

# Xi Jinping's War on Everything

by Phillip Orchard - September 7, 2021

Each August, the Communist Party of China's top powerbrokers slip away for a super-secret conclave at a beachfront resort in the city of Beidaihe. The event tends to spark China's annual political silly season, marked by wild speculation about winner-take-all **power struggles** and imminent challenges to the omnipotence of President Xi Jinping, who sometimes fans the flames by mysteriously **disappearing from state media** for a few weeks. There's even the occasional rumor of running **gun battles** in the streets of Beijing. In years like this one – that is, ones that precede the CPC's all-important semi-decennial Party Congresses – the rumor mill tends to get extra spicy.

This year, though, Xi is making the silliness more serious. The summer was already running hot thanks to Beijing's belligerent celebrations of the CPC's 100th birthday, to say nothing of its **offensives** targeting the tech and private education sectors. Since the Beidaihe conclave (believed to have been held about three weeks ago), Xi has shifted focus to perceived cultural scourges ranging from video game addiction to celebrity worship to the evils of **botox-addled capitalists**. This has been accompanied by a conspicuous surge of neo-Maoist rhetoric in state media, the zeitgeist encapsulated by one widely promoted essay describing his crackdowns as “a profound revolution ... a return to the essence of socialism” – proclaiming, in essence, that “the red has returned.”

Is this more of the same, or is something driving China toward a second Cultural Revolution?

## Go Big

Xi has been pushing an ambitious reform agenda since he first took power in 2012. The widely shared recognition among CPC powerbrokers that the party would not survive without a strongman at the helm – one capable of picking and winning fights against entrenched interests and the wealthy, of rooting out endemic corruption in the regulatory machine and the military – is partly what allowed Xi to **amass** so much power so quickly in the first place. And Xi's approach to governing a state as large and unwieldy as China has generally been to test the limits of how much one man and his inner circle can effectively **micromanage**.

The bulk of Xi's reforms have been motivated by one of two things. One set could be described as sound policies aimed at heading off one of the many potential existential crises keeping party

leaders awake at night – a cascading **financial collapse**, environmental collapse, corruption and institutional rot, and so on. The other set has been aimed purely at cementing the CPC's control over just about every critical **lever of power**, including propaganda, the dispensation of prosperity, and the People's Liberation Army.

The latest campaign, though, is focused on reforming Chinese culture itself. Judging by the sheer number of domestic targets in the CPC's crosshairs, there's quite a bit preventing China from, to borrow from the aforementioned essay, "controlling all the cultural chaos" and developing a "lively, healthy, masculine, strong and people-oriented culture."

There are, to start, the money-grubbing ways of China's wealthy capitalists – those resisting a "transformation from the capital at the center to people at the center." Since July, Xi and state media have been banging the drum about "common prosperity." There's fire behind the rhetorical smoke here: A number of new policies targeting "excessive incomes" are reportedly in the pipeline, and the recent tech crackdown illustrated just how far Beijing is willing to go to bring them into line. High-profile Chinese conglomerates have evidently been spooked; charitable donations have **soared** over the past month.

There's also the influence of Western culture, with Beijing introducing new policies tightening its grip on the entertainment sector and clamping down on social media **adulation of celebrities** (at least one of whom is also being publicly targeted for tax evasion). Artists who don't "meet political or moral standards" will be banned from transitional broadcasters and streaming platforms. On Sept. 2, Chinese regulators ordered entertainment programs to reject "sissy pants" celebrities, going out of their way to denounce the pernicious influence of effeminate men.

And then there's education. Beijing effectively wiped out the lucrative private tutoring industry in July by requiring most companies to convert to nonprofits. This was meant partly to ensure equal access to education regardless of social class. It was also motivated by Beijing's long-held desire to control what the kids are learning these days. Beginning this month, the president's eponymous ideology – "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" – will start being taught in lower levels of primary school. (To make the impossibly dry doctrine more interesting to grade schoolers, it's being **reframed** as "Grandpa Xi's" wisdom on being good party- and country-loving citizens.) And last month, Beijing banned minors from playing video games on school nights and all but a few hours on the weekend.

