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Reflections on the July 1, 2021, Centenary of the Chinese Communist Party Part One: Centenary Propaganda and Chinese Socialism with Xi Jinping Characteristics

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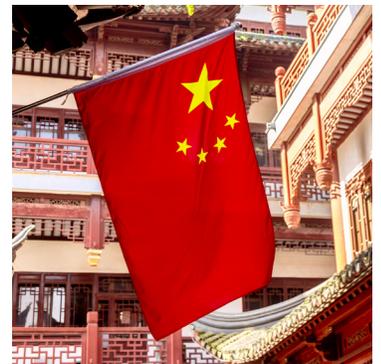
“Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world–historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.”

—Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*¹

Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), President of the People’s Republic of China, and Chairman of the Central Military Commission, is indisputably just such a “world–historic personage.” To see how powerful he is, one need only look at China’s main state newspapers in recent years to see days when the entire front page was covered with stories about what Xi Jinping thinks about this issue or that policy, or watch state television news to see report after report about Xi Jinping’s speeches and travels throughout China. Xi is widely believed to be China’s new leader for life, having eliminated or marginalized his rivals at the top of the party, so much so that he has no obvious successors, and he has already paved the way to become general secretary for at least a third five–year term at the National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in November 2022. Xi has directed state propaganda to refer to him as the ideological “Core Leader” of the Chinese Communist Party, thereby creating the perception that he should be viewed as the legitimate ideological successor of the People’s Republic of China’s

greatest leader, Chairman Mao Zedong, originator of the Chinese Marxism known as Maoism. Unlike his predecessors at the 80th and 90th anniversaries of the founding of the CCP, who gave their addresses in the nearby gigantic Great Hall of the People, on July 1, Xi took full advantage of the COVID precautions requiring large gatherings to be held outdoors to hold his centenary speech looking down from atop the Gate of Heavenly Peace, wearing the same grey Sun Yatsen suit that Mao was wearing in the giant portrait hanging just below him. He looked out across tens of thousands of cheering party members in the giant square below to the enormous Mausoleum of Mao in the distance. Observing all of this outsized pageantry and brutalist symbolism must make learned Chinese Marxists wonder, however—following Marx’s famous invocation of Hegel’s notion of the role of historic personages—is Xi Jinping the tragedy, or is Xi Jinping the farce?

Marx famously wrote *The Eighteenth Brumaire* in 1852 to explain how what appeared to start with great promise as a socialist revolution in 1848—with workers in Paris rising up to overthrow a



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corrupt and dysfunctional republic—was in the end to become tragically and unexpectedly a successful coup d'état by the ne'er-do-well nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte: “The constitution, the National Assembly, the dynastic parties, the blue and red republicans, the heroes of Africa, the thunder from the platform, the sheet lightning of the daily press, the entire literature, the political names and the intellectual reputations, the civil law and the penal code, *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, and the second Sunday in May, 1852—all have vanished like a phantasmagoria before the spell of a man whom even his enemies do not make out to be a sorcerer.” Louis Bonaparte outlasted the protesting masses, the constitutionalists, the republicans, and other powerful forces to eventually make himself Emperor Napoleon III of France's Second Empire. He may indeed have not been a sorcerer, but he was, after all, a Bonaparte. More importantly, he was a Bonaparte in a nation that could remember the glorious victories of his uncle while at the same time, inexplicably, forgetting the tragedy of the epic Napoleonic defeats. The selective memory that recalled Pope Pius VII traveling from Rome to crown Napoleon Bonaparte emperor in Notre Dame, and then *La Grande Armée*—bearing the imperial standard of red, white, and blue surrounding a Romanesque eagle beneath a crown—marching through the capitals of the many kingdoms of the former Holy Roman Empire, was somehow capable of forgetting the decimating losses of French troops on the road back from Moscow, then again at Leipzig, and then finally at Waterloo. In comparing himself to Mao, Xi Jinping is hoping similarly that the Chinese people will remember ardently the defeat and flight of the Kuomintang to Taiwan, the reunification of most of China's territory from imperial days, and the ending of the “Century of Humiliation” at the hands of Western powers and Japan. And Xi is also hoping that the Chinese people will somehow forget the tens of millions who died from drought, plague, and starvation in the 1960s and the political chaos and mass violence of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution from 1968 to 1976.

