

Liu Yuan: Archetype of a “Xi Jinping Man” in the PLA?

James Mulvenon and Leigh Ann Ragland*

Liu Yuan and Xi Jinping clearly share a great deal in common. Both were born to senior CCP cadres, and are members of the elite “princelings” cohort. Yet both men’s fathers were subjected to purge and mistreatment during the late Mao era, and both families suffered grievously. Despite these dark memories, both Liu and Xi went on to achieve rapid growth in their official careers, and have been outspoken in their extolling of the early years of the CCP revolution. As Xi prepares to ascend to the highest positions in the system at the 18th Party Congress, this article endeavors to profile Liu Yuan, identify his possible ideological and bureaucratic intersections with Xi Jinping, and assess the implications for PLA promotions and party-military relations in the Xi era.

Liu Yuan: “Red Princeling”

Born in Beijing in 1951,¹ General Liu Yuan (刘源) is the son of Liu Shaoqi, who served as president of the PRC from 1959 to 1968. A native of Ning County in Hunan Province,² President Liu was an early comrade of Chairman Mao during the revolution.³ He raised his family in the elite Zhongnanhai leadership compound, where Liu Yuan joined the palace guard at the age of 13.⁴ Over three summers of training, Liu was promoted from private to corporal, eventually earning designations as “top-grade marksman” (特等射手) and “‘five good’ fighter” (五好战士). In 1966, Liu Yuan was selected for the National Flag Guard (国旗护卫队) and marched in the National Day Parade in Tiananmen Square.⁵

Liu Yuan’s idyllic world of revolutionary privilege came crashing down with the onset of the Cultural Revolution. The designated heir apparent to Chairman Mao, Liu Shaoqi was purged and arrested in 1968,⁶ and eventually died from his harsh treatment in 1969, naked and deprived of his medicine on the floor of his prison cell. Although Liu Shaoqi is now considered a revolutionary hero and honored in Chinese society,⁷ Liu Yuan and his family members were severely persecuted by the Red Guard and factions within the CCP from 1966 until Liu Shaoqi’s political allies regained power in the late 1970s. Liu Shaoqi’s eldest son, Liu Yunbin, was forced to commit suicide⁸ and his wife, Wang Guangmei, was imprisoned for 12 years.⁹ Liu Yuan himself was “sent down” (下放) in 1968 for seven years in remote Baifang village, Shanyin County, Shaanxi Province (山西省山阴县白坊村).¹⁰ In 1972, Liu Yuan wrote to Chairman Mao, asking for

* Leigh Ann Ragland is a research associate at DGI’s Center for Intelligence Research and Analysis (CIRA). She received her B.A. in International Affairs and Chinese Language and Literature from George Washington University’s Elliott School of International Affairs.

permission to see his mother and father.¹¹ In August of that year, the Center conveyed two instructions from Mao: “Your father is dead, but you can see your mother” (父亲已死, 可以见见妈妈).¹² Liu reportedly responded to this news with no tears, but “gnashed his teeth with hatred” (只有切齿的仇恨).¹³

Despite the campaign by Liu and other members of the “princeling faction” to engage in “red singing” (唱红) and romanticize the early, pure years of the Chinese Communist revolution, Liu Yuan does not shirk from criticizing Chairman Mao’s actions in his later years or those of his sycophants. In *You Do Not Know Liu Shaoqi*, which he co-wrote with his mother, Liu speaks of his respect for Mao, but emphasizes that respect “does not mean blind faith and blind obedience.”¹⁴ He also highlights the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution as the two great “mistakes” of the revolutionary period.¹⁵ In his essay, “Democracy in the Party,”¹⁶ Liu suggests that Mao’s most brilliant time was “when democracy was strongest in the party” (他最辉煌的时候, 正是党内最民主的时候), but that Mao “went down the wrong road” (走错了路).¹⁷ Liu offered as a lesson a story about his own family’s suffering: “Mao was great, but when he departs from democracy, acts arbitrarily, rejects criticism, and loses supervision he also commits great mistakes.”¹⁸ While praising his father’s belief in the value of criticism and self-criticism, Liu doesn’t spare him from responsibility for the disasters, refusing to accept “maintaining party unity” (维护党的统一) as an excuse and chiding him for not identifying the problems quickly enough and not correcting Mao’s errors.¹⁹

