

Ch'ang Cheng

The Long March and CCP Leadership

Introduction

The Long March was perhaps one of the most arduous treks in history. Traversing more than 6000 miles across China, the Marchers endured horrific conditions. The magnitude of the experience left a truly searing impact on their lives. Such a myth developed around the March that those who survived were viewed as heroes; their accomplishment was considered one of the greatest feats in history. Amongst survivors, a bond of kinship developed that would prove unique in the history of China's Communist Party (CCP). As the ranks of the party grew, the Long Marchers took on leadership roles within the party and, upon the founding of the People's Republic of China in October 1949, the government itself. Indeed it is these survivors who formed the political elite who ruled China for much of its modern history. Their experiences on the Long March proved extremely formative in the shaping of these new leaders.

Background

In the fall of 1927, Mao Zedong led his small army into the Jianggangshan Mountains. Only several months earlier, on April 12, 1927, Chiang Kai-shek, had begun purges of CCP members. The CCP had operated under a united front with the Kuomintang (KMT) for several years, however relations disintegrated and soon the Communists faced persecution at the hands of the KMT. The Communist Party was forced underground, however uprisings and revolts were staged in an attempt to regain legitimacy and power. Mao led the failed Autumn

Harvest Uprising in September, after which he sought refuge in the mountains with his army.¹

Mao was joined at Jianggangshan by Zhu De and the CCP's Fourth Army in April of 1928; the forces had now grown three or four-fold. Meanwhile at the Ninth Plenum of Comintern's Central Executive Committee held in February, it was determined that the CCP should build up military forces in the remote areas of China so that eventually they might challenge the KMT. Additionally, it was decided that the CCP should develop soviet safe areas; Jianggangshan began to develop into one such area. Its remote location offered protection from KMT forces, and soon CCP troops at Jianggangshan grew to around 10,000.²

In 1930, Chiang Kai-shek began his first in a series of annihilation campaigns. By 1931, Chiang had led three campaigns, all of which only sought to further strengthen the CCP army.³ The Communists successfully applied the strategy of guerilla warfare, established at the Ninth Plenum.⁴ Mao and Zhu had trained their forces in such tactics, using surprise attacks to capture weapons, enemy soldiers, and land. Peasants, who had benefited from the Communist's land redistribution, offered vital support to the forces in the form of intelligence and supply gathering, and military coverage for the guerilla forces.

A fourth unsuccessful campaign was launched by the Nationalists in 1932. After this, however, Chiang took advice from the Germans and before setting out

¹ Stephen Uhalley, Jr., *A History of the Chinese Communist Party* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1988), 30-36.

² Ibid, 38-39.

³ Conrad Schirokauer, *A Brief History of Chinese Civilization* (New York: Harcourt Brace Javonovich, Inc., 1989), 334.

⁴ Uhalley, 38.

on a fifth annihilation campaign, this time with a different strategy. The KMT forces encircled the Jiangxi Soviet with between 750,000 and 800,000 men, creating a blockade.⁵ Strategized by German advisor Von Seeckt, the campaign progressively tightened around the mountain base in increasingly smaller concentric circles. The battle of Guangchang in mid-April 1934 proved to be a turning point for the Nationalists, as they procured a victory over the CCP forces. After this loss, Mao felt that the CCP's guerilla tactics were no longer effective. Indeed, in May Mao led an unauthorized guerilla mission which proved unsuccessful. By mid-October of 1934, the CCP decided to withdraw from the mountain base.⁶ Thus began the Long March.

Fleeing from Jiangxi, the Communists moved east into Hunan. They wound their way to Sichuan in the southwest and into the interior of Northern China, before finally concluding the march. Li De led the retreat from Jiangxi; Mao was sick at the time and had fallen from favor due to his actions in the unauthorized attack in May.⁷

“At first it was nothing but night marching,” Harrison Salisbury writes. “By day the men stretched out and slept in the shade of camphor trees or huddled under clumps of alders.” Companies would often sing together on these night marches when enemy troops weren't near; propaganda was used to keep the troops in high spirits. “We didn't know we were going to have to walk so long,”

⁵ Schirokauer, 334.

⁶ Uhalley, 48-49.

⁷ Ibid, 49.

