

IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS

The Cultural Revolution in China: its 50th anniversary was ignored but its legacy lives on today

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ABSTRACT

The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was one of the most tragic periods in China's history. It unleashed a decade of violence, in which more than a million Chinese died, some 16 million were banished to the countryside and many others suffered imprisonment, seizure of property, torture or humiliation. It left in its wake a shattered country, a fractured society in turmoil and a devastated economy.

The Chinese Communist Party ignored the 50th anniversary on 16 May of the start of the Cultural Revolution, with no official commemoration. The state-controlled media then exhorted the people to regard the Cultural Revolution as a closed chapter and to look ahead. They distanced the Party from its responsibilities for the disaster, in an indication that the country's leaders are still haunted by its spectre.

Nonetheless, the Cultural Revolution's legacy lives on in modern China and some parallels are being drawn with the current President Xi Jinping's crackdown against corruption. Xi's use of some of the Revolution's methods seems to reflect a pragmatic attempt to reassert the Party's authority in response to the new challenges posed by the rapid transformation of China, rather than heralding a repeat of the Cultural Revolution. The Party has said its lessons have been learned and it must not be repeated. Nevertheless, the former Premier, Wen Jiabao, cautioned in 2012 that without effective political reforms, a similar historical tragedy might happen again.

This paper is an initiative of the Policy Department, DG EXPO
English-language manuscript was completed on 07 June 2016.

Printed in Belgium.

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Table of contents

1	Introduction: a forgotten anniversary	4
2	Reasserting the orthodox Party line	4
3	Past criticism of the Cultural Revolution	5
4	The Cultural Revolution in China	6
5	The legacy of the Cultural Revolution in China	8
6	The Chinese new Left and nostalgia for revolutionary China	9
7	The Cultural Revolution and Xi Jinping	10
8	Resorting to Cultural Revolution methods in contemporary Chinese politics	11
9	Conclusions	13

1 Introduction: a forgotten anniversary

No official events were held on 16 May 2016 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the start of the Cultural Revolution.

China's Cultural Revolution officially began 50 years ago, on 16 May 1966 when several top-level officials who had fallen out of favour with the chairman of the Communist Party, Mao Zedong, were purged. Following the death of Mao Zedong and the official revision of the period in by the Party in 1981, the decade of turmoil and violence was gradually ignored and disappeared from both public debate and school books.

Beijing held no official events on 16 May 2016 to commemorate the start of the decade-long revolution. The Party-controlled media carefully avoided making any references to it and there was a clamp-down on social media discussion of the event. The Chinese Communist Party chose simply to ignore this embarrassing anniversary. This was probably because the Party feared that any public discussion about its responsibilities in triggering the most profound upheaval in China since the end of the Civil War might have called into question its very role and its legitimacy to lead the country.

However, the official silence was broken the next day by the Party's main organ, the People's Daily, and by the state-run Global Times. The two newspapers condemned both the theory and the practice of the Cultural Revolution and exhorted the people to look to the future. The articles attracted the attention of commentators because they appeared to have official backing and suggested that, despite all the Communist Party's efforts to erase the period from the country's collective memory, the spectres of the Cultural Revolution still haunt China's leaders.

2 Reasserting the orthodox Party line

The day after the anniversary, two state-controlled newspapers condemned both the theory and the practice of the Cultural Revolution and exhorted the people to look to the future.

The editorial in the People's Daily, headed 'Learning lessons from history in order to better move forward', offered an interpretation of the Cultural Revolution that was carefully constructed to gloss over the Party's responsibilities and encourage readers to regard this terrible period in China's history as a closed chapter.¹

The newspaper argued that: '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'. It stated that the Cultural Revolution was 'wrongly launched by the leaders and exploited by a counterrevolutionary clique', overlooking the heavy responsibility borne by Mao and the Party's followers.

While stressing that the lessons of the Cultural Revolution must not be forgotten, the article urges the Chinese people to align with the Party's reading of the period and avoid any revisionist temptation: 'We must firmly fix in our memories the historic lessons of the Cultural Revolution, firmly

¹ People's Daily, editorial: China will never allow a repetition of Cultural Revolution (17 May 2016).

