Editorial

ERIC FLORENCE

For once, this issue of *China Perspectives* is not a special feature made of a collection of articles. We have decided on this occasion to publish a rare and previously unreleased document that narrates and illustrates the rivalries, struggles, and political campaigns that were carried out in Beijing from the summer of 1975 to the spring of 1976 and reached their climax with several demonstrations at Tiananmen Square within the first few days of April 1976.

While the Ninth Party Congress in April 1969 aimed at officially legitimating the Cultural Revolution, Mao also wanted it to be the beginning of a reconstruction phase for the Party. Despite this desire for Party unity, in consideration of the political succession of an ever more isolated and increasingly physically fragile Chairman, the tensions at the top of the Party continued to intensify until the death of the Great Helmsman in September 1976. [1] These tensions took the form of a series of political campaigns and public demonstrations on the capital's university campuses as well as on Tiananmen Square.

While this period remains rather weakly documented in the political history of the People's Republic of China, it is nonetheless quite important for the understanding of the political dynamics of the late Mao era, particularly among the elites of the Communist Party as well as in the relationship between these elites and the Chinese population.

For a long period of time, most of the pictures of Maoist China were limited to "Potemkin images" that gave an idealised version of everyday life in the Mao era. [2] More recently, China's more pluralistic post-Mao society and the development of the digital sphere have not only enabled expanding the field of photographic representations of Maoist China, but also have allowed the beginning of construction of a popular memory of the Mao era through history, literature, and documentary films. The latter was the focus of a recent special feature published in *China Perspectives*. [3]

David Zweig, who has since become a renowned China specialist, was an eye-witness to these events. Hence, a few months ahead of the 40th anniversary of these demonstrations, the opportunity for *China Perspectives* to publish David Zweig's narrative, analysis, and photographs of this political drama was self-evident. Plunging us into the unfolding of these crucial events of the end of the Mao era, these unique photos qualify as valuable political anthropology.

From mid-November 1975 onward, the first images of the launch of the campaign against the "wind of Rightist reversal," which later specifically targeted Deng Xiaoping, explicitly represent a visual illustration of the categorisation techniques, social control, and mass mobilisation that had been used endlessly and had become quasi-ritualised since the 1940s, and which culminated during the Cultural Revolution in an ever greater theatricalisation of violence.

David Zweig's pictures of the Tiananmen events between January and early April 1976 also capture a growing public expression of resistance by the Beijing people. From the simple but highly symbolic placement of wreaths and photographs of Prime Minister Zhou Enlai at the foot of the obelisk commemorating revolutionary heroes and deeds, and the writing of numerous calligraphies as an echo to the "big character posters" (*dazibao*) imposed during political campaigns (*yundong*), to the populace's re-appropriation of Tiananmen Square as the very site for staging hierarchical power by the regime, [4] these were the very symbols, tools, and sites of official power that were drawn on by Beijingers.

But David Zweig's photo essay does more than shed light on the political struggles behind the 1976 events. It depicts Deng Xiaoping's return to power in 1973 and his temporary and partial political disgrace at the end of November 1975 because of the antagonistic stance of Mao, who could not decide between the increasingly urgent need to improve the economy and his desire to protect the gains of the Cultural Revolution and prevent the Party from "bureaucratic degeneration." The public expression of resistance and the magnitude of the popular mobilisation at Tiananmen Square opposing the kind of radical politics of the Cultural Revolution embodied by the "Gang of Four" somehow hinted at what Jean-Luc Domenach called a "double reconciliation" that can be conceived of as a component of post-Mao pragmatism: a first reconciliation between the people and their leaders around a "viaticum of survival" resulting from the scars of the Cultural Revolution; and a second reconciliation within the Party itself on the necessity of inverting priorities between the politico-ideological and economic spheres. [5]

Ultimately, as a privileged eyewitness of these events, David Zweig skilfully combines political analysis and sober depiction of the atmosphere and emotional load of what he observed between November 1975 and April 1976. The 38 pictures gathered in the present issue of *China Perspectives* document with sheer visual power a core modality of the exercise of political power in the Mao era and the public expression of resistance to this power by the Beijing people.

Eric Florence is director of the CEFC.

1. Alain Roux, *Le Singe et le Tigre. Mao, un destin chinois* (The Monkey and the Tiger: Mao, a Chinese Destiny), Paris, Larousse, 2009, pp. 813-868.
2. "Everyday Life in Mao's China: A Q&A with Historian Covell Meyskens," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 27 January 2016, http://blog.lareviewofbooks.org/chinablog/everyday-life-maos-china-qa-historian-covell-meyskens (accessed on 3 February 2016).
3. "Remembering the Mao Era: From Creative Practices to Parallel History," *China Perspectives*, No. 2014/4.
4. To a certain extent, the more than two million people who spontaneously gathered at Tiananmen Square cannot fail to echo the mass meetings orchestrated by Mao on this very square during the Cultural Revolution.
5. Jean-Luc Domenach, *Mao, sa cour et ses complots. Derrière les murs rouges* (Mao, His Court and His Plots: Behind the Red Walls), Paris, Fayard, 2012, pp. 426-427.