Liu Yuan’s Privileged Career Trajectory

With the terror of the late Mao era behind him, Liu Yuan’s professional career bears all of the hallmarks of the scion of a revolutionary family. Premier Zhou Enlai personally approved him to return to Beijing from the countryside in 1975.²⁰ For two years he worked as a riveter (铆工) in a crane factory (起重机厂).²¹ When Liu Yuan was barred from taking the college entrance examination in 1977, Deng Xiaoping wrote a letter that got in him into Beijing Normal University,²² where he studied in the history department.²³ The major turning point in Liu’s career was the 1980 Fifth Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee, in which Deng Xiaoping officially cleared Liu’s father of prior accusations, named him a revolutionary hero, and gave him a posthumous state funeral.²⁴ Once he graduated in 1982, Liu joined the Chinese Communist Party, and then became a grassroots cadre in Henan—a location where his father had overseen projects and retained a good reputation.²⁵ He was selected as a vice-county commissioner of Henan in 1983, mayor of Zhengzhou, Henan, in 1986,²⁶ and vice-governor of Henan in 1988. Through the intercession of PLA elder Yang Shangkun, Liu then joined the military in 1992 at age 41 to become a major general and political commissar of the People’s Armed Police (PAP) Hydroelectric Power Headquarters.²⁷ He later became the PAP deputy political commissar in 1997, and was promoted to PAP lieutenant general in 2000.²⁸ In 2003, he was transferred to the General Logistics Department (GLD), where he served as the deputy political commissar with the rank of PLA lieutenant general.²⁹ Liu was selected as political commissar of the Academy of Military Science (AMS) in 2005.³⁰ He was promoted to full general in 2009, and then was transferred from AMS to

become the political commissar of the GLD in 2010³¹—this transfer is noteworthy because since 1975, all political commissars at AMS have retired after completing the position.³²

Liu Yuan's Writings: Neo-Maoist?

General Liu Yuan has a reputation for being a strategic and sometimes controversial thinker on both domestic and foreign policy.³³ His 17-page preface for Zhang Mushing's collection of essays on New Democracy, *Changing Our View of Culture and History*, includes two controversial suggestions: adopt Mao's "New Democracy,"³⁴ and end the Deng-era principle of "No Debate."³⁵ Concerning "New Democracy," Liu asks, "Why don't we just have confidence and just use our native born 'New Democracy,' which Chinese Communist Party member Mao Zedong raised and Liu Shaoqi put into practice?"³⁶ Transcripts from the Beijing book launch forum in May 2011 revealed support from several Chinese military officers, including hardliners such as Major General Luo Yuan (AMS deputy secretary-general), a frequent commentator in the Chinese media on military and strategic issues, and Major General Zhu Chenghu (National Defense University), who in 2005 threatened the United States with nuclear attack in the event of a conventional attack by the United States against China.³⁷ Also in attendance were party elder Hu Guangzheng, Qiao Liang (the co-author of the sensational book *Unrestricted Warfare*), and Major General Liu Weiwei (AMS deputy secretary-general).³⁸

