

Mao and Chinese Elite Politics in the 1950s: The Gao Gang Affair Revisited

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Abstract

Published in 1990, Frederick Teiwe's *Politics at Mao's Court: Gao Gang and Party Factionalism in the Early 1950s* remains to be the authoritative masterpiece on China's elite politics in early 1950s. Its essential finding is that Mao dominated the CCP and the "high-level politics became court politics, where the name of the game was to divine the preferences of the Chairman and use or adjust to those preferences in ways that furthered individual or group interests." The author treats the CCP elite politics in the context of policy preference, ideological tendency, and the concern for Party unity. Because Mao's "self-restraint" and commitment to "the unity and democracy" in those early years, the Gao-Rao affair ended relatively benignly without upsetting the party solidarity and the democratic atmosphere that characterized the inner-party life in the period. The Teiwe's thesis seems to derive from the basic question: How could the structure of court politics deliver the result of unity and democracy in China's elite politics in early 1950s?

Based on newly available historical materials, this study will ask a different question: How did Mao manipulate the elite politics that created the inner-party tension, leading to the alleged "Gao-Rao anti-Party Clique," in order to strengthen his own charismatic authority? Max Weber points out that "'Charisma' shall be understood to refer to an extraordinary quality of a person, regardless of whether this quality is actual, alleged, or presumed. 'Charismatic authority,' hence, shall refer to a rule over men.... to which the governed submit because of their belief in the extraordinary quality of the specific person." He also said, "It is understood that, in reality, obedience is determined by highly robust motives of fear and hope--fear of the vengeance of magical powers of the power-holder, hope for reward in this world or in the beyond-- and besides all this, by interests of the most varied sort." This study will demonstrate that the fundamental concern for Mao was not any specificity of policy, ideology, or unity; it was rather his personal power and the perceived threat to it. If the underpinning legitimacy of his authority rested on the belief of his personal

extraordinary quality, the preservation of this belief became fundamental to all other considerations. Thus, Mao used his old tactics in personnel politics that he called *can shazhi* (putting sands in the mix), by moving Gao, Rao, and others, from regional positions to central positions. Thus, the beginning of the Gao-Rao Affairs. The end result was not only the downfall of Gao and Rao, but also Liu Shaoqi's one-hour long self-criticism at the party convention. Mao was the sole winner of the whole event.