



# Xi, Mao, and China's Search for a Usable Past

PAUL GEWIRTZ 01.14.14



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People visit an art exhibition marking the 120th birthday of Mao Zedong at the National Museum on December 26, 2013 in Beijing.

Since its founding, the United States has had understandable pride in its great achievements, but also has had to reckon with its complex moral history—beginning but hardly ending with the fact that our original Constitution accepted the evil of slavery and the terrible suffering of millions of American slaves until a horrific civil war ended the practice of slavery in the 1860s. China today is experiencing its own process of reckoning with its history, revealed in fascinating ways late last month during the official celebration of the 120th birthday of Mao Zedong. What's involved is nothing less than China's search for a usable past—an account of its history that can serve its large goals for the country's future—and the Communist Party's search for a usable past that can help preserve its hold on power.

## Xi on Mao: Reinterpretation and Contextualizing the Past

There has been much speculation about what China's new top leader, Xi Jinping, genuinely believes about Mao. Mao is the foundational figure of the People's Republic of China, the unifier of a divided country who established Communist Party rule in 1949. But his governance was pervaded with monstrous policy disasters that were not reversed until China's "reform and opening up" in 1978. Tens of millions of Chinese died from famine, persecution, and organized violence under Mao. Xi Jinping's father, once a Vice Premier of China, was himself purged by Mao, exiled, and then jailed during the Cultural Revolution. Xi's actual policies as a provincial Party Secretary and many early decisions as the new national leader would clearly have been anathema to Mao. Yet some have speculated that Xi is in fact a neo-Maoist, pointing to his frequent references to "Mao Zedong thought" in speeches, visits to Mao landmarks, and revival of the

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Maoist concept of the “mass line.” The very idea of holding a high-profile expensive 120th birthday celebration of Mao has been viewed by some as evidence of Xi's Maoist leanings.

“Leftists” in China today have advocated a Maoist revival that would reject “capitalist” trends, challenge inequalities that have increased as China has modernized, and revive “red” cultural themes. At the same time, others see China's further progress as impossible unless Mao is toppled as an icon.

In this heated climate, Xi Jinping delivered a remarkably complex speech about Mao on December 26, as the centerpiece of the 120th birthday celebration. Several things now seem clear: There will be no Maoist revival under Xi Jinping's rule. There will be no nationalization of Bo Xilai's leftist “red” events in Chongqing before his downfall. China's new leaders will not shy from highlighting Mao's “serious mistakes.” At the same time, Xi's speech demonstrates that the ruling Communist Party is still coming to terms with Mao's place in modern Chinese history, the complexity of Mao's legacy, and how to use the Party's history to shape its future—with the paramount goals of both maintaining the Party's legitimacy in power and advancing a “great renewal” and “great rejuvenation” of the Chinese nation, whose relevant history stretches to a time long before Mao.

Newspapers internationally called Xi's speech a politically astute balancing act. Indeed it was. But such *Político*-style commentary ignores the intellectual complexity of Xi's remarks. Of course the speech was a performance, and not a confessional or an academic lecture. It was a political act and a form of “propaganda,” full of CCP (Chinese Communist Party) jargon and rhetoric. But that does not make it unimportant. When drafters clearly have chosen every word carefully to make some point or to avoid making another, a close reading is illuminating. The complexity of Xi's speech appears both in his substantive evaluation of Mao and in his methodology in making that evaluation. In both respects, Xi draws heavily but subtly revises two prior Party documents: the 1981 “Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party Since the Founding of the People's Republic of China,” in which Deng Xiaoping and China's new leadership after Mao's death first formally articulated Mao's “serious mistakes”; and the 1993 speech delivered by General Secretary and President Jiang Zemin on the occasion of Mao's 100th birthday.

Xi Jinping, however, puts a distinctive stamp on Mao's ideas to make them support a pragmatic and transparent form of governance. He characterizes and significantly confines Mao's contributions to a particular past period in China's evolving history.

