

Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D.C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

January 30, 1984

CHINA: A PERSPECTIVE ON THE SPIRITUAL POLLUTION CAMPAIGN

Summary

China's two-month old campaign against "spiritual pollution"--a codephrase deriding liberalizing trends in ideology--has begun to wind down, although the concern for ideological conformity and social control that triggered the campaign has not abated. We believe the campaign is being reined in primarily because it had become a vehicle for attacking elements of the reform program--such as the agricultural responsibility system--and had aroused foreign speculation that it might adversely affect China's open-door policy. Because the campaign exacerbated a longstanding dispute within the party over the role of ideology in society, we believe the issue will emerge again, though perhaps in a more carefully controlled fashion.

[Redacted]

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The confusion generated by the spiritual pollution issue and by the contradictory guidance emanating from Beijing suggests that some political jockeying occurred within the Politburo over the scope and targets of the campaign. We do not believe the situation verged on a major power struggle, but available evidence does suggest that strains and disagreements developed during the course of the campaign, contributing to confusion at lower levels. General Secretary Hu Yaobang at times appeared to be a target of damaging criticism for tolerating spiritual pollution, but was nonetheless instrumental in curtailing the excesses of the campaign. Insofar as any light has been shed on Chinese leadership dynamics, we believe the campaign has underscored the potential constraining forces that party and army conservatives can have on the reform program and on the political conduct of Deng's successors.

[Redacted]

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This memorandum was prepared by members of the Domestic Policy Branch, Office of East Asian Analysis, Directorate of Intelligence. Comments and questions are welcome and may be directed to the Chief Domestic Policy Branch

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Origins of the campaign¹

Although the spiritual pollution issue--in various forms--has been debated in China for years, we are not certain why Deng chose to highlight the issue in his speech to the 2nd Plenum of the 12th Central Committee in mid-October. That Deng himself has been concerned with the question of "liberalism" and unorthodox ideas among writers and artists is clear from his key speeches over the last five years. Furthermore, the issue involves very fundamental philosophical problems that have plagued party ideologues ever since the fall of the Gang of Four, namely how to manage the contradiction between promoting material progress through economic reform and maintaining ideological orthodoxy and tight social controls. Chinese leaders also want to avoid a Polish-style situation and to combat the cynicism that has afflicted the party and the society at large regarding "Communist ideals." [redacted]

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For Deng and his old guard Politburo colleagues, the solution seems to be to reiterate orthodox Marxist concepts, to maintain party domination of intellectual life, and to shut off debate when it affects the party's prestige or legitimacy. Although Deng has been associated in the past with advocacy of a freer climate of intellectual debate, he has consistently warned writers and artists to observe the party's boundaries. [redacted]

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We believe the fact that his warnings were ignored not only affronted Deng personally but exposed him to criticism from party conservatives. Deng is also concerned that well-known party theoreticians, such as former propaganda chief Zhou Yang and two senior editors of the People's Daily, have promoted heterodox ideas in major speeches and articles. Borrowing freely from "bourgeois" philosophers, they discussed Marx's "humanism" and personal "alienation" caused by the party in a socialist society. These ideas evidently were perceived as threatening by the party elders, because they contributed to a loss of faith in the party by youth and intellectuals. [redacted]

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Deng's speech to the October 1983 plenum can therefore be seen as a continuation of his battle against "liberalism" and tolerance for heretical thinking in the party's propaganda apparatus. He defined the problem in broad terms: spiritual pollution consists not only of spreading "decadent and declining ideas of the bourgeoisie," but also of losing faith in socialism or in the leadership of the party. Deng warned that the problem could "wreck the country" if it were not checked. [redacted]

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¹See appendix for a detailed chronology of the spiritual pollution campaign.

