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Repeat of Cultural Revolution 'Impossible,' Says China

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May 17, 2016

State media controlled by the ruling Chinese Communist Party on Tuesday broke an official silence on the decade of political violence known as the Cultural Revolution, which began 50 years ago this week, saying China should put the past behind it and avoid further discussion of the "huge disaster."

"The decade-long internal chaos was a huge disaster," the *Global Times* newspaper, which has close ties to the party, wrote in an opinion article published in the early hours of Tuesday morning.

China on Monday marked the 50th anniversary of the start of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), which some political commentators fear could still return in another guise.

The decade of factional armed struggle, mob lynchings, and kangaroo courts turned the country upside down, as late supreme leader Mao Zedong took on his political rivals, using the "revolutionary masses" as political support.

The *Global Times* said the "decade of calamity" that began with a red block headline "Announcement" in the *People's Daily* on May 16, 1966, had left many in China with permanent psychological scars.

"It is not possible for such a revolution to be repeated," the paper said, adding: "We have bid farewell to the Cultural Revolution. We can say it once again today that the Cultural Revolution cannot and will not come back."

Official verdict

Meanwhile, an editorial in the party's own *People's Daily* newspaper, said the party would be sticking to its official verdict as laid down in a Communist Party resolution in 1981.

"History has shown that the Cultural Revolution, initiated by a leader laboring under a

misapprehension and capitalized on by counterrevolutionary cliques, led to domestic turmoil and brought catastrophe to the party, the state, and the whole people," the paper said, echoing the earlier resolution.

"The harm caused was comprehensive and serious," it said. "History has fully proved that the Cultural Revolution was a complete mistake in both theory and practice."

"It was not and cannot be a revolution or social progress in any sense," the paper said.

The 1981 Central Committee resolution "on certain questions in the history of our party since the founding of the People's Republic of China" found that Mao was a good leader whose tragedy was that he couldn't see his own mistakes.

"We should be brave enough to face up to the mistaken actions of our leaders," the paper said, in an article titled "Take warnings from history for a better tomorrow."

It said the party would unite around President Xi Jinping as general secretary, omitting the term "core" which had begun to appear in official media in recent months, sparking concern that Xi was consolidating his power as a strongman.

Dissident Chinese author Xu Lin said the articles reflect the deepest fears of China's rulers.

"The government is maintaining its stance of repudiating the Cultural Revolution ... because their worst fear is that it will repeat itself," Xu said.

"During that time, the masses held struggle sessions against officials, which was Mao Zedong's whole aim in starting it."

"I think they are afraid that if things get out of hand, they won't be able to hold onto power," Su said.

Campaigns 'never stopped'

Cato Institute visiting fellow Xia Yeliang said many in China are now asking themselves whether the mentality that created the Cultural Revolution is still alive in today's society.

"The Chinese Communist Party has had a political campaign running pretty much every year since it took power in 1949," Xia said. "You can see it in the editorials run by the *People's Daily*, *Red Flag* magazine, *People's Liberation Army Daily*, and so on."

"These political campaigns have never stopped in that time, whether they are large or small."

Retired Shandong University professor Sun Wenguang said Tuesday's editorials are likely a response to a feared backlash over a recent "private" performance of Mao-era revolutionary songs at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing.

The Communist Party has long been ambivalent about the Cultural Revolution, happy to encourage red nostalgia for Mao suits, rousing revolutionary anthems, and Little Red Books on the one hand, while playing down the deaths and torture of large numbers of people at the hands of Red Guards and lynch mobs on the other.

"They played red songs and displayed portraits of Mao Zedong with his Red Guards armband," Sun said. "That song, 'Sailing the Seas Depends on the Helmsman,' was basically the theme tune of the Cultural Revolution from start to finish."

"People thought they were trying to advocate [a return to] the Cultural Revolution."

Struggle sessions

Fifty years ago, Mao exhorted China's youth to eliminate "members of the bourgeoisie threatening to seize political power from the proletariat," initially a reference to Mao's premier Liu Shaoqi and his "Soviet revisionist" supporters within the party.

But the violent "struggle" sessions, at which figures of respect like teachers and parents were humiliated and sometimes killed, often made little political sense to anyone, with targets selected seemingly at random or to settle old grudges, witnesses have said.

According to veteran Chinese dissident Wei Jingsheng, much of the violence and armed factional fighting was instigated by the sons and daughters of high-ranking party officials.

"All it took was a few of these children of officials with a bit of nerve, to incite a crowd to start something," Wei told an anniversary symposium in Washington on Monday.

"The majority of these were supporters of [then premier] Zhou Enlai, although there were also some offspring of officials from the party central office," he said.

"When people see those around them deifying Mao Zedong, then they deify him too. People are like sheep," Wei said. "Everybody was playing a role together."

No one dared oppose

Meanwhile, the Cato Institute's Xia said nobody at the top dared to oppose Mao, and nobody could make any sense of his actions at the time.

"We have no idea what Mao was thinking ... and I'm not sure I could even follow his thinking if I did," Xia said. "Zhou Enlai didn't know what was going on, and neither did Liu Shaoqi. Nobody did."

Xia said the "struggle" sessions escalated out of fear of reprisals. "Why did they struggle people to death?" he said. "Because they were afraid that the person would come and struggle them back and denounce them."

"They killed people in struggle sessions to preserve their own personal safety."

The official death toll by 1976 numbered more than 1.7 million, with much of the country's cultural and artistic heritage destroyed in campaigns to eradicate traditional Chinese culture to make way for a new, revolutionary culture, arbitrated by the "proletariat."

Xia estimated the economic losses of the era at no less than three trillion yuan (U.S.\$153 billion at today's exchange rate).