Mao, Xi began, was “a great patriot and a national hero,” who stood “at the wavefront of the positive tide in the Chinese nation.” A summary positive verdict—“great patriot and a national hero”—was foreordained in this speech, but Mao is described as only “a” national hero, not the supreme one, and the “wavefront” metaphor (潮流前列) locates him as a positive force at a particular and early moment in time—a force that recedes, a force followed endlessly by other equivalent forces. Significantly, Xi repeats Deng's formulation in the 1981 Resolution that Mao's “achievements were primary and his mistakes secondary,” but does not repeat the Resolution's more specific statement that “his contributions to the Chinese revolution far outweigh his mistakes.”

The “greatest contributions” Xi attributes to Mao are almost all restatements from Jiang Zemin's 1993 speech: Mao “led the Party and the people to find the correct path of New Democratic Revolution”; “completed the anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism tasks,” “established the PRC and the basic socialism system,” “achieved fundamental success in socialist construction,” and “pooled experiences and created conditions for

China's exploration of building socialism with Chinese characteristics." Xi phrases all of these contributions as abstractions, and doesn't specify ways in which Mao concretely improved the lives of the Chinese people.

So much for Mao's deeds. What of Mao's ideas? These are the two key sentences in Xi's speech: "The Communist Party of China will hold high the banner of Mao Zedong Thought forever in pursuing the Chinese nation's rejuvenation...Party members should adhere to and make good use of the 'living soul' of Mao Zedong Thought, namely seeking truth from facts, the 'mass line' and independence."

Something will last "forever"—but what? Apparently only the "living soul" of Mao Zedong Thought. Both words in this phrase, which Xi repeats from the 1981 Resolution, suggest departures from Mao's literal utterances. The "soul" of Mao Zedong thought seems different from Mao's literal words, just as references to "the spirit" of a law signals something different from the "letter" of the law. And although the word "living" might mean "enduring," it may also connote something similar to the word "living" in the phrase "living Constitution" in American constitutional discourse—an approach to interpretation that is the opposite of "original intent" and views texts as having a dynamic meaning that should be adapted to changing circumstances.

What are the substantive elements of Mao Zedong Thought to be given this dynamic interpretation? Significantly, there is no discussion in Xi's speech of any of Mao's specific thoughts about economic policy or political structure, many of which were discussed in some detail (and praised) in the 1981 Resolution and in Jiang Zemin's 1993 speech. All three elements of Mao Zedong Thought that Xi emphasizes in this speech – seeking truth from facts, the mass line, and independence—are about approaches to governance, not substantive policies. And as Xi now describes this "living soul" of Mao Zedong Thought, all three can be seen as good governance practices that are shared world-wide, even though phrased here in CCP jargon.

"Seeking truth from facts" is pragmatism and learning from experience. The mass line may sound like a chilling authoritarian idea to many Westerners. But even in Mao's *Little Red Book*, waved by fanatic Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution, the chapter on the mass line focuses on rather conventional ideas about listening to the people's views and not presuming to know better than they do what their interests and wants are. Xi's interpretation of the phrase "mass line" invokes moderate notions of governing power: that "people are the fundamental force to decide the Party's future and fate," that "Party members [should] serve the people wholeheartedly," and that officials should cherish the power entrusted by the people [and] maintain the 'flesh and blood ties' between the Party and the people" and "address problems of the Party that arouse people's complaints." In fact, Xi's interpretation of the mass line includes rather democratic-sounding phrases that do not appear in Mao's *Little Red Book*, in the Party's 1981 Resolution, or in Jiang Zemin's 1993 speech. In Xi's phrasing, "mass line" means "truly allowing the people to judge our work (真正让人民来评判我们的工作) and "subject[ing] power to the people's supervision" (自觉让人民监督权力). Of course the mass line concept does not contain the slightest embrace of democratic elections. But at least at the level of ideas, Xi has adapted the Maoist concept of the mass line to serve policies of accountability to the people, transparency and responsiveness that have a more democratic flavor.<sup>1</sup> About "independence," Xi says that China should "maintain national pride and national self-confidence, unswervingly walk a path of its own," and adhere to an "independent foreign policy of peace."

