather, it manifests when one or more of these four dimensions—or specific key factors within them—undergo "out-of-type" changes.

If a change remains within the defined boundaries of totalitarianism—such as the refinement of coercive methods or adjustments in administrative flow—it constitutes merely a "weakening of totalitarianism," as its logic continues to circulate within the original closed system. True de-totalitarianization means a breakthrough in the essential characteristics of totalitarianism at a specific level. For instance, in the power dimension, it occurs if autonomous spaces emerge in economic or cultural spheres beyond state control; in the ideological dimension, it occurs if official doctrine regresses from absolute truth to ritualized obedience, allowing for non-regime logic in the private sphere; in the mobilization dimension, it occurs if there is a shift from forced mass participation to widespread political apathy; and in the leadership dimension, it occurs if the shift moves from unrestricted charismatic dictatorship to technocratic governance constrained by bureaucratic rules. Whenever a qualitative

change beyond the scope of totalitarian features occurs in any of these dimensions, that specific dimension has entered a state of de-totalitarianization.

However, the occurrence of de-totalitarianization is not synonymous with the completion of a post-totalitarian transition. A regime that has broken away from the totalitarian category possesses multiple logical trajectories: it may face total collapse due to a sudden loss of control, or it may shift toward authoritarianism, democracy or sudanism. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that in the vast majority of historical experiences involving totalitarian regime change, de-totalitarianization is most likely to lead to a post-totalitarian state. This is because the organizational inertia and institutional legacy of the old system typically ensure that the retraction of power results in a "half-baked" intermediate state.

Therefore, a "post-totalitarian transition" is established only when two restrictive conditions are met: first, the dynamic process of de-totalitarianization ultimately brings and holds the regime within the category of a "post-totalitarian regime"; second, this regime is able to maintain relative stability for an extended period under this newly established logic. Only when de-totalitarianization across various dimensions has accumulated to the point where the entire system can no longer be defined as a totalitarian entity, and simultaneously, a steady state has formed that fundamentally aligns with post-totalitarian characteristics, can we say that a "post-totalitarian transition" has occurred.

1.6.2 Post-totalitarian Transitions ever Happened

According to the rigorous definition of post-totalitarian transition established in this study, a historical survey reveals that this specific political phenomenon has manifested almost exclusively within communist totalitarian frameworks. It is observed that the vast majority of these regimes did not remain static but eventually underwent a systemic shift into post-totalitarianism. These cases span across diverse geopolitical landscapes: in Europe, we observe this in the Soviet Union, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia; in Asia, it is evident in China, Mongolia, Vietnam, and Laos; and in the Americas, it is represented by Cuba.

It is crucial to note that within the broader universe of communist totalitarianism, only a distinct minority of regimes failed to navigate this transition. For instance, the systems in Albania and Romania collapsed or shifted so abruptly that they bypassed a stable post-totalitarian phase and transitioned directly toward democratization. Meanwhile, North Korea remains a deviant case that has effectively institutionalized its totalitarian structure to the present day, and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia was terminated not by internal transition but by external military intervention. This pattern suggests that while the shift from a totalitarian to a post-totalitarian logic is a highly probable developmental trajectory for communist states, it is a contingent historical outcome rather than a teleological inevitability.

The empirical identification of these cases can be fraught with methodological challenges, regardless of the clarity provided by Linz's regime typology or our own refined definitions. It is inherently difficult to assert that every listed case is beyond academic dispute or to pinpoint the exact temporal boundaries—the precise starting and ending points—of each transformation case. This difficulty is first rooted in the inherent limitations of typology itself, as any such framework relies on the selective generalization and high-level abstraction of multifaceted political features. When confronting the immense complexity of real-world political phenomena, no conceptual framework can remain parsimoniously elegant while simultaneously accommodating the idiosyncratic nuances of every individual national case; the sheer diversity within "communist systems" often strains the boundaries of even the most robust categories.

Furthermore, this task is complicated by a profound scarcity of direct empirical research that treats "post-totalitarian transition" as a primary, standalone subject of inquiry. Most of the granular data and analytical insights required for such a study are currently scattered across fragmented investigations of national political histories or broader theories of democratic transition. This scholarly fragmentation makes the task of synthesizing a sufficient and coherent evidentiary chain exceptionally challenging, as we must often infer the specific logic of post-totalitarian transition from research focused on entirely different political outcomes.

Finally, one must contend with the fundamental ambiguity of transitional boundaries, a problem vividly illustrated by the case of Bulgaria. While Linz and Stepan (1996) suggest that Bulgaria's post-totalitarian transformation took place as late as 1988, the

country had already embarked on a path toward full democratization by the end of 1989. This historical proximity raises a critical theoretical question: Does a post-totalitarian transition require a sustained period of institutional stability to be recognized as a distinct regime state? Or should we interpret the driving mechanisms of these two transitions—post-totalitarian and democratic—as functionally identical, thereby treating them as a single, continuous evolutionary arc? For the scope of this investigation, we tentatively adopt Linz's classification while remaining cognizant of these tensions. Similarly, communist Poland remains a subject of intense debate; whereas Linz and Stepan (1996) classify it as an authoritarian regime, other scholars such as Saxenberg (2003, p.15) argue it was a "failed" totalitarian state that achieved post-totalitarian status as early as 1956. For the purpose of our analysis, however, the conceptual boundaries of post-totalitarian transition do not encompass the specific upheavals observed in Poland during that period.

Despite these complexities, a comprehensive clarification of every individual case's minute trajectory is not strictly necessary for the goals of this study. What is required instead is a general understanding of the global phenomenon of post-totalitarian transition. This is an achievable objective because these transitions are rarely silent or imperceptible; they almost invariably involve high-profile, "breakthrough" events—such as major leadership purges, radical shifts in official party line, or large-scale civil unrest—that serve as clear empirical markers. We specifically prioritize the analysis of transitions that are either directly comparable to China's experience or those that exerted a tangible historical influence on China's own path.

By summarizing these patterns through a macro-comparative lens, we gain a strategic advantage in explaining the timing of these shifts, which occurred in distinct historical waves: the 1950s (the Soviet Union), the 1960s (Czechoslovakia), the 1970s (China and Cuba), and the 1980s (Vietnam). A pivotal concentration of these transitions occurred in the mid-1950s, a wave primarily catalysed by the death of Joseph Stalin and the subsequent de-Stalinization initiated at the 20th Congress of the CPSU. As the ideological and geopolitical hegemon of the communist world, the Soviet Union's internal de-totalitarianization exerted immense pressure on its peers. However, a crucial distinction must be made between "satellite states" and "indigenous revolutionary regimes." For states like East Germany or Hungary, which were

architected under Soviet shadow, the Kremlin's shift acted as an almost mandatory external imperative for transition. Conversely, indigenous regimes like China and North Korea possessed significantly higher degrees of domestic legitimacy and autonomy. While some responded to the 1950s wave by transitioning, others reacted with fierce resistance: North Korea suppressed internal challengers to preserve its high-totalitarian core, while China launched massive internal campaigns to inoculate its system against "revisionism." Understanding why some indigenous regimes resisted transition in the 1950s only to undergo it decades later—as China did in the late 1970s—is essential for identifying the true internal engines of post-totalitarian change.

1.6.3 Theoretical Frameworks for Explaining Post-totalitarian Transition

In light of the existing scholarship in comparative politics, the theoretical resources available for explaining the profound phenomenon of post-totalitarian transitions can be systematically categorized into two primary types: direct and indirect resources. The former consists of research that takes the post-totalitarian transition itself as the primary, standalone object of study; while these resources possess the highest degree of theoretical relevance, they remain relatively scarce in contemporary literature. The cornerstone of this category is the seminal framework developed by Juan Linz, who identifies three primary pathways of de-totalitarianization and transition, each driven by a distinct causal logic that reshapes the regime's core.

The first pathway is characterized as being "by choice," wherein the ruling elite—often a new generation of technocrats or reform-minded leaders—deliberately initiates a softening of the regime. This "top-down" transition is frequently a strategic response to the realization that the high costs of total social mobilization and ideological enforcement have become economically and politically unsustainable. However, this choice is rarely purely altruistic; it is often a defensive modernization aimed at preserving the core of the Party-state by sacrificing its more abrasive, totalitarian edges. By intentionally introducing "out-of-type" elements—such as legalistic procedures or limited market autonomy—the rulers hope to trade absolute control for systemic efficiency and renewed legitimacy.

The second pathway, "by decay," refers to an internal "hallowing out" of the state's organizational structures and a gradual, systemic erosion of the political elite's ideological fervour. This is a process of entropy where the revolutionary "charisma" of the regime is replaced by bureaucratic inertia. In this scenario, the widening gulf between official dogmas and lived reality leads to a pervasive "ritualization" of belief. The political apparatus continues to function through formalistic compliance, but the cadres themselves no longer believe in the teleological mission of the state. This decay creates a "silent transition," where the regime remains totalitarian in form but becomes post-totalitarian in substance, as the state loses its capacity to penetrate and mobilize the private lives of its citizens.

The third pathway is "by societal conquest," where forces outside the formal party-state apparatus successfully resist or escape totalitarian control. This is the most dynamic and often the most volatile route, occurring as social actors reclaim spaces of relative autonomy—whether through the emergence of an "underground" civil society, independent religious communities, or intellectual circles. This "bottom-up" pressure forces the state to concede its monistic grip on society. In this pathway, the transition is not a gift from the rulers or a result of neglect, but a hard-won expansion of social pluralism that effectively "conquers" territories previously occupied by the state's totalizing ideology (Linz & Stepan, 1996). While Linz's framework provides a crucial instrument for identifying these trajectories, it acts more as a typology of outcomes than a comprehensive causal theory, necessitating the integration of broader analytical tools from indirect resources.

Crucially, in the historical reality of political change, these three pathways do not necessarily function in isolation. They may occur simultaneously, reinforcing one another, or they may unfold sequentially. For instance, a regime's strategic "choice" to reform is often a reactive measure triggered by the manifest "decay" of its own administrative and ideological efficacy. Alternatively, a "societal conquest" might only become possible once the institutional decay has weakened the state's repressive apparatus. The specific configuration and interplay of these pathways—and particularly which pathway emerges as the dominant driver—exert a decisive influence on the overall tempo of the transition and the final institutional character of the resulting post-totalitarian regime.

However, it is imperative to recognize that Linz's three pathways are highly generalized abstractions and "ideal types." While they provide a crucial instrument for identifying broad trajectories, they are inherently insufficient for providing a detailed or nuanced explanation of a specific transition process. Relying solely on these generalized categories risks oversimplifying a process that is, in reality, a contingent outcome forged in the crucible of constant bargaining and conflict. For example, the role of political elites is significantly more complex than the term "by choice" might suggest. While the overall direction of a transition might be described as an elite-led "choice," this does not imply a monolithic or linear progression. In practice, elite agency is often contradictory: the same leadership group may proactively push for certain reforms while simultaneously acting as a stubborn barrier to others, depending on shifting internal and external pressures. Furthermore, the ruling elite is never a "monolith"; it is a fragmented landscape of competing factions with divergent interests and varying degrees of commitment to the transition. Therefore, a fine-grained explanation of post-totalitarian transition requires us to move beyond these macro-level pathway summaries. We must investigate the intricate micro-dynamics and the multi-factor bargaining processes—involving structural, institutional, and agency-level variables—to understand how the transition actually navigates through the friction of competing political interests.

The indirect resources can be further subdivided into two categories that offer different levels of analytical utility. The first category encompasses studies of broadly defined political changes within communist systems, such as research on "reform" or "de-Stalinization." Although these studies may not focus on regime type as their ultimate variable, they provide indispensable insights into the specific micro-mechanisms—such as bureaucratic manoeuvring, the relaxation of police terror, and policy experimentation—that facilitate the transition. The second category consists of the vast and highly mature theoretical corpus of democratization studies. Despite the differing starting and ending points, both post-totalitarian transitions and democratizations represent the fundamental shift from one regime type to another. Given that democratization theory has developed a sophisticated set of analytical frameworks and core variables, it can serve as a potent intellectual scaffolding for our inquiry. By borrowing the framework from democratization theory, we can evaluate which variables remain decisive in a post-totalitarian context. This approach allows us

to analyse the transition through a multi-factor framework encompassing four dimensions: institutional factors, structural/economic factors, internal agency, and international factors.

Regarding institutional factors and the legacy of the old regime, it is paramount to recognize that in totalitarian states, the party-state system nearly monopolizes control over all social, political, and economic resources. This monistic concentration of power means that forces outside the system face almost insurmountable challenges in independently driving political change; consequently, the characteristics and internal mutations of the totalitarian regime itself often play a decisive role in shaping the transition. In the leadership dimension, a key factor that may trigger a post-totalitarian transition revolves around the fundamental shift in the balance between the personal power of the top leader and the institutionalized power of the party-state apparatus (Lowenthal, 1970). When the supreme leader passes away or retires, the remaining political elites—motivated by intense concerns for their own physical and political security—often proactively seek to change the system. Their goal is a transition from a personalistic rule of terror to a more predictable, institutionalized framework to avoid the threat of the "permanent purge" (Linz & Stepan, 1996). While scholars like Seweryn Bialer (1980) and Jerry F. Hough (1980) associate the generational succession of ruling elites with these transformations, it must be noted that neither the turnover of a leader nor a generational shift automatically leads to transition, as the survival of the North Korean regime through three generations proves.

Furthermore, the increasing gap between official ideology and reality serves as a potent institutional propellant toward post-totalitarianism (Linz & Stepan, 1996). On one hand, this cognitive dissonance results in a profound reduction of belief among political elites in the official dogma, prompting them to either proactively initiate systemic changes or passively allow the structure to decline into "decay." On the other hand, the ritualization of ideology weakens its ability to control the population, potentially opening spaces for the emergence of relatively independent social forces or critical voices. In certain extreme and rare circumstances, such as in the case of China, large-scale mobilization efforts initiated by the state can backfire, disrupting the very institutional control and social stability they were meant to reinforce. This

institutional failure inadvertently leads to the emergence of economic, social, and cultural diversity, thereby forcing the regime toward a post-totalitarian breakthrough.

Regarding economic factors, it is essential to clarify that this term refers not to economic systems or pluralism, but to the level and trend of economic development. First, we must address the applicability of Modernization Theory, the most prominent explanatory framework in democratization studies. In the context of communist totalitarianism, the traditional version of this theory—which posits that economic development creates an autonomous middle class that demands political rights—is largely inapplicable. This is because, under such systems, the state's monopoly over the means of production prevents the emergence of a middle class independent of the party-state (Lewis, 1990). Despite this, a general pattern is observable: economically developed totalitarian countries tend to undergo post-totalitarian transitions earlier than their less developed counterparts. To explain this without relying on an independent middle class, scholars like Moshe Lewin (1988) adapted modernization theory to the Soviet case. He argued that industrialization and urbanization necessitated the professionalization of the populace and the "modernization" of the Communist Party's own cadres. This process creates a stratum of professionals and intellectuals within the system who are less doctrinaire and more receptive to technocratic transformation. Similarly, Richard Lowenthal (1970, 1974, 1983) contended that the functional necessity of modern development would eventually override revolutionary idealism, forcing communist political systems to move toward liberalization and pluralism to survive in a modern world. While insightful, these theories can sometimes be overly broad when applied to specific transition cases. A second, more immediate economic approach focuses on the role of economic downturns and performance crises. In the study of China's reforms, many scholars identify the severe economic decline and widespread poverty following the Cultural Revolution as a primary driving force for change (Zhang, 1998; Xiao, 2019). However, historical evidence suggests that post-totalitarian transitions do not occur as an immediate, automatic reflex to economic crises or famines. Instead, rulers are often more inclined to respond to such pressures by adjusting specific economic policies or allowing minor degrees of de-totalitarianization to alleviate the crisis (Ericson, 1991; Wolf, 1991). Therefore, while the deterioration of economic conditions increases the willingness of both political elites and the populace to seek a departure from the status

quo, economic factors cannot help explain the specific timing and pathway of the transition.

Complementing these structural pressures is the role of internal agency. Given the extreme concentration of power in totalitarian states, the personal beliefs and actions of leaders have an enormous leverage on political change. If Khrushchev had not delivered his "secret speech" at the 20th Congress, the trajectory of many post-totalitarian transition processes would have been significantly different. Within these systems, high-ranking leaders often lead a "double life," concealing their true intentions until a significant political opening occurs, as seen in Lavrentiy Beria's immediate review of political cases and curtailment of secret police powers after Stalin's death (Deutscher, 1953). Furthermore, the outcome of intra-party factional struggles between orthodox Stalinist dogmatists and local reformist factions often determines the success of the transition (Rothschild & Wingfield, 2008). While non-institutional actors may be involved, their influence is typically limited by the extent to which political elites choose to utilize them for their own agendas.

Finally, a comprehensive explanation must account for international factors, which act as critical external constraints and catalysts. To discuss their role effectively, it is essential to distinguish between totalitarian regimes that underwent self-initiated communist revolutions and those where totalitarianism was imposed by foreign powers. The former category, which includes the Soviet Union, China, Yugoslavia, Vietnam, and Cuba, features post-totalitarian transitions that were relatively less influenced by external pressures due to their higher degrees of domestic legitimacy and autonomy. In stark contrast, the transitions in "satellite" regimes were significantly shaped by direct Soviet interference or the fear of its withdrawal. This direct influence was particularly evident during the mid-1950s wave of post-totalitarian transitions, where the Kremlin's shift acted as an almost mandatory directive for its dependents (Fowkes, 1995; Kramer, 1999). Moreover, the impact of international factors is primarily driven by the hierarchical and ideological relationships among countries within the Communist bloc itself. The influence of the broader Cold War context and countries outside the Communist bloc—such as Western democracies—is comparatively limited in the initial stages of post-totalitarian transition (Kramer, 1999). International factors, therefore, function as a "modulating variable" that either

accelerates or inhibits the internal drivers of change, depending on a regime's geopolitical position and its level of sovereignty.

1.6.4 Explanatory Framework for China's Post-totalitarian Transition

Building upon the theoretical resources discussed in the previous section, we now seek to construct a specialized explanatory framework for China's post-totalitarian transition. As a case study, this Endeavor requires a fine-grained dynamic analysis of the transition process and its underlying power mechanisms. Transition is not a static outcome but a fluid progression; therefore, we must refine the general variables of transition theory to account for China's unique historical and political landscape. This necessitates a critical evaluation of which factors are meaningful in the Chinese context, identifying which elements act as decisive drivers and which remain peripheral. To capture the complexity of this transformation, we adopt a four-dimensional framework consisting of institutional factors, elite agency, societal factors, and international factors.

The first dimension, institutional factors, encompasses both the inherent characteristics of the pre-existing regime and the functional role the system plays during the transition itself. As a macro-variable, the features of the old totalitarian system act as a structural constraint, defining the rhythm, the path, and the eventual boundaries of change across various levels of the state. While the internal "decay" of the system serves as a fundamental propellant for transition, the stubborn persistence of certain institutional layers can create significant path dependency. Such institutional inertia often impedes the pace of reform or diverts the transition onto unexpected trajectories, forcing a compromise between the old logic of control and the new logic of liberalization.

The second factor is elite agency, which includes the elite structure prior to the transition, the identity of the actors who initiate and lead the process, and the personal styles and choices of paramount leaders. In contexts where the elite are characterized by clear factional divisions, the transition is best analysed through the prism of intra-party bargaining and conflict. In such cases, the pre-transition power structure and the

question of which faction emerges victorious are of paramount importance in determining the transition's direction. However, as factional disputes are resolved or suppressed, the personal beliefs and idiosyncratic choices of the top leader gain greater explanatory weight. It is essential to recognize that elites are not teleological agents of reform; their agency is fundamentally Janus-faced, capable of acting as both the engineers of de-totalitarianization and the ultimate guardians of the Leninist core..

The third dimension addresses societal factors. Unlike democratic transitions, where civil society is often a prerequisite, social forces are virtually non-existent under a high-totalitarian system. Consequently, in the Chinese post-totalitarian transition, the mere emergence and development of societal autonomy constitute a powerful driver of change. The "conquest" of social space—whether through economic activity or cultural expression—constantly pushes the boundaries of the party-state. However, the outcome of societal action is not preordained; when social forces interact with other variables, such as elite crackdowns or institutional adjustments, the results may not always favor a linear progression toward transition.

Finally, we consider international factors. Given that China is a quintessential "indigenous revolutionary state," external forces do not function as decisive or primary drivers of its political metamorphosis. Instead, international factors typically appear as situational variables or contextual pressures. They provide a background against which domestic actors calculate their interests—such as through policy emulation, international prestige, or global economic integration—but the engine of China's post-totalitarian transition remains fundamentally internal, driven by the domestic interplay of institutions, elites, and a nascent society.

2 Chapter 2 Chinese Totalitarian Regime: Evolution and Characteristics

The study of pre-transitional totalitarian systems holds multiple significance in articulating and explaining post-totalitarian transitions. The condition of the totalitarian regime is an integral part of the historical background of the transition. The internal characteristics and evolutionary shifts within the totalitarian system provide the primary driving force for change, while simultaneously acting as structural constraints that shape the process and influence the eventual outcome. Moreover, China has a prolonged history of totalitarianism, marked by several instances where the regime faced significant pressures for de-totalitarianization; however, these pressures ultimately failed to evolve into a definitive de-totalitarianization. Discussions regarding how these de-totalitarianizing impulses emerged—and the reasons why they were stifled or remained unrealized—provide a direct reference for explaining the successful transition that followed. We shall first delineate the evolutionary process of the Chinese totalitarian regime, and then, based on a brief horizontal comparison, summarize the core characteristics of the system. Dealing with such an extensive and complex history, conducting staged discussions based on the evolution of the totalitarian system is a preferable approach.

2.1 The Evolution of Chinese Totalitarian Regime

2.1.1 The Establishment of Totalitarianism, 1949-1956

The People's Republic of China was officially established on October 1, 1949, by the CCP through a self-initiated, indigenous revolution. This fundamental origin set China apart from Eastern European nations such as Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania,

Bulgaria, and East Germany, where Communist rule was largely secured under the shadow of Soviet military pressure (Hammond, 1971). However, despite its unique path to power, China followed the trajectory of most other communist regimes by establishing a comprehensive Soviet-style totalitarian system in the years that followed (Li, 2001; Meliksetov & Pantsov, 2003).

Upon confirming its capacity to seize and maintain territorial control, the CCP urgently sought to integrate China into the Soviet-dominated communist bloc, primarily as a strategy to consolidate its fragile grip on power. This "leaning to one side" policy was driven by two imperatives: first, the need for Soviet military and diplomatic backing to counter potential U.S. interference; and second, the CCP's acute lack of administrative resources and experience in managing a modern state apparatus. In June 1949, Liu Shaoqi conducted a secret mission to the Soviet Union for high-level talks with Joseph Stalin. After Stalin signaled his approval of the CCP's strategic direction and China's entry into the bloc, Mao Zedong issued "On the People's Democratic Dictatorship" on June 30, publicly formalizing China's alignment with the USSR and its commitment to learning from the Soviet model (Shen & Xia, 2015).

Through a series of violent suppressions and mass mobilization movements, the CCP effectively eradicated perceived "class enemies" and liquidated the remnants of societal diversity, thereby establishing an absolute one-party monopoly. This transformation was structurally solidified through the embryonic development of the "Danwei" (work unit) system, which tethered individual survival to state-controlled entities, effectively atomizing society and precluding autonomous organization. With the assistance of thousands of Soviet experts, China adopted the USSR's centralized government structure, planned economic system, and educational curriculum. Stalin's interpretation of Marxism-Leninism was enshrined as the sole ruling ideology, and by 1956, the institutional scaffolding of a Soviet-style totalitarian regime was firmly in place.

In this period, the CCP acted as a disciplined and eager student, largely replicating the Soviet political architecture without significant modification. However, certain distinct characteristics remained. In contrast to the brutal and protracted collectivization in the Soviet Union, China's elimination of economic pluralism was remarkably rapid and relatively peaceful. A pivotal mechanism in this transition was

the "Unified Purchase and Marketing" system (统购统销) introduced in 1953, which allowed the state to decapitate the market by seizing control over the circulation of essential goods. The success of these measures significantly bolstered Mao Zedong's confidence in the inherent superiority of the Chinese socialist path.

In the dimension of leadership, Mao Zedong had already secured absolute dominance during the Yan'an Rectification Movement. The Seventh National Congress in 1945 formally established "Mao Zedong Thought" as the party's guiding ideology. While his authority was further sanctified by the revolutionary victory and successful collectivization, Mao remained tactically cautious in asserting his ideological independence, partly due to the Kremlin's refusal to recognize "Mao Zedong Thought" as a legitimate theoretical innovation alongside Marxism-Leninism.

Finally, it is noteworthy that while Stalin's death in 1953 triggered early tremors of post-totalitarian transition in the Soviet Union and East Germany, the CCP remained largely insulated from these pressures. Before the landmark 20th Congress of the CPSU in 1956, the Chinese leadership perceived the shifts in the Eastern Bloc not as a systemic crisis of totalitarianism, but as a localized leadership struggle, leaving the Chinese regime's commitment to high-totalitarianism unshaken.

2.1.2 The Wave of Post-totalitarian Transition and the CCP's Choice, 1956-1957

In the early months of 1956, following the basic completion of the socialist transformation of ownership, the leadership of the CCP perceived that political power had been significantly consolidated. They believed the fundamental socialist framework was now secure, allowing the party to shift its focus toward rapid industrialization and economic development. Recognizing that such progress was impossible without technological expertise and the active participation of intellectuals, the CCP began to reverse its previous policies of ideological rectification. The state sought to improve the living and working conditions of professionals to encourage their contribution to the national project. This shift eventually evolved into a broader relaxation of speech controls, encouraging intellectuals, artists, and members of

democratic parties to express their opinions—a policy famously known as the "Hundred Flowers" campaign (Shen, 2008).

In February 1956, Nikita Khrushchev delivered his "Secret Speech" at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, initiating a policy of de-Stalinization. Mao Zedong generally concurred with this shift, particularly the denunciation of Stalin's dogmatism, as it promised to liberate China from blindly copying the Soviet model and allow it to forge a distinctive path to socialism. Mao found satisfaction in the prospect that China would no longer have to submit to the direct guidance and suppression of Soviet leaders. However, the critique of the personality cult carried an inherent implication of de-totalitarianization at the leadership level—a prospect Mao found intolerable. He required a personality cult centered on himself and was determined to prevent a similar de-totalitarianizing rupture from occurring within China (Jian, 2015). Nevertheless, under the systemic pressures generated by the broader wave of post-totalitarian transitions, the 8th National Congress of the CCP rhetorically introduced several policies analogous to the de-totalitarianizing measures seen in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, such as countering the personality cult, strengthening intra-party democracy, enhancing external supervision, improving the legal system, and allowing for a limited scope of market economy.

The eruption of the Hungarian Revolution in October 1956 served as a turning point. The CCP leadership began to realize the immense pressure for de-totalitarianization and the existential risk of losing political power. Consequently, they recommended that the Soviet Union send troops to suppress the uprising. Reflecting on these events, Mao developed a new insight: while the Communist Party could indeed lose power, he believed China had already successfully eliminated its counterrevolutionaries. He argued that the primary challenge was now handling "internal contradictions among the people," which he proposed to address through a rectification of the Party's own working style. Facing resistance to this rectification from within the party bureaucracy, Mao mobilized non-party individuals to offer suggestions, ostensibly to assist the CCP in improving its conduct (MacFarquhar, 1974).

Contrary to Mao's expectations, members of the democratic parties and intellectuals did not limit their suggestions to minor adjustments; instead, they raised sharp

criticisms against the Party's absolute leadership and the totalitarian system itself. On May 19, 1957, a student democracy movement erupted at Peking University, followed by protests and strikes across various regions. By late May, fearing these events could escalate into a "Hungarian-style" crisis, Mao launched a massive crackdown. The shift from the Rectification Movement to the Anti-Rightist Campaign marked a total reversal of policy. Mao abandoned the previous consensus that class struggle had ended, asserting instead that it remained the principal contradiction in society (Shen, 2008). Notably, the policies aimed at weakening totalitarianism proposed during the 8th National Congress were completely shelved, and the totalitarian regime was further consolidated and strengthened.

While the reversal of these guidelines was triggered by specific events, it reflected Mao Zedong's unwavering determination to prevent a post-totalitarian transition. Having successfully established the system, he intended to use it as a powerful instrument for his grand visions and refused to see it weakened or dismantled. At that time, neither the political elites nor the general population possessed a clear understanding of the systemic drawbacks of totalitarianism. The pressure for change was primarily an external phenomenon; the internal momentum required for a genuine transition had not yet matured.

2.1.3 The Great Leap Forward and the Intensification of Totalitarian Rule, 1958-1960

The Great Leap Forward was initiated and directly led by Mao Zedong himself. This radical movement originated from Mao's boundless optimism and his eagerness to transform China's backward condition following the successful consolidation of the Soviet-style system. While the de-Stalinization policy of the 20th Congress of the CPSU provided an opening for China to pursue a unique path of socialist development, the Great Leap Forward did not commence in 1956. At that time, Mao's radical economic plans faced opposition from the more rational factions led by Zhou Enlai and the technical caution of Soviet experts, leading the 8th Congress of the CCP to confirm a more prudent developmental policy.

Once the Anti-Rightist Movement concluded and the 8th Congress's moderate approach was effectively abandoned, Mao gained the political latitude to focus on extreme economic mobilization. Around this time, Mao's ambitions grew significantly, fueled by his shifting role within the international communist movement. The wave of post-totalitarian transition triggered by Stalin's death had brought intense turmoil to the Eastern Bloc, and Mao's role in stabilizing the alliance significantly enhanced his prestige among European communist parties. His experience at the 1957 Moscow Conference convinced him that, in terms of personal charisma and ideological purity, he was more qualified than Khrushchev to lead the international movement. The primary obstacles to his ascendancy were China's lack of economic and military parity with the superpowers and the absence of a distinct "Chinese model." A successful Great Leap Forward would have effectively removed these obstacles, providing the material and theoretical foundation for Mao's leadership of the communist camp (Shen & Xia, 2015).

At the Moscow Conference, Nikita Khrushchev proposed catching up with the United States within 15 years; in response, Mao suggested China would surpass the United Kingdom in the same timeframe, though his true ambition was to eclipse the Soviet Union itself. Under the guidance of these hyperbolic objectives, Mao set his totalitarian machinery in motion, initiating a nationwide mobilization campaign for economic development (Lin, 2008).

A prevailing view suggests that during the Great Leap Forward, China's path deviated significantly from the Soviet model. While institutional and policy differences certainly existed, a comparison based on the core mechanics of the Soviet-style system reveals that China's framework during this period did not represent a liberalization or a fundamental innovation. Economically, China's system functioned as a mobilization economy, closely resembling the Soviet "War Communism" model (Montias, 1970; Bernstein, 2010). Politically, the use of deep, large-scale mobilization to achieve state goals is a hallmark of Soviet-style totalitarianism rather than a departure from it. As Teiwes (2000) pointed out, the movement featured a "poorly organized decentralization" that hindered central planning coordination. However, this was not a weakening of political control, but rather a strategic bypass of the central state bureaucracy. By delegating administrative powers to local cadres, Mao aimed to

dismantle the "rational" resistance of the central planning apparatus, thereby establishing a more direct and unconstrained mobilization mechanism.

In fact, through this movement, state power expanded to its absolute limit. The establishment of the People's Communes, characterized by the "integration of government and society", allowed the state to effectively absorb the last vestiges of private life and economic autonomy (Gao, 1998). In August 1959, in response to Peng Dehuai's criticism of the movement at the Lushan Conference, Mao launched a repression of "right-opportunists," purging those who dared to voice dissenting opinions. By silencing the elite opposition, mobilizing the peasantry into military-style communes, and seizing total control over resources, China's Soviet-style totalitarian system reached its zenith.

2.1.4 The Great Famine, Strategic Unloading, and the Escalation of Mao–Liu Conflict, 1961-1965

The Great Famine was a direct consequence of Mao's Great Leap Forward. This unprecedented catastrophe in human history compelled Mao Zedong to terminate the movement in January 1961 and initiate adjustments to the national economy. From a systemic perspective, the Great Leap Forward represented a phase of "overloading": the leadership attempted to extract resources from society far beyond its endurance through extreme administrative pressure. To rescue the regime from the brink of collapse, the CCP leadership had no choice but to implement a "strategic unloading" by comprehensively revising the radical policies of the Great Leap Forward. This unloading involved a temporary retreat of state power from certain social and economic spheres, necessitating measures associated with weakening totalitarianism.

This round of weakening totalitarianism differed from the first attempt in 1956. It was driven not by formal policy guidelines, but by the urgent need to address specific domestic crises and ease the dire situation within the country. As part of this effort, censorship was relaxed, and the regime began rehabilitating individuals persecuted in previous political movements. Additionally, the Party tacitly allowed spontaneous agricultural reforms like the Household Responsibility System (包产到户).

Throughout late 1961 and the first half of 1962, the CCP notably refrained from launching any political movements for nearly a year. Through this "unloading," the system managed to regain its breath after a period of violent upheaval.

