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## 自力更生

## Self-reliance

YANG Long

**T**he Chinese Communist Party (CCP) first referred to ‘self-reliance’ (*zili gengsheng*) in the late 1930s. The meaning of the term shifted over time, reflecting the Party’s economic capacity and changes within official ideology. In English, self-reliance is defined as a ‘reliance on one’s own powers and resources rather than those of others.’<sup>1</sup> In Mandarin, self-reliance has an additional connotation of regeneration through one’s own power and effort. It is a dynamic phrase that entwines power, economic, and spiritual growth, and has lent itself to continuous redefinition.<sup>2</sup> This essay traces how self-reliance came to have a precise meaning in official Party discourse in response to economic constraints during the War of Resistance against Japan (1937–45) and describes how it was redefined to justify Mao’s radical isolationist policies between the late 1950s and early 1970s. Despite China’s integration into the global capitalist economy, the phrase has retained conceptual flexibility in its adaptation to the changing economic policies and political landscapes of the 1980s and 1990s. Tracing the fluid meanings of self-reliance provides a lens through which we can more clearly understand how China politically conceptualises the economy and its own position in the world.

*Historical Origins*

Although the concept of self-reliance predated the conflict with Japan, it was the War of Resistance against Japan which made the need to practically implement policies aimed at self-reliance a concrete reality. The Party’s efforts to turn the term into a precise formulation—a so-called *tifa*, i.e. a term that was, and still is, used by the CCP to encapsulate its political ideas and important policies<sup>3</sup>—began in the late 1930s. After the surviving the treacherous Long March and prolonged economic blockade, the Party was on the verge of fiscal collapse. The outbreak of the war with Japan and the

economic isolation of the communist base in northwest China further exacerbated the woes of the CCP. In order to increase self-sufficiency in food and living necessities, in February 1939 Mao launched a series of production campaigns in the area controlled by the CCP by encouraging all students and soldiers to engage in agricultural and industrial production.<sup>4</sup> The concept of self-reliance was first formulated in precise terms in a speech that Mao gave to senior Party officials in June 1939 to mobilise all CCP members to make mental preparation for the most adverse conditions. In his words: 'The Party and its military force need to prepare for the harshest [survival] environments.'<sup>5</sup>

In the following years, the Party's fiscal situation worsened due to two factors. First, the CCP's continuous success in territorial expansion and military recruitment threatened and provoked the Nationalist Party into an attempt to isolate the CCP nationwide. Second, the Rectification Campaign, launched by Mao in 1941, not only created many internal enemies but also distracted Party members from agricultural production (see Mertha's essay in the present volume). The dramatic increase of the burden on peasants in 1941 left the Party with no choice but to accentuate the importance of self-reliance through production campaigns.<sup>6</sup> These underlying tensions came to a head on 3 June 1941, when the acting governor of Yanchuan county, northern Shaanxi, was struck dead by lightning while he was attending an administrative meeting in an open-air square. At the same event, a peasant whose donkey had also been killed by lightning publicly put a curse on Mao, asking why the heavens did not strike him dead instead. In the next few days, the peasant told anyone who was willing to listen about the curse he had put on Mao. The local public security agency investigated the peasant's outburst, and acknowledged that his discontent arose from the Party's policies that had led to the high agricultural tax burden. Mao himself also acknowledged that the excessive burden imposed on the peasants had pushed them to the verge of subsistence. This incident served to strengthen the CCP leadership's resolve to implement the policy of self-reliance through further production campaigns aimed at increasing agricultural output.<sup>7</sup>

The CCP's ability to overcome scarcity during the War of Resistance depended on its ability to mobilise the masses in production campaigns and 'regenerate' its own conditions of existence. After the victory over the Japanese, self-reliance became cemented as an official formulation within official Party discourse. On 13 August 1945, Mao delivered a speech in Yan'an, in which he summarised the lessons from the war that was then ending, underscoring the importance of self-reliance in the following way:

On what basis should our policy rest? It should rest on our own strength, and that means 'regeneration through one's own efforts' (*zili gengsheng*). We are not alone; all the countries and people in the world opposed to imperialism are our friends. Nevertheless, we stress regeneration through our own efforts. Relying on the forces we ourselves organise, we can defeat all Chinese and foreign reactionaries.<sup>8</sup>

In this sense, the war with Japan provided the historical basis and justification for the ideological framing of self-reliance as a political and economic concept. The continued survival of the CCP, against overwhelming odds, meant that the Party had self-confidence that it could rely on itself to overcome dangerous times ahead. Mao's statement strove to attach revolutionary spirit and significance to 'regeneration through one's own efforts,' thus embedding the concept deep within Party symbolism.

### *Self-reliance in China's Era of High Socialism*

In the 1950s and 1960s self-reliance gradually evolved from a symbolic commitment and mark of loyalty to China's socialist project into a Maoist principle of development and foreign relations. In the early 1950s, the CCP discarded the wartime policy of self-reliance and instead adopted the socioeconomic development model of the Soviet Union. The CCP's dependence on Soviet aid—including technical specialists—was vital for the promotion of the industrial sector. However, commencing from around 1955 fissures started forming in the Sino-Soviet alliance. In 1957, the Soviet Union began withdrawing experts from China in response to the escalation of the diplomatic feud between the two countries. The conflict between the remaining Soviet experts and Chinese officials in 1958 and 1959—when the Great Leap Forward was in full swing—gave the Soviet Union an excuse to pull back even further.<sup>9</sup> As a result of the Sino-Soviet split and the loss of technical expertise, Mao revitalised the concept of self-reliance as the fulcrum of domestic development strategies and relations with the international community. Unfortunately, this approach did not accelerate industrialisation as envisioned, but rather facilitated and fed into the utopian economic experiment turned disaster of the Great Leap Forward (1958–62).<sup>10</sup>

