

Xi Jinping Wants to Become the New Mao

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The birthday approaches of Xi Jinping, China's president and general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party. Entering the world on June 15, 1953, he is the first Chinese leader born after the revolution. And he increasingly looks like the most consequential Chinese politician since Mao Zedong, the man most responsible for creating the People's Republic of China. Indeed, in Xi's campaign to strengthen his and the CCP's authority, he appears to be modeling himself after Mao.

Which should make the rest of us very nervous.

The Great Helmsman, as Mao was known, was born 60 years before Xi. His father was a prosperous farmer who had no use for his son's intellectual pursuits. But Mao was inspired by the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty, the desultory remains of a once-great empire. He read widely, including classical liberal literature, at Peking University but eventually embraced Marxism. He attended the first CCP National Congress in 1921, which began his rise up the party ladder. After the famed Long March, through which the battered communists escaped the Nationalists, he was named chairman of the Military Commission, cementing his dominant position in the party. Eight years later he was named CCP general secretary. On October 1, 1949, he famously proclaimed creation of the People's Republic of China in Tiananmen Square. "We have stood up," he declared.

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The man called the "Red Emperor" had prodigious determination and imposed his will on almost every aspect of Chinese society. Until his death in 1976, he dominated the CCP and Chinese politics. At times his colleagues sought to push him aside, his mistakes too grievous to ignore. But he always found a way to reassert himself — to the great detriment of his desperately poor and oppressed countrymen.

He continues to torment his nation from the grave, his image inescapably linked to modern China. He died 54 years ago, but his childhood home in the town of Shaoshan in Hunan Province is preserved as a place of homage for the faithful — as well as an occasional curious foreigner. More pervasively, Mao's face decorates Chinese currency. More dramatically, his portrait still hangs on the Gate of Heavenly Peace, the northern border of the space made infamous by the killing of demonstrators in 1989.

Moreover, his body, or a wax copy, lies in state in a large mausoleum in Tiananmen Square that draws a steady stream of visitors. On entering the building, the human tide flows right and left to pass first by the massive bronze statue of Mao, before which true believers lay flowers. Urged on

by the mausoleum's staff, people quickly surge past the glass-encased body. On exiting the building, Chinese capitalism reasserts itself, as numerous booths hawk overpriced Mao tchotchkes.

He is still venerated despite how he abused his authority. After overthrowing the Nationalist government, he launched a campaign against the CCP's many enemies. Several million "counter-revolutionaries" and "landlords" were murdered; millions more ended up in *laogai* or labor camps.

In September 1950, North Korea's Kim Il-sung lost his attempt to conquer the South. As allied forces followed Kim's broken military northward, Mao pressed his colleagues to intervene. The result was "an entirely new war," in the words of U.S. commander Gen. Douglas MacArthur. After Beijing entered the Korean War, the conflict was not settled until June 1953. Around 200,000 Chinese soldiers, including Mao's son, died to save what evolved into a weird totalitarian hybrid of monarchy and communism, which Mao later criticized.

With the regime under attack for its authoritarian methods, he initiated the Hundred Flowers Campaign in 1956, in which he invited criticism: "Let a hundred flowers bloom," Mao insisted. Alas, he either soured on hearing people's opinions or used the campaign to expose opponents, launching another round of repression, the Anti-Rightist Movement. Millions more apparently were killed or imprisoned.

Even more disastrous was the "Great Leap Forward," launched in 1958 as part of the second Five-Year Plan, intended to rapidly industrialize China. The Great Leap Forward was characterized by agricultural collectivization and backyard steel mills, both of which were disastrous. Local officials claimed phantom surpluses while the national government exported food. The result was mass starvation as the regime claimed an ever-larger share of ever-lower production and employed violent "anti-grain concealment" drives, arresting, torturing, and even murdering peasants accused of hiding food for themselves and their families.

Some true believers diminish the casualty totals, claiming that "only" a few million died needlessly. Ian Johnson noted that "On the Chinese side, this involves a cottage industry of Mao apologists willing to do whatever it takes to keep the Mao name sacred: historians working at Chinese institutions who argue that the numbers have been inflated by bad statistical work." But official Chinese population statistics tell a different story. Serious estimates of human devastation vary widely, ranging between 20 and 45 million.

