

New Mao Lauds Old Mao: China's Xi Jinping Takes Politburo on Communist Road Trip

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Xi Jinping is living large. He successfully stage-managed the Chinese Communist Party's 20th National Congress, with himself as the star and essential performer. The event concluded with his enemies prostrate and his factotums omnipresent. He left with another five-year term, effectively turning the general secretaryship into his position for life.

He also demonstrated that when everyone owes you for their job, you can drag even the most senior officials, in this case fellow Politburo members, on the most embarrassing field trips imaginable, such as visiting the city of Yanan, a sacred site (if communists hold anything sacred) for the CCP. There, madman Mao Zedong, who led, and nearly destroyed, the People's Republic of China from its founding until his death, was confirmed as party leader in 1945. And Xi was sent to a nearby village to be reeducated after the dismissal of his father, a one-time Mao favorite, during the Cultural Revolution.

Most people who had seen their father humiliated, their family disrupted, and themselves sentenced to involuntary servitude would have rejected the system that imposed such injustices. But not Xi. In a unique Chinese variant of Stockholm Syndrome, he came away from that experience wanting to be the person with the power to force everyone else to conform to his wishes.

While parading his political vassals dressed in matching blue coats, Xi declared: "The purpose [of this visit] is for us to review the glorious years of the party in Yanan, in memory of the great achievements of our revolutionaries, promote the Yanan spirit, and carry forward the fighting spirit [of the revolutionaries] as we strive to achieve goals set out in the 20th party congress."

Mao Zedong is the CCP's great embarrassment, from which China cannot escape. Tiananmen Square is one of the most recognizable symbols of modern China. Primarily remembered as where youthful demonstrators demanding democracy were brutally dispersed in 1989, the space is dominated by Mao's memory.

His portrait hangs on the Gate of Heavenly Peace on the square's northern edge. Mao's mausoleum sits in the center, attracting long lines of visitors, including a few foreigners like me. Many place flowers in front of a large bronze seated Mao upon entering the structure, before gliding past his

glass enclosed body—most likely wax—and then exiting downstairs past stalls filled with overpriced tchotchke celebrating the life of one of the cruelest mass murderers in history.

Despite his pretense of representing long oppressed Chinese peasants, he was the son of a wealthy farmer. He broke with the past, rejecting the marriage arranged by his parents, becoming a nationalist and revolutionary, and one of the CCP's founders in 1921. He was hardened by the murder of his wife, brother, and sister by Kuomintang forces. Determined, brutal, and ruthless, he eventually displaced all rivals. As the preeminent figure in the new regime, he declared establishment of the People's Republic of China in Tiananmen Square on October 1, 1949.

His famed declaration, "We have stood up," resonated with a people long oppressed and impoverished. Alas, the CCP replaced rather than eliminated the old elite, as Mao & Co. took up residence in Zhongnanhai, a comfortable compound next to the ancient imperial home known as the Forbidden City. And Mao, eventually known as the Red Emperor, was no less arbitrary and powerful than any ruler of Imperial China.

He drenched the new nation in blood. First were campaigns against "landlords," "counterrevolutionaries," and other enemies, which cost five million or perhaps even more lives. Millions also were imprisoned. No one knows for certain how many suffered, but the people's professed guardians were very busy.

In 1950 Mao took the PRC into the Korean War, prolonging the conflict by more than two years. Millions died in that conflagration, including some 200,000 Chinese, among them Mao's son. The North Korean regime saved by Mao's intervention, which turned into a unique form of monarchical communism, has killed and imprisoned hundreds of thousands, and maybe even millions, of its unlucky people.

In 1956, Mao initiated the Hundred Flowers Campaign or Movement. He urged his countrymen to speak freely. "Let a hundred flowers bloom," he declared. It is unclear whether he was shocked to receive criticism rather than praise, or hoped to locate doubters, enticing "the snakes out of their caves," as he later claimed. In any case, he then launched the Anti-Rightist Movement against those who responded. Millions were murdered.

