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The Tragedy of Lin Biao

Riding the Tiger during the
Cultural Revolution
1966–1971



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1

INTRODUCTION

'Do not lightly ride [the tiger of political power].' Lin Biao's reading notes, sometime before the Cultural Revolution¹

'Be passive, passive and again passive.' Lin Biao's advice to his friend Tao Zhu shortly before the latter's fall, December 1966 and January 1967²

'At any given time, in all important questions, Chairman Mao always charts the course. In our work, we do no more than follow in his wake, and that's it.' Lin Biao at the Ninth Party Congress, April 1969³

More than two decades after his demise, the case of Lin Biao, who became Mao Zedong's personally anointed successor in 1966 but was denounced as an unprincipled conspirator following his death five years later, remains the most obscure and controversial case of top-level elite conflict in the history of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). While the official version of Lin's death in September 1971 as the result of a plane crash while fleeing to the Soviet Union is widely disbelieved both in and outside China, this appears the least problematic aspect of the Party's account of Lin Biao during the Cultural Revolution.⁴ More

¹ Guan Weixun, *Wo suo zhidaode Ye Qun* (The Ye Qun I Knew) (Beijing: Zhongguo wenxue chubanshe, 1993), p. 202. Guan, a secretary to Lin's wife (see below, n. 11), found this notation in Lin's hand as a marginal comment concerning Cao Cao's observation upon becoming Prime Minister during the Han dynasty that 'when riding the tiger it is difficult to get off.'

² Quan Yanchi, *Tao Zhu zai 'Wenhua dageming' zhong* (Tao Zhu during the 'Cultural Revolution') (n.p.: Zhonggong zhongyang dangxiao chubanshe, 1991), pp. 196, 215.

³ 'Impromptu remarks by Lin Biao at plenary session of the Ninth National Congress of the CCP on 14 April 1969', as trans. by Michael Schoenhals in *The Stockholm Journal of East Asian Studies*, vol. 2 (1990), p. 102.

⁴ Intellectuals and urban residents in China generally have little confidence in the CCP's account while the 'inside story' published in the West, Yao Ming-le, *The Conspiracy and Death of Lin Biao* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), which claims that Mao arranged for Lin's assassination, has considerable acceptance. Party historians, however, including those deeply sceptical of many aspects of the official verdict on Lin Biao, accept the story of the fatal flight after careful analysis of the available data. For a refutation of Yao Ming-le's book, see *Dang de wenxian* (The Party's Documents),

problematic is the story of military coup plans and an assassination plot directed against Mao by Lin in the last desperate period of his political decline – apart from the question of whether such plans actually existed, there is much to suggest that to the extent that they did, it was Lin's son, Lin Liguo, who organised these projects without his father being aware.⁵ Yet it is concerning more fundamental political questions that not only the official account but also the basic thrust of Western analysis are most in need of re-examination. How did Lin Biao ascend to the position of successor to Mao? Why did he fall so precipitously in 1970–1? What were Lin's objectives, methods and role over the entire 1966–71 period? What does the case of Lin Biao tell us about the nature of Chinese politics in the Cultural Revolution period?

Any effort to reconstruct the politics of the Lin Biao case faces enormous methodological problems. Most obviously, the great political sensitivity of the affair has resulted in a distorted official account. The awkwardness of explaining how Chairman Mao's 'best student' could turn into an assassin produced confused and conflicting claims, a tendency to paint Lin as unremittingly evil,⁶ and efforts to protect the reputations of both Mao and

no. 4 (1989), pp. 81–4. Moreover, recent investigative reporting by Peter Hannam, 'Solved: the mystery of Lin Biao's death', *AsiaWeek*, 2 February 1994, pp. 32–3, provides near conclusive proof of Lin's presence on the plane in the form of interviews with the KGB experts who examined the remains of the crash victims as well as photographs of those remains which were taken to Moscow.

