

Mao Zedong Never Called Deng Xiaoping a ‘capitalist roader’

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One of the occasional epithets thrown at Deng Xiaoping is ‘capitalist roader [zouzipai]’. Those who use it usually say that Mao Zedong called Deng by such a name. This is not true.

From the moment Mao launched the Cultural Revolution in May of 1966, he spoke of those within the Communist Party who were part of a faction that wanted to ‘walk down the capitalist road [zouzibenzhuyi daolu]’, a term that would be shortened to ‘zouzipai’ and is usually translated as ‘capitalist roader’. But Mao never used the term to speak of Deng Xiaoping.

How did the term become attached to Deng? The short answer is that it was other Leftists who did so in the 1960s, calling Deng the ‘number two person in authority pursuing the capitalist road’, and then during the tumultuous events in 1976. In the latter case it was the Gang of Four – a title coined by Mao in a negative sense – who dubbed Deng a ‘capitalist roader’.

Let us look more closely at 1976, when both Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong died. Power was slipping from an ill and physically weakened Mao. Popular support was decisively shifting to Deng Xiaoping, but the Gang of Four – politically tone deaf – tried to arrest that flow by a series of ill-timed acts (see the account in Vogel, pp. 157-83). A reluctant Mao gave in to pressure to remove Deng from office (as he had similarly been reluctant to remove Deng in the 1960s), and while an anonymous ‘capitalist roader’ was frequently attacked in the press, in private Deng was named not by Mao but by members of the Gang of Four.

The death of Zhou Enlai was the spark for the events of the year. Zhou died on 8 January, 1976. His funeral was a muted affair, since the Gang of Four feared the people coming out to mourn. Frustrated, people planned a larger commemoration on 5 April, the date of the Qingming Festival, when ancestors are commemorated. By late March, flower wreaths began turning up at the Memorial to Revolutionary Martyrs in Tiananmen Square. They were removed. By the evening of 4 April more than two million flowed out into the streets, mourning Zhou and shouting slogans for Deng.

The Gang of Four became desperate. The crowds were designated a ‘counter-revolutionary’ movement, and Deng was seen as the master-mind behind the scenes. Yet he was still not named so publicly. On 5 April, 1976, the mayor of Beijing, Wu De, taped a pronouncement, calling on people to leave Tiananmen Square. The pronouncement was published the next day, and contained passages such as the following:

The capitalist roader in the Party who refuses to repent is the general representative of the bourgeoisie. His revisionist program, his revisionist line and his reactionary words and deeds embody the bourgeoisie’s desire for restoration. By targeting the spearhead of the struggle and thoroughly exposing and criticising him, we will be able to distinguish right from wrong and unite over 95 per cent of the cadres and the masses to win a greater victory in fighting back against this right-leaning tendency.

This text comes from the issue of the *Renmin Daily* on 6 April, 1976 (<https://cn.govopendata.com/renminribao/1976/4/6/1/>). It contains no explicit mention of Deng Xiaoping.

But events are a little unclear. According to the oral records of Wu De, the author of the original pronouncement, Deng’s name was added in the print version of *Renmin Daily*. Is this case? The archival versions of the *Renmin Daily* do not have Deng’s name. What is clear is that in meetings called by the Gang of Four on 6 and 7 April, 1976, Deng was clearly named and attributed with organising a ‘counter-revolutionary’ movement. Mao was not involved.

All of this was to be too late. Popular support was clearly behind Deng (who remained quietly at home), the Gang of Four had lost touch, and an ailing Mao was reluctant indeed to attack his old comrade.

Above all, it is clear that Mao himself never called Deng Xiaoping a 'capitalist roader'.