

Charlie Lee. What does Mao's legacy teach us about how Xi Jinping Thought will shape China?

Introduction:

Xi Jinping has become the most powerful man in China since Mao Zedong, and many would argue that his ambitions are to surpass the dominance of Mao's governance over China (the Guardian, 2022). Xi grew up under Mao's rule during the Cultural Revolution and personally experienced the chaos and riots. The Cultural Revolution, which led to a death toll of around 1.6 million people (De Witte, 2019), was denounced by the CCP in 1981 as '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' (digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org, n.d.). Thereafter, measures such as retirement age for high officials and term limits were introduced to prevent centralised leadership and power.

After coming into power in 2012, Xi Jinping swept all those measures away and rose to a position of absolute power, leading to a concentration of power that resembles Mao's. One of the ways Xi has established his power is through the Xi Jinping Thought, a doctrine of his ideology, which is taught nationwide throughout primary school till university (Al Jazeera, 2021). This has brought parallels of similarity to the Little Red Book, which was Mao's way of spreading his ideology, and whether history shows that this may become a threat to China in the future.

Summary of Documentary:

Jie Hu's documentary *Though I am Gone* focuses on the horrors of the Cultural Revolution, through one of the early victims of the Cultural Revolution. Bian Zhongyun had been a respected party secretary and vice principal working at one of Beijing's elite girls' middle schools. However, Bian was beaten to death horrifically on the 5th of August, 1966 after Mao encouraged students to challenge 'intellectuals' under the guise that the bourgeoisie was threatening the fundamental socialist beliefs that Mao had, revealing the breakdown in society where students inflicted devastating pain and torture to their elders. This documentary also explores some of the propaganda used by Mao, creating an atmosphere of hostility and distrust, such as public announcements that would say that "Mao's thesis was completely correct and that the bourgeoisie was still trying to use old ideas such as culture, customs and habits of exploiting classes to corrupt the masses." (Hu, 2007), depicting the cult-like influence and trance that Mao held over the population, and the devastating consequences that centralised power and ideological control can have.

Reaction:

My reaction to watching this documentary was a combination of disbelief and horror at how the students could act so cruelly and beat their teachers to death, under the authority of one

man. It also reminded me of a psychology study about obedience, called ‘Milgram’s theory’, which tested how obedient ordinary individuals would act under a figure of authority, even if it causes harm to someone. Milgram’s results showed that around two-thirds of the participants continued to the highest level of potential harm to someone and are willing to cause harm if they bear no responsibility (McLeod, 2024). This study shows that under the authority of a leader, individuals have the capacity to rise to horrible extremities, which was evident in the Cultural Revolution, where the Red Guard shared this relationship with Mao, who directly told them to be violent (Hu, 2007). In comparison, Xi’s use of propaganda and the Xi Thought could have the same influence over the Chinese people, with unwavering obedience to his decision-making.

Analysis:

Xi’s focus on ideological control draws comparison to Mao, where Mao cultivated the people of China with his Little Red Book. The Little Red Book included 267 quotes from Mao Zedong about his views on class struggles and his ideologies. The Chinese youth used this as a thought of radicalisation and centred their thinking around this book and Mao himself. During the Cultural Revolution, the Little Red Book was seen as the key to survival, as the Red Guard would use it as a barometer of whether those who were counter-revolutionary could quote from it (Cathcart, 2015). In a similar vein, the ‘Xi Jinping Thought’ was first introduced in 2017 at the 19th National Congress of the CCP and included in the constitution, further consolidating his ideology and indoctrinating his words into the education curriculum nationwide, ensuring that his Thought is aligned across all generations. It would seem that Xi drew inspiration from Mao to ensure that his fundamental beliefs and ideologies were widespread across the country to retain control over his political views and strategy.