Far, far worse was the "Great Leap Forward," initiated in 1958, which turned out to be a national jump into an economic abyss. Mao planned simultaneous agricultural collectivization and backyard industrialization. Both campaigns were catastrophic collectivist failures.

The premier account of this disaster comes from Yang Jisheng, a CCP member and Xinhua reporter whose father starved to death during the Great Leap Forward. Yang's *Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine: 1958-1962*, a 629-page chronicle of horror now banned in the PRC, details Mao's manifestly impractical, impossible, inane dictates, backed by a chorus of cowardly party leaders afraid to criticize the "Great Helmsman." Local cadres lied about the size of the harvest and stole food for themselves. Beijing exported grain while farmers starved to death. The stories of individual hardship and state cruelty are many, and difficult to comprehend decades later.

Even CCP apologists acknowledge that millions of people died. Independent analysts agree that the numbers are in the tens of millions. Estimated Yang: “the Great Famine brought about 36 million unnatural deaths, and a shortfall of 40 million births. China’s total population loss during the Great Famine then comes to 76 million.” This is what happens when one man exercises near-absolute power over 660 million, China’s population in 1958. Yang explains, “With Mao as China’s sole theoretical authority, as well as the ultimate wielder of political and military power, China’s government became a secular theocracy that united the center of power with the center of truth. Divergence from Mao’s views was heresy, and since the government had the power to penalize and deprive an individual of everything, the merest thought of discontent prompted an overwhelming dread that gave rise to lies.”

So disastrous was the experience that Mao’s colleagues shunted him aside in governing. So in 1966 he initiated the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution to destroy his perceived enemies. It was a madcap affair, equal parts mob violence/mental breakdown/public hysteria/social collapse/party purge/civil war/armed conflict. The visual image frozen in time was frenzied “Red Guards” protestors humiliating hapless prisoners and destroying cultural artifacts. Xi’s family was one of the millions caught up in Mao’s egotistical war on his countrymen. Mao formally ended the organized social convulsion three years later, but the horror did not fully cease until his death in 1976.

Yang chronicled this Maoist disaster as well, in another mammoth volume, *The World Turned Upside Down: A History of the Chinese Cultural Revolution*. He dismissed later CCP attempts to present the party as the chief victim of mad Mao. Writes Yang: “Official histories amply cover the persecution of cadres during the Cultural Revolution but barely mention or even distort the repeated bloody suppressions targeting ordinary people, the victims of which outnumber persecuted cadres by many hundredfold.”

It is difficult to summarize what convulsed the entire country. Explained Yang: “The Cultural Revolution was an extremely complex historical process with multiple layers of conflict between multiple forces enmeshed in repeated power struggles and reversals over the course of ten years and a vast geographical space.” The experience is unimaginable to anyone living in a normal democratic state.

Overall, how many people did the “Red Emperor” kill? Estimates range between 35 million and an incredible 100 million people. The actual number probably is somewhere in between. *The Black Book of Communism*, for instance, figured 65 million. The mind boggles at such numbers.

Mao’s death triggered a vicious power struggle. First moderate Maoists moved against the radical fringe, including Mao’s widow. Then Deng Xiaoping, a tough-minded but pragmatic revolutionary, gained control and was known as the PRC’s “paramount leader.” He opened the Chinese economy and lifted personal restrictions. He turned back calls for democratic reform, however, with the Tiananmen Square crackdown and subsequent massive party purge. Still, even then China remained much freer than under Mao.

The CCP could neither repudiate Mao’s role nor ignore his crimes, so it compromised by admitting that he had made mistakes. However, the party proclaimed, he was 70 percent right. His image not

only dominates Tiananmen Square but abounds elsewhere across the PRC. His portrait adorns the nation's currency. And his birthplace in Hunan province is a celebrated tourist destination. There are other venerated locations, like that which Xi and his high-ranking clerks visited.

The best that can be said of Xi is that he values stability, and would not intentionally plunge China into anything like the chaos in which Mao thrived. Both believed in the supremacy of party and dictator, however, and were willing to subordinate everyone and everything else to their own judgment. Xi's mandatory field trip comes as no surprise. It nevertheless offers a depressing harbinger for the future.

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