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The Long Shadow

Mao's spirit influences Chinese politics to this day and the power struggle for his legacy is still raging.



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Shaoshan, Hunan province becomes a place of celebration around this time of year and attracts millions of tourists. The small village is the birthplace of Mao Zedong, the founder and father of the People's Republic of China. The local government has spent quite lavishly as they prepare for development and tourism projects to celebrate the 120th anniversary of his birth. In Shenzhen, a new statue in his image has been made, covered in gold, jade, and other jewels.

Although Mao and Marx have been replaced in many ways by modernization, the great helmsman is still at the center of China. His body still dominates Tiananmen Square, his giant portrait hanging at the entrance of the Forbidden City. His body remains preserved and still on display in a crystal casket in the

Great Hall of the People just west of the square in Beijing. And of course, his face can be found on the country's bank notes.

Materialism instead of class struggle

Some call him a tyrant, while others still revere the leader as a savior. He is indeed an enduringly multifarious figure in today's China. He can be seen joining the ranks of popular tutelary gods in temples across the country. From Red Guard armbands to his little red book, Mao is also an item of great consumption. In textbooks across the nation, he is still zealously praised. He captured the success of the revolution and mobilized mass participation. He restored pride to a nation that was governed and occupied by multiple foreign powers over a century. Many would argue that he paved the way for the country's later success under Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening up period. And most recently, he was compared to the late Nelson Mandela as a strong leader.

But his legacy is still being fought out. Mao's attempts to shake rural China by a wave of communization turned out to be a massive failure and led to widespread famine that claimed more than 30 million lives. The issue is still taboo and those numbers are often debated if not outright denied as attempts to destroy the party's credibility.

The exuberance of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in the 1960s to turn politics upside down never materialized and didn't turn out to be a triumph for the masses. When the revolution era came to an end with the arrest of the gang of four in 1976, the Party leadership absolved Mao. He did not become a fifth member of the gang, and has still not fully atoned for his sins. Deng Xiaoping addressed the Cultural Revolution and Mao's status in a resolution that announced that he was 70 percent correct and 30 percent wrong. His mistakes were only secondary to his merits. The wounds of the revolution have never been fully attended to because he was separated from the worst of his policies.

The past and the present are undeniably linked and the successors of Mao must pay respect to their predecessor. The man remains a ubiquitous figure in a country that looks very different than when he died 37 years ago. Under Mao, there was a principle of class struggle but today's China is a place where economic construction and materialism takes center stage. The party's legitimacy has to be affirmed, and Mao's legacy too must endure.

Nearly a decade ago, former Hu Jintao wore a Mao suit to praise the man for his success in unifying the country. Xi Jinping also said that officials should not doubt Mao's achievements. Xi often quotes the late leader and has been seen as embracing Maoism since his rise. He has reestablished the primacy of the party

and has gathered more power than any leader since Mao. His adherence to the official line has inspired mass line politics.

The past is taboo

Also, the fallen Communist Party leader Bo Xilai utilized grass-roots mobilization to deal with governance problems that included singing revolutionary songs from the Mao period and sent his critics to labor camps. His Mao-like tactics and policies gained popular support but eventually precipitated his undoing. He now faces life in prison. Ultimately, he was removed not because of his Maoist policies but because he was a political threat to the leadership. Xi may in fact embrace his political tactics to further solidify power in the future.

Maybe Deng was right. Maybe Mao's contributions were far greater than his errors. But we won't know until China faces itself and truthfully reflects on its history. If it doesn't, then historic recurrence could manifest itself in various forms. In some ways, it already is. History sometimes has the tendency to bear striking similarities with the present, especially in a place where a large part of the past is still largely taboo.

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ASIA PACIFIC | LETTER FROM CHINA

Mao's Legacy Still Divides China

By DIDI KIRSTEN TATLOW MAY 5, 2011

BEIJING — “At the center of the center of China lies a corpse that nobody dares remove.”

So runs the memorable opening line of “Behind the Forbidden Door,” a book published in 1985 by the Italian journalist Tiziano Terzani.

Today, 35 years after Mao Zedong’s death, his corpse still lies in the grandiose Chairman Mao Memorial Hall in the center of Tiananmen Square, the granite plain that is the symbolic center of this nation of more than 1.3 billion. Every year, hundreds of thousands of people stand in line, sometimes for hours, to view, for a few seconds, the embalmed body of the man so many Chinese still revere.

Yet 45 years ago, on May 16, 1966, this same man began the Cultural Revolution, an orgy of political violence that killed perhaps two million Chinese.

Mao’s preeminence in China is linked to his role in founding the People’s Republic in 1949. Yet his controversial political legacy, of which the Cultural Revolution is just one example, is growing more, not less, disputed, with time.

At stake is nothing less than long-stalled political reform, say some Chinese analysts and retired Communist Party officials.

“An honest, earnest, serious assessment of Mao based on facts” is “necessary,” Yawei Liu, director of the Carter Center’s China Program in Atlanta, said in an e-mail.