In short, Xi Jinping has domesticated "Mao Zedong Thought" to rather practical twenty-first century ideas about governance.

So much for Mao's accomplishments in deed and thought. And now for the fuller reckoning. Although Mao was a "great figure" and the "living soul" of Mao Zedong Thought will last "forever," Xi emphasizes that "it cannot be negated that Mao took detours during the exploration of the path of building socialism ... [and] made serious mistakes in his later years, especially during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976)." These phrases are standard boilerplate, going back to the 1981 Resolution. It was shortly after this Resolution was released that Deng Xiaoping made his famous comment that Mao was "70% right, 30% wrong." As in the 1981 statement, the emphasis in Xi's speech is on the mistakes of the Cultural Revolution. There is no straightforward acknowledgment of disastrous policies of Mao's prior to the Cultural Revolution, such as the Great Leap Forward, which led to the deaths of millions of Chinese. The China that today demands with considerable justification that Japan fully acknowledge the terrible acts against China it undertook over many years is a China that does not itself candidly acknowledge the terrible acts that its own government and Party committed against the Chinese people.

If Xi's mixed verdict about Mao is not itself strikingly new, his characterizations and contextualizations are both new and interesting. "Revolutionary leaders are not gods, but human beings," Xi said. Human beings exist at a particular time and place, and therefore "evaluations of historical figures should be placed in the historical circumstances of their time and society." As compared to the 1981 Resolution and Jiang Zemin's 1993 speech, Xi's emphasis is more on the evaluations made by ordinary people rather than just by Party officials. Rhetorically, Xi's contrast between Mao not being a "god" but a "human being" also reflects a recurring and defining trope in Xi's speech. He lists a series of things we "cannot" do in evaluating Mao, which often involves a pairing of one "cannot" about excessively exalting Mao and another "cannot" about excessively diminishing him.

- “[We] cannot ... refuse to allow people to point out and correct their errors just because they are great; neither can we totally repudiate them, erase their historical achievements, and fall into a mire of nihilism just because he made errors and mistakes.... To lose the banner of Mao Zedong Thought would mean a negation of the Party’s glorious history.” This passage rests on a balance between achievements and mistakes and a distinction between criticism and repudiation. It is noteworthy that this passage invites ongoing public criticism of Mao’s errors, even as it rejects repudiation of Mao.
  
- “[We] should not simply attribute the success in historically favorable circumstances to individuals, nor should we blame individuals for setbacks in adverse situations.” This passage rests on a distinction between individual responsibility and historic circumstances, asserting that both Mao’s successes and failings were the product of historical conditions as well as his own individual actions. This further supports the verdict that Mao deserves neither unbalanced praise nor unbalanced condemnation. Indeed, Xi’s emphasis on historic context somewhat softens the debate about how right or wrong Mao was. Mao lived at a certain historic stage, Xi seems to be saying, and all leaders will have limits arising from the historic period they lived in.
  
- “[We] cannot use today’s conditions and level of development and understanding to judge our predecessors, nor can we expect the predecessors to have done things that only the successors can do.” (不能用今天的时代条件、发展水平、认识水平去衡量和要求前人，不能苛求前人干出只有后人才能干出的业绩来。) One of the most interesting sentences in Xi’s speech, this passage draws a contrast between today and the past. “Although revolutionary leaders had a very high theoretical standard, rich experience in struggle, and outstanding leadership ability, this did not mean that their thoughts and actions were not limited by the conditions of their time period.” Xi embellishes this thought with the argument that earlier Party leaders had “no precedent” for what they were trying to accomplish, and with the sort of simile that is becoming one of Xi’s trademarks: “There was no precedent for establishing socialism in China’s type of social and historical conditions. Like climbing a tall mountain not yet summited by man, all climbers must clear the brush and create a new path.” In these passages Xi picks up on and rephrases a passage about today and the past from an earlier speech he made on January 5, 2013, which also uses the rhetorical trope of contrasting “cannots”: “One cannot negate the historical period before the reform and opening-up by the historical period after the reform and opening-up, nor can one negate the historical period after the reform and opening-up by the historical period before the reform and opening-up.” The contrast between then and now is effectively an argument to block any Mao revival; Mao’s policies belong to another era entirely, and that might justify or explain them, but they certainly could not be justified now.

