

China seeks some of Mao's past

Some time ago before lockdowns I met a group of 6th form Chinese students in a local school who wanted to ask me about UK democracy and politics. They spoke good English and asked good questions to reveal some of the disputes and cross currents in our national debate. Towards the end of the class session I said it was now my turn to ask a few questions to learn something about China. They agreed. My first question was to ask them to say what they thought of the legacy of Chairman Mao.

None of them wanted to answer and they all looked very worried about the mentioning of the name of the founder and first government leader of their ruling party. So I rephrased the question, in case the problem was my implying they might have their own views of a contentious topic. I asked them to tell me what was the official party or leadership view or line on the Mao years. I assumed they would have been primed as they were abroad as ambassadors for their country to learn more of the western system. There was still a reluctance to say anything and a refusal to endorse possible lines I proposed.

It meant I did learn something. It meant I was reminded why I dislike authoritarian systems where people are terrified to have a view, and where even the establishment cannot always supply a clear line. This is all suddenly very relevant because President Xi has just made China's last hundred years of history a central issue which includes a crucial role for Mao in the first 55 years of communism. President Xi showed that he respects the legacy of Mao by visiting sites connected to that leader and above all by wearing a well tailored version of a Mao jacket to address his party and nation. His words were carefully crafted, pointing to the struggles of early communism where he sided by implication with Mao against the internal and external forces that opposed a communist vision of One China. He avoided directly mentioning Mao and any reference to the more contentious Great Leap Forward and Cultural revolution that Mao unleashed. He also deployed the reformists language of Deng who followed Mao, praising the achievement of creating "a moderately prosperous society in all respects" and using the phrase "socialism with Chinese characteristics". He did however go further by reminding China that its progress is based on Marxism.

The use of Mao was presumably designed to reinforce Xi status as the unchallenged supreme leader who will get more than the customary ten year period in office of his predecessors. The ceremony was designed to reinforce the message of one people, one party, one nation, with strong references to the need to fully integrate Hong Kong and Macao, to tackle Taiwan and to see off any overseas threat to the One China vision. The anniversary celebration came over as a very defensive event lacking in flair and innovation. There were of course no jokes and no licensed criticisms or interesting reflections on China past in Xi's speech. The fly pasts produced well organised formations but the placing had been sorted out well away from the audience and cameras. The pilots merely had to fly on a constant pre set course at a constant speed to stay together. There were to be no spectacular aerobatics

or changing of shapes with the audience in view. The Politburo and other powerful supporters nervously sought to clap and look impressed at the right moments. The President looked relieved when the planes flew and the guns went off in good order without incident. The message of the speech was China now has to become "a great modern socialist country in all respects", a task for the next 100 years. There was also the usual threats over Taiwan and the need to integrate and control One China more.