



Mao's Revolution Threatens Xi's 'China Dream'

August 29, 2021 **Michael Sobolik** *The National Interest*

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; China

In early August, two Chinese Olympians raised eyebrows in Tokyo when they took the podium at the event's medal ceremony. In apparent violation of Olympic rules, Bao Shanju and Zhong Tianshi displayed a political symbol: pins bearing the silhouette of Mao Zedong. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) announced an investigation into the matter, but the initial reaction from Chinese state-controlled media was supportive. The hawkish tabloid *Global Times* exclaimed "Look! Chairman Mao is on the chest of champions," and the post went viral on Weibo (China's version of Twitter).

Yet, six hours later, *The Daily Beast* reports, the Weibo post disappeared. China's state television channel, CCTV, followed suit, editing out the Mao badges from its replay footage. Even more surprising was China's quiet cooperation with the IOC regarding the incident. A week later, the committee announced that it had received a "clarification" from Beijing and that Chinese athletes "have been warned." Just like that, the case was closed.

But the episode is a curious one. After all, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) hasn't exactly cultivated a reputation of norm-following of late. From ignoring the 2016 UN tribunal ruling over the South China Sea territorial disputes to inserting spyware into the African Union's headquarters and obfuscating coronavirus investigations, Beijing has been quick to throw its weight around on the world stage in recent years. And China's aggressive "Wolf Warrior" diplomats have taken this temerity to new heights, with the implicit blessing of President (and party boss) Xi Jinping.

It is stranger still, given that Maoist rhetoric has become a regular tool for China's leaders—one that he has used to great effect to rally nationalist sentiment and justify a confrontational stance on the world stage. Why, then, was the CCP so quick to cooperate with the IOC in the most recent dispute, and distance itself from Mao in the process? The answer may lie in the fact that, for Xi, Maoism has become something of a double-edged sword.

To be sure, in the past Xi has sought to rehabilitate the "Great Helmsman," and literally copy-pasted Mao's cult-of-personality playbook to secure his hold on power. But Maoism is also giving voice to millions of Chinese who increasingly wonder whether Xi's "China Dream" applies to them.

Even as China's economy has boomed over the past three decades, income inequality has bedeviled the nation. Since the 1970s, the income gap between China's "haves" and "have-nots" has grown to the point that in 2018 an International Monetary Fund working paper labeled China "among the most unequal countries in the world." Today, roughly six hundred million Chinese—nearly double America's population—live off a monthly income of \$140. But even for those lucky enough to work for big tech companies like Tencent or Alibaba, the grueling work hours and overtime aren't translating into staples of prosperity like homeownership.

The resulting populist frustration is fueling Mao's bottom-up comeback, to the point that CCP officials have arrested Maoist activists, canceled a Maoist conference tied to the Party's centenary, and—to come full circle—silenced the political speech of China's own Olympians. For Xi and his allies, Mao was a useful historical figure to justify their political ambitions. For millions of young Chinese, however, Mao is a symbol of a revolution and class struggle that remains unfinished.

All this may explain why, in recent years, Xi has begun toning down pro-Mao rhetoric and instead boosting Confucius, China's civilizational voice of hierarchical submission to authority. This swap serves the interests of political elites like Xi, who now need the people to settle down, learn their place, and trust the Party.

Therein lies Xi's political conundrum. He cannot be a revolutionary like Mao, because the Chinese Communist Party is no longer an insurgent organization. It is the sole proprietor of political power in China and is thus in the business of self-preservation. Thus far, stoking nationalism has worked well enough for the Party, but if the Chinese people begin to demand more from their government, all bets are off. Xi will forestall that day for as long as he can, even if he needs to resort to petty photoshopping.