⁵ A range of Party historians interviewed, including those relatively accepting of the official characterization of Lin, acknowledge the possibility or likelihood that this was the case. For a published comment, see Wang Nianyi, *1949–1989 nian de Zhongguo: Dadongluan de niandai* (China 1949–1989: The Years of Great Turmoil) (Henan: Henan renmin chubanshe, 1988), pp. 388–9, 421, who states there is no evidence of Lin's awareness.

⁶ In the 1980s the emphasis on greater historical objectivity has led to acknowledgement of Lin's positive contributions during the revolution, but there is little sign of any official re-evaluation of his actions in the post-revolutionary period, especially during the Cultural Revolution. However, the fact that the authorities, probably reacting to pressure from veterans of Lin's Fourth Field Army, have allowed the publication of books casting major if discreet doubt on the Party's verdict concerning Lin suggests a tacit recognition that the official story is, at the very least, overstated. The key works in this respect are the scholarly study, Wang Nianyi, *Dadongluan*; and the reminiscences of two secretaries in Lin's household, Zhang Yunsheng and Guan Weixun (see below, n. 11).

Zhou Enlai. A further consequence of such sensitivity has been both severe limitations on access to materials concerning Lin for Party historians seeking a more objective evaluation and limits on what they can say in print, with the result that even the most serious scholars give contradictory accounts of the inherently confusing events of the Cultural Revolution period. The importance of these limitations for scholarship within China cannot be overstated; even the seminal work of the military Party historian Wang Nianyi, for all its excellence, has been hobbled by archival restrictions, and in the resulting analysis some of his most important points must be made indirectly. Beyond general bias, conflicting detail and restrictions on sources, a major problem concerns the reliability of key materials on the case; some were clearly fabricated by the authorities⁷ while others – especially the important evidence of leading figures at the trial in 1980–1 of the ‘Lin Biao and Jiang Qing cliques’⁸ – are of questionable validity. In particular, General Wu Faxian who provided some of the most significant evidence concerning Lin Biao’s activities is – according to a well-informed Party historian – deeply remorseful over his testimony, parts of which he claims to have invented to please his inter-

⁷ While not created out of whole cloth, Lin’s alleged ‘571 military coup plan’ is an example. According to a Party historian in the military, the document issued in 1972 as the ‘Outline of “project 571”’ (see the translation in Michael Y.M. Kau (ed.), *The Lin Biao Affair: Power Politics and Military Coup* (White Plains: International Arts and Sciences Press, 1975), pp. 81–90) was constructed on the basis of confessions by collaborators of Lin Ligu. The notion of a ‘571 project’ comes from an isolated scrap of paper bearing the circled number 571 found in the effects of one of Lin Ligu’s accomplices.

⁸ Although one historian denounced the trial as a kangaroo court where testimony was rehearsed, this seems overstated. According to a participant in the process, the principle of ‘truth from facts’ and the right to speak freely were emphasized to the defendants, and, in fact, some charges were dropped on the basis of the evidence. Nevertheless, as the following case of Wu Faxian suggests, the incentives for giving the prosecutors what they were looking for were substantial. Compilations of evidence from the trial are: *A Great Trial in Chinese History: The Trial of the Lin Biao and Jiang Qing Counter-Revolutionary Cliques, Nov, 1980-Jan. 1981* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1981); the more extensive *Lishi de shenpan* (The Historic Trial) (Beijing: Qunzhong chubanshe, 1981); and the more recent Xiao Sike, *Caoji shenpan: shenli Lin Biao fangeming jituan qinliji* (The Super Trial: A Participant’s Account of the Trial of the Case of the Lin Biao Counterrevolutionary Clique) (2 vols, Jinan: Jinan chubanshe, 1992).

rogators.⁹ Moreover, unofficial interpretive works¹⁰ and first-hand accounts are subject to bias and limitation, even when they run counter to the official picture as in the memoirs of Lin's secretary, Zhang Yunsheng.¹¹

Another methodological problem is that the public record of Lin Biao's statements, so often used by Western analysts to determine his political position,¹² have no necessary relationship to his private views. Apart from the well-known case of Lin's political report to the Ninth Party Congress in 1969, on other

⁹ Oral source. Cf. below, p. 24, n. 38; and Barbara Barnouin and Yu Changgen, *Ten Years of Turbulence: The Chinese Cultural Revolution* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1993), pp. 216, 325.

