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IS THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION RELEVANT IN MODERN CHINA?

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The short answer is "yes" to two things: charismatic leadership within the Chinese Communist Party, and dealing with democracy

“Had Mao died in 1956, his achievement would have been immortal. Had he died in 1966, he would still have been a great man but flawed. But he died in 1976. Alas, what can one say?” That was the view of Chen Yun, one of China most senior leaders and a contemporary of Mao Zedong.

Indeed, Mao in 1956 would only be seven years removed from the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) following over a century of humiliation at the hands of European powers. Two years later, Mao launched the Great Leap Forward which caused the deaths of an estimated 30 million Chinese. Add to that the trail of destruction and displacement that the Cultural Revolution wrought, and one gets the idea of Mao's mixed legacy.

“Deng Xiaoping said, ‘Never again a charismatic Mao,’” recalls the University of British Columbia's **Timothy Cheek**. “Mao had all the power because the entire Central Committee believed in him so much. Deng wanted to make sure nobody would have that much power within the party.”

The legacy and lessons of the Cultural Revolution

Deng, who eventually became as powerful as Mao, helped abolish the post of Party Chairman in 1982 to stave off the possibility of one man ever wielding – and abusing – the kind of power Mao had. Current Chinese President Xi Jinping is sometimes called “Chairman Xi” in reference to his position as Chairman of the Central Military Commission, and enjoys a level of popularity that draws comparison to Mao. What would Deng make of all this?

“Deng Xiaoping was not adverse to some popular cult of personality,” Cheek told *Perspectives @SMU*. “He was concerned that it shouldn't take root in the party. He was ok for there to be a popular face for the public. He wanted to make sure it wasn't possible for any one person to overturn the Central Committee.”

"Mao had all the power because the entire Central Committee believed in him so much. Deng wanted to make sure nobody would have that much power within the party."

In essence, that is a major legacy of the Cultural Revolution, which left political institutions in tatters. Deng sought to and succeeded in strengthening the power of the Politburo and the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC). Votes are now cast at the National Party Congress to elect who becomes part of the Central Committee, the Politburo, and the all-powerful seven-man Politburo Standing Committee. Despite Xi Jinping's perceived power, decision-making at the top is still very much a collective endeavour.

The other legacy of the Cultural Revolution, Cheek says, is China's relationship with democracy. "It's taught the people they can criticise the government," Cheek explains, "Chairman Mao taught them that. It's taught them to name injustice and blame the perpetrator. Mao wanted them to blame the Four Olds, but the people ended up blaming the Communist Party."

The Cultural Revolution's contribution to democracy in China

The "Four Olds", namely old customs, culture, habits, and ideas, were the official reasons for China's economic backwardness. Mao associated the Four Olds with those who showed bourgeois tendencies, which often meant the urban elite. While he purged Party members whom he thought displayed bourgeois behaviour during the Cultural Revolution, students – who evolved into the Red Guards – took up his call to "smash the old world and establish the new world".

Part of Mao's strategy in the Cultural Revolution was the "rustification of educated youth" (下乡知识青年) in sending former Red Guards and urban youth into the countryside to learn from the farmers. While the main objective was to disband the growing mob that was menacing Beijing at the time, Mao had hoped it would connect the youth of China with the vast rural majority of the Chinese population.

Mao could arguably point to Qin Hui (秦晖) as an example of what the policy was meant to achieve. The son of government officials who was sent to live in rural Guangxi province for nine years, Qin made his way back to qualify for university and has since become a strong advocate for social justice for China's rural and urban poor.

"You have approximately 10 million such folks, of whom a small number fought their way back into the exams in 1978 to top position," says Cheek of Qin, who now teaches at the prestigious Tsinghua University in Beijing. "What's the point? The point is: he was fundamentally transformed in a way that Mao wanted. Mao wanted urban people to understand the true plight of rural folks and the dignity of manual labour. Qin Hui got it.

"What he also got was that it was ok to criticise the party. Before 1966, you just couldn't do that. Mao forever changed Chinese politics by showing that it was possible to criticise the party, and this has made Chinese politics more vibrant."

Black cat, white cat, good cat

The Cultural Revolution, says Cheek, built the foundations for democracy in China by "building independent thought, the conviction to stand up to speak one's mind, and partially to show how bad government can be without democracy". While it failed to solve the two big issues that still

haunt China – the income gap and corruption by party officials – blindly implementing the Western model of a liberal democracy would not work in China.

“Now the Chinese who want to make China better say, ‘The Communist Party is full of mistakes but the Helsinki model isn’t all it’s cracked up to be either,’” quips Cheek. “The capitalist model may be discredited but it doesn’t mean it’s useless. Just because the West is no longer the gold standard doesn’t mean that law and private property are bad things. It means you have to choose very selectively. You do not adopt one system or another.”

In other words, it would be quite similar to what Deng said in 1961 in the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward: “It doesn’t matter if it’s a black cat or a white cat, if it catches mice it is a good cat.”

Timothy Cheek is the Director of the Centre for Chinese Research, Institute of Asian Research at the University of British Columbia. He was the speaker at the SMU Wee Kim Wee Centre event, "China's Cultural Revolution and Its Contemporary Significance" that was held on February 10, 2015.