Mao Zedong was well aware of his significant failure during the Great Leap Forward. While he could accept the practical negation of his policies, he could not tolerate any questioning of his authority. He feared that a prolonged period of "unloading" would fundamentally alter the nature of the regime and threaten his historical legacy. Two incidents particularly troubled him. First, at the "Seven Thousand Cadres Conference" in January 1962, Liu Shaoqi subtly criticized the Great Leap Forward and Mao himself, gaining support from many high- and mid-level officials. Under pressure, Mao was compelled to engage in self-criticism. The only dissenting voice was Lin Biao, who attributed the difficulties to cadres failing to follow Mao's directives—a speech Mao deeply appreciated as it signaled his growing dissatisfaction with Liu and his supporters (Zhang, 2006). Second, in July 1962, Liu and Mao engaged in a heated argument over the Household Responsibility System. Liu told Mao, "So many people have starved to death. History will record this under both your name and mine. People eating people will be documented!" From Mao's perspective, this was an ominous warning that his legacy would be subjected to a Khrushchev-style "secret report" after his death (Gao, 2000).

Starting from the second half of 1962, Mao re-emphasized class struggle, denouncing the "unloading" measures as "revisionism" and "capitalist restoration," thereby terminating this strategic retreat. Faced with Mao's ideological justifications, Liu had no choice but to concede. Over the following two years, although Mao held the highest authority, his will was not always fully implemented, while Liu's prestige as the designated successor continued to grow. Tensions between the two deepened. By December 1964, Mao began openly accusing Liu and resolved to purge him and his potential supporters.

Mao realized that to completely eradicate Liu's influence, this purge would need to match the scale of Stalin's Great Purge of the 1930s. He made thorough preparations aimed at one goal: strengthening his absolute control over the Party and the state. First, he solidified control over the "apparatus of violence," such as the military and police, by courting Lin Biao and elevating the military's role in political life. Second, in

coordination with Lin, he unleashed the propaganda machine to promote an unprecedented personality cult. Third, with Jiang Qing's help, he organized theorists to construct an ideological discourse for the purge, creating an intense atmosphere of class struggle to reinforce ideological control.

The remaining key question is: in what way will this purge be conducted?

2.1.5 Maoist Great Purge and Hyper-mobilization Totalitarianism, 1966-1969

Regardless of how Mao Zedong later defined the political purposes and significance of the so-called "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution," at its inception, his aims appeared relatively clear, primarily involving two objectives. One was to purge the Liu Shaoqi faction and its potential allies, thereby re-establishing Mao's absolute control over the party. This was the explicit, short-term, and practical goal, falling within Mao's own framework of "anti-revisionism" and the "struggle-criticism" phase. The other objective was to prevent the emergence of another Liu Shaoqi-like figure. This was the vague, long-term, and idealistic goal, characterized as "preventing revisionism" and "reform."

To purge senior leaders within the party, Mao faced three primary options. The first approach, which he had consistently used since the establishment of the PRC, involved employing normal party procedures to criticize and charge his opponents—often accusing them of forming an "anti-party group." This method typically targeted a minority and required Mao to maintain a fundamental level of control over the party apparatus and the support of the majority in formal meetings. However, Mao was aware that he lacked such majority support at the time, as evidenced by the tensions at the 7,000-People Conference. Even when using his "salami tactics" (dividing the bamboo shoot), the risk of failure remained substantial.

The second approach, resembling the methods used by Stalin during the Great Purge and by Mao during the Yan'an Rectification Movement, involved establishing or reorganizing a relatively independent institution (Gao, 2018). This body would report directly to the top leader and wield coercive powers for ideological indoctrination, arrests, and interrogations. Alternatively, intelligence or security agencies could carry

out these actions directly. This approach fulfilled Mao's need to seek support outside the formal party bureaucracy and seemed feasible. However, Mao had not used this method since 1942, and Stalin's Great Purge had already been heavily discredited within the communist bloc, making it difficult to justify politically.

The first two methods did not require mobilizing the masses. In contrast, the third method mirrored the approach used in the 1957 rectification campaign, where the masses were mobilized to criticize the party bureaucracy. It effectively leveraged Mao Zedong's charismatic leadership and his ideological dominance. However, there was little historical precedent for a supreme leader to mobilize the masses to overthrow a large number of party leaders. Moreover, if the movement's target was the majority of the bureaucracy, the question arose: who would mobilize such a movement? Additionally, as seen in 1957, there was a risk that mass movements could spiral out of control. If the bureaucrats were overthrown, who would be capable of restoring control?

Mao ultimately opted for mass mobilization as the primary method while utilizing the first two as complementary measures to maximize his strategic advantages. At the beginning of the Great Purge in May 1966, before his true intentions were revealed, he initially used conventional methods to charge Peng Zhen, Lu Dingyi, Luo Ruiqing, and Yang Shangkun with forming an "anti-party group." This served as a testing ground and effectively eroded the influence of the Liu Shaoqi faction. At this point, Mao also formed the Central Cultural Revolution Group as a dedicated body for the purge, led de facto by his wife, Jiang Qing.

Mao then allowed Liu and Deng to initiate the "Work Teams" (which resembled a new Anti-Rightist Movement), exacerbating the contradictions between the bureaucracy and the students (Yang, 2021). Subsequently, Mao disclosed the true target—Liu Shaoqi—and personally mobilized the previously suppressed Red Guard movement. Lin Biao then succeeded Liu as the official successor.

In October 1966, Mao directed the movement toward the ruling apparatus at all levels, calling on the masses to "rebel and seize power." In January 1967, he instructed the military to intervene in the nationwide "seize power" movement. After toppling the incumbents, Mao mandated the establishment of Revolutionary Committees with a

"three-way combination" consisting of representatives from revolutionary cadres, mass organizations, and local garrison troops. This was aimed at restructuring grassroots governance. In the process, factionalism within mass organizations escalated into armed conflict (武斗). In certain regions, Mao temporarily lost control.

However, once Mao achieved his basic objectives, he ordered the suppression of mass movements to restore order. In July 1968, Mao terminated the student Red Guard movement, and the mass rebellion quickly receded from the political stage. In October 1968, Liu Shaoqi was branded a "traitor, spy, and capitalist roader" and permanently expelled from the Party. Mao's purging objectives were largely achieved. Subsequently, he initiated the "Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement," dispersing the students he had already utilized.

In April 1969, the CCP convened the Ninth National Congress to codify the outcomes of the purge, leading to a new bureaucracy dominated by military personnel (Gao, 2014). Mao's strategy was a sequence of testing opponents through conventional means, orchestrating conflicts between the masses and the bureaucracy, launching a direct assault through mass movements, and finally utilizing the military to fill the power vacuum and restore order.

The phenomenon of Mao's hyper-mobilization totalitarianism is unprecedented and largely irreplacable. Its realization is contingent upon extreme centralization, radical ideological control, charismatic authority, and superior political acumen. Even then, ensuring that participation remains within the leader's control is extraordinarily difficult. Therefore, hyper-mobilization totalitarianism is not merely a sub-type of totalitarianism; it is a unique state that emerged during Mao's attempt to reshape the system.

When the period of hyper-mobilization concluded, the system reverted to a conventional state. This reshaped system did not differ significantly in structure from its predecessor. However, the radicalized ideology was often at odds with routine governance, and the stability of the new bureaucracy remained unproven, posing substantial risks to the regime.

Notably, unlike Stalinist purges, Mao subjected most officials to criticism and abuse rather than immediate execution, leaving room to potentially reinstate some cadres in

the future. This characteristic distinctly shaped the subsequent evolution of the system (Walder, 2016). Furthermore, although the primary targets were bureaucrats, the most tragic victims remained those individuals historically labeled as "class enemies" (Su, 2011).

2.1.6 Unfinishable Purge and the Decay of Totalitarianism, 1969-1976

In the context of Mao Zedong's political maneuvers, has the extensive purge reached its conclusion with the Ninth Congress? Evidence of deep internal conflict within Mao himself can be discerned from both his discourse and actions. Following the achievement of his immediate objective in launching the Cultural Revolution—eradicating the influence of the Liu Shaoqi faction—the realization of the long-term goal of preventing the emergence of new figures akin to Liu Shaoqi (or Khrushchev) remained ambiguous and uncertain for Mao. However, the situation swiftly became clearer.

At the Ninth Congress, unprecedentedly, Lin Biao's successor status was enshrined in the party constitution, and within the new leadership structure, the Lin Biao faction's influence held a certain advantage over the Jiang Qing faction. Yet, Lin Biao was acutely aware that he was merely a pawn enlisted by Mao Zedong to eliminate Liu Shaoqi. His position as Mao's heir was far from secure. To safeguard his ascent to the highest echelons of power, Lin Biao needed to undermine his political adversaries and consolidate his political advantage. From Mao's perspective, these actions appeared to have the taint of "usurping authority" (Gao, 2006). At the Second Plenary Session of the Ninth Central Committee convened in August 1970, conflicts erupted between the Lin Biao faction and the Jiang Qing faction. Mao decided to suppress the Lin Biao faction. Lin Biao adopted a defiant stance, refusing to submit a written self-critique. The tensions between the two escalated further, prompting Mao Zedong to prepare for the complete downfall of Lin Biao. Ultimately, on September 13th, Lin Biao fled to the Soviet Union by plane. The aircraft crashed in the Mongolian Wendoerhan region, resulting in the deaths of Lin Biao, his wife, and son. Post-event, Mao learned that Lin Biao's son, Lin Ligu, had orchestrated an assassination attempt on him. The failure

of this assassination may have been a direct impetus for Lin Biao's decision to flee to the Soviet Union (Yang, 2021).

The Lin Biao incident dealt a severe blow to Mao Zedong personally, as well as to the Cultural Revolution and the authoritarian system. Mao's health rapidly deteriorated, and his spirits waned significantly. Nevertheless, he managed to stabilize the political situation after the crisis triggered by the Lin Biao affair through a series of concessions and adjustments. Firstly, he purged members of the Lin Biao faction and suppressed the influence of the People's Liberation Army. Secondly, following the Lin Biao incident, Zhou Enlai smoothly ascended to the position of the second most prominent figure, forcing Mao to rely more heavily on Zhou Enlai. However, Mao never fully trusted Zhou and later initiated criticism against him. Thirdly, Mao released a significant number of veteran cadres who had been sidelined in the previous purge, with Deng Xiaoping being a notable representative. Fourthly, he promoted cadres or heroic figures who, in Mao's view, had performed exceptionally during the Cultural Revolution, including Wang Hongwen, Hua Guofeng, Wu De, Chen Yonggui and others (Shi & Li, 2008; Macfarquhar & Schoenhals, 2008).

In Mao Zedong's perspective, although Jiang Qing, Zhang Chunqiao, and Wang Hongwen would not disavow Mao or the Cultural Revolution, their prestige and capabilities were insufficient to control the situation. Therefore, in the new round of selecting successors, Deng Xiaoping emerged victorious, gaining the authority to oversee daily affairs and initiating an overhaul. However, when Mao requested Deng to lead a resolution to affirm the Cultural Revolution, Deng refused (Shi & Li, 2008). Mao Zedong once again realized that his chosen successor might negate his legacy after his death, leading to the subsequent downfall of Deng Xiaoping. Ultimately, Mao chose the relatively mediocre Hua Guofeng as his successor in April 1976. The rationale behind this decision lay in Hua Guofeng's perceived loyalty, honesty, and his ability to be accepted by various political factions (Shi, 2020). Five months later, Mao Zedong passed away.

Regardless of what transpired after Mao's death, it can be asserted that Mao Zedong's plan during this stage to "prevent new revisionism" completely failed. With successive purges of Mao's potential successors, the entire totalitarian system underwent a gradual process of institutional decay after the Lin Biao incident. Its primary

manifestation was the decay of the totalitarian system, accompanied by the development of some extra-systemic social forces.

On the ideological front, incessant purges led to an increasing disparity between the radical Cultural Revolution ideology and reality. Thoughts questioning and criticizing the Cultural Revolution, and even the totalitarian system, began to sprout and develop. To expose the crimes of the Lin Biao faction, Mao Zedong publicly disclosed Lin Ligu's coup manifesto, "Notes on the 571 Project." Its sharp criticism of Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution served as an enlightening text for many (Hu, 2016). Of course, public criticism remained limited to very few cases. However, the control exerted by totalitarian ideology over people's thinking undoubtedly weakened.

Even as Mao's health deteriorated after the Lin Biao incident, he still maintained absolute leadership over the party during this stage. However, as the pillar and symbolic representation of the entire totalitarian system, Mao Zedong's image as an all-powerful figure during the era of hyper-mobilization of totalitarianism could no longer be sustained, given his declining health and the impact of multiple political purges.

In the mobilization dimension, the purges during this period no longer employed the hyper-mobilization methods but reverted to traditional organizational forms and institutional mobilization. Due to the lingering effects of hyper-mobilization and accumulated social contradictions from previous movements, there was a resurgence of "rebellious movements" in the political movements of this stage. For instance, in the "Criticism of Lin Biao and Confucius" campaign, which aimed to counter the trend of rejecting the Cultural Revolution that emerged after the Lin Biao incident, a new wave of rebellions emerged. At this point, Mao Zedong, unwilling to initiate large-scale purges involving widespread social participation, had to introduce measures to suppress the rebellious movements, leading to a hasty conclusion of the "Criticism of Lin Biao and Confucius" campaign (Shi & Li, 2008).

Not only did the weakening of ideology and Mao's personal authority contribute to this institutional decay, but the unstable state of the bureaucratic system and the capricious nature of policies also affected the system's control over the populace. The extremely high level of centralization during the era of hyper-mobilization of

totalitarianism became challenging to sustain, resulting in a low degree of pluralism at the economic, cultural, and social levels. Phenomena such as de-collectivization were observed in several provinces, including Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Guangdong, and Sichuan. Due to its unique geographical features, many areas in Guangdong even witnessed the emergence of sizable free markets. After the Lin Biao incident, loopholes appeared in the stringent household registration management system in many regions, enabling people with rural household registrations to reside in urban areas, making it difficult to fully enforce restrictions on free migration (Dikötter, 2016). Cultural and social pluralism was notably reflected in the student groups compelled to "go to the mountains and countryside." Partially liberated from systemic constraints in urban areas, many educated youths began engaging in relatively independent reading and contemplation. In certain regions, this led to the formation of "intellectual groups," where individuals shared books, exchanged experiences, and discussed issues (Yin, 2009).

The consequences of this institutional decay during this period were prominently demonstrated in the Tiananmen Square protests that erupted on April 5, 1976. Differing from the mass rebellions under the hyper-mobilization of totalitarianism, this time witnessed a spontaneous and large-scale political protest by the masses. While Mao Zedong decided to suppress the movement, he took more severe measures against Deng Xiaoping, who had already faced criticism, revoking all of Deng's positions and expanding the "Criticize Deng, Counterattack Rightist Overturn Mistaken Verdicts Campaign."

By this juncture, the pressures for de-totalitarianization within the Chinese system had accumulated to a critical level. The process of institutional decay had left the state apparatus fragile and fragmented, while the elite, having endured successive and unpredictable purges, were increasingly disillusioned with the radical totalitarian logic. Simultaneously, the first sprouts of independent social forces were emerging within the cracks of systemic control, fueled by an ideological crisis that had eroded the regime's moral authority. When Mao Zedong, the ultimate guardian and architect of this system, passed away in September 1976, the fundamental question emerged: could such a strained and decaying system be sustained? Given the collapse of ideological consensus and the deep-seated grievances among the elite and society alike,

the continuation of the orthodox totalitarian path appeared nearly impossible. The stage was set for a fundamental transformation.

2.2 The Characteristics of Chinese Totalitarian Regime

Following the longitudinal historical review of the evolution of Chinese totalitarianism, we can now refine its core characteristics through a comparative international lens. These features not only define the unique face of Maoist totalitarianism but also serve as macro-structural variables that played a critical role in shaping the eventual transition from a totalitarian system to the era of reform. The systemic features formed through this specific historical trajectory determined that China's evolutionary logic, when faced with transitional pressures, would differ fundamentally from that of the Soviet Union and Eastern European states.

From the perspective of global totalitarian studies, the primary characteristic of the Chinese system is its strong endogenous origins and strategic autonomy. Unlike the Eastern Bloc satellite states, where totalitarianism was an "imported product" imposed by the Soviet Red Army, the Chinese system was a self-generated product of a native revolution. This endogeneity granted the CCP immense nationalistic legitimacy and maintained its independent status within the socialist camp. Following the Sino-Soviet split, the Soviet Union transitioned from a "Big Brother" to a direct antagonist, severing the bureaucratic constraints of the Soviet model and pushing the Chinese system into an unrestricted, radicalized state. Even when China initiated a rapprochement with the U.S. during the late Cultural Revolution for Realpolitik reasons, the system remained ideologically closed and hermetic.

Regarding its mobilization patterns, the Chinese system exhibited extraordinary mobilization intensity. While the Soviet Union under Stalin utilized state power for rapid industrialization, the Great Leap Forward in China was far more radical, attempting to bypass historical stages by overextending society's physical and psychological endurance. The Cultural Revolution, however, presented a unique

mobilization logic: unlike movements such as the Great Leap Forward, which aimed at resource extraction, the Cultural Revolution was a manifestation of pure power struggle. Mao uniquely pioneered a model where the leader directly mobilized the masses to dismantle his own bureaucratic apparatus from the bottom up, with the core objective of eradicating political rivals and absolutely consolidating his personal authority. This "artificial destruction" of the party-state machinery for the sake of power manoeuvres was a hallmark of the Cultural Revolution that set it apart from movements in other communist states.

In terms of leadership, this unique logic was rooted in Mao Zedong's exceptional status. In the typology of totalitarian leaders, Mao was a rare hybrid: he was both the founder of the regime and its chief disruptor. Throughout the revolutionary struggle, he established a charismatic leadership that was further deified after 1949. During the early Cultural Revolution, his authority reached a zenith where he became not just the head of state but the sole representative of ideological truth. In Soviet history, Lenin was the revolutionary founder, and Stalin was the bureaucratic builder; Mao, uniquely, played both roles during the Cultural Revolution—using his status as the "Revolutionary Teacher" to assault the "Bureaucratic Builder" persona he had previously occupied to cleanse the bureaucracy of those who threatened his power.

Regarding ideology, the Chinese system was characterized by extreme radicalization and decoupling. Mao's theory of "Continued Revolution under the Dictatorship of the Proletariat" pushed class struggle to a state of permanence. This radicalization served less as a tool for administration and more as a lethal weapon for the leader's power struggles. As movements progressed, this radical discourse became increasingly detached from economic and social realities. While some Eastern European states transitioned into "Real Socialism" in the post-Stalin era—demanding only outward compliance—China continued to enforce a dogmatic revolutionary ideal. This decoupling reached its peak after the Lin Biao incident, manifesting as a widespread crisis of faith.

Regarding the dimension of pluralism, the Chinese system was characterized by extreme homogeneity for most of its history, with social spaces entirely suppressed through mass campaigns. The societal sprouts in China had a unique dynamic: they originated from the system's own "internal wounds." During the Cultural Revolution,

Mao's decision to batter his own bureaucratic apparatus for power struggle created a vacuum of administrative control; simultaneously, the severe decoupling of extreme ideology from harsh reality caused the regime to lose its basic explanatory power and persuasiveness. This dual fissure, created by the paralysis of control and the bankruptcy of ideology, facilitated the initial emergence of social forces during the late stage of the system—such as informal rural markets and clandestine reading groups. These spontaneous forces arising from institutional decay provided the social soil for the post-Mao transition.

3 Chapter 3 Balance of Top Power before the Transition

While political transitions are invariably shaped by the strategic actions of elites, such behaviours are not merely a series of idiosyncratic or stochastic choices made in isolation. Rather, they are structurally embedded decisions conditioned by pre-existing frameworks. The elite configuration inherited from the prior regime exerts a profound influence on the trajectory, tempo, and scope of the transition, effectively defining the strategic boundaries within which transition occurs. The Chinese experience underscores the primacy of elite composition before the transition in shaping post-totalitarian transition. In contrast to the Soviet Union, where the post-Stalinist elite consisted primarily of a consolidated class of 'purge survivors,' the Chinese top political elites were characterized by a fragmented tripartite structure. The specific 'structural location' of these elites relative to Mao and the regime became the primary determinant of their behavior, objectives, and relative power during the subsequent transition. To clarify the driving mechanisms of this transition, one must examine the internal tensions and asymmetrical resource distributions inherent in the elite power structure of the late Maoist era. Briefly, the main political players were divided into three factions: the Cultural Revolution faction, led by Jiang Qing; the moderate faction, and Deng Xiaoping. (Gao, 2007; Teiwes & Sun, 2007) This chapter seeks to trace the genealogical origins of this tripartite factional structure and examine its evolutionary trajectory. By conducting a structural deduction of the power dynamics following Mao's demise, we aim to delineate the structural constraints and strategic possibilities that shaped elite behaviour and power struggles in the subsequent transition. Ultimately, this analysis provides a macro-analytical framework for understanding the strategic choices made by political elites in the transition within the broader structural constraints of the era.

3.1 Post–Lin Biao Reconfiguration and the Formation of a Tripartite Elite Structure

The tripartite elite structure that characterized the late Maoist period did not emerge fully formed but was the cumulative outcome of successive reconfigurations of top leadership following the Lin Biao Incident. In the early stages of the Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong relied primarily on two structurally distinct elite groupings to advance his political objectives, each anchored in a different source of authority.

The first was the Cultural Revolution Group (CRG), led by Jiang Qing and composed of figures such as Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, and Wang Hongwen. Rather than emerging from the established Party–state hierarchy, this group originated in Mao’s effort to cultivate a new political force external to the traditional bureaucratic order. Its authority derived less from institutional seniority than from direct proximity to Mao’s revolutionary legitimacy. Most of its members possessed backgrounds in propaganda, cultural work, or mass mobilization, rather than in military command or administrative governance. Politically, the group defined itself through direct confrontation with the pre-Cultural Revolution political elite that had previously monopolized control over the Party–state apparatus, relying on continuous political struggle and mass participation as the primary means of displacing and neutralizing its rivals. Functionally, the CRG served as the principal executor of ideological campaigns, the coordinator of political purges, and the mobilizational engine of the upheavals of 1966–1969.

The second grouping coalesced around Lin Biao within the military establishment. Its rise was rooted in the expanding political role of the People’s Liberation Army throughout the 1950s and early 1960s and was reinforced by Mao’s reliance on military authority to contain the escalating disorder of the early Cultural Revolution. The core figures of this grouping—senior commanders such as Huang Yongsheng, Wu Faxian, Li Zuopeng, and Qiu Huizuo—were veteran military leaders whose power rested on entrenched command networks and institutional legitimacy within the PLA. Politically, this elite configuration emphasized discipline, hierarchy, and organizational control, promoting the military as the stabilizing force capable of temporarily substituting for a paralysed civilian bureaucracy. Its primary functions

included suppressing factional violence, supervising revolutionary committees, and reconstructing basic administrative order (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals, 2008).

Although these two groupings embodied contrasting sources of authority—ideological mobilization versus organizational command—both were indispensable to Mao's strategy during the initial phase of the Cultural Revolution. At the Ninth Party Congress, Mao institutionalized this provisional arrangement beneath his own authority, granting greater weight to the military leadership, which had borne primary responsibility for restoring order, while preserving the Cultural Revolution Group as a political counterweight against excessive military consolidation. With the traditional Party bureaucracy largely neutralized, however, this configuration proved inherently unstable. The two groupings entered an increasingly zero-sum struggle over the post-purge political order, a contest that Mao initially sought to manage through a precarious strategy of balance.

This balance unravelled at the 1970 Lushan Conference, where latent tensions crystallized into a fundamental conflict over the constitutional structure of the state. Lin Biao's supporters' attempt to restore the post of State Chairman was interpreted by Mao as an effort to formalize succession and institutionalize military dominance. Mao responded with a decisive strategic pivot, purging key intermediaries aligned with Lin and initiating a campaign of fragmentation within the military leadership. The ensuing confrontation culminated in the September 13 Incident of 1971, when the Lin Biao group collapsed amid allegations of a failed coup attempt. Lin's death and the subsequent purge of the military high command not only eliminated a major pillar of elite power but also precipitated a profound legitimacy crisis for the regime.

Although Jiang Qing's faction prevailed in the immediate power struggle following the Lin Biao Incident, it lacked the organizational capacity and administrative reach necessary to sustain the operation of the totalitarian system as a whole. The collapse of the military leadership and the ensuing governance crisis forced Mao Zedong to recalibrate his political strategy. Rather than relying exclusively on the Cultural Revolution faction, Mao gradually softened his stance toward previously purged veteran revolutionaries, facilitating their selective rehabilitation. At the same time, he promoted younger cadres loyal to the Cultural Revolution to fill key vacancies, producing a provisional balance between the radical executors of the movement and

the rehabilitated administrative elites. This arrangement also served to reopen the question of political succession under conditions of heightened uncertainty. The resulting configuration was institutionalized through personnel appointments at the Tenth Party Congress, marking the initial consolidation of a tripartite elite structure beneath Mao (Teiwes & Sun, 2007, p. 103).

In the post-Lin Biao period, the Cultural Revolution faction—centred on Jiang Qing, Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, and Wang Hongwen—occupied a position of symbolic and ideological centrality. Its influence rested on privileged access to Mao's authority and control over propaganda and political discourse, enabling it to act as the principal enforcer of revolutionary orthodoxy. Yet this dominance was structurally fragile. Lacking independent organizational bases within the provincial bureaucracy or the military command, the faction's power remained highly contingent on continued political mobilization and Mao's personal endorsement.

The same governance crisis that constrained the Cultural Revolution faction also created the conditions for the functional return of veteran revolutionary elites. Under Zhou Enlai's coordination, large numbers of previously purged cadres were rehabilitated to restore minimal administrative capacity, while Ye Jianying assumed responsibility for stabilizing the decapitated military hierarchy through the day-to-day management of the Central Military Commission. The decisive moment in this process was the 1973 reinstatement of Deng Xiaoping, whose combined military credentials and administrative authority allowed the veteran group to regain effective control over key state institutions. Alongside figures such as Li Xiannian and Chen Xilian, these rehabilitated elites reconstituted a latent but resilient power base grounded in bureaucratic expertise, organizational networks, and the loyalty of the professional officer corps and technocratic apparatus.

The repeated instability generated by earlier power struggles between the Lin Biao clique and the Cultural Revolution faction exposed the structural limits of a two-polar elite configuration. Rather than producing a controllable succession order, such arrangements repeatedly intensified factional confrontation and systemic uncertainty. In response to these constraints, Mao Zedong increasingly relied on a group of intermediary figures positioned between the radical Cultural Revolution faction and the rehabilitated veterans. This emerging stratum—later retrospectively identified as

the “Moderates”—occupied a distinctive structural location: its members were neither primary victims of the early Cultural Revolution purges, which insulated them from an overriding drive for retribution, nor were they radical instigators of violent power seizures, which made them functionally compatible with the routine operations of the state bureaucracy.

Hua Guofeng’s rapid ascent exemplified this intermediary role. Having built a reputation in Hunan for administrative steadiness and personal loyalty, Hua was praised by Mao as an “honest man.” Following the leadership vacuum created after 1971, he was transferred to the central leadership to oversee agriculture and later the Ministry of Public Security. Hua’s relationship to the Cultural Revolution was characterized by pragmatic compliance rather than ideological leadership: he implemented the movement’s later institutionalized practices without becoming deeply embedded in the Cultural Revolution faction’s internal struggles. From Mao’s perspective, Hua’s value lay in his relative factional ambiguity, which allowed him to mediate between competing elite groups while preserving minimal administrative continuity. Alongside Hua, other figures such as Ji Dengkui, Li Desheng, and Wang Dongxing assumed key roles in personnel management, military balancing, and regime security. Ji Dengkui was advanced for his pragmatic handling of rural affairs; Li Desheng helped dilute residual Lin Biao-era influence within the military; and Wang Dongxing, as commander of the Central Guard Unit, formed the core of Mao’s late-stage personal security apparatus.

The Tenth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 1973 marked the institutional consolidation of this tripartite elite configuration. The Cultural Revolution faction secured its ideological stronghold through Wang Hongwen’s unprecedented elevation to the position of third-ranking Vice Chairman and the continued presence of Cultural Revolution Group members in the Politburo. The veteran revolutionaries, in turn, registered their functional return through the collective re-election of rehabilitated cadres—including Deng Xiaoping—to the Central Committee. Meanwhile, the intermediary group coalesced into a distinct administrative stratum, as figures such as Hua Guofeng, Wu De, and Ji Dengkui were elevated to the Politburo to fill the structural vacuum left by the Lin Biao Incident.

Within the power configuration that took shape following the 1973 Tenth Party Congress, the distribution of strength among the three elite groupings was marked by profound structural asymmetry. The Cultural Revolution faction, as the primary executors of the ongoing movement, possessed a near-monopoly over ideological resources and agenda-setting power. Their cohesion derived from continued political mobilization and privileged access to Mao's personal authority rather than from organizational depth. This rendered their dominance structurally fragile: while influential in propaganda and mass mobilization, they lacked durable support within the provincial bureaucracies and the military command. The "floating" character of their power meant that internal stability depended heavily on political opportunity and continued endorsement from the apex of authority, rather than institutional entrenchment. As a result, efforts toward administrative normalization or bureaucratic stabilization were perceived as direct threats to their positional survival.

In contrast, the Veteran Revolutionaries at this stage did not yet constitute a consolidated political bloc. They remained a collection of rehabilitated former targets navigating a slow and uncertain process of recovery. The organizational networks that had once underpinned their authority had been severely dismantled by years of purges, leaving their influence fragmented and largely latent. Their residual strength rested primarily on professional expertise, institutional memory, and reputational capital rather than on immediate command over political resources. Between the Cultural Revolution faction as executors and the veterans as former targets, there persisted a deep and irreconcilable antagonism rooted in the experience of political violence rather than in policy disagreement. Constrained by their precarious status in the early 1970s, the veterans adopted a cautious and defensive posture, incrementally reintegrating administrative and military resources while remaining subject to persistent political suspicion.

The Moderate group—or the administrative upstarts—occupied the most precarious position within this triadic structure. Although they held high-ranking titles within the Central Committee and the State Council to fill the leadership vacuum, they lacked internal cohesion, shared political experience, or an independent organizational base. Drawn from heterogeneous backgrounds spanning provincial administration, the military, and security services, these cadres did not form a self-conscious "third force."

Their authority was fundamentally delegated and mediatory, contingent on Mao's continued confidence and their utility as functional intermediaries. Structurally fragmented, they were caught in a dual dependency: adherence to the Cultural Revolution faction's political line was necessary to maintain revolutionary legitimacy, while reliance on the veterans' technical expertise was indispensable to prevent administrative breakdown. Survival within this unstable triadic arrangement thus depended less on collective strategy than on individual manoeuvring within narrow structural constraints.

3.2 Succession Engineering and the Reconfiguration of Elite Alignments

From the Tenth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party until Mao Zedong's death, elite politics increasingly revolved around the question of supreme leadership succession. Yet the evolution of factional dynamics during this period cannot be reduced to a conventional rivalry among competing groups. Instead, it unfolded within a political landscape increasingly constrained by Mao's late-stage succession logic and his declining capacity to enforce it. In Mao's final years, this logic was governed by two non-negotiable conditions. First, no potential successor could be allowed to repudiate Mao himself or the legacy of the Cultural Revolution. Second, political order had to be maintained at two interconnected levels: the internal hierarchy of Party authority and the continued survival of one-party rule. Without such order, Mao understood, any effort to safeguard his personal and political legacy would collapse rapidly.

The Cultural Revolution faction initially appeared to satisfy Mao's first condition. Following the Tenth Party Congress, Mao actively elevated its institutional standing, assigning Wang Hongwen responsibility for overseeing the Party's day-to-day operations and appointing both Wang and Zhang Chunqiao to the six-member Military Affairs Commission in an effort to consolidate influence over the armed forces. However, the subsequent performance of Wang Hongwen after his promotion to Vice Chairman exposed significant limitations. He proved unable to manage the complex demands of national administration and military coordination, displaying a reliance on

symbolic politics and personal style rather than strategic capacity. Mao's assessment of Zhang Chunqiao was more ambivalent but no less constrained. While Zhang remained a formidable ideologue and an uncompromising defender of Maoist orthodoxy, his deep isolation within both the Party bureaucracy and the PLA deprived him of the organizational base necessary for effective governance. As it became increasingly evident that the Cultural Revolution faction lacked the capacity to translate ideological loyalty into administrative order, Mao was forced to reassess its viability as a succession vehicle and to turn his attention toward alternative configurations within the elite.

In May 1975, Mao authorized Deng Xiaoping to assume Wang Hongwen's responsibilities in overseeing the Party's day-to-day operations and to implement a limited program of "rectification" aimed at alleviating the administrative chaos produced by the Cultural Revolution. Deng's return was accompanied by the cooperation of officials associated with the moderate administrative stratum, who supported these efforts as a means of restoring basic state functionality (Li, 2012). During this period, Jiang Qing's group reacted with pronounced hostility to Deng's rehabilitation, interpreting it as a direct challenge to the political legitimacy of the Cultural Revolution. Their resistance prompted Mao to issue a series of restrained criticisms toward the Cultural Revolution faction. In retrospect, these remarks were later incorporated into narratives portraying Mao's declining confidence in that group, although at the time they reflected tactical adjustments rather than a definitive realignment of succession preferences (Gao, 2007).

