



China's Third Historical Resolution: A Preview

By Bert HOFMAN

China's Communist Party has just completed the Sixth Plenum of the Central Committee of the 19th Party Congress. The meeting, from 8 to 11 November, will be remembered for passing a Historical Resolution, only the third in the party's history.

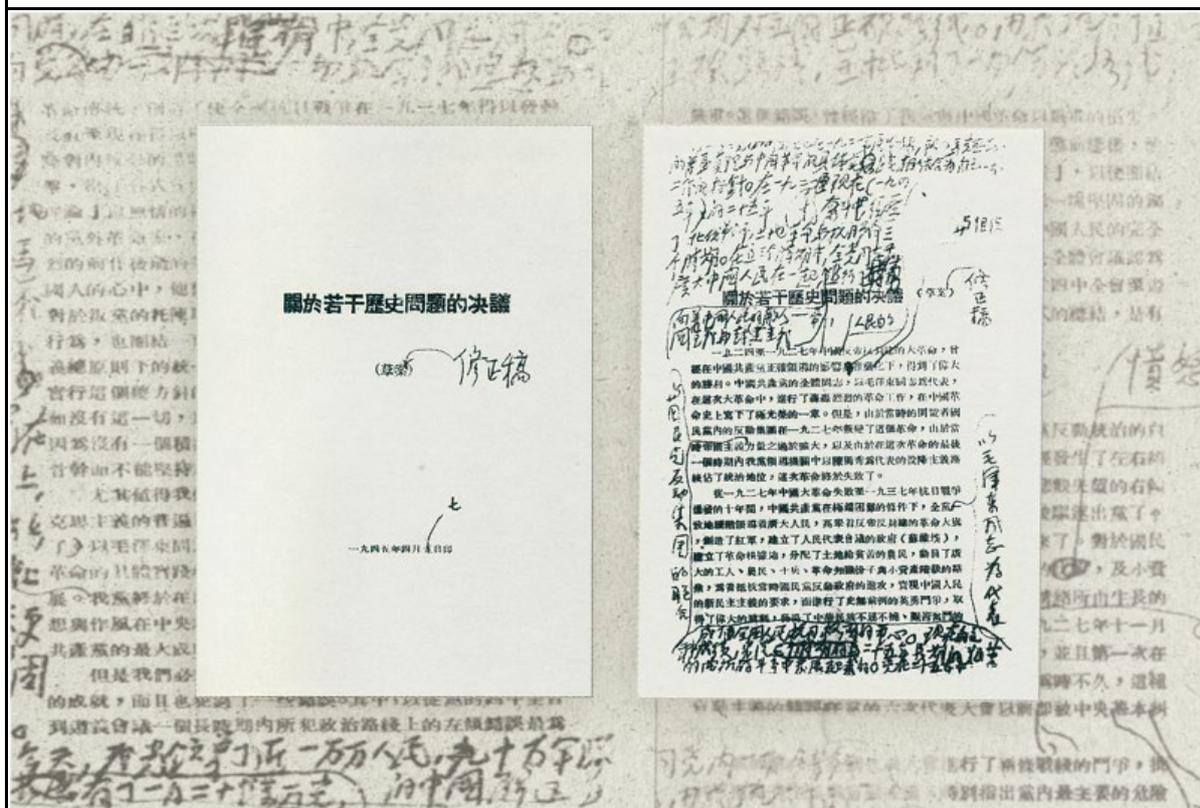
“Plenums” are meetings of the Communist Party of China's Central Committee and their alternates, currently about 350 people. A Central Committee is elected every five years at every National Party Congress, with the last held in 2017 and to last till next year when the 20th National Party Congress takes place and a new Central Committee is chosen. In between National Party Congresses are usually seven Plenums.

Traditional topics of the Sixth Plenum are Party ideology and organisational matters. This year's Sixth Plenum was special because the main topic was to review and approve a “Historical Resolution”. The previous two were passed in 1945 under the guidance of Mao Zedong and 1981 under Deng Xiaoping. So this was a rare occasion.

Past resolutions settled important ideological conflicts within the Communist Party. The 1945 “[Resolution](#) on certain questions in the history of our party” settled ideological conflict after what is known as the Yan'an Rectification that purged the party of Mao Zedong's rivals. The policies and ideas of Mao's opponents were framed as “mistakes”, “deviations” and “petty bourgeois ideology”, and the resolution confirmed Mao as the supreme leader of the CPC, and later China.

Mao himself was deeply involved in the drafting—he knew the importance of the “correct” assessment of history for his future leadership. He was reported to have personally corrected the many drafts of the document (Figure 1), and made sure that the Central Committee depicted his thoughts and actions as “entirely correct”. History is never permanent, though, and the 1945 Resolution was removed from Mao's collected works in 1967 perhaps because of the positive assessment of Liu Shaoqi in the Resolution, Mao's right hand from 1945 to 1966 who had fallen out of Mao's grace by that time.

