

Where is China Going? Reflections on the 50th Anniversary of the Cultural Revolution

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2016 marks the 50th Anniversary of the Cultural Revolution, launched by Mao Zedong, at that time the leader of the Chinese Communist Party. The campaign was an unprecedented disaster for the Chinese people and nation. According to Ye Jianying, one of the founders of the Chinese Communist Party, the campaign had caused 20 million deaths, and the persecution of more than 100 million people. Such massive slaughter and persecution necessarily led to an extreme distortion of humanity. It is the source of the immoral behaviour in today's China.

Ji Xianlin, professor of Beijing University, described the calamity as “the most barbaric, the most brutal, the most ignorant, and the most ridiculous.” He also described the campaign as “a human tragedy of utmost barbarity, utmost cruelty, utmost absurdity, utmost ignorance, utmost savagery, that was totally against the human conscience.”

Although the Cultural Revolution took place fifty years ago, it still has an impact on today's society. As Lord Acton said, “Despotic power is always accompanied by the corruption of morality.” After a decade in which human evil was let loose, a low-grade Chinese ethnic group has been formed that is the cause of the moral decadence of modern Chinese society. That is precisely the problem of the after-effects of the Cultural Revolution.

In the interest of the renewal of the Chinese nation, we should seriously consider the cause of this calamity—the system of “one-party rule”—and dare to abolish it. However, as the Chinese Communist Party still tries to maintain its regime, it will not allow the people to do so. Regarding this issue, there is a profound

contradiction between the interests of the Party and the interests of the country. Summing up the Cultural Revolution is beneficial to the people, as they can avoid repeating the same mistakes. However, it is unfavorable to the government, because any investigation will lead to the crisis of the legitimate rule of the Communist Party. In order to maintain the interests of the ruling party, they give short shrift to the benefit of the people.

In 1981, the Chinese Communist Party adopted the “Resolution on certain questions in the history of our party since the founding of the People’s Republic of China” (*Resolution*), and “repudiated the Cultural Revolution.” However, as the Party dared not repudiate Mao Zedong (the repudiation of Mao is equivalent to the repudiation of the Chinese Communist Party), the official verdict remained that “Mao was 70 percent correct and 30 percent wrong.” They let off lightly the serious mistakes of Mao, including the establishment of the lawless system of “one-party rule.”

Yet, if we do not investigate the cause (ideological as well as institutional) of the Cultural Revolution and prosecute the crimes, we shall inevitably repeat the same mistakes. The Spanish philosopher, George Santayana said, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” As the authorities did not allow the people to investigate the disaster of the Cultural Revolution, we could not rule out the possibility of its restoration today. In fact, in recent times, many Chinese scholars use the term *semi-cultural revolution*, which reflects the return of the policies and ideology of the Cultural Revolution period.

The *semi-cultural revolution* started to appear as Bo Xilai, former Communist Party Secretary of Chongqing, promoted the singing of red songs. Former Premier Wen Jiabao warned at the press conference after the closing meeting of the Fifth Session of the 11th National People's Congress (March 14, 2012), “after the crackdown on the Gang of Four, although the Party adopted resolutions on many historical matters, and implemented the *reform and opening-up*, the mistake of the Cultural Revolution and feudalism have yet to be fully eliminated.” Twice Wen mentioned the *Resolution* and stressed that “without successful political

reforms...such historical tragedies as the Cultural Revolution may happen again in China.”

Premier Wen’s warning was not alarmist. Today, the historical conditions are certainly different from the past; it is therefore unlikely that the Cultural Revolution will be fully restored. However, the underlying factors which caused the tragic Cultural Revolution have been totally preserved. If all the necessary conditions are present, then policies similar to the Cultural Revolution will be revived.

I believe that the root-cause of the calamity of the Cultural Revolution was the totalitarian political system of the Chinese Communist Party’s “one-party rule.” The characteristics of the Chinese Communist Party are the same as those of a “Leninist Political Party”:

- One ideology: the whole Party has only one belief, i.e. the so-called “universal truth”;
- One leader: the personality cult of the Party leader, the concentration of power in the hands of the leader;
- One political party: stressing that the Party leads everything, the Party replaces the government;
- One army: Party leadership over the army;
- One pen: close attention to propaganda and ideology, to brainwash the people.

Regarding the present situation of the Chinese Communist Party, all the above five features are kept. The institutional factors which led to the Cultural Revolution are still kept intact. The *Resolution* (1981) only denied the campaign of the Cultural Revolution, not the institutional factors which led to the campaign.

In fact, since Xi Jinping came to power at the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), all those “factors of the Cultural Revolution” have been restored. This process of revival includes the following aspects.

1. Xi Jinping did not “negate either of the two thirty-year periods” of the Chinese Communist Party’s history. This in fact has changed the spirit of the *Resolution*, and it is possible the Cultural Revolution can be revived in the ideological sphere.

