



THE AMERICAN SPECTATOR

EDITED BY R. EMMETT TYRRELL, JR.

China on the Rise: Never Forget the Horror of Chinese Totalitarianism | The American Spectator | USA News and Politics

Doug Bandow

March 25, 2021

The People's Republic of China is America's biggest foreign policy challenge. China is an ancient civilization and a fascinating country. It also is regressing toward brutal authoritarianism if not totalitarianism. This terrible legacy undermines the legitimacy of the Chinese political system.

For many people, misrule under Mao Zedong, the so-called Great Helmsman and Red Emperor, might seem like old news. But the PRC continues to illustrate the danger of infusing absolute dictatorship with communist ideology. That toxic combination yielded years of immiserating poverty, brutal tyranny, social chaos, and mass murder.

Yang Jisheng powerfully chronicled this experience. A member of the Chinese Communist Party, he worked for Xinhua News Agency for more than three decades. He was traumatized by the Tiananmen Square massacre, which encouraged him to explore the reality of CCP rule. In 2008, he also became deputy editor of *Yanhuang Chunqiu*, a liberal historical journal later seized by President Xi Jinping's minions and turned into a mouthpiece of dictatorship.

Yang used his Xinhua position to travel about the country, unearthing a history that many people knew of but not well. He benefited from good timing, researching and writing while China was liberalizing after exiting the Maoist era. He completed his project before Xi Jinping reestablished suffocating censorship and tight controls over everything political. Yang published in Hong Kong while the rule of law, civil liberties, and press freedom remained intact.

He produced two mammoth tomes that detailed the unimaginable suffering of a nation and people whose 4000-year history exhibits contrasting moments of glory and tragedy. China's civilization initially eclipsed what came to be called the West. Yet the system turned inward while the Europeans looked beyond their limited continent. The consequences were profound.

The West came to respect the life and dignity of every person, who was understood to have been created in the image of God. But this philosophy largely bypassed the Chinese Empire, which for centuries devalued those who toiled in harsh obscurity. Peasants lived and died unnoticed as emperors ruled, invaders conquered, dynasties flipped, and revolutions erupted.

Western powers were equally callous and careless in their treatment of the Chinese population. In the 1930s, Japan visited foreign fury and murderous nationalism on an ill-prepared but brave people, a fight that continued in World War II. In 1949, the civil war concluded with creation of

a renewed empire, the People's Republic of China, announced by Mao Zedong on October 1 in Tiananmen Square.

Alas, the revolution only intensified the agony of the Chinese people. Power had to be consolidated. Political enemies had to be crushed. Cadres had to be rewarded. Domestic ideological campaigns had to be run. And a war had to be fought against America. Collective casualties ran into the millions, so many individual eggs infamously broken to make a national omelet of the Marxist–Leninist variety. In 1958 came what became known as the Great Leap Forward, a collective headlong dive into the abyss. Mao intended to spur development with an intense program of rural industrialization and agricultural collectivization. The result, however, was dislocation, disruption, devastation, and starvation.

Yang became the premier chronicler of Mao's most catastrophic fantasies. For instance, *Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine: 1958-1962*, published in 2008, is a compelling, often mind-numbing read. It runs 629 pages, with 87 devoted to notes and bibliography. It can be summarized as the story of what happens when the world's most populous nation anoints one person as a secular god and turns his ideological nightmares into national policy. Insulated from reality, Mao denied overwhelming evidence of failure and treated critics as class traitors. His cowardly colleagues competed with one another to more completely and quickly enforce his arbitrary will, irrespective of human cost.

This depressing story is repeated throughout the book. Mao made manifestly inane, impractical, and impossible demands to implement real communism. Other party leaders, even those who foresaw the disaster to come, joined in a CCP chorus praising the new proposals and sending them across the nation. Local apparatchiks implemented the directives, despite the obvious stupidity in doing so. Crop production dropped while provincial leaders falsely informed Beijing of increasingly bountiful harvests, leading to ever-greater national requisitions. As farmers and their families starved, cadres looted supplies for themselves. Officials who reported failure and hardship were denounced as rightists and punished accordingly. This general routine was repeated again and again in province after province with ever more gruesome results.

Yang had a personal stake in his story since his father died of starvation. Only years later did Yang realize that his government was responsible for that very personal loss. His tragedy was repeated endlessly, yet such deaths were treated by Beijing as abstract statistics. Eventually even Mao recognized the resulting humanitarian carnage, but it still affected him little. Yang wrote of one incident: "On October 26, 1960, Mao read a report stating that hundreds of thousands of people had starved to death in Xinyang Prefecture. He responded with a blasé memo of a dozen words: 'Liu [Shaoqi] and Zhou [Enlai], please read today and this afternoon discuss ways to deal with this.'"