FIGURE 1 MAO'S HANDWRITTEN NOTES ON A DRAFT OF THE 1945 HISTORICAL RESOLUTION



Source: Wang Junwei (王均伟), Chongwen “Guanyu ruogan lishi wenti de jueyi” jiangding liangge weihu de zijue (Revisit the “Resolution on Certain Historical Issues” and Strengthen the Consciousness of the “Two Safeguards”), *Qiushi*, 2019/1, http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2019-01/01/c_1123923740.htm, accessed 13 November 2021.

The 1981 “[Resolution](#) on certain questions in the history of our party since the founding of the People’s Republic of China”, shepherded by Deng Xiaoping, assesses the “errors” of the Cultural Revolution and moved the party away from class struggle towards economic development. Though criticising Mao’s mistakes, it also reconfirmed “Mao Zedong Thought” as a guiding ideology next to Marxism-Leninism. Mao had been “basically good” for China, despite his “errors” in later years under the influence of the Gang of Four so the judgment went.

Again, Deng Xiaoping was deeply involved in the drafting (see, for instance, Ezra Vogel’s *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* pp. 365—373). Though he wanted to be crystal clear on Mao’s mistakes, he also wanted to preserve Mao as a symbol for the Party and the nation, while rehabilitating the victims of the Cultural Revolution and the remaining victims of the 1957 Anti-rightist campaign (in which Deng played a prominent role!). Finally, he wanted to sideline Hua Guofeng, the anointed successor to Mao. He succeeded — Hua resigned from Party chairmanship in advance of the Sixth Plenum of the 11th CPC Central Committee in June 1981 when it became clear that the four years of his reign since Mao’s death were part of the historical resolution, and not in a positive way.

This time, the nature of the resolution is very broad — reviewing the full 100 years of the CPC, compared to 25 for the first and 31 for the second. There are no obvious ideological issues to be settled, even though recent policy initiatives, such as the common prosperity strategy and

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the dual circulation strategy, suggest a shift towards more socialism in the socialist market economy.

Compared to the ideological and personal fireworks of the first and second Historical Resolutions, the third resolution seems to be a rather tame affair. In fact, the title of the piece, “Resolution on the Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Party over the Past Century” suggests as much. It is about “achievement” and “experiences” rather than “questions” or issues.

The Historical Resolution itself has yet to be released, but the CPC has issued a long [communiqué](#), which presumably previews the main contents of the resolution. Rather than settling ideological issues or (re-) evaluating historical contributions of prominent party figures, the resolution appears first and foremost to be a celebration of the 100 years of the CPC’s existence. And of Xi Jinping, of course.

Each of Xi Jinping’s predecessors is given his dues, from Mao Zedong to Deng Xiaoping to Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao, they are all there. This leads to a rather wordy phrase, such as “The Political Bureau of the Central Committee holds high the great banner of socialism with Chinese characteristics, adheres to the guidance of Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, the important thinking of the “Three Represents”, the scientific outlook on development, and Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era...”. However, it does not rock any ideological boats.

If there is criticism on Xi Jinping’s predecessors, it is this passage: “It [the Central Committee under Xi Jinping] has solved many tough problems that were long on the agenda but never resolved and accomplished many things that were wanted but never got done. With this, it has prompted historic achievements and historic shifts in the cause of the Party and the country”.

This passage can be seen as a mild jab at Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, who, in the eyes of Xi Jinping, neglected Party building and turned a blind eye on corruption. Perhaps this mild criticism is the result of the composition of the drafting committee for the Resolution, which no doubt included Wang Huning, the Party’s current ideological Czar.

Wang played the same role under Jiang and Hu (the “three represents” and “scientific outlook on development” are widely attributed to [him](#)). His most famous book, *America Against America*, which now command high prices on the [secondary market](#) was written in 1991. Strong criticism of the recent past would have been “Wang Huning Against Wang Huning” so to speak.

Compared to the criticism of the past in the communiqué, the language of the first and second Historical Resolutions was a lot sharper. The first contains phrases such as:

“The gravest of all [error’s] was the “Left” error in the political, military and organisational lines from the time of the Fourth Plenary Session of the Sixth Central Committee of the Party in January 1931 to the enlarged meeting of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee in January 1935 (the Tsunyi Meeting). That error caused serious losses to our Party and to the Chinese revolution”.