These passages, and the recurring rhetorical trope, create a pervasive sense of equipoise in evaluating Mao. Indeed, the balance between the two clauses in each passage, coupled with the failure to repeat the conventional phrase that Mao’s achievements “far outweigh his mistakes,” sound rather more mixed than Deng’s “70% right, 30% wrong” assessment.

The last third of Xi’s speech is not about Mao at all, but about China’s future. This section makes clear that Xi’s purposes in this speech are to fit Mao and the Party’s history into Xi’s ambitions for the future. Xi’s at least implicit recognition is that reinterpreting Mao and acknowledging his great “mistakes” will not by itself give the Party wide credibility and legitimacy. The Party’s best hope is to offer larger goals and

ideas for the future that harken back to larger elements in China's history before the Party came to power. "Since modern times, the Chinese nation has always been dreaming of realizing 'great rejuvenation' (伟大复兴). Our predecessors made great efforts for making the dream come true. Today ... China has never been so close to realizing the goal of the nation's great renewal (伟大复兴)." Xi weaves past, present, and future into a single expansive thought. We must never forget the bitterness and glory of yesterday and take today's responsibility and hold fast to our great dream of tomorrow—to realize the China Dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."

These are the foundational ambitions and rhetorical mantras of Xi Jinping's administration so far. His speech makes clear that he is not focusing on any sort of Maoist revival. His revivalist stakes are far larger—a "great renewal" and "great rejuvenation" of the Chinese nation, whose prior greatness reaches far deeper into China's past. By speaking of "renewal" and "rejuvenation," Xi is acknowledging that China's usable past is not to be found simply by sifting through Mao's and the Party's history to separate "achievements" and "mistakes" during this limited period.

Xi underscores the two broad policy efforts that his administration is now undertaking as the primary methods for advancing his grand ambitions: (1) to "unswervingly advance reform and opening-up," as embodied in the recent Third Plenum decisions; and (2) to "seriously treat illnesses" that harm "the nature and purity of the Party" and "rip out any 'malignant tumors' on the healthy bodies of the [CCP]" which threaten the Party's goal "to always be at the core of leadership." As with his discussion of Mao, Xi acknowledges certain large deficiencies in many current Party officials (his emphasis has been on problems such as corruption, extravagance, and "formalism"), but does not mention wrongs and problems related to the Party's authoritarian character that domestic and foreign critics have insistently addressed and that undoubtedly made Mao's unchecked "mistakes" possible. Xi's goal in this speech is not to make a comprehensive defense of the Party and its policies but to create a usable narrative that fits the Party's history to the "great rejuvenation" of the Chinese nation.

## China's Search for a Usable Past

A nation's history is not confined to its past. Out of the cacophony of events that have happened in the past, those in the present must identify and create a history that is told. That selectivity and shaping in the telling is inescapable, but it is also functional. For nations everywhere, their history is usable and in fact is



*China Photos/Getty Images*

Sculpture of former Chinese leaders, from left to right, Deng Xiaoping, Mao Zedong, and Jiang Zemin, on view at the Military Museum of the Chinese People's Revolution.

used to try to shape their future. In his brilliant essay, "[The Search for a Usable Past](#)," the American historian Henry Steele Commager wrote about this process in the early years of the young United States. He emphasized how a usable past had to be in part *created* since we had so little real history. We needed a history to help define who we were, what our ideals were, who were our heroes and villains, and what we wished to

become. Commager describes how we selected, we exaggerated, and we created a history that was usable in the first century of our country's existence. Now, China's future depends in part on its capacity to identify a usable past.

