

# The Cultural Revolution's Legacy in China

The Chinese government did not celebrate the 50th anniversary of the bloody period, but President Xi Jinping's actions have drawn comparisons to the era.



Kim Kyung-Hoon / Reuters

MATT VASILOGAMBROS | MAY 16, 2016 | GLOBAL

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When the Cultural Revolution began in 1966, it didn't matter that future Chinese President Xi Jinping's father, Xi Zhongxun, was a veteran and leader in the Communist Revolution. He was a representative of the bourgeoisie that China needed to purge, Mao Zedong said. The elder Xi was jailed for 16 years, while the future president was sent to the countryside to grow up and perform hard labor, leaving his life as an intellectual to realize Mao's revitalized vision of communism.

The 10-year period began May 16, 1966, as Mao inspired the country's youth to turn on their parents and teachers, often violently. These so-called Red Guards targeted the elites who were driving the country toward capitalism. During that period, 16 million children, like Xi, were sent to the countryside, while top leaders who were perceived as being against the Communist Party were either jailed or killed.

While there is no official count for the number of people who died during that period, one scholar estimated the number as between 500,000 to 8 million, and the number of people persecuted in the tens of millions. As *The New York Times* describes:

During the Cultural Revolution, Red Guards targeted the authorities on campuses, then party officials and "class enemies" in society at large. They carried out mass killings in Beijing and other cities as the violence swept across the country. They also battled one another, sometimes with heavy weapons, such as in the city of Chongqing. The military joined the conflict, adding to the factional violence and killing of civilians. The pogroms even included cannibalization of victims in the southern region of Guangxi.

That period, which ended with Mao's death in 1976, is a controversial part of China's history, one that current top officials would rather look past than celebrate. Monday marks the 50th anniversary of that start of the Cultural Revolution and there is no official celebration or recognition from state media.

Xi, though rarely, has talked about the turbulent decade. Speaking to state-run CCTV in 2003, he said:

"In the past when we talked about beliefs, it was very abstract. I think the youth of my generation will be remembered for the fervor of the Red Guard era. But it was emotional. It was a mood. And when the ideals of the Cultural Revolution could not be realized, it proved an illusion."

The anniversary leaves the Chinese government in a predicament. It clearly wants to look past what the Communist Party in 1981 said was "the most severe setback and the heaviest losses suffered by the party, the country, and the people." It also wants to quell any concerns that China may be heading toward another Cultural Revolution.

That fear was highlighted earlier this month when a symphony played several “red songs” at Beijing’s Great Hall of the People, celebrating the Communist’s Party’s socialist past. One of those songs was “Sailing the Seas Depends on the Helmsman,” the anthem of the Cultural Revolution. “Mao Zedong Thought is the sun that forever shines,” reads one line of the song.

Though the party’s Central Committee quickly distanced itself from the performance, critics still said a group inside the country wants a return of the repressive period.

Xi has led a crackdown in recent years on dissent, censoring media and the Internet. He has also gone after civil society, giving security forces control over foreign non-governmental organizations that deal with human rights, public health, and education.

Like Mao during the Cultural Revolution, there’s also been an increase in Xi’s cult of personality, as his face dons the front page of newspapers and propaganda across the country. There are even pop songs that celebrate him.

Xi even gave himself a new title as Chinese military power grows and regional tensions increase with disputed islands in the South China Sea. In April, donning a camouflaged uniform, the general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party also became the commander in chief of the joint battle command.

Meanwhile, Mao is still celebrated as one of the key figures in Chinese history. On the 120th anniversary of Mao’s birth four years ago, Xi called him “a great patriot and national hero.” As *The Sydney Morning Herald* reports:

But 40 years on from his death, Mao remains central to the Communist Party's narrative of ruling legitimacy. His embalmed body lies in state in a mausoleum overlooking Tiananmen Square, while his portrait smiles over the Forbidden City and graces every Chinese banknote.