Xi Jinping's rise to power in many ways actually does resemble that of Louis Bonaparte, for Xi is Chinese Communist Party political royalty. His father, Xi Zhongxun, was one of the party elders that Chairman Mao relied upon to enforce a new central national order in China's Northwest provinces and regions, working as a political commissar controlling the People's Liberation Army there, and then directing the new central government's propaganda and education organs. He also oversaw the growth of its policy research institutions as a vice-premier in the 1960s. Xi Zhongxun was one of the few party elders who survived the decade-long tragedy of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, the death of Chairman Mao in 1976, and the fall of the ultra-leftist Gang of Four two years later. He also worked with Deng Xiaoping to open up China to the global economy and introduce the “market socialism” or “socialism with Chinese characteristics” that returned capitalism to Chinese society. Xi Zhongxun became the party and provincial leader of South China's Guangdong Province in 1978, overseeing the transformation of coastal cities, such as Shenzhen, into special economic zones with the help of foreign investment from the wealthy and transnational Cantonese diaspora of businessmen from nearby Hong Kong and all over the world. The elder Xi retired in the late 1980s, elbowed aside for being too close to disgraced party leader Hu Yaobang, ousted in 1987 for not being hard enough on student democracy protesters. Although shunted aside, one can only imagine the exceptionally rich treasure chest of life experiences the elder Xi must have passed on to Xi Jinping: how to use the party to control the military, how to create a distinctly Chinese nationalistic propaganda system, how to create policy research institutions to serve the centralization of the state, and how to work with the Chinese diaspora to carve out special economic zones and revive the private sector in China.

Much like Louis Bonaparte, Xi Jinping was born to rule. Xi was not related to China's great ruler, Chairman Mao, nor his successor, Deng Xiaoping, but neither of them had political offspring, making Xi Jinping the next best thing. Actually, Xi was

the next best thing but for one person: Bo Xilai. The son of a party elder even more highly ranked than Xi Jinping's father, Bo Xilai was also a party princeling leveraging the same resume-building experiences Xi Jinping had in the 1990s and early 2000s in order to rise up in the party ranks. Both started out in central party and state organs. Xi Jinping then became the successful leader of the wealthy Fujian Province, then the wealthier Zhejiang Province, and then even China's wealthiest city, Shanghai. Bo Xilai led the largest city of the industrial Northeast, Dalian, then the surrounding wealthy province, Liaoning, before working more closely with then top party leader Hu Jintao before being assigned to lead China's newest and most populous city, Chongqing, in Southwest China. Both Xi Jinping and Bo Xilai made anti-corruption campaigns hallmarks of their leadership, earning them broad, local support, but Bo Xilai took a risky step further, conjuring up what had been collective taboo among Chinese leaders since the death of Mao: mass political movements driven by a propaganda-fueled cult of leadership. In Chongqing, Bo Xilai revived the Maoist style of mass patriotic education campaigns with the "Red Culture Movement," a move that the firmly technocratic central party leaders Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao had soberly avoided employing in the 1990s and early 2000s. Both the more studious and wonkish Xi and the more flamboyant and populist Bo were top princeling contenders to replace Hu Jintao as party leader at the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2012. However, Bo Xilai rapidly and unexpectedly fell from power, his wife having been implicated in the murder of a British citizen, and then his municipal police chief fleeing to the American consulate in Chongqing, claiming fear of assassination. Without opposition, Xi Jinping was chosen by remaining party elders to replace the retiring Hu Jintao as party general secretary in 2012.

And so how was the wonkish and more technocratic Xi Jinping of 2012 reborn as Mao 2.0 in less than a decade? His record shows that he started off by following in his father's footsteps. First, Xi replaced many top military and police leaders and firmed up direct party central control over them. Second, he

not only extended the very popular anti-corruption campaigns that had marked his leadership in the provinces, he made them a permanent feature through the strengthening of the party's internal police, the Central Discipline Inspection Commission. Previous party general secretaries often began their first terms with anti-corruption campaigns, but after a year or two of prominent arrests, would move on to the challenges of economic growth and expanding Chinese influence in international affairs. Xi Jinping, however, has maintained his focus on ensuring the loyalty of party members through continued anti-corruption and propaganda efforts. The tens of thousands of representatives (chosen from China's 90 million party members), who were sitting in Tiananmen Square on July 1, 2021, for the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party, regularly participate in internal investigations, testing not only their administrative skills but their ideological purity as well—the "Study the Great Nation" app, which teaches users about President Xi Jinping and the Communist Party, has replaced Mao's Little Red Book.² They must swear to never criticize the party or its leaders, nor belong to any non-party organization, for fear they might be arrested and whisked away into secret and potentially perpetual detention until they confess their transgressions. Chinese Communist Party members certainly enjoy political privileges and economic influence, but they also effectively sign away their right to due process and civil rights in the people's courts.