As I suggested at the outset of this essay, just as post-1978 China has to come to terms with Mao and the darker parts of his legacy, we have had to come to terms, most significantly, with slavery and our original Constitution, written in 1787, that protected slavery. We have revised and reinterpreted our "Founding Fathers" without abandoning them. In criticizing slavery's protection by our original Constitution and by our Supreme Court, Abraham Lincoln reached back to the earlier and more "usable" Declaration of Independence from 1776, which insisted that "all men are created equal." When racial subordination continued in the United States long after the Civil War, the end of slavery, and the guarantee of "equal protection of the laws" was enshrined in our amended Constitution, civil rights activists in the twentieth century returned to the more "usable" purposes of the civil war, the constitutional ideal of "equal protection," and the iconic stature of Abraham Lincoln to push for broader equality. They did not protest against America's values; rather, they invoked those values as expressed in "usable" portions of our history to promote the civil rights cause as the fulfillment of the United States' best and deepest purposes—and this movement largely prevailed.

In 1987, the United States celebrated the Bicentennial of our Constitution. In doing so, we had to come to terms with this complexity—the evil and the suffering—of our constitutional history with regard to slavery and the treatment of African-Americans. But the Constitution's greatness, and the fact that it established the most durable democracy in world history, was almost universally hailed. We did not repudiate our founders or the flawed Constitution itself. Rather, we recognized their contributions, our country's dramatic evolution through war and constitutional amendment and reinterpretation, and the ongoing efforts within a continuous national narrative to construct and reconstruct a usable American past that would support a better American future.

Every country is engaged in the construction and reconstruction of a usable past within a continuous history. For China today, that task is distinctively important, multi-faceted, and difficult. China's history is extremely long and immensely complex. The People's Republic of China that was established in 1949 self-consciously marked a new beginning, and it defined itself in part in opposition to China's past. But of course such an effort was illusory, and predictably Mao mimicked many practices of past Chinese rulers and selectively emphasized people, events, and practices from China's past that helped define and shape the present and future China he was hoping to create.

As this essay has illustrated, Mao himself is now part of China's history, and reconstructing and interpreting Mao is part of what China's leaders must do today. (They do not yet seem prepared to re-interpret the Tiananmen events of 1989, but almost surely will need to do so at some point, perhaps at several different points over time.) What is the version of Mao that will serve the Communist Party and the country? China's current leaders believe that Mao can neither be deified nor demonized, not simply because that would be untrue but because that would not be useful. Mao's "serious mistakes" must be reckoned with and openly acknowledged in order to justify many present policies; but, China's present leaders apparently believe, his achievements also need to be affirmed to legitimate the rule of the Communist Party and other present policies. So constructing a usable version of Mao is what most of Xi Jinping's speech was about.

But Xi was also proclaiming his broader vision of China's "great renewal" and "great



rejuvenation,” and this requires both looking ahead (the “China Dream,” 中国梦) and reaching back to well before Mao’s time to an image of China’s earlier greatness, an earlier China that could be renewed and rejuvenated rather than created out of nothing, or created out of a Chinese history beginning in the year 1949.

Consider just two pressing issues for China deeply connected to its history, about which it must decide how to interpret and use history.

The first issue is where values will come from as China moves forward. China today places great value on making money and on self-interested material success, long denied to the Chinese. But values in addition to individual materialism are needed to hold a country together and make it a good country. Where will these values continue to come from in China? The announced ideology of China’s Communist Party no longer seems to be a source of moral values for Chinese society. Indeed, it is no longer clear what that ideology really is. China certainly has no equivalent to the United States’ faith in its Constitution as a continuing source of our country’s values, as almost a civic religion. Moreover, China does not have a strong conventional religious tradition that can be the source of values. Furthermore, the close family structures that were a traditional forum for the generational transfer of values have been weakened as Chinese society has become more mobile and, yes, more free.