During the early years of the Cultural Revolution, the commitment to self-reliance was bound up with radical revolutionary values, which in practice resulted in self-imposed isolation. In the domestic sphere, the emphasis on self-reliance at all levels through continuous propaganda campaigns resulted in a dramatic decline in both the supply of light industrial products in cities and state support to rural areas.<sup>11</sup> A case in point was the national campaign to 'Learn from Dazhai in Agriculture' (*nongye xue dazhai*) which emerged in 1963 and became the model for revolutionary agriculture based on the practices of Dazhai, a village in Shanxi province. Dazhai villagers placed a great deal of effort in the policy of self-reliance, and refused support in the form of state grain, state funds, and other outside relief materials. Their attempts to sustain themselves were showcased by the central government to compensate for its own limited ability to provide Chinese people with the life necessities they badly needed.<sup>12</sup> In the international sphere, the Party's excessive commitment to self-reliance resulted in the breaking off of diplomatic ties with other countries and the reduction of foreign imports, particularly of industrial equipment.<sup>13</sup>

By the late 1960s, the international isolation and rigid insistence on self-reliance had caused the Chinese economy to lag behind a large number of European and Asian countries, which had experienced rapid economic growth during this period.<sup>14</sup> Its economic anxieties compelled the CCP to modify its policies by seeking rapprochement with both the United States and Japan in the early 1970s.<sup>15</sup>

### *Contemporary Transformation*

At the onset of the reform period, the Party leadership under Deng Xiaoping paid enormous attention to repairing and renovating the institutions and norms of political life. At the same time, the Party shifted its focus from continuous revolution to economic reform and the country's integration into the global economy. Against this backdrop, the concept of self-reliance was hollowed out leaving behind only a name, akin to a museum piece in the shrine of the Chinese Revolution. That being said, it was a source of pride and glory within and legitimation of Party history. In the CCP's decisive 1981 'Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party since the Founding of the People's Republic of China,' the relationship between self-reliance and the victory of the Chinese Revolution was highlighted in these terms:

It must be said that, fundamentally, victory in the Chinese Revolution was won because the Chinese Communist Party adhered to the principle of independence and self-reliance and depended on the efforts of the whole Chinese people, whatever their nationality, after they underwent untold hardships and surmounted innumerable difficulties and obstacles together.

The postreform articulation of self-reliance reformulated the term from a pillar of Maoist revolutionary thought and action, to a Dengist conceptualisation that saw self-reliance as a means to an end in the struggle to ultimately reclaim China's rightful place on the world stage.

The transformation of the concept of self-reliance into a historical artefact was further confirmed by Deng Xiaoping's opening address at the Twelfth National Congress of the CCP in September 1982. In his speech, Deng specified that 'China's affairs should be run according to China's specific conditions and by the Chinese people themselves. Independence and self-reliance have always and will always be our basic stand'. The objective of his speech was, however, to emphasise the importance of economic development through 'unswervingly following a policy of opening to the outside world and increasing our exchange with foreign countries on the basis of equality and mutual benefit.'<sup>16</sup> In the following seven years, Deng, mentioned the term self-reliance on at least four separate occasions, but all in the context of policies aimed at accelerating economic reform and integrating China into the global economy.<sup>17</sup>

In the late 1980s and 1990s, when Chinese economic reform gained momentum, the term self-reliance was gradually discontinued in official Party documents and speeches by Party leaders. It was only in the late 1990s that a debate over the revision of the state-sponsored *Chinese Dictionary of Etymology (cihai)* brought the term back into the public discourse. This dictionary, updated on a ten-year basis, is roughly equivalent to the Britannica Concise Encyclopaedia. At that time, the editors of the *Dictionary* succeeded in removing 'self-reliance,' alongside hundreds of existing entries related to revolutionary discourse, such as 'independence and self-reliance,' 'criticism and self-criticism,' and 'the Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party.' These changes immediately provoked heated controversy among Chinese scholars, with left-wing intellectuals lashing out against the editors of the *Dictionary* and accusing them of denying the legitimacy of the Chinese Revolution, as well as Mao's historical merits.

As a belated response to the above criticism, at a conference in 2005 the *Dictionary's* editor-in-chief explained that the controversial updates had aimed to 'get rid of the stale and take in the fresh.' More specifically, old-fashioned words were no longer included in the new version of the dictionary because they were not deemed useful for the Chinese people, as they did not describe the current socioeconomic and political circumstances.<sup>18</sup>

Fast forward two decades to today, and self-reliance suddenly seems to be having a resurgence. Between September and November 2018, Chinese President Xi Jinping frequently used the term in his speeches during visits to several high-tech companies. A number of observers of China have interpreted this as Xi's attempt to revitalise Maoist political rhetoric.<sup>19</sup> However, we should be careful not to hear Mao's voice in Xi's words. A closer look at the context and usage reveals that Xi's main concern is not about the revival of Maoist revolutionary rhetoric, but about the development of a number of key technologies in response to accusations that China engages in technology and intellectual property theft coming from the United States. The current Chinese leadership is of course keenly aware of the importance of technological development for the economy, as well as the vulnerability of Chinese companies that rely on global supply chains for high-tech components, many of which originate in the United States. While Xi's use of the term self-reliance may evoke memories of Mao's isolationism, in actuality it is a reflection of the Dengist interpretation of self-reliance as a means to an end—in this case China's continued rise within the global economic order.

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