Lack of Guidance Leads to Problems

We do not know whether Deng intended that his remarks should become the basis for a nationwide ideological campaign, or whether that decision was made by other leaders. That the campaign got under way within a week of the plenum suggests it was planned in advance. That different leaders seemed to take the movement in different directions suggests it was not well-organized enough to prevent distortion for other objectives. The campaign against spiritual pollution moved ahead rapidly in late October, with State Chairman Li Xiannian, NPC Chairman Peng Zhen, and military leader Wang Zhen raising the issue in major speeches. Wang in particular seemed to alter the tone of the debate by linking spiritual pollution to an "antirightist" theme. He told an audience of ideological workers in Nanjing that they needed to undergo a purge. [redacted]

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The campaign hit its peak in early November, when a few writers publicly admitted the existence of the problem within their ranks, Zhou Yang made a guarded self-criticism for speeches and articles he authored on "alienation in socialism," and Hu Jiwei and Wang Ruoshui--the two "liberal" editors of People's Daily--were sacked. On 8 November, the spiritual pollution issue was added to an otherwise nondescript editorial on rural concerns, implying that it was a serious problem in the countryside, requiring party action. On 12 November, the People's Daily printed a vitriolic commentary, entitled "Eliminating Spiritual Pollution Is Also a Kind of Emancipation of the Mind," which implicitly attacked many reform policies and contained oblique criticisms of Hu Yaobang and perhaps even Deng himself. The commentary also seemed to question China's association with the United States. [redacted]

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Some members of the party and other influential non-party leaders apparently viewed these developments with alarm and began to make their misgivings known to the party leadership. They raised fears that the campaign would degenerate into a reckless "anti-rightist" campaign, like the one in 1957, and would disrupt practical work. [redacted]

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Reports from around the country also related serious excesses carried out in the name of eliminating spiritual pollution. The China Youth League, for example, complained that some cadre had criticized youth for wearing colorful clothes and stylish hairdos, or for reading Western classical literature. Local cadre, many of them Cultural Revolution holdovers, took advantage of uncertain guidelines to attack any and all things that smacked of liberalism, including established party policies. In the military, things went even further. Soldiers were charged with spiritual pollution for complaining about army food, putting up pictures of their girlfriends, and smoking filter-tipped cigarettes. [redacted]

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Efforts to rein in the spiritual pollution campaign began as early as 16 November, with the publication in People's Daily of a commentator's article that took a moderate approach to the issue, urging caution and avoidance of the extreme methods typical of the Cultural Revolution era. In its tone and page placement, the article resembled an authoritative editorial. That it was only a commentary, and therefore less authoritative, suggests that the Politburo may not have been in full agreement on the question of providing guidance for the campaign: [redacted]

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The campaign sputtered on, and efforts to bring it under control were piecemeal. On 8 December, Propaganda Department head Deng Liqun told an audience of propaganda workers that the spiritual pollution campaign was not to be carried out in the countryside, reversing the earlier editorial.² Subsequently, scientists, foreign trade workers, and nonparty leaders were told that the campaign would not be permitted to interfere with their work. [redacted]

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During this period, Hu Yaobang's views on spiritual pollution found their way into the media. Hu, whose silence on the campaign may have been a sign of reservations about it, told Chinese students in Japan that the campaign should be confined strictly to ideology and to literature and art. His remarks were picked up by the Workers' Daily on 12 December but were ignored by the People's Daily. [redacted]

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The party finally issued a form of authoritative guidance on 23 December. A speech by PLA General Political Department director Yu Qiuli, delivered at the end of November, was republished in the People's Daily with an editorial note that the party leadership found the speech "excellent, comprehensive, and completely in line with the realities." Yu attacked local excesses and set out strict guidelines for implementing the campaign: only those things specified by the Central Committee are to be criticized as spiritual pollution, and only in a restrained and prescribed manner. [redacted]

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²Deng Liqun had made another important speech on 28 November, laying out "ten clear lines of demarcation" for the campaign. The speech was not published in full, however. [redacted]

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The People's Daily New Year's Day editorial, usually a programmatic description of the work to be done in the ensuing year, made scant mention of spiritual pollution and insisted repeatedly that "economic construction" was the party's prime task; "under no circumstances should this task be interfered with or undermined." Later in the month, US Embassy sources were told that the spiritual pollution campaign was essentially over. [REDACTED]

A Damage Assessment

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We believe that the issue of spiritual pollution is very important within the party and that it will arise again in the course of rectification, as well as in routine guidance of literary work. The issue also involves the party's commitment to reform. It is remarkable how quickly local officials, presumably opposed to reformist methods, if not goals, made use of the campaign to attack even successful reform policies. The hypersensitivity of cadre to shifts in the political line from Beijing is a reminder that support for reform among leftist local officials is tenuous at best. [REDACTED]