While Deng proved effective in restoring administrative order, his political rehabilitation remained fundamentally conditional. Mao's acceptance of Deng's return was premised on the assumption that functional governance could be restored without reopening the question of the Cultural Revolution's political legitimacy. Deng's refusal to publicly affirm the movement as a historically justified revolutionary undertaking, therefore placed him in direct tension with Mao's core political constraint. Once this incompatibility became explicit, Deng's administrative effectiveness was no longer sufficient to secure his position. The Tiananmen Incident of April 1976 served as a critical catalyst rather than an underlying cause, precipitating Deng's removal and

thereby demonstrating the decisive role of ideological compliance in determining the limits of late Maoist rehabilitation.

By the mid-1970s, Mao Zedong no longer possessed the political capacity he had exercised even a few years earlier. Repeated failures in managing elite succession, combined with severe physical deterioration, substantially constrained his ability to arbitrate factional conflict or impose durable political arrangements. First-hand accounts from Mao's personal physicians and nursing staff document a pronounced decline in his cognitive and bodily functions in the final stage of his life, limiting both the scope and intensity of his political intervention.(see Zhang, 1989, p.31; Li, 1994) At the same time, public resentment toward the Cultural Revolution faction, and Mao himself—most visibly expressed in the April Fifth Tiananmen Incident—had reached an unprecedented level, further narrowing the available political space. Under these compounded constraints, Mao increasingly retreated from attempts to shape China's long-term posthumous trajectory and instead confined his political objectives to the preservation of two immediate bottom lines within a sharply limited temporal horizon (Han, 2015).

It was within this contracted strategic space that Hua Guofeng emerged as a viable political solution. Mao's recorded assessments of Hua throughout the early and mid-1970s suggest not admiration, but cautious acceptance. His evaluations were consistently restrained, describing Hua as "reliable," "honest," "practical," and "competent," in marked contrast to the superlative praise he had previously bestowed on Lin Biao as a "brilliant marshal" or on Deng Xiaoping as a "rare talent." In Mao's calculus, Hua combined sufficient administrative experience with the conspicuous absence of an independent power base. His loyalty appeared dependable, his political style unassertive, and his personal ambition limited. These characteristics rendered him broadly acceptable across competing elite constituencies and capable of maintaining a temporary balance between the Cultural Revolution faction and the veteran revolutionaries. It was precisely this low-risk profile—rather than visionary leadership—that positioned Hua as a short-term custodian capable of safeguarding Mao's minimal political constraints without introducing new uncertainties (Shi, 2020).

Two days after the suppression of the April Fifth Tiananmen Incident, Mao issued a decisive resolution to remove Deng Xiaoping from all Party and state positions and to

elevate Hua Guofeng to the posts of First Vice Chairman of the CPC Central Committee and Premier of the State Council. The creation of the singular title of “First Vice Chairman,” which departed from the long-standing practice of multiple vice chairmen of equal rank, established a clear hierarchical ordering within the leadership. Rather than constituting a comprehensive succession design, this institutional adjustment functioned as an immediate signal of authority and a provisional mechanism for stabilizing elite relations during Mao’s final months.

Mao Zedong’s own valedictory remarks provide direct evidence of the uncertainty and fragility surrounding his political legacy and succession arrangements in the final months of his life. On June 15, 1976, during a meeting with Ye Jianying and other central leaders, Mao stated:

It has long been said that reaching seventy years old is rare in life. I am now over eighty, and as one grows old, one naturally thinks about what comes after. There is a Chinese saying: “Wait until the coffin is closed before making a final judgment.” Although mine is not yet closed, it soon will be, and I think I can already make a judgment. I have done two major things in my life: First, I struggled with Chiang Kai-shek for decades, driving him out to a few small islands, and during the eight-year War of Resistance against Japan, I sent the Japanese back to their homeland. There are not many people who disagree with these deeds—only a few who chatter in my ear, simply urging me to recapture those islands early. The other thing, as you all know, is launching the ‘Cultural Revolution,’ which has fewer supporters and many opponents. These two things are not yet finished; this legacy must be passed to the next generation. How to hand it over? If it cannot be handed over peacefully, it will be amid turmoil; if not handled well, it may result in bloodshed and chaos. What will you do? Only Heaven knows. (Zhonggong Zhongyang Wenxian Yanjiushi, 2003, pp. 1781–1782)

This statement reveals Mao’s explicit recognition of the contested status of the Cultural Revolution and the profound uncertainty surrounding the transfer of his

political legacy. While he reaffirmed the historical significance of his revolutionary achievements, he simultaneously acknowledged that the Cultural Revolution commanded limited support and faced widespread opposition. More importantly, Mao openly articulated the risk that the handover of this legacy might not proceed peacefully and could instead give way to disorder, bloodshed, and political upheaval. At this juncture, Mao's remarks no longer reflected confidence in the durability of any long-term succession arrangement. Rather, they underscored the narrowing of his political horizon to the immediate problem of legacy transmission under conditions of heightened instability, reinforcing the interpretation that his late-stage political choices were governed by short-term risk containment rather than expectations of institutional continuity.

In assessing the post-succession balance of power among the three elite groupings, it is essential to distinguish between surface-level political signals and underlying structural realities, particularly with regard to the actual strength of the veteran revolutionary faction. Superficially, the veterans appeared to have been marginalized during the campaign to "Criticize Deng Xiaoping and Oppose the Right-Deviationist Verdict-Reversing Trend," which seemed to push them out of the immediate political core. Following Deng's removal, only the Cultural Revolution faction and the moderate administrative stratum remained formally active around Mao.

Beneath this appearance, however, the political influence of the Veteran Revolutionary faction continued to expand up to the launch of the "Criticize Deng" campaign and was largely preserved even in its aftermath. By this stage, Mao neither possessed the political energy nor demonstrated the inclination to initiate a comprehensive purge of the Veterans (Han, 2015). Deng Xiaoping's Party membership was retained, and leading veteran figures were subjected to temporary political sidelining rather than systematic elimination. Ye Jianying, who presided over the day-to-day work of the Central Military Commission, and Li Xiannian, a Vice Premier, were placed on medical leave, while other veteran revolutionaries—including Gu Mu, Xu Xiangqian, Nie Rongzhen, and Wang Zhen—continued to occupy key positions within the State Council and the military leadership. At the provincial level, veteran-aligned leaders such as Zhao Ziyang, Jiang Weiqing, and Bai Rubin remained in control of major Party committees. Although Chen Xilian, a figure

associated with the moderate group, temporarily replaced Ye Jianying in overseeing the routine operations of the Central Military Commission, his authority within the armed forces was comparatively shallow. The Standing Committee of the Central Military Commission continued to be dominated by veteran revolutionaries, allowing the faction to retain substantial influence over the People's Liberation Army and preserving a decisive structural advantage within the late Maoist power configuration (Ding, 2013).

Under Mao's still-commanding but visibly waning authority, the political equilibrium among the Cultural Revolution faction, the moderate group, and the Veteran Revolutionary faction settled into a condition of paralysis marked by profound fragility. The Cultural Revolution faction continued to occupy prominent formal positions and retained symbolic revolutionary capital, yet its fundamental weakness lay in institutional isolation. It neither controlled the military nor the security apparatus, nor did it command the core bureaucratic machinery required to convert ideological dominance into effective administrative authority. The moderate group clustered around Hua Guofeng gained institutional visibility as Mao's compromise solution but lacked the independent organizational depth necessary to dominate the system without the continued backing of the ultimate arbiter. The Veteran Revolutionary faction, by contrast, though politically sidelined after the April Fifth Tiananmen Incident, preserved substantial institutional memory—rooted in long-standing administrative and military experience—and retained dense professional networks within both the Party and the armed forces. This latent capacity positioned the Veterans as a reserve force poised to fill the vacuum created by Mao's impending absence.

Structurally, this phase witnessed a relative convergence in the strength of the Veterans and the Moderates, alongside a gradual erosion of the Cultural Revolution faction's position. Repeated rounds of political confrontation further entrenched hostility between the Cultural Revolution faction and the Veterans, rendering their antagonism increasingly irreconcilable. The Moderates, initially positioned by Mao as intermediaries within this unstable triad, were therefore compelled to reassess their orientation toward the two opposing poles. To understand how this recalibration unfolded, the following section focuses on three pivotal events and one key individual.

The first pivotal development was the “Rectification” initiated under Deng Xiaoping’s leadership, during which figures associated with the moderate group assumed an unusually active operational role and, in practice, aligned their administrative actions with the Veterans’ pragmatic agenda. This functional convergence was particularly evident in two domains. First, in the scientific and technical sectors, Hua Guofeng—then responsible for overseeing scientific work—provided critical administrative support for Hu Yaobang’s rectification of the Chinese Academy of Sciences. Hua endorsed the drafting of the “Outline of the Work Report of the Chinese Academy of Sciences” (《科学院工作汇报提纲》) and supported the appointment of professionals with “genuine talent and learning” to leadership positions. (Yu, 1998, p.172) By facilitating the correction of the radical practice of subordinating expertise entirely to political criteria, Hua’s actions produced outcomes consistent with the Veterans’ modernization-oriented priorities. Second, Hua Guofeng cooperated with Deng Xiaoping in administrative rectification in Hunan Province, where he concurrently held the post of First Party Secretary. In this setting, rectification measures emphasized the suppression of factional disruption, the normalization of production, and the reassertion of bureaucratic coordination. (Cheng & Xia, 2004, p.468) Taken together, these measures demonstrated a governing tendency to prioritize political stability and routine administration over renewed mass mobilization.

The second pivotal development occurred during the suppression of the April Fifth Tiananmen Incident and the subsequent “Campaign to Criticize Deng Xiaoping and Counter the Right-Deviationist Reversal of Verdicts.” Although the moderate group appeared to cooperate with the Cultural Revolution faction at the level of formal political execution, Hua utilized administrative mechanisms to constrain revolutionary mobilization. As the principal executor of the campaign, he resisted efforts by the Cultural Revolution faction to transform it into a mass movement aimed at a comprehensive purge of Veteran Revolutionaries within the Party and the military. In February and March 1976, Hua presided over the drafting of key central documents, notably Circular No. 4 [1976], which required that the campaign remain strictly under the “leadership of Party committees” and explicitly prohibited cross-regional networking, the formation of independent fighting groups, and the storming of

government organs. (Teiwes & Sun, 2007, p. 497). This institutional containment effectively functioned as a protective buffer for the Veteran Revolutionary faction.

The third pivotal event was Hua Guofeng's private meeting with Ye Jianying in July 1976. During this encounter, Hua displayed marked deference to Ye's military seniority, while Ye expressed approval of Hua's emphasis on political stability, economic recovery, and cautious personnel management. Ye further warned Hua of the "militia issue," drawing attention to the Gang of Four's efforts to expand and arm militia forces in Shanghai. Contemporary accounts indicate that Ye regarded the exchange positively (Xiong, 2008, p.6).

With respect to the first two developments, it remains difficult to determine whether the Moderates' differentiated patterns of cooperation with the two opposing factions reflected autonomous political preferences or strategic compliance with Mao's shifting intentions (Teiwes & Sun, 2007, p. 493). Nor does the third episode alone permit a definitive inference regarding Hua's political orientation, as similar gestures of respect may have been extended to Jiang Qing. Considered collectively, however, these three developments suggest a narrowing political distance between Hua Guofeng and the Veteran Revolutionary faction. While this convergence did not crystallize into an overt alliance during Mao's lifetime, it produced a tacit alignment around the shared imperatives of preserving political order and preventing a unilateral seizure of power by the Gang of Four.

The critical individual in this configuration was Wang Dongxing. As Director of the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and commander of the Central Guard Unit (the 8341 Special Regiment), Wang functioned as Mao's most trusted gatekeeper, deriving his authority from proximity to the supreme leader and control over the inner security of the leadership compound. Although Wang remained an executor of Mao's will, his relationship with Jiang Qing was marked by sustained tension, rooted in her repeated interference with security protocols and her perceived encroachment on professional command boundaries (Li, 1994). This personal estrangement carried broader structural implications. As a figure associated with the moderate group, Wang's hostility toward the Cultural Revolution faction signaled the latter's failure to penetrate the most critical layer of the regime's security apparatus.

Taken together, these three developments and the positioning of Wang Dongxing indicate that the moderate group maintained a markedly more functional and cooperative relationship with the Veteran Revolutionary faction than with the Cultural Revolution faction. Whether assessed in terms of shifting power relations or inter-group alignments, the political landscape in the final months of Mao's life was evolving in a direction increasingly unfavourable to the Cultural Revolution faction.

3.3 The Collapse of Mao-Centred Equilibrium and the Reordering of Elite Power

The three-faction structure analysed above was a delicate architecture designed by Mao, for Mao, and maintained exclusively through his personal authority. With his death, the central pillar of this "asymmetric balance" vanished, triggering a fundamental reorientation of political logic, away from a charisma-based system of loyalty and toward one increasingly shaped by institutional seniority, informal networks, and "hard power". The primary reason the Moderates found it increasingly impossible to align with the Cultural Revolution faction was the drastic shift in the overall power landscape. In the post-Mao reality, both the Moderates and the Cultural Revolution faction saw their relative strength decline sharply, while the Veterans' faction experienced a decisive and structural resurgence. This shift was rooted in the immediate collapse of the Cultural Revolution's promotion logic: without Mao's personal endorsement, the formal positions held by those who rose to power during the decade were effectively devalued in the post-Mao political environment. In contrast, power naturally gravitated back toward the veteran cadres, whose strength was inherent in their revolutionary seniority and extensive administrative networks—assets that were intrinsic to their person rather than delegated by a supreme leader. (Dittmer, 1978)

Moreover, during Mao's lifetime, the supreme leader acted as a structural constraint that prevented the military and the Veterans from taking direct action against the Cultural Revolution faction. With Mao's death, this constraint vanished, and the possibility of the veteran generals deploying the military to resolve political disputes

became a credible possibility. For the Moderates, aligning with the Veterans offered a share in this resurgent "hard power" and a guarantee of physical security. Conversely, an alliance with the Cultural Revolution faction offered no such protection; by siding with them, the Moderates would have inherited the Veterans' animosity without any military shield, placing themselves in the direct crosshairs of an unrestrained armed force.

Crucially, the factor of time presented a deteriorating environment for both the Moderates and the Cultural Revolution faction. Mao's "residual prestige" functioned as a fading protective shield and a temporary preservative for their political legitimacy. As long as Mao's shadow remained cast over the political landscape, it provided a narrow "manoeuvring space" for these two factions to justify their authority based on the supreme leader's past mandates. However, this was a rapidly depleting asset. Unless a significant power realignment occurred, the "natural" structural advantages of the Veterans—seniority and military control—would inevitably reassert themselves, leaving the ideological immunity of the Cultural Revolution faction and the "designated successor" status of the Moderates increasingly vulnerable. Consequently, both groups faced a shrinking window of opportunity to take significant action to consolidate their respective positions.

Beyond this macro-structural shift, internal frictions further foreclosed any possibility of an alliance between the Moderates and the Cultural Revolution faction. A critical conflict over the "Exclusivity of Succession" emerged: Hua Guofeng's legitimacy rested on a delegated mandate from Mao, yet the Cultural Revolution faction viewed themselves as the only authentic heirs. This internal fracture was reinforced by the position of Wang Dongxing, whose control over the "inner guard" provided the Moderates with localized hard power. Wang's long-standing friction with the Cultural Revolution faction meant that any pivot toward them would have jeopardized his own safety and the Moderates' primary security asset.

Based on the analysis above, the profound impact of Mao's death on the relative strength and mutual relationships of the three factions rendered any sustained alliance between the Moderates and the Cultural Revolution faction structurally implausible.

3.4 Factional Struggles and Divergent Political Prospects

China's political transition post-Mao diverged significantly from the Soviet experience following Stalin's death. In the Soviet Union, the political leanings of the high-level elite remained largely opaque under Stalin's atomizing terror. Consequently, even Beria, the chief of Stalin's secret police, could pivot overnight to champion de-totalitarianization as a strategic manoeuvre in the ensuing power struggle (Bialer, 1980). In such systems, elite behaviour often masks true convictions, with strategic survival overriding ideological consistency during systemic crises (Qin, 2023).

However, the Chinese transition was defined by a unique structural clarity. The factions emerging from the Cultural Revolution were not merely administrative groupings, but entities forged by the mechanics of the purge itself. The Cultural Revolution faction was structurally and politically bound to the Maoist system; their political capital was entirely illiquid, as it could not be converted into authority outside the framework of the Cultural Revolution. They lacked the "political exit" available to Soviet elites; for them, any substantive de-totalitarianization signalled their own political and perhaps physical liquidation.

Conversely, the Veteran Revolutionaries' commitment to reversing the purges of the Cultural Revolution—exemplified by the large-scale rehabilitation of veteran cadres—was not merely a policy adjustment, but a structural catalyst that necessitated an eventual rupture with the Maoist system. Since the purges were conducted in Mao's name and justified by his theory of "continuous revolution," any systemic effort to redress these grievances inevitably functioned as a de facto negation of Mao's personal judgment in practice and the radical ideology that sustained his authority. For the Veterans, the act of "returning to power" was inextricably bound to a "return to normalcy," a process that systematically dismantled the institutional pillars of the Cultural Revolution. Consequently, the correction of past injustices became the primary engine of de-totalitarianization, as it delegitimized the very terror mechanisms upon which the late-Maoist regime had relied.

For the Moderates, structural pressures and considerations of political survival increasingly pulled them toward an alignment with the Veteran Revolutionary faction.

At the same time, however, their delegated source of authority and their own experiences during the Cultural Revolution encouraged a more neutral and cautious posture with respect to the ultimate political line. At the structural level, the agency available to the Moderates was exercised within increasingly narrow constraints generated by the post-Mao power imbalance, such that elite decisions were shaped by multiple competing considerations rather than a simple binary choice. Within this constrained environment, Hua Guofeng nevertheless occupied a position of comparatively greater room for initiative by virtue of his status as Mao's designated successor. Until a decisive political action was taken, the choices available to the Moderates retained a degree of openness and could plausibly have led to divergent trajectories for China's post-totalitarian transition. Their agency therefore indicates that the movement toward de-totalitarianization was not a single predetermined path, but one whose pace and scope could have been modulated—or temporarily delayed—depending on their strategic orientation.

4 Chapter 4 Hua Guofeng and the First Phase of the Post-totalitarian Transition

4.1 Hua Guofeng's "Big Move" and Its Aftermath

4.1.1 The Huarentang Incident

Only twenty-seven days elapsed between the passing of Mao Zedong on September 9, 1976, and the arrest of the "Gang of Four" ordered by Hua Guofeng on October 6. This brief interregnum represents a precarious power vacuum in contemporary Chinese history, defined by a heated realignment of elite factions in the initial "post-Mao" era. As the designated successor, Hua Guofeng occupied the formal institutional centre. This inherited legitimacy and his official standing afforded him the political initiative, establishing Hua as the decisive protagonist of this historical drama. It is worth noting that a narrative crediting Ye Jianying with the primary role in the arrest long prevailed in China; it was not until recent years that this version was corrected by historians and officially acknowledged. While the previous chapter analysed the power balance and interrelations among the three factions, many factors remained unpredictable—chief among them the actual political potency of Mao's residual authority once his physical presence was gone. Given the relative scarcity of archival data regarding this period and the complexity of individual motives, we must synthesize structural analysis with key political manoeuvres to delineate the fundamental logic of this power realignment.

Just two days after Mao Zedong's passing, on September 11, Hua Guofeng took the initiative to visit Li Xiannian, requesting him to consult secretly with Ye Jianying regarding strategies to handle the "Gang of Four." This quick move demonstrates that before Mao's death, Hua's early moves suggest that he had already contemplated the post-Mao political landscape, formulated a preliminary strategy, and indeed reached a degree of tacit understanding with the veteran cadres. Crucially, Hua possessed a clear-eyed realization that the veteran establishment—particularly the military, which commanded the state's coercive resources—would be of paramount importance in the power realignment of the early post-Mao era. Ye Jianying naturally supported Hua's

proposal and cooperated actively. Evidence suggests that even during Mao's lifetime, Ye had already engaged in private discussions concerning the removal of the "Gang of Four" with prominent figures such as Wang Zhen and Nie Rongzhen. Wang Dongxing was also among the key figures involved in the earliest stages of these deliberations. According to the inferences drawn by Han Gang (2013, p.50), a substantive consensus on resolving the "Gang of Four" issue had been reached among at least four pivotal leaders—Hua Guofeng, Ye Jianying, Wang Dongxing, and Li Xiannian—no later than September 14.

A fact often marginalized or deliberately obscured in mainstream historical narratives is that a significant number of high-ranking CCP officials were privy to this operation prior to its execution, despite its ostensibly top-secret nature. Hua Guofeng communicated with nearly all Politburo members then in Beijing, with the exception of the Cultural Revolution faction; this included figures such as Wu De, Ji Dengkui, Chen Xilian, Chen Yonggui, Su Zhenhua, and Ni Zhifu. Numerous veteran leaders—including Chen Yun, Xu Xiangqian, Nie Rongzhen, Yang Chengwu, and Deng Yingchao—were informed of the intent through Ye Jianying. According to the Biography of Su Yu, immediately following the conclusion of Mao's memorial services on September 18, Ye Jianying approached Su Yu (then a member of the Standing Committee of the Central Military Commission) and instructed him to "look into the situation of the military units surrounding Beijing." (Editorial Group of the Biography of Su Yu, 2007, p.1008) That so many high-ranking leaders were aware of the plot, yet none opposed it nor allowed a single leak, underscores a remarkably broad and cohesive consensus among the party elite regarding the removal of the "Gang of Four." It further demonstrates that Mao's "residual authority" had significantly eroded within the high command; the leadership appeared to be collectively awaiting the charismatic leader's demise as the long-anticipated signal to act swiftly in restoring political order.

Then how, specifically, was the "Gang of Four" problem to be resolved? Two primary options were on the table: a formal vote through party meetings, or direct arrest—the so-called "quarantine and investigation". Given that the "Gang of Four" had installed numerous supporters within the Central Committee during the 10th National Congress, convening a plenary session for a vote would have entailed significant political risks

for Hua Guofeng and his allies. Ultimately, the decision was made to employ direct physical containment. This choice was informed, in part, by the "June Incident" in the Soviet Union. In June 1957, Khrushchev's opponents, including Malenkov, Kaganovich, and Molotov, used their numerical advantage in the Presidium to vote for his removal as First Secretary. However, Khrushchev countered by mobilizing the Air Force to fly his supporters from across the country to Moscow to participate in the meeting, thereby depriving the opposition of their numerical advantage and securing his position as the supreme leader. Subsequently, these opponents were branded as an "Anti-Party Group." To forestall any such procedural reversals, "quarantine and investigation" became the preferred strategy to guarantee an absolute victory. As the primary architect of the operational plan, Wang Dongxing personally selected and organized the Wang Dongxing personally handpicked tactical teams from the Central Guard Bureau under his command to execute the arrests of the "Gang of Four" and Mao Yuanxin within the walls of Zhongnanhai. Externally, after securing permission from Chen Xilian—with whom Hua Guofeng had engaged in multiple prior tactical consultations—Wu De mobilized units of the Beijing Garrison to manage the outer perimeter. These forces were tasked with apprehending other key members of the Cultural Revolution faction, maintaining urban order, and seizing control of strategic hubs, including the People's Daily, the Xinhua News Agency, the Central People's Broadcasting Station, as well as airports and telecommunications centres. The decisive control over these media, communication, and transportation hubs was of paramount importance. It not only physically severed the channels through which the Cultural Revolution faction might have sought support from their base in Shanghai or launched social mobilization but also ensured that Hua Guofeng could swiftly seize control of the national narrative, transforming the non-procedural arrests into an irreversible political reality. The success of this strategy demonstrates that in a political environment devoid of Mao's charismatic authority, the nominal and "soft" power held by the Cultural Revolution faction was remarkably fragile when confronted with "hard" power.

Although there is no concrete evidence suggesting that the Cultural Revolution faction attempted to launch a coup prior to their arrest, they indeed failed to identify shared interests with the moderate faction within the shifting political landscape. Consequently, the tactical alliance the two groups had maintained during the earlier

"Criticize Deng" campaign could not be sustained. Their political intransigence effectively neutralized the role Mao Zedong had envisioned for Hua as a "balancer" between the two hostile factions. During the Politburo meeting on September 29 concerning National Day arrangements, Jiang Qing proposed that Mao Zedong's liaison—and his nephew—Mao Yuanxin, be allowed to remain in Beijing. This move was undoubtedly a strategic attempt by the Cultural Revolution faction to bolster their claim as the legitimate heirs to Mao's legacy by maintaining control over a key family member. Had Mao Yuanxin remained in the capital, his unique status would have posed a latent, if not direct, challenge to Hua Guofeng's own succession. In response, Hua demonstrated a firm political stance, explicitly opposing the proposal and insisting that Mao Yuanxin return to Liaoning—a position that garnered the support of the majority of attendees. Despite Jiang Qing's relentless persistence, which extended the meeting into the early hours of the following morning, she ultimately failed to achieve her objective. For Hua Guofeng, the situation had reached a tipping point. On one hand, the strategies employed by the Cultural Revolution faction to augment their political leverage posed a substantive threat to the legitimacy and exclusivity of his own succession. Equally critical was the realization that, given his position as a "weak balancer," constraining the radical demands of the faction through formal intra-institutional coordination had proven to be an exercise in futility. Consequently, following this meeting, Hua accelerated his operational preparations, resolving to employ non-procedural measures to fundamentally reshape the existing power structure. (Han, 2008a, p.152)

On October 6, 1976, Hua Guofeng exercised his authority over the central leadership to decisively launch the arrest operation in Beijing. Supported by the Central Guard Bureau under Wang Dongxing's command, Hua used the pretext of calling a Standing Committee meeting to review important documents to successfully place Wang Hongwen, Zhang Chunqiao, and Yao Wenyuan under "quarantine and investigation" at Huarentang. Meanwhile, Jiang Qing and Mao Yuanxin were also smoothly taken into custody at their respective residences. During this process, Wu De mobilized the Beijing Garrison to handle the external coordination. They not only successfully took control of key departments but also, according to the prior plan, successfully apprehended other core members of the Cultural Revolution faction. (Wu, 2000; Zhang, 2012) The entire operation was a sequence of tightly linked actions executed

with remarkable speed and precision. Although this was a major event involving a complete restructuring of the power landscape, because the deployment was thorough and received full support from the military and guard systems, no conflict occurred. The success of this coordinated effort not only physically ended the political lives of the Cultural Revolution faction but also ensured that the national situation remained stable during this instant shift of power.

Following the arrests, late on the night of October 6, Hua Guofeng called an emergency Politburo meeting at Yuquanshan. With the "Gang of Four" removed, the meeting proceeded smoothly. Hua first informed the attendees about the actions taken against the four, gaining the full and immediate support of the Politburo members. A notable detail then emerged during the session: Hua Guofeng took the initiative to propose that Ye Jianying serve as Chairman of the Party and the Central Military Commission. Ye declined and instead proposed that Hua take the position, a suggestion that was unanimously approved. This kind of mutual deference regarding supreme power would have been impossible during the Mao era.(Zhou, 2006) This interaction not only reflected the political trust between Hua and Ye during this extraordinary period, but also revealed a major shift in the system of leadership: power was no longer solely the result of a leader's personal dictate, but began to take on the character of collective agreement and mutual recognition. By the end of the night, Hua officially became the top leader after Mao through formal procedures.

This rather "bold" operation was characterized by zero internal resistance during both its planning and execution; not only was it rightfully supported by the Veteran Revolutionaries, but it is also difficult to find any instance of dissent among the moderate elites. When the news eventually broke, the action swiftly garnered universal support across the broader elite and social strata. At the level of the political elite, this support manifested primarily as a sense of "survivalist relief." On the night the news spread, the homes of many long-reclusive veterans remained brightly lit. General Nie Fengzhi, then ill, reportedly leaped from his hospital bed upon hearing the news, ignoring medical advice to demand wine, shouting that he must "drain this glass of red wine." At the popular level, the public response took on a tone of near-carnavalesque political satire. Streets in Beijing witnessed the spectacle of the entire city out for celebratory toasts, with premium liquor and cigarettes selling out instantly. Citizens

rushed to buy "three males and one female" crabs (a metaphor for the Gang of Four), performing a ritualistic political reckoning at the dinner table. This convergence of elite relief and popular celebration retroactively supplied the operation with a form of legitimacy. Thus, the Huarentang Incident achieved a smooth transition of the nation's supreme power with minimal physical cost.

4.1.2 A New Horizon for De-totalitarianization

At this juncture, with Mao gone, the tripartite balance of power he had meticulously orchestrated came to an end. The emergence of a new political logic and power structure meant that the prospects for de-totalitarianization had fundamentally shifted. Overall, the situation grew increasingly favourable for an out-of-type political change, such that the structural conditions had largely been put in place. First and foremost, the operation dealt a decisive blow to a totalitarian system that was already under immense structural pressure generated by elite realignment and institutional exhaustion, and had, crucially, lost its central pillar. While the passing of Mao Zedong removed the regime's anchor, the Huarentang Incident purged the most uncompromising defenders of that system from the political stage. By shattering the long-standing atmosphere of political high pressure and systemic inertia, the action significantly diminished the fear that had previously paralysed those forces seeking to abandon totalitarianism. The totalitarian system was not only deprived of its internal support but was also confronted by an organized and decisive force of political negation, rendering its continued maintenance increasingly untenable. Furthermore, the new leadership was tasked with reconstructing its political legitimacy. To solidify the foundation of their non-procedural seizure of power, Hua Guofeng and his colleagues were compelled to systematically criticize the radicalism of the "Gang of Four." This political logic—establishing authority through the critique of extremism—objectively forced the centre of power to distance itself from old totalitarian discourse, thereby creating the necessary space for policy transition. Third, the formation of an alliance between the Moderates and the Veteran Revolutionaries provided a powerful institutional impetus. As primary victims of the Cultural Revolution, the veterans possessed a profound motivation to dismantle the very institutions that had caused

their suffering, providing a potent drive for China's departure from the totalitarian framework.

Finally, as the formal process of de-totalitarianization was about to unfold, the international dimension must be factored into the calculus of change. Admittedly, Maoism continued to retain a cadre of international supporters—ranging from the Party of Labour of Albania and Western Maoist parties to left-wing intellectuals and Maoist groups like the Shining Path in Peru (Cheng, 2008, p.93) —who leveraged their ideological purity to exert resistance against China's shift toward pragmatism. However, on balance, the global environment was overwhelmingly favourable for such a transition. On one hand, by 1976, under the influence of the Soviet transition, the number of communist states that had completed their post-totalitarian shift far exceeded those that still adhered to a totalitarian regime. In this broader context, China's de-totalitarianization was not an anomaly but a belated alignment with a prevailing pattern that the "Revisionist" forces had already rendered increasingly salient. The survival and relative stability of these regimes offered a visible alternative to China's exhausted orthodoxy, creating a persuasive precedent for the Chinese to follow. On the other hand, the existential security threat posed by the Soviet Union had previously driven Mao to initiate a rapprochement with the United States. As the world's leading democratic power, the U.S. now represented a crucial external favourable factor. This strategic pivot not only alleviated the pressure of encirclement but also provided an external anchor for the post-Mao leadership to begin decoupling the nation from its rigid, isolationist totalitarian past.

However, structural possibility did not translate into political ease. While the fall of the "Gang of Four" opened a window for an out-of-type change, it was already evident at this historical juncture that de-totalitarianization would not unfold as a simple or triumphant march. A cluster of profound structural constraints and historical burdens remained visible, posing significant obstacles and injecting deep uncertainty into the nation's future direction. First, the paramount leader, Hua Guofeng, was ensnared in a fundamental "paradox of legitimacy." (Hao, 2022) His authority rested on two potentially contradictory pillars: the personal mandate bestowed by Mao Zedong ("With you in charge, I am at ease") and the decisive act of arresting Mao's closest radical followers. While there existed a strained window of opportunity to separate the

"Gang of Four" from Mao himself, the logical tension remained acute. To uphold his status as the legitimate successor, Hua had to safeguard the sanctity of Mao's fundamental line; yet, to justify the 1976 operation, he was compelled to pursue a course that inherently required distancing the regime from the radical excesses of the past. While the situations of other moderate figures varied, they generally confronted a similar dilemma. This underlying contradiction significantly inhibited their capacity for any proactive or thorough-going de-totalitarianization.

Second, the historical baggage of the Moderate elites, stemming from their active role in executing Cultural Revolution policies, served as a significant constraint. Many key figures in this faction were deeply entrenched in the late-Maoist power structure. Wang Dongxing, for instance, was heavily implicated in the systemic persecution of Veteran Revolutionaries throughout the preceding decade. Simultaneously, figures like Chen Yonggui embodied the ideological commitment to the "Dazhai Model"—a cornerstone of the Cultural Revolution's agrarian policy. This meant a continued reliance on high-level collectivization, mass mobilization for infrastructure projects, and a state-led approach to agricultural mechanization. Any proactive move toward deep de-totalitarianization would not only invite a critical reassessment of their own historical roles in the purges but would also threaten the legitimacy of the policies they represented. Consequently, they would favour a limited "correction of excesses" over a fundamental institutional overhaul.

Third, the alliance between the Moderates and the Veteran Revolutionaries was fundamentally structurally fragile. As evidenced by the previous points, a clear gap existed in their respective stances toward de-totalitarianization; compared to the Veterans, the Moderates were significantly more conservative and constrained in their approach. This divergence was further inflamed by specific grievances accumulated during the purges in the Cultural Revolution. Furthermore, the Moderate faction suffered from a tenuous power base; their influence within the military was insufficient, and they lacked the revolutionary prestige and administrative networks required to match the veterans in terms of systemic authority. Collectively, these three factors rendered the alliance a temporary truce of convenience, one likely to evolve into open confrontation between the two factions, leading to a subsequent

reorganization of the supreme power structure. Such an impending struggle introduced profound uncertainties into the overall trajectory of China's de-totalitarianization.