## Or Go Home

Combined with state media's promotion of inflammatory Maoist articles, all this has sparked concern over whether a second Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution is taking shape. The first one, which Mao launched in 1966 as a way to cling to power, killed hundreds of thousands of people and basically set modernization of the Chinese economy and state back a full generation. The fear that Xi's assiduous cultivation of a Mao-like personality cult (now strictly forbidden in the CPC's constitution) will give him the power to burn down the system in order to save it is understandable.

To be sure, there are some similarities between now and then. Both Mao and Xi have demonstrated a willingness to sacrifice economic growth for the party's power. Like Mao, Xi appears to have few qualms about **scapegoating** the rich and tagging them as capitalist, counterrevolutionary servants of the West. Both believe firmly in the power and importance of ideology and the corrosive potential of foreign influences. Both have had good reason to assume their power is never quite as secure as it appears, and both understand that catering to the masses at the expense of coastal elites is a good way to get what you want.

But there are also some important **differences**. For one, it's doubtful that this is any sort of bid by Xi to reclaim lost power or head off a major internal challenge. The opposite was the case with Mao, who was sliding toward mere figurehead status in 1966 after the **disasters** of the Great Leap Forward had come to light. With Xi widely expected to buck precedent and stick around for a third term as party secretary at next year's Party Congress – or even promote himself to some higher rank – continued grumblings about his consolidation of power from some corners of the party elite are inevitable. But it's nearly impossible at this point for any faction to take him down without putting the party itself at **serious risk**.

Meanwhile, there are signs that Xi is attempting to prevent the cultural reform push from getting out of hand. Accompanying the calls for “common prosperity” in state media, for example, have been a number of articles aimed at assuaging the worst fears of China’s business community. Taken comprehensively, the message has effectively been: We don’t think being rich is bad and in fact want more people to be rich. Just do it on our terms, or else. This is very much in line with Xi’s philosophy, which sees markets as important and merely in need of oversight. Notably, state media edited out some of the most inflammatory parts of one prominent neo-Maoist essay (including a line describing recently targeted tech giants like Ant Group and Didi as foreign agents opposed to the people). And, for the first time, Xi, whose own father was purged and sent to work in a factory in the 1960s, appeared to implicitly denounce the Cultural Revolution, albeit quietly in the form of a footnote in one of the new primary school textbooks espousing his grandfatherly thoughts.

In reality, there’s probably not all that much new to see here. It’s doubtful that this is a desperate play by Xi to save himself and extend his reign ahead of the Party Congress, nor is there much reason to believe he’d wipe out the economy for the sake of party purity. It’s merely his latest flex in the service of several long-held goals, particularly finding a way to govern China and curb existential threats to its stability **without snuffing out its dynamism**. To date, he’s tried to do this mostly by micromanaging China through sheer force of will. This makes it so no amount of power will ever be enough for Xi. A government can only do so much. So he seems bent on getting the public, broadly speaking, to march to the same tune and get in the habit of reforming itself without being asked.

If there’s an added sense of urgency to the campaign, it’s because Beijing has good reason to think conditions are perpetually ripe for rapid deterioration. China has entered a prolonged slowdown in economic growth as the model that fueled its rise runs out of steam, and untold numbers of Chinese citizens are still **very poor**. Relations with the most important buyers of Chinese products and underwriters of Chinese investment, meanwhile, are quite likely to **worsen**, and a full-on clash with the U.S. and its friends can’t be ruled out. Given the magnitude of the pressures his country is facing, from both inside and out, Xi is pushing for a China that’s fully behind him when the time comes for painful decisions or an unavoidable period of severe deprivation. In Xi’s China, in other words, the next crisis is always, inevitably, just **around the corner**. This is no country for sissy pants.

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