By Mao's own measure, the mass campaign was his greatest achievement after leading the Communists to victory over the Japanese and the Kuomintang government which was exiled to Taiwan.

The Chinese government’s actions today are eclipsed by the events of that 10-year period, but as Xi tightens his grip over the country, comparisons are being made with a dark period in China’s history.

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# Excerpt From People's Daily on the Cultural Revolution

Sinosphere

By CHRIS BUCKLEY    MAY 17, 2016

BEIJING — People's Daily, the main newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party, has broken the general official silence about the 50th anniversary of the start of the Cultural Revolution. A commentary in the newspaper on Tuesday urged Chinese citizens to accept the party's longstanding verdict on the Cultural Revolution, the traumatic campaign that Mao Zedong began in 1966 in an effort to purify and rejuvenate the communist revolution.

Here are some excerpts from the first half of the commentary. The second part urges people to rally around President Xi Jinping and his policies:

The Cultural Revolution was a major setback for the progress of our party and country. How should we understand the "Cultural Revolution"? In August 1980, Deng Xiaoping twice met the Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci and answered her questions about how the Chinese Communist Party evaluated Comrade Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution, which at the time were of great concern at home and abroad. The Sixth Plenum of the party's 11th Central Committee approved the "Resolution on certain questions in the history of our party since the founding of the People's Republic of China," which gave correct conclusions on a succession of major historical issues since the founding of the new China, and thoroughly negated the Cultural Revolution and the "theory of continuing the revolution under the

dictatorship of the proletariat.” It factually evaluated the historical status of Comrade Mao Zedong, and fully expounded on the great significance of Mao Zedong Thought as the guiding ideology of the party. The political definition and analysis of the causes of the Cultural Revolution in this Resolution have withstood the test of experience, the test of the people, and the test of history, and they possess unshakable scientific truth and authority.

The Cultural Revolution was wrongly launched by the leaders and exploited by a counterrevolutionary clique. It brought the grave disaster of internal turmoil to the party, country and people of every ethnicity, and the harm it created was comprehensive and severe. History has amply demonstrated that the Cultural Revolution was totally wrong in theory and practice. In no sense was it, or could it have been, revolutionary or socially progressive.

Our party has always taken a solemn approach to errors and mistakes, including those by its leaders, first by having the courage to acknowledge them, second by giving a correct analysis of them, and third by resolutely correcting them. Thereby, these errors and mistakes, together with the party's successes, become a precious historical lesson. The “Resolution on History” made a distinction between the Cultural Revolution as a period and the Cultural Revolution as a political movement, and it separated out the mistaken theory and practice of the Cultural Revolution from the total history of this decade, vigorously counterattacking the mistaken viewpoint that would use negating the Cultural Revolution to negate the history of the party and negate the leadership of the party and the socialist system. Precisely because we have this correct stance, our party awoke from its setbacks, reaffirmed an ideological line based on seeking truth from facts, achieved a shift in the focus of work [to economic development], laid down the party's fundamental line of the preliminary stage of socialism, established the road of socialism with special Chinese characteristics, achieved a great historic transformation, and pioneered a new journey of reform and opening up. After more than 30 years of reform and opening up, our country has become stronger by the day, the living standards of the people have massively improved, the socialist democracy and legal system have constantly improved. The road we are taking is increasingly broad, and will not be, nor will we ever allow a re-enactment of a mistake like the Cultural Revolution.

History always advances, and we sum up and absorb the lessons of history to use it as a mirror to better advance. “The remembrance of the past is the teacher for the future.” We must firmly fix in our memories the historic lessons of the Cultural Revolution, firmly adhere to the party’s political conclusions about the Cultural Revolution, and resolutely prevent and resist meddling from the left and the right that focuses on the problems of the Cultural Revolution. We will not take the old path that is closed and stultified, nor will we take the errant path of changing our banner. Rather without any wavering we will take the path of socialism with special Chinese characteristics.

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