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.' Furthermore, the article reiterates that the Party's reassessment of the Cultural Revolution in 1981 had 'unshakable scientific truth and authority' and should not be the subject of further discussion. The author also warned: '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.' Chinese citizens must look to the future, said the paper, urging the people to rally round President Xi Jinping and his policies.²

The Global Times said the Cultural Revolution had given China the positive legacy of 'immunity from unrest' because the lesson that it must not be repeated had been learned.

A second editorial, published in the Global Times on 17 May and entitled 'Society firmly rejects Cultural Revolution', said the lessons of the turmoil had been learned with the result that China had actually been left the positive legacy of 'immunity from unrest'. It stated: 'Nobody fears turmoil, and desires stability more than us [the Party]' and concluded: 'Entirely denying the values of the Cultural Revolution will help Chinese society remain vigilant against the danger of all kinds of disorder.'

3 Past criticism of the Cultural Revolution

The views stated in the two commentaries are not new. For a few years, Mao's successor, Deng Xiaoping³, allowed historians to explore at least part of the truth about what had happened during the 10 years from 1966 to 1976. Publications analysing the previous decade became extremely popular in China. They frequently offered what came to be known as 'scar literature', read by millions of Chinese.⁴

But then Deng Xiaoping decided that it had gone far enough and feared that continued exposure of the excesses perpetrated in the Party's name during the Cultural Revolution might lead to the Communist Party's grip over China becoming weaker.

A Politburo resolution in 1981 condemned the Cultural Revolution while seeking to preserve Mao's legacy intact.

The result was the publication in 1981 of an official resolution⁵ by the Chinese Communist Party Politburo that formally condemned the Cultural Revolution while seeking to preserve Mao's legacy as the founding father of the Chinese Communist state.

The resolution stated that the Cultural Revolution, initiated and led by 'Comrade' Mao Zedong, 'was responsible for the most severe setback and the heaviest losses suffered by the Party, the state and the people since the founding of the People's Republic'. However, the Party cleared Mao by

² DW, China, Cultural Revolution is long over (May 2016)

³ Deng Xiaoping described the Cultural Revolution as 'ten years of catastrophe' (see footnote 4).

⁴ The Diplomat, How China Remembers the Cultural Revolution (16 May 2016).

⁵ Resolution on certain questions in the history of our party since the founding of the People's Republic of China (Adopted by the Sixth Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on 27 June 1981).

concluding that while 'he made gross mistakes during the Cultural Revolution [...] if we judge his activities as a whole, his contributions to the Chinese revolution far outweigh his mistakes'.

Deng Xiaoping was reported to have declared in 1978: 'We will never do to Mao what the Soviets did to Stalin' and the official verdict remains that Mao was 70 % correct and 30 % wrong. This judgement — despite a progressive decline in esteem for the 'Great Helmsman' and the dramatic changes that the country has undergone since his death — is still a cornerstone of Party doctrine. On the 120th anniversary (in 2013) of Mao's birth, President Xi referred to him as 'a great patriot and national hero'.⁶

4 The Cultural Revolution in China

The Cultural Revolution was started by Mao Zedong in an attempt to strengthen his political position and fight against 'deviationism'.

The Cultural Revolution — its full name was the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, — officially started on 16 May 1966 when Chairman Mao Zedong approved a secret circular declaring war on 'representatives of the bourgeoisie' who had 'sneaked into the Communist Party, the government, the army and various spheres of culture'.⁷

In the mid-1960s, Mao's grip on power had weakened after the failure of his 'Great Leap Forward' (1958-60) and the economic crisis that followed. With the Soviet Union's precedent in mind, Mao feared that the current party leadership in China was moving too far in a revisionist direction, with an emphasis on expertise rather than on ideological purity.⁸ Mao gathered a group of radicals, including his wife Jiang Qing and defence minister Lin Biao, to help him attack current party leadership and reassert his authority.⁹

On 5 August 1966, Mao published a call to "bomb the headquarters". A few days later (on 16 August), at the Eleventh Plenum of the Eighth Central Committee, he officially announced the launch of the 'Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution'. Mao shut down the schools and universities and during the months that followed he encouraged massive youth mobilization. Radical youth groups, known as 'Red Guards', began attacking China's elderly and intellectual population.¹⁰ They called into question all traditional values and 'bourgeois' behaviour and put party officials to the test by publicly criticizing them.

