

If China Aspires to Global Leadership, It Should Bury Mao

By Doug Bandow
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Tiananmen Square symbolizes modern China. The space forever will be remembered as the focus of the mass demonstrations dispersed by brute military force in 1989. Today the square is peaceful -- but dominated by the ghost of Mao Zedong, likely the greatest mass murderer in history.

His portrait hangs on the Gate of Heavenly Peace which sits on Chang'an Avenue, a major street along the northern edge of the iconic Square. Mao's mausoleum at the center draws thousands of visitors every day. The country has abandoned almost every element of his thought since his death in 1976, but the leadership clings to his aura. His many victims still await justice.

The Great Helmsman was born in 1893. The son of a wealthy farmer, he rejected the marriage arranged by his parents. He then became a nationalist and revolutionary, and in 1921 one of the founders of the Chinese Communist Party. His parents died when he was young. He eventually had much reason to hate the Kuomintang, whose forces executed his wife, sister, and brother; his third marriage ended in divorce, after which he married actress Jiang Qing, later a member of the infamous "Gang of Four." He commanded Red Army forces with varying degrees of success while gradually achieving preeminence during a struggle that lasted nearly three decades. In Tiananmen Square on October 1, 1949, Mao proclaimed the establishment of the People's Republic of China: "We have stood up," he announced a few days before.

The Communists became the new elite, with the leadership taking up residence in Zhongnanhai, a well-guarded compound next to the ancient Forbidden City, home to the emperors. Over time his rule became ever more erratic and brutal. After taking power he orchestrated campaigns against "landlords" and other "counter-revolutionaries," which murdered as many as five million, or perhaps more, with millions more sent to labor camps.

In 1956 he launched the Hundred Flowers Campaign or Movement, which offered Chinese an opportunity to speak freely: "Let a hundred flowers bloom," he said. However, Mao soon tired of criticism and began the repressive Anti-Rightist Movement. It's possible that he initiated the first to expose his enemies, or entice "the snakes out of their caves," as he later put it. Executions were widespread, with some estimates of the dead hitting the millions.

Barely a year after the PRC's formation, Mao pressed for Beijing's intervention in the Korean War, which was not settled until June 1953. Nearly 200,000 Chinese likely died, including Mao's son. In this way China saved the Kim dynasty in North Korea, which pioneered a system of monarchical communism, which Mao later criticized, and killed hundreds of thousands or millions of its own people.

In 1958 came the "Great Leap Forward," intended to rapidly industrialize China. Agricultural collectivization and backyard steel mills proved to be an economic catastrophe. With substantial food diverted to the cities and overseas for export, rural people starved to death. Those who resisted searches for hidden food were arrested, tortured, and sometimes killed. Mao's degree of knowledge is disputed, though many around him were aware of the social carnage. We are unlikely to ever know the real cost: Between 20 and 46 million Chinese likely died during this period.

Mao staged a purge against his opponents and those who doubted the success of the Great Leap Forward. But he ultimately had to give way and lost some influence. In 1966, however, he launched the Proletarian Cultural Revolution against his enemies: the result was a xenophobic power struggle/civil war which consumed many of his old colleagues while leaving an entire generation without education or skills. Frenzied "Red Guards" also targeted the PRC's cultural patrimony, destroying antiquities as well as people. The prisons filled and millions may have died before Mao ended the campaign in 1969.

Estimates of the total number of deaths under the man known as the "Red Emperor" range between 35 million and 100 million people. Even the experts divide. R.J. Rummel, author of *Death by Government*, estimated more than 35 million. The *Black Book of Communism* figured about 65 million. Whatever the number, it numbs the mind. It is true that Mao did not intend all of these deaths. But they were the natural and predictable results of his policies. He knew enough to investigate the catastrophic consequences all around him. However, he demonstrated no concern about the human horror of which he was aware.

