

Hotel Gutian: We Haven't Had That Spirit Here Since 1929

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In November 2014, Central Military Commission Chairman Xi Jinping used the occasion of the 85th anniversary of the 1929 Gutian Conference to convene a critical meeting on political work in the People's Liberation Army. Xi addressed the 420 generals and senior military officials in attendance for the two-day meeting, reminding them of Mao's dictum about party control of the military and connecting the themes to his current anti-corruption campaign. This article provides historical context for the 2014 meeting, describes the scene, analyzes the key speeches, dissects the content of the pre- and post-meeting propaganda, and concludes with an assessment of the short- and long-term implications.

Introduction

In November 2014, Central Military Commission Chairman Xi Jinping used the occasion of the 85th anniversary of the 1929 Gutian Conference to convene a critical meeting on political work in the People's Liberation Army. Xi addressed the 420 generals and senior military officials in attendance for the two-day meeting, reminding them of Mao's dicta about party control of the military and connecting the themes to his current anti-corruption campaign. This article provides historical context for the 2014 meeting, describes the scene, analyzes the key speeches, dissects the content of the pre- and post-meeting propaganda, and concludes with an assessment of the short- and long-term implications.

Background on the 1929 Gutian Congress

The Gutian Congress was held on 1 November 1929 in Shanghang County in southeastern Fujian Province.¹ It was the ninth meeting of the Chinese Communist Party since its founding in 1921, and the first following the Nanchang Uprising in August 1927 that marked the founding of the Red Army. Most of the attendees of the 1929 congress were soldiers, and Mao Zedong chaired the meeting as the Comintern-appointed political commissar.

Mao authored the meeting's concluding resolution, entitled "On Correcting Mistaken Ideas in the Party," which addressed a set of "non-proletarian ideas" within the party and Army, including "ultra-democracy," "the disregard of organizational discipline," "absolute egalitarianism," "subjectivism," "individualism," "the ideology of roving rebel bands," and "the remnants of putschism."² But the lasting legacy of the Gutian meeting was Mao's criticism of what he called "the purely military viewpoint." Specifically, Mao was criticizing a number of wayward views in the military. The first was the belief that "military affairs and politics were opposed to each other," even going so far as to say that "military affairs [had] a leading position over politics."³ The second was the incorrect

view that the task of the Red Army “is merely to fight,” instead of serving as “an armed body for carrying out the political tasks of the revolution” as well as “doing propaganda among the masses, organizing the masses, arming them, helping them establish revolutionary political power and setting up political organizations.”⁴ Indeed, the Gutian Conference was the seminal moment where the principle of CCP control of the military was enshrined as core party doctrine, and “set the tone for the army’s political work during the revolutionary era” and beyond.⁵

Propaganda Buildup before the Meeting

Prior to the 2014 Gutian Conference, the party and military propaganda systems were in full swing on the issue of party control of the military. The most complete read-ahead material for the conference attendees was a Yu Guang article in the July 2014 issue of *Seeking Truth* entitled “Looking at Casting the Military Soul from the Contemporary Values of the Gutian Conference.”⁶ Describing party leadership of the military as “the immutable military soul of the Chinese military” and “an important political advantage of the party and of the nation,” the author insists that this arrangement is essential for “achieving the goals of the dream of a powerful nation and the dream of a powerful military.” At the same time, Yu Guang reminds his readers that the party-military relationship was not always so clearly subordinated, recalling the “intense debate at the Seventh and Eighth Party Conferences of the Fourth Red Army over the core issues of who was to lead the Red Army and who was to command it.” He argues that “achieving consensus had proven difficult” until Mao suggested a reorientation with the following elements: (1) “a new military leadership system of absolute party leadership of the military,” (2) a mission statement that declared that the “Red Army is an armed group that executes the political tasks of the revolution,” (3) imperatives that the “military not lead politics” and that “the military not control political power,” and (4) the primacy of “party organization within the military.”