The Cultural Revolution soon spiralled out of control, effectively becoming a quasi-civil war between generations.

The revolution soon spiralled out of control and effectively became a quasi-civil war between generations: 'Violence spread nation-wide, causing hundreds of thousands of deaths: suicides, assaults, shootings even

⁶ The Atlantic, The Cultural Revolution's legacy in China (2016). The New York Times, Breaking the Silence about the Cultural Revolution (24 May 2016).

⁷ The Economist, It was the worst of times (14 May 2016).

⁸ Mao also feared exposure to the same kind of posthumous condemnation of his actions. He did not approve of the 'New Course' in the Soviet Union and the open criticism of Stalin's actions that became commonplace during the Khrushchev era.

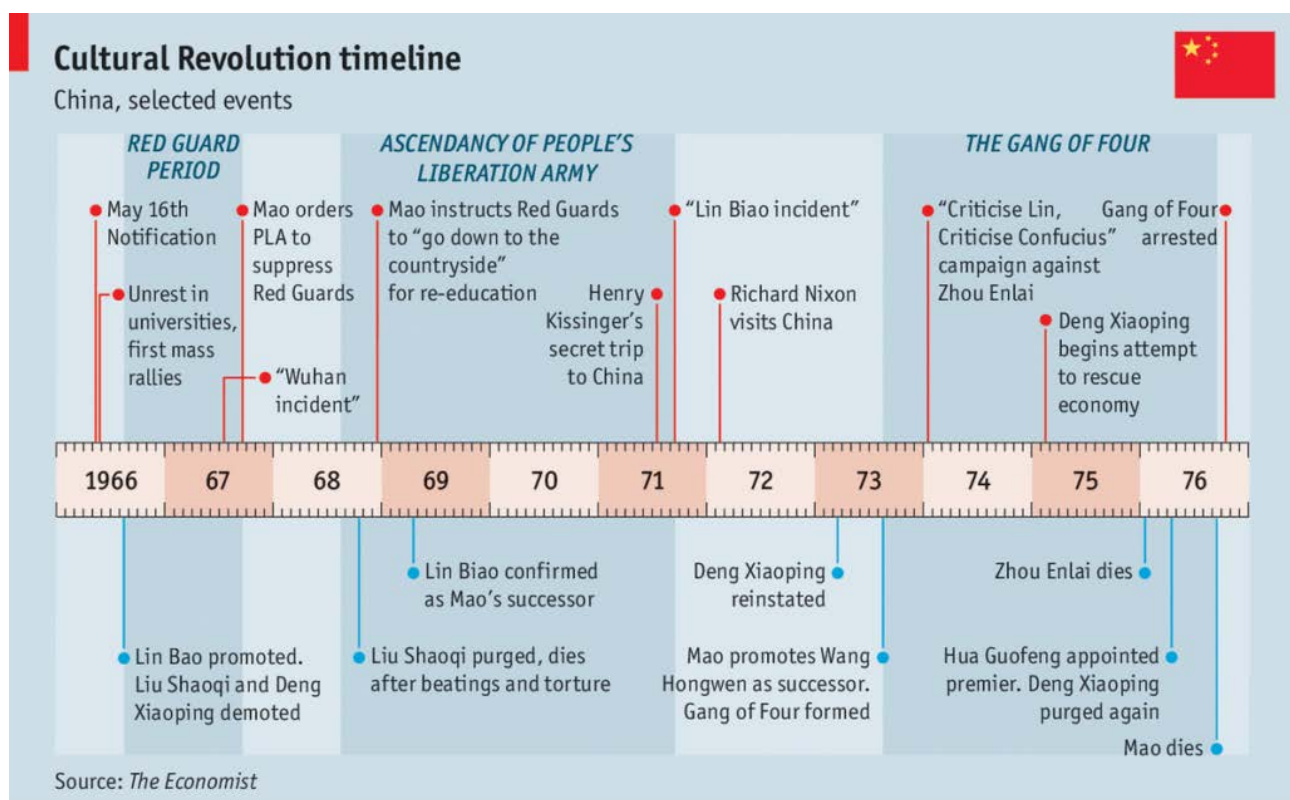
⁹ Encyclopaedia Britannica, Cultural Revolution (2016)