Finally, the lingering inertia of the old regime ensured that de-totalitarianization would not be an easy task. This resistance was rooted in a rigid institutional path dependency, where the state's operational logic and the bureaucracy's "rules of the game" remained deeply embedded in totalitarian patterns, creating immense structural drag. This institutional inertia was further compounded by a legacy of fear and ideological rigidity etched into the collective psyche. Decades of radical political purges had left both the cadre and the public trapped in deep-seated cognitive constraints—a habit of conformity and a reliance on revolutionary rhetoric that could not be discarded at once.

4.2 The First Phase of the Post-totalitarian Transition

Although Hua Guofeng did not officially relinquish his positions as Chairman of the CCP and the Central Military Commission until June 1981, his tenure as the actual paramount leader effectively concluded by the end of the Central Working Conference in late 1978. This brief period remains one of the most blurred chapters in the history of the People's Republic. For decades, it has been oversimplified into two reductive labels: a period of "advancing haltingly" and the rigid adherence to the "Two Whatevers". Both characterizations originate from the 1981 Historical Resolution orchestrated by Deng Xiaoping. While the Resolution acknowledged that the arrest of the "Gang of Four" ushered the nation into a "new period of historical development," it contended that the process of correcting the errors of the Cultural Revolution became mired in "oscillation" due to Hua Guofeng's adherence to the "Two Whatevers"—namely, "We will resolutely uphold whatever policy decisions Chairman Mao made, and unswervingly adhere to whatever instructions Chairman Mao gave." It was only with the "Great Turning Point" of the Third Plenary Session of the 11th CPC Central Committee—where Deng Xiaoping effectively succeeded Hua in governance and repudiated the "Two Whatevers"—that a comprehensive and earnest rectification of Cultural Revolution-era mistakes truly commenced.

However, even a basic logical analysis reveals deep contradictions within this long-dominant narrative. If Hua was truly committed to the "Two Whatevers," why would he undertake the monumental risk of arresting the "Gang of Four"—the very embodiments of Mao's radical line? Furthermore, if Hua's adherence to these dogmas had effectively preserved the Maoist totalitarian grip, how could Deng Xiaoping have successfully displaced him and reshaped the political landscape in such a short period? To better grasp the reality of this era, it is imperative to set aside the conventional narrative and adopt a perspective centred on political systemic transition. Based on the analytical framework provided by Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, we must first conduct a concrete examination of the shifts occurring across the four dimensions: leadership, ideology, mobilization, and pluralism. Only then can we formulate a comprehensive re-summarization and repositioning of the political evolution of this era, and the specific role played by Hua Guofeng.

4.2.1 Leadership

An investigation into the nature of leadership during this period must begin with an analysis of the supreme power structure, as the "trinity" of official roles held by Hua Guofeng is highly deceptive. Following the arrest of the "Gang of Four" in October 1976, Hua rapidly consolidated the positions of Chairman of the CCP, Chairman of the Central Military Commission, and Premier of the State Council. In the history of the People's Republic of China, such a formal concentration of power was unprecedented; even at the zenith of his power, Mao Zedong never simultaneously held these three highest offices in a formal capacity. This overlapping of roles creates an illusion that Hua Guofeng had inherited Mao's omnipresent, supra-institutional, and absolute authority. However, once we set aside these nominal titles and scrutinize the actual operation of power, it becomes evident that Hua's substantive authority as supreme leader underwent a precipitous decline compared to that of Mao. This divergence between formal status and actual power—between 'name' and 'reality'—precisely reveals that the nature of supreme leadership was already sliding from totalitarian toward post-totalitarian characteristics.

According to Linz and Stepan's framework, the defining characteristics of totalitarian leadership are its inherent unpredictability and its limitless, supra-institutional reach, leaving the political elite in a state of permanent insecurity. However, an examination of Hua Guofeng's tenure reveals a profound structural contraction of this power, manifested first in the reality Hua lacked the necessary political capital to preclude challengers like Deng Xiaoping from assuming key positions, let alone initiate a purge against them. Secondly, this retrenchment of power was distinctly reflected in the political temperament and leadership style of the top leader. Hua's way of exercising the power is best captured by the observations of Hu Jiwei, the former Editor-in-Chief of the *People's Daily*, who provided a vivid contrast between Mao Zedong and Hua Guofeng:

[Hua Guofeng's] attitude was relatively gentle; he was upright and cautious in his conduct. This stood in sharp contrast to Chairman Mao Zedong. Mao would often let Liu Shaoqi or Deng Xiaoping preside over meetings, but he would quickly interrupt them and take back full control of the proceedings. When Mao made conclusions, he would elevate the issues to the level of high political principle (上纲上线), creating a tense atmosphere; the entire meeting was under his absolute control, and the "smell of gunpowder" grew increasingly thick. Hua Guofeng was not like this. For instance, in all meetings concerning propaganda, he almost always let Wang Dongxing preside while he sat by temperately, never adding fuel to the fire of Wang's aggressive "artillery." Instead, he played a role in mitigating and relaxing the tension. Especially when Wang Dongxing was fiercely denouncing me, Chairman Hua did not escalate the charges against me. He neither ordered me to stop working for self-examination nor dismissed me from my post. This allowed me not only to continue leading the *People's Daily* but also greatly encouraged me to boldly emancipate my mind and improve the newspaper with a considerable degree of independence. (Hu, 2003, p.35)

Hu Jiwei's testimony highlights a critical rupture in the exercise of supreme power: the spatial and qualitative retreat of the leader's will. By refraining from reclaiming "full control" of meetings and refusing to "escalate charges" against dissenters, Hua effectively altered the previously zero-sum logic of political authority. This self-limitation signalled that the leader was no longer an "unpredictable thunderbolt" capable of arbitrary destruction, but a mediated authority operating within defined procedural lines. Consequently, the transition from ideological intimidation to a moderated, "gentle" conduct provided the elite with a newfound professional safety, transforming the political arena from a site of permanent terror into a space where independent initiatives could finally emerge.

The decline of the supreme power was further exacerbated by the exhaustion and secularization of charismatic authority. In the transition toward post-totalitarianism, leadership moves from original charisma—an absolute mandate derived from revolutionary conquest and perceived divine qualities—to the derivative authority embodied by Hua Guofeng. The construction of Hua's public persona was largely unsuccessful because it lacked substantive revolutionary achievements. Instead, Hua relied on a manufactured legitimacy inextricably tethered to Mao's personal endorsement: "With you in charge, I am at ease" (你办事我放心). (CCLROC, 2013, p.648) By overseeing the construction of the Mao Zedong Memorial Hall and presiding over the publication of the Selected Works of Mao Zedong, Hua positioned himself not as a creative ideological prophet, but as the "Grand Guardian" of a deceased leader's legacy. Because his charisma was "borrowed," his mandate became increasingly secularized. This "pruning" of charismatic power meant the leader was no longer a semi-deity above the system, but a high-ranking functionary whose legitimacy was contingent upon elite consensus.

The other decisive evidence of this structural contraction was the emergence of "negotiated decision-making," where the supreme leader's will became openly challengeable. In the totalitarian era, the supreme leader's decree was an oracle that brooked no opposition; to suggest a counter-path was to commit political heresy. However, the restoration of the National College Entrance Examination (高考), a core institutional reversal of Cultural Revolution practice, in 1977 demonstrated a fundamental shift in this power dynamic. Hua Guofeng had initially signalled his clear

preference for maintaining the Cultural Revolution-era "recommendation" system, a core Maoist legacy. Yet, when the recently rehabilitated Deng Xiaoping directly challenged this stance during a science and education forum, Hua did not resort to ideological suppression or personal purge. Instead of viewing Deng's counterproposal as an affront to his supreme authority, Hua exhibited a newfound capacity to respect and accommodate rival perspectives. (Shi, 2020, pp.99-103) By formally endorsing Deng's merit-based plan and allowing his own initial policy to be superseded, Hua confirmed that the supreme leader was no longer the "exclusive possessor of truth" but a facilitator of elite negotiation.

These evolving logics—political clemency, the secularization of charisma, and negotiated decision-making—reached their logical conclusion during the Central Working Conference of late 1978. The significance of this event lies in its role as the arena where a weakened supreme leader was forced to surrender the "monopoly on truth" to a consolidated bloc of Veteran Revolutionaries. Although Hua convened the meeting to discuss economic adjustments, the veteran faction launched a tactical "agenda capture." By launching a frontal assault on the "Two Whatevers," the 1976 Tiananmen Incident, and other legacy political purge cases, they effectively put the top leadership on trial; by directly naming Vice Chairman Wang Dongxing, they delivered a transparent indictment of Hua Guofeng himself.

It is critical to observe that at the early stage of this conference, Hua's downfall was not a foregone conclusion. Wielding the "Trinity of Power" and presiding over the conference, he still retained the formal legitimacy and organizational capacity to suppress the dissent, which he could have branded as "factionalism" or "anti-Party activity." In a totalitarian system, a leader faced with such a direct challenge would have utilized the state apparatus to purge his detractors. However, the reality of the post-Mao landscape revealed a profound contraction of supreme power. Faced with an overwhelming majority of Veteran Revolutionaries, Hua opted for a strategic retreat rather than a high-risk confrontation. By choosing to accommodate the dissent rather than suppress it, Hua showed the nature of his role as just a "negotiator" of elite interests and the era of the "one-man oracle" had ended.

In summary, at the level of the leadership system, the weakening of supreme power and the emergence of substantive constraints signify that an "out-of-type" change had

already begun to take shape at the level of leadership practice. This shift is a definitive indicator of de-totalitarianization; however, it must be noted that this transition occurred primarily within the logic of *realpolitik* rather than through formal institutionalization or nominal reform. While the formal titles remained in Hua's hands, the substantive authority of the office was undergoing a precipitous contraction. This leads to a critical inquiry: what forces drove this retreat of power? While the personal style and proactive choices of key political leaders played a limited role, the primary momentum derived from the structural decay of the system and the unique composition of the political elite.

The most fundamental driver was the endogenous decay of the totalitarian system itself. After a decade of the Cultural Revolution, the hyper-centralized command chain had reached a point of functional exhaustion. The two primary pillars of totalitarianism—ideological mobilization and state terror—had suffered from severe diminishing returns, leaving both the elite and the masses in a state of political fatigue. This systemic decay meant that a post-Mao leader could no longer wield power as a "unilateral force of nature" or rely on a "monopoly on truth" to silence dissent. The state apparatus, crippled by its own past excesses, began to gravitate toward bureaucratic routine and pragmatic survival, effectively shrinking the space available for absolute dictatorial whim.

Equally decisive was the emergence of a unique elite structure that served as an unprecedented check on supreme authority. Unlike the totalitarian era where the leader stood in solitary transcendence above a flattened bureaucracy, the post-Mao landscape featured a powerful bloc of revolutionary veterans who possessed immense political capital and organizational networks. This created a *de facto* negotiated power environment where the supreme leader was no longer a semi-deity but a participant who had to accommodate competing veteran interests. As demonstrated by the restoration of the Gaokao, the leader's will had become challengeable; authority was no longer an absolute oracle, but an office increasingly contingent upon empirical feedback and mutual concession.

Ultimately, the transition from "limitless reach" to "negotiated boundaries" was not a voluntary gift from the leadership, but a structurally compelled retreat. The collision between a decaying totalitarian machine and a resurgent, consolidated elite forced the

supreme power into a cage of consensus. Whether the landscape will shift following a future realignment of power remains to be seen; however, the profound decay of the regime has undoubtedly rendered the re-emergence of a new totalitarian-style leader an exceedingly difficult prospect within the structural conditions of the immediate post-Mao period.

4.2.2 Ideology

In the theoretical framework of Linz and Stepan, the transition from totalitarianism to post-totalitarianism is defined by a fundamental erosion of the official ideology's "sacred" and "comprehensive" character. While a totalitarian system is driven by an elaborate ideology that provides a "reachable utopia" and guides state policies, sense of mission, and the legitimation of all actions, the post-totalitarian phase is marked by the ideology's functional and influential decline. This shift involves the ideology becoming a "ritualized" part of social reality rather than a source of genuine belief. The commitment to the final utopian mission weakens, and the ideology's power to provide absolute guidance is superseded by a "programmatic consensus," which is based on rational goals and limited debate.

This ideological transition in the late 1970s was catalysed by the endogenous decay of the Maoist system. During the Cultural Revolution, the official ideology had become increasingly radicalized, creating a profound chasm between revolutionary rhetoric of utopia and socio-economic reality of dystopia. By 1976, this ossified dogma had largely lost its capacity to persuade the masses or control the bureaucracy, serving instead as a source of systemic fatigue. Facing the ideological crisis of the post-Mao transition, the CCP elite did not respond with a unified strategy. Instead, three distinct yet converging approaches emerged. These approaches—ranging from tactical preservation to fundamental renewal—conflicted and converged, ultimately driving the de-totalitarianization process significantly forward.

To understand Hua Guofeng's approach to ideological issues, one must begin with the highly controversial slogan: the "Two Whatevers". While the 1981 Historical Resolution characterized this slogan as the primary guideline of Hua's entire tenure,

the findings of this study suggest that such an interpretation is historically unreasonable. Setting aside the controversial evaluations of historical figures, this analysis focuses on the ideological significance of the slogan. According to research by Han Gang (2008b, p.7), there were various versions of the "Two Whatever," yet from Hua's initial usage, it is clear that the slogan was formulated to address specific issues rather than as a programmatic manifesto. The earliest "Whatever" appeared on October 26, 1976, during Hua's conversation with heads of the central propaganda apparatus. Regarding the criticism of the "Gang of Four," Hua stated: "For whatever the Chairman [Mao] nodded his head to or gave instructions on, do not criticize. For instance, the 'eight model operas' must still be affirmed. If a certain actor is no good, you can change the person." (cited from Han, 2008b, p.7) The classic version of the "Two Whats" emerged between January and February 1977, as Li Xin, deputy director of the General Office of the CPC Central Committee, was drafting a speech for Hua. Li Xin explained the rationale behind the slogan as follows:

In the drafting process, the most difficult issue to handle was that under the circumstances of the time; to stabilize the situation, we had to hold high the banner of Chairman Mao. We could not say Chairman Mao made mistakes, nor could we suggest that "Criticizing Deng and Repelling the Right-Deviationist Reversal of Verdicts" was wrong. At the same time, we had to state that inviting Comrade Xiaoping out to work was correct and necessary. Thus, the drafting work was extremely difficult; it was impossible to make the argument foolproof. Because I emphasized holding high Chairman Mao's banner and stabilizing the situation, the "Two Whats" formulation appeared in the second draft of the speech outline. (as cited in Gan, 2009, p. 58)

From an ideological perspective, this reflected Hua's strategy of "Name-Reality Separation" (名实分离)—a strategy in which ideological symbols were preserved rhetorically, while their capacity to dictate concrete policy outcomes was deliberately neutralized—during the incipient phase of his leadership. This meant that while actual

policies and guidelines were no longer strictly dictated by Maoist orthodoxy, the banner of Maoism was still held high in rhetoric, even when negating Mao's specific decisions. (Hao, 2022) The most striking example is Hua Guofeng's political report at the 11th National Congress of the CCP. In this pivotal document, Hua relied almost exclusively on Mao Zedong's past criticisms of the "Gang of Four," as well as related speeches and quotations, to construct the political justification for their arrest. By framing the purge not as a departure from the previous era but as a rigorous execution of Mao's own wishes, Hua successfully utilized the "name" of the charismatic leader to authorize a substantial shift in the power structure and political direction. This strategy was further manifested in Hua's selective citation of Maoist slogans to legitimize a new policy focus. He frequently invoked instructions such as "grasp revolution, promote production" (抓革命、促生产) and "pushing the national economy forward" (把国民经济搞上去). As is widely recognized, these quotes did not reflect—and were even antithetical to—the core revolutionary tenets of Maoism. Hua did not attempt to modify the old ideology as a whole or subvert its nominal sanctity; instead, he decoupled it from actual policy by selectively emphasizing those elements that supported his pragmatic agenda. This effectively stripped the ideology of its interventionist power, transforming it from a "guide for action" into a passive "political shield."

It must be noted that this was merely Hua's cautious strategy in the initial stage, and he soon diverged from this rigid adherence and started to directly rectify issues within Maoist ideology. He did not abandon the "Two Whatevers" only after being criticized. In fact, he quickly realized that it was too absolute. After the March 1977 Central Working Conference, Hua never mentioned the "Two Whatevers" again, and the slogan disappeared from official documents and media. The most significant example interconnected with the theme of post-totalitarian transition was the restoration of good relations with Yugoslavia. This diplomatic manoeuvre carried profound ideological weight. In Maoist ideology, both domestic and foreign "revisionism" were existential threats to the revolutionary cause, with Yugoslavia labelled a "revisionist" state by the CCP as early as 1958. Politically, "revisionism" here referred to the wave of post-totalitarian transitions in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe following Stalin's death. Relations further deteriorated in the early 1960s as the CCP branded

Yugoslavia a tool of imperialism. However, a significant shift occurred in May 1977 when Hua Guofeng sent a congratulatory telegram to Tito on his 85th birthday. By June 1978, the two parties officially restored relations, and in August, Hua visited Yugoslavia, acknowledging it as a socialist state and expressing interest in its institutions (Zhu, 2008; Wu, 2015; Xiang & Xiang, 2021). This was not merely a diplomatic normalization, but an explicit ideological reclassification. By formally legitimizing the very "revisionism" that the Cultural Revolution was designed to eradicate, Hua effectively broke the Maoist monopoly on the "correct" socialist path, signalling that the ideology was no longer a sacred, infallible oracle, but a flexible framework subject to pragmatic revision.

Deng Xiaoping's approach offered a more proactive and sophisticated strategy for ideological management: instrumental reinterpretation. Unlike Hua's passive shielding, Deng sought to wrest the hermeneutic authority away from the dogmatists by redefining what constituted "true" Maoism. The centrepiece of this strategy was the concept of "comprehensively and accurately grasping Mao Zedong Thought" (完整地、准确地理解毛泽东思想). Deng first introduced this formulation in a letter to the Central Committee on April 10, 1977, while he was still in political limbo. (Deng, 1994, p.39) Later, in May and July 1977, as the tension with the "Two Whatevers" intensified, Deng repeatedly and emphatically underscored this point. He pointed out that Mao Zedong Thought is a comprehensive system, and one cannot just take a few sentences and regard them as the absolute truth without considering the historical context and the system as a whole. (Deng, 1994, pp.38-39, 42-47)

This was a masterful move of ideological clipping. By framing Maoism as a system rather than a series of divine oracles, Deng created a theoretical mechanism to selectively prioritize certain Maoist tenets—such as seeking truth from facts—while conveniently relegating others—such as permanent revolution or class struggle—to the background as context-specific artifacts. This effectively downgraded the ideology from a rigid action guide to a malleable vocabulary warehouse. However, it is crucial to note that at this incipient stage, Deng's strategy remained largely a rhetorical counterproposal rather than an implemented reality. While it provided a potent weapon to challenge the "Two Whatevers" and compete for discourse power, the actual

substantive rectification of ideological content did not take place until Deng had consolidated supreme power.

The third and most radical approach was the fundamental challenge of ideological orthodox. This was a collaborative intellectual movement facilitated by Hu Yaobang, who utilized his position at the Central Party School to provide a "protected space" for theorists to challenge the prevailing orthodoxy. This strategy culminated in the publication of the seminal article, "Practice is the Sole Criterion for Testing Truth," in May 1978, which stated: "Any theory, even if it is a 'correct' theory during its formation, must be tested and developed through practice... To fear the test of practice is to acknowledge that one's theory is flawed or even erroneous." (Special Commentator, 1978) Unlike the previous two schemes, which remained within the framework of competing for the mantle of Maoist orthodoxy, this discussion on the "Criterion of Truth" attempted to strip the ideological dogmas of their sacred statues. By replacing revelation with empiricism as the operational guide, Hu and his intellectual allies maintained that no ideological tenet, however sacred, was immune to the test of tangible results.

The debate immediately ignited a fierce confrontation within the high leadership. Wang Dongxing, who sat at the apex of the propaganda and security apparatus and officially commanded the ideological organs, launched a stern suppression. He condemned the article as "cutting down the Maoist banner" (砍旗) and "throwing the party into chaos," using his subordinates to stifle its dissemination. Despite recognizing that this intellectual tide posed a fundamental challenge to his own ideological strategy, Hua Guofeng refrained from using his supreme authority to administratively crush the dissenting voices. This restraint, as reflected in Hu Jiwei's previously cited appraisal of Hua's political style, was a defining feature of his response to this ideological conflict.

Recognizing the tactical potential of this debate to break the political deadlock, Deng Xiaoping publicly threw his weight behind the "Criterion of Truth" movement. This political endorsement provided a decisive "umbrella" for Hu and his intellectual allies. Simultaneously, military veterans like Luo Ruiqing signalled their support, grounding the debate in the loyalty of the armed forces and providing the necessary security for the dissenting voices. (Shen, 2005, pp.121-147) Following this, senior theorists of the

veteran faction, such as Hu Qiaomu, Deng Liqun, and Zhou Yang—who would soon take charge of ideological affairs—openly praised the discussion. (Shen, 2005, pp.163-167) As the discussion spread, provincial leaders across the country began to issue public statements of support, creating a powerful wave of regional endorsement. (Shen, 2005, pp.212-246) This collective mobilization, moving from the military and theoretical elite to local provincial officials, created a state of "forced consensus" (逼宫) against the institutional monopoly held by Wang Dongxing and his ideological team. While the immediate target was Wang, this offensive effectively challenged Hua Guofeng's ideological strategy. Crucially, although Hua Guofeng had long since ceased mentioning the "Two Whatever's" and had in practice moved away from the rigid ideological strategies of his early tenure—even maintaining a posture of tolerance toward the ongoing debate—the ultimate target of this political tide remained Hua himself as the supreme leader.

Taken together, between 1976 and 1978, the CCP leadership confronted the rapid decay of Maoist ideology and its widening gap with the requirements of political reality through three distinct yet objectively converging strategies. Hua Guofeng attempted a "tactical shielding" by ritualizing the ideology to isolate it from policy, while Deng Xiaoping pursued an "instrumental reinterpretation" to clip the ideology into pragmatic, usable components. Simultaneously, Hu Yaobang and a circle of intellectuals executed a "fundamental renewal" by establishing empiricism as the ultimate arbiter of truth. Regardless of whether these manoeuvres were rooted in factional survival or a sincere drive for de-Maoization, they collectively facilitated a decisive erosion of the ideological foundations of totalitarianism during the Hua era.

The shift in the ideological landscape was also driven by the undeniable reality that ideology could not sustain its utopian legitimating function in an unconditional and mobilizational manner. As the transcendental promise of a Communist future became increasingly detached from the dire material conditions of the post-Cultural Revolution era, the elite gradually abandoned the role of ideology as a prophetic guide. Instead of attempting to revive a defunct utopian vision, the leadership sought a more pragmatic foundation for governance. In place of the abandoned utopian goals, the party elites sought to establish a "Programmatic Consensus" to define a new objective that could reunify both the elite and the masses, providing a pivot for China's future.

In policy terms, this transformation manifested as the shift from the "Key Link of Class Struggle" (以阶级斗争为纲) to the "Priority of Modernization" (以现代化建设为中心).

The official 1981 Historical Resolution later claimed that Hua Guofeng persisted with the "Key Link of Class Struggle," and that it was not until the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee that this directive was ceased in favor of the strategic decision to shift the work focus to socialist modernization. However, this narrative does not align with the historical facts. Although Hua summarized his governance strategy as "Grasping the Key Link to Govern the Country" (抓纲治国), he explicitly defined this "link" not as class struggle, but as the exposure and criticism of the "Gang of Four." As previously analysed, Hua's strategy was characterized by a separation of name and substance. Between "Grasping the Link" (the ritualistic) and "Governing the Country" (the practical), the latter was clearly the operative priority, with its core content being "Modernization." This is substantiated by the actual distribution of Hua Guofeng's personal work focus and leadership energy during this period. According to statistics by Han Gang, nearly all national conferences convened by the CCP Central Committee and the State Council during these two years focused on "Modernization" themes such as planning, production, science and technology, education, and foreign trade. Moreover, prior to the Central Working Conference, Hua had already proposed the "shift of focus," convened meetings to seek consensus, and reached a decision. At the opening ceremony of the Central Working Conference, Hua himself took the initiative to propose that, before discussing specific economic agendas, the participants first deliberate on the proposal to "shift the focus of national work to socialist modernization starting from January 1979." At this juncture, there was no significant divergence between Hua Guofeng and Deng Xiaoping on the fundamental necessity of this strategic shift. In other words, even before the displacement of supreme power, this shift in the focus of work had already become a "programmatic consensus" among the party elite.

It is essential to clarify why the emphasis on "Modernization" was so pivotal for de-totalitarianization, particularly within the ideological sphere. This can be understood through Richard Löwenthal's classic framework of "Development vs. Utopia." Löwenthal (1970) argues that communist regimes—especially those born from

indigenous revolutions in underdeveloped nations—are driven by two inherently contradictory goals. On one hand, they pursue a Utopian mission to ideologically reshape society; on the other, they are forced by existential pressures and the reality of backwardness to pursue Development (economic and military modernization) to catch up with the West. However, these two objectives are fundamentally at odds: economic development necessitates the incentivization of experts, the use of material rewards, and the establishment of a stable social hierarchy (bureaucratization). Conversely, the Communist Utopian goal demands the eradication of such inequalities through constant ideological mobilization. There would be a long-term historical trend: as these communist societies approach the complexities of an advanced industrial state, the forced restructuring of society through ideological fervour becomes increasingly difficult, if not impossible. Ultimately, "Modernization" inevitably triumphs over "Utopianism." In this process, the regime undergoes a decisive metamorphosis, transitioning from a revolutionary "movement-regime" into a conservative, managerial bureaucracy.

This intrinsic tension between Utopia and Development manifests in a particularly extreme and cyclical form within the history of the CCP, deeply rooted in the origins of the Cultural Revolution as discussed in Chapter 2. When Mao's ideological experiments—the Great Leap Forward—collapsed into unprecedented disaster, his colleagues, most notably Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, stepped in with pragmatic, development-oriented policies to stabilize the economy. However, Mao viewed these pragmatic corrections as "Revisionist" threats to his orthodox vision and absolute power, using them as a pretext to launch the Cultural Revolution and purge his political rivals. This cycle repeated itself within the Cultural Revolution's own timeline. Following the first wave of purges, the Lin Biao group attempted to use the political report for the Ninth Party Congress to signal an end to the chaos and shift the Party's focus toward economic development. This effort, spearheaded by Chen Boda's draft, was vehemently rejected by Mao and the Gang of Four. They condemned it as an endorsement of the "prioritizing only productive forces" (唯生产力论), a direct challenge to Mao's doctrine of "Politics in Command." In 1975, Zhou Enlai re-proposed the goal of the "Four Modernizations," and Deng Xiaoping led the "Rectification", only to be struck down by Mao once again; this was also a similar

case. Consequently, a recurring historical mechanism emerged: every time an ideological movement led by Mao produced catastrophic consequences, his colleagues would attempt to stabilize the regime by invoking the demands of economic development. Yet, each time, these efforts would provoke Mao's resentment, leading to further purges and a renewed, violent rejection of developmental priorities.

Following the arrest of the Gang of Four in 1976, the accusation of the "prioritizing only productive forces" remained a potent ideological barrier, continuing to obstruct any strategy that prioritized economic construction. However, with the "Utopian" pillar no longer defended by a charismatic leader, Hua Guofeng rejected the Gang of Four's harsh criticisms and reaffirmed the legitimacy and importance of economic development at the first major national conference under his leadership—the Second National Conference on Learning from Dazhai in Agriculture in December 1976 (Shi, 2020). Over the following two years, this cyclical pattern was successfully broken. The "programmatic consensus" on modernization could finally take root without the looming fear of a sudden ideological backlash, marking a decisive departure from the era where the regime's legitimacy was anchored in Utopian ideology.

In summary, as a result of Hua Guofeng's strategy of separating "name" from "substance", the CCP's propaganda discourse during this period continued to uphold Mao Zedong Thought as the dominant ideology. In reality, however, the persuasive and controlling power of this ideology had undergone a significant decay, rendering the maintenance of the old ideological order an impossible task. Driven by a collective survival instinct and the exigencies of power struggle, the political elite accepted this reality, adapted to the trend of systemic erosion, and proactively pushed for ideological de-totalitarianization. Consequently, the infallibility of the old totalitarian ideology was fundamentally undermined, and its function as an exclusive and unconditional guide for belief and regime legitimacy was profoundly hollowed out. In its place, a new "Programmatic Consensus" began to take shape, anchored in modernization rather than utopian struggle. In this phase of ideological de-totalitarianization, both the systemic decay of the Maoist structure and the strategic choices made by the elite were equally indispensable.

4.2.3 Mobilization

In a totalitarian system, the state orchestrates widespread, mandatory, and large-scale mobilization, emphasizing the active "enthusiasm" of the masses while systematically eroding private life. In contrast, the post-totalitarian phase is marked by a declining interest in organizational mobilization. Participation becomes a ritualized mechanism designed merely to secure a minimum level of outward conformity and obedience. Within the hierarchy, the "cadres" and "soldiers" of the regime transition from ideological crusaders into careerists and opportunists. The pervasive boredom with dominant values and the eventual "privatization" of individual life become recognized social facts. In short, the distinction between a totalitarian and a post-totalitarian regime regarding mobilization lies in a comprehensive "downgrading" across all dimensions. While the institutional framework for mobilization is retained, the frequency, scope, and depth of these campaigns undergo a significant decline. Whether such a comprehensive downgrading had actually occurred in the late 1970s, however, remains an empirical question rather than a theoretical presumption.

Examining the mobilization during Hua Guofeng's rule, we observe a gradual decline in the political elite's subjective enthusiasm for mass campaigns, accompanied by a more cautious approach to their execution. However, this attitudinal shift did not translate into a corresponding transformation in the structural logic or operational modality of mobilization. The mobilization during this period indeed showed a weakening trend compared to the hyper-mobilization mode in the Cultural Revolution. However, based on the limited empirical evidence, it would be premature to conclude that mobilization had undergone an out-of-type transformation.

First, it is imperative to address the allegation put forward by the 1981 Historical Resolution that Hua Guofeng persisted in the "Criticize Deng and Counter the Rightist Reversal of Verdicts" campaign. While Hua maintained the "Criticize Deng" slogan as a brief rhetorical concession to orthodox continuity, he refrained from further mobilizing the movement in any substantive practice. On the contrary, he effectively deconstructed the campaign from within by facilitating the political rehabilitation of the very high-ranking officials who had been its primary targets. This strategic reversal

saw the return of key figures such as Deng Xiaoping, Hu Yaobang (see Manmei, 2005, pp.212-213), Hu Jiwei(see Hu, 2006, p.1), Zhang Aiping(see Zhang, 2008, pp.401-407), Song Renqiong (see Song, 1994, p.34-35), Tan Qilong(see Tan, 2003, p.729).

Closely intertwined with the “Criticize Deng” movement was the formal classification of the 1976 Tiananmen Incident as a “counterrevolutionary incident.” As this designation was a direct legacy of Mao Zedong’s personal decision—and because several members of the moderate faction had been implicated in its initial suppression—Hua Guofeng maintained the “counterrevolutionary” label for the incident until the 1978 Central Working Conference. However, in practice, Hua decisively halted the investigations and systematic persecution of the incident's participants. As early as November 1976, he ordered the release of numerous individuals detained during the crackdown and consistently sought to depoliticize and marginalize the controversy in subsequent official discourse (Han, 2008b, p.8).

In terms of practical governance, Hua Guofeng largely refrained from extending the unresolved mobilizations of the Mao era. However, immediately following the arrest of the “Gang of Four,” he initiated his own campaign: the movement to “Expose and Criticize the Gang of Four,” also known as the “Expose, Criticize, and Investigate” (揭批查) movement. This movement served as the “Key Link” within his broader strategy of “Governing the Country by Grasping the Key Link.” The “Expose, Criticize, and Investigate” campaign persisted until the end of 1978, spanning the entirety of Hua Guofeng’s tenure. The movement exhibited a rigorous, phased organizational structure: The first stage focused on exposing and criticizing the “Gang of Four’s” conspiracy to usurp Party and state power, aimed at rapidly consolidating the legitimacy of the new leadership through public mobilization. The second stage transitioned to a denunciation of their “criminal history,” seeking to further erode the ideological foundations of their factional system by overturning previous political lines. The third and most substantive phase was the “investigation” stage; it concentrated on scrutinizing individuals and incidents linked to the “Gang of Four,” striving to thoroughly dismantle their factional networks within the party-state apparatus at all levels.((Cheng et al., 1998, pp.17-24)

Due to the extreme rarity of academic research on this campaign and the relative scarcity of historical archives, it remains difficult to ascertain the exact decision-

making processes, underlying motives, or the psychological states of the participants involved. Nevertheless, evidence gathered from official policy documents, media propaganda, and regional summary reports indicates that the scope and methodology of this movement exhibited no significant departure from the Maoist era.

In terms of scope, the campaign exhibited a characteristically totalitarian reach, extending from the central political core to factories, rural communes, and academic institutions, leaving virtually no corner of the social sphere untouched.

