

BOOK REVIEW

## Forging Leninism in China: Mao and the Remaking of the Chinese Communist Party, 1927–1934

Joseph Fewsmith. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022. x + 214 pp. £22.99 (e-book). ISBN 9781009070157

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Joseph Fewsmith has written a valuable, concise and very readable overview of the key forces that shaped the transformation of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), from the collapse of the First United Front with the Kuomintang in 1927 to when it was forced to abandon the Jiangxi Soviet in 1934. It is a powerful reminder that we should all take the Party's narrative of its history with a large pinch of salt. By committing an act of "historical nihilism," Fewsmith has done a great service to scholarship and to the understanding of the early history of the CCP.

One of his key findings that stands out is how misleading it is to embrace in broad-brush terms the widely repeated view that Mao was very successful in working with and winning over the peasants by adopting a rural-based, rather than an urban-based approach to the Communist movement in China. Fewsmith has shown convincingly that this was just not true of the Party's formative years. He has demonstrated that by "adopting radical land policies (confiscation) Mao lost the support of the peasants" in the rural Jinggangshan base area (pp. 165–167).

The second finding that jumps out is Fewsmith's conclusion that "[u]ltimately, the Communist Movement in south Jiangxi failed not only because of the military pressure put on it by the GMD [Kuomintang] but primarily because of the tension within the party and between the party and local society" (pp. 168–169). The point is not that changed military tactics adopted by Chiang Kai-shek's forces could not have driven the Communists out of the Jiangxi Soviet. It is that even in the heyday of Mao's power in Jinggangshan, it never enjoyed the kind of support from the rural population widely assumed to be true. The fact that the CCP was able to hang on to power longer and more effectively in the countryside than in the cities in the early 1930s should not be taken to imply it enjoyed wide popular support among the peasants.

The third revealing finding is the scale of brutality of early Maoist rule, in addition to its very heavy reliance on military power. The brutality is directed not only against landlords and the richer peasants but also against fellow Communists. By Fewsmith's count, the *sufan* (suppress counterrevolutionaries) movements in Jiangxi and Hubei "resulted in the execution of some 100,000 Communist Party members" in a relatively short space of time (p. 163). It not only substantially depleted the ranks but, above all, showed what camaraderie under the Communist Party meant in practice in this period. What Fewsmith has not explained is why so many in the Party remained so willing and committed to its cause, despite the scale and viciousness of its fratricide.

These sobering findings are presented in a highly readable narrative and are summarized clearly in the concluding chapter. Fewsmith has made it easy for readers to understand how the CCP dealt with the countryside and intra-party contradiction in an important period of its transformation.

Where I quibble with Fewsmith is in the choice of the main title of the book, *Forging Leninism*. The sub-title "Mao and the remaking of the CCP 1927–1934" correctly sums up its principal focus, whereas the main title raises an expectation that is not fully met. As Fewsmith acknowledges in the

conclusion, the CCP was not fully forged into a powerful and united Leninist party capable of seizing national power until after Mao completed the Party rectification in Yan'an, a decade after it was forced out of the Jiangxi Soviet. The book does not explain in full how the Party was forged into a Leninist instrument, but it does explain powerfully what the process of forging Leninism entailed in its earlier stage.

In short, this is a well-written and insightful book that is highly recommended for students and anyone who seeks an unvarnished account of how Mao approached the Communist movement when he first got an opportunity to do so in his first primary "revolutionary base area." Knowing this helps readers to gain a better perspective on how Mao could have done what he did to China and the CCP after winning power nationally in 1949.