Pivoting to the contemporary situation, Yu argues “the times have changed, but the logic remains the same.” Specifically, he asserts, “the development of our party and military are at a new historical starting point,” especially given “major changes . . . in the environment both inside and outside the military,” but “China’s basic national situation and military situation have not changed.” Among the immutable elements are: (1) “the important status and role of the [party] to lead the military”; (2) the primacy of “people” as the key “factor that determines who wins and loses wars.” More interesting are the author’s list of “changes in the environment,” which includes professional concerns about the “profound development of the new world revolution in military affairs,” which creates a set of “arduous and complex tasks of deeply reforming and strategically transforming the Chinese military.” These difficult efforts are complicated by “plots of westernization by enemy forces” and “corrosion by various incorrect ideological trends,” which the author describes darkly as “diverse,” “varied,” “acute,” and “complex.” Enemies in “the West” are “pointing the spears of westernization and differentiation at the Chinese military in a reckless attempt to pull the Chinese military out from under the party’s banner.” They are attempting to undermine the current system by promoting ideas such as “departyizing and depoliticizing the military,” “nationalizing the military,” and the so-called “universal values” and “constitutional democracy.” This subversion has

“blurred the understanding of the legal principle of absolute party leadership of the military in some officers and men” and “blurred their understanding of the special advantages of the military system with Chinese characteristics,” leading “some” to “blindly admire the military system and military control model of the west.”

Yet the weakness of Yu’s article and the great challenge for the party is the lack of effective, concrete measures for combating these trends. In the vacuum, Yu offers more of the same, no doubt with greater intensity and revolutionary spirit. He calls for “actively exploring effective ways and scientific methods of implementing and enforcing the basic system of absolute party leadership of the military,” “promoting inner-party democracy,” “improving decision-making mechanisms,” and “strengthening supervision, selecting people, and appointing people within the party.” In the end, he concludes with the view that success will be determined by finding people who are “absolutely reliable,” implicitly suggesting that some of the current crew may not be completely up to snuff. This last point was likely front and center in the minds of the hundreds of attendees at the November 2014 meeting, who were collectively under greater scrutiny than at any time since the post-Tiananmen political purges.

The 5Ws of the 2014 Gutian Conference

The 85th anniversary celebration of the Gutian Conference on 1 November 2014 was held at the historic site of the original 1929 meeting. According to a Xinhua report, Xi Jinping personally proposed that the gathering be held in Gutian.⁷ Attendance at the meeting was no doubt mandatory for any senior military leader who was ambulatory and breathing. Xinhua reports that all members of the Central Military Commission showed up, including Fan Changlong, Xu Qiliang, Chang Wanquan, Fang Fenghui, Zhang Yang, Zhao Keshi, Zhang Youxia, Wu Shengli, Ma Xiaotian, and Wei Fenghe.⁸ Additional non-military attendees included Politburo member Wang Huning and CCP General Office Director Li Zhanshu.⁹ The rest of the crowd was drawn from “relevant leaders of the four general headquarters, the major leaders and political department directors of the large units, leaders of CMC General Office, political commissars of quasi-military regions and army-level units, the relevant comrades of the general headquarters and large units’ offices, representatives of the grassroots and heroic models, and the relevant leaders of Ministry of Public Security.”¹⁰ In total, the 2014 event was witnessed by “more than 420 representatives.”¹¹

The color commentary that accompanied the conference provided some details about the venue and the activities of the participants. Faithful to the propaganda style manual, the building’s white walls and green roof tiles “looked solemn, old, and plain,” adorned with a “glistening” banner reading “Gutian Congress Shines Forever.”¹² Xinhua tells us that attendees “visited the museum,” gazed upon a statue of Mao Zedong “with reverence,” dined on a likely spartan representation of something called the “Red Army meal” (reportedly brown rice and pumpkin soup), studied historical documents, listened to lectures about “tradition,” and saw “red movies.”¹³ There was the requisite cleansing ritual of criticism and self-criticism, with special emphasis on “the negative lesson and the harmful influence of Xu Caihou’s case.”¹⁴ Xinhua also wins a Marxist poetry award for its evocative assertion that “the meeting was full of a pungent gunpowder smell, and

the attendees collectively underwent a round of party character tempering and spiritual baptism.”¹⁵

Apart from the atmospherics, the propaganda apparatus was resolute in its view that Xi Jinping was large and in charge. He began his morning by “cordially” receiving all of the participants, and then he “led” all CMC members in touring the site. Xi Jinping closely inspected the ground, “stopping at the photos and exhibition boards to examine them,” and “now and then asking the docent some related questions.”¹⁶ While viewing the hall that housed the 1929 meeting, he “joined the people around him in remembering the utmost hardships and strenuous struggles that the forefathers endured in search of the revolutionary path, and talked to them about the situation and his feelings of his various visits to Gutian.”¹⁷ In a striking performance of ancestor worship, Xi climbed the 151-flight staircase of the Chairman Mao Memorial Garden, “respectfully laid a floral basket at Mao Zedong statue, personally smoothed out the ribbons on the floral basket, led the people to bow three times to Mao Zedong statue, paid homage to the statue, and deeply remembered the great exploits of the revolutionaries of the older generation.”¹⁸

