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In the early 1950s, there were very few Western political scientists, indeed few scholars in any discipline, who were studying the new regime in mainland China. The economic historian Walter Rostow and a few colleagues wrote The Prospects for Communist China in 1954, but there was just one scholar, hitherto a historian of ancient China, who decided to examine in detail the activities of the Chinese Communist Party in power: Richard L. ("Dixie") Walker, whose China under Communism: The First Five Years was published in 1955.

Walker faced a number of difficulties. Unlike most scholars today, he had no access to China. Moreover, Beijing allowed very few of its domestic publications to be exported. The CIA’s Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) and the BBC Monitoring Service provided broadcast material in translation. The US Consulate General in Hong Kong was translating Xinhua releases and People’s Daily articles for its Survey of China Mainland Press, but it was not till the mid-1950s, that the consulate was able to publish Extracts (later Selections) from China Mainland Magazines, signaling that smuggled material was now reaching Hong Kong in sufficient quantities for a new title to be launched. Perhaps Walker obtained materials from the KMT on Taiwan.

Also unlike today, there were no grants for the study of contemporary China, and Walker had no groups of colleagues researching the same field. He was pretty much a lone wolf, though he would have found a kindred spirit in Father Laszlo Ladany (1914-1990), who started publishing China News Analysis in Hong Kong in 1953. There were also a few China scholars at the University of Washington, Seattle, whose anti-communist views jibed with Walker’s. 1 But most American Sinologists, whatever their domestic political attitudes, had been disgusted by the corruption and incompetence displayed by the KMT, as reported by American journalists, during its wartime and postwar rule on the mainland, and seemed prepared at least to withhold judgment on the Communist regime. So the publication of Walker’s book was not welcomed as the first book to discuss the new Communist regime in detail?2

American social science research on China in the universities did not really get going until after the Soviet launch of their first sputnik in 1957. Thereafter, the National Defense Education Act of 1958 authorized federal spending for, among other subjects, the study of the Soviet Union and China and their languages. Naturally, some of the first books on China based on the PhD research facilitated by the new funding dealt with the recent past.3 Fortunately, in the mid-1950s Beijing started permitting the publication of considerable official material, though this would be seriously curtailed during the grim
famine years of the early 1960s. The material included government reports to the annual meetings of the National People’s Congress, inaugurated in 1954; all the speeches at the 8th CCP Congress in 1956 and the main speeches to its second session in 1958; Mao’s speeches on collectivization (1955) and on contradictions among the people (1957); reports on the anti-Rightist Campaign (1957); and on the Great Leap Forward and the anti-Right Opportunist Campaign (1958-59).

More material became available during the chaos of the Cultural Revolution. Red Guards who found transcripts of in camera Mao speeches in the desks of officials they had harried out of their offices felt obligated immediately to circulate the unedited words of the Chairman. Thus the original version of the contradictions speech and many other hitherto unknown texts became available.

During the reform era, an avalanche of new material, both official and unofficial, has descended upon China watchers: nianpu and collected speeches of major leaders, as well as biographies and reminiscences about them and many other lesser figures in the party; autobiographies by senior leaders, some published in Hong Kong because they were written without official permission; chronologies; documentary collections; statistical compendia; innumerable books about significant incidents in the Maoist period; directories and handbooks from ministries and other organizations; county gazetteers and local histories of various kinds; and in some parts of some provinces, persistent scholars have managed to get access to archives.

As historians of modern China tiptoe into the Maoist period, how are they to gain control of this mass of material? Fortunately for them, a distinguished group of seven Chinese-American historians and librarians, aided by colleagues in Taiwan and on the Chinese mainland, have labored mightily over the past 16 years, collecting enormous quantities of data on what they have delineated as the key characteristic of Maoist politics: the campaign, what Walker called the drive, the movements designed to mobilize the Chinese people incessantly in the quest for one target or another. Ultimately, whatever the official goal, the objective of every campaign was political, a weeding out from the “broad masses” of loyal, activist, or simply obedient Chinese of the notional five percent of citizens who were recalcitrant in some way, which might indicate, according often to the whim of the officiating cadre, disloyalty or even counter-revolutionary tendencies.

These seven scholars of the Maoist trove started with the “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution,” the mother of all movements in its length, 10 years, and the massive disruption it caused in China. Their aim, as survivors of the Cultural Revolution, was to supply western scholars with additional data for researching it. But as Song Yongyi explains in his preface, conscience and a sense of duty compelled them to chronicle previous movements. The Chinese Anti-Rightist Campaign Database, 1957- followed in 2010; The Chinese Great Leap Forward Great Famine Database, 1958-1962 followed in 2013; and their work concludes with this latest Database of Chinese Political Campaigns from Land Reform to State-Private Joint Ownership, 1949-1956. In total, the four databases comprise over 30,000 documents. For scholars and PhD students of modern China, these databases provide a magnificent starting block which Richard Walker would
have envied, and the field owes a considerable debt of gratitude to Professor Song and his colleagues.

The years 1949-1956, covered in the latest database, are seen by many Chinese historians as a golden era when the Communist party took over the country and initiated its programs to change China. Mao had two basic aims: to transform the country socially and to rebuild it economically. The first aim involved changing China from a nation of private businesses and peasant family farming into, ultimately, a state in which industry and commerce were owned and operated by the government and all peasants were members of collective farms. The second aim was to be achieved by series of Soviet-style Five-Year Plans; the first plan started in 1953 although its details were not finalized and announced until 1955.