Methodologically, the movement demonstrated a profound path dependence, inheriting the Maoist logic of mobilization across the dimensions of repertoire, organization, and discourse. First, the regime utilized institutionalized "mobilizational repertoires," ranging from the proliferation of big-character posters and high-intensity "struggle rallies" to the "everyone-must-pass-the-test" mechanism, which compelled individuals to declare their political stances on key incidents of the late Cultural Revolution—an intrusive level of social control identical to the previous era. Second, regarding organizational technology, the regime continued to employ the vertical intervention model of "Special Case Groups" and "Work Teams." "Investigation Offices" established at all levels dispatched teams that possessed extraordinary powers to bypass standard bureaucratic hierarchies, seize personal dossiers, and conduct "isolated investigations," proving that governance remained movement-driven rather than institutionalized. Finally, the discursive logic remained anchored in the binary framing of "class struggle," with official media consistently utilizing political labels such as "class enemies" or "newborn bourgeois elements" rather than legal standards to categorize targets.

In summary, the campaign was partially aimed at negating and terminating Cultural Revolution-style mobilization, with a clear emphasis on the restoration of order—a goal exemplified by the successful cessation of armed factional conflicts (武斗) across the country by the first half of 1977. However, the movement itself relied on methodologies that remained largely synonymous with the very mobilization patterns it sought to negate. As the primary form of political mobilization during this period, the campaign did not exhibit comprehensive or explicit characteristics of “de-escalation”. In Linz and Stepan’s terms, this indicates that the mobilizational

dimension of the regime remained firmly within the totalitarian repertoire, despite emerging constraints at the level of elite intent.

As described in the previous section, the considerations behind concluding the "Expose, Criticize, and Investigate" campaign were closely intertwined with the proposition of "shifting the focus". In his opening speech at the 1978 Central Working Conference regarding this shift, Hua Guofeng revealed his underlying thoughts on the relationship between political mobilization and economic construction.

Hua stated: "Regarding the 'Double Hits' (双打), we previously considered launching a movement from both the top-down and bottom-up.... After much consideration, we decided against this approach. Once a mass movement is launched, the leadership's energy would inevitably be consumed by it, which would hinder the provinces and municipalities from focusing on modernization." He further added: "We must advocate for the rule of law. While mass criticism and struggle rallies remain necessary, they should proceed through the courts. We must stop the practice of parading people in trucks; such methods should no longer be used." He also noted: "We had originally contemplated a nationwide rectification movement (整风) from top to bottom and bottom to top. Developing such a national movement would take six months to a year and would drain significant energy from leadership at all levels." (Yu, 1998, p.79) The "Double Hits" refers to "striking at the destructive activities of class enemies and striking at the frenzied assaults of capitalist forces." Aimed at the social base of the "Gang of Four," it was regarded as an extension of the "Expose, Criticize, and Investigate" campaign, and the two were often collectively termed "One Criticism and Two Hits" (一批双打). From these statements, it is evident that due to his commitment to concentrating energy on modernization, Hua scaled back the envisioned "Double Hits" from a nationwide mobilization to a localized, autonomous effort, and he ultimately abandoned the planned internal Party rectification movement altogether. Furthermore, his realization that certain violent and humiliating repertoires within mobilization were excessive—and his subsequent emphasis on the rule of law—demonstrates a diminishing interest in mass mobilization and a restraint in its application.

Compared to the significant shifts in elite leadership and ideology, changes in the sphere of political mobilization remained relatively faint and lagged. This unevenness highlights a key feature of the Hua era transition: while ideological discourse and elite alignment began to loosen, the mobilizational apparatus remained largely intact. The "Expose, Criticize, and Investigate" campaign remained the dominant mode of political engagement. Its totalizing scope, the vertical penetration of its organizational technology, and its reliance on the discursive logic of "line struggles" all testify to a profound path dependence on the governance toolkit of the Maoist era. The observed changes in mobilization had not yet reached the threshold of an "out-of-type" transformation, thereby leaving a structural opening for the more radical institutional transformation that would follow.

4.2.4 Pluralism

According to Juan Linz's framework, the transition from totalitarianism to post-totalitarianism is typically marked by the emergence of "limited, non-responsible pluralism." However, in the immediate aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, the fledgling pluralism in China had not yet reached the institutionalized level. Instead, the most accurate term for this period is a "thaw" (解冻)—a metaphorical softening of the frozen political landscape. This "thaw," however, should not be conflated with the emergence of Linzian "limited pluralism." It represented a loosening of control and tolerance of deviation, rather than the institutional recognition or routinization of plural interests. In this period, the post-Mao leadership's strategic efforts to "loosen the ties" (松绑) acted as the permissive conditions that allowed long-suppressed social energies to burst through the cracks of the system.

During the Hua Guofeng era, while the monistic political facade remained intact, economic pluralizing effects manifested through significant "marginal breakthroughs" and an "informal recovery" within the cracks of the command economy. In the rural sector, the state began to retreat from the extreme suppression of private space. Pioneering local experiments in provinces such as Sichuan and Anhui emphasized the autonomy of production teams and explored the expansion of "private plots" (自留地)

and the development of “diversified operations” (多种经营) to alleviate rural poverty. (Xiao, 2019, pp.30-34) This top-down relaxation of rural policy provided a permissive atmosphere that courageous local actors quickly exploited. Seizing upon this loosening, a small number of peasants began to experiment with, a small number of peasants began to experiment with the Household Responsibility System, a practice that had been repeatedly denounced in previous years. The most renowned of these instances—the secret pact of Xiaogang Village in Anhui Province to divide communal land among individual households—took place precisely during the period of the 1978 Central Working Conference. Late on the night of November 24, 1978, eighteen villagers from Xiaogang pressed their bright red thumbprints onto a "secret contract" to partition the land, a defiant act that would eventually become the symbol of China's rural transformation. (Li, 1993, pp. 10-12)

In urban sectors, pluralism manifested as a cautious yet significant functional differentiation within the institutional structure. To absorb the mounting employment pressure from millions of returning "sent-down youth," the regime loosened restrictions on urban collective enterprises and permitted a fraction of individual handicraft businesses to operate as supplementary fillers to the state sector. More pivotally, this period witnessed nascent experiments in expanding enterprise autonomy. (He, 2003) Pioneered in provinces like Sichuan, these initiatives allowed state-owned enterprises to retain a portion of their profits after fulfilling administrative quotas. (Xiao, 2009, p.38) This practice effectively constituted a de facto acknowledgment of the enterprise as a relatively independent economic entity with its own interests, challenging the totalitarian logic that reduced enterprises to mere appendages of the state bureaucracy. Furthermore, the Hua era marked a structural loosening of the state's autarkic tendencies through the large-scale introduction of foreign technology and the cautious exploration of foreign capital utilization through government loans and compensation trade, which introduced external market benchmarks into domestic economic calculus as technical references.

These practical manoeuvres triggered a systematic reappraisal of "monistic" dogmas within the ideological sphere, culminating in the 1978 State Council Theory Workshop (国务院务虚会). Prompted by high-level delegations to Western Europe, Japan, and Yugoslavia, this workshop signalled a transition away from the rigid Maoist

dichotomy that viewed "plans" and "markets" as mutually exclusive. As Vice Premier Gu Mu (2009, p.308) observed:

A series of pivotal ideas began to emerge, including the correct application of the law of value, the reform of the economic structure, the adherence to distribution according to work and the development of diversified operations in rural areas. In particular, intense discussions were held regarding ways to strengthen the introduction of foreign technology, expand foreign trade exports, and adopt flexible methods for the utilization of foreign capital.

By re-acknowledging the objective "law of value," the regime provided an enabling cognitive framework for nascent economic plural practices to temporarily survive.

It must be emphasized that economic pluralism during this period remained in a highly incipient state. These changes were primarily confined to the margins of daily life and the technical supplementation of heavy industry; they did not reach the depth of restructuring core resource allocation or establishing formal legal protections. This development suggests that while the regime was retreating from total control, it had not yet crossed the threshold of a typological transition to a post-totalitarian system.

In a totalitarian system, the state maintains a monopoly over intellectual and spiritual life. During the Hua Guofeng era, pluralistic tendencies in cultural 的 mention manifested as a partial relinquishment of the state's "monopoly on truth" and a tentative shift from political propaganda toward more diversified narratives of life and science. The most prominent indicator was the 1978 National Science Conference, famously hailed as the "Spring of Science." By declaring that "science and technology are productive forces" and identifying intellectuals as part of the "working class," the regime effectively decoupled scientific inquiry from the constraints of class struggle. (Deng, 1994, p.86-92) This signalled a retreat of the state from ideological interference in the natural sciences, acknowledging that scientific development follows its own autonomous and objective laws. This resurgence of rationality introduced professional

expertise as a diverse dimension of social value, challenging the absolute dominance of political zeal.

Many cultural organizations that had been shut down during the Cultural Revolution were able to resume activities during this period. For example, in May 1978, the Third Expanded Meeting of the Third National Federation of Literary and Art Circles (CFLAC) announced the restoration of CFLAC, the Writers' Association, and other artistic and literary organizations. During this period, many world-renowned literary classics and works of literary theory published before the Cultural Revolution were reprinted. The People's Literature Publishing House's "Classics Reprint" initiative caused a sensation, sparking a massive nationwide book-buying fever.(Hong, 1999) By reviving the pre-Cultural Revolution cultural legacy, the state indirectly validated a more pluralistic intellectual landscape, creating a crucial bridge between the rigid Maoist era and the radical 'Emancipation of the Mind' that was to follow.

The gradual opening toward the outside world during the Hua era introduced a powerful external catalyst for cultural pluralism. A landmark event occurred in October 1978, coinciding with the signing of the Sino-Japanese Treaty of Peace and Friendship, when the first "Japanese Film Week" was held in seven major Chinese cities. The screening of films such as *Manhunt* (追捕) triggered a seismic shift in the Chinese public's aesthetic and cultural sensibilities. In terms of visual and narrative logic, *Manhunt* presented a modernized urban landscape and a fast-paced storytelling style that stood in stark contrast to the stagnant "Model Operas" (样板戏) of the previous decade. (Liu, 2015, p.121-130) More importantly, the film's protagonist, Du Qiu, redefined the concept of the "hero" for a generation of Chinese viewers. Unlike the "larger-than-life" revolutionary archetypes, Du Qiu represented a silent, cool, and autonomous individual whose motivations were driven by personal justice and romantic longing rather than class struggle. While Hong Kong and Taiwanese pop culture—most notably the music of Teresa Teng (邓丽君)—had already begun to permeate the Chinese social fabric via clandestine channels, the public screening of *Manhunt* held a distinct institutional significance. Unlike the "underground" consumption of Mandopop, which represented a private re-appropriation of emotion, *Manhunt* was a state-sanctioned event. Its presence in the public square signalled a formal, top-down retreat from aesthetic monopoly. By juxtaposing the clandestine

“private pluralism” of pop music with the state-approved “public pluralism” of foreign cinema, we can see the Hua era as a period where the boundaries of the permissible were being fundamentally renegotiated, marking the first time in decades that the public could engage with lifestyles and emotions relatively insulated from, though not independent of, the totalitarian political grid.

Simultaneously, the cultural landscape witnessed a "thaw" in creative expression. Some artistic activities experienced a transition from underground “samizdat” to semi-public expression. The “No Name” Painting Group (无名画会), which had operated in strict secrecy during the peak of the Cultural Revolution, began organizing informal salon exhibitions in private apartments, replacing revolutionary icons with impressionistic landscapes and mundane domesticities. Simultaneously, the circulation of handwritten poetry manuscripts—most notably by poets who would later form the “Misty” poetry school(朦胧诗派)—proliferated within urban youth circles. These poems, such as Bei Dao’s early drafts of *The Answer*, substituted the collective language of class struggle with an intensely personal vocabulary of skepticism and existential angst. This bottom-up cultural resurgence, alongside the emergence of "Scar Literature" (伤痕文学), exemplified by works like Liu Xinwu's *The Class Counselor* (1977) and Lu Xinhua's *The Scar* (1978). (Hong, 2010, p.251) While these works remained politically aligned with the critique of the "Gang of Four," they successfully shifted the narrative focus from grand revolutionary archetypes to private emotions, individual tragedies, and humanitarian concerns. This reclamation of the "private sphere" of feeling represented a significant crack in the monolith of totalitarian propaganda.

When demarcating the social pluralism of this era, one must differentiate it from the structural social shifts that followed. Pluralism during the 1976–1978 period manifested as a softening of the totalitarian monistic identity, the initial resuscitation of “professional communities,” and the embryonic emergence of informal associations. The most vital shift was the transition from identity-based monism to functional pluralism. The 1977 Gaokao reform introduced meritocracy as a rival standard to political status, effectively breaking the state's monopoly over social mobility. By de-emphasizing “class origin” in favour of academic merit, the regime allowed for a social stratification based on knowledge and competency. This individual-level shift

was complemented by the revival of professional associations (such as the CFLAC) in 1978. These organizations, while still administrative arms of the state, signalled the return of the “professional community,” where individuals congregated based on technical expertise rather than political mobilization. Simultaneously, the emergence of semi-private intellectual circles—such as those surrounding the early “Stars” art group—represented an “informal pluralism.” However, this social space remained strictly “intra-systemic.” Individuals and groups remained parasitic on the “Danwei” system for all essential resources, from housing to creative materials. In Linz’s terms, such intra-systemic and resource-dependent pluralism falls short of even “limited pluralism,” remaining contingent rather than routinized.

In the institutional sphere, pluralism was manifested as an administrative thaw—a necessary unfreezing of the state machinery. This process focused on the re-establishment of basic functional boundaries to undo the indiscriminate blending of Party, state, and military roles that had characterized the Cultural Revolution. With the gradual replacement of the "Revolutionary Committees" by the restored State Council apparatus, state power began a return toward functional differentiation. The military’s withdrawal from direct local governance and the re-activation of specialized government ministries allowed for a degree of bureaucratic regularization. This transition moved the regime away from the erratic, campaign-style rule toward a more predictable administrative logic.

Taken together, the pluralism of the Hua era was best understood not as the emergence of limited pluralism, but as a pre-pluralistic thaw: a loosening of monistic control that permitted diversity of practice, taste, and function, without institutionalizing autonomous interests or stable channels of representation.

4.2.5 The First Phase of the Post-totalitarian Transition: The Hua Era in Retrospect

Based on the preceding analysis, it is evident that following the Huarentang Incident, the anticipated process of de-totalitarianization did indeed unfold. While the nominal facade of the regime remained largely unchanged, the core dimensions of leadership

and ideology underwent an out-of-type erosion—that is, a qualitative shift in the logic through which power was exercised and legitimated. Although changes in mobilization and pluralism remained limited to preliminary de-escalation and functional “thawing,” these developments indicate that the regime had irreversibly entered a de-totalitarianizing trajectory.

This trajectory was structurally compatible with, and subsequently carried forward by, the Deng Xiaoping era, representing a process characterized more by continuity than rupture. Many policies and structural adjustments that later became central to reform were already initiated during the Hua period, removing the most radical obstacles of the old system and creating the political space in which subsequent transformations could be clarified and institutionalized. This chapter does not argue that the post-totalitarian transition was completed during the Hua Guofeng era. Rather, it adopts a retrospective phase perspective: once the Deng-era reforms are incorporated into the same analytical horizon, the Hua period can be identified as the initial phase of a unified post-totalitarian transition. The designation of this phase rests not on its internal completeness, but on its structural continuity with the subsequent stage of consolidation.

In this sense, the Huarentang Incident should be understood as the critical starting point of China’s post-totalitarian transition, and the period of Hua’s leadership as the opening phase of a continuous, yet uneven, structural transformation.

This raises the critical question of why our observation and positioning of this era differ so markedly from the official CCP historiography that has dominated public consciousness and academic discourse for decades. There is no scholarly dispute regarding Hua Guofeng’s personal limitations—his unstable power base, reliance on Maoist legitimacy, and constrained manoeuvrability are well documented (Teiwes, 1984). Beyond these individual factors, however, much of the evidence of this transition was filtered, marginalized, or rendered analytically invisible by the Party’s “Historical Resolution,” which framed the period as “advancing haltingly” to consolidate the legitimacy of the succeeding leadership. More fundamentally, this discrepancy stems from several structural characteristics of the de-totalitarianization process at this specific stage.

A primary feature challenging traditional narratives was the transformation in the nature of supreme command. Unlike the “Mao-in-command” era, this was no longer a period of “Hua-in-command.” Hua’s personal directives could no longer unilaterally determine the system’s trajectory. This shift resulted, first, from the spontaneous decay of the totalitarian apparatus itself, which compelled political elites to manage rather than engineer systemic change in order to preserve stability. Second, despite formally holding the “trinity” of top offices, Hua lacked Mao’s absolute control over the military and the bureaucracy. As Veteran Revolutionaries returned to positions of influence, they increasingly dominated key administrative and military sectors. During this period, Deng Xiaoping was already advancing de-totalitarianizing initiatives; although these moves required Hua’s formal approval, they were no longer decided by him alone. This fragmentation and negotiation of authority constituted a clear structural manifestation of the de-totalitarianizing process.

Furthermore, the de-totalitarianization of the Hua era was obscured by a strategy of “Name and Reality Separation”. Confronted with the contradiction between pragmatically revising the Maoist line and preserving Mao’s authority as the foundation of his own legitimacy, Hua adopted a dual-track approach. While concrete policies increasingly departed from Maoist dogma, official propaganda continued to employ orthodox ideological language. This disjunction between discourse and practice did not negate the reality of de-totalitarianization; rather, it concealed it from interpretations reliant solely on formal rhetoric and contemporaneous media.

Finally, the historical significance of a policy cannot be inferred from its textual content alone but must be understood within the political field in which it operates. Although the rejection of Cultural Revolution extremism often took the form of a return to the “Seventeen Years” (1949–1966) status quo, dismissing this as mere restoration overlooks how the post-Mao context fundamentally altered the political effects of these measures. In the Mao era, pragmatic administrative adjustments functioned as subordinate patches, easily neutralized by the gravity of charismatic authority. In contrast, the post-Mao vacuum transformed the restoration of normalcy—such as administrative rationalization or the reinstatement of the Gaokao—into an outlet for a decade of accumulated transitional pressure. Once the Huarentang Incident opened the valve, even a return to earlier practices assumed a subversive

character. By channeling these volatile forces through the shell of the past, the Hua era did not restore the old order, but catalyzed an irreversible unfreezing of the monolith, laying the empirical foundations for the subsequent phase of transition.

In sum, the political transformation of the Hua Guofeng era was not a linear advance toward a predefined blueprint, but an extrication from the extreme state produced by the Cultural Revolution. While this process often manifested as a return to functional order, its momentum in multiple spheres exceeded previous limits, generating substantive breakthroughs. This uneven yet decisive departure from extremity initiated and decisively oriented the trajectory of China's post-totalitarian transition. Its dynamics were driven less by visionary design than by the spontaneous decay of the totalitarian apparatus and the calculative survival strategies of existing elites. After a decade of upheaval, the system's capacity for total control had eroded, compelling a retreat toward functional regularity.

Yet this configuration was inherently unstable. The fragmented power structure—defined by the uneasy balance between the formal mandate of the Moderates and the institutional weight of the Veteran Revolutionaries—could not persist as a durable equilibrium. A new round of political realignment was therefore inevitable. As authority was reconfigured through subsequent struggles, both the mechanisms and the depth of de-totalitarianization would be transformed, determining not only who would govern, but how far the transition would ultimately proceed.

4.3 The Moderates and the Veterans: The Path Toward a Showdown

4.3.1 Cooperation

After the removal of the Cultural Revolution faction, the moderate faction allied with the Veterans to establish a new high-level political framework, distributing power based on contributions made during the arrest of the Gang of Four. This collaboration remained stable for over a year. On one hand, the cooperation of in-office elder figures, particularly Ye Jianying, played a crucial role in eliminating the Cultural Revolution

faction and subsequently supporting Hua Guofeng. On the other hand, for Veterans who held no official positions at the time, Hua's leadership in removing their political adversaries fulfilled their desire to improve their circumstances and return to government. In essence, Hua implemented a political course that rejected the Cultural Revolution, earning a certain level of goodwill and support from the Veterans. This arrangement constituted a temporary coalition of convenience, grounded not in ideological convergence but in complementary needs: legitimacy and continuity for the Moderates, and political rehabilitation for the Veterans.

A key moment marking the Veteran Revolutionaries' return to power came in July 1977 at the Third Plenary Session of the 10th Central Committee, where Deng Xiaoping was reinstated as Vice Chairman of the CCP, Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission, Vice Premier, and Chief of the General Staff. Deng's return significantly strengthened the Veterans' influence within the central leadership. As a symbolic figure of the veteran revolutionary faction, his reinstatement signalled opportunities for other Veterans to return as well. At the 11th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, the elder faction had held a majority both in the Politburo and in its Standing Committee. In December 1977, another prominent elder, Hu Yaobang, was appointed head of the CCP Organization Department, granting him control over personnel appointments and further facilitating the political comeback of elder figures.

From October 1976 to February 1978, the two factions essentially remained in a cooperative phase. Despite their historical grievances, long-standing differences in political status within the Party, and conflicting views on Mao and the Cultural Revolution, they shared common short-term goals. With the Moderates leading the political line and the Veterans gradually regaining power, both factions worked together to purge the remnants of the Cultural Revolution faction and correct the errors of that period. Their shared interests initially outweighed their differences. However, as the Veterans' influence grew and demands for a deeper repudiation of the Cultural Revolution intensified, tensions between the two factions began to surface, leading to an increasingly fierce power struggle.

4.3.2 Conflict

The shift from cooperation to conflict between the Moderates and the Veterans can be attributed to three main factors: First, the Veterans' faction put forward increasing demands, including a broader political reinstatement, greater power, and official redress for the historical injustices that had led to their downfall. However, Hua Guofeng was no longer able to fully accommodate these demands. Second, while Ye Jianying, as an in-office elder, initially served as a key representative of the Veterans' faction, the faction's internal dynamics shifted as more Veterans—especially Deng Xiaoping—returned to power. Ye Jianying could no longer fully represent the faction, and his support for Hua no longer guaranteed the faction's overall backing. Third, some members of the Veteran Revolutionary faction, particularly intellectuals within the Party, were dissatisfied with the Moderates' conservative stance on ideological discourse. They sought to push for greater ideological openness and fewer restrictions. While ideological dissatisfaction provided a visible arena for confrontation, it was fundamentally rooted in the shifting balance of power and moral authority between the two factions.

In this conflict, the most prominent figure within the moderate faction was Wang Dongxing. Originally Mao Zedong's personal bodyguard, Wang later controlled the Central Guard Bureau during the late Cultural Revolution. He had deep personal grievances against the Gang of Four, which made him instrumental in their arrest under Hua Guofeng's leadership. His clashes with the Veterans stemmed from two key factors. First, his power was largely derived from his personal ties to Mao, and he had actively participated in purging elder officials during the Cultural Revolution. Second, starting in March 1977, he was appointed as Director and Party Secretary of the Office for Editing and Publishing Mao's Works, as well as First Vice President of the Central Party School, holding some influence over ideological matters. After the 11th Party Congress, he was further elevated to Vice Chairman of the CCP, overseeing ideological affairs. However, Wang lacked both the expertise and experience to effectively manage ideological issues. Under Hua's leadership, the Party's ideological rhetoric remained conservative, creating a disconnect between official discourse and actual policy directions. This ideological rigidity became a vulnerability for the Moderates and an easy target for criticism. Wang Dongxing, being one of the more

conservative figures within the moderate faction, became central to many of the factional disputes.

Some of the most notable conflicts involved Wang directly. For example, he criticized an article advocating distribution according to labour, which had been written under Deng Xiaoping's guidance, as well as the now-famous essay "Practice Is the Sole Criterion for Testing Truth". (Hu, 2006) In response, Hu Yaobang and others organized counterarguments to defend the essay, with Deng openly endorsing it. (Wu, 1995) Additionally, Wang Dongxing, Wu De, and Ji Dengkui refused to hand over the case files from the Cultural Revolution purges, compiled by the Central Special Case Group, to Hu Yaobang's Organization Department. (Li, 2005, p.315) In structural terms, this resistance functioned to obstruct the rehabilitation of cases in which they had been implicated, thereby protecting their own political survival.

Deng Xiaoping also encountered direct conflicts with Hua Guofeng over military affairs, as his growing authority in the military began to clash with Hua's formal position as Chairman of the Central Military Commission. (Vogel, 2001, p. 229; Niu, 2012) These conflicts were concentrated between March and July 1978. While many of them did not directly involve Hua, the Veterans' faction naturally held him responsible for Wang Dongxing's actions. Wang's prominence in these conflicts did not reflect an autonomous political line but rather exposed the structural vulnerabilities of the Moderate coalition, whose ideological rigidity lacked both coherence and credibility.

As the political rehabilitation of wronged officials progressed and the Cultural Revolution line was further discredited, the Veterans increasingly gained the moral high ground. In contrast, many of the Moderates had participated in Cultural Revolution-era purges and crackdowns. Their survival or rise during the Cultural Revolution became a political liability at this time. As tensions mounted, pre-existing divisions and even personal grievances erupted, intensifying the struggle. The Moderates found themselves in an increasingly precarious position, as the logic of political survival shifted from "loyalty to the late leader" to "rectifying historical trauma"—a domain where the Veterans held undisputed moral and historical authority.

4.3.3 The Veteran Revolutionaries Prepared to Seize Power

By September 1978, Deng Xiaoping likely recognized that the Veteran Revolutionary faction had amassed to move the struggle from backstage negotiation into the open offensive against the Moderates. In late September, Deng held a series of meetings with local leaders in northeastern China, where he openly contrasted the principle of "seeking truth from facts and proceeding from reality" with the "Two Whatevers". Deng also criticized rigid ideological dogma and introduced viewpoints that diverged from the central leadership's official stance. He explicitly suggested, "Let's just lay the issues out in the open instead of discussing them behind closed doors," (CCLROC, 2004, p.401) thereby making the factional struggle public. Over the next two months, the Veterans responded swiftly to Deng's call. Senior leaders across the country, including military figures and regional Party chiefs, issued statements endorsing "seeking truth from facts and proceeding from reality". (Huang, 2009, p.208-209)

By this point, the conditions were ripe, and a new power struggle was about to unfold. China's de-totalitarianization was about to enter a new phase.

5 Chapter 5 Deng Xiaoping and the Second Phase of Post-totalitarian Transition

5.1 Deng's De-totalitarianizing Agenda

While the de-totalitarianization of the Hua Guofeng era was characterized by “crisis management” and systemic “decay”—with relatively little proactive breakthrough or holistic planning from the political centre—the period beginning in late 1978 under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping saw a significant increase in the element of “de-totalitarianization by choice” within a constrained post-Mao structural environment. This phase was marked by a more pronounced role for political elites in driving a self-aware, directionally purposeful restructuring of institutions, guided by a logic of calibrated control. Although social pressures and the natural erosion of the old system remained vital drivers of transformation, the historical record indicates that the Veteran Revolutionaries faction, led by Deng, increasingly sought to shape the rhythm, depth, and boundaries of the process.

An examination of the pivotal four-month period—from the Central Work Conference in late 1978 to Deng Xiaoping's articulation of the “Four Cardinal Principles” in March 1979—reveals that his de-totalitarianizing agenda was not merely a series of makeshift expedients. Rather, a negative vision for political transformation—defining which boundaries could not be crossed—had begun to crystallize during these initial months of power consolidation. This period outlined the basic governing logic of “Deng-style de-totalitarianization” and, in doing so, established the foundational template for the second stage of China's post-totalitarian transition.

5.1.1 The Central Work Conference

The Central Work Conference of November 1978 was the true crucible of China's second-phase de-totalitarianization. While the subsequent Third Plenary Session is often celebrated as the official “turning point,” it was merely the formal codification

of the political breakthroughs achieved during the thirty-six days of this Work Conference. This meeting was a strategic theatre where the Veteran Revolutionaries, led by Deng Xiaoping, utilized the charge of the “Two Whatevers” to dismantle the moderate faction’s legitimacy and install a new political order.

The offensive against the Moderates had been carefully signaled by Deng as early as September 1978. When the conference convened on November 10, the Veterans' faction had already secured a commanding structural advantage. The attendees of this meeting included the Politburo, the Central Military Commission, vice-chairmen of the National People’s Congress, provincial leaders, and military district commanders. Yu Guangyuan (2008, p.16-19), a key participant and observer, noted that after studying the roster, it was evident the Veterans held a crushing majority. This was, in essence, a conference "where something could be accomplished"—meaning the Veterans possessed the "votes" and the seniority to force a redistribution of power.

The Central Work Conference, convened on November 10, 1978, was originally orchestrated by Hua Guofeng as a meeting, primarily focusing on economic issues, and the formal transition of the Party's strategic priority toward the modernization construction. Notably, Deng Xiaoping was absent during the conference's opening, as he was conducting a diplomatic tour of Southeast Asia. By the time he returned to Beijing on November 14, the political landscape of the meeting had already been fundamentally transformed. The catalyst for this shift was Chen Yun’s intervention on November 12 during the Northeast Group discussion. By raising the "unjust, false, and wrong cases" (冤假错案) regarding Bo Yibo, Tao Zhu, Peng Dehuai and other Veteran Revolutionaries, Kang Sheng’s mistakes in the Cultural Revolution and specifically demanding the reversal of the verdict on the 1976 Tiananmen Incident, Chen triggered an outpouring of debate across all group sessions. These discussions rapidly expanded to include the "Criterion of Truth" debate. All these issues exerted immense pressure on the moderate leadership, who were significantly outnumbered. There was an inherent political legitimacy in the anger expressed by the veteran delegates, who had only recently returned to office after being purged during the Cultural Revolution. Conversely, the moderate leaders were inextricably linked to the suppression of the 1976 Tiananmen Incident, the delays in rehabilitating victims, and the obstruction of the "Criterion of Truth" debate. This dynamic cast the moderate

faction as the primary obstacle to the process of "Setting things right from chaos" , leaving them politically defenseless against the moral authority of the resurgent Veterans.

November 25 marked the decisive point in this power realignment. During the plenary session that day, Hua Guofeng delivered a speech in which he praised the "democratic atmosphere" of the conference and offered a positive response to the grievances raised. By officially announcing the rehabilitation of those involved in the Tiananmen Incident and other historical cases, Hua effectively conceded to the Veterans' demands. In doing so, he indirectly acknowledged the errors of his own previous positions. This speech served as a signal that, in the high-level power struggle, the Veteran Revolutionaries had achieved a definitive, stage-wise victory. The shifting hierarchy was further confirmed that evening. When the Standing Committee of the Politburo met to hear reports on the rehabilitation of the Tiananmen Incident, it was Deng Xiaoping, rather than Hua Guofeng, who delivered the definitive remarks on behalf of the Central Committee. This transition in the role of the primary spokesperson underscored Hua's loss of actual authority. Thus, in the absence of any public rupture, violent confrontation, or formal institutional process, the outcome of the power struggle between the Moderates and the Veterans had effectively been settled. (Zhu, 1998; Yu, 2008) Lacking the support of the military and realizing he was outmatched by the veteran elite's collective strength, Hua Guofeng chose not to utilize his supreme office for a desperate resistance, allowing for a quiet realignment of the CCP's leadership core.

Following the pivotal events of November 25, the Veteran Revolutionaries were greatly emboldened and began to press their advantage to consolidate victory. On one hand, the political offensive against the moderate faction escalated, becoming even more targeted. Core moderate figures, particularly Wang Dongxing, faced direct criticism by name. He was denounced for his stubborn adherence to the "Two Whatevers," his historical role in obstructing Deng Xiaoping's return to power, and his persistent suppression of the "Criterion of Truth" debate and the rehabilitation of "unjust, false, and wrong" cases. On the other hand, the Veterans moved to address the issue of the Party's central leadership personnel. It was at this juncture that Deng Xiaoping proposed the principle of "only additions, no removals" (只进不出). To

maintain overall stability and avoid a disruptive rupture, Deng suggested that the principal formal positions held by the moderate leaders remain intact. (Yu, 1998, p.105; CCLROC, 2004, pp.526-527) Adhering to this principle, the conference participants did not demand the outright dismissal of the "Whateverists." A representative instance of this approach was the proposal put forward by the Northwest Group, which recommended that figures such as Wang Dongxing, Chen Xilian, and Ji Dengkui no longer hold certain key concurrent and substantive posts. Based on this strategic realignment, the conference delegates put forward a series of heavyweight personnel recommendations to the Central Committee: they suggested that Chen Yun be added to the Politburo Standing Committee as a Party Vice Chairman, with a seniority ranking placed ahead of Wang Dongxing; that Deng Yingchao, Hu Yaobang, and Wang Zhen enter the Politburo; and that Xi Zhongxun, Wang Renzhong, Zhou Hui, Song Renqiong, Han Guang, Hu Qiaomu, and Chen Zaidao be added to the Central Committee. Although these were formally framed as "proposals" pending ratification by the upcoming Third Plenary Session, they signalled a complete win for the Veteran Revolutionaries. Through this flexible "addition-only" strategy, the Veterans successfully secured a majority within the decision-making core without triggering systemic upheaval, effectively hollowing out Hua Guofeng's supreme authority. However, the policy of "no removals" was merely a temporary strategic arrangement. The fact that the moderate leaders continued to occupy high-ranking positions remained a threat to the power of the Veteran Revolutionaries, an unstable situation that would have to be settled eventually.