Next, Mao's apologists claim that he did not know or believe claims about the rural reality. But news of mass hardship reached the leadership, causing his colleagues to eventually act. Moreover, attempting to transform the country includes responsibility to assess the consequences. Johnson noted that the inevitable consequence of Mao's orders "was that farmers had no grain, no seeds, and no tools." Catastrophe was inevitable. Mao created the system, including purges of his critics, in which subordinates were afraid to tell him the truth. And he expected hardship when he mandated smaller food allotments for those targeted as "enemies of the people."

So great was the disaster that Deng Xiaoping, who later oversaw China's dramatic shift toward the market, and Liu Shaoqi, Mao's onetime political heir who later died in custody, sought to sideline the Great Helmsman, leaving him to reign as revolutionary symbol while others

managed the economy. Mao was not finished, however: in 1966 he instigated the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, supposedly to upend the new ruling class and stultifying bureaucracy and instill permanent revolutionary fervor in China.

More important, however, was his desire to wreak revenge on his enemies and regain his influence. He urged the young to “bombard the headquarters” filled with bourgeois enemies who had infiltrated the revolution. Mobs of “Red Guards” waving his little red book of quotations went forth in search of rightists and counter-revolutionaries to destroy.

The result was chaos: a mix of party purge, xenophobic crusade against foreign influence, old-fashioned power struggle, populist know-nothing campaign against authority, and bitter civil war. Schools were closed and youth sent to labor in the countryside. Intellectuals and officials were demonized and terrorized before ad hoc tribunals. China’s ancient heritage, from cultural, historical, and religious landmarks to antiquities, artifacts, and relics, was ravaged. Millions were abused, imprisoned, and/or killed. Deng was exiled to the countryside, and Liu, the country’s nominal head of state, was denounced as a “traitor” and “capitalist-roader” and ousted. Mao formally called off the madness in 1969, but in practice the campaign continued until 1976. After Mao’s death Liu was rehabilitated and Deng was elevated.

Mao left a trail of devastation behind all his major decisions. The casualties were prodigious but unknowable with any certainty. The estimates range widely, from 35 million to an astonishing 100 million people. Even those who know communism well disagree: R. J. Rummel, author of *Death by Government*, figured 35 million, while the famous collective work *The Black Book of Communism* indicated 65 million. Ian Johnson criticized higher figures for discrediting the case against Mao, but still suggested 42.5 million, a monumental slaughter.

Whether because of murderous intent or callous disregard, Mao ended up as history’s greatest mass killer. His policies resulted in wholesale death. And he seemed indifferent to the prodigious human suffering, dismissing the deaths of class enemies and faithful peasants alike. After all, he believed, China could afford the losses since it had many more people to carry the revolutionary banners forward.

The moral responsibility lies with Mao. And he was motivated by a perverse ideology that was disastrous everywhere it was imposed. Another fundamental problem, however, was unlimited power. It was not always that way. Johnson wrote in the *New York Review of Books*,

Mao drove home his plans in a series of meetings over the next months, including a crucial one — from January 11 to 20 [1958] in the southern Chinese city of Nanning — that changed the Communist Party’s political culture. Until that moment, Mao had been first among equals, but moderates had often been able to rein him in. Then, in several extraordinary outbursts, he accused any leader who opposed “rash advance” of being counter-revolutionary. As became the pattern of his reign, no one successfully stood up to him.

Which is why Xi’s rule also should be feared. The CCP has never adequately accounted, let alone apologized, for Mao’s crimes. To do so would discredit the PRC’s very founding. So the Communist Party proclaimed that he was 70 percent right and 30 percent wrong, embracing his legacy ever more tightly.

As repression has worsened in recent years, criticism of the Great Helmsman has become largely verboten. Access to historical archives has been restricted. Journals specializing in critical

historical study have been censored. Historian Hong Zhenkuai, who has written about the Great Leap Forward, complained, “Critical voices have been silenced.” He worried for the future: “The danger is that if you don’t reflect on the errors of the past, don’t acknowledge the mistakes that were made, you’re incapable of drawing warnings from history.”

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Minimizing Mao’s crimes reflects Xi Jinping, who, Johnson wrote, “has held fast to this view of Mao in recent years. In Xi’s way of looking at China, the country had roughly thirty years of Maoism and thirty years of Deng Xiaoping’s economic liberalization and rapid growth. Xi has warned that neither era can negate the other; they are inseparable.”