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It is less clear that the minimal guidance given the campaign and its confused course reflect divisions within the central leadership. The evidence thus far is merely suggestive:

- Postponement of a work conference to discuss ideological issues from December to the spring of 1984.
- Reversal of the 8 November editorial;
- The month-long delay in publishing Yu Qiuli's speech providing guidance to the PLA³ and the relative lack of publicity for Deng Liqun's speech limiting the campaign.
- A National Peoples Congress Standing Committee meeting in early December discussed the spiritual pollution issue for several days but was unable to issue an official statement because the issue was "complex and its solution will be protracted." [REDACTED]

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The coincidence of the campaign with renewed criticism of Hu Yaobang is another factor suggesting it has been internally divisive. Hu's close association with some of the writers under attack, his month-long silence on the conduct of the campaign and the selective editing of his comments in early December all suggest to us that he was a target of the controversy. Moreover,

³The current campaign has not set the army against the party, as did the Bai Hua affair, although the issue is strikingly similar. Yu's guidance suggests Deng's speech was widely misunderstood by the military. [REDACTED]

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he was implicitly attacked in some of the early November commentaries. At the same time, Hu's leadership style was reportedly being criticized by several senior Politburo members. We believe that Hu's reputation and leadership credibility were damaged by these events, though not irreparably. Hu seems to have been instrumental in efforts to curtail and redirect the campaign. [REDACTED]

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We do not believe that the campaign issue should be read as a major factional breakdown or power struggle at the top. Nonetheless, the campaign seems to have created strains and exposed differences in approach between leaders apparently willing to tolerate some intellectual ferment--such as Hu--and more conservative leaders who will brook no challenge to accepted dogma, particularly on the issue of the party's ideological mandate. There may also be a generational element to the disagreements, with elders seeking ideological unity and "successors" stressing the need to get on with practical economic work. Despite their differences, the leadership reached a consensus that the campaign had been ineffective and needed to be restricted. The curtailment of the campaign suggests that, in the short term, the younger leaders have regained some initiative to press their efforts for a party purge and economic reform. [REDACTED]

In our view, the spiritual pollution campaign exacerbated ideological divisions within the party. For that reason, we do not believe the spiritual pollution campaign is over. The debate in fact, has continued within the press, albeit in a more controlled and limited fashion. It is clear that major differences of view still exist in the party over ideological questions. The planned Central Committee meeting on ideology this spring will provide an opportunity to raise spiritual pollution again, and we expect the controversy to continue. [REDACTED]

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We believe that the inept way in which the party has handled the spiritual pollution issue probably has damaged its already tattered reputation among China's intellectuals and disaffected youth. [REDACTED] the campaign caused at least some intellectuals to pull away from involvement in party affairs. Literature and art production dropped off sharply, with writers fearful of publishing anything that might later be attacked as culturally contaminated. [REDACTED]

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APPENDIX: A CHRONOLOGY OF THE "SPIRITUAL POLLUTION" DEBATE

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- 22 Sep Zhongguo Jiaoyu Bao (China Educational Journal) publishes an editorial entitled, "Educational Workers Must Combat Intellectual Pollution," an early reference to problems criticized in subsequent propaganda.
- 24 Sep Deng Liqun tells an academic degree committee that educators, theoretical workers, and literary and art workers should "strive to eliminate spiritual pollution in all ideological spheres."
- 30 Sep In National Day toast, Zhao Ziyang notes continuing efforts to "prevent and counter moral pollution by decadent bourgeois ideology."
- 12 Oct Communique of 2nd Plenum and publication of rectification "Decision." Communique mentions only Deng/Chen speeches on ideological work, notes a meeting will be held to make decisions on topic. "Decision" discusses "corrosive influence of bourgeois ideology" but doesn't adopt "spiritual pollution" rhetoric.
- 15 Oct Liberation Army Daily (LAD) editorial asks party members to "dare to struggle against acts that cause spiritual pollution."
- 18 Oct Li Xiannian and Ni Zhifu both use the term in their speeches at the 10th National Trade Union Conference.
- 21 Oct Peng Zhen makes speech to forum of important non-party personages and provides first open media discussion on contents of Deng's speech to 2nd plenum: says Deng's themes were rectification and spiritual pollution.
- 23 Oct Wang Zhen, in Nanjing, discusses Deng's speech and calls for "purification" of the ranks of theory teachers. Wang calls for action "to correct the rightist tendency of weakness and laxity."
- 27 Oct Xinhua reports Hu Yaobang's address to the forum of non-party personages, which is basically a historical review with only a very perfunctory mention of opposing spiritual pollution.
- Jingji Ribao (Economic Daily) editorializes that "spiritual pollution is neither a common problem of ideology nor a purely academic problem, but a political problem of reality."
- 31 Oct People's Daily frontpages a commentary, "Hold Aloft the Banner of Socialist Literature and Art and Resolutely Guard Against and Eliminate Spiritual Pollution." Enjoins party members to