During the course of the conference, Xi made it abundantly clear that this was not his first visit to Gutian, which is not surprising given his official postings to Fujian from 1985 to 2002. He told the participants that he had been to the old revolutionary base area on 19 occasions, “every time making a special trip to visit with the veteran red armymen and the dependents of the armymen and martyrs.”¹⁹ On this trip to Gutian, Xi Jinping again specially invited “ten veteran red armymen, dependents of the armymen and martyrs, as well as representatives of veteran underground party members, veteran guerillas, veteran transporters, veteran liaison men, and veteran township cadres in the old soviet areas.”²⁰ During their meeting at the Party Member-Cadres Education Center, Xi Jinping was at his paternalistic best, holding the “veteran comrades’ hands and show[ing] concern about their comfort.”²¹ Naturally, the “veteran comrades were especially moved on seeing Xi Jinping,” and reciprocated his concern by expressing “their trust in the party central committee and their delights over the nation’s development and achievements.”²²

Xi’s Speech to the Conference

The centerpiece of the conference was Xi Jinping’s speech. After the customary throat-clearing about the “Party commanding the gun” and the military’s fine traditions of political work, Xi offered a relatively positive assessment of military developments since the 18th Party Congress, crediting the PLA with “closely focusing on the goal of strengthening army, stepping up and improving political work, concentrating on forging the army spirit, servicing the center, rectifying the prevalent practice, strictly enforcing the discipline, and punishing corruption.”²³ At the same time, he identified 10 “outstanding problems” in the military, with particular emphasis on “leading cadres’ ideology, politics, and work style.”²⁴ The main causes of these problems were spiritual, and included “problems in ideals and beliefs, principle of party spirit, revolutionary spirit, [and] organizational discipline.”²⁵ At the same time, he called out “insufficient education of the instructors themselves, excessive leniency and softness in managing the leading cadres, failure to effectively develop the supervision system’s functions, and loopholes in

developing rules and regulations.”²⁶ In a blinding flash of the obvious, Xi complained that management of officials is “too lax” and “the supervision system has flaws.”²⁷ Directly contradicting unnamed individuals arguing that the PLA should spend more time on military professional tasks than political work, Xi countered that domestic and foreign trends demand that “political work should only be strengthened, not weakened.” Xi then cast a pall over the room by discussing the case of Xu Caihou, who was investigated in March 2014, expelled from the party in June 2014, and confessed to accepting “extremely large” bribes on 28 October 2014.²⁸ Highlighting Xu’s case as a cautionary tale, Chairman Xi called for the attendees to “deeply reflect on the lessons learned and thoroughly exterminate its influence.”²⁹

After diagnosing the disease, Xi then proceeded in his speech to offer the remedy in the form of five directives. As with all speeches of this sort, the cardinal order of the remedies is often as significant as the content of the remedies, especially as a reflection of the priorities for political guidance. The first, as usual, was spiritual, focused on reinforcing the ideological commitment to party leadership over the military. The second was managerial, centered on recruiting and promoting reliable people who will not be swayed by negative ideological trends. The third directive specifically addressed the anti-corruption campaign, emphasizing that it was a long-term, existential fight not a short-term correction. All the way down in the fourth position was warfighting and combat proficiency, though even here Xi was less interested in “winning” than cultivating the “dauntless, heroic, and adamant combat style of the officers and men.” The fifth directive was a throwaway line about “innovating the development of political work.” All in all, a strikingly political agenda with little if any concentration on military professional tasks.

Time for Everyone to *Biaotai*

Immediately following Xi’s speech, senior military leaders rose to praise the speech and the speaker. CMC Vice Chairman Fan Changlong polished the cormorant by describing the meeting as an “historic event of milestone significance” and Chairman Xi’s speech as a “very profound” message that “greatly shocked and deeply educated” him.³⁰ CMC Vice Chairman Xu Qiliang declared that the speech “contains profound thoughts” and “shines with the truth of our times.”³¹ Other highlights of the more than 20 *biaotai* remarks from military leaders include comments from controversial PLA officers, such as GLD Political Commissar Liu Yuan and NDU Political Commissar Liu Yazhou. In Liu Yuan’s speech, “Earnestly Implement Demand on ‘Three Strict and Three Solid Things’,” he repeats his earlier prescient and unpopular warnings about the “destruction of the armed forces’ political ecology” by the corruption of officers like “Xu Caihou and Gu Junshan.” Liu Yazhou’s speech, entitled “Vigorously Cultivate Outstanding Talented Military Personnel Who Can Shoulder the Heavy Responsibility of Strengthening the Army,” focused on “cultivation of talented military personnel” as the remedy, with no mention of some of his more controversial beliefs about political reform. Finally, Wang Jianwei, political commissar of the National University of Defense Technology, offered a technological perspective in his speech, “Strengthen and Improve the Armed Forces’ Political Work in the Information Network Era,” arguing that ideological supremacy on the “information network should become a position that must be fought for, defended, and occupied.”³²