The ideologies between Mao’s Little Red Book and Xi’s Thought differ slightly. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao rallied the Red Guard to attack the party from the outside. While Mao’s ideologies focused on class struggles and that power came from the will of the people, meaning that the ‘intellectuals’ and officials of the party were constantly monitored and challenged (Morgan, 2015, pp.656–662), Xi Jinping’s Thought promotes Nationalism, where it targets both internal and external enemies (Gries, 2024). He emphasises the vision of “One country, One people, One ideology, One party, One leader” which requires everyone in China to buy into the idea that their purpose is for the greater good of China (Tsang, 2024). Xi believed that the way to run the country successfully was to have a heavily unified party, with top-down control (Frisch, 2024).

Xi’s desire for ideological unity has led him to resort to forms of coercion rather than persuasion to solidify his power (Gries, 2024). Jack Ma, one of the wealthiest men in China and founder of Alibaba, criticised financial regulation in China as ‘outdated’ in 2020. This led to Ma not being seen in public for the next 3 months and his company was forced to cancel a planned IPO, leading to the company’s value dropping by nearly £54 billion (Gries, 2024). This shutdown of Alibaba and Ma’s reputation was a peek at the wider political agenda that Xi had created, ensuring that the CCP had control over the sector that had the

potential to undermine Xi, and sent the message that business leaders should place the nation above their own business needs (Gries, 2024). This has led to worries that the country is returning to the ideologies of the 1950s, where the capitalist mindset was thought of as having weaknesses and flaws (Yuan, 2020), drawing comparison to Mao's authoritarian needs of having ideological compliance across all sectors.

In areas where there is opposition and protest, the introduction of the National Security Law in Hong Kong and accusations of genocide against the Uyghurs in Xinjiang have led to concerns that the CCP are violating human rights and using repression to consolidate power (Doan, 2023). This shows Xi's willingness to use violence and heavy repression to silence and eliminate opposition, echoing Mao's use of force in the Cultural Revolution, which can consolidate power, but risks alienating and destabilising the country.

Xi's zero-covid policy in 2022 showed frailties in his ideology. The policy's harsh implications were met with increasing public dissatisfaction, with 277 protests against the policy nationwide, revealing the consequences of having one key decision-maker for policies that affect millions of people (Hale and Peñafuerte, 2022). In a country with such a large population, it is impossible to have everyone buy into his 'China first' policy (Garrrick, 2024). With Xi having all this power, anyone in the party who questions him or disagrees with his policies risks punishment and being labelled a dissident (Doan, 2023). The danger that the Xi Thought exposes to China is that any action that he makes as the key and only decision-maker may not be in the people's best interests. History suggests that leaders with this much power could lead to unprecedented chaos, as Mao's decision-making caused the Great Leap Forward, which led to a famine that killed tens of millions of people, and the Cultural Revolution was also labelled a severe setback, with no heavy repercussions on Mao as he was the leader supreme.

On the other hand, the Xi Thought has strengthened the CCP and the people's nationalistic pride. Xi's rise to power allowed him to stamp out corruption, with nearly 5 million in the party being investigated (AP NEWS, 2022), and some view his assertive foreign policy, also known as the 'Wolf-Warrior diplomacy', as a way to make the country powerful again. Xi's ambitions are thought to be to restore China to its rightful place (Frisch, 2024), and to have the whole nation supporting his idea of nationalistic pride via the Xi Thought could help him pursue those ambitions.

Conclusion:

To conclude, whether the Xi Thought will become a threat to China heavily relies on balancing Xi's ideological ambitions with the needs of the people, and how he evolves. Although it has helped make the CCP more dominant and united the party, by stamping out corruption, it has also received pushback from the people of China, causing tension by his form of coercion rather than persuasion. If Xi fails to make the right decisions, it could lead to social unrest and stunted economic development. History shows that with centralised power at the top, the likelihood of poor decisions can increase and lead to disastrous results,

such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, but can also help create a sense of obedience and loyalty. While Mao's China descended into chaos, the fate of China's future solely relies on whether Xi can get the balance right between his own ambitions and the people's needs, without repeating Mao's past mistakes.

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