
PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA
ELITE STUDIES: A REVIEW OF THE
LITERATURE

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THIS ARTICLE is concerned with analysis of political change in the People's Republic of China (PRC). The purpose is to examine methodologies that will contribute to the development of advanced approaches that will in turn allow better predictions about political progress and stability.

Political change in the PRC in recent years has defied explanation, much less prediction. Scholars have applied models, projected trends, developed intuitive hypotheses, and used nearly every social science methodology available to make sense of the events of the Chinese Communist movement. To say that the topic of political change in China is important and has serious implications throughout the world is clearly an understatement. Whether used as a model within other nations or as a factor in inter-nation relationships, what is happening in China demands attention.

One of the most illuminating approaches to the study of politics in China has been elite analysis. By definition elites are those who manipulate power, and that power is the essence of the political process.¹ But once elites are selected as the focus of attention there are still major methodological questions that must be answered depending in part on the purpose of study.

If our purpose is limited to the prediction of succession or which policy or range of policies is likely to prevail over the short run, then a relatively narrow focus on elite conflict is useful. This approach can say little, however, about the long range maturity and stability of the political system. If the concern is more than what domestic or foreign policy is likely to result from the prevalence of one individual or group, then a more fundamental analysis of the political processes and the po-

¹ Robert A. Scalapino, "Introduction," in Robert A. Scalapino, ed., *Elites in the People's Republic of China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1972), p. vi.



litical environment must be included. This means movement from a factional politics model to some form of bureaucratic model.²

A factional model is defined by its focus on groups of elites in conflict within a single political system. The model stresses analysis of the groups to determine what characteristics of group members might suggest group attitudes or behavior patterns that can be correlated with policy outcomes.

A bureaucratic model, on the other hand, focuses on institutions and formal roles within institutions to identify changing characteristics and relationships of roles that might suggest conclusions about institutional adaptability to or stability in changing political environments. This model can also organize data to be compared with a Weberian ideal-type bureaucracy to explain and predict bureaucratic behavior.

Whether one selects the factional or bureaucratic model to organize data, the subject matter must be elites and the method elite analysis. Gordon Bennett divides elite analysis into four variables: the environment (to include the time dimension), the issues, the nature of the elite, and the political outcomes of elite conflict.³ A fifth variable, the decision-making process, should be added.

Each of these variables includes sub-sets of variables, and most scholars to this point have focused on the sub-sets, one or more of the five variables, or on relationships between the variables. There is no agreement as to which combination produces the best insights or predictive capacities. It is clear, however, that single factor analysis or reductionist approaches have not produced valuable conclusions, although most have developed and organized essential data that contribute significantly to more eclectic approaches.

A critical problem still to be resolved is one of level of analysis. Most approaches can be considered micropolitical analysis, but some scholars have begun to move into the level of middle-range theory and macro-political analysis. The hope of someday reaching a general theory is still open, but in the meantime middle-range theory or macro-analysis based upon data from earlier micro-analyses has contributed significantly to our understanding of politics in China. Perhaps the most fruitful approach would fall into the category of "middle-range theory and hypothesis of intermediate scope."⁴

Review of the Literature

Clearly some scholars work from a narrower data base than others.

² For factional models see Gabriel A. Almond, "Interest Groups and the Political Process," in Roy C. Macridis and Bernard Brown, eds., *Comparative Politics: Notes and Readings* (Homewood, Illinois: The Dorsey Press, 1968), pp. 181-197. Also see H. Gordon Skilling, "Interest Groups and Communist Politics," *World Politics* 3 (April 1966), pp. 435-451. For the bureaucratic model see Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. by A. Henderson and T. Parsons (London: William Hodge, 1947).

³ Gordon Bennett, "Elites and Society in China: A Summary of Research and Interpretation," in Scalapino, *Elites*, pp. 3-37.

⁴ Scalapino, *Elites*, p. v.



It is difficult, however, to categorize research efforts by the scope of the data base. It is possible to separate works by the degree of focus on particular variables, variable sub-sets, or relationships between variables. It is also possible to break them down by complexity as measured by the number of variables or relationships considered. Finally, most works can be distinguished by whether they fit into a general factional or bureaucratic model of political analysis.

At the least complex end of the scale are works on individual elites. These studies assume, often correctly, that the individual under study exercises significant influence over politics and that an understanding of the background, behavior, and attitudes of that person will clarify political policies. The best examples are the detailed biographies on Mao Zedong (Mao Tse-tung),⁵ Lin Biao (Lin Piao),⁶ Zhou Enlai (Chou En-lai),⁷ and Liu Shaoqi (Liu Shao-ch'i).⁸ A major weakness of these studies is the lack of explanation for more general political change and the rapid obsolescence of the work when the individual elite member is removed from the political scene by purge or death.