Post-Meeting Propaganda

It is always important to closely examine post-meeting or speech propaganda work, both to confirm the important *tifa* but also to try to detect any important variations or subtle disagreements with the official line. In this case, there was very little evidence of the latter. Authoritative state media summarized the meeting thusly:

The conference deeply studied and implemented the spirit of a series of important speeches by Chairman Xi, especially his important speech at this conference, adhered to the principle of ideological party building and political army building established by the Gutian Conference [in 1929], carried forward the fine tradition of our army's political work, studied and settled major practical issues concerning our party's ideological and political army building with a spirit of reform and rectification.³³

Xinhua offered three “highlights” of the meeting:

—The contemporary theme of the army's political work is to closely center on realizing the Chinese dream of the Chinese nation's great rejuvenation, and provide a strong political guarantee for realizing the party's goal of strengthening the army under the new situation.

—To strengthen and improve our army's political work under the new situation, the most important thing now is to erect four fundamental things: Firmly erect the ideals and beliefs throughout the army, firmly erect the principle of party spirit throughout the army, firmly erect the standards for combatworthiness throughout the army, and firmly erect the prestige of political work throughout the army.

—To strengthen and improve our army's political work under the new situation, we should now focus on the following five areas: Focus on firmly forging the army spirit, focus on effectively managing senior and middle-ranking cadres, focus on improving the work style and struggling against corruption, focus on nurturing the combatant spirit, and focus on innovating the development of political work.³⁴

The subsequent *Liberation Army Daily* editorial³⁵ and commentator article³⁶ were long on reflexive ideological cant about the glories of the past and the challenges of the present but short on any tangible policy changes or new ideas, other than doing more of the same with greater energy. One very direct *Liberation Army Daily* article insisted that the Gutian Conference sent a “clear signal,” reiterated that the Party must maintain absolute control of the military, piled on the criticism of Xu Caihou, and issued more broadsides against calls to “nationalize” the military as “conceited and naïve . . . ideals from the West.”³⁷ *Qiushi* described the speech, which was given at “a holy place of the revolution,” as “a new ‘political blueprint’ for strengthening and developing the military” that will allow the PLA to scrape “poisoned tissues off bones.”³⁸ The only false note came from a very brave Professor Ni Lexiong in Shanghai, who told the *South China*

Morning Post that “Xi’s move to promote such ‘Red Army spirit’ will fail because such utter devotion is contrary to current basic social values, where people just pursue economic interests under the market economy.”³⁹ Professor Ni’s current location and health are unknown at the time of writing.

Assessment

What to make of this very “retro” move by Xi Jinping, forcing hundreds of senior military leaders to revisit one of the touchstones of the revolution and haranguing them with ideological and moral exhortation? Was the meeting and his speech really a “major innovative development of the party’s military guidance theory” filled with “new thoughts, new viewpoints, new requirements for energetically building political organs and political cadre contingents that are absolutely loyal to the party, competent in focusing on war-fighting, and able to keep a good style and image”?⁴⁰ Did it really “open a new chapter of political army building and of strengthening and developing the military in our times,” providing “a profound answer to the important practical issue in the domain of political work” and “an explicit roadmap and a guideline for unfolding action for political work under the new situation”?⁴¹ Is “political work,” rather than the technical and professional achievements of military modernization since the late 1990s, really the PLA’s “greatest feature and greatest advantage” and essential for achieving the “China dream”?⁴² Can ideological purity and revolutionary spirit defeat a carrier strike group?