Soon after Xi Jinping became the General Secretary at the 18th National Congress, he held the first study class for the Central Committee, so as to implement the spirit of the Congress. He precisely said that “the historical period after the 1978 economic reforms must not be used to deny the historical period before the economic reforms, and the historical period before the economic reforms must not be used to deny the historical period after the economic reforms.”

The purpose of his speech was actually to enumerate the merits of the Cultural Revolution, as the historical period before economic reforms lasted for 27 years (1949-1976), and nearly half of the period (10 years) was the calamity of the Cultural Revolution. “The historical period before economic reforms” is undeniable, that is to say, the Cultural Revolution is undeniable. It is exactly against the spirit of the *Resolution*, creating an environment of public opinion to “justify” the Cultural Revolution, thus to provide the ideological conditions of the *semi-cultural revolution*.

2. Xi Jinping brought up the issue of “ideological struggle,” reviving the concept of “class struggle” during the period of the Cultural Revolution.

On August 19 2013, at the National Work Conference on Propaganda, Xi gave an important speech (*Speech 8.19*), which led the whole country into a state of *semi-cultural revolution*. According to the Publicity Department of CCP, Xi’s speech was to promote the ideology work to the same level as economic work.

We know that one of the scourges of the Cultural Revolution was to ensure the ideological purity of the people. Therefore, “class struggle” has to be “mentioned day after day, month after month, and year after year.” As a result, everybody

considered those who opposed their opinions as anti-revolutionary, and destroyed them physically or mentally.

After the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese Communist Party drew a lesson from the bitter experience. Deng Xiaoping decided to abandon this senseless struggle of ideology, so as to concentrate on the economic work, thus starting the economic development in the 30 years after Cultural Revolution. Deng Xiaoping's "black cat and white cat" theory showed that he despised ideology.

However, in the beginning of *Speech 8.19*, Xi Jinping said, "Economic construction is the Party's central work, ideological work is an extremely important work of the Party." That is to say, ideological work is restored to the same level of importance as economic construction; or they are the "two centres" of the Party. This is a major revision of Deng Xiaoping's idea of "one centre."

Such a revision directly restores the theory of "class struggle." The September 2014 issue of the *Red Flag Manuscript* carried the article "Adhering to the People's Democratic Dictatorship Will Not Lose the Debate" by Wang Weiguang, the director of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. He wrote, "Today our state of socialism with Chinese characteristics is going through a historical era prescribed in the classical works of Marxism – this is an era of a deadly battle between the two perspectives, the two paths, the two destinies, the two great forces of socialism and capitalism. In this era, the class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, between socialism and capitalism, permeates all spheres of life. Class struggle cannot be extinguished either in the international sphere or inside the country." His speech was the standard rhetoric of the Cultural Revolution; it ushered in again the atmosphere of the Cultural Revolution.

During the Cultural Revolution, the targets for attack were the "five black categories." During the period of *semi-cultural revolution*, there are new targets for attack: human rights lawyers, underground religions, dissidents, network leaders,

under-privileged groups (the so-called “new five black categories”). The Chinese Communist Party considers that these groups, under the banner of “internet freedom,” are trying to change the traditional “from top to bottom” model of promoting democracy. They try to penetrate the grass-roots “from bottom to top,” so as to create conditions of “change.” On 9 July 2015, the Chinese authorities launched a man-hunt for human rights lawyers, and over 100 lawyers were arrested. This was the beginning of the crackdown against the “new black categories.”

Moreover, Xi Jinping proposed the “Seven Don’t-Mentions,” trying to suppress dissenting voices by administrative measures. On 22 April 2013, the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China issued the “Report on the Current Situation of the Ideological Front” (*Document No. 9*), in which Xi listed the “Seven Don’t-Mentions.” These include: constitutional democracy, universal values, civil society, liberalism, media independence, plutocratic capitalism, and errors in the history of the Party (“historical nihilism”). These topics are “banned from public discussion,” and the authorities thus lead China back to the period of the Cultural Revolution when there was only one voice.

3. Xi Jinping re-established a highly centralized system. He amended the regulations concerning the collective leadership in the CCP’s Constitution. The aim of those provisions had been to avoid recommitting the same mistakes of the Cultural Revolution.

After Xi came to power, he has held more than ten top offices, including: the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, the President of the People’s Republic of China, and the Chairman of the Central Military Commission (it is customary practice for the leader to occupy these three posts); the Chairman of the National Security Commission, the Chairman of the Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reforms, Chairman of the Leading Group for

Financial and Economic Affairs, Chairman of the Central Leading Group for Internet Security and Informatization, Chairman of the Central Leading Group for Taiwan Affairs, Chairman of the Central Leading Group for Foreign Affairs, Chairman of the Central Leading Group for National Defence and for the Military Reform of the Central Military.