stand in the front rank of the struggle. Warns against repeating leftist error of "oversimplified, one-sided, crude, and excessive" criticism.

- 1 Nov Speaking to foreign correspondents, Deng Liqun denies any danger of the new campaign leading to another Cultural Revolution.
- 4 Nov Writers hold press conference, say they have nothing to fear, and warmly embrace criticism while denouncing spiritual pollution.
- 5 Nov Zhou Yang offers his self-criticism, and thanks "Comrade Hu Yaobang and others" who attended a meeting of the Central Advisory Commission: "They sternly criticized me, but also helped me with warmth."
- In a lengthy PD article, prominent party philosopher Xing Benshi refutes the theory of alienation.
- 7 Nov Wenyi Bao (Literary Gazette), the party's primary arts journal, prints a lengthy editorial which asserts that one reason for the appearance of spiritual pollution is that "the leadership in literature and art is generally incompetent."
- 8 Nov The first PD editorial to address spiritual pollution is entitled, "It is Imperative to Eliminate Spiritual Pollution in Building Civility Villages and Towns." Notes presence of ideological confusion among some peasants. Passages on spiritual pollution look almost like editorial inserts. (See entry of 8 Dec., following)
- 9 Nov PD front page commentator, "Pay Utmost Attention to Party Rectification Study, Raise the Consciousness of Communist Party Members," seeks to make a clear connection between the drive against spiritual pollution and party rectification. Solving the problem of spiritual pollution is a necessary first step in attaining the first goal of rectification, ideological unity.
- Xinhua reports speech by Deng Liqun to more than 100 theoretical workers on 5 Nov., citing "lack of organization" among theorists as a main cause of spiritual pollution. Indirectly promises greater central control and attributes term "spiritual pollution" to Deng Xiaoping.
- 12 Nov Incendiary PD front page commentator, "Eliminating Spiritual Pollution is Also a Kind of Emancipation of the Mind," uses inflammatory language to criticize some of the rhetoric of reform, cites explicitly anti-US articles by Mao to criticize fawning attitude toward foreign things.
- 14 Nov AFP publishes officially confirmed story that Hu Jiwei and Wang Ruoshui are sacked from PD posts.

15 Nov Speaking again to Western journalists, Deng Liqun denies that current drive will lead to another "anti-rightist" campaign or Cultural Revolution.

Guangming Ribao (GMRB), party newspaper aimed at intellectuals, Commentator, "Elimination of Spiritual Pollution Must Also Take Practice as the Criterion." A fairly hard-line piece, makes an imprecise connection between crimes of the young and spiritual pollutants.

16 Nov PD front page commentator, entitled "Build Spiritual Civilization, Oppose Spiritual Pollution," looks just like the long awaited editorial--but isn't. Takes a relatively moderate, instructive line. Quotes Deng's 2nd plenum speech, defining spiritual pollution as "spreading all kinds of corrupt and declining ideas of the bourgeoisie," and "a lack of faith in the cause of socialism and communism or in the leadership of the Communist Party."

17 Nov Zhongguo Qingnian Bao (China Youth Daily), organ of the China Youth League, runs a commentator article stating that young people who want their lives to be more colorful and interesting should not be accused pursuing a bourgeois way of life.

GMRB Commentator addresses "Eliminating Spiritual Pollution and the Opening Up to the Outside World," saying that the "stupid way" of opposing the open door must be resisted, but so too must the liberal trend of uncritically borrowing foreign things.