No one will ever know the true death toll from the grossly misnamed Great Leap Forward, but even regime apologists admit that it was in the millions. Yang's conclusion: "I estimate that 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." Quite a price to pay for an idiotic ideological experiment that failed on day one and could have been halted quickly but for Mad Mao's delusions.

Unfortunately, in this totalitarian system the Red Emperor's contrary opinion ended all debate. Explained Yang:

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.

But so disastrous was the failure of the Great Leap Forward that party leaders, including such near CCP immortals as Liu, Zhou, and Deng Xiaoping, afterward pushed more rational economic policies and pried practical control away from Mao. The latter came to see Liu, chosen by Mao as president, as an ideological apostate and political enemy. This was one cause of the Mad Mao's next grand misadventure, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. "It would be overly simplistic to attribute the Cultural Revolution to nothing more than the power struggle between Mao and Liu or to Mao's idiosyncrasies; all the same, Mao's suspicion and dissatisfaction toward Liu were factors," wrote Yang.

And he should know. He also wrote *The World Turned Upside Down: A History of the Chinese Cultural Revolution*. This volume, published four years ago but only recently available in the U.S., ran 722 pages, including 72 pages of notes.

Mao unleashed the campaign in 1966. It was originally supposed to end in 1969 but continued until Mao's death in 1976. This Frankenstein social experiment was, if anything, more bizarre and senseless than the Great Leap Forward. The latter, in theory, was intended to spur the PRC to the forefront of humanity, yielding a society more productive and wealthy than even America. In contrast, the Cultural Revolution mixed personal pique with ideological purification, party purge, civil war, and social breakdown.

Armed warfare broke out. The military was engaged, divided, and purged. Competing mobs battled for control across China. Provinces were torn apart. Party officials divided into warring gangs. Ideological vigilantes abounded as "Red Guards" invaded universities, sacked ministries, destroyed homes, held trials, exacted peremptory injustice, and tortured and murdered revolutionary enemies. Schools emptied, with students, including a young Xi Jinping, sent to the countryside to labor and learn. Mao exiled his lucky rivals, including Xi's father, to factories and fields, sometimes multiple times. The unlucky ones, like Liu, ended up in prison, where, denied adequate medical treatment, he died. So did hundreds of thousands or millions of other Chinese.

Mao triggered the Cultural Revolution just like he did the Great Leap Forward. Although some top party officials resisted his worst excesses, they almost always fell in line if confronted. Zhou, though widely seen as a moderate in the West, constantly played the cowardly shill to survive politically. Deng was slightly braver and twice purged as a result. Although Mao stood on the nation's political summit alone, he quickly lost control of the process as chaos spread across the vast land. Subsequently the CCP attempted to paint the party rather than people as the principal victim of the Cultural Revolution. Yang wouldn't let this deceptive historical rewrite stand unchallenged: "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. Yang explained, "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.” In detailing these events Yang produced another tour de force.

China was delivered from its misery only by Mao’s death on September 9, 1976. There could be no greater relief for the suffering people. Within a month the leadership’s radical advocates of the Cultural Revolution, the infamous “Gang of Four” led by Mao’s widow, Jiang Qing, were arrested, soon to be convicted in Stalinesque show trial and imprisoned. It took another two years for Deng to emerge as the undisputed “paramount leader” of the CCP, after which he set the country on a reform course that changed China and world history.

Deng’s PRC was not free, but he made it a freer nation. Unfortunately, Xi has reversed that progress and much more. Today’s China is increasingly authoritarian, with totalitarian characteristics — suffering from pervasive censorship and religious persecution, mass detention of the Uyghurs, an end of intra-CCP restraints, and a growing Xi personality cult. That doesn’t mean war, whether cold or hot, is the right response by the U.S. government. It is important, however, to understand the challenge presented and to remember from Chinese history the potential dangers posed by the CCP’s creation of another Red Emperor.

Of course, the greatest threat from Xi’s imperial communist state is to his countrymen. These creative, entrepreneurial, talented, and vibrant people deserve to be free. They have suffered under several varieties of political bondage over the last 4,000 years. Xi’s PRC is the latest and might not be the last. But the Chinese people ultimately retain the power to make a better and freer future.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America’s New Global Empire.