

‘Chairman of everything’: Is China’s President Xi making like Mao?

Rowan Callick, The Australian, April 9, 2016 12:00AM, China Correspondent, Beijing



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Xi Jinping, who will most likely make time next week for a brief meeting with Malcolm Turnbull, has a soft spot for Australia, where he is proud to have visited every state.

But he is hard on China.

He is not what he was supposed to be — the third in a succession of decade-long leaders to rule remotely, as the unifying force between the Communist Party’s factions, the chairman of the board, its Politburo Standing Committee.

The question of the hour is might he become instead what some observers fear: a cult figure taking the country back to the future, towards another cultural revolution to echo the histrionic decade Mao Zedong set in motion 50 years ago next month.

The simple answer is: no. That can’t happen.

But he has certainly shaken up China’s neighbours through the construction of bases in the South China Sea and more benignly through the grand strategic vision of the New Silk Road.

And he has shaken up his own party, in the only way Leninist institutions lacking elections can be renovated: by a vast ongoing purge, in the form of his signature anti-corruption campaign.

No one expected this. The large figure with the open, agreeable face and the famous singing wife, Peng Liyuan, who was viewed like most leading “princelings” to be comfortable in his own skin, was thought to be a modest reforming type.

Willy Lam, a journalist turned professor in Hong Kong who has one of the best track records for forecasting Chinese political futures, describes Xi as “a low-key, consensus-building cadre in the mould of (former) premier Wen Jiabao. He definitely lacks the brilliance, charisma and boldness of a Zhu Rongji (another former premier).”

Instead, Xi has drawn all power in towards himself in a rapid centralising thrust.

He is described as “The Core”, as “the chairman of everything”, who has established new commissions on every key policy front, from security to the internet to the economy, which he chairs and which override the conventional, long-established government, parliament and even party structures.

He has taken on the most powerful alternative sources of influence in China — party strongmen Bo Xilai and Zhou Yongkang — and seen them jailed for life.

He has taken a hard line on anyone voicing independent views. Many have been jailed. Many of the human rights lawyers who have defended them have been jailed, usually for “creating public disorder,” or even for “subverting state power.”

People posting on the once-effervescent Chinese version of Twitter, Weibo, have grown wary.

The nation has grown more quiet, despite its hundreds of millions of usually independently spirited netizens.

A Chinese business journalist, a Hong Kong publisher and a Swedish NGO adviser who were deemed to have troubled the powers that be have each been required to deliver self-criticisms on national TV.

When Xi visited the three leading party-state media organisations; Xinhua news agency, China Central TV, and People’s Daily, a banner was draped behind him stating “CCTV’s family name is ‘the Party’.” Xi urged media staff to “enhance their awareness to align their ideology, political thinking, and deeds to those of the party’s Central Committee.”

New regulations ban foreign-invested media from publishing online in China without government approval.

A new civil society law is set to bar NGOs from collaborating with foreign counterparts. News of the Panama Papers that included details of dormant shell companies associated with Xi’s brother-in-law was censored this week, causing our sister paper The Wall Street Journal to editorialise, citing a Chinese proverb about people giving themselves away: “The foolish man buried his treasure and then posted a sign, ‘This ground does not contain 300 taels of silver’.”

Leading US Sinologists Andrew Nathan and David Shambaugh have written of China’s “resilient authoritarianism”.

But Xi, larger than life, is popular. During the 2016 Chinese New Year, Xi joined other “red pilgrims” in mountainous Jinggangshan where Mao established his first revolutionary base in 1927, and where Xi was televised sharing a meal with peasants in front of a pious poster of Chairman Mao. A new

video of a dance called “Uncle Xi in love with Mama Peng” has been viewed more than 300,000 times, although a revisionist song comparing Xi to Mao, The East is Red Again, has been deleted from the internet.

Some of this is disturbing, some mere party politics China-style.

But China is massively enmeshed with the world in a way that it was not in 1966, nor was the Soviet Union even in 1990.

Its people have moved on. They are largely apolitical, their minds drifting towards other worlds in the face of even insidious propaganda.

The Australian research director of China policy, David Kelly, a visiting professor at Peking University, says those who fear a cult of Xi driving a new cultural revolution would do well to ponder the fate of Yuan Shikai (1859-1916), who succeeded Sun Yat-sen to become republican China’s second president, and then had himself enthroned as the Hongxian Emperor.

“But by then Chinese people had moved on. They were past emperors. Essentially, no one took any notice.”

Xi runs such a risk if he were to press his present route to its logical conclusion.