Mao’s legacy overshadows China to this day, so “without such a thorough verdict, it would be hard for China to launch meaningful political reform,” Mr. Liu said.

In China, the debate over Mao’s legacy is growing increasingly heated, conducted via Web sites, articles and books.

Broadly, liberals and pro-market forces stand on one side; leftists and Maoists on the other. The leftists, perhaps better organized, operate scores of Web sites, including the popular Utopia (www.wyzxsx.com), Mao Zedong Flag (www.maoflag.net) and Red China (www.redchinacn.com).

Behind this florescence of often-aggressive debate lies the pressure of decades of fast economic growth on the country’s rigid political framework, little changed since Mao’s day. The government has responded by trying to better manage social conflict and increasing repression.

The liberal faction harbors a wide range of opinion. Some see Mao as a deeply flawed figure who had his achievements. Others see him as merely power-mad, even a Machiavellian killer.

Leftists see Mao as a symbol of days when people were more equal and many things, including basic social services, were free or subsidized. Curiously, some rich businessmen belong here, too, having benefited enormously from the political stasis of the last decades.

A recent essay by the liberal economist Mao Yushi, “Returning Mao Zedong to his Original Person,” has highlighted the controversy.

Mr. Mao, who is no relation to Mao Zedong, accused the former leader of hypocrisy and unusual cruelty.

The Cultural Revolution was merely a ploy to destroy his many critics after the

disaster of the Great Leap Forward famine, which killed around 30 million people, Mr. Mao wrote.

Evidence of cruelty is found, for example, in Mao's indifference to the fate of friends he drove to suicide, wrote the economist, and that of President Liu Shaoqi, whom Mao first attacked, then pretended to save, only to have Mr. Liu expelled from the party on his 70th birthday, before dying, untended, in jail in 1969.

A document circulating online purporting to detail a proposal by top Communist Party officials to remove Mao Zedong Thought from party work, documents and policies, has also sharpened debate.

The supposed Politburo document, No. 179, dated Dec. 28, 2010, is said to have been proposed by Xi Jinping, the man expected to become China's next president, and Wu Bangguo, the head of the National People's Congress.

Even if a hoax — the internal workings of the Politburo are almost entirely opaque, and it is almost impossible to verify its authenticity — the document has refocused attention on the issue of Mao's legacy among commentators and party officials.

A retired official at China's National Defense University, Xin Ziling, reportedly called the document a "turning point" in Chinese politics, in an interview circulating on the Web. Mr. Xin could not be reached for comment.

"All this stuff indicates how central Mao is to China's political orthodoxy," said Mr. Liu of the Carter Center. "A clear verdict and break with Mao will pave the way for real political reform to take place."

Leftists have reacted strongly to Mr. Mao's essay, and the apparent move to delete Mao from official ideology. Some said that Mr. Mao, the economist, should provide evidence of his claims, or face the courts. Others reflected on the political value of Mao for the party.

"Separated from Mao, the Communist Party has no glory left!" said one commentator, Li Lin, in a typical entry on maoflag.net.

In Tiananmen Square on Sunday, Wang Yanjuan, 50, was one of thousands inching forward in line outside the mausoleum.

“For us, Mao Zedong is the founder of our country. We deeply admire him. He lives in our hearts,” said Ms. Wang, who is from the northeastern city of Shenyang. “In his day, education was free,” she added.

Her 76-year-old mother, in Beijing for the first time, had only one request: to see Mao’s body. “She doesn’t want to do anything else,” Ms. Wang said. “When we’ve done this, we can go home.”

Inside the mausoleum, suddenly, he’s there, flat on his back inside a thick crystal coffin. His face glows orangeish under bright lights.

His springy gray hair is neatly combed back at the sides. He is dressed in a gray tunic, the Communist Party flag — gold hammer and sickle on a red background — draping his body from the chest down. An armed honor guard of two soldiers stares somberly ahead.

Back outside, Ms. Wang, for whom this is a second visit, appeared satisfied. “That was very good,” she said.

What does her mother think?

“It’s the same for her. Very good,” Ms. Wang said. But, pointing at her 20-year-old daughter, up ahead, she said: “My daughter, she’s young and doesn’t care so much. I don’t think young people could accept Mao’s times as we did.”

A version of this article appears in print on May 6, 2011, in The International Herald Tribune.

Mao's legacy in Xi Jinping's China

Even 40 years after his death, the Communist Party of China still feels the need for Mao Zedong to maintain its legitimacy. DW talks to sinologist Felix Wemheuer about the leader's legacy and current significance.

Born to a wealthy farmer in the Hunan province in 1893, Mao aimed to transform China into a communist state and succeeded in achieving his goal 1949, when he declared the People's Republic in Beijing's Tiananmen Square.

However, his reign of China was anything but smooth, with the country experiencing convulsions as a consequence of the leader's ill-conceived initiatives, which have led to the deaths of millions of people.