At the close of the conference, the reports from the three top leaders—Deng, Ye, and Hua— formalized the new power structure and proposed a broad agenda for de-totalitarianization in the coming stage. Deng Xiaoping's closing address was later canonized by the CCP as the programmatic document of the "Reform and Opening-up" era. Indeed, as the new de facto supreme leader, Deng did not limit himself to the specific issues discussed during the conference. Instead, he delivered a strategic declaration for China's future direction that was groundbreaking in both substance and style, moving away from the rigid, traditional "Party jargon" (党八股). This characteristic is primarily manifested in the first section, which centers on the theme

of emancipating the mind. In describing the dangers of rigid thinking, Deng (1994, p.142) noted:

Once people's thinking becomes rigid, they will increasingly act according to fixed notions. To cite some examples, strengthening Party leadership is interpreted as the Party's monopolizing and interfering in everything. Exercising centralized leadership is interpreted as erasing distinctions between the Party and the government, so that the former replaces the latter. And maintaining unified leadership by the Central Committee is interpreted as "doing everything according to unified standards."

Deng (1994, p.142-143) further criticized the dangers of so-called "book worship" (本本主义) :

Once people's thinking becomes rigid, book worship, divorced from reality, becomes a grave malady. Those who suffer from it dare not say a word or take a step that isn't mentioned in books, documents or the speeches of leaders: everything has to be copied. Thus responsibility to the higher authorities is set in opposition to responsibility to the people.

Then, Deng (1994, p.143) formally validated the "Criterion of Truth" debate and concluded with his most famous warning:

When everything has to be done by the book, when thinking turns rigid and blind faith is the fashion, it is impossible for a party or a nation to make progress. Its life will cease and that party or nation will perish. Comrade Mao Zedong said this time and again during the rectification movements. Only if we emancipate our minds, seek truth from facts, proceed from reality in everything and integrate theory with practice, can we carry out our socialist

modernization programme smoothly, and only then can our Party further develop Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought. In this sense, the debate about the criterion for testing truth is really a debate about ideological line, about politics, about the future and the destiny of our Party and nation.

As the preceding passages demonstrate, Deng was not merely engaging in questions of thought. By using thought problems as his point of entry, he launched a selective critique of the ideological absolutism and organizational monism of the Mao era and moved swiftly to establish his own realist guiding philosophy for future governance, which was of great significance in advancing de-totalitarianization to a broader and deeper level. His attack on "book worship" was a direct strike against the "Two Whatevers," precisely hitting the vulnerability of Hua Guofeng's leadership—namely, his dependence on Mao for legitimacy and his ideological strategy of dissociating "name" from "reality". By branding Hua as a practitioner of book worship, Deng successfully constructed a powerful narrative of transitioning from the "Two Whatevers" to the "Emancipation of the Mind," effectively elevating this shift into a critical choice concerning the very survival of the Party and the nation. By branding Hua as a practitioner of "book worship," Deng successfully constructed a powerful narrative of transitioning from the "Two Whatevers" to the "Emancipation of the Mind" and effectively elevated this ideological shift into a critical choice concerning the very survival of the Party and the nation, thereby forging the necessary legitimacy for the transfer of supreme power.

In the second part of his address, Deng discussed "democracy." Deng's so-called "democracy" primarily referred to democratic centralism in Party decision-making and a more tolerant attitude toward differing opinions. Within this context, he mentioned the rehabilitation of the Tiananmen Incident, and stated that:

The recent reversal of the verdict on the Tiananmen Incident has elated the people of all of China's nationalities and greatly stimulated mass enthusiasm for socialism. The masses should be encouraged to offer criticisms. There is nothing to worry about even if a few malcontents take advantage of democracy

to make trouble. We should deal with such situations appropriately, having faith that the overwhelming majority of the people are able to use their own judgement. One thing a revolutionary party does need to worry about is its inability to hear the voice of the people. (Deng, 1994, pp.144-145)

This passage clearly refers to the Xidan Democracy Wall movement. On November 27, during a conversation with foreign guests, Deng Xiaoping expressed his stance on the Democracy Wall for the first time; his sentiments were largely consistent with those voiced here, providing a significant boost to the movement's momentum. The mention of these two events—the Tiananmen Incident and the Democracy Wall—carries profound symbolic weight. Just as the 1976 Tiananmen movement had been a show of support for Deng, the Xidan Democracy Wall was initially aligned with his interests. By rehabilitating the former and tolerating the latter, Deng effectively leveraged popular outcry and the “democratic” atmosphere to topple Hua Guofeng from his position as the supreme leader.

Furthermore, Deng introduced the concept of "economic democracy," which referred to changing the excessive centralization of the economic management system by delegating power downward to stimulate the initiative of various sectors. Finally, he mentioned that guaranteeing democracy requires the strengthening of the legal system. While this section appears to address the concepts of “democracy” and “rule by law,” its actual content did not involve any transformation of the country's fundamental political system. Although it provided some guidance for the subsequent de-totalitarianization policies and encouraged the expression of dissenting opinions from the public (providing a "green light" for Democracy Wall), the discourse in this part is not particularly noteworthy.

The third part, which discussed handling "legacy issues" for the sake of "looking forward," revealed the conservative side of Deng's strategic vision. He made it clear that while specific "errors" of the past must be corrected, the reflection on and negation of the totalitarian system must be limited. The core issue was the assessment of Mao and the Cultural Revolution. To safeguard “stability and unity”, Deng (1994, pp.148-

149) made clear his stance on protecting Mao as the bedrock of legitimacy of Party's rule, by reaffirming:

It is no exaggeration to say that were it not for Chairman Mao there would be no New China. Mao Zedong Thought has nurtured our whole generation... Without Mao Zedong Thought, the Communist Party of China would not exist today... Mao Zedong Thought will forever remain the greatest intellectual treasure of our Party, our army and our people.

Regarding the Cultural Revolution, Deng's stance was remarkably cautious:

The "cultural revolution" should also be viewed scientifically and in historical perspective. In initiating it Comrade Mao Zedong was actuated mainly by the desire to oppose and prevent revisionism. As for the shortcomings... and the mistakes... at an appropriate time they should be summed up and lessons should be drawn from them. (Deng, 1994, p.149)

This section warrants profound scrutiny, as its ideological stance and tone diverge sharply from the first part. While the preceding discourse offered a trenchant indictment of Maoist excesses, the narrative here shifts toward a defensive posture regarding Mao and his legacy. This pivot serves as an explicit way to set the final boundaries for Deng's de-totalitarianization agenda; the extent to which Mao was repudiated essentially dictated the ultimate limits of the reform process. At this juncture, Deng had clearly not formulated a concrete strategy for reconciling Mao's complex heritage with the requirements of the new era. This ambiguity is encapsulated in his concluding remarks:

The "Cultural Revolution" has become a stage in the course of China's socialist development, hence we must evaluate it. However, there is no need to do so

hastily. Serious research must be done before we can make a scientific appraisal of this historical stage. It may take a rather long time to fully understand and assess some of the particular issues involved. We will probably be able to make a more correct analysis of this period in history after some time has passed than we can right now. (Deng, 1994, p.149)

But why was he so eager to establish a boundary that he himself had not yet fully defined? Firstly, as he noted, this was a matter of universal concern both at home and abroad; as the newly ascended paramount leader, he felt compelled to take a public stance. Secondly, and more crucially, lay the issue of “stability and unity” underpinning this global attention. To understand what 'stability and unity' truly signified, we can examine his speeches from late November. As recorded in his official Chronicle, he told foreign visitors that China would never follow Khrushchev's example by denouncing its former leader. For Deng, Khrushchev's “Secret Report” was a cautionary tale of how de-Stalinization led to chaos in the Soviet bloc. He was resolved to move China away from totalitarianism without triggering that same kind of upheaval.

From this perspective, “looking forward” signified more than just shifting the party's focus toward modernization. It also embodied Deng's vision of forging a stable, new political structure during the process of de-totalitarianization to sustain those modernization goals. This represented a sophisticated strategic foresight that Hua Guofeng—who was preoccupied with managing immediate crises and the pressures of de-radicalization while holding an unstable grip on power—was simply unable to manifest during the initial transitional stage.

The fourth part of Deng's speech turned to more concrete matters, specifically addressing the systems and methods of administrative management and new economic policies. The sole highlight was his mention that:

I think we should allow some regions and enterprises and some workers and peasants to earn more and enjoy more benefits sooner than others, in accordance with their hard work and greater contributions to society. If the

standard of living of some people is raised first, this will inevitably be an impressive example to their “neighbours”, and people in other regions and units will want to learn from them. (Deng, 1994, p.152)

This was far more than a mere adjustment of economic policy; it was a challenge to the ascetic egalitarian ideology of the Mao era. By advocating for income disparity based on productivity, Deng gave a veiled endorsement of the fundamental principles of a market economy. This concept was later simplified into the famous slogan, "letting a part of the population get rich first" (让一部分人先富起来), which became the rallying cry for introducing market mechanisms into the Chinese socialist framework.

Through this address, we can discern Deng’s vision for moving China away from totalitarianism—a blueprint that was still taking shape in his mind as he took the reins of power. As the rehabilitations for the purges and repressions of the totalitarian era progressed and the veteran revolutionary Veterans made their full political comeback, it became clear that a further dismantling and departure from the Maoist system was inevitable. This stance was explicit. At this stage, his emphasis lay in drawing a sharp ideological line against the "Two Whatevers" while introducing innovative concepts for economic diversification. However, he remained cognizant that such reflection and revision must be tempered. As for where exactly the line should be drawn, he had not yet reached a definitive conclusion.

In contrast to Deng’s strategic address, the report delivered by Ye Jianying was less substantive in content. Instead, its significance lay in the immense political weight it carried. With his immense military and moral prestige, Ye expressed his support for the new reorganization of power and legitimized the power shift by emphasizing "democratic" spirit within the Party. Ultimately, his stance served primarily to stabilize the Party’s internal political ecology and provide the "ballast" necessary for Deng’s de-totalitarianization agenda.

Hua Guofeng concluded with a report that was essentially a strategic retreat. Beyond summarizing the significant achievements of the session and arranging the agenda for the upcoming Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee, the most critical

aspect of his address was his admission of error. Hua admitted that he bore primary responsibility for the formulation and promotion of the "Two Whatevers." However, he did not directly admit to the accusations of suppressing the debate on the Criterion of Truth, merely stating that he had accepted the general consensus and now supported the principle that practice is the sole criterion for testing truth. Finally, he addressed the issue of collective leadership, proposing that, from then on, official documents and reports should no longer use the phrase "Chairman Hua and the Central Committee", but simply refer to "the Central Committee". Hua Guofeng's speech further confirmed the transfer of supreme power and the ultimate defeat of the "Whateverist" faction in the power struggle. This transition can be characterized as a typical post-totalitarian power contest. Departing from the brutal patterns of the Mao era—defined by public denunciations, violent purges, and physical humiliation—both factions acted with a heightened concern for personal security and systemic stability. This moment marked the transition from a predominantly crisis-driven de-totalitarianization to a more elite-guided second phase within the same post-totalitarian trajectory.

5.1.2 Unprecedented Atmosphere of Freedom

Following the Central Work Conference and the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee, an unprecedented atmosphere of freedom emerged both within the Party and in society, marking a rare, fragile alignment between the state's tactical need for "thought emancipation" and society's pent-up desire for justice and freedom.

On January 1, 1979, the People's Daily published an editorial titled "Concentrate Major Efforts on Production and Construction". Then, the CCP accelerated efforts to redress wrongful convictions and revise past policies targeting so-called "class enemies," effectively dissolving the caste-like social structure that had defined the totalitarian era and ideologically deconstructing Maoist radical ideology. A landmark and haunting example was the rehabilitation of Zhang Zhixin in Liaoning Province; her posthumous recognition as a revolutionary martyr in early 1979—following the revelation that her vocal cords had been severed before her execution to prevent her from shouting slogans. (Xiao, 2008, pp.17-19) A pivotal move in dismantling the judicial terror of the totalitarian era was the abolition of the "Six Public Security

Articles" (公安六条). This 1967 decree, which had institutionalized the persecution of anyone vaguely accused of "maligning the leadership," was revoked, signalling a strategic retreat from the arbitrary state violence that had characterized the Cultural Revolution. The institutional shift toward a more codified system was further solidified by the decision of the Standing Committee of the Fifth National People's Congress to establish a Legal Affairs Committee, led by the rehabilitated Peng Zhen. The institutional loosening was mirrored in the economic sphere by the liberalization of rural market trade (集市贸易), effectively decriminalizing small-scale private commerce and allowing the long-suppressed "tail of capitalism" to breathe life back into the stagnant economy (Teiwes & Sun, 2016). Simultaneously, pilot discussions on the Household Responsibility System continued in Anhui and Sichuan as part of experimental reforms (Teiwes & Sun, 2016; Xiao, 2019).

In terms of ideology, this "right to truth" permeated the Party's highest intellectual circles during the Theory Work Conference convened on January 18, 1979, where Deng Xiaoping and Hu Yaobang encouraged an unprecedented expansion of permissible thought. Wang Ruoshui and Li Honglin made bold breakthroughs in "storming the forbidden zones," discussing previously taboo issues and sharply criticizing Mao Zedong's personality cult. As the conference progressed, discussions increasingly expanded beyond the ideological boundaries set by the Central Committee. These topics included a deep and comprehensive critique of both the Cultural Revolution and Mao Zedong, a denunciation of the cult of personality and lifelong tenure for leaders and calls for democracy and the rule of law. The concepts of "democracy" and "rule by law" discussed at the meeting clearly diverged from Deng Xiaoping's address at the Central Working Conference. For instance, participants pointed out that the People's Congress was not truly elected by the people—and even if it were, it remained a mere formality since all decisions were ultimately dictated by Party meetings. Other pressing questions were raised: "Which is superior: the law or the Party committee?" and the warning that if China failed to implement democracy, society would inevitably gravitate toward an admiration for "bourgeois democracy." (see Goldman, 1991; Wu, 1995, p.58-85; Su, 1996, p. 80-110). A watershed moment in this elite critique occurred in early March 1979, when Lu Dingyi, the veteran former propaganda chief who had been purged during the

Cultural Revolution, returned to the political scene with a searingly influential article. Lu utilized his immense prestige to indirectly but devastatingly criticize Mao Zedong's late-career failures, specifically the "Leftist" radicalism that had derailed the Great Leap Forward. By framing the Cultural Revolution not as a momentary lapse but as the result of a long-term deviation from "Scientific Socialism," Lu Dingyi provided high-level justification for a bold re-evaluation of Mao's legacy.

The most striking demonstration of social power of this period was the Xidan Democracy Wall Movement. On November 27, 1978, Deng Xiaoping had expressed understanding and tolerance toward big-character posters in a conversation with foreign guests, which propelled the movement to its peak as it initially served as a strategic ally to the Reformists in their struggle to displace the "Whateverists." However, a critical divergence soon emerged between the discourse of the streets and that of the Party halls. While Party intellectuals at the Theory Work Conference were still debating the "true" meaning of socialism and criticizing Mao within the boundaries of the system, the activists on the Democracy Wall began to look outward for new intellectual weapons. These social activists began to introduce liberal concepts and theoretical resources to dismantle the very foundations of the totalitarian structure. Moving beyond the critique of "bureaucratism" or "leftist errors," they utilized terms like "individual liberty," "natural rights," and "pluralism" to challenge the CCP's monopoly on power. On December 5, 1978, Wei Jingsheng posted *The Fifth Modernization*, bluntly asserting that without political democracy, modernization would inevitably devolve into a tool for a new dictatorship. On January 5, 1979, Ren Wanding and others released *The Chinese Human Rights Declaration*, directly propelling the discourse from "intra-systemic correction" to "universal human rights." Even more groundbreaking was that this movement catalyzed a proliferation of spontaneous organizations and independent, privately-run periodicals. By-passing the state's monopoly on propaganda, activists founded independent journals such as *April 5th Forum*, *Fertile Earth*, *Today*, *Exploration*, and *Human Rights Paper*. They also established spontaneous organizations with embryonic political structures, such as the "China Human Rights Alliance" and the "Enlightenment Society." The "Democratic Discussion Groups" in Shanghai asserted that "the root of all evil is the dictatorship of the proletariat" and called for the "firm and thorough criticism of the Communist Party of China." Another spontaneous organization in Shanghai, the "Association for the

Promotion of Socialist Democratic Systems," was even more radical, claiming that "overthrowing the Communist Party is the will of the people" and advocating for "governing the country using capitalism." This sprout of "horizontal organization" posed a fundamental threat to the monolithic power of the CCP. This leap—from socialist self-rectification to liberalism and the sprout of "horizontal organization"—meant that the social movement had formally breached the CCP's core political forbidden zones.

Moreover, this momentum of defiance was amplified by a massive wave of collective actions and petitions (上访) that flooded the capital and major cities, as marginalized groups moved from private grievance to public protest. The petitioners' demands were starkly pragmatic: they sought the formal reversal of "counter-revolutionary" verdicts, the restoration of lost jobs and confiscated property, and the return of urban household registration (Hukou) for those illegally exiled to rural areas during the Cultural Revolution. (see Widor, 1979; Garside, 1981, pp.212-298; Xiao, 2008, pp.42-69). The most volatile of these groups were the "Educated Youth" (Zhiqing). Their protests were driven by the singular, desperate demand to end their rural exile and return to the city. Having been sent to the countryside under Mao's "Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages" campaign, they now demanded that the new leadership honor the "Emancipation of the Mind" by restoring their right to urban life and employment. The tension reached a climax on February 5, 1979, when thousands of youth in Shanghai lay across railway tracks to block trains, paralyzing a major national artery for hours. Crucially, a dangerous synergy began to emerge as these desperate petitioners began to align with the spontaneous organizations of the Democracy Wall in Beijing. This budding alliance between the radicalized intelligentsia and the marginalized masses was a nightmare for the CCP, as it signaled the birth of an autonomous political force capable of mobilizing across class lines.

Diplomatically, this internal "thaw" was powerfully reinforced by the formal establishment of Sino-U.S. relations on January 1, 1979, and Deng Xiaoping's historic visit to the United States. This was not merely a strategic realignment but a profound cultural watershed; state-controlled media suddenly broadcast images of American prosperity and technology. Deng's pragmatic persona during the trip—epitomized by his donning of a ten-gallon hat at a Texas rodeo—signalled a departure from Maoist

austerity. This opening created a powerful "demonstration effect," as the arrival of American journalists and Western films made the pursuit of freedom and individual rights seem like a global norm rather than a subversive conspiracy. On the Democracy Wall, the "Letter to President Carter" appeared. It lamented the lack of human rights and democratic protections in China, offered high praise for the Declaration of Independence, and affirmed the United States to be the most democratic country in the world. (Huang, 2011)

5.1.3 The Four Cardinal Principles

The Party leadership was divided in response to the surging social movements of the time. As early as January 2, 1979, Hua Guofeng held a discussion with Hu Yaobang and Hu Qiaomu regarding current political trends in society. During this meeting, Hua expressed a dual concern: while he acknowledged the need to monitor social dynamics, he was wary of "flipping the pancake"—a reference to repeating the erratic policy shifts of 1957, which saw the transition from "Open Door Rectification" to the "Anti-Rightist Campaign." He argued that the Party should not encourage free speech in the name of democracy only to pivot toward a crackdown on anarchism when issues arose; rather, he believed the development of democratic life must be guided in a healthy and orderly manner. However, the differing political inclinations of Hu Yaobang and Hu Qiaomu became immediately apparent the following day when these remarks were relayed to the Central Propaganda Department. Hu Qiaomu highlighted the dangers of the movement, comparing the domestic situation to the rise of dissidents in the Soviet Union. He noted with concern that some were now claiming socialism was inferior to revisionism, and revisionism inferior to capitalism. Warning that the current climate mirrored the early months of 1957—where Mao's critique of dogmatism inadvertently cleared the way for an opposing radical trend—Qiaomu argued that the situation in 1979 had become far more complex. In contrast, Hu Yaobang chose to anchor his interpretation on a different part of Hua Guofeng's instructions, placing his emphasis on the directive that, no matter what happened, the situation must not be allowed to devolve into another Anti-Rightist Campaign. This exchange revealed an emerging cleavage inside the leadership: how to harness the legitimacy of "thought

emancipation” without reproducing either the 1957-style policy reversal or an uncontrolled pluralization of political space.

Deng Xiaoping’s personal stance was of paramount importance in this delicate situation. Above all, the prevailing "democratic atmosphere" was a direct byproduct of his ascent to supreme leadership during the Central Working Conference, where he spearheaded the rehabilitation of those wrongly persecuted, and issued his clarion call for the "emancipation of the mind." More significantly, it was Deng himself who had encouraged the Theory Work Conference to break through ideological taboos, explicitly instructing not to establish "forbidden zones," while specifically requesting that they debate the issue of democracy. His initial tolerance and public validation of the Democracy Wall movement had likewise acted as a catalyst for its rapid growth. At this juncture, any sudden move to suppress these movements would have inevitably undermined the legitimacy of the newly consolidated leadership and its emancipatory rhetoric. Consequently, Deng’s eventual choice of position was undoubtedly the result of profound and careful deliberation.

Beginning in February 1979, a series of measures were implemented to suppress what the leadership perceived as politically destabilizing tendencies. However, from late January to early March, Deng was fully occupied with his historic visit to the United States and the outbreak of the Sino-Vietnamese War, leaving him little time to manage domestic affairs. When he finally refocused his attention on the home front, he immediately discovered that the Democracy Wall had become a platform for dissent, featuring sharp criticisms of both the war and his personal leadership. This realization prompted Deng to deliver a significant address concerning the Sino-Vietnamese War and the democratization movement on March 16, in which he condemned the Xidan Democracy Wall movement for having "gone too far." On the same day, the CCP Central Committee issued a document reaffirming the decision of the Third Plenary Session: the assessment of Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution must be handled with extreme caution and must not be rushed. The document argued that the recent practice of publishing articles openly criticizing Mao was neither prudent nor appropriate. This was widely seen as a direct rebuke of Lu Dingyi. Deng’s criticism of the Democracy Wall quickly prompted a sharp rebuttal from the movement's most radical wing; on March 25, Wei Jingsheng published a daring article in Exploration

titled "Democracy or a New Dictatorship," warning that "the people must be vigilant against Deng Xiaoping degenerating into a dictator" (Widor, 1979, p.160-164). This personal and ideological affront provided the final impetus for Deng to launch a comprehensive suppression of the "democratic atmosphere," shifting the state's priority in the short term from breaking dogma to restoring order.

On March 29, the Beijing Municipal Revolutionary Committee and the Ministry of Public Security took action to suppress big-character posters and unofficial publications. They cracked down on spontaneous grassroots organizations, arrested their core members, and prohibited "rallies and demonstrations that obstruct traffic" as well as "attacks on Party, government, and military organs, enterprises, and public institutions." (Xiao, 2008, pp.68-69) On March 30, during the second phase of the Theory Work Conference, Deng delivered the speech Upholding the Four Cardinal Principles, which emphasized upholding to the socialist path, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the leadership of the Communist Party, and Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought. Deng (1994, p. 173) stated:

The Central Committee considers that we must now repeatedly emphasize the necessity of upholding these four cardinal principles, because certain people (even if only a handful) are attempting to undermine them. In no way can such attempts be tolerated. No Party member and, needless to say, no Party ideological or theoretical worker, must ever waver in the slightest on this basic stand. To undermine any of the four cardinal principles is to undermine the whole cause of socialism in China, the whole cause of modernization.

Deng's introduction of these "Four Cardinal Principles" was a direct response to the challenges they faced during the Theory Work Conference and the Democracy Wall movement. However, with the exception of "the leadership of the Party," the other three principles were the core pillars of the old ideology. Having already observed Deng's stance toward the old ideological framework—specifically his earlier proposal to "understand Mao Zedong Thought comprehensively and accurately"—it is clear

that he intended to re-interpret the old ideology rather than strictly upholding it. In this speech, Deng (1994, p.171) stated:

Some comrades say that we should uphold “correct Mao Zedong Thought”, but not “erroneous Mao Zedong Thought”. This kind of statement is also wrong. What we consistently take as our guide to action are the basic tenets of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought or, to put it another way, the scientific system formed by these tenets. When it comes to individual theses, neither Marx and Lenin nor Comrade Mao could be immune from misjudgements of one sort or another. But these do not belong to the scientific system formed by the basic tenets of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought.

In other words, only that which is "correct" constitutes the "scientific system" and must be upheld; that which is "erroneous" does not belong to the scientific system and need not be upheld. But this raises the question: which parts are correct, and which are erroneous? When discussing the dictatorship of the proletariat, Deng stated: “ Lin Biao and the Gang of Four, while boosting their so-called 'all-round dictatorship', exercised a feudal fascist dictatorship over the people. We have smashed this dictatorship, which had nothing in common with the dictatorship of the proletariat but was its diametric opposite.” Therefore, as to what truly constitutes the dictatorship of the proletariat—whether the Cultural Revolution version or the Reform era version was the real one—this, too, was for the Party Central Committee of the time to decide. As for what constitutes socialism, the room for interpretation was even greater. In the years that followed, Deng (CCLROC, 2004, p.1070) himself suggested that Lenin’s New Economic Policy might represent a good form of socialism. Then, can the "leadership of the Party" also be subject to a "comprehensive and accurate" reinterpretation? Under conditions of political pluralism, if the Party holds power through elections (whether genuine or sham), could that still be considered "party leadership"? Theoretically, if political monism (one-party rule) could not be maintained, such a definition might be possible. However, to this day, the "party

leadership" referred to by the CCP remains synonymous with "the absolute leadership of the Party," leaving no room for alternative interpretations. In other words, the essence of the "Four Cardinal Principles" is that political monism is the true unshakeable bottom line. As for the old ideology—even if it is no longer used as a guide for action and it can be reinterpreted—the framework itself must be preserved (at least nominally) and cannot be completely overturned. This is because if the ideological framework were to be fully dismantled, it would be impossible to maintain the absolute leadership of the Party. This positioning was not merely based on an interpretation of the Four Cardinal Principles; it was explicitly confirmed by Deng himself. In his speech on January 16, 1980, Deng (1994, p. 266) stated:

Upholding the Four Cardinal Principles means upholding socialism, the dictatorship of the proletariat, Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought, and Party leadership. The crucial thing is to uphold Party leadership. Ours is a party rooted in Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought; it is the core force which leads in the struggle for the cause of socialism and in the exercise of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Later, in his speech on December 25, 1980, Deng (1994, p. 358) reiterated this stance:

The core of these four cardinal principles is upholding leadership by the Communist Party. We have said many times that without leadership by the Party a big country like China would be torn by strife and incapable of accomplishing anything. Whether inside or outside the Party, all tendencies towards weakening, breaking away from, opposing or liquidating leadership by the Party must be criticized.

This confirms that in Deng's mind, the leadership of the Party served as the essential vessel for the other three principles and was the single most non-negotiable element of his political framework.

Regarding the relationship between the "emancipation of the mind" and the Four Cardinal Principles, Deng (1994, p.178) stated:

Is anything I have said here out of keeping with the spirit of the Third Plenary Session of the Party's Eleventh Central Committee? No, everything I have said relates to measures that must be taken to carry out the principles and policies laid down at that session. Let me repeat: If we fail to adopt these measures, these principles and policies will come to naught. So will our effort to shift the focus of our work, so will our modernization programme, and so will the promotion of democracy inside and outside the Party. Therefore, it is entirely wrong to say, as some have said, that the Central Committee has decided on a 'tightening up' policy, or that it has changed its policy of promoting democracy.

Is there, in fact, a conflict between the “emancipation of the mind” and the Four Cardinal Principles? This is precisely the key to deciphering Deng's de-totalitarianization agenda.

5.1.4 Deng's De-Totalitarianization Agenda

The political developments over these four to five months allow for a clear outline of the de-totalitarianization agenda pursued by Deng Xiaoping and the mainstream force of the Veteran Revolutionaries. This agenda can be summarized in three key points.

First, unlike the Hua Guofeng era, the active choices made by the political elite during these months clearly became the primary driving force behind de-totalitarianization. This refers not only to the fact that Deng's "emancipation of the mind" speech and the CCP's acceleration of “Setting things right from chaos” (拨乱反正) significantly advanced the de-totalitarianization process, but also that other forces were only able to play an important role because of Deng's tolerant or encouraging attitude. Consequently, the nature of the de-totalitarianization blueprint in Deng Xiaoping's mind came to serve as a vital guide for the de-totalitarianization efforts that the

political elites would make. To explore this issue, one must return to the interpretation of the relationship between the "emancipation of the mind" and the Four Cardinal Principles. From the perspective of their core stances, the two are indeed antithetical. However, in terms of constructing a coherent de-totalitarianization blueprint, the two are—as Deng himself claimed—not contradictory at all. The former primarily served as a clarion call for the second stage of de-totalitarianization (which, while implying certain constraints, left them ill-defined), whereas the latter established definitive boundaries for this process. However, if these boundaries are set too rigidly, leaving no room for de-totalitarianization, then the contradiction remains. This necessitates a deeper investigation into what, exactly, these boundaries consist of. Judging from the Four Cardinal Principles and the corresponding acts of suppression, the boundary Deng set for de-totalitarianization was precisely the post-totalitarian system. In other words, Deng hoped that this wave of de-totalitarianization would transform the totalitarian system into a post-totalitarian one, which would then stabilize within that post-totalitarian framework for a relatively long period. To put it more simply: Deng wanted a post-totalitarian transition. The boundary of the post-totalitarian system drawn by Deng was remarkably precise. Party leadership—that is, political monism—is the ultimate, unshakeable bottom line. In the typology developed by Linz and Stepan (1996, pp.44-45), it is the sole constant between totalitarianism and post-totalitarianism. While the old ideology had largely lost its persuasive power and social control, its structural framework remained intact. No longer centred on utopian ideals, it was repurposed to safeguard the program of modernization. The suppression of spontaneous organizations and independent publications demonstrated Deng's requirement that cultural and social pluralism must be limited; it could not be allowed to become institutionally accountable or politically consequential. These characteristics are already sufficient to define Deng's objective as a post-totalitarian system. Consequently, in a period when the comprehensive "Setting things right from chaos" had only just begun, many veteran cadres had yet to be rehabilitated, and the pressures of transition had not been effectively relieved, there remained significant room to further advance de-totalitarianization—provided that the characteristics described above were not breached.

Then, why was Deng's vision for this boundary so ambiguous during his "Emancipation of the Mind" speech, yet became so "textbook-precise" just four

months later? This is because, when confronted with more radical de-totalitarianization proposals in early 1979, Deng—much like his counterparts in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe—identified the non-negotiable bottom line: political monism. Deng Liqun remarked that the situation the Party faced in early 1979 was even more complex than that of the 1957 Anti-Rightist Campaign. Indeed, in 1957, China's de-totalitarianization had not yet begun. A more apt comparison would be the 1956 Hungarian Uprising, in which the Party's monopoly on power was nearly dismantled in a wave of radical de-totalitarianization. It is highly probable that by March 1979, Deng sensed the "scent" of the Hungary Uprising, prompting his resolute crackdown and a sudden, sharp realization that the Party's leadership was the ultimate red line. As historian Tony Judt (2005, p.320) observed regarding the Soviet crackdown on Hungary: "In Communist eyes, the real threat posed by Nagy was neither his liberalization of the economy nor the relaxation of censorship. Even the Hungarian declaration of neutrality, though regarded in Moscow as 'provocative,' was not the occasion for Nagy's downfall. What the Kremlin could not condone was the Hungarian Party's abandonment of a monopoly of power—the 'leading role of the Party.'" In essence, political monism was both the starting point and the fulcrum of a post-totalitarian blueprint; all other dimensions of the political system were merely supporting structures. One can conceptualize this as a 'fortress-and-moat' design: the fortress of the Party's monopoly is the fixed centre. Surrounding this core are the various domains of the regime: economy, culture, society, institution, ideology and mobilization mode, as the moats protecting the fortress. The degree of de-totalitarianization within these moats—the extent of marketization, the relaxation of censorship, or the withdrawal of mass mobilization—was never an end in itself. Rather, the "depth" and "width" of these moats were calibrated based on their utility in shielding the core. Crucially, the "depth" and "width" of these moats were not conceived in a vacuum; they were dynamic structures of equilibrium constructed under the dual constraints of the regime's ultimate objective and its immediate material realities. The fundamental characteristics that formed the dynamic structures of post-totalitarian states in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe were systematically categorized by Linz and Stepan into their typology. Given that the post-totalitarian transitions across various Communist regimes followed a broadly similar logic, the typologically legible boundaries Deng established in early 1979 were far from

arbitrary; they were a manifestation of the inherent structural requirements for political survival of Communist parties.