¹⁰ A case in point is the influential book by the reform intellectual Yan Jiaqi and his wife, Gao Gao and Yan Jiaqi, *Wenhua dageming, shinianshi 1966-1976* (History of the 'Cultural Revolution' Decade 1966-1976) (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 1986). Ironically, while frowned upon by the authorities for its relentless account of evil-doings during the Cultural Revolution, the book perpetuates many official myths as well as being sloppy on matters of detail. In the following discussion we often use this book as representative of the official view although technically this is not the case. For a critique emphasising the book's various inaccuracies by the leading historian of the period, Wang Nianyi, see *Dangshi tongxun* (Party History Bulletin), no. 4 (1987), pp. 18-29.

¹¹ Zhang Yunsheng, *Maojiawan jishi: Lin Biao mishu huiyilu* (True Account of Maojiawan: Reminiscences of Lin Biao's Secretary) (Beijing: Chunqiu chubanshe, 1988). A translation of roughly one-sixth of this book, together with a perceptive if brief introduction by Lawrence R. Sullivan, can be found in *Chinese Law and Government*, no. 2 (1993). In addition, Wen Feng, *Shentanxia de Lin Biao* (Lin Biao Down to Earth) (Beijing: Zhongguo huaqiao chubanshe, 1993), mirrors Zhang's book and is apparently based on a journalist's interviews with him and other of Lin's secretaries; it is useful primarily for identifying some people not identified in *Maojiawan*. While there are varying assessments of Zhang's account among Chinese scholars and it contains some significant factual errors, it can be considered broadly reliable and revealing despite the author's restrained sympathy for his former boss and his limited access to Lin while working for him in the crucial period from summer 1966 to late 1970. Another major recent book, Guan Weixun, *Ye Qun*, provides further credible information from a vantage point inside Lin's residence. The author, who had been a deputy director of the army's cultural bureau, was hired to read classical texts to Lin's wife, Ye Qun, from 1968 to 1971, and subsequently in the 1980s conducted interviews with Lin's daughter, Lin Liheng (Lin Doudou), and other members of his circle.

¹² See especially the work of Lin's contemporary biographers, Martin Ebon, *Lin Piao: The Life and Writings of China's New Ruler* (New York: Stein and Day, 1970); and Thomas W. Robinson, 'Lin Piao as an élite type', in Robert A. Scalapino (ed.), *Elites in the People's Republic of China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1972).

occasions he read speeches or put his name to articles prepared by others – even by those allegedly in opposing political camps as in the case of ‘his’ celebrated 1965 treatise ‘Long live the victory of people’s war’.¹³ This, of course, is related to the gap between the private beliefs and public actions of politicians everywhere, but, as this study demonstrates, this gap was often extraordinarily wide in Chinese politics, and especially so during the Cultural Revolution. Finally, the very nature of Lin’s reclusive persona and the questions at issue – political motives, possible conspiracies and clashes of personalities over trivial matters – contributes greatly to the difficulty of analysis. Thus we share the assessment of the most careful chronicler of the Cultural Revolution period, Wang Nianyi, that key materials on Lin Biao are lacking, that research is necessarily very incomplete, and that only individual opinions can be offered.¹⁴ Yet the documentary evidence which does exist, together with interviews of Party historians, some of whom are altering their own interpretations as new evidence becomes available and passionately seek a just verdict on a case where ‘there has never been such disregard [of the principle of “seeking] truth from facts”’,¹⁵ does provide the basis for analysis. At the very least such an analysis can cast doubt on official claims as well as conventional wisdoms in Western scholarship, and it is also possible to present an alternative interpretation, however tentative on specific issues.