Still, 40 years after his death, Mao Zedong's presence remains impossible to escape in China, yet difficult to discuss. His corpse still lies in state in the center of Beijing, watched over by a giant portrait hanging on the Forbidden City in Tiananmen Square. While Mao is still officially venerated by the ruling CPC as the founder of modern China, some fear the party, in a bid to modernize its image, wants to play down his legacy. Meanwhile, Mao has become a potent symbol for leftists within and without the ruling Communist Party who feel three decades of market-based reform have gone too far, creating social inequalities like poverty and graft.

In lauding Mao, they sometimes seek to put pressure on the current leadership and its market-oriented policies. In a DW interview, China expert Felix Wemheuer explains about Mao's record on both the domestic and foreign policy fronts and how his personality cult continues to play a role in present-day China.

DW: Could you tell us about Mao's journey from being the son of a wealthy farmer to the head of communist China?

Felix Wemheuer: We have to go back to the period immediately after the end of World War I. A major theme of the so-called "May 4th Movement" of 1919 was the question of how to make China a modern nation while fending off Western imperialism. In this context, many intellectuals turned to communism and the Soviet Union.

The Treaty of Versailles and the disappointment caused by the pact, which transferred the control of the Shandong region (currently Shandong Province) to Japan, also contributed to the development.

Mao was also part of this movement and he founded the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 1921. Initially, he was only one of several leaders. But his successful strategy, of creating so-called liberated areas in the hinterland with guerilla bases and establishing a parallel state later propelled him to become the party's sole leader and the figurehead of the Chinese Communist revolution.

It also helped him establish his personality cult and image as a person who developed the right strategy to implement the Chinese revolution, which ultimately brought the CPC to power.

The takeover of power by the CPC under Mao's leadership was followed by two catastrophes resulting in the loss of millions of lives. How do you view these disasters and Mao's responsibility for causing them?

The two catastrophes are the Great Leap Forward (1958-61) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). The Great Leap Forward was part of an ill-conceived industrialization program, with the help of which China wanted to quickly modernize and catch up with the West. Mao pursued this goal along with the establishment of a communist society. But it failed miserably and ended in a catastrophe. His aim certainly

was not to have people starve to death, although after the famine broke out he did little to save as many as possible.

During the Cultural Revolution days, however, Mao applied some of the lessons learned from the failure of the Great Leap Forward, thus ensuring that the nation's economy did not entirely collapse. There was a small economic slump at the start of 1967, but agriculture and industry remained relatively stable during that time. Despite party infighting and political chaos, the economy did not once again collapse.

The paradox in Mao's attitude towards violence is that at the start of each of his big campaigns, he always incited violence against landowners and party cadres. But at the same time, when things started to get out of hand, he was the only one who could stop them. That led many victims to a paradoxical situation where they could only be saved by Mao. Even Xi Zhongxun, the father of the current President Xi Jinping, was one of the victims of the Cultural Revolution. Almost all members of the current leadership come from families that suffered during the revolution. As a result, these people have many reasons to say Mao was bad. But they don't do that because the party is still of the view that it cannot justify its legitimacy without Mao.

How do you see Mao's record on the foreign policy front?

Mao scored his most lasting successes in foreign policy. Although the nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) government was recognized as one of the victors of World War II and accorded a permanent seat in the UN Security Council, the KMT remained very weak and was unable to control either Xinjiang or Tibet. But after the Communist takeover in 1949, China was able to re-establish its control over a territory that was in accordance with the borders of the Qing Dynasty.

The West initially had to give up all its claims and then China was able to assert its independence from Soviet Union's policies. Following the escalation of the Sino-Soviet conflict, Mao made a strategic pivot, normalizing relations with the US in 1972 under President Richard Nixon. This put an end to the bipolarity of the Cold War in Asia, where China and the US joined hands in their opposition against the Soviet Union.

In the early 1960s, it was considered outrageous in the world communist movement to publicly challenge the Soviet leadership. And the Soviet Union, for its part, tried to bring together all eastern European nations to oppose China. Moscow succeeded in its mission, with the exception of Albania, but China was able to gain new allies, particularly in Africa.

What role does Mao play in Xi Jinping's China?

With his anti-corruption campaign, President Xi - similar to Mao - has positioned himself as someone who is above the party. Xi presents himself as a leader who - in the interests of the Chinese people - is willing to take on the party ruthlessly to cleanse it of corruption. Xi's pledges like vowing to crack down on both "tigers" and "flies" were also a page taken from Mao's book. In general, we are currently seeing a trend towards strong men like Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump. And it is somehow fitting for Xi to be regarded as China's strongman. In my view, he wants to cultivate a Mao-like charisma without actually propagating Maoist content. So the idea of class struggle does not matter at all.

Nevertheless, maintaining stability and continuity is important for the party. And Mao is viewed in a much more positive light now than ten years ago. But discourse over his legacy has been more or less limited, portraying Mao as the leader who built a strong and rich China that was able to assert its importance on the international arena.

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