LAD Commentator, "Carry Out Reeducation in Opposing Liberalism," states that "the current struggle to combat spiritual pollution is a part of the party rectification campaign."

20 Nov In a meeting with Korean Workers Party delegation, Hu Yaobang says that a major purpose of party consolidation and opposition to spiritual pollution is to effect a rise in economic work.

28 Nov Deng Liqun addresses a joint meeting of cultural department and radio and television propaganda workers, discussing the scope, policies, and limits of campaign to eliminate spiritual pollution. Talk includes the authoritative "10 clear lines of demarcation" but is only excerpted in press coverage.

30 Nov Yu Qiuli addressed GPD audience on how to draw clear lines of demarcation in eliminating spiritual pollution. Speech is mentioned in press, but full text is not published. Excerpts--cited as Central Committee guidance--are published on 23 Dec. (See entry of that date, following)

2 Dec 3rd Session of the 6th NPC Standing Committee publishes comments from 5 plenary meetings (from 29 Nov to 2 Dec) at which spiritual pollution is discussed. Secretariat member Chen Pixian notes some are shocked by drive to eliminate spiritual pollution, and asks "what's wrong with a little shock?"

A front page "short commentary" in PD, "Eliminate Spiritual Pollution, Draw Clear Distinctions," hits the now familiar themes--make careful demarcation, don't disrupt the economy.

8 Dec Xinhua radio alerts listeners to pay attention for important commentary: "'Eliminate Spiritual Pollution' Should Not Be Mentioned in the Countryside." Hence the only PD editorial of the drive is reversed. Report goes on to cite excesses of cadre who felt licensed by the editorial of one month earlier.

NPC Standing Committee meeting ends, declines to issue a decision on eliminating spiritual pollution despite spending 7 days on it. Peng Zhen says, "It is all right not to make a decision for the time being."

9 Dec Deng Liqun again, at a forum on ideological and political work in enterprises: "We should firmly focus on economic construction and must not waver on this question." Explains that the Central Committee decided the drive against spiritual pollution was inappropriate in rural areas.

9 Dec A front page PD Commentator--"Encourage the Peasants to Go All Out to Become Well-Off Through Hard Work"--backs up Central Committee decision to stop the spiritual pollution campaign in the countryside, once again discusses the erroneous criticisms leveled at wealthy peasants.

12 Dec Gongren Ribao (Workers' Daily) quotes Hu Yaobang in a front page commentator: "Spiritual Pollution chiefly refers to the remarks and works of a very small number of people in theoretical circles and in the fields of literature and art that are harmful to the building of the four modernizations and to the stability and unity of the country."

13 Dec GMRB summarizes the Gongren Ribao commentator and edits out Hu's remarks.

23 Dec Xinhua broadcasts excerpts from Yu Qiuli's 30 November speech, which bears the imprimatur of the Central Committee: "excellent, comprehensive, and completely in line with the realities in various localities and departments."

GMRB publishes Deng Liqun speech of 4 June 83, "Propaganda Workers Must Maintain a Clear Head." Obviously revised, speech has Deng, some four months before the 2nd Plenum, calling for the elimination of "spiritual pollution."

- 26 Dec Mao's birthday commemorated with a full turnout of the leadership at the Mao Mausoleum, a PD editorial, and on the 25th, a long remembrance by Hu Yaobang.
- Cultural figure Lin Mohan, writing in Hongqi (pp. 33-35), notes that "to eliminate spiritual pollution requires destruction." Notes that some writers have stopped writing to protest the drive against spiritual pollution.
- 28 Dec In GMRB front pager, commentator Shi Youxin calls combating spiritual pollution "a vital content of party rectification." Shi denies that the struggle is winding down, says it is long-term, necessary project.
- 31 Dec The PD New Year's editorial subordinates spiritual pollution--and everything else on the agenda, rectification included--to economic construction. Spiritual pollution is given hardly any space.

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- 9 Jan Zhang Xiaotian, author of "Boundless Grass Over the Plain," offers a cowering self-criticism in PD (p. 7).
- 10 Jan Banyuetan Commentator, "Prospects for 1984," almost skips mention of spiritual pollution. Drive is indeed winding down, despite Shi Youxin's protestations.

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EA M 84-10018

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