At a slightly more complex level are the scholars who attempt to categorize groups of elites who influence policy based upon similar attitudes (factions), similar organizational interests (interest groups), or upon some type of personal relationships (cliques).⁹ The search is for some commonality in the group's background that is likely to cause predictable political behavior or relationships. These categories also range from very simple to very complex. The least complicated are the elite groups defined by scholars in Taiwan based upon left or right leanings; they include the dichotomies between radicals and moderates, reds or experts, the cultural revolution group (Jiang Qing [Chiang Ch'ing] faction), or Old Cadres Group (Deng Xiaoping [Teng Hsiao-p'ing]/Zhou Enlai).¹⁰ Yao Meng-hsuan is representative of this group of scholars.¹¹

⁵ See Jerome Chen, *Mao and the Chinese Revolution* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965); Stuart Schram, *Mao Tse-tung* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967); Robert J. Lifton, *Revolutionary Immortality: Mao Tse-tung and the Chinese Cultural Revolution* (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1968); Robert Payne, *Portrait of a Revolutionary: Mao Tse-tung* (New York: Abelard-Schuman, 1961).

⁶ Martin Ebon, *Lin Piao: The Life and Writings of China's New Ruler* (New York: Stein and Day, 1970); Thomas Robinson, *A Politico-Military Biography of Lin Piao, Part I, 1907-1949* (Santa Monica, California: Rand Corporation, 1971); Michael Y. M. Kau, ed., *The Lin Piao Affair: Power Politics and Military Coup* (White Plains, New York: International Arts and Sciences Press, 1975).

⁷ Kai-yu Hsu, *Chou En-lai: China's Gray Eminence* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1968).

⁸ Lowell Dittmer, *Liu Shao-ch'i and the Chinese Cultural Revolution: The Politics of Mass Criticism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).

⁹ For useful definitions that distinguish factions, interest groups, and cliques, see John B. Starr, "From the 10th Party Congress to the Premiership of Hua Kuo-feng—the Significance of the Colour of the Cat," *China Quarterly* 67 (September 1976), pp. 480-484.

¹⁰ Found in numerous articles in the journals *Issues and Studies* or *Da Lu Yan-jiu* (*Ta Lu Yen-chiu*).

¹¹ Meng-hsuan Yao, "The Chinese Communist Internal Struggle During the Power Transition," Paper presented to the Fifth Sino-American Conference on Mainland China (Taipei, Taiwan, June 1976).



One of the most important problems with this approach is identifying the members. For example, in nearly all of these descriptions Hua Guofeng (Hua Kuo-feng) was identified as a radical and should have been purged in 1976 when the group leaders were purged. Instead he became Premier and Chairman of the Party. Nonetheless, these analyses can be useful in the larger examination of elite conflict at the national and provincial levels because they help to clarify the issues.

Ralph Powell has also divided the groups in terms of simple dichotomous power relationships. He pits Lin Biao and his party-soldiers against all others who gain support "within the party apparatus or from party members in government or mass organizations."¹² Richard Thornton suggests a similar dichotomy, but the two poles are Mao (and his friendly factions) and all others.¹³ John Starr has suggested another dichotomy based on work style (eclecticism versus dialectic) that provides another underlying principle for differentiating leadership categories.¹⁴

PRC analysts also focus on dichotomous relationships.¹⁵ The classical Maoist analysis is in terms of class background: bourgeois versus proletarian. Elites are also divided by their stand on current policy. There are those revisionists who take the capitalist road versus those who follow the correct party line.

The problem with dichotomies is twofold: they are always black and white by definition when the real world includes many shades of grey, especially in Chinese politics where a shade of grey is perceived or interpreted as black at one point in time and white at another point. The second problem is the difficulty of assigning more than the top few who make public speeches or whose background is well known to one of the groups. For example, in the frequently discussed dichotomy of party versus army, there are real problems in identifying the members of each group. Most key army elites are also party members and many party cadres have extensive military experience. Neither party nor army is monolithic; seldom do all members of the High Command agree on any given issue, even those dealing with the role of the military.

Ting Wang defined three categories of leadership elites by adding a "career military" to the Jiang Qing (radical) group and the Zhou Enlai (moderate) group.¹⁶ This approach also introduces notions of personal power relationships into the equation rather than relying on simple adherence to similar positions on policy issues. Kenneth Lieber-

¹² Ralph Powell, "The Increasing Power of Lin Piao and the Party Soldiers, 1959-1966," *China Quarterly* 34 (April/June 1968), pp. 40.

¹³ Richard Thornton, "Teng Hsiao-p'ing and Peking's Current Crisis: A Structural Interpretation," Paper presented to the Fifth Sino-American Conference on Mainland China (Taipei, Taiwan, June 1976).

¹⁴ Starr, "From the 10th Party Congress," pp. 487-488.

¹⁵ See almost any issue of the journals *Beijing (Peking) Review* or *Renmin Ribao (Jenmin Jihpao)*.

¹⁶ Ting Wang, "The Succession Problem," *Problems of Communism* 22 (May/June 1973), pp. 13-24.