Mao remained the ultimate power in Beijing, opening relations with the United States in 1972. However, his health worsened and he died on September 9, 1976, after suffering three major heart attacks. A vicious power struggle ensued, with Deng Xiaoping, a long-time comrade of Mao who was periodically purged and rehabilitated, eventually winning control. A decade after Mao's death Deng had firmly set the PRC on a path of economic reform that would have horrified the Great Helmsman. But the Tiananmen Square massacre seemed a Maoist throwback and will forever tarnish Deng's reputation.

So far Mao's legacy appears to be secure. He was a political genius who instinctively knew how to amass and use power. Without him the modern Chinese state might not exist. The CCP could not ignore his crimes, but declared that while he made mistakes, he was 70 percent right and only 30 percent wrong. In 2008 on the 115th anniversary of his birth the Chinese government opened a Mao Zedong Square in his home town of Shaoshan, in Hunan province. His picture can be found on the walls of shops, offices, and homes; his face adorns Chinese currency.

Most dramatic is Tiananmen Square, with his dominating portrait and mausoleum. The latter's hours of operation are few and the number of visitors many. Signs warned against sandals and immodest dress, but there were too many people for the authorities to police any kind of dress code. When I joined the line mid-morning on Tuesday it began at the building's side, headed to the rear, then reversed course back toward the front. The line moved at a steady slow walk, with individuals and groups constantly attempting to push by and gain a couple feet.

The lines split apart going through a security check-point. The security guards seemed more concerned about cameras than guns, though they ignored photo-capable cell phones. The line then reformed and moved forward again.

A half dozen stands lined the route, selling flowers -- a not very attractive standard bouquet. On entering the mausoleum the line split right and left as people deposited their flowers in front of a statue of a sitting Mao, surrounded by low green plants and backed by a painting of a peaceful mountain scene. He looked thoughtful, as if plotting his next madcap scheme, perhaps another "Great Leap" toward disaster or cultural destruction in the name of revolution. Flowers, all bound tight, accumulated impressively; I suspect the profit-minded Chinese government puts them back out for resale the next day.

In the next room the Great Man, assuming it really is him, lies under glass beneath a blanket decorated by a hammer and sickle. He looked shrunken, his face pale. Two soldiers stood guard behind him, while mausoleum staff urged onlookers to move along. After all, hundreds or thousands more were in line, waiting their turn. There was no time to gawk at the body of the man who four decades before could have ordered the death of any of us.

The two lines reunited in the final room before exiting the mausoleum. Outside were a variety of vendors offering Mao tchotchke. What home should be without a Mao picture, or even better, a Mao statue? I wanted one of the latter, but their prices ran into the hundreds of dollars. My office is decorated with statues of Soviet Communist Party leaders Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin and secret police chiefs Felix Dzerzhinsky and Lavrenti Beria. All were bargains compared to the price of Mao -- but, of course, he was the greatest murderer of them all, and therefore should cost more.

Still, it seems a little strange to have Mao trinkets that only the rich capitalists who now join the Communist Party can afford. In fact, there didn't seem to be too many buyers. Then the viewers flowed back into Tiananmen Square. How many revered the man, who killed more of their countrymen than did Japan and Chiang Kai-shek combined, is impossible to know. But the mausoleum reportedly is a favored destination of rural folks.

Maoism is dead. Mao Zedong retains some adherents on the left, and Bo Xilai, the Politburo member dramatically ousted two years ago, deployed aspects of Maoism to advance his ambitions. But today Mao is more symbol of modernity than inspiration for policy. The current leadership is nationalistic, cynical, and ruthless. But top officials are not mad.

Still, eventually the PRC will have to confront Mao's legacy. The country has moved dramatically beyond him -- he wouldn't recognize his nation's capital, highlighted by wide

boulevards, stylish buildings, social freedom, and pervasive commerce. His brutal, unpredictable dictatorship has disappeared, but in its place has emerged a blander, more prosaic and bureaucratic authoritarian system. Still, the Chinese people remain in chains, though their fetters now are gold and silver.

That will eventually end, however. Some day the Chinese people will bury Mao along with his legacy. Then they truly will be free.

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