As in other respects concerning Chinese élite politics,¹⁶ Western analyses of Lin Biao, both those appearing in the period

¹³ See below, pp. 26–7, 106–8.

¹⁴ Wang Nianyi, *Dadongluan*, pp. 368–9.

¹⁵ The sentiment, originally articulated by General Huang Yongsheng of the ‘Lin Biao clique’ (see Xiao Sike, *Caoji shenpan*, vol. 1, p. 303), was cited approvingly by an oral source specializing in the case. On the value of interviews, see Frederick C. Teiwes, ‘Interviews on Party history’, *CCP Research Newsletter*, nos. 10 & 11 (1992).

¹⁶ See the discussion of Western adaptations of the official ‘two line struggle’ model of the pre-1966 period in Frederick C. Teiwes, *Leadership, Legitimacy, and Conflict in China: From a Charismatic Mao to the Politics of Succession* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1984), p. 5.

following his death¹⁷ and the few recent works dealing with the case,¹⁸ have been heavily influenced by Chinese interpretations. While there are some significant differences among Western interpretations, and of course between Chinese accounts and Western scholarly views which have demonstrated a healthy scepticism concerning aspects of the official line,¹⁹ there has nevertheless been a substantial degree of agreement on political issues that have strong echoes in official Chinese sources. The following points, at some risk of oversimplification, fairly characterize the dominant interpretation:

1. Lin Biao was an ambitious politician who did what was necessary in terms of political manoeuvring and factional combat first to consolidate his control of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), and then to attain and retain the position of successor to Mao including an ill-fated effort to become People's Republic of China (PRC) state chairman in 1970.

¹⁷ Significant studies from the immediate post-Lin period include: Jürgen Domes, *China after the Cultural Revolution: Politics between Two Party Congresses* (London: C. Hurst, 1976), parts I-II; Jaap van Ginneken, *The Rise and Fall of Lin Biao* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976); Philip Bridgham, 'The fall of Lin Biao', *China Quarterly* (CQ), no. 55 (1973); Ellis Joffe, 'The Chinese army after the Cultural Revolution: the effects of intervention', CQ, no. 55 (1973); and Harry Harding, 'Political trends in China since the Cultural Revolution', *The Annals*, July 1972. In an earlier work one of the present authors, Teiwes, *Leadership*, pp. 105-13, was similarly misled into some of the same errors as these works, albeit in the context of a correctly Mao-centred interpretation; a first step in correcting said errors was idem, 'Mao and his lieutenants', *Australian journal of Chinese Affairs* (AJCA), no. 19-20 (1988), pp. 63-7.

¹⁸ In particular, the state of the art essays by Harry Harding, Roderick MacFarquhar, Thomas Robinson and Jonathan D. Pollack in *The Cambridge History of China* (CHOC), vol. 15 (Cambridge University Press, 1991). The book by Barnouin and Yu which came to hand after the present analysis was drafted, *Ten Years of Turbulence*, especially ch. 6, is easily the best Western study to date. It is particularly notable for its clear understanding that 'Mao was too formidable an emperor' (p. 201) for 'Lin Biao [to] be considered a threat' (p. 208), but in our view it errs on various specific developments and most fundamentally in its characterisation of Lin as 'highly ambitious and unscrupulous in [his] attempts to strengthen [his] own position' (p. 211), and in claiming he engaged in 'acute' struggle with Mao after the 1970 Lushan plenum (p. 200).

¹⁹ E.g., see Domes, *China after the Cultural Revolution*, pp. 130-2; van Ginneken, *Rise and Fall*, pp. 270-4; and Barnouin and Yu, *Ten Years of Turbulence*, pp. 216-17.

2. During the active phase of the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1968, Lin was a forceful proponent of the movement, even to the extent of advocating or at least sanctioning measures which disrupted the economy and the army, although perhaps with some restraint where his military 'power base' was concerned.