What are the resources that China can draw upon as a continuing source of values? One possible answer is China’s Confucian tradition. But the Communist Party has long rejected Confucianism as the basis of the loathed feudal and imperial order, as a system of thought founded on legitimating hierarchies. In recent years, the Party has experimented with a Confucian revival but without full-throated leadership backing. (A few years ago, a large statue of Confucius suddenly appeared prominently in Tiananmen Square, and then just as suddenly was **moved away a few months later**.) A central question for China’s leaders today is whether or to what extent Confucian ideas are a usable past for China. Can some form of Confucianism be revived and reconstructed (i.e., partly created) to be a usable history as a source of values for modern China? Without identifying some sort of usable history as a source of values for China, its leaders will be left with things like Hu Jintao’s understandable but poignant project of declaring “**Eight Honors and Eight Disgraces**” (八荣八耻) for the Chinese people—a self-appointed Moses announcing self-created Commandments from the ground-level leadership compound in Beijing.

A second issue concerns China’s historic relations with other countries. To an extent that outsiders rarely understand, China’s leaders and people see the world through the lens of a terrible “century of humiliation” that China suffered at the hands of Western powers and Japan between the 1840’s and 1940’s. Xi Jinping’s hoped-for “great renewal” and “great rejuvenation” of the Chinese nation is about a return to a version of China’s greatness that preceded the century of humiliation. In some sense, it is powerfully liberating and strengthening for China to keep that history alive in mind. “Never again” is a phrase with resonance for many peoples. And other countries dealing with China must understand how actions they take, whether so intended or not, can often resonate with China as a reiteration of past attempts to humiliate China and keep it down.

China’s historic relationship with Japan is especially in mind these days. Current territorial conflicts between the two countries over a few islands in the East China Sea raise non-trivial issues about sovereignty and access to much-needed natural resources. But one element that undoubtedly drives China powerfully in this dispute is its memory of repeated past invasions and occupations of China’s sovereign territory by Japan, as






well as Japanese atrocities committed during such conflicts. China is deeply affected by this historic memory, and it perceives that Japan is not sufficiently acknowledging and making amends for it's aggressive history (as Japan indeed is not). At the same time, China can be harmed if it sees everything through the lens of its "century of humiliation." This can create hyper-sensitivity and over-reaction. It can weaken China's newly justified self-confidence as a strong power, with the capacity this implies to take steps that involve shared compromise and would advance the common well-being of nations. And an excessive focus on past experiences of weakness can yield new sources of conflict with other nations.

In short, a significant part of the project of modern China is to construct and reconstruct a usable past, an understanding of its history that will best serve its purposes going forward. Xi Jinping's reckoning with Mao Zedong last week is part of that, but only a part—and perhaps, in the end, only a small part.

*The author is grateful to Jeremy Daum, Julian Gewirtz, Huang Yue, Raymond Lu, and Graham Webster for their advice and assistance in the preparation of this article.*

1. Later in his speech, Xi notes that "The [CCP] should continue our current campaign to strengthen the 'mass line.'" **As described elsewhere**, this recent campaign is focused on "clean[ing] up four undesirable work styles—formalism, bureaucracy, hedonism and extravagance" so as "to improve interactions between [CCP] officials, Party members and the people at large." This campaign has included requirements that some officials undertake publicized "self-criticism" sessions, which are a throw-back to some of Mao's most offensive policies that required officials to make public confessions of their wrongdoing, although recent self-criticism sessions have seemed to be considerably **more benign** and **less feared** than in Mao's time. ↪

**Topics:** History, Politics  
**Keywords:** Mao Zedong, Xi Jinping, Maoist Revival, History, Chinese Communist Party, Jiang Zemin

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"Wavefront" is a mistranslation. Chaoliu (潮流) means "tide" and by extension, a "trend" which is the meaning here.

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Thanks for this, the Chinese in the speech was 潮流前列 so "wavefront" strikes us as an accurate translation. We ought to have included all four characters though and have now done so above.

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