The second Resolution does not mince any words either:

“Chief responsibility for the grave ‘Left’ error of the ‘cultural revolution’, an error comprehensive in magnitude and protracted in duration, does indeed lie with Comrade Mao Zedong. But after all it was the error of a great proletarian revolutionary. Comrade Mao

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Zedong paid constant attention to overcoming shortcomings in the life of the Party and state. In his later years, however, far from making a correct analysis of many problems, he confused right and wrong and the people with the enemy during the ‘cultural revolution’.

If not for settling any ideological battle, what is the significance of the third Historical Resolution?

The mere fact that this Historical Resolution is passed under Xi Jinping *is* the most important aspect of the resolution. This elevates Xi to the same level as Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, and sets the stage for Xi himself and his version of Socialism to be around for a long time to come.

Xi’s position in the Party is already very strong so he did not need the resolution to further consolidate his power as many argued. In fact, it is widely expected that next year, at the 20th National Party Congress, he will obtain a third term as general secretary, breaking the informal rule on two-term limits put in place by Deng after Mao. Instead, Xi seems to want to consolidate history and assure his place in it. This is the main function of the third Resolution.

Xi’s resolution as reflected in the Communiqué left out much of the criticism on Mao from the second Historical Resolution or for that matter the damnation of the Leftist Errors from the first. In doing so, he seems to want to re-establish continuity with Mao, and rather than talking up the “errors” of the past, the Communiqué emphasises the “glorious journey” of the CPC and “valuable historical experience” culminating in Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era. As the Communiqué states: “This is the Marxism of contemporary China and of the 21st Century”.

The absence of strong ideological language will give comfort to those who feared that the resolution might be used to chart out a turn to the left. The episode over the summer, when Li Guanman’s blog found its way into the official media websites, suggested that a leftist turn was not out of the question. The Communiqué suggests otherwise. Even “Common Prosperity” gets only one mention in the text. Nevertheless, Marx and Marxism, never absent from any Party document, accrues 14 mentions, continuing an upward trend that even pre-dates Xi Jinping.

The Communiqué has of course a lot of Xi Jinping in it, considering that he has only been in charge for 10 out of the 100 years of history that the Resolution reviews. In total, his name appears 17 times, compared to seven for Mao Zedong and five for Deng Xiaoping (and two for Hu Jintao and one for Jiang Zemin). No doubt, the Resolution itself will have more of it: the 1945 resolution mentioned Mao Zedong 52 times. In contrast, Deng’s 1981 resolution only mentions him 10 times, reflecting his wariness of personality cults in the wake of Mao’s reign. It also enabled Deng to mount the creation of a personality cult charge against Hua Guofeng.

In this context, according to the Communiqué and [this People’s Daily web](#) report, the two previous resolutions still hold: “In his explanation, General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out that from the founding of the party to the beginning of reform and opening up, the major issues of right and wrong in the party’s history have been basically resolved by these two historical resolutions, and their basic expositions and conclusions are still applicable to this day”. This presumably includes the lesson (number 10 in the 1981 Resolution) on personality cult:

“In light of the lessons of the “cultural revolution” and the present situation in the Party, it is imperative to build up a sound system of democratic centralism inside the Party. We must carry out the Marxist principle of the exercise of collective Party leadership by leaders who have

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emerged from mass struggles and who combine political integrity with professional competence, and we must prohibit the personality cult in any form”.

Some observers see this continued adherence to the second resolution as an implicit criticism of Xi Jinping’s leadership style, which arguably has moved away from collective leadership.

A further minor setback for Xi could be that the Resolution did not credit him with “Xi Jinping Thought” but rather kept the longish “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era”. Mao had his Mao Zedong Thought and Deng his Deng Xiaoping Theory in the constitution of the CPC, and some had expected Xi to get his Xi Jinping Thought incorporated, but it seems that this will have to wait for another day.

Irrespective, with the third Historical Resolution put to his name, and after a year of celebration of the 100th CPC anniversary, the achievement of the *Xiaokang* (moderately prosperous) society and the eradication of extreme poverty, Xi Jinping comes out of the Sixth Plenum stronger than ever, a deft politician, a man with a mission and [a man of the people](#).

No doubt, the third Historical Resolution will be analysed and studied by academics and China watchers for decades to come. In real life, though, the attention will shift to the 20th National Party Congress, which the Communiqué promises to take place in “the second half” of next year, probably October or November.

Shortly before that, the Seventh Plenum of the 19th Central Committee will take place. It is there, and at the high-level meetings over the summer, that key personnel decisions will be made. Though the rules today are less clear than before, there will likely be a major turnover in the CPC power structure, namely the Central Committee, Politburo and Standing Committee of the Politburo. The Sixth Plenum made it all but certain that Xi Jinping will stay, but the key question is whether a possible future successor to Xi is anointed, whether a new Premier will be designated, and whether key portfolios such as foreign affairs and economy will get new Czars.

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