The Constitution of the Chinese Communist Party states: “Party committees at all levels function on the principle of combining collective leadership with individual responsibility based on the division of work” (Chapter 2, Article 10 [5]). Xi Jinping obviously went against the provision of “collective leadership” in the Constitution.

4. Xi Jinping re-established a leadership structure that does “not separate the party from the government, but substitutes the party for the government.” Facing the calamity of the Cultural Revolution, Deng Xiaoping had severely criticized the policy of “no separation between party and government, substituting the party for the government” of the Maoist period. In 1980, Deng gave a speech “On the Reform of the System of Party and State Leadership,” severely criticizing this model of leadership. However, after Xi Jinping came to power, he restored such a leadership structure.

On 7 January 2016, at the First Meeting of the Politburo Standing Committee, Xi Jinping stressed the centralized leadership of the party. He said, “Party and government, military, civilians and education—east, west, south, north and center—the party is leader of all.” It was what Mao Zedong had suggested in 1973: “The Politburo Standing Committee rules all—party and government, military, civilian and education—east, west, south, north and center.”

In order to implement the principle of “Party and government, military, civilian and education—east, west, south, north and center—the party is leader of all,” Xi Jinping unprecedentedly asked the six leading party groups—the National People’s Congress Standing Committee, the State

Council, the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, the Supreme People's Court, and the Supreme People's Procuratorate—to listen to the reports of the General Secretariat. General Secretary Xi Jinping convened the meeting and gave an important speech. This kind of centralization only happened during the period of Mao Zedong. It has not happened again in the last thirty years. This reverts to the period of the Cultural Revolution, restoring the leadership of “no separation between party and government, substituting the party for the government”.

5. Xi Jinping has assumed the status of the “core of the leadership.” He allowed the personality cult to grow around him. This violated the prohibition of “personality cult” in the Party's Constitution.

On 27 January 2016, Li Zhanshu, director of the General Office of the Party's Central Committee, suggested that “all organizations and members of the Party should enhance the core awareness and the alignment awareness. They must see the absolute loyalty to the Party as the fundamental political requirement and the most important political discipline. They should keep pace with the Party Central Committee—with Comrade Xi Jinping as the General Secretary—in thought, politics and action. They should follow the Party's theory, line, principles and policies, follow the spirit of the 18th CPC National Congress, the 3rd, 4th and 5th Plenary Sessions of the 18th Central Committee. They should also follow the Party's decisions in reform, development and stability, in domestic and foreign affairs and national defense and in running the party, state and army.”

On 29 January 2016, at a meeting of the Politburo, Xi Jinping suggested that every member should have the “four kinds of awareness,” i.e. “the political awareness, the overall-situation awareness, the core awareness and the awareness of aligning with the party.” This was the clearest evidence that Xi proclaimed himself as the “core.” On the same day, the *People's Daily* published an article online, stating that Xi

Jinping had “four competencies”: 1) political will; 2) the ability to control the whole situation; 3) innovation and creativity; 4) cohesion appeal. By attributing the “four core competencies” to Xi Jinping, it was evident that Xi boasted himself as the “core”.

At the same time, he tacitly agreed to the rise of “personality cult,” for example, nauseating songs which praised him, the production of Xi badges, and even the concocting of a story that Mao Zedong commissioned Xi Jinping. Xi Jinping obviously violated the provision of the Party’s Constitution: “The Party forbids all forms of personality cult” (Chapter 2, Article 10 [6]).

6. The authorities started to create an atmosphere of the characteristics of the Cultural Revolution: “complete silence in the Party, uniformity of public opinion outside the Party”. The Chinese Communist Party Disciplinary Regulations (published on 18 October 2015) were put in force this year. Article 46 (2) prohibits the “improper discussion of fundamental policies of the Central Party authorities, and causing damage to the centralism and unity of the Party.” Minor cases will receive a warning; more serious cases will be punishable by removal from office or being placed under probation; the most aggravating cases will result in expulsion from the Party.

On 20 February 2016, Xi Jinping spoke at the News and Public Opinion Work Conference, stressing that “the media run by the Party and government are the propaganda battlefields of the Party and government, and must be *surnamed Party*”. He explained that “Party news and public opinion work must adhere to the principles of the Party, which at its most fundamental level means upholding Party leadership over news and public opinion work. No matter how the times and the media formats change, the principles and systems of the Party media cannot change. The media run by the Party and government must be *surnamed Party*. All the work of the Party’s news and public opinion media must embody the Party’s will, reflect the Party’s standpoint, safeguard the authority of the Party Centre, safeguard Party unity, and must

love the Party, uphold the Party and exist for the sake of the Party.” This in fact creates an environment of “uniformity of public opinion outside the Party.”

It has been 50 years since the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution. However, all these measures create an atmosphere of the Cultural Revolution in China again. Because of the resurgence of these elements of the Cultural Revolution, one cannot be too optimistic about the future of China.