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Fifty years after the Cultural Revolution

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May 16, 1966, is regarded as the beginning of Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution in China. Post-Maoist China has never quite come to terms with Mao's legacy and especially the disastrous Cultural Revolution.

Many countries have a founding myth that inspires and sustains a national culture. South Africa celebrates the accomplishments of Nelson Mandela, the founder of that nation's modern, multi-racial democracy. In the United States, we look to the American Revolution and especially to the ideas in the Declaration of Independence of July 4, 1776.

The Declaration of Independence, written by Thomas Jefferson, is the most eloquent libertarian essay in history, especially its philosophical core:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. – That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, – That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.”

The ideas of the Declaration, given legal form in the Constitution, took the United States of America from a small frontier outpost on the edge of the developed world to the richest country in the world in scarcely a century. The country failed in many ways to live up to the vision of the Declaration, notably in the institution of chattel slavery. But over the next two centuries, that vision inspired Americans to extend the promises of the Declaration — life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness — to more and more people.

China, of course, followed a different vision, the vision of Mao Zedong. Take Mao's speech on July 1, 1949, as his Communist armies neared victory. The speech was titled, “On the People's Democratic Dictatorship.” Instead of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, it spoke of “the extinction of classes, state power and parties,” of “a socialist and communist society,” of the nationalization of private enterprise and the socialization of agriculture, of a “great and splendid

socialist state” in Russia, and especially of “a powerful state apparatus” in the hands of a “people’s democratic dictatorship.”

Tragically, and unbelievably, this vision appealed not only to many Chinese but even to Americans and Europeans, some of them prominent. But from the beginning, it went terribly wrong, as should have been predicted. Communism created desperate poverty in China. The “Great Leap Forward” led to mass starvation. The Cultural Revolution unleashed “an extended paroxysm of revolutionary madness” in which “tens of millions of innocent victims were persecuted, professionally ruined, mentally deranged, physically maimed and even killed.” Estimates of the number of unnatural deaths during Mao’s tenure range from 15 million to 80 million. This is so monstrous that we can’t really comprehend it. What inspired many American and European leftists was that Mao really seemed to believe in the communist vision. And the attempt to actually implement communism leads to disaster and death.

When Mao died in 1976, China changed rapidly. His old comrade Deng Xiaoping, a victim of the Cultural Revolution, had learned something from the 30 years of calamity. He began to implement policies he called “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” which looked a lot like freer markets: decollectivization and the “responsibility system” in agriculture, privatization of enterprises, international trade, liberalization of residency requirements.

The changes in China over the past generation are the greatest story in the world — more than a billion people brought from totalitarianism to a largely capitalist economic system that is eroding the continuing authoritarianism of the political system. On its 90th birthday, the CCP still rules China with an iron fist. There is no open political opposition, and no independent judges or media. And yet the economic changes are undermining the party’s control, a challenge of which the party is well aware. In 2008, Howard W. French reported in the New York Times:

“Political change, however gradual and inconsistent, has made China a significantly more open place for average people than it was a generation ago.

“Much remains unfree here. The rights of public expression and assembly are sharply limited; minorities, especially in Tibet and Xinjiang Province, are repressed; and the party exercises a nearly complete monopoly on political decision making.

“But Chinese people also increasingly live where they want to live. They travel abroad in ever larger numbers. Property rights have found broader support in the courts. Within well-defined limits, people also enjoy the fruits of the technological revolution, from cellphones to the Internet, and can communicate or find information with an ease that has few parallels in authoritarian countries of the past.”

The Chinese Communist Party remains in control. And there’s a resurgence of Maoism under the increasingly authoritarian rule of Xi Jinping. But at least one study finds ideological groupings in China divided between statisticians who are both socialist and culturally conservative, and liberals who tend toward “constitutional democracy and individual liberty, . . . market-oriented reform . . . modern science and values such as sexual freedom.”

Xi’s government struggles to protect its people from acquiring information, routinely battling with Google, Star TV and other media. Howard French noted that “the country now has 165,000

registered lawyers, a five-fold increase since 1990, and average people have hired them to press for enforcement of rights inscribed in the Chinese Constitution.” People get used to making their own decisions in many areas of life and wonder why they are restricted in other ways. I am hopeful that the 100th anniversary of the CCP in 2021 will be of interest mainly to historians of China’s past and that the Chinese people will by then enjoy life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness under a government that derives its powers from the consent of the governed.

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