Zhang Shengji said. “You had to be in good spirits if you were going to march fifty miles in a night and take three county seats.”⁸

The Red Army successfully fled the mountain; Nationalist leader Von Seeckt ordered the troops to not follow, as he feared the Communists would stage an ambush. It wasn't until October 30 that the KMT fully realized the mass movement of CCP forces. Still, the Nationalists did not engage much of their army until late November when the Communists reached the Xiang River⁹

Some 90,000 Communists crossed this river in what proved to be a rather challenging maneuver.¹⁰ The crossing itself was not the issue: “At the fords...the river was about three hundred feet wide but not more than waist deep. The water was cold and swift, but it could be forded by resolute soldiers.”¹¹ Rather, the CCP forces ran into opposition at Xiang from a now-mobilized Nationalist army. Half of the Red Army crossed the river, only to find themselves in the perilous situation of being attacked by the enemy while the forces were divided. More than half of the Communist troops were killed in the battle, which lasted a week.¹²

Shortly after the crossing at Xiang, a meeting was held at Zunyi. The CCP forces rested here from January 6-18, 1935; the meeting of the Politburo held at this time is now seen as a turning point of the Long March.¹³ A shift in command had begun to take place at Tongdao, however the Zunyi meeting further solidified this; once more the CCP was turning to Mao for advice and leadership. Otto

⁸ Harrison E. Salisbury, *The Long March: The Untold Story* (New York: Harpers & Row Publishers, Inc., 1985), 59-60.

⁹ *Ibid*, 66.

¹⁰ Uhalley, 49.

¹¹ Salisbury, 98.

¹² *Ibid*, 100-104.

¹³ Uhalley, 49.

Braun, a German who had been sent by Comintern to offer guidance to the Chinese Communists, was repeatedly criticized at the meeting, while Mao found himself elected to the Standing Committee of the Politburo. Although power was formally placed in the hands of Zhou Enlai and Zhu De, the Zunyi conference saw a return of confidence in Mao's leadership abilities.¹⁴

Under Mao's leadership, the tides were turning. The CCP successfully fought off well-trained Sichuan troops. They then went on to, in a series of complicated weavings and positioning, confuse the KMT. Mao scattered his army, sending divisions in different directions; the result was utter confusion on behalf of the Nationalists.¹⁵

Mao met up with Zhang Guotao's Fourth Front Army on July 20. At that time numbering merely 10,000 in his First Front Army, Mao advocated moving northward to form a new soviet, while Zhang preferred to remain in Sichuan. Sure enough, Mao's forces swung north.¹⁶

They passed through a wide array of climates and weather. From the snowy mountains to the grasslands, the army marched through. In a propaganda piece produced by the Chinese Foreign Languages Press, the author describes climbing the Snowy Mountains:

Going down was easier than going up, but since there was no sunshine on this side of the mountain it was colder. We were all wearing the same thin

¹⁴ Salisbury, 114-126.

¹⁵ Ibid, 153-166.

¹⁶ Uhalley, 51.

*cotton clothes, and we shivered with the cold. I tied a blanket around my waist and so went walking, slipping and rolling down the snowy slopes.*¹⁷

At the Chinese-Tibetan border, troops faced waterlogged grassland. With no place dry to sleep, men were forced to lean against one another all night, standing up to sleep.¹⁸ “A careless step could send you to a fearful death in its muddy depths,”¹⁹ Chang-feng writes.

In October of 1935, the Red Army finally arrived in Boao, Shaanxi. They joined an existing soviet and Communist army at Boao; the discovery of its existence came from a captured KMT newspaper found at Hadapu.²⁰ Upon arrival, the Communist forces as a whole totaled about 20,000;²¹ Mao’s First Front Army numbered a mere 7,000. They were joined by He Long’s Second Front Army and Zhang Guotao’s Fourth Front Army in 1936. Additionally, around this time the capital of the soviet was moved from Boao to Yan’an, a location that proved even more strategically advantageous.²²

The statistics of the march are impressive: the army covered an average of 114 miles of marching per day. It crossed 18 mountain ranges and 24 rivers. Territorially, the CCP forces trekked through 12 territories, six minority regions, and occupied 62 cities. In addition to fighting the Nationalists, the Communists also faced the armies of 10 provincial warlords.²³

¹⁷ Chen Chang-feng, *On the Long March with Chairman Mao* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1972), 70.

¹⁸ Schirokauer, 336.

¹⁹ Chang-feng, 80.

²⁰ Salisbury, 286.

²¹ Schirokauer, 336.

²² Uhalley, 51.

²³ Kenneth Lieberthal, *Governing China: From Revolution Through Reform* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1995), 47.