There was little disagreement among Mao’s colleagues over this latter aim. Ideologically, the CCP had decided to “lean to one side” in the Cold War, the Soviet side, and since the Soviet Communist party under Stalin had transformed Russia from an underdeveloped rural state into the world’s second super power, it made sense in Beijing to follow Moscow’s lead. But in the area of socialist transformation, Mao’s senior colleagues Liu Shaoqi and Zhou Enlai found themselves outflanked on the left by the Chairman. In 1940, at a time when the Communists were under severe pressure from the KMT, Mao had felt the need to solicit support from the “third force,” politicians and intellectuals of independent standing, many of whom were members of small parties. He outlined a theory of “New Democracy” which he promised would be the way the CCP would govern if it came to power. The essence of the theory was that, since the CCP lacked expertise in agriculture, industry and commerce, the party would for the foreseeable future allow the private economy to continue in existence.

In the early years of the new regime, senior leaders, notably Liu Shaoqi and Zhou Enlai, promoted this New Democratic Line, only gradually realizing that Mao had abandoned it. In power, the ever-restless Chairman was not prepared to defer his dream of a modernized, socialist China. He proclaimed the General Line for the Transition Period according to which the CCP would complete socialist transformation and industrialization in some 10 to 15 years. In a speech to the Politburo on June 15, 1953, included in this new dataset, Mao attacked the rightist deviation of anonymous colleagues who “fail to recognize there is a change in the character of the revolution and they go on pushing their ‘New Democracy.’” Liu, Zhou and their colleagues fell into line, but the episode sparks a “what if” thought: if Mao had stuck to New Democracy, could China’s economic miracle have started decades earlier?

One certain consequence of Mao’s abandonment of New Democracy was the proliferation of campaigns. Of course, campaigning did not start with Mao’s speech in June 1953. A brief honeymoon period in the immediate aftermath of the proclamation of the People’s Republic on October 1, 1949, ended with the start of the Korean War in June 1950 and especially after the entry of the “Chinese People’s Volunteers” into the Korean peninsula in October that year. It prompted a ‘Support Korea, Resist America’ campaign. Land reform had started in Communist-controlled areas even before victory and it continued.
There was a “three antis” campaign against cadre corruption in newly captured urban environments and a “five antis” campaign against the businessmen who might tempt cadres with “the sugar-coated bullets of the bourgeoisie.” Intellectuals, especially those who had studied in or been influenced by the West, had their thinking remolded. Nor were party intellectuals exempted as the campaign against Hu Feng underlined. Former KMT officials, their families, and anyone who could be stigmatized as a sympathizer were targeted in two campaigns against counter-revolutionaries, the zhen fan and the su fan. The final campaigns of the period covered by this new database were a renewed drive for rural collectivization urged on by Mao—who compared skeptical colleagues to tottering old ladies with bound feet—and following on its success, a movement to enroll all businessmen in joint state-private enterprises, a way station to total nationalization. There was resistance as the documents show, but within a brief seven years, the CCP was able to proclaim China a basically socialist state, and without the massive upheavals the process had entailed in the Soviet Union.

The effect of all these campaigns, whatever the disruption they caused, was that by 1956, no Chinese citizen could have been in any doubt that the CCP was firmly in charge of the country and that it was very unwise to disobey party cadres implementing the policies of the Chairman and his colleagues. A principal factor in this realization by individual Chinese and their families was the violence which accompanied every campaign. There can be no final calculation of the total human cost of the campaigns of the first half of the 1950s until the central party archives are opened to independent researchers. In his 1957 contradictions speech, Mao mentioned a figure of over 700,000 executions, but in private communications Chinese historians have suggested that this was only a partial estimate. If so, it seems possible that, in what the CCP looks back on as a golden era of nation-building before the leftist catastrophes starting with the Great Leap Forward in 1958, more people were executed or committed suicide because of political persecution than at any other period in the Maoist era, including the Cultural Revolution. But of course, whatever the final toll, it pales in comparison with the tens of millions who perished during the Great Leap famine.

In order to guide researchers, the scholars have divided the latest database into several segments covering, for instance, Mao’s speeches; other leaders’ speeches; major documents and directives; social unrest. Arranged in this way might seem difficult for historians to figure out the chronology, but it makes perfect sense. To have had all the nearly 8,000 documents arranged in chronological order would have been overwhelming. Perhaps the best approach to the database would be to construct a timeline, probably based on the segment on Mao speeches, and then slot in relevant material from other segments, but scholars will develop their own strategies for combing these materials. Historians should be reassured that the dates given in the title of each database are not rigid. The editors have been careful to include appropriate material from before and after the main period covered. Thus though there seems to be a gap in the coverage between 1962 and 1966, in fact there is not because the Cultural Revolution database starts well before 1966.
In short, these scholars have provided future historians of the Maoist era with excellent tools with which to explore those turbulent years. Their achievement demonstrates how fortunate Western Sinologists are to have the benefit of so many Chinese-born colleagues in their midst.

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1 They included Karl August Wittfogel, Franz Michael, and George Taylor.
2 See for instance the review of Walker’s book by the distinguished Qing historian, Mary C. Wright, in the February 1956 issue of the *Far Eastern Quarterly*. On a personal note, the present author wrote what he considered a balanced review of the book for the London *Daily Telegraph* which was unexpectedly published as an op ed. Unbeknownst to him in advance, the op ed page editor titled the review “China’s Black Record.” Many years later he speculated with Walker as to whether this was the reason the Chinese legation in London never got a reply from Beijing about his visa application.
4 Despite the official blackout on the impact of the Great Leap Forward, Richard Walker managed to shed light on the resulting famine in two pamphlets: *Letters from the Communes* (1959) and *Hunger in China* (1960), both published by the *New Leader*.
6 See Stuart Schram, *Mao Tse-tung Unrehearsed*.
8 An example of historians moving into the early PRC years is Jeremy Brown & Paul G. Pickowicz (eds), *Dilemmas of Victory: The Early years of the PRC*.