Xi Jinping and the Cultural Revolution

Mao, diluted

The Cultural Revolution echoes faintlyin Xi Jinping’s rule

T

HE Cultural Revolution wasa hellish

period formillionsofChinese. Presi-

dentXi Jinping’sfather, Xi Zhongxun, a

ministerunderMao, wastortured, and a

half-sistercommitted suicide. Yetsome

who lived through the period (those who

suffered less) recall aspectsofit with

nostalgia. So itiswith mixed feelings that

Chinese nowviewthe recentreappear-

ance ofsome ofthe ingredientsthat

made thatera so toxic.

Manyliberalsin China wince ata

renewed emphasisunderMrXi on the

CommunistParty’straditional beliefs,

including“Mao Zedongthought”. They

fretaboutadulation ofMrXi in the offi-

cial media—faintlyreminiscentofMao’s

personalitycult, which reached fever

pitch duringthe Cultural Revolution.

Othersshrug. China needsa strongman

like Mao, theysay(though nothisRed

Guard mobs).

MrXi wantsto be seen assuch a man.

Bytakingall the top jobsunderhis con-

trol, he hasbeen turningawayfrom the

collective leadership ofequalsthat Deng

had created afterthe Cultural Revolution

to ensure the capriciousrule ofsomeone

like Mao could neverhappen again. In

earlyApril MrXi gave himselfa new title:

“commander-in-chief” ofthe JointOper-

ationsCommand, a newbody(he was

alreadyhead ofthe armed forces). He

showed thisoffbyappearingforthe first

time in publicwearingcombatfatigues.

MrXi clearlyworriesthatliberals

mighttryto use the horrorsofthe Cultur-

al Revolution to negate Mao entirely, and

thusthe party’srightto rule. He has been

campaigningagainstwhathe calls“his-

torical nihilism”, namelyattemptsto

blacken the party’searlyrecord bycon-

trastingitwith the prosperityofthe

post-Mao era.

Officially, the Cultural Revolution is

still described ashavinginflicted “untold

disasters” on China. ButMrXi wantsthe

period since 1949 to be seen asa continu-

ouswhole, with no breakin 1976 when

Mao died. He doesnotwantpeople to

conclude thatMao wasall bad.

There are huge differencesbetween

MrXi’srule and the Cultural Revolu-

tionaryperiod, ofcourse. MrXi has no

truckwith Maoistideasaboutpermanent

revolution. Through hisanti-corruption

campaign, he isattackinghisenemies in

the party, buthisattackscome from

above, not(asin the Cultural Revolution)

from below. He iseven rumoured to be

tryingto dampen hismini-personality

cult. ButasAndrewNathan ofColumbia

Universitypointsout, even distant paral-

lelsare worrying. MrXi isblowing on the

embersofthe conflagration thatcon-

sumed China 50 yearsago.