But what do Liu and his cohort mean by "New Democracy" and ending the principle of "No Debate"? These are clearly coded discussions, using historical phrases and concepts to advance new ideas during the leadership transition, but the participants have intimate familiarity with these texts and can make subtle allusions that are largely opaque to outsiders. The main theme of Mao's 1940 essay "On New Democracy" is that Chinese must pursue a third political development path, rejecting both the liberal capitalist/parliamentary democratic systems of the West and the authoritarian political systems of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.³⁹ He notes that the Kuomintang had led an aborted bourgeois-democratic revolution in 1927, but "the capitalist class, headed by the big bourgeoisie, kicked the masses aside, seized the fruits of the revolution, formed a counter-revolutionary alliance with imperialism and the feudal forces, and strained themselves to the limit in a war of 'Communist suppression' for ten years."⁴⁰ Mao advocates a "New Democracy" in which a coalition of classes, under the leadership and guidance of the working class and its communist party, work to create a "new democratic order" as a stepping stone to socialism and then communism. Mao's "bloc of four social classes" is symbolized in China's national flag, where the large star represents the Chinese Communist Party and the four smaller stars symbolize the proletarian workers, peasants, the petty bourgeoisie (small business owners), and the national capitalists. These social classes clearly have different class interests, but Mao argues that they all support the "Three People's Principles" (Nationalism, Democracy, and the People's Livelihood) and are opposed to Japanese imperialism and feudalism.⁴¹ By creating a "united front and [practicing] long-term co-operation with all those classes, strata, political parties and groups and individuals that are willing to fight Japan to the end,"⁴²

the party can create the conditions for a simultaneous capitalist bourgeois-democratic revolution and socialist revolution that Mao calls the “New Democracy” stage.⁴³ The characteristics of this phase include participatory democracy and a socialist market economy, in which the republic “neither confiscate[s] capitalist private property in general nor forbid[s] the development of such capitalist production.”⁴⁴ But Mao is clear that this is only an intermediate stage to socialism under the dictatorship of the proletariat, and ultimately a stateless, classless, moneyless communist society.

But what does this ideological mumbo-jumbo mean for modern China and the coming CCP leadership under Xi Jinping? One interpretation is that the remarkable period of economic reform since 1978 has finally provided China with the capitalist, market economy foundation that was missing in 1949, creating proletarian worker, petty bourgeois, and national capitalist classes while retaining elements of socialism. As a result, advocates of “New Democracy” could be arguing that the CCP needs to implement additional features of this proto–New Democracy stage, including fostering a more participatory democratic transition to the more advanced stages of socialism and communism. This bears some similarity to Jiang Zemin’s “Theory of the Three Represents,” which sought to co-opt the new social classes into the party itself, as well as Xi Jinping’s concept of “power is conferred by the people” (权为民所赋).⁴⁵ In addition, Liu Yuan’s rejection of Deng’s principle of “No Debate” suggests that there needs to be greater freedom of discussion within the party itself rather than the conservative, top-down democratic centralism of the party under Jiang and Hu. Such a view is entirely compatible with calls for the implementation of a competitive, multi-candidate voting system (差额选举) to replace the current non-competitive, single-candidate voting system (等额选举) at the highest levels of the party.⁴⁶ In short, Liu Yuan’s advocacy of “New Democracy,” greater intra-party democracy, and rejection of “No Debate” could represent a limited form of Chinese political reform, though without touching the third rail of single-party rule of the CCP.

Liu Yuan and Xi Jinping

Liu Yuan and heir apparent Xi Jinping clearly share a great deal in common. Both were born to senior CCP cadres, and are proud members of an elite “princelings” cohort. Yet both men’s fathers were subjected to purge and mistreatment during the late Mao era, and both families suffered grievously. Despite these dark memories, both went on to achieve rapid growth in their official careers, and have been outspoken in their extolling of the early, “pure” years of the CCP revolution when the CCP cadre were largely free from corruption and admired by the people.

Liu and Xi may have even spent time together during their young adulthood. Both were in Beijing from 1979 until 1982.⁴⁷ Liu Yuan had returned to Beijing in 1975. He was a student at Capital Normal University (formerly known as Beijing Normal University) from 1978 until his graduation in the summer of 1982.⁴⁸ Before he left Beijing for Henan, Liu Yuan and Xi attended what Xi describes as “a good number” of meetings together.⁴⁹ Also according to Xi, Liu Yuan and he were the only two people

who decided to leave Beijing to go down to grassroots units at the time, which was a move that many people around them did not understand.⁵⁰