What makes this so noteworthy is the mistreatment of Xi’s father, Xi Zhongxun, one of the revolutionary greats. Xi père held a number of high-level positions before being purged during the Cultural Revolution. He was sent to work in a factory and later imprisoned; one of Xi’s sisters was killed by Red Guards, while Xi was sent to work in the countryside, arrested when he later ran away, and then sent to a work camp. Only after many attempts was he able to join the CCP.

If anyone should be critical of Mao, it is Xi. Instead, Xi lauds Mao’s legacy. Last September Xi joined several CCP notables in visiting the Red Emperor’s mausoleum and bowing three times to show his respect. This was a reprise for Xi and his colleagues, who did the same in December 2013, early in his presidency. Although more circumspect then and with far less authority, he called on Chinese people to follow the “spirit” of Mao Zedong Thought and whitewashed Mao’s philosophy, which he said involved “being practical and factual, staying close to the ordinary people and staying independent and autonomous.”

Far worse, though, Xi is becoming the new Mao. Indeed, in subtle ways Xi is promoting himself as the greater figure. At Mao’s childhood home, the gift shop is filled with tacky and pricy memorabilia. When I visited a couple years ago, one bookshelf displayed several commemorative plates with different images of Mao. There was one Xi plate — larger than any other and placed at the center of the display. There was no question who was more important.

The centralization of power in the CCP and Xi has been steady. Although he appears to be a more sober and grounded tyrant, he remains a tyrant. And the similarities in governance are both stunning and distressing. Elizabeth Economy of the Council on Foreign Relations wrote,

Like Mao, Xi has prioritized strengthening the party, inculcating collective socialist values, and rooting out nonbelievers. Like Mao, who invoked “domestic and foreign reactionaries” to build nationalist sentiment and solidify the party’s legitimacy, Xi has adopted a consistent refrain of unspecified but “ubiquitous” internal and external threats. And like Mao, Xi has encouraged the creation of a cult of personality around himself.

Perhaps most distressing has been his steady campaign to dismantle any and all limits on the party and its general secretary. Even a loose authoritarian system, where politics no longer is blood sport and dissatisfied citizens can make their complaints known, provides important feedback to government leaders. Failures are more likely to be recognized. Colossal blunders are more likely to be avoided, or at least damage from them is more likely to be moderated.

So it was in the PRC. *Foreign Policy*'s Jonathan Tepperman observed,

While remaining nominally communist, the country embraced many forms of market capitalism and a number of other liberalizing reforms. Of course, the old system remained highly repressive (remember Tiananmen Square) and was far from perfect in many other ways. It did, however, allow the Chinese government to function in an unusually effective fashion and avoid many of the pathologies suffered by other authoritarian regimes. Censorship never disappeared, for example, but party members could disagree and debate ideas, and internal reports could be surprisingly blunt. No longer.

The mishandling of COVID-19 loosed a global pandemic, but at least the regime's most grievous failure was measured in weeks and focused in the city of Wuhan. The Great Leap Forward went on for years and across the entire country. The number of deaths, not infections, were in the tens of millions. Next time there may be no doctors willing to talk to their colleagues, no citizen journalists seeking share the news, and no social media able to chide the government for its criminal suppression of information.

While another Great Leap Forward is not likely, other missteps are. And they could directly impact other nations. Just as Beijing is heading back down the totalitarian path, it is growing more aggressive internationally: COVID-19, trade, Hong Kong, the Belt and Road Initiative, Taiwan, commercial disputes, and the South China Sea, to name just a few. The decision to directly impose security legislation on Hong Kong is a dramatic and negative step. Additional threats, especially of military action, against Taiwan and treaty allies Japan and Philippines could be even more destabilizing, potentially triggering a direct confrontation with the United States.

Dealing with the PRC is no easy task. The rise of Mao II must give anyone who believes in freedom pause. China is a far tougher competitor and/or adversary than the Soviet Union. Both sides would have much to lose in any war, whether cold or hot. Still, Xi, like Mao, will not rule forever. And he, like Mao, might be followed by someone determined to dismantle a tyranny that had harmed so many Chinese people.

Ultimately, the Chinese people need to confront Mao's disastrous legacy. He made a country, but it is very different from the PRC today. Yet his tyrannical principles continue to act like fetters on the Chinese people — silver and gold, in contrast to the lead and iron fetters of the past, but no less confining. When he and his vision are both buried, then China and its people will be truly free.

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