3. While initially allied with Mao, around the time of the Ninth Party Congress in April 1969 as the Cultural Revolution entered its 'construction' stage, the Chairman and his increasingly insecure successor began to fall out with an unrelenting power struggle developing by the time of the summer of 1970 Lushan plenum, if not earlier.

4. Apart from Mao himself, Lin's chief antagonist was Zhou Enlai who organized an anti-Lin coalition, while the 'Cultural Revolution left' represented possible if untrustworthy allies.²⁰

5. The core of the post-Ninth Congress struggle was Lin's effort to perpetuate military preponderance over the polity while Mao and Zhou sought to restore civilian control.

6. In attempting to secure his power Lin Biao developed a programme of defence preparedness, a hard-line foreign policy, and Great Leap-style economic policies designed to appeal to China's military-industrial complex, but this programme lost out to a coalition of civilian administrators and regional military leaders who favoured more moderate policies.

Our review of the evidence suggests that all of the above points are seriously flawed. In contrast, we offer the following summary evaluation of the Lin Biao case:

1. Far from being excessively ambitious, Lin was content with an inactive albeit honoured position and was thrust into a leading role by Mao and subsequently cast aside for reasons that had little to do with any wishes he may have had for greater power.

²⁰ This view was strongly expressed in the immediate post-Lin period. Under the influence of post-Mao Chinese accounts of the struggle of the 'Lin Biao and Jiang Qing cliques', more recent Western analyses have given greater attention to conflict between these two groups.

2. While Lin publicly assumed a proponent's role during the Cultural Revolution as befitted his new status as the successor, and also seemingly took advantage of the situation to settle some personal grievances, to the extent that a personal political orientation can be deduced from his actions and private statements, it was in favour of economic moderation and limiting chaos, particularly in the army.

3. Lin never opposed Mao politically but instead operated by the prime political rule of strictly following the Chairman's wishes to the extent that they could be determined. Even in the desperate post-Lushan period his posture was passive and he most likely (although not certainly) had no knowledge of any military coup or assassination plots.

4. There was no fundamental conflict between Lin and Zhou Enlai as Zhou accepted Lin's superior status and Lin did not interfere in Zhou's activities. The conflict which did exist was between Lin and his supporters and Jiang Qing's 'group' which fundamentally developed from competition for Mao's blessing and was concerned more with trivial matters and perceptions of relative power than with policy issues.

5. Although the relationship of civilian and military authority caused considerable friction within the Party, there is little to suggest that Lin or his top associates in the PLA command were pushing for a Bonapartist outcome.

6. While Lin did have an interest in the institutional well-being of the military and the PLA as an organisation played a key role in supervising the economy, there is no evidence of his shaping a coherent programme to appeal to a military-industrial complex, or indeed of any developed policy positions throughout the entire 1966-71 period.

This interpretation suggests that Lin Biao was a tragic figure, but it is important to be clear in what sense he can be regarded as tragic. It definitely does not imply a favourable moral judgment on Lin. Instead it concerns a man who was at best an acute observer but became a reluctant player in the most turbulent years of CCP politics. As for personal morality, ironically the

most adequate summary judgment of Lin may have come in the form of an obscure historical reference by Mao at the critical August-September 1970 Lushan plenum – one which saw Lin's wife, Ye Qun, seeking scholarly advice as to possible implications. According to Mao's allusion, 'King Zhou [Lin Biao?] is no good, but he's not as bad as people think.'²¹ Rather than any virtue, what makes Lin tragic is that essentially he had little interest in politics and did not wish to be in his exalted position. He was the victim of his circumstances, trapped above all by the designs and whims of Mao but also by the shifting currents of an unpredictable political situation and the manipulation of his own family. The following analysis elaborates on Lin's plight, and the nature of élite politics in this period, first by examining Lin and his context in broad terms, then by reviewing his role during key conflicts in the active phase of the Cultural Revolution in 1966–8, and finally through the lens of major developments from the Ninth Congress to the period of Lin's decline in 1970–1.

²¹ Zhang Yunsheng, *Maojiawan*, p. 396.

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