In recent years, Xi Jinping has mentioned Liu on at least three occasions in anecdotes, first in a 2000 interview with reporter named Yang, then in a speech he gave at a 2003 alumni event at the Fujian Province Foreign Studies School (福建省外学学校), and later in an interview that would be quoted in a 2007 *Zhejiang Daily* newspaper article.⁵¹ On the occasions Xi referenced Liu Yuan, he discussed their decisions to leave Beijing for grassroots cadres in 1982 and said they “happened to hold the same views.”⁵² On the other end, Liu Yuan has also cited Xi Jinping as an example to follow when writing.⁵³

Conclusion

Despite their complicated personal history, the evidence suggests that Liu Yuan is very much the archetype of a “Xi Jinping man” in the PLA. Liu has the correct princeling pedigree, and its corresponding “right to rule.” Like Xi, Liu draws upon a striking pre-Deng narrative in his language and allusions, freely quoting Mao and extolling the purer, corruption-free revolutionary heritage of the Chinese Communist Party before the disasters of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Yet neither man is trying to turn back the clock, rather, both appear to be seeking new paths of reform that foster economic growth while preserving the single-party rule of the CCP in a period of profound social upheaval.

The implications of the rise of a Liu Yuan for PLA promotions and party-military relations are less clear. Despite his own lack of professional training and qualifications to be a top leader in the General Logistics Department, there is no evidence that Liu favors anything other than continued promotion of professional warfighters. Moreover, there is no evidence that Liu rejects the “conditional compliance” model of party-military relations in the post-Tiananmen era, in which the PLA is clearly subordinated to the party in exchange for relative autonomy in defense affairs. At the same time, Liu’s rejection of the principle of “No Debate” could extend to greater tolerance of PLA inputs to grand strategy and foreign policy decisionmaking, which have been constricted under the current regime. Indeed, his own writings on foreign policy have been noted for their boldness and occasional variance from official policy. If Liu Yuan is indeed the archetype of a Xi Jinping man in the PLA, then one might expect to see even greater “assertiveness” on the part of the military, which could make the 18th Party Congress years very interesting for Sino-U.S. relations. As Mao would say, “there is great chaos under Heaven, and the situation is excellent!”

Notes

¹ See <http://sjfm.xilu.com/liuyuan/>.

² <http://baike.baidu.com/view/232871.htm>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Information accessed at <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/69112/73583/73598/index.html> on 28 October 2011.

⁷ Huang Zulin (黄祖琳), “He grew up amid the torment of the ‘Cultural Revolution’” (在“文革”磨难中长大), *Beijing Huanqiu Renwu Online* (北京环球人物网), 16 March 2011, pp. 19–21. Additional information was obtained from an interview with Deng Xiaoping, accessed at: <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/dengxp/vol2/text/b1470.html> on 9 November 2011.

⁸ Huang Zulin, “He grew up amid the torment” (see endnote 7).

⁹ Information regarding Wang Guangmei’s imprisonment was pulled from an essay written by Liu Yuan. Information accessed at <http://wenku.baidu.com/view/6055852f453610661ed9f47c.html> on 27 October 2011.

¹⁰ Huang Zulin, “He grew up amid the torment.”

¹¹ <http://baike.baidu.com/view/232871.htm>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Liu Yuan, “My father Liu Shaoqi—The two biggest mistakes of his life” (父亲刘少奇一生中最大的错误有两件), *China Digest* (中华文摘), accessed at <http://military.china.com/history4/62/20110212/16378506.html> on 10 October 2011.

¹⁴ Wang Guangmei and Liu Yuan, *You Do Not Know Liu Shaoqi* (你所不知道的刘少奇), Henan People’s Publishing House, 2001.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ This article may have originally been published on *Qiushi* journal’s online website. It was republished 8 May 2009, in a collection of faculty-selected articles on theory published by Donghua University.

Information accessed at <http://www.docin.com/p-80502117.html>,

<http://www2.dhu.edu.cn/dhuxxt/xinwenwang/shownews.asp?id=13686> on 28 October 2011.

