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China should spurn mass murderer Mao

By Doug Badow
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Tiananmen Square symbolizes modern China. The space forever will be remembered as the focus of the mass demonstrations dispersed by brute military force in 1989. Today the square is peaceful — but dominated by the ghost of Mao Zedong, probably the greatest mass murderer in history.

His portrait hangs on the Gate of Heavenly Peace in the iconic Square. Mao's mausoleum draws thousands of visitors every day. The country has abandoned most of his thought since his death in 1976, but the leadership clings to his aura.

The Great Helmsman was born in 1893. The son of a wealthy farmer, he helped found the Chinese Communist Party in 1921. He commanded Red Army forces with varying degrees of success while gradually dominating the CCP and founding the People's Republic of China in 1949.

Over time his rule became ever more erratic and brutal. After taking power he orchestrated campaigns against "landlords" and other "counter-revolutionaries," which murdered as many as five million, or perhaps more.

In 1956 he launched the Hundred Flowers Movement, which offered Chinese an opportunity to speak freely: "Let a hundred flowers bloom," he said. However, Mao soon tired of criticism and began the Anti-Rightist Movement. Executions were widespread; some estimates of the dead hit the millions.

Barely a year after the PRC's formation, Mao pressed for Beijing's intervention in the Korean War, which was not settled until June 1953. Nearly 200,000 Chinese died, including Mao's son.

In 1958 came the Great Leap Forward, intended to rapidly industrialize China. Agricultural collectivization and backyard steel mills proved to be an economic catastrophe. Mao's degree of knowledge is disputed, though many around him were

aware of the social carnage. Between 20 and 46 million Chinese probably died in this period.

In 1966 he launched the Proletarian Cultural Revolution: the resulting xenophobic power struggle/civil war consumed many of his colleagues. The prisons filled and millions may have died before Mao ended the campaign in 1969.

The best estimates of the total number of deaths under the man known as the “Red Emperor” range between 35 million and 65 million people. Whatever the number, it numbs the mind.

Mao did not intend all of these deaths, but they were the predictable result of his policies. Moreover, he demonstrated no concern about the human horror of which he was aware.

Mao remained the ultimate power in Beijing, opening relations with the United States in 1972. After his death on Sept. 9, 1976, Deng Xiaoping, a long-time comrade of Mao who was periodically purged and rehabilitated, eventually won control.

A decade after Mao’s death, Deng had firmly set the PRC on a path of economic reform that would have horrified the Great Helmsman. But the Tiananmen Square massacre seemed a Maoist throwback and will forever tarnish Deng’s reputation.

So far Mao’s legacy appears secure. The CCP now says that he was 70 percent right and only 30 percent wrong.

His portrait and mausoleum dominate Tiananmen Square. I recently joined the crowd lining up to enter the latter.

Stands line the route, selling flowers. On entering the mausoleum people deposited their flowers in front of a statue of a sitting Mao, backed by a painting of a peaceful mountain scene. He looked to be plotting his next madcap scheme.

In the next room the Great Man, assuming it really is him, lies under glass beneath a blanket decorated by a hammer and sickle. He looked shrunken, his face pale. Two soldiers stood guard behind him.

Afterward, viewers bought Mao tchotchkes outside as they flowed back into Tiananmen. How many revered the man, who killed more of their countrymen than did Japan and Chiang Kai-shek combined, is impossible to know.

Maoism is dead. Mao Zedong retains adherents on the left, but Mao is more symbolic of modernity than inspiration for policy. The current leadership is nationalistic, cynical and ruthless. But top officials are not mad.

Still, eventually the PRC will have to confront Mao’s legacy. A blander, more prosaic and bureaucratic authoritarian system has replaced his brutal, unpredictable dictatorship.

The Chinese people remain in chains, though their fetters now are gold and silver.
Someday the Chinese will bury Mao and his legacy. Then they will be free.

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