The assessment that Deng was reacting to the spectre of Hungary is grounded in his own lived experience. As the deputy head of the Chinese delegation to the 20th Congress of the CPSU, Deng was in Moscow when Khrushchev delivered the "Secret Speech" and received a copy right after the conference.(Shi, 2001, p.460) Later, during the 1956 Hungarian Uprising, he was dispatched by Mao alongside Liu Shaoqi to Moscow to assist the Soviet leadership in managing the crises in Poland and Hungary. At that time, Deng had maintained a remarkably hawkish stance on the Hungarian crisis, insisting that the Soviet Union "must not hand over the revolutionary positions to the enemy."(Shi, 2001, p.469) In March 1979, as Deng faced the emerging possibility of a coalition between intra-party intellectuals, dissident voices, grassroots protesters, and senior leaders—all centred on a radical de-totalitarianization agenda—the parallels with the Hungarian crisis of 1956 would have been strikingly apparent. Given his personal involvement in managing that crisis, Deng likely recognized almost the same mechanism that had led to the collapse of Party authority in Budapest. Ten years later, he would confront another wave of protests that bore an even closer resemblance to the Hungarian Uprising; once again, he chose the path of suppression. Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" had served as the critical backdrop to the Hungarian Revolution, a lesson Deng had long since internalized; by March 1979, his resolve to avoid a similar rupture was only further strengthened. Unlike Khrushchev, who could distance himself from Stalin's excesses, Deng faced the reality that Mao's stature in China was equivalent to that of Lenin and Stalin combined. Moreover, Deng had spent his entire career fighting side-by-side with Mao. His key political allies now were, for the most part, the first generation of Party leaders who had participated in the Civil War and the various suppression campaigns; their triumphs and their "debts of blood" were inextricably tied to Mao. Consequently, in evaluating Mao's legacy, Deng had to be far more cautious, knowing that to completely de-sacralise Mao would be to dismantle the very foundation upon which his own generation's authority rested.

Based on Deng's blueprint and several key policies of the short era, it is evident that the political elites, led by Deng Xiaoping and the rehabilitated veterans, were the proactive drivers of the de-totalitarianization process. This phase of transition can be

understood through its primary engine: the return of the veteran elite. Having suffered immensely during the Cultural Revolution, these veterans possessed both the existential motivation to dismantle the Maoist model and the vast political resources to execute such a shift. Their collective comeback provided the decisive momentum for de-totalitarianization, as they functioned as the "main force" in breaking the old structure. However, this initiative had a pre-defined and rigid ceiling. Their goal was never a transition to liberal democracy, but rather a strategic shift toward a post-totalitarian equilibrium. This is the first essential characteristic of de-totalitarianization in this period.

Second, the dynamics of elite factionalism served as a significant variable during the initial stage of de-totalitarianization. The 1978 Central Working Conference marked the most significant shift in the power structure since the Huaiyentang Incident, inevitably exerting a profound influence on the trajectory of reform. As previously noted, the power struggle was not fully resolved at this session, ensuring that factional friction remained a persistent factor for a period. However, it is crucial to observe that in the second phase, the risk of volatile power struggles diminished significantly. This stability was rooted in a fundamentally altered political landscape: the factional structures inherited from the Cultural Revolution had been overturned, leaving the "moderate" remnants without the political capital or institutional support to pose any meaningful threat. Furthermore, the Veteran Revolutionaries were bound by a proactive mission to reclaim authority and rectify a decaying system, making the possibility of major internal schisms highly unlikely. The potential for volatile power struggles was further diminished by a profound reactive sentiment: a collective exhaustion with the decades of purges and internecine strife. By weaving together, a weakened opposition, a shared strategic goal, and this common historical trauma, the leadership established a resilient consensus.

In the early months of this stage, the emphasis on democracy and openness was driven by a complex interplay of genuine reformist leanings and strategic power imperatives. Two primary mechanisms of elite power play, in particular, catalysed this trend. First, as they sought to seize power from the top, the veteran elites utilized the concept of "Inner-Party Democracy" as a crucial procedural tool to challenge the existing leadership within formal organizational frameworks. And at the same time, they

encouraged a broader "People's Democracy" to create a potent political atmosphere; by fostering a climate of public dissent and social expectation, they generated external pressure that complemented their internal maneuvers. Second, the Veterans needed to maximize the perceived ideological rift between themselves and the Moderates. By exaggerating these policy differences, they framed the power struggle as an epochal conflict between "Emancipating the Mind" and the "Two Whatevers." While these ideals reflected a sincere desire to rectify the system, they also provided the necessary political legitimacy for the veterans' ascent. Consequently, during the Central Working Conference, the vigorous promotion of democracy and "emancipation of the mind" emerged as a pivotal factor—not merely as an end in itself, but as a strategic necessity that aligned with the immediate goals of the power struggle.

Following the Third Plenary Session, once the new power structure was largely in place, Deng executed two decisive strategic moves: his historic visit to the United States and his leadership of the border war against Vietnam. Through these, he bolstered his international standing and tightened his grip over the military, securing practical levers of power that far outweighed his formal titles. Having effectively shifted from a challenger seeking power to a ruler exercising it, Deng's political calculus fundamentally changed. The tactical need for a "democratic atmosphere"—which had served as a powerful lever to destabilize his predecessors—evaporated, replaced by an urgent requirement for stability and the preservation of his newly won authority. This shift in priority helps explain his eventual decision to suppress the "excessive democracy" he had previously encouraged.

This dynamic illustrates how elite power play functioned as a notable variable, shaping the trajectory of de-totalitarianization during the early months of the second phase. This pattern—wherein the elite's demand for democracy and openness fluctuates according to the exigencies of power consolidation—remained a persistent influence throughout the remainder of this period.

The third mode characteristic of this period manifests as a complex interaction between the political elite, social forces, and institutional decay. Although the proactive de-totalitarianization initiated by the political elite served as the primary engine of change, social forces and the underlying decay of the system continued to play significant roles. However, these factors rarely operated in isolation; their impact

was realized primarily through their interaction with the political elite. During the initial months of the second phase, as the elite expanded the political sphere to serve their own strategic ends, social forces seized an unprecedented opportunity for development. This resulted in a period of exceptional vitality, most notably represented by the Democracy Wall movement and a surge in social protests and petitions. At the same time, while institutional decay had played a decisive role in the first phase, its influence appeared less conspicuous in the second phase due to the elite's more proactive top-down de-totalitarianization. Nevertheless, during this brief window, the depth to which intellectuals within the Party re-evaluated or outright abandoned old dogmas reflected a further erosion of the ideology's persuasiveness and control within the establishment. Although Deng Xiaoping had signaled that the Theory Conference should not be restricted by "no-go zones," he likely did not anticipate that these intellectuals would push boundaries to such an extent, nor did he realize how far the strength of the old ideology had decayed.

Looking at the interaction between these three elements, the political elite—and Deng Xiaoping in particular—clearly maintained a dominant influence. In practice, while social forces and intellectual dissent possess their own internal momentum, the space available for them to operate and exert influence is significantly affected by the openings provided by the elite. In this dynamic, when the activities of social and intellectual forces remain within the implicit boundaries tolerated by the leadership and align with the elite's broader de-totalitarianization agenda, they often receive encouragement or recognition. However, when the momentum of these forces pushes the transition toward a degree of openness that exceeds the elite's thresholds of tolerance, the leadership tends to shift toward suppression. Ultimately, the actual pace and boundaries of the de-totalitarianization process are shaped by this continuous interplay—where the elite's role as the primary driver of reform exists alongside their function as the arbiter of political order. Elite opening creates opportunity structure; elite boundary reassertion closes it.

In summary, based on the analysis of the first four months of the second phase, three distinct patterns emerge as critical frameworks in analyzing the trajectory of the second phase of de-totalitarianization. First, the proactive choices of the political elite constitute the primary force behind the process; however, their objective is limited to

the transition into a post-totalitarian system. Second, the rhythm of reform is modulated by internal power struggles. To strip the Moderates of their authority, the veteran elites often amplify the rhetoric of "democracy" and "openness" to build legitimacy and create a certain political atmosphere; yet, once their power is further secured, they pivot toward prioritizing stability and central authority. Third, while institutional decay and social forces serve as significant variables, their impact is mediated by elite control. As the dominant actors, the political elite adjust their stance—shifting between support, tacit recognition, and suppression—based on how these factors align with their own strategic requirements at the moment. The analysis of the three basic patterns suggests that the subsequent progression of de-totalitarianization can be systematically examined through these three perspectives: the proactive role of the political elite in driving the transformation toward a post-totalitarian system, the dynamic relationship between de-totalitarianization and internal power struggles, and the way the political elite interacted with institutional decay and social forces to collectively shape the course of the transition. While Deng's de-totalitarianizing agenda has now become analytically legible, the remaining question concerns how this agenda would confront subsequent structural constraints and competing forces, and whether the regime could sustain the post-totalitarian equilibrium it sought to construct.

5.2 Limited De-Totalitarianization by Choice

The institutional transformations during the second phase were characterized by a distinct "top-down" initiative. The logical origin of this proactive de-totalitarianization was rooted in the collective trauma and survival instinct of the rehabilitated elite who had endured the political terror of the Cultural Revolution. For these Veteran Revolutionaries, the Cultural Revolution was not merely a failure of governance but a catastrophic destruction of their personal political lives and physical safety. They realized that the radical environment—marked by absolute personal dictatorship, ideological fanaticism, and uncontrollable mass mobilization—was the very soil in which the Cultural Revolution grew. Therefore, the foundational logic of their active

de-totalitarianization was a "survival-driven" impulse: to dismantle the institutional conditions of the Cultural Revolution and establish a baseline of "elite security."

It is crucial to clarify that while "preventing a second Cultural Revolution" served as the logical origin, the resulting reforms exhibited a significant radiating effect. The elites' original pursuit of certainty and proceduralism for the sake of self-protection evolved into a broader set of secondary changes aimed at enhancing institutional rationality, administrative efficiency, and social stability. Even cases that appear disconnected from the lessons of the Cultural Revolution are, in essence, logical extensions of this primal drive toward a more predictable order.

However, this survival-driven transformation faced an insurmountable boundary: all de-totalitarianization measures were strictly confined within the prerequisite of the Party's absolute leadership. The elites sought "security patches" that would preserve single-party rule. Because the methodology was restricted to the internal party bureaucracy, these reforms could not fundamentally resolve the problem of unchecked power. Their ultimate goal was not a transition to constitutional democracy, but rather the construction of a more rationalized and predictable "Post-Totalitarian" regime.

5.2.1 Leadership

The dimension of leadership is most intimately connected to the logical origin of elite survival. Because the leadership structure was the primary site of the Cultural Revolution's violence, it became the first area where the rehabilitated elite sought to build defensive moats. It is essential to distinguish the leadership changes in this second phase from those in the first phase. In the first phase, the shift toward a more pluralistic leadership was largely a by-product of regime decay and a "de facto" state of paralysis caused by factional constraints. In contrast, the second phase was characterized by a high degree of elite agency. During this period, the de facto power constraints were consciously publicized and fixed through formal rules and institutional regulations. The elite moved beyond a mere "state of truce" to actively constructing a rational-legal framework that could outlive the immediate political moment.

First, the elite transformed the "fact" of mutual constraint into "rules" of institutional safety. This was achieved by establishing a bottom line for political conflict and dispersing the risk of autocracy through structural bureaucratization. The restoration of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) in December 1978 served as the foundational institutional vessel for this logic. Its mission was not merely routine anti-corruption, but "rectifying Party style"—a euphemism for rebuilding a safe environment where the state apparatus could no longer be weaponized for personal purges. This drive toward normalization was further refined on February 22, 1980, when the elite implemented a "dual leadership" model for the CCDI. By subjecting local commissions to both their corresponding Party committees and the higher-level CCDI, the elite sought to strengthen vertical oversight and prevent the rise of "local emperors." However, maintaining the primacy of the local committee's leadership reflected the clear boundary of the reform: it was designed to make the hierarchy safer for its members, not to dismantle the Party's absolute authority.

Then, this institutionalization culminated at the Fifth Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee (February 1980). The session formally adopted the "Guiding Principles for Inner-Party Political Life," which functioned as a codified truce among elite actors. To prevent the recurrence of personal dictatorship, the document explicitly prohibited the cult of personality and mandated that "no leader is allowed to decide important issues alone." Addressing the trauma of "cruel struggles," it established concrete protections for elite members, such as the strict prohibition of "false accusations" and the guarantee that "different views in discussion must not be treated as political deviance." Most importantly, it institutionalized the "Three-No's" (no labelling, no bludgeoning, no hat-pulling), a direct move to dismantle the psychological terror and extra-legal persecution of the previous decade. (CCLROC, 2011a, pp.359-377) Simultaneously, the session orchestrated the reconstruction of the Central Secretariat to establish a "first-line and second-line" leadership system. By strategically decoupling high-level policy deliberation from routine execution, the elite created an institutional buffer that dispersed authority across a collective bureaucratic machinery. This was a deliberate expansion of the survival logic, ensuring that power would be exercised through a tiered, predictable process rather than the concentrated whim of a single leader.

Second, the elite utilized the formal reversal of past political persecutions to physically anchor the new "safety contract," with the rehabilitation of Liu Shaoqi as the most significant case. During the Fifth Plenary Session in February 1980, the Central Committee issued a resolution to entirely nullify the 1968 verdict that had branded Liu—the former Head of State—as a "renegade, traitor, and scab." The session declared the previous investigation a "fabrication by Lin Biao and the Gang of Four" and restored Liu's reputation as a "great Marxist and proletarian revolutionary." (CCLROC, 2011a, pp.381-383). This was not merely a retrospective act of justice; it was a strategic move to provide a physical guarantee for the "bottom line" of elite conflict. By using the Party's highest formal machinery to exonerate the ultimate "enemy" of the Cultural Revolution, the leadership sent a concrete signal that the era of treating top-level colleagues as mortal enemies had officially ended.

Third, the crisis of succession—which was inextricably linked to the violent purges of the Cultural Revolution—compelled the elite to establish a more viable and stable mechanism for institutional metabolism. Recognizing that the absence of clear succession rules had historically triggered catastrophic power struggles, the veterans prioritized creating a transition process that favoured bureaucratic rationality over ideological zeal. This logic of stability extended from the pinnacle of power to the entire bureaucratic apparatus, shifting the focus of cadre selection from class struggle toward the demands of economic modernization.

At the central level, the Fifth Plenary Session institutionalized this transition by restoring the Central Secretariat. By electing Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang to the Politburo Standing Committee—with Hu serving as General Secretary—the elite established a functional "first line" to handle day-to-day state affairs. Meanwhile, elder leaders like Deng Xiaoping, Chen Yun, and Ye Jianying retreated to a "second line," effectively positioning the Secretariat as a designated "successor echelon" to ensure a controlled and predictable handover of power. (CCLROC, 2011a, pp.336-340).

This top-level reorganization mirrored a broader crisis within the bureaucracy, where the rehabilitated cadres were often too elderly or lacked the technical education required for the new reform era. To address the urgent need for a professionalized elite, Deng Xiaoping (1994, p.326), in his landmark speech on August 18, 1980, titled "On the Reform of the System of Party and State Leadership", explicitly redefined the

criteria and institutional path for elite selection by citing and endorsing Chen Yun's vision:

Comrade Chen Yun said that in selecting cadres we should stress political integrity and professional competence. By political integrity he meant principally keeping to the socialist road and upholding leadership by the Party. With this as a prerequisite, he added, we should see to it that our cadres are younger on the average, better educated and better qualified professionally. Comrade Chen Yun said, moreover, that the employment and promotion of such cadres should be institutionalized. These ideas of his are very good.

This shift marks the clear boundary of proactive de-totalitarianization: while the elite sought to modernize the bureaucracy through youth and expertise, they explicitly reinstated the Party's leadership as the non-negotiable prerequisite. Thus, the new metabolism was designed not to weaken the Party's monopoly, but to safeguard its survival by creating a more efficient, modernized vanguard that could operate safely within a rationalized institutional framework.

Furthermore, a more delicate challenge for ensuring elite security was the establishment of a "safe exit" mechanism for veteran cadres—specifically, the abolition of life-long tenure in leading posts. Given that the paramount leaders, including Deng Xiaoping, Chen Yun, and Ye Jianying, were themselves advanced in age, the issue was fraught with political sensitivity. The formal move toward dismantling this system began on April 23, 1980, when an enlarged meeting of the Politburo adopted the "Decision on Not Nominating Comrades Who Have Lost the Ability to Work as Delegates to the 12th National Congress or as Candidates for the Central Committee." This marked the practical starting point for institutionalizing the retirement process.

In his "818 Speech," Deng (1994, pp.331-332) explicitly connected the abolition of life-long tenure to the broader rationalization of the bureaucratic system. He endorsed and expanded upon the ideas initially proposed during the Fifth Plenary Session:

In the draft of the revised Party Constitution discussed at the Fifth Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee, it was proposed that life tenure in leading posts be abolished. As we see it now, this provision needs to be further revised and supplemented. What is essential is to improve the systems of election, recruitment, appointment, removal, assessment, impeachment and rotation of cadres and, in the light of specific conditions, to work out appropriate and explicit regulations for the terms of office and retirement of leading cadres of all categories and at all levels (including those elected, appointed or invited). No leading cadre should hold any office indefinitely.

Although the issue of life-long tenure was not fully resolved within the mid-1981 timeframe of this phase, it was firmly placed on the political agenda as a non-negotiable goal for institutionalization. This process eventually culminated in the 1982 Constitution, which stipulated that state leaders could serve no more than two consecutive terms. By institutionalizing retirement, the leadership converted political defeat from an existential threat into a manageable career transition—one of the key psychological preconditions for post-totalitarian stability.

Finally, a proposal for the de-totalitarianization of leadership—one far more radical and comprehensive than what had been envisioned in his "Emancipate the Mind" speech—was put forward by Deng in this "818 speech". Deng underscored the need to eliminate feudal influences and reform the Party and state leadership system. This address was groundbreaking in that it did not merely attribute the failures of the Cultural Revolution to individual mistakes or Party rule violations but directly identified the issue of autocracy. This perspective moved beyond traditional communist ideological explanations and expanded the scope of institutional reform to include Party and state leadership structures, thereby opening space for discussions on political system transformation. (Deng, 1994, pp.320-343) Although this speech appeared to gesture toward systemic political reform, its underlying logic remained firmly intra-party and instrumental rather than constitutional. Deng's primary concerns were the excessive concentration of power, lifelong tenure, and

bureaucratism. Solutions such as promoting intra-Party democracy and abolishing lifelong tenure sought to improve Party leadership but did not redefine its role. While Deng spoke about ensuring that people enjoyed full civil rights, no concrete institutional reforms were introduced to achieve this goal. Some efforts to relax Party control over government and enterprises hinted at limiting its power through institutional diversification, yet they did not challenge the Party's overarching dominance over the state and economy. According to Deng Liqun (2006, p.181-182), who was involved in drafting the speech, Deng Xiaoping commented on Mao's dictatorial style, stating, "It's not that we don't need centralization—the problem is excessive centralization." Deng aimed to limit the extent of power concentration rather than fundamentally redesign the political system to prevent autocracy. After all, by this time, the one who held supreme power was Deng himself. Regardless of Deng's own original intentions, this speech inspired forces within both the Party and society that anticipated political structural change, once again creating a "democratic atmosphere." However, only a few months later, Deng retreated from the position he had held in that speech.

5.2.2 Ideology

By affirming the "Criterion of Truth" debate and officially declaring the shift of the Party's focus toward "Socialist Modernization," the Central Working Conference in late 1978 signalled that the old Maoist dogma—centred on class struggle—had lost its role as the comprehensive guide for state action. However, this transition was not a linear path toward openness. The introduction of the "Four Cardinal Principles" in early 1979 established a rigid political perimeter intended to curb radical deviations, yet the "Thought Liberation" movement did not collapse under these constraints. Instead, Hu Yaobang and his intellectual circle sought to synthesize the Four Principles with the spirit of "Thought Liberation". Under the leadership of Hu Jiwei, People's Daily continued to serve as a platform for debating democracy and the rule of law, suggesting that ideology in this period was no longer a monolithic cage but a selectively contested space where elites used "instrumental reinterpretation" to maintain the momentum of within newly defined boundaries.

The ideological climate received a second impetus in August 1980 with Deng Xiaoping's "818 Speech". Its profound critique of the "over-concentration of power" once again generated a relatively free political atmosphere, expanding the discursive space for substantive ideological revision. This loosening was manifested through a powerful act of symbolic de-sacralization on 25 August 1980, just before the opening of the Third Session of the Fifth National People's Congress. The massive portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin—which had dominated the front of the Monument to the People's Heroes since 1971—were dismantled and removed from Tiananmen Square. This proactive removal of "political totems" is a move away from ritualized charisma, but not toward ideological neutrality or pluralism. The limits of this proactive de-totalitarianization were once again made manifest during Deng's interview with the Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci on August 21 and 23, 1980. When Fallaci asked if Mao's portrait above Tiananmen Gate would be kept, Deng (1994, p.344) replied:

It will, forever. In the past there were too many portraits of Chairman Mao. They were hung everywhere. That was not proper and it didn't really show respect for Chairman Mao. It's true that he made mistakes in a certain period, but he was after all a principal founder of the Chinese Communist Party and the People's Republic of China. In evaluating his merits and mistakes, we hold that his mistakes were only secondary. What he did for the Chinese people can never be erased. In our hearts we Chinese will always cherish him as a founder of our Party and our state.

Ultimately, the most critical ideological challenge of this period was the evaluation of Mao Zedong. From the moment of Mao's death, Deng had been contemplating how to manage his legacy and re-interpret Mao Zedong Thought. By October 1979, Deng decided that this issue must be resolved through a formal party document—the "Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party." The drafting process began on October 30, 1979, and was not officially adopted until June 1981; this nearly twenty-month duration underscores the immense difficulty and the high level of

contention surrounding the document. Deng (1994, p. 291-293) established three guiding principles for the draft, emphasizing that the most fundamental and crucial one was to affirm Mao's historical position and uphold Mao Zedong Thought. This imperative presented the primary dilemma for the drafting committee. The legitimacy of the reform era was built upon the correction of Mao-era mistakes, particularly those of the Cultural Revolution. Therefore, Mao's "late errors" had to be highlighted, yet they could not be allowed to undermine his overall historical standing. And Mao's late-life theories must be negated, while Mao Zedong Thought must be maintained as the core of official ideology. To resolve this, Chen Yun proposed a strategic temporal shift: by incorporating the twenty-eight years of revolutionary success prior to 1949 into the assessment, the Party could ensure that Mao's foundational contributions outweighed his later mistakes (Deng, 2006, pp. 165-166).

The tension inherent in this process became evident between October and November 1980, when nearly 4,000 senior cadres participated in internal discussions. Many veterans, bearing the physical and political scars of the Cultural Revolution, offered critiques that far exceeded Deng's intended scope. To prevent this ideological deconstruction from devolving into a delegitimization of the Party itself, Deng and Huang Kecheng intervened. Huang, who had been purged alongside Peng Dehuai at the Lushan Meeting as early as 1959, possessed a unique moral authority; as a long-term victim of Mao's purges, his defence of Mao provided a powerful persuasive force among the disgruntled Veteran Revolutionaries. (Xiao, 2008, p.294) Deng (1994, p. 298) argued that discarding the "banner of Mao Zedong Thought" would be equivalent to "denying the Party's glorious history."

The finalized resolution fundamentally negated the Cultural Revolution; it redefined Mao Zedong Thought as a "scientific system of collective wisdom" rather than the personal whims of the late Mao. This effectively "archived" the most dangerous elements of totalitarian ideology—such as the theory of "Continuous Revolution"—as personal errors. In doing so, the elite successfully transformed ideology from a weapon of unpredictable mobilization into a protective shield for the establishment, securing the political safety of the bureaucratic class while ensuring the continuity of the state's symbolic legitimacy. From the perspective of ideological de-

totalitarianization, the Historical Resolution functioned as a contextual validation, while simultaneously establishing its formal institutional ceiling.

Within the leadership, Hu Yaobang was seen as the most important institutional carrier of ideological liberalization. His own reflections on the system were profound, and from his tenure overseeing the Theoretical Trends journal onward, he actively promoted discussions on ideological issues. He championed ideological emancipation and advocated for a more tolerant approach to speech control, distinguishing himself as a key reformist figure. (Wang, 1997; Hu, 2004)

Taken together, ideological reform in this period did not eliminate the regime's symbolic foundations but recalibrated them—replacing utopian mobilization with bounded reinterpretation in service of the stability of a new order.

5.2.3 Mobilization

This phase of "de-mobilization" began at the 1978 Central Working Conference, where the leadership formally decided to wind down the "Expose, Criticize, and Investigate" movement. By declaring the conclusion of this movement, the elite signalled a structural break from the "logic of the campaign" that had defined the preceding decade. This transition was institutionalized through the public trial of the "Lin Biao and Jiang Qing Counter-Revolutionary Cliques". Rather than relying on the chaotic and violent mass rallies characteristic of the Cultural Revolution, the elite chose a "judicial theatre" as the primary instrument for settling historical accounts. Broadcast to hundreds of millions, the trial functioned as a "substitute mobilization," redirecting public political energy into a state-managed legal process. However, this transition had inherent limitations. Despite the veneer of legalism, it remained a political trial designed to segregate the crimes of the "Two Cliques" from the actions of Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai. By isolating the defendants as criminal usurpers, the elite avoided an ideological reckoning with the top leadership, thereby preserving the structural integrity of the regime while offering a legalistic closure to the era of upheaval.

The continued repudiation of past political campaigns, alongside the rehabilitation of victims of wrongful political persecution also contributed to the de-totalitarianization in mobilization. These rehabilitations, which had commenced during the era of Hua Guofeng's leadership, expanded into a comprehensive campaign during the second stage of the transition. The scope of these redressal efforts extended beyond cases and movements from the Cultural Revolution to encompass cases from the pre-Cultural Revolution era and even reached back into the revolutionary periods prior to the founding of the People's Republic. Under Mao, political purges and suppressions heavily relied on mass mobilization, not only as a tool to implement policy and eliminate political adversaries but also as a crucial source of legitimacy for the regime. Consequently, the rejection of these movements signified not only a critique of Maoist suppressions and purges but also a broader reconsideration of mobilization as a governing technology rather than as a source of revolutionary legitimacy.

Another critical step in de-mobilization was the constitutional amendment abolishing the "Four Big Freedoms" (big-character posters, mass debates, mass speaking out, and mass airing of grievances), which had been a key instrument of totalitarian mobilization. The "Four Big Freedoms" emerged from the 1957 Rectification and Anti-Rightist Campaign and later became a core political slogan of the Cultural Revolution, even being enshrined in the 1975 Constitution. Article 13 of the 1975 Constitution explicitly guaranteed citizens' right to engage in these "new socialist revolutionary forms," and the 1978 Constitution further elevated them to a fundamental civil right. (see Shen, 2008; Jian et al., 2006, p.13) In practice, however, these freedoms were never genuinely granted; rather, they functioned as controlled outlets for state-sanctioned political expression within the totalitarian mobilization framework. Unlike post-totalitarian regimes, where political leaders often abandon mass mobilization due to a lack of ideological confidence, totalitarian systems depend on genuine ideological commitment from the populace. Citizens are expected not merely to obey but to actively and enthusiastically participate in political life, expressing their "support" through sanctioned forms of public demonstration. The "Four Big Freedoms" provided the mechanisms through which this orchestrated participation occurred. Under this system, nearly all public expression was guided and controlled by the Party. When dissenting voices emerged, they were swiftly suppressed—either by state authorities or by other citizens acting as enforcers of Party

doctrine. Totalitarian leaders never feared that these expressions would challenge their control; rather, they saw them as essential tools for reinforcing ideological conformity.

However, as de-totalitarianization progressed, the regime's control over public discourse weakened. Independent-minded citizens began repurposing these officially sanctioned modes of expression to voice genuine grievances, effectively transforming artificial freedoms into real ones. This shift fundamentally undermined the government's ability to regulate speech and maintain ideological dominance. The Democracy Wall Movement exploited precisely this transitional loophole. Many senior Party officials had suffered severe persecution during the Cultural Revolution, often at the hands of radical factions who used the "Four Big Freedoms" as platforms for denunciation. During the post-Mao transition, these officials once again found themselves targeted by public grievances expressed through the same mechanisms. Unable to tolerate such criticism, Party leaders moved decisively to eliminate this avenue of dissent. On August 30, 1980, during the Third Session of the Fifth National People's Congress, the Constitution was amended to remove the "Four Big Freedoms." (Xiao, 2008, p.247)

Despite the shift away from mass mobilization, the Communist Party did not completely abandon mobilization as a political tool. Instead, in the second phase of de-totalitarianization, mobilization efforts were primarily directed inward—toward Party members—rather than toward the public. These internal campaigns were designed to achieve specific political objectives and maintain ideological discipline within the Party. Deng Xiaoping's "Remedial Education" on the "Criterion of Truth" (真理标准问题补课), launched in May 1979, was essentially an ideological education campaign within the Party. Its purpose was to disseminate the ideological line established by the top leadership to local officials and the military, ensuring ideological unity and coordinated action, ultimately stabilizing the new power structure. (Wu, 1995, p.86-93; Shen, 2005, pp.433-470) This form of mobilization was already a paradigmatic case of post-totalitarian mobilization as defined by Linz and Stepan.

5.2.4 Pluralism

Economic pluralism, which began as tentative experimentation under Hua Guofeng's leadership, experienced systematic breakthroughs during the second phase of de-totalitarianization. While the Hua era had already initiated modest measures of "devolving power and yielding profits" (fangquan rangli) to stimulate production, this trend accelerated into a fundamental restructuring of the state-society relationship. The central government granted local authorities and state-owned enterprises significantly greater financial autonomy, allowing for the gradual emergence of the individual economy (个体户) in urban areas.

A defining shift in this phase was the move beyond mere administrative decentralization toward a strategic opening to the global market. The establishment of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and the proactive introduction of foreign capital represented a pivotal departure from the autarkic past, creating "experimental enclaves" where market mechanisms were permitted to operate. While the most radical transformation—the rural Household Responsibility System—was not initially a top-down initiative by the political elite (a dynamic to be analyzed in later sections), the state's eventual endorsement of these grassroots innovations signaled a decisive retreat from the total mobilization of individual livelihoods. This burgeoning economic pluralism provided the material impetus for social and institutional changes, forcing the regime to adapt its governance to an increasingly complex and autonomous social landscape.

During the second phase of de-totalitarianization, cultural pluralism continued to expand, building on the "thaw" initiated in the first phase. This period saw a further loosening of restrictions on artistic and literary works, creating greater space for expression within politically tolerated boundaries. A significant shift in the Party's cultural policy occurred with Deng Xiaoping's speech at the Fourth National Congress of Literary and Art Workers on October 30, 1979. He asserted that "administrative orders in the field of literary creation and criticism must be abolished" and emphasized that the Party should not interfere in writers' creative choices. (Deng, 1994, p.213) Although the CCP never fully implemented these principles, the overall policy remained relatively open and tolerant, fostering a notable degree of cultural pluralism.

Social pluralism saw little progress under Hua Guofeng's leadership but experienced significant breakthroughs during the second phase of de-totalitarianization. The CCP's approach to social organizations shifted from strict political control and outright bans to a more tolerant and open stance. This shift facilitated the revival of various social organizations that had been disbanded or suspended during the Cultural Revolution. Notable organizations that resumed activities included the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, the All-China Women's Federation, the Communist Youth League, and the All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce. Religious organizations, which had been nearly eradicated during the Cultural Revolution, were also permitted to resume activities. Churches, mosques, and other places of worship reopened. On January 25, 1980, the CCP Central Committee approved the United Front Work Department's report on convening national meetings for religious groups. Following this, major religious organizations—including the China Islamic Association, the China Taoist Association, the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee of Protestant Churches in China, and the China Buddhist Association—held meetings and resumed operations. ("Dangdai Zhongguo" Congshu Bianjibu, 1996, pp.161-162)

Institutional pluralism, which had been almost non-existent during the first stage of the transition, achieved a considerable degree of progress during the second stage. Key measures included: initiating the "separation of Party and government", restoring the operation of democratic parties (non-Communist political parties within the framework of the United Front), strengthening the rule of law by accelerating legislative processes, enhancing the role of the National People's Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), and allowing non-Party members to assume leadership positions in state institutions.

A particularly notable development was the legislative work of the Second Session of the Fifth NPC, which enacted several key laws, including: *Organic Law of Local People's Congresses and Local People's Governments at All Levels*, *Election Law for the NPC and Local People's Congresses at All Levels*, *Organic Law of the People's Courts*, *Organic Law of the People's Procuratorates*, *Criminal Law*, *Criminal Procedure Law*, *Sino-Foreign Joint Venture Law*. Among these laws, the two concerning the NPC introduced significant electoral reforms. For the first time, direct

elections for people's congress representatives were extended beyond the village and neighbourhood levels to the county level. Additionally, the single-candidate system was replaced by competitive elections (差额选举). Between late 1979 and 1981, these policies were implemented across a broad range of local elections. (Cheng, 1981) However, it is critical to note that this legal system was not designed to stand above the Party; rather, it functioned as a regularized instrument through which the Party could exercise its will more predictably. Similarly, the nomination process in grassroots elections remained firmly under the Party's organizational oversight. In this context, "competitive" did not mean "independent," as candidate lists were strictly vetted by Party committees to ensure that only politically "reliable" individuals could stand for election.

Overall, the institutional pluralism that emerged during this stage must be understood as a strategic rationalization of the regime rather than a substantive restriction on Party power. From the perspective of preventing a recurrence of the Cultural Revolution, this institutional pluralism represented an extension of de-totalitarianization at the level of leadership. Its primary aim was not to surrender authority to society or to establish the supremacy of law over the Party, but to impose procedural order on the exercise of Party power. By establishing a framework of "legality" and "separation of functions," the elite sought to ensure that the Party's power would no longer be exercised in a chaotic, arbitrary manner that could lead to systemic self-destruction. This was, in essence, a form of institutionalized self-restraint designed to protect the collective survival of the establishment. In this sense, many of these mechanisms remained ornamental, designed to project an image of "rational-legal" governance while the Party's ultimate monopoly remained unassailable. The elite were willing to codify limits on the expression of power precisely because they intended to reinforce the resilience of the organization. Ultimately, this pluralism served to modernize the facade of the state, ensuring that while the method of rule became more regularized, the monism of political power remained absolute.