¹⁷ Liu Yuan, “Democracy in the Party,” accessed at

<http://www2.dhu.edu.cn/dhuxxt/xinwenwang/shownews.asp?id=13686> on 28 October 2011.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Liu Yuan, “My father’s two mistakes in life” (我父亲生前的两个错误), excerpts from Liu Yuan, *You Don’t Know Liu Shaoqi*, accessed at: http://sjfm.xilu.com/2011/0315/news_554_146261.html.

²⁰ Huang Zulin, “He grew up amid the torment.”

²¹ <http://baike.baidu.com/view/232871.htm>

²² Huang Zulin, “He grew up amid the torment.”

²³ <http://baike.baidu.com/view/232871.htm>

²⁴ Huang Zulin, “He grew up amid the torment.” Additional information was obtained from an interview with Deng Xiaoping, accessed at: <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/dengxp/vol2/text/b1470.html> on 9 November 2011.

²⁵ Lu Yan (路琰), “I Can’t Ruin the Good Name of the Older Generation” (不能把老一代的名声干砸) *Beijing Huanqiu Renwu Online* (北京环球人物网), pp. 24–27.

²⁶ See <http://sjfm.xilu.com/liuyuan/>.

²⁷ <http://baike.baidu.com/view/232871.htm>

²⁸ See <http://sjfm.xilu.com/liuyuan/>.

²⁹ Zhang Lei (张雷) and Xiao Ying (肖营), “Low-Key Political Commissar Liu” (低调的刘政委), *Beijing Huanqiu Renwu Online* (北京环球人物网), pp. 24–27.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² With the exception of Liao Hansheng (AMS political commissar from December 1973 to February 1975) and Ye Jianying (AMS political commissar from November 1957 until October 1972), the collected biographies of AMS political commissars show that retirement usually follows the completion of this post. Information accessed at

<http://baike.baidu.com/view/125640.htm?fromenter=%D6%D0%B9%FA%BE%FC%CA%C2%BF%C6%D1%A7%D4%BA>, <http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/张工>, <http://baike.baidu.com/view/98379.htm>, <http://baike.baidu.com/view/305141.htm>, <http://baike.baidu.com/view/308558.htm>, <http://baike.baidu.com/view/178269.htm>, http://www.gov.cn/gjjg/2009-01/21/content_1211141.htm,

<http://baike.baidu.com/view/1827.htm>, <http://baike.baidu.com/view/1812.htm>, http://junshi.xilu.com/2009/1103/news_1375_353698_1.htm, on 9 November 2011. Additional reference information was also obtained from *Chinese Communist Party Central Committee members from all previous sessions* [中国共产党历届中央委员] 1921–2003, (Chinese Communist Party History Press [中共党史出版社], 2004), p. 393; p. 401; p. 724; p. 786; pp. 660–662; p. 815; p. 951; pp. 960–961.

³³ Zhang Lei and Xiao Ying, “Low-Key Political Commissar Liu” (see endnote 29).

³⁴ Mao conceptualized “New Democracy,” in his essay “The Doctrine of New Democracy” (新民主主义论), but he decided to move the nation directly toward socialism instead. Liu Yuan’s father, Liu Shaoqi, supported “New Democracy,” and attempted to put it into action before he was deposed. Information accessed at <http://cmp.hku.hk/2011/05/19/12486/> on 27 October 2011.

³⁵ Liu Yuan’s preface calls for an end to the era of “No Debate” (不争论), a saying that is attributed to Deng Xiaoping. Information accessed at http://www.strongwindpress.com/pdfs/HKFax/No_HK2010-24.pdf, http://www.china.com.cn/culture/txt/2008-10/17/content_16624945.htm, on 27 October 2011.

³⁶ Information accessed at <http://cmp.hku.hk/2011/05/19/12486/> on 27 October 2011.

³⁷ Chi Hsiao-hua, “Warning the US Government Not To Interfere With Affairs in Taiwan Strait,” *Hong Kong Sing Tao Jih Pao*, 20 July 2005, p. A20.