¹⁰ In August 1966 alone, more than 1,700 teachers were beaten to death in Beijing.

cannibalism. Purges of China’s educated population left projects without engineers, laboratories without scientists, and factories without foremen. Gangs of Red Guards pillaged libraries, museums, and tombs. Universities closed, and higher education stopped for a decade.¹¹

Disillusioned with the Red Guards because of their inability to overcome their factional differences, Mao decided in 1968 to send millions of urban youth to the countryside to do farm labour. The Cultural Revolution effectively ended in 1976 after Mao’s death and the arrest of the 'Gang of Four' members of the radical political elite subsequently convicted for implementing the harsh policies of the Cultural Revolution and including Mao’s third wife, Jiang Qing.

Figure 1:
The 10 years of the Cultural Revolution



Economist.com

The Cultural Revolution lasted about ten years and ended only after Mao's death in 1976.

The Cultural Revolution lasted about 10 years. During this period over a million Chinese died, some 16 million were forced to move to the countryside and millions more suffered imprisonment, seizure of property, torture or general humiliation. It left behind a shattered country, a society that was fractured and in turmoil and a devastated economy.

¹¹ Foreign Affairs, The Cultural Revolution still haunts China's Communist party (May 2016).

5 The legacy of the Cultural Revolution in China

The Cultural Revolution marked modern China deeply and its effects are still felt today.

The Cultural Revolution marked modern China deeply. At the end of this tortured period, the Chinese Communist Party was left in what a commentator describes as a state of 'paranoid disarray'.¹²

In an attempt to avoid a new Maoist-style authoritarian trend which would bring the Communist Party — and the country as a whole — to the brink of disaster, the Party elite agreed to respect strict codes of collective leadership and mandatory retirement. The system has worked relatively well, at least until the appointment of the current president, Xi Jinping (see below).

For senior members of the Party above a certain age 'the Cultural Revolution is a spectre, a living dictionary definition of *luan* or "chaos": how the party nearly destroyed itself by giving too much leeway to a dictator and letting a youth movement grow beyond control'.

Deng Xiaoping, who was himself purged twice and only later rehabilitated, well understood the risks incurred by the Party and dramatically changed the Party line, putting an end to what was known as the perpetual 'class struggle'. Under his leadership, the Party adopted a pragmatic albeit ¹³heterodox approach to the economy, giving rise to a sort of socialist capitalism. He also placed huge emphasis on lasting economic development and scientific modernisation, both of which had suffered from the rigid dogmatism of the Red Guards.

Mao's massive attacks on the party and system he had created eventually produced the opposite of what he had intended. Many Chinese lost interest in politics and turned instead to business and making money as their main centre of interest.

The Cultural Revolution also seriously damaged society's shared values and social bonds in China.

The Cultural Revolution also seriously damaged Chinese society's shared values and social bonds. China's social ethics have not recovered from the assault on the traditionally honoured values ('the Four Olds': old customs, old culture, old habits, old ideas).¹⁴

The Cultural Revolution caused a generation to be lost. Chinese in their teens and early twenties in the late 1960s were denied education and taught to redress grievances by demonstrating in the streets. There is no place for these individuals in contemporary China. An entire generation of Chinese was simply unable to adjust to this changed environment and was left to live in the margins of the society.¹⁵

However, it is also true that a number of Chinese dissidents came from the generation that was prevented from attending school or university during

¹² Foreign Affairs, The Cultural Revolution still haunts China's Communist party (May 2016).

¹³ Ibid, footnote 12.

¹⁴ The Diplomat, How China remembers the Cultural Revolution (May 2016).