5.3 Intertwined Paths: De-totalitarianization and Power Struggles

An examination of the interaction between de-totalitarianization and elite power struggles during the early months of the second phase reveals a recurring structural pattern: the tempo and direction of de-totalitarianization were repeatedly recalibrated in response to the imperatives of power struggles. This pattern persisted throughout the remainder of the second stage, the process of which can be understood from two perspectives:

The first is the overarching political cycle of the second phase. This cycle began with a brief "low tide" of de-totalitarianization following the introduction of the Four Cardinal Principles. From there, it transitioned into a phase of renewed advancement, only for the momentum to gradually decelerate until the system settled into a relatively stabilized post-totalitarian equilibrium. This entire process was synonymous with the continuous dispossession of the moderate faction's power. In other words, as the veteran elite consolidated their authority—most notably with the resolution of Hua Guofeng's status as the nominal supreme leader—the primary political incentive for proactive de-totalitarianization diminished. Once the "de-totalitarian" agenda had fulfilled its role in dismantling the old power structure and securing factional dominance, the drive to further push the boundaries of the system naturally waned, leading to the final "settlement" of the post-totalitarian framework.

The second perspective highlights a recurring pattern where Deng Xiaoping's attitude toward de-totalitarianization underwent a sharp reversal within a short timeframe—reminiscent of the shift from the "Emancipate the Mind" speech to the "Four Cardinal Principles." During the following period of the second phase of the transition, such a shift indeed occurred once again, and it was likewise directly related to resolving the power issue of the moderate faction. It occurred between Deng's "August 18 Speech" in 1980 and his speech at the Central Work Conference on December 25 of the same year. Over a similar span of roughly four months, the trajectory once again repeated the same pattern: an initial rhetorical and institutional expansion of democracy, followed by a rapid retreat once the central power question was resolved. This pivot constituted a critical turning point in the broader cycle, signalling that the overall

momentum of de-totalitarianization had entered a period of decline. We can examine several key milestones during this phase to understand how the internal power struggle influenced the rhythm and ultimate trend of de-totalitarianization.

After the introduction of the Four Cardinal Principles and related measures to suppress free discussion and popular protests, the so-called state of "chaos" was alleviated. As previously analysed, Deng Xiaoping still intended to continue pushing for de-totalitarianization. However, some conservative forces utilized the Four Cardinal Principles to adopt a passive or resistant attitude toward these reforms. To keep the momentum of de-totalitarianization moving forward, Deng initiated a Party-wide educational movement in July 1979 known as the "Remedial Education" on the Criterion of Truth. Regarding the rationale behind these "Remedial Education," Deng (1994, pp.190-191) stated:

Taking the country as a whole and considering the major issues, we can say that the debate over the thesis that practice -- as opposed to the "two whatevers" -- is the sole criterion for testing truth has pretty definitely settled the question of what our ideological line should be. ... Our political line is to achieve the socialist modernization of our country. ... Despite the fact that some people still have reservations, the Party's ideological line and political line have been established. What question remains to be settled, then? The extremely important question of organizational line. Once a political line has been set, it has to be concretely implemented by people, and the results will vary depending on who does the implementing, those who are in favour, those who are against, or the middle-of-the-roaders.

The so-called "organizational question" essentially refers to personnel issues. Undoubtedly, except for regaining the momentum of de-totalitarianization, this movement was also directly aimed at moderate leaders; it served to build intra-Party consensus for phasing out the "entry-only, no-exit" strategy within Central Work Conferences and further weakening the influence of the Moderates.

Subsequently, at the Fifth Plenary Session of the Eleventh CCP Central Committee in February 1980, a series of de-totalitarianization policies were adopted. These included the official rehabilitation of Liu Shaoqi, the passage of the "Guiding Principles for Inner-Party Political Life," and the restoration of the Central Secretariat. Against the backdrop of this atmosphere, Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang became new members of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau, further strengthening the control of the Veteran Revolutionaries over this top leadership tier. The previous "entry-only, no-exit" strategy was also shattered, as a proposal was made to remove Wang Dongxing, Ji Dengkui, Wu De, and Chen Xilian from their leading positions. (CCLROC, 2011a, p. 383) Consequently, Hua Guofeng found himself increasingly isolated and without allies within the central leadership.

On August 18, 1980, Deng Xiaoping delivered his famous speech, explicitly stating that the upcoming Third Session of the Fifth NPC would focus on leadership changes—most notably, Hua Guofeng's replacement as premier by Zhao Ziyang. Deng justified this transition by arguing that power should not be overly concentrated, leaders should not hold too many concurrent positions, and the Party needed to clarify distinctions between Party and government roles while addressing succession issues. According to Deng Liqun, one of the speech's drafters, its true purpose was to provide theoretical justification for Hua's removal. (Deng, 2006, p.183) On October 20, 1980, the CCP Secretariat announced a policy to prohibit the display of portraits of current central leaders, aiming to dismantle personality cults. Between November 10 and December 5, the Politburo held nine consecutive meetings to critique Hua's political errors. At the first of these meetings, on November 10, Hua voluntarily offered to resign from all Party positions, marking the complete elimination of the moderate faction's influence.

Just weeks later, on December 25, Deng Xiaoping delivered a speech at the Central Work Conference in which he reversed the reformist tone of his August 18 address. Now, he emphasized that "democracy that rejects Party leadership and discipline is not socialist democracy," (Deng, 1994, p.359) explicitly warning against bourgeois liberalization and calling for the reinforcement of the People's Democratic Dictatorship. In effect, he reasserted the Four Cardinal Principles, marking another

retreat from previous positions and a significant weakening of the overall momentum of de-totalitarianization.

By mapping the intersection of key de-totalitarianization milestones and the pivotal moments of the power struggle, their intertwined nature becomes self-evident. While these reforms cannot be reduced solely to the exigencies of political maneuvering, the chronological and logical alignment between the two is striking. Taken together, these episodes suggest that de-totalitarianization functioned not only as a normative reform agenda, but also as a strategic instrument within elite power struggles. Deng Xiaoping repeatedly mobilized de-totalitarianizing measures to facilitate power consolidation, while allowing the resolution of that consolidation to define the ultimate limits of the de-totalitarianization itself.

5.4 Interactions and Boundaries: The Dynamics Between Political Elites and Non-elite Factors

The second phase of de-totalitarianization was characterized not only by elite-driven reform, but by an expanding field of interaction between political elites and non-elite forces. As elite initiatives opened structural space, social forces, institutional decay, and external shocks entered the process as conditional variables—capable of either reinforcing or destabilizing the trajectory of de-totalitarianization. Particularly during the second stage, the liberation of social forces was more comprehensive and profound than in the first; indeed, social forces played a pivotal role in de-totalitarianization at the level of pluralization. And the emergence of society from a vacuum is, in itself, a defining characteristic of de-totalitarianization. However, it is noteworthy that when factors outside the political elite begin to exert a more substantive and influential impact, interaction with the elite becomes inevitable. This interaction produced two structurally distinct outcomes. In integrative cases, political elites incorporated external pressures into the de-totalitarianization process or otherwise grant recognition to their demands and actions. In containment-driven cases, elites moved to suppress these forces once they were perceived to threaten the boundaries of the post-totalitarian system.

A primary example of the integrative interaction between political elites and other forces is the transition from the People's Commune system to the Household Responsibility System. Historically, this process was a narrative of peasants seeking self-preservation by breaking away from the collective economic framework; following the Great Famine, many regions spontaneously adopted fixing output quotas to each household as a survival mechanism, which initially gained support from high-level leaders like Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping before being banned and criticized under Mao Zedong's opposition. By the first stage of the post-Mao transition, many localities were secretly practicing similar systems, manifesting both as a growth of spontaneous social forces and as a symptom of systemic decay, as local officials often looked the other way in defiance of official Party policy. This "turning a blind eye" by local cadres was not merely a failure of oversight; it represented a grassroots strategic alignment where local state agents, faced with the exhaustion of the collective model, prioritized local survival over central ideological orthodoxy. What followed was not top-down reform but a process of ex post institutionalization, in which elite recognition lagged—and was compelled by—an already consolidated social reality.

After the 1978 Central Work Conference shifted the CCP's focus to economic development, new policies granted more autonomy to the peasantry but still explicitly prohibited household-level quotas.(Xiao,2019,p.30-34) Nevertheless, peasants leveraged the loosening political atmosphere to experiment with various forms of responsibility systems, finding sympathy not only among local cadres but also from high-ranking provincial leaders like Wan Li. In January 1979, Wan Li famously alleviated political pressure on grassroots officials by stating that while he did not advocate for the "Great Contract" (大包干) in Fengyang County, he would take responsibility for any errors or problems. By February 1979, despite no change in national policy, the Anhui Provincial Committee under Wan Li designated Shannan Commune as a pilot site, granting the practice a degree of de facto legitimacy. (Chen & Xia,1998, p.112) As these cases became increasingly frequent and public, they ignited fierce debate within the Party, leading the Central Committee to issue Document No. 31 in April 1979. This document made a tactical concession by semi-legalizing group-level quotas and leaving a small opening for isolated households in remote areas, a policy shift that effectively encouraged further local experimentation.

By the end of 1979, various responsibility systems had spread to become the mainstream reality, resulting in a "tug-of-war" between enthusiastic peasants and pressured local officials. Recognizing the clear productivity gains, Deng Xiaoping (1994, p.315) delivered a speech in May 1980 expressing support, though he framed the system merely as an expedient measure for production rather than a fundamental systemic change. The definitive breakthrough arrived with the issuance of Document No. 75 in September 1980, which officially supported the demands of the masses for household quotas in impoverished regions. While the document technically restricted the scope of the reform, the ambiguity of its criteria allowed the Household Responsibility System to obtain legal status in fact. This led to its rapid expansion beyond peripheral areas into central and prosperous regions, ultimately achieving a breakthrough in rural economic pluralization.

Another integrative example of de-totalitarianization occurred at the mobilizational level with the termination of the "Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside" movement. This Movement exemplified Mao-era mass mobilization, though its origins were complex. Initially launched in 1955 as an ideological initiative, it encouraged educated youth to "go where the motherland needs them most" and "voluntarily train themselves in the hardships of rural life" to help eliminate the "three great differences"—between workers and peasants, urban and rural areas, and mental and manual labour. Many young people, including those from politically marginalized "black category" families, saw participation to rehabilitate their political status. However, from 1968 onward, the movement was transformed into a large-scale, organized relocation program, closely tied to the extreme mobilization of the early Cultural Revolution. During the initial phase of the Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong launched the Red Guards movement to purge his political adversaries. These youth-led groups zealously championed Mao's cause, contributing significantly to the political turmoil. By 1968, however, having largely succeeded in eliminating his rivals, Mao sought to restore order. To neutralize the increasingly uncontrollable Red Guards and address the growing issue of urban youth unemployment, the Party intensified the Down to the Countryside Movement, forcing approximately one-tenth of the urban youth population into rural areas. (see Bernstein, 1977; Ding, 1998; Liu, 1998; Qin, 2022)

By the late 1970s, however, the ideological fervour of the movement had evaporated, and it increasingly functioned as a source of profound social friction. During the transition under Hua Guofeng, the central leadership began to acknowledge the necessity of reform, yet they remained trapped in a "systemic dilemma": while they wished to alleviate social discontent, they feared that a sudden mass return of millions to the cities would collapse the fragile urban economy and cause unprecedented unemployment. The turning point arrived between late 1978 and early 1979, as the cautious "drip-feed" policy of partial returns failed to satisfy the youth, instead catalysing a shift from clandestine resentment to organized social resistance. In a striking display of grassroots agency, sent-down youth across China—most notably in Yunnan Province—launched waves of petitions, hunger strikes, and public demonstrations. The situation reached a crisis point when thousands of youth in Xishuangbanna organized a massive strike and engaged in "lying on the tracks" to block vital railway arteries, effectively paralysing regional transportation. This movement was not merely a cry for help; it was a sophisticated political challenge that leveraged the internal fissures within the Party elite.

Faced with the rising political cost of suppression and the skyrocketing economic burden of maintaining the commune-based mobilization system, the central leadership was forced to conduct a pragmatic cost-benefit analysis. Pragmatic officials realized that the loyalty of a generation was being permanently alienated, and the cost of social instability had far surpassed the potential costs of urban job creation. In a rare instance of constructive interaction, the state chose to recognize the legitimacy of the youths' plight. By 1980, the government facilitated a massive influx of youth back to their home cities through various administrative channels—such as "medical leave" (病退) or "hardship returns" (困退)—and the expansion of the urban service sector. The movement officially ended on September 6, 1980, when the State Council issued the Opinions on the Current Work of Educated Youth Going to the Countryside. (Qiu, 1998, p.272-364) The formal cessation of the movement marked a significant retreat of the state from the mobilization of individual lives, representing a successful case where social forces pushed the political elite toward a more pluralistic and less coercive order. Faced with the threat of an organized social movement that could destabilize the urban core, the state chose to relinquish its mobilizational reach in a

calculated retreat, effectively conceding social space to forestall a broader systemic political explosion.

The containment-driven interaction of this phase is most clearly reflected in the profound shift in Deng Xiaoping's stance between his August 18 speech and his speech on December 25, 1980. While the requirements of the power struggle remained a background element, as previously analysed, they were secondary in this specific context. This shift was fundamentally driven by a combination of systemic decay, the surging pressure of social forces, and a critical external factor—all of which converged to form what the leadership perceived as an existential threat to political monism. This transition bears a striking resemblance to the earlier pivot toward the "Four Cardinal Principles." The primary distinction, however, is that an external catalyst played a decisive role in Deng's calculus, forcing a strategic retreat from his earlier liberalizing positions to ensure that the "chaos" did not breach the core boundaries of the post-totalitarian regime.

The external factor was the Polish Solidarity Movement. In July 1980, Poland faced widespread strikes triggered by rising prices following subsidy reductions. By August, the Polish United Workers' Party underwent major leadership changes and recognized the formation of independent trade unions beyond party control. On September 17, the Solidarity trade union, led by Lech Wałęsa, was officially founded, and by November 19, Polish authorities formally acknowledged its legitimacy—effectively ending the ruling party's political monopoly and plunging it into crisis.

Initially, Deng did not perceive the Polish situation as a direct threat to China's stability. However, on September 24, a letter from Hu Qiaomu to Hu Yaobang highlighted the potential parallels between Poland and China, raising concerns about foreign influence, ideological divisions, trade unions, and religious movements undermining the Communist Party's rule. (Hu, 1980, p.287-289) Minister of Propaganda Wang Renzhong echoed these concerns, advocating against further promotion of Deng's speech on reforming the Party and state leadership system at an October 9 Propaganda Department meeting. (Ruan, 1992, p.108) Around the same time, Chen Yun warned, "If we fail in economic and propaganda work, we will capsize." (CCLROC, 2015, p.262) As previously analysed, the memory of the 1956 Hungarian Uprising had already instilled a deep sense of vulnerability within Deng

Xiaoping; the unfolding events in Poland exerted a similar influence, precisely because they struck at his ultimate "red line": the absolute leadership of the Party. In this sense, the "Poland Factor" was not merely a distant foreign news item, but a chilling domestic mirror that exerted a powerful demonstration effect.

Adding to these concerns was the growing political activism among university students, who took advantage of the new electoral law to run for local People's Congress seats. The most notable elections occurred in Beijing from October to December 1980, where many student candidates—some previously active in the Democracy Wall movement—campaigning on radical platforms openly critical of the Communist Party's political system. (Chen, 1992, pp.372-373) Another factor emerged from within the establishment itself. Following Deng's August 18 speech, pro-reform intellectuals within the Party felt revitalized and began publishing a flurry of articles in response to the call for restructuring the party and state leadership. Many of these proposals went significantly further than those voiced during the 1979 Theoretical Framework Conference. Some even suggested that the separation of powers under bourgeois democracy was "worth studying and learning from." (Xu, 1980) Major state media outlets, including the People's Daily, Guangming Daily, and Workers' Daily, actively organized discussions on political reform, generating considerable momentum and recreating an atmosphere reminiscent of the earlier democratic spring in 1979

When integrated, these factors—the resurgence of social autonomy, the internal push from intellectuals, and the alarming "demonstration effect" from Poland—reproduced a political climate strikingly similar to that of March 1979. The "Poland Factor" acted as a catalyst, transforming abstract anxieties about liberalization into a concrete existential threat. It demonstrated that if de-totalitarianization was not strictly bounded, it could lead to the emergence of organized, independent social forces. Predictably, Deng retreated from his previous advocacy of political reform. In his December 25 speech, he fundamentally shifted his tone, stating:

Reform of the system of Party and state leadership must be carried out prudently and in an orderly way. ...Democracy without socialist legality,

without the Party's leadership and without discipline and order is definitely not socialist democracy. On the contrary, that sort of democracy would only plunge our country once again into anarchy and make it harder to truly democratize the life of the country, develop the economy and raise the people's standard of living.(Deng, 1994, pp.359-360)

Another quintessential containment-driven example of interaction involves the political storm surrounding the screenplay *Unrequited Love* (《苦恋》) and its film adaptation, *The Sun and the Man*. The narrative of *Unrequited Love*, authored by Bai Hua, follows a patriotic painter who returns to China after the anti-Japanese war, only to endure relentless persecution during various political movements. The story concludes with his tragic death in a frozen wasteland, where his body forms a giant "question mark" in the snow. The most controversial element—and the one that struck a raw political nerve—was a poignant question posed by the painter's daughter: "You love this country... but does this country love you?" This line directly deconstructed the state's efforts to rebuild a narrative of blind patriotism by painfully decoupling the concept of the "motherland" from the "political regime."

The controversy erupted in early 1981 when the Liberation Army Daily launched a fierce attack, branding the work as a prime example of "bourgeois liberalization." However, this traditional ideological assault failed to achieve a quick victory, instead exposing deep fissures within both the Party and society. Within the establishment, Hu Yaobang and the cultural departments were reluctant to initiate a massive political campaign, hoping to protect the fragile creative freedom that had emerged after the Cultural Revolution. Consequently, major state outlets like the People's Daily initially refused to reprint the critical articles, leading to a rare public display of internal Party disagreement.

Simultaneously, social forces demonstrated significant resilience. Having just emerged from the shadows of the Cultural Revolution, intellectuals and the artistic community were instinctively wary of "labeling" and ideological persecution, and they openly expressed their opposition to the crackdown. Despite the official pressure, Bai Hua and his work garnered widespread sympathy and support from the public, creating

a popular consensus that stood in stark contrast to the official line. Bai Hua himself received thousands of letters from across the country expressing solidarity. This deadlock—characterized by internal Party foot-dragging and a defiant social atmosphere—created a tense "confrontational interaction" that eventually necessitated a final intervention and verdict from Deng Xiaoping.

On March 27, 1981, Deng Xiaoping (1994, p.398) remarked during a conversation:

We should intensify propaganda and education concerning adherence to the Four Cardinal Principles and write more articles on the subject. We should criticize wrong ideologies whether they are Left or Right. Emancipation of the mind, too, means opposing both Left and Right ideologies. ... It is necessary to criticize the film script *Unrequited Love* because the issue involved is the upholding of the Four Cardinal Principles. Of course, when engaging in criticism we should present facts, reason things out and guard against being one-sided.

Later, on July 17, Deng emphasized that the most pressing issue regarding the Party's leadership over the ideological and artistic fronts was a state of "laxity and weakness" (涣散软弱). He identified the controversy surrounding *Unrequited Love* as a reflection of the trend toward bourgeois liberalization, asserting: "The essence of the Four Cardinal Principles is to uphold Communist Party leadership. ... The keystone of bourgeois liberalization is opposition to Party leadership." (Deng, 1994, P.391) In doing so, Deng once again positioned political monism as the non-negotiable "red line," setting definitive boundaries for cultural pluralism and ideological de-totalitarianization. His critique of "laxity and weakness" manifested a profound dissatisfaction with the degree of systemic decay—particularly within the cultural administrative apparatus. However, consistent with his containment of other de-totalitarian forces during this stage, Deng did not resort to Cultural Revolution-style "mass criticism" or the launching of large-scale political movements. The post-totalitarian leader demonstrated a calculated willingness to tolerate a certain degree of

social autonomy, cultural pluralism, and even institutional decay, provided they did not encroach upon the fundamental principle of political monism.

5.5 The Ebbing of De-totalitarianization and its Settling into a Post-totalitarian Structure

Linz and Stepan (1996, p.294) caution that post-totalitarianism should be understood as a continuum, making it analytically difficult to identify a precise moment of transition from totalitarian rule. While this conceptual warning is theoretically sound, China's post-Mao trajectory displays an unusually clear sequence of political developments that allows the consolidation of a post-totalitarian order to be identified with greater confidence. In this study, the transition begins with the removal of the Cultural Revolution faction in October 1976, which shattered the charismatic-ideological core of Maoist totalitarianism and opened the regime to elite reconfiguration. Its conclusion, however, should not be understood as the exhaustion of change across all subsystems, but as a political outcome in which accumulated de-totalitarianization pressures were first effectively released and then consciously bounded, producing a stable post-totalitarian equilibrium by mid-1981.

It is therefore necessary to reiterate the analytical distinction between de-totalitarianization and a post-totalitarian transition. De-totalitarianization refers to a movement away from totalitarian rule and may lead to divergent regime outcomes, including authoritarianism or democratization. A post-totalitarian transition refers to a de-totalitarianization process that results in the stabilization of a post-totalitarian regime. The Chinese case exemplifies a successful transition to post-totalitarianism. Accordingly, the analytical task of this chapter is not to demonstrate "completion" by proving closure at the level of mobilization, ideology, leadership, or pluralism, but to explain how de-totalitarianization was stabilized within the boundaries of a post-totalitarian regime.

By late 1980, the political system had reached a historically observable turning point. After years of elite insecurity, ideological volatility, mobilizational strain, and unresolved social grievances, the cumulative pressures generated by Maoist

totalitarianism ceased to escalate or reinforce one another. Instead, they were largely absorbed, defused, or rendered manageable within the existing political framework. Only after this release of pressure does the structural character of the regime become analytically clear. When examined retrospectively, the four core dimensions of the system—leadership, ideology, mobilization, and pluralism—by late 1980 already exhibited the defining characteristics of a post-totalitarian order: elite politics stabilized through collective leadership and predictable succession arrangements; ideology stripped of mobilizational absolutism and reduced to a bounded legitimating framework; mass political mobilization abandoned as a routine mode of governance; and limited but durable forms of economic, social, cultural, and institutional pluralism taking shape without threatening political monism. Crucially, after this point, no further major de-totalitarianization breakthroughs occurred across these dimensions.

The absence of such breakthroughs should not be attributed to mere institutional inertia. Rather, it reflected a dual judgment that had taken shape within the political elite. On the one hand, the pressures inherited from Maoist totalitarianism had been sufficiently released. On the other hand, precisely because these pressures had receded, the leadership became increasingly sensitive to a new category of risk: that further de-totalitarianization might generate autonomous forces capable of breaching the regime's political bottom line. As elite security was restored and factional uncertainty diminished, the marginal benefits of further openness declined. De-totalitarianization was no longer treated as a necessary corrective, but as a variable requiring deliberate control. In this sense, the stabilization of the transition was both an outcome and a conscious political choice.

This logic became explicit in the sequence of events between late 1980 and mid-1981. On December 25, 1980, Deng Xiaoping warned at the Central Work Conference that “democracy that rejects Party leadership and discipline is not socialist democracy,” marking a clear departure from the expansive tone of his August 18 speech and signaling that de-totalitarianization was approaching a structural limit. In early 1981, this limit was enforced through ideological confrontation. Deng's March call to criticize *Unrequited Love* transformed a cultural controversy into a political demarcation, demonstrating that cultural and ideological pluralism would no longer be tolerated once it severed the moral bond between the Party, the state, and the nation.

In the immediate aftermath of this controversy, Deng articulated a decisive conceptual reorientation. In his March 26, 1981 conversation with Deng Liqun, he aligned himself with the position that it was no longer appropriate to prioritize opposition to “Left” deviations. As Deng stated, it was essential to “oppose both ‘Left’ and ‘Right’ tendencies,” since focusing exclusively on one side would itself constitute a political deviation. (CCLROC, 2004, p.726-727) As the remnants of Maoist totalitarianism continued to recede, the leadership became increasingly aware that the system was approaching the “Right” boundary—the non-negotiable limit defined by political monism. Consequently, opposition to the “Right” was elevated to a status no less important than opposition to the “Left,” with the explicit aim of anchoring the regime within a zone that was neither totalitarian nor political pluralism. This conceptual “middle ground” was precisely the post-totalitarian regime.

The consolidation of this equilibrium was completed at the Sixth Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee in June 1981. The Historical Resolution functioned simultaneously as a mechanism of elite consensus and as an instrument of ideological containment. Internally, it transformed divergent elite experiences of persecution and reform into an authoritative and collectively sanctioned narrative, closing open-ended disputes over Mao, the Cultural Revolution, and historical responsibility. Externally, it established a firm ideological ceiling: while the Cultural Revolution was fundamentally negated, Mao Zedong Thought was preserved as the symbolic foundation of Party legitimacy. In this way, the Resolution disciplined the permissible scope of critique, ensuring that ideological de-totalitarianization could no longer evolve into political delegitimation. At the same time, the leadership arrangement finalized at the plenum resolved the Hua Guofeng question and consolidated the Deng–Hu–Zhao configuration, eliminating the last source of elite uncertainty that had sustained de-totalitarianization momentum. Only after this consolidation did Deng Xiaoping, in July 1981, publicly criticize the ideological and cultural apparatus for being “lax and weak,” making explicit what the Sixth Plenum had already achieved structurally: this wave of de-totalitarianization had ebbed.

By mid-1981, de-totalitarianization had carried the Chinese regime firmly into the post-totalitarian domain, beyond which no further qualitative breakthroughs occurred. The immense pressures released in the aftermath of the Huarentang Incident had been

effectively absorbed, elite consensus over the permissible limits of de-totalitarianization had largely formed, and a new configuration of political power had been substantially stabilized. In this sense, Deng Xiaoping's effort to arrest de-totalitarianization at the post-totalitarian stage can be regarded as successful, and China completed its post-totalitarian transition. This did not imply the exhaustion of all forces of systemic change. Rather, from this point onward, the post-totalitarian regime would continue to confront recurrent challenges pulling it either toward a renewed "Left" or toward a liberalizing "Right."

6 Chapter 6 Conclusion

At the macro level, this study challenges the conventional academic framework used to interpret China's political transformation from the Mao era to the post-Mao era. Rather than treating this process as a simple narrative of "from revolution to reform," it reconceptualizes the period as a regime transition from a relatively stable totalitarian system to a relatively stable post-totalitarian system, thereby restoring the fundamentally political nature of this historical transformation. Methodologically, the analysis shifts away from explanations centred on isolated turning points and instead reconstructs a long-term, phased, and internally coherent process. At the explanatory level, it moves beyond single-motive interpretations—such as leadership personality or line struggle—and develops a multi-factor analytical framework that integrates institution element, elite agency, social forces, and external influence. This approach allows the post-Mao transition to be examined through the internal logic of regime evolution rather than through episodic or actor-entered narratives.

Within this framework, the study traces the dynamic mechanisms that drove China's post-totalitarian transition. The process began with the cumulative legacy of Maoist totalitarianism itself. Prolonged mass mobilization, rigid political monism, ideological absolutism, and repeated elite purges produced a system characterized by extreme internal tension and structural fragility. With the disappearance of charismatic authority following Mao's death, the core supports of the totalitarian order collapsed, and the regime became vulnerable to elite reconfiguration. The political marginalization and persecution experienced by Veteran Revolutionaries during the Cultural Revolution further ensured that distancing the system from Maoist totalitarianism became a broadly shared imperative among those who retained or regained access to power. In this sense, de-totalitarianization was not an accidental deviation but an inevitable structural response to the accumulated contradictions of the Maoist system.

The formal opening of the transition was produced by the interaction between political line struggles and elite factional realignment. The Huaiyentang Incident of October 1976 decisively foreclosed the possibility of restoring a radicalized totalitarian order and opened a window for regime transformation. Hua Guofeng's repudiation of Cultural Revolution extremism played a critical enabling role at this juncture by unlocking the political impasse and allowing the transition to begin, even though its ultimate direction had not yet been determined.

The transition then unfolded in two analytically distinct phases. In the first phase, de-totalitarianization was driven primarily by systemic decay rather than by coherent elite design. Political elites responded pragmatically to institutional paralysis and governance failure, producing substantive changes in leadership practices and ideological control, while mobilization and pluralism were only partially downgraded. The gradual return of the Veteran Revolutionaries altered the balance of power within the elite, generating new tensions that propelled the transition into its second phase.

The second phase was characterized by a qualitative shift in agency. Veteran elites possessing substantial institutional resources came to dominate the process, and Deng Xiaoping emerged as the decisive political actor. Early in this phase, Deng developed a clear awareness of the regime's non-negotiable boundary and a working conception of the boundaries within which a post-totalitarian order could be constructed and sustained, although Deng and the CCP leadership as a whole knew nothing about the concept of post-totalitarianism. De-totalitarianization was no longer a passive response to systemic decay but a strategically managed process: it was actively advanced where it facilitated elite consolidation and regime viability and deliberately contained where it threatened political monism. Through this dual logic, the regime simultaneously redrew power boundaries and neutralized the destabilizing legacies of Maoist totalitarianism.

By mid-1981, the de-totalitarianization process had produced a new and stable equilibrium. Across the core dimensions of leadership, ideology, mobilization, and pluralism, de-totalitarianization had proceeded far enough to dismantle the totalitarian core of the Maoist system, yet no longer generated momentum for further qualitative transformation. Elite insecurity had largely receded, factional uncertainty had been resolved, and a new configuration of political authority had taken shape. From this

point onward, no major de-totalitarian breakthroughs occurred; instead, the system entered a phase of consolidation in which the post-totalitarian order was stabilized. China had completed the post-totalitarian transition.

In the first stage of transition, elite agency and institutional decay play the primary roles; however, institutional decay dictates the overall trend, while the elites merely navigate and capitalize on this momentum. By the second stage, the elites seize the initiative. While institutional decay continues to exert influence, it largely gives way to the elites' proactive advancement of de-totalitarianization. Within this liberalized environment, social forces begin to emerge but remain weak; international factors also start to come into play, though they function primarily as contextual variables.

Based on the foregoing analysis of the post-totalitarian transition and its underlying mechanisms, it is useful to return to the original research context and reconsider what an inquiry into the origins of post-totalitarianism can contribute to our understanding of the post-totalitarian regime itself. In the first stage, de-totalitarianization remained in a relatively rudimentary and chaotic state, with its ultimate prospects appearing quite blurred. The Central Work Conference at the end of 1978 accelerated the process, carving out greater space for liberalization. Concurrently, various proposals regarding the future of de-totalitarianization were put forward. Faced with these competing visions, core figures among the veteran elites, such as Deng Xiaoping, recognized the necessity of defining the limits of this de-totalitarianization. By articulating their "bottom line" through the "Four Cardinal Principles" in March 1979, they rejected more radical de-totalitarianization proposals and gradually formulated a more coherent and distinct blueprint for de-totalitarianization. Only when the leader who effectively controlled core political resources came to recognize that the bottom line of de-totalitarianization was the absolute political domination of the Party did post-totalitarianism truly begin to take shape. From that point onward, Deng Xiaoping became the principal architect and chief defender of China's post-totalitarian regime.

At its core, post-totalitarianism originated in the political determination of the ruling elite not to relinquish absolute leadership during the process of de-totalitarianization. To achieve this objective, the elite confined institutional loosening within a balance zone between "functional liberalization" and "political monopoly." Within this zone, economic vitality was released, levels of mobilization were downgraded, and

ideological fanaticism was abandoned in order to ease systemic strain, while political power itself remained tightly unified. Elite perceptions were decisive in this process, because the extreme concentration of resources under totalitarianism meant that a resolute leader could, at least technically, maintain political monism by mobilizing residual resources such as the military and the bureaucratic apparatus. The reason political monism was treated as a non-negotiable bottom line was that it constituted the critical “risk equilibrium point” in the de-totalitarianization process: before this point, the costs of retreat were lower than the costs of maintaining the old dogmas; once it was crossed, however, the risks of regime replacement and personal reckoning became uncontrollable.

From this perspective, the essence of the post-totalitarian system can be understood as a form of “constrained de-totalitarianization.” This origin logic—rooted in elite risk calculation—profoundly shaped the behavioral patterns of the post-Mao Chinese regime. It displays extreme rigidity with regard to political bottom lines, while simultaneously exhibiting considerable flexibility in other domains. This distinctive logic of oscillating between “opening” and “tightening” without ever departing from the core of political monism helps explain why a regime born out of crisis has nevertheless demonstrated a high degree of stability. Finally, this origin logic also offers a sobering insight into the prospects for democratization under post-totalitarianism. The central issue for democratic transition lies in the restructuring of the rulers’ cost calculus: that is, how interactions among internal and external variables might raise the “repression costs” of maintaining political monism while effectively lowering the “exit costs” associated with relinquishing monopoly rule. Only when this balance of costs undergoes a fundamental reversal can the logic of the post-totalitarian system itself be brought to an end.

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