Finally, Xi also followed his father's path in strengthening control over propaganda, but added a twist he must have learned from his disgraced former rival, Bo Xilai: Maoist-style patriotic education. We can see this most clearly if we compare the evolution of language in the Communist Party anniversary speeches and statements, from the 50th anniversary in 1971 under Mao,³ to the 80th anniversary in 2001 under Jiang Zemin,⁴ to the 90th anniversary in 2011 under Hu Jintao,⁵ and finally to Xi Jinping's speech this July 1.⁶ Each of these speeches clearly reflects the ambition of the party leaders on their day in the sun: "Where We Have Been and Where I Will Lead Us."

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Marx argued that revolutions happen when exploited classes realize they can supplant their oppressors, and in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, he demonstrated how a cunning and relentlessly ambitious man with national name recognition can fool his political rivals and the people into surrendering to his will:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honored disguise and borrowed language.⁷

First, let us look at what is said in the Communist Party anniversary speeches, comparing Mao to Jiang to Hu to Xi. One thing we notice is that as China shifts from a planned economy to a market economy, the commemorative speeches get shorter and shorter. The 1971 report was some 14,000 English words in length, the 2001 one was 15,000 words, the 2011 was 10,000 words, and Xi gave a relatively brisk 5,200 words on July 1. For comparison, Fidel Castro's famous "History Will Absolve Me" speech in 1953 was 26,200 words long and took four hours to deliver. President Joe Biden's inaugural address in January 2021 was a breezy 2,300 words in length. Xi Jinping might thus be said to be twice as wordy as a Joe Biden, but only a third as verbose as his CCP predecessors.

The next thing we notice in comparing these speeches is the change in themes and language. In 1971 the most common word mentioned was "party," followed by "people/masses," then "Mao," "chairman," "China," "socialist/communist," and

"nation." "Class" was mentioned 46 times, and "struggle" appeared 80 times, reflecting the importance of the then ongoing persecution of capitalists and landlords. Fifty years later, under Xi Jinping, the most common terms were "China" and "nation"—together they comprised an astonishing 5.7% of the words mentioned in the speech—followed by "party," "people," and "socialist/communist." "Struggle" appears only 13 times, and "class" not at all. The speeches of Jiang in 2001 and Hu in 2011 are somewhere in between Mao and Xi, but the rhetorical transformation is most clear with Xi, replacing the ideological prominence of the language of Chinese Communism with the language of Chinese nationalism. Under Xi Jinping, the celebration of the Communist Party has been transformed into the celebration of the Chinese nation and its leader. Xi Jinping did not introduce billionaires to the CCP—Jiang Zemin did that—but it is astonishing that Xi Jinping, the self-anointed "Core Leader" of the Chinese Communist Party, stepped up to the podium on the Gate of Heavenly Peace on July 1 to talk at length about the Chinese nation but said nothing about class conflict, class struggle, or any of the other ideological goals of Marxism and Maoism.

From 1848 to 1852, Louis Bonaparte invoked the constitution, the republic, and democracy, and he worked with both Republicans and the Party of Order, among others, against working Frenchmen, but only long enough to isolate each ally one by one and then replace the republic with the Second Empire under his rule as Napoleon III. We must wonder if Xi Jinping is similarly invoking Communism, Socialism, and patriotism in his centenary speech in order to strengthen the Chinese Communist Party, or if he is invoking these to prepare China for rule by one man: from tragedy finally to farce.

ENDNOTES

1. Marx, Karl, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 1852, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm>.
2. Javier C. Hernández, “The Hottest App in China Teaches Citizens About Their Leader — and, Yes, There’s a Test,” *The New York Times*, April 7, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/07/world/asia/china-xi-jinping-study-the-great-nation-app.html>.
3. Likely because he was in poor health by 1971, Mao did not issue a speech on the 50th anniversary, but the *Beijing Review* from this time provides an analogous statement at http://www.bjreview.com/90th/2011-06/30/content_373054.htm.
4. “Jiang Zemin’s Speech at the Meeting Celebrating the 80th Anniversary of the Founding of the Communist Party of China,” July 1, 2001, <http://www.china.org.cn/e-speech/a.htm>.
5. “Full Text of Hu Jintao’s speech at CPC anniversary gathering,” July 1, 2011, http://www.china.org.cn/china/CPC_90_anniversary/2011-07/01/content_22901507.htm.
6. “Full text of Xi Jinping’s speech on the CCP’s 100th anniversary,” *Nikkei Asia*, July 1, 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Full-text-of-Xi-Jinping-s-speech-on-the-CCP-s-100th-anniversary>
7. Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

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