In early 1982, Deng Liqun and Hu Qiaomu were placed in key positions in the fields of propaganda and culture, reflecting the Party’s resolution to tighten control on ideological matters. Soon afterwards, a campaign to strengthen patriotism and Communist morality followed. Some intellectuals who had been adamant in their critique of the Party role during the Cultural Revolution were purged. For example, Zhang Xianyang, a member of the CASS Marxist-Leninist Institute, continued to criticize Mao after the Theory Conference of 1979. Zhang questioned the Leninist political system, in particular the notion of ‘democratic centralism’, and had called Hu Qiaomu an ‘anti-humanitarian’. When Deng Liqun became head of the Propaganda Department in 1982, Zhang was forced to step down as head of the Marx-Engels Research Office in the Marxism-Leninism Institute. Zhang withdrew from direct engagement in political activities and joined Yu Guangyuan and Su Shaozhi in editing materials on socialism, but in the fall of 1985 he was allowed to re-register as a Party member and resumed his former administrative position.

Though Deng Liqun and Hu Qiaomu retired from their posts as active leaders of the CASS Presidium, they retained their ties with CASS as advisors of the leadership and through their connection networks. The shifting of leaders between academic, political, and administrative organizations did not seem to yield great problems or even debate. In 1982 Deng Liqun became the head of the Propaganda Department, one of the supervisory organs of CASS, when Zhou Yang retired as its deputy head to become Vice-President of CASS. At the Twelfth National Party Congress in 1982, Hu Qiaomu joined the Politburo and was put in charge of culture, while Deng Liqun joined the Secretariat and became responsible for propaganda. He also took over the management of the Policy-Research Office of the Secretariat. The consequences of these academic and political shifts were felt at CASS and the relational networks between political leaders and intellectuals.
The political think-tanks created by Premier Zhao Ziyang drew on the research experience of reform-minded intellectuals such as the economists Yu Guangyuan and Xue Muqiao. Apart from looking after the careers of young reformist intellectuals, Premier Zhao also expressed his intention to lighten the financial burdens and improve the poor living conditions of middle-aged intellectuals in a speech on June 28, 1982. Moreover, the CCP Central Committee repeatedly stressed the selection and promotion of younger cadres (i.e., middle-aged Party intellectuals) and the assignment of them to important posts.1 After the Twelfth Party Congress, just when conservatives were preparing to slow down reform plans, Zhao and Hu Yaobang launched their plans for commercial reform in agriculture and in the urban regions. The clash that followed put a temporary end to these plans. Similarly, in the field of theory, on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of Marx’s death, Hu Yaobang gave a speech in which he advocated China’s adoption of ‘advanced culture’, implying a policy in favour of young, educated intellectuals instead of older, uneducated, ‘revolutionary’ cadres. He also favoured a more ‘creative’ approach to Marxism.2

At the celebration of Marx’ Centennial in March 1983, Su Shaozhi, who in 1982 had replaced Yu Guangyuan as head of the CASS Research Institute of Marxist-Leninist Mao Zedong Thought, argued that Chinese Marxism had become obsolete. It needed updating through the exploration of the achievements of the modern sciences and social sciences in the West. Such exploration, he argued, was not just an issue of expanding knowledge. Su recognized that the contemporary capitalist state plays the role of protecting the ‘organism of society’ and ensuring the entire process of expanded reproduction. The emergence of such a modern state, Su argued, made it necessary to reappraise Lenin’s thesis of the state being purely an instrument for exploiting the oppressed classes.3 Su pointed out that since capitalism could renew itself by means of technological revolution, instead of discussing the time of death of capitalism, China needed to concentrate on the challenges posed to Marxism by ‘post-industrial’ society and the ‘information revolution’.

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1 Wang Hsue-wen (1983, 15–16) (the speech lines are quoted from Guangming Ribao, June 29, 1982).
3 Shambaugh (1991, 75).