³⁸ This information was pulled from transcripts of the book event. Information last accessed at <http://www.mshw.org/theory/politics/2011-05-08/1348.html>, <http://www.21newyouth.net/viewnews-10149-page-2.html>, http://bjwb.bjd.com.cn/html/2011-05/02/content_396596.htm, <http://www.bookdao.com/article/19755>, <http://www.sixiang01.com/?action-viewnews-itemid-1335>, on 27 October 2011.

³⁹ Mao Zedong, “On New Democracy,” *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, Vol. II, Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1975, pp. 339–384.

⁴⁰ Mao, “On New Democracy,” p. 356.

⁴¹ Mao, “On New Democracy,” p. 361.

⁴² Mao, “On New Democracy,” pp. 357–58.

⁴³ Classical Marxist theory dictates that the capitalist bourgeois-democratic revolution occurs first, clearing the way for the proletarian class to emerge as the majority, overthrow capitalism, and begin constructing socialism.

⁴⁴ Mao, “On New Democracy,” p.353.

⁴⁵ Xi Jinping introduced the concept in a speech to the Central Party School in September 2010, saying, “The Marxist view of authority can be summed up in two phrases: power is conferred by the people, and power is used for the people.” See <http://www.21yuhuo.org/english/shownews-1.html>.

⁴⁶ Zheng Yongnian, *The Chinese Communist Party as Organizational Emperor: Culture, Reproduction, and Transformation (China Policy Series)*, Routledge Press, February 2010, p.196.

⁴⁷ Xi Jinping, “My Experience Working in Mountainous Area and Countryside” (我的上山下乡经历), [Learning Expo] (学习博览), 2010, vol. 12, pp. 16–17.

⁴⁸ http://rarb.zjol.com.cn/rarb/html/2007-05/08/content_7541860.htm.

⁴⁹ http://rarb.zjol.com.cn/rarb/html/2007-05/08/content_7541860.htm.

⁵⁰ Xi Jinping, “My Experience Working in Mountainous Area and Countryside” (我的上山下乡经历), [Learning Expo] (学习博览), 2010, vol. 12, pp. 16–17.

⁵¹ Xi Jinping has been quoted in several sources telling an anecdote about how Liu Yuan and he chose to leave Beijing for grassroots cadres in 1982. Although some details and wording remain constant, the variance between three particular versions suggests that reporters are not all quoting the same original source and that he has told this anecdote more than once. The earliest version appears in a 2000 interview with Xi Jinping, available at <http://www.cqjgdj.gov.cn/n54194c339p3.aspx>. The second variation appears in a speech given by Xi Jinping at a 2003 alumni event at the Fujian Province Foreign Studies School (福建省外学学校), and published in a collection of essays, “Fujian Province Literary Mastery” (福建博士风采). This speech was reprinted as “My Experience Working in Mountainous Area and Countryside” (我的上山下乡经历), [Learning Expo] (学习博览), 2010, vol. 12, pp. 16–17. The third variant of the anecdote appears in an article published in *Zhejiang Daily News* (浙江日报) on 8 May 2007: “Xi Jinping: Shanghai Municipal Committee’s ‘good hand’ that undertook 7 years of peasant [life]” (习近平：当过七年农民的新任上海市委“一把手”). Many sources probably quote one of these three variations; for an example see Wu Zhifei’s (吴志菲)

article, “Xi Jinping: From Loess tall hillsides to the Shanghai beach” (习近平:从黄土高坡到上海滩), in *Sweep of Party History* (党史纵横), Liaoning: CCP Liaoning Party Committee Research Office, 2007, vol. 5, p. 19.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Wen Shifang (文世芳) and Wang Wenqing (汪文庆), “Liu Shaoqi’s View on Learning—An Interview with Liu Yuan, political commissar of the Academy of Military Sciences” (刘少奇的学习观——访军事科学院政委刘源上将), *Decision & Information* (决策与信息), November 2010.