



China Erases History, Again

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Seven years ago, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) warned its members to "forcefully resist influential and harmful false tides of thought." The memorandum, entitled "Document 9," was heavy on theory and light on specifics. In the wake of the coronavirus, however, we're beginning to see the implications of Xi Jinping's instruction to win the ideological battlefield.

In response to a recent directive from China's Ministry of Education, schools across the People's Republic of China (PRC) are purging their libraries of "illegal" or "inappropriate" books—meaning anything that, in the Party's view, damages national unity, threatens the party's sovereignty, destabilizes social order, breaks with CCP policies, defames government officials or promotes religious doctrine. Notably, books about Christianity and Buddhism and the classics of George Orwell's cannon—*Animal Farm* and *1984*—have already received the axe in some schools.

Book bans naturally hearken back to particularly dark episodes in the 20th century, and not just in Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union. The CCP has its own heritage of frenzied book-burning sessions, particularly during Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution, the most tumultuous and unstable period of Chinese history since 1949. Mao's methods during the Cultural Revolution, impulsive as they were, contextualize Xi's far more disciplined campaign today to control the speech and behavior of both Chinese citizens and foreign governments.

After the disaster of the CCP's "Great Leap Forward"—Mao's ill-begotten attempt to industrialize China's economy that starved to death 45 million people—the "Great Helmsman" hatched a plan to turn the people against his political opponents. Mao announced a campaign against "rightists," "counterrevolutionaries" and the "bourgeoisie"—anyone who stood in the way of "socialism with Chinese characteristics." Importantly, Mao never defined these targets, for they were always changing. No association, status or heritage guaranteed safety for anyone in China. What guaranteed right standing one week, such as blood relation to CCP political elites, could spell doom the next. This chaos resulted, in the words of historian Frank Dikötter, in "loss of trust and predictability in human relations, as people turned against each other."

Mao's primary agents during this decade of disaster were college students across China. These "Red Guards," deputized by Mao or his subordinates, carried out the program of ideological purification with implicit approval from Beijing to shame, torture and even kill anyone they deemed a threat to the Revolution. Rivaling groups of Red Guards even turned against each other, as definitions of "friend" and "foe" shifted.

One thing, however, never changed. Fealty to Mao Zedong alone was the only safe expression of speech in China—whether in the form of posters of his likeness, or banners and books quoting his speeches. With this cult of personality, Mao took a wrecking ball to China's pre-revolutionary past and created a society where safety and survival only came by swearing allegiance to him, the CCP and the Revolution.

What then, does the Cultural Revolution mean for Xi Jinping's China today? After all, China isn't in a similar period of political upheaval; far from it. If anything, Xi Jinping has taken every precaution to eliminate ideological threats to the CCP *before* they metastasize. "Document 9" reads less like a Revolution manifesto and more like a threat assessment. Even so, Xi's campaign to erase knowledge and whitewash truth itself, both within China and around the world, echoes Mao's grisly melody.

With his recent book ban campaign, Xi is deputizing teachers to implement the library purges under vague guidelines. Although the program is new, the incentive is clear: a "race to the bottom," where schools seek to outdo each other in censorship. Just as Mao tasked college students to carry out the Cultural Revolution, Xi has assigned teachers to compile a burn list. This instance is a microcosm of the game Xi wants to play, at least with China's Han population—cooperative censorship, implemented by the Chinese people themselves.

Globally, the CCP's United Front Work Department carries out a similar function—shaping the discourse about China favorably, and using foreigners to advance the Party's political interests. Confucius Institutes are the poster child of this strategy: infiltrate American universities with Mandarin language programs, supplemented with "cultural" history that whitewashes any mention of Tibet, Taiwan, Xinjiang, Tiananmen Square or even the Cultural Revolution itself. Any university that violates this speech code risks losing Chinese student researchers, and even funding from the PRC.

Recent suggestions in Congress to sanction United Front organizations stem from a simple recognition: The global information dominance that the CCP pursues is an existential threat to the First Amendment. The party banning books in China is the same party that tore its own country apart for 10 years, and now it is trying to redefine truth itself in America's own schools.

If the American people are not vigilant and awake to this threat, George Orwell's words of *1984*, which eerily describe China's Cultural Revolution, could come true in our own universities: "Every record has been destroyed or falsified, every book rewritten, every picture has been repainted, every statue and street building has been renamed, every date has been altered. And the process is continuing day by day and minute by minute. History has stopped. Nothing exists except an endless present in which the Party is always right."

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