¹⁵ Britannica, Cultural Revolution (2016)

the Revolution and spent instead time instead 'making the revolution' in the countryside. A commentator has noted that 'Liu Xiaobo, Hu Ping, Su Xiaokang, Zheng Yi, Liao Yiwu and many more of the most effective critics of the Communist regime had set out as ardent red youth eager to learn from the politically-advanced peasantry, were shocked by the poverty and oppression they actually found, suddenly saw communist theory as a fraud, and resolved from that moment on to think for themselves.'¹⁶

A real debate over the Cultural Revolution and its excesses has never taken place in China. In 1980, a Chinese scholar, Ba Jin, proposed the creation of a Cultural Revolution Museum. The proposal was quickly dismissed and most of the official archives of that period are no longer available for consultation. As noted by a commentator: 'To write about a brutal regime that has fallen is one thing, to write under an altered form of that very regime is quite another.'¹⁷ It is also true that unlike Stalin in the Soviet Union, Mao was the founder of the Chinese Communist state.

However, painful memories cannot be erased so easily. Though the Party prevented the Chinese people from talking about their experiences in public, the effect was to drive the memories into private spaces, with confidences unspoken or shared only with trusted friends. This resulted in an effective separation between public attitudes and private memories.

6 The Chinese new Left and nostalgia for revolutionary China

Some Chinese are feeling a growing sense of nostalgia for this revolutionary period of their recent history.

Some Chinese are experiencing a growing sense of nostalgia for this turbulent period of their recent history. It is not unusual to come across groups of middle-aged people singing old revolutionary songs. In early May 2016, a gala organised at China's National Assembly building, the Great Hall of the People, featured several old-time Maoist songs only a few days before the unmarked anniversary of the Cultural Revolution.¹⁸

Though the Chinese Communist Party's Central Committee quickly distanced itself from the performance this may suggest that even among the Chinese Communist elites represented in the National Assembly, condemnation of the Cultural Revolution not as strong as it might appear from the government-controlled newspaper editorials.

In order to preserve Mao's legacy, the Cultural Revolution has often been

¹⁶ New Bloom Magazine, A Red Star Over China? (2016).

¹⁷ Perry Link, writing in 'The Diplomat' on 16 May 2016.

Thomas Plankers, a German psychologist cited by the Economist (14 May 2016), noted that 'In the few countries where people have come to terms with dark periods in their history, historians and public intellectuals have played vital roles in overcoming the reluctance of politicians and ordinary people to talk openly. That process has not happened in China.'

¹⁸ Foreign Policy, Is China returning to the madness of the Mao's Cultural Revolution? (16 May 2016).

Leftists in contemporary China are a small minority kept under control by the Party.

depicted as a 'deviation' of the Left. Leftists in contemporary China are a small minority.¹⁹ China's New Left rose in the 1990s in opposition to China's shift away from a centrally planned economy and its return to free market principles after the Deng Xiaoping period but it remained limited in number in the years of the economic boom.

The situation may change if China's economic slowdown becomes more visible. As an analyst has pointed out: 'For many Chinese [...] gilded transformation since economic reform, memories of Mao-era social equality, the exaltation of the working class, and a national sense of common purpose are increasingly rose-coloured.'²⁰

The case of Bo Xilai demonstrates that the party is not immune to neo-Maoist temptations.

The case of the Bo Xilai, the former minister of commerce and Party secretary of Chongqing from 2007 to 2012, demonstrated that not even the Party is immune to neo-Maoist temptations. Bo Xilai was expelled from the Party and sentenced for corruption to five years' imprisonment. However many commentators believed that his fall came about because he was proposing an alternative model of development (fairer and more environmentally friendly) that was in direct contrast to the one promoted by the Central Government.²¹

7 The Cultural Revolution and Xi Jinping

The Chinese president, Xi Jinping, was himself a victim of the Cultural Revolution. As the son of one of the Mao's stricter advisers, Xi Jinping was what is known as a 'Princeling'.²² Xi's father, Xi Zhongxun, served as secretary general and vice premier of the State Council in the 1950s and 1960s and, after the end of the Cultural Revolution, as a Politburo member in the 1980s. He was one of the group of Chairman Mao's closest companions, known in China as the 'The Eight Great Eminent Officials' or the 'Eight Immortals'.

The young Xi Jinping was just 15 years old when his father was arrested on the orders of Mao. The future president of China was beaten by his classmates and exiled to the countryside. He spent six years of his life

¹⁹ The Chinese New Left project emphasises the growing disparities between rural and urban areas in modern China and the sacrifice of principles of equality to the drive toward development, and calls for a critical reevaluation of China's Maoist legacy in light of China's present — including the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution.