Impact of the Long March

All in all, the Long March proved detrimental to the Chinese Communists. “The CCP was but a poor shadow of its former self,”²⁴ writes Shum Kui-Kwong. Party organizations and revolutionary bases were lost and destroyed; party membership was reduced dramatically. The leaders of the Communist Party “were so preoccupied with military maneuvers and the mere problem of survival that they could hardly devote any thought to political issues.”²⁵ It was a retreat, and in that regards, a large failure in respect to party gains made before the purges of the early 1930’s.²⁶

The Long March had positive effects, as well, though. “The march became the basis for a heroic myth about the CCP,” writes Kenneth Lieberthal, “that greatly bolstered the party’s unity and prestige in subsequent years.”²⁷ An aura was created around survivors of the Long March; they became icons of the party, representatives of the challenges that were overcome in the creation of the People’s Republic of China.

It is these survivors who have formed the backbone of the Communist Party and Government following the 1949 founding of the People’s Republic. Lieberthal writes about the stomach ailments and insomnia that plagued survivors for the rest of their lives. Their “reward,” of sorts, for living through the ordeal has been a higher status within the party. “Ever after, the CCP has differentiated between those who participated in the march and those who did

²⁴ Shum Kui-Kwong, *The Chinese Communists’ Road to Power: The Anti-Japanese National United Front, 1935-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1988), 57.

²⁵ Ibid, 47.

²⁶ Ibid, 234.

²⁷ Lieberthal, 48.

not. The former, called ‘Long March cadres,’ enjoy a prestige and camaraderie that sets them apart even within the ranks of the party itself.”²⁸ It is these cadres who make up the political generation that is referred to as the “Long March generation.”

A political generation is a group that has experienced a sociologically significant event that bonds the group together. This grouping is not adherent to age or gender; rather, it is the way the group responds to a significant event that defines the political generation. Certainly the Long March falls into such a category.²⁹

“The term ‘political generations’...may be more accurately identified as ‘political elite generations,’” writes Cheng Li. He identifies the Long March veterans as one of five political generations amongst China’s political elite. “The hardship of the Long March and the Yan’an periods are seen to have molded the members of that cohort in particular ways. Meanwhile, the strong bond that derived from this shared experience has created a ‘sense of collective identity and solidarity among them.’”³⁰

These men knew each other well. They spent over a year with each other, constantly on the move. They endured the hardships of constant fighting against the Nationalists, harsh weather, and extremely challenging terrain. “There was not much that these men did not know about each other – right down to their bowel movements.” A common cheer in Yan’an was “the Chairman’s bowels

²⁸Ibid, 47.

²⁹ Cheng Li, *China’s Leaders: The New Generation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001), 6-7.

³⁰ Ibid, 8.

have moved.”³¹ Even something as personal as this was shared amongst the group.

As a new government was formed in 1949, this opened a window of opportunity for the creation of a new elite system. “Almost all of the 8,000 Communist soldiers who survived the Long March later became the country’s political elites.” Indeed, their struggles gave birth to the new government they founded; “their bonding...became the foundation for the People’s Republic of China, just as their hardship became the legitimate base of their rule.”³²

Having created a new communist state, certainly the Long March veterans, who filled such a vital role in party development at this point in time, felt responsible for the success of the government. Stepping in to fill the role of caretakers of the state, these survivors became the leaders of the CCP. “Among Chinese Communist cadres, especially older ones, the sentiment that ‘we have *won* the country by fighting’ is deeply rooted,”³³ Alan Liu contributed. There is a sense of “ownership” of the country that comes with fighting such a long revolution.

Indeed it is those who fought for the country who are counted as leaders of this “Long March generation”: Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Lin Biao, and Deng Xiaoping, among others.³⁴ They are the generals and early Politburo members. Not all were established in leadership positions during the Long March, however. Deng Xiaoping climbed higher up the status ladder during the Long March, from

³¹ Salisbury, 121.

³² Li, 220.

³³ Alan P. L. Liu, *How China Is Ruled* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1986), 159.

³⁴ Li, 9.

secretary-general of the General Political Department to overseeing the political propaganda group of the First Army.³⁵

Even just four years after the Long March ended, the survivors had begun to solidify their power. As the ranks of the Communist party began to swell, especially with young students and intellectuals, the status of the Long Marchers was emphasized at the expense of the new recruits. These “old-time revolutionaries” established their own credible backgrounds while at the same time questioning those of the newer members. As Mao Zedong said, “The students, intellectuals, and professionals come from the landlord, petty-bourgeois and bourgeois classes. Students are a very important [sector] of the social revolution but play no decisive role; only the proletariat and peasant play this role.”³⁶

In the new government, these men formed a “true ruling class, set apart from the population.”³⁷ Interestingly enough, in a society rhetorically dedicated to the masses, one of the most distinctive features of the Chinese government has been the stratification of the class and rank system. There is a distinct difference between cadres and the public, however even more specifically; there are distinctions amongst levels of cadres. Primary in the ranking system is seniority, followed by rankings according to power. *Gaogan* are these powerful senior

³⁵ Salisbury, 143.