Short answer: not really. But the GPD’s *Qiushi* article is correct when it argues “military reform has entered the stage of tackling tough issues and has come to a crucial juncture of style rectification and anti-corruption,” especially given the crushing impact of the arrest of Xu Caihou, which did in fact cause “immeasurable harmful effects to the prestige of the party and the PLA, to the image of political work, and to the belief and faith of the military forces.”⁴³ One certainly gets the impression that Xi saw the Xu case as rocking the very foundations of the military, especially given that Xu’s “bribes for promotion” scheme is reportedly standard practice at every level of the military promotion system and *every officer attending the Gutian meeting therefore was an unindicted co-conspirator in Xu’s larger crime by participating in that system*. Indeed, when the officers in the audience reflect on Xu’s case, they must think some state-directed atheist variant of “there but for the grace of God go I.” So it is entirely understandable that Xi, as a leader, would want to get everyone in one place and directly communicate a unifying message that combined both exhortation and warning. Ironically, however, the takeaway message from this political work conference may be entirely political in a different sense of the word; namely, given the fact that nearly every officer is complicit in the PLA corruption system to one degree or another, the criteria for investigation and arrest have as much to do with personal ties, loyalty, connections, and patronage networks as with levels of criminality. Thus, the vague messages from the meeting really offer no clear guidance to the officer corps other than “keep mouthing the right political slogans and maybe you won’t end up in the dock.” It is certainly the wrong time to own extensive real estate, have large sums of money ferreted abroad, send your children to expensive foreign schools, possess a foreign passport, wear expensive watches or drive a luxury car. Instead, one’s time is likely better spent these days boning up on Mao’s *Collected Works*,

so you can whip out just the right phrase when the situation calls for you to be more red than expert.

Notes

¹ “Xi Urges Serious Reflection On Xu Caihou’s Case,” *China Daily*, 1 November 2014.

² Mao Zedong, “On Correcting Mistaken Ideas in the Party,” December 1929, *Collected Works of Mao Zedong*, Vol. 1, accessed at: https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_5.htm.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “Xi Urges Serious Reflection On Xu Caihou’s Case.”

⁶ All subsequent quotes are taken from Yu Guang, “Looking at casting the military soul from the contemporary values of the Gutian Conference,” *Qiushi*, 31 July 2014, No. 15.

⁷ Cao Zhi and Li Xuanliang, “(Military) All-Army Political Work Conference held in Gutian; Xi Jinping attends meeting, delivers important speech, emphasizes need to develop role of political work as lifeline for strengthening the army and invigorating the military, and to struggle for realization of the party’s goal of strengthening the army under the new situation,” Xinhua, 1 November 2014.

⁸ Cao Zhi and Li Xuanliang, “All-PLA Political Work Conference concludes at Gutian; Fan Changlong, Xu Qiliang attend and address the conference,” Xinhua, 2 November 2014.

⁹ “(Military) All-Army Political Work Conference held in Gutian.”

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ “All-PLA Political Work Conference concludes at Gutian.”

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ “(Military) All-Army Political Work Conference held in Gutian.”

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ All quotes in this section can be found in “(Military) All-Army Political Work Conference held in Gutian.”

²⁴ All quotes in this section can be found in “(Military) All-Army Political Work Conference held in Gutian.”

²⁵ All quotes in this section can be found in “(Military) All-Army Political Work Conference held in Gutian.”

²⁶ All quotes in this section can be found in “(Military) All-Army Political Work Conference held in Gutian.”

²⁷ “Xi urges serious reflection on Xu Caihou’s case,” Xinhua, 1 November 2014.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ All quotes in this section can be found in “(Military) All-Army Political Work Conference held in Gutian.”

³⁰ “All-PLA Political Work Conference concludes at Gutian.”

³¹ Ibid.

³² “Provide strong political guarantee to achieving party’s strong-military objective in new situation—Excerpts of speeches by representatives to All-Army Political Work Conference,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 3 November 2014, pp.6–7.

³³ “All-PLA Political Work Conference concludes at Gutian.”

³⁴ “(Military) All-Army Political Work Conference held in Gutian.”

³⁵ Editorial, “Provide strong political guarantee for fulfilling the party’s military strengthening goal under the new situation,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 2 November 2014.

³⁶ Staff commentator, “It is urgently necessary to settle prominent problems in political work—Second Talk on seriously studying and implementing chairman xi’s important speech at the All-PLA Political Work Conference,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 5 November 2014, p. 1.

³⁷ “‘Party Commands Gun’ Must Be Upheld,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 3 November 2014.

³⁸ PLA General Political Department, “The Scientific Guide to Strengthening and Developing the Military under the new situation—Deeply study and implement Chairman Xi Jinping’s important speech at the All-PLA Political Work Conference,” *Qiushi*, 1 December 2014, No. 23.

³⁹ Minnie Chan, “Communist Party ‘Controls The Gun,’ PLA Top Brass Reminded,” *South China Morning Post*, 5 November 2014, accessed at:

<http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1632136/communist-party-controls-gun-pla-top-brass-reminded>.

⁴⁰ “The Scientific guide to strengthening and developing the military under the new situation.”

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.