²⁰ New Bloom Magazine, *A Red Star Over China?* (2016).

²¹ Under the rule of Bo Xilai, Chongqing — a town of 33 million inhabitants — also underwent attempts to reintroduce 'red culture' with the promotion of the singing of 'red songs' from the Maoist era in schools, erection of statues of Mao, and encouragement of television programmes that enforced Maoist and patriotic themes.

²² The children of veteran communists, who held high-ranking offices in China before 1966, the first year of the Cultural Revolution, are commonly called 'princelings'. There are princelings by birth — sons and daughters of former high ranking officers and officials of the CCP — and princelings by marriage.

working on a collective farm located in a remote area of Yanchuan country (Central China).²³

President Xi has seldom spoken about his early years and he carefully avoids making references to the Cultural Revolution times. In an interview he released to the state-run Chinese TV channel CCTV in 2003, Xi commented that 'In the past when we talked about beliefs, it was very abstract. I think the youth of my generation will be remembered for the fervour 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.'²⁴

President Xi wants to preserve the role of the Party in China and knows that stability has to be secured at all costs.

President Xi well knows what happened when the Red Guards went out of control and the country was precipitated into a state of quasi-anarchy. He also knows that this almost destroyed the Party. Xi Jinping, along with many of his predecessors who experienced humiliation and exile during the Revolution, has developed a persistent dislike of power in the hands of the people and is obsessed with the need to maintain the country's stability at all costs.²⁵

Professor Roderick MacFarquhar commented in a recent interview on the attitude of President Xi in these terms: 'Xi Jinping said that we can't write off the Mao era, but we don't know what element of the Mao era he doesn't want to write off. We know one thing: he does not like the Cultural Revolution's spontaneity. The one thing he doesn't want is chaos. Mao had a feeling that he could control things by his Thought. He gave people the umbrella of his Thought and let them do whatever they wanted. He believed they would come to the right conclusion. But post-Mao leaders don't want this kind of disruption.'²⁶

8 Resorting to Cultural Revolution methods in contemporary Chinese politics

Xi Jinping has a vision for China as a stable, strong and 'rejuvenated' country, under the enduring leadership of the Chinese Communist Party.

Xi Jinping has a particular vision for China, of a stable, strong and 'rejuvenated' country, under the enduring leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. To achieve these goals, Xi seems to be ready to resort to at least some of the methods of the Cultural Revolution: personality cult, concentration of power in the hands of a single person and attempts to identify the party and its leader 'with a show of pride to the world'.²⁷

There is also a strong parallel (although obviously on a very different scale) between the Cultural Revolution and the recent anti-corruption campaign

²³ Niall Ferguson, China's great leap backward (published in Newsweek on 26 March 2012).

²⁴ Ibid. footnote 6.

²⁵ Susan Lawrence, The legacy of Red Guards (1996).

²⁶ The New York Times, Q. and A.: Roderick MacFarquhar on the Cultural Revolution and China Today (3 May 2016). Roderick MacFarquhar is a scholar of elite Chinese politics at Harvard University, and a leading expert on the Cultural Revolution.

²⁷ Ibid footnote 13.

launched by the Chinese president. Mao used the Red Guards officially to protect the revolution but more prosaically to defend his own political position. Xi aims to 'rejuvenate' the country and 'purify' the Party, but ultimately uses these ideological battles to make his political position stronger and gain popular support.

The deification of Chairman Mao was a feature of the Cultural Revolution. Mao's personality cult assumed religious proportions after being promoted to provide momentum for the Red Guards movement. The 'Great Helmsman' was portrayed as infallible and his 'Little Red Book', including his Revolution's sayings and slogans, become one of the most widely read books in the twentieth century.²⁸

Albeit on a much smaller scale, President Xi is also following Mao in promoting his own personality cult.

