

China Enters Era of “Cultural Resolution”

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The most powerful leader since Mao. In reality, President Xi Jinping has less control than Mao Zedong but is more powerful as China was not the global economic titan it is today when the Great Helmsman died in 1976.

But Xi feels less comfortable than his status implies he should as he bids to be president for life.

*The mountains are high and the emperor is far away is a saying in China that hints at how difficult it is to run a country of 1.4 billion people across 23 provinces, five autonomous regions, four municipalities and two special administrative regions. Then there are 3,000 prefecture and county level regions, and at least 40,000 township divisions. Consequently, local governments have long turned a blind eye to some Beijing diktats, a dynamic captured by a saying in Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*: “A general in the field is not bound by the orders from his sovereign.”*

China is top heavy. Public dissent is *verboden*, and officials hide problems and silence whistle-blowers.

Simply put there is often nothing to be gained by trying to correct a wrong. When Covid-19 first appeared in Wuhan, police targeted eight doctors who tried to warn the public. The city's mayor later said he had to wait for Beijing's instructions before releasing information on the outbreak.

The cult of personality, once believed dead and buried, has been resurrected. No, we are not on the verge of a new cultural revolution but we are in a time of cultural resolution.

To confirm this, the Chinese Communist Party endorsed a "historical resolution" this month, putting Xi behind Mao but ahead of Deng Xiaoping the man who "made modern China". It says that Xi is core leader and his beliefs are bedrock doctrine.

Without mentioning names, previous leaders are dammed.

Before Xi took office, the resolution says, China's "capacity to safeguard its national security was lacking".

Xi has expanded China's global influence, the resolution adds, with no hint of irony but it warns that the party needs to remain vigilant to tackle dangers ahead.

"Constant retreat will only bring bullying from those who grab a yard if you give an inch," says the resolution ignoring that, officially, China is on the metric system. But it sounds better than grab a meter if you give a centimeter. "Making concessions to get our way will only draw us into more humiliating straits," it claims.

This will give Xi the type of unquestioned authority necessary to push his agenda through. The endorsement is only the third of its kind since the founding of the party - the first was passed by Mao in 1945 and the second by Deng Xiaoping in 1981. The question is why was it necessary?

China was the future once, now it seems the past is looming ahead.

The light-touch relative liberalism of the Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao eras are a distant memory. Dissent during their presidencies was allowed online and universities could debate democracy and constitutional change, even if discreetly.

Under Xi they resemble almost halcyon days. The genuine pride felt in China's rising global status seems to have kept the middle class broadly in line but this is not a blank check. An economic downturn could change the equation.

Already property values are falling and the true cost of Evergrande and other failed developers has still to be factored in. And there is a sense that an opportunity has been lost. The international atmosphere has changed and China realizes it should have capitalized more in the goodwill it enjoyed globally up to about say four years ago. And the Taiwan issue has yet to be settled, from Beijing's point of view.

This is a pivotal 12 months with a major party congress in October next year, when Xi will seek confirmation of his third unlimited term.

Both Jiang and Hu were forced to step down after two five-year terms each. This was meant to prevent the life-term power grab that Mao had enjoyed. Xi, in contrast, has made it clear that he intends to go for a third term and beyond. There seems little chance of home-grown political opposition derailing his plans. Xi has the army and presidency.

Xi, China's first ruler for life since Mao, came to office extolling the virtues of the Chinese Dream. It is little mentioned today.

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