³⁶ John Israel and Donald W. Klein, *Rebels and Bureaucrats: China's December 9ers* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976), 187.

³⁷ Liu, 160.

cadres, the highest ranking officials in government.³⁸ It is these positions that historically have been filled by members of the Long March generation.

“Everyone is in a panic and nobody knows when misfortune will befall him,” said Chen Yi, in reference to the Cultural Revolution.³⁹ This tumultuous half-decade saw members of the Long March generation turn against one another in a fight, once more, for survival. “The unity of the march veterans did not shatter until about three decades later, when Mao initiated the Cultural Revolution,”⁴⁰ Lieberthal posits. Even so, this time of great suspicion and tyranny did not fully dissolve the bonds amongst the generation. Li points out that the close political relationships renewed themselves and carried through into the post-Cultural Revolution era as Deng Xiaoping and other leaders returned to power.⁴¹

For many years there was no formal system of retirement for cadres, but rather a de facto life-tenure system. As cadres aged, the government became clogged at all levels of government, but superfluous bureaucracy. Deng began to reform this system; however he faced the challenge of the cadre system being tied to social class. Veteran cadres were less likely to accept retirement as it meant they lost their power and influence.⁴²

Still, as the leadership has continued to age, the political elite have been forced into retirement. Indeed, although technically retired, all important decisions

³⁸ Ibid, 160.

³⁹ Frederick C. Teiwes, *Leadership, Legitimacy, and Conflict in China: From a Charismatic Mao to the Politics of Succession* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1984), 106

⁴⁰ Lieberthal, 48.

⁴¹ Li, 220.

⁴² Liu, 170.

were still made by this power group. “The leaders of the late 1980s and early 1990s may be seen broadly as the equivalent of a board of directors of a major corporation...they set the major directions of the enterprise, and those in daily charge.....serve only as long as they maintain the elders’ confidence.”⁴³

While the Long March generation has retained control despite technical retirement, members of younger political generations have been chosen as replacements. Often children of the Long Marchers, or *taizi*, have come into positions of power. Indeed the children of Deng Xiaoping, Bo Yibo, Chen Yun, He Long, and Liu Shaoqi, among others, hold leadership positions in either the Chinese government or corporate world.⁴⁴

Analysis and Conclusion

In the history of modern China, certainly the Long March has played a significant role, if not practically, than symbolically. Having survived the challenges inherent in the experience, the veterans were so bonded that they formed a unique group. Those who had not climbed the Snowy Mountains, trekked through the marshy grasslands, and skirmished constantly with the Nationalist forces could never understand. Like so many formative life experiences, it is exclusive to the veterans who lived through it.

These men fought for the formation of a Communist China; through successes and failures, onward they marched. Upon the completion of the trip, they were hailed as heroes within the CCP. Newer, younger members looked to

⁴³ Lieberthal, 188.

⁴⁴ Li, 131-133.

these survivors for guidance and leadership, and the veterans were more than willing to offer this. As more and more veterans assumed leadership roles within the party, they became entrenched into these high ranking positions, maintaining power amongst their generation for nearly fifty years.

Certainly, one might argue, all CCP members of any importance prior to the Long March such as Zhou Enlai held leadership positions from the very beginning. This is true; however other leaders such as Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping rose in importance within the party over the course of this year on-the-go. Quite simply, whether they ascended to power before or during the Long March, the leadership of China has been drawn from this select group. They're unique support bond and status amongst the party created a generation of political elite that was able to exact control over the CCP and the People's Republic of China for the first half century of the country's history.

Thus the impact of China's Long March has certainly been felt, especially as it continually relates to China's leadership. Now, as many of these survivors have passed away, China is embarking its second half-century with new leaders at the helm. Although some carry on the surnames of the Long March leaders, they are poised to write a new chapter in China's extensive history, having been molded not by the Long March, but by the actions of the Long March generation. While they may not have experienced the same *Ch'ang Cheng*⁴⁵ as the earlier generation, they certainly, too, have been impacted by it indirectly through the guise of the Great Leap Forward, Cultural Revolution, and Economic Reforms.

⁴⁵ Lieberthal, 47.

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