In July 1977, Deng Xiaoping reemerged at the third plenary meeting of the 10th Central Committee, and resumed the duties which had been stripped from him during the April 1976 Tiananmen incident. This was the final rise of his “three falls and three rises,” and from this, Mao Zedong’s China gradually transitioned into Deng Xiaoping’s China.

I

Does Deng Xiaoping’s rise imply something “non-Mao (非毛)?” This question was once a topic of debate among Chinese and international circles.

“Non-Mao” was not coined by CCP members. Yet it is nonetheless a reasonable question. Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping had a deep, but complicated relationship. Indeed, his first fall was the result of dogmatists labeling him a Maoist, and his first rise due his nomination by Mao to the post of General Secretary. Yet Deng’s second fall came when Mao started the Cultural Revolution to criticize “Liu [Shaoqi] and Deng, heads of the bourgeoisie.” Deng’s second rise was the consequence of a strategic move by Mao to reemploy Deng to head a number of rectification projects during Zhou Enlai’s illness; at this time Mao had high hopes for Deng. However, Mao later lost confidence in Deng’s ability to uphold Cultural Revolution principles in his rectification work, and began the campaign to “criticize Deng and counterattack the rightist trend of rehabilitation,” proposing in April 1976 to strip Deng of all his duties within the Party. This was Deng’s third fall. The Mao Zedong who criticized and stripped Deng of his power was already an old man, lonely and critically ill, besieged by the Gang of Four, and completely out of touch with reality and the masses.
Mao appointed a different successor, but he was not confident that the succession would go smoothly. Supposedly, not long before his death, Mao said that two affairs, the Taiwan problem and the Cultural Revolution, were not yet finished, and he would have to leave them for the next generation. If the transfer of power could not be completed peacefully, it would have to be undertaken in turmoil. Done badly, it could get bloody; only the heavens know what you should do.

Not a month after Mao passed away, the party committee led by his appointed successor effortlessly vanquished the Gang of Four. This admirable campaign commanded full support from the party and the entire populace, and created the conditions necessary for altering China’s fate. Soon after smashing the Gang of Four, the party proposed the “two alls” (两个凡是; to firmly support all of Mao’s policies, and to forever follow all of Mao’s directives). This was intended to show the commitment of the new leaders to following Mao’s will and continue flying his flag. Additionally, the leaders would use Mao’s criticism of the Gang of Four to demonstrate the legitimacy and orthodoxy of its exposure and overthrow. However, within the “two alls” framework, criticism of the Gang of Four was severely limited and Mao’s errors could not be touched. The “criticize Deng and counterattack the rightist trend of rehabilitation” campaign and the 1976 Tiananmen incident were considered “anti-revolutionary issues” and problems of the Cultural Revolution, and could not be resolved smoothly according to the will of the people. Yet only with the resolution of those issues would conditions be ripe to change China’s fate.

Deng Xiaoping’s third rise opened a large gap in the “two alls” framework. However, at the time no one discussed the validity of the still extant Mao directives critical of Deng. When it opened in August 1977, the Eleventh Congress proclaimed that the overthrow of the Gang of Four marked the successful conclusion of the Cultural Revolution. The party and the people both supported ending the Cultural Revolution. Yet to call the Cultural Revolution a victory, to proclaim that in the future China must conduct many more cultural revolutions, and to say that the guiding ideology of the Cultural Revolution, the theory of “continuous revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat,” was the most important development of Mao Zedong ideology, was to indicate that the Eleventh Congress still endorsed the errors Mao made in his late years. Although they certainly wished to rectify the many problems caused by the Cultural Revolution, they still restricted it to the framework of assessing Mao as “70% success, 30% failure.”