Xi Jinping has also started developing his own personality cult. Last year a new version of one of the most emblematic songs of the Cultural Revolution, 'The East is Red', was circulated on the internet. The title was changed to 'The East is Red Again' and the modified lyrics portrayed Xi as the successor to Mao: 'The sun again rises, and Xi Jinping succeeds Mao Zedong. He's striving for the people's rejuvenation. Hurrah, he is the people's great lucky star!' In March this year at the annual meeting of the National People's Congress, a Party's delegation from Tibet wore badges portraying Xi Jinping's face. During the Cultural Revolution, nobody dared leave their home without wearing a Mao button but this custom has disappeared in recent years.

President Xi, who was already the nominal head of the Chinese armed forces, has also been awarded the new title, expressly created for him, of 'Commander in Chief of the Joint Battle Command'. The Chinese president received this new honour at a ceremony in April 2016 at which he wore a military camouflage uniform. This is rather unusual in modern China since the ruling classes gradually abandoned the uniform-style attire adorned with a red star so common during the Revolution.

Xi uses some of the methods of the Cultural Revolution to reinforce his political position and achieve his goals.

President Xi believes that his objectives can be attained more easily if he adopts a strongman posture. Xi has used the Cultural Revolution methods effectively in pursuing his long-standing battle against corruption. Rather than making the system more transparent and based on the rule of law, Xi has preferred to channel people's anger against rivals in the Party who have been accused either of being corrupt or of having tolerated the corruption that spread in the provinces and municipalities under their responsibility.

Similarly, Xi has increased his personal power and the hold of the Party over Chinese society, which had in recent years become more open and pluralist. Control of the media, severe censorship and suppression of dissent are being enforced with renewed vigour and extended means. Xi's aim is to pursue the ideological purity of the party and the country by 'reminding the artists, journalists and academics to serve the party and avoid even the mild

²⁸ Instituto Elcano, La Revolución Cultural y la China actual (25 May 2016)

criticisms that have been largely tolerated for decades'.

9 Conclusions

The legacy of the Cultural Revolution is still felt in modern China in many ways but it is unlikely that a similar event will happen.

The effect of the Cultural Revolution was to call into question and ultimately destroy the values that had been at the core of Chinese civilisation for centuries.

Xi's decision to resort to Cultural Revolution methods seems to be a pragmatic response by the Party to the new challenges posed by a rapidly changing China.

The Cultural Revolution's legacy is still felt in modern China in many ways today. However the country has changed radically since the years of the 'Red Terror' and a resurgence of movements similar to the one that marked the country's recent history so profoundly is not likely. The Party seems to have learned the lesson and knows that another crisis of the sort triggered by Mao's quest for a 'greater order under heaven' would spell the end of the Communist Party's rule over China. The Chinese masses do not seem ready to rise up again for the 'revolution' and put an end to what has been one of the most impressive periods of economic development in history.

The legacy left by the Cultural Revolution's is that the Chinese people lost faith in the government and turned their back on politics in order to focus instead on business. The Cultural Revolution also had the enduring effect of calling into question and ultimately destroying the values that had been at the core of Chinese civilisation for centuries.

Nonetheless, President Xi has decided to resort to some of the methods used during the Cultural Revolution to achieve his own goals. This has led many commentators correctly to draw some parallels between the Cultural Revolution and the Xi's fight against corruption. But there are also fundamental differences. Xi's aim is to reinforce his role and the role of the Party in China and the role of China abroad, whereas Mao sought to defend his utopian vision of the Revolution and defend his posthumous memory.

Xi's decision to use Cultural Revolution methods is more likely to signal that the Party is seeking to provide a pragmatic response to the new challenges posed by a rapidly changing China. Reasserting control over the media and playing the card of nationalism in foreign policy are both expressions of the political pragmatism that characterised the Communist Party's leadership in the period that followed Mao.

Nonetheless, the unprecedented concentration of power in the hands of Xi and his growing personality cult may suggest that, unless kept under tight control, this new trend could lead to an increasingly authoritarian and much less liberal China in future.

Any attempt to block any change that calls the status quo into question is dangerous because, as the Cultural Revolution demonstrated, it is not easy to reverse major historic processes of transformation, like the one China is currently experiencing. The then Chinese premier, Wen Jiabao, in a rare moment of candour, cautioned in 2012 that without effective political reforms, 'such historical tragedies as the Cultural Revolution may happen again in China.'