

Party Over in China as Communist Party Takes Back Control

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China’s second cultural revolution is hitting the brakes. This one is not about Mao’s little red book but TV remote controls, fridges, cars, mobile phones, and yes, most important, property, the trappings of the modern age, admittedly more apparent in the east of the country but aspired to greatly in the less-developed west.

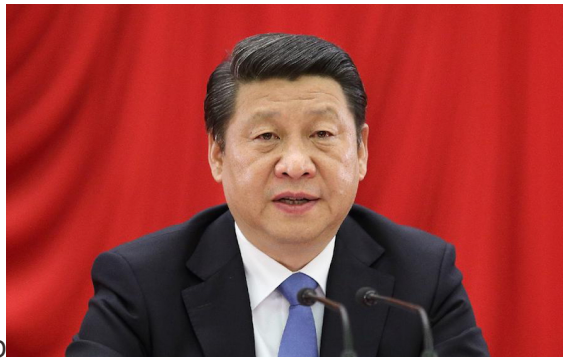
Four decades of turbo-charged growth have given way to Xi Jinping thought. Enough is enough. Total party supremacy is what matters now.

This ushers in the profits, not of doom, but slow growth. Entrepreneurs will feel the party’s wrath unless they heed it in every respect. Consequently, party cadres, with no business experience, have and will have a greater say in corporate decision making.

Deng Xiaoping launched China’s pro-market reforms in the late 1970s specifically to avoid this scenario. He knew party interference stifled innovation. Deng grasped that the country was destitute because it was isolated from the world. Deng and his successors lifted controls on private investment, trade, foreign business, travel, education and almost every aspect of society.

The booster rockets were ignited. Growth and wealth followed, albeit in an unbalanced way with the east coast benefitting most. Politics and profit, commerce and communism, could co-exist, or so it seemed.

Xi takes a different line. The booster rockets have been jettisoned. The West’s version of commerce, albeit more honored in the breach, sees the customer as king, has boards that are answerable, offers choices (except for online mega-corporations), would only serve to nurture conditions where one day the party itself would face questioning and criticism. If people felt they had a right to question commercial decisions then they may well feel



emboldened to question the party's policies.

Now state-owned enterprises, inefficient and top heavy, have more bank loans granted, while private companies have seen their market expansion slow.

Even the Covid response plays into this narrative. Not since the cultural revolution, the one of the little red book, have foreigners got such a bad press in China. Americans (accused by Chinese media of denying science and being obsessed with individual rights at the cost of society) are portrayed as too selfish, divided, and ignorant to fight the virus. Prime time TV news delights in images of mask-less Westerners on crowded beaches and streets or at anti-lockdown protests.

Chinese officials are fired if a case is discovered and whole cities can be plunged into lockdown, much stricter than the version in the west.

The government fosters a sense of grievance among the people that they are not getting the praise they think they deserve from the West for tackling Covid. This feeling of being scorned adds fuel to the propaganda fire. US politicians are accused of China-bashing to cover up their own incompetence and (in excess of) 600,000 pandemic deaths.

What is not covered on the TV news or any news is where the virus originated from and how it first became widespread.

But events can sometimes take unexpected turns. One fact rarely commented on in the West and never mentioned in China is how many people are leaving. In the 1960s, tens of thousands of people, not surprisingly, fled China's cultural revolution. That was at a time when passports were hard to get. As the country stabilized, that number dropped. The number is rising rapidly once again.

From 2012 and 2020 when the West was recovering from the financial crisis and China was booming, the annual number of asylum-seekers from China rose from 15,362 to 107,864, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Since Xi took power at the end of 2012, 613,000 Chinese nationals have applied for asylum in another country. The majority, about 70 percent, sought a new life in America. More freedom, protecting their wealth and a better quality of life are the main, and obvious, reasons for the exodus.

Xi wants the party to work harder to ensure its grip on power. Part of this is to make sure that China can stand on its own if the US launches a fully-fledged economic war against it. But China, within living memory, has stood on its own. Something is amiss when such a scenario repeating itself is even the vaguest of possibilities.

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