

This opinion piece by PCI Vice President, Tom Plate, appeared in the South China Morning Post on Tuesday, November 5, 2019.



Opinion

America is living under the threat of a Mao-like figure – Donald Trump

- What's the truth at the heart of the endless impeachment drama in Washington? While Chinese leader Xi Jinping has been compared to Mao Zedong, it is surely US President Donald Trump who outdoes Xi with his paranoia and constant disruption



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Published: 3:00am, 5 Nov, 2019

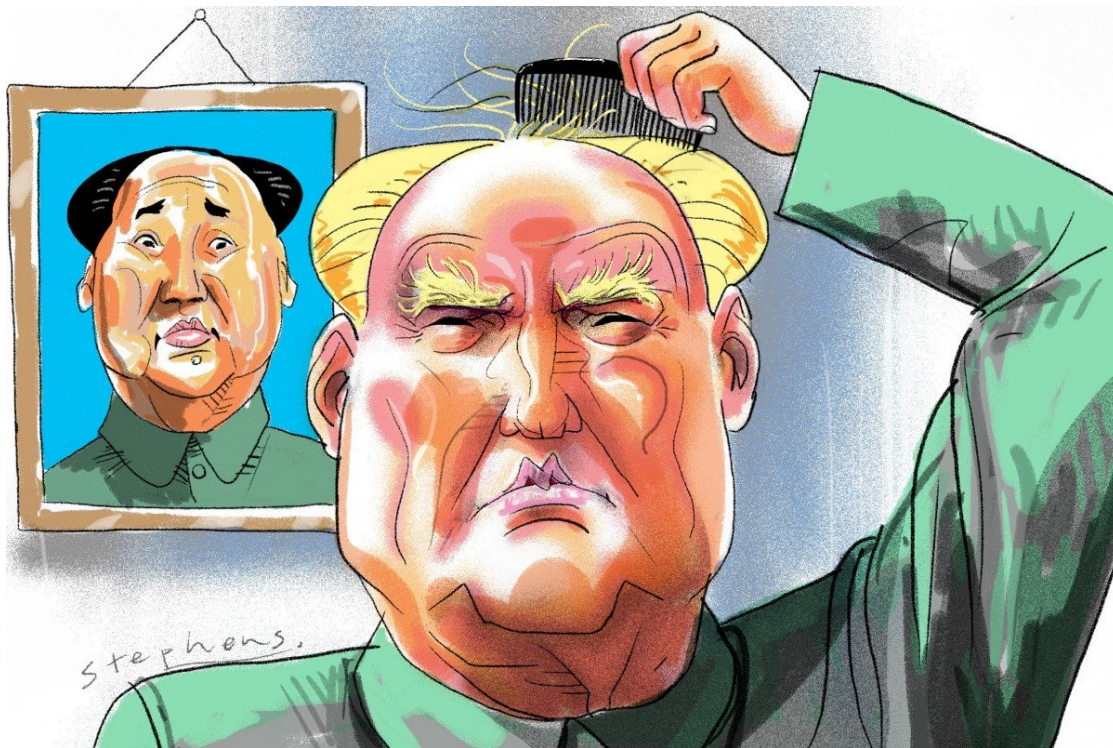


Illustration: Craig Stephens

The stars and stripes of the American flag, as if sliced by partisanship into bipolar bands of red and blue, never seemed more at cross purposes. Only true haters might find pleasure in the state of the country now.

In the House, as if ploughing through a field of empty dreams and lame tweets, Democratic crusaders for the impeachment of President Donald Trump proceed with little to stop them – unless the American

people become too spiritually exhausted to care any more, or can't bear to watch, or are waiting for the national election next November before getting emotionally involved. Republican loyalists, a sad phalanx of partisans, hide behind platitudinal patriotism.

But if you step back from the unseemly sight unfolding in Washington – or if you were viewing, say, from Asia – the American psychodrama is hard to beat from one aspect: that so much of it plays out in public light.

You might have thought that, by now, even the otherwise insatiable might be sated, but no. Like the anti-government, pro-democracy demonstrations and street battles in Hong Kong, the show in the US goes on, heading for some historic big bang or deflating denouement.

For those who come to the spectacle with hungry eyes, a feast awaits. Some news shows have never seen ratings lifts like these (a gladiator circus always brings people out). From dawn to dusk, and sometimes through the night, new events pop up on the American screen even while old ones are still being marketed as news.

Messy as all this is, Americans who still want to believe their political system is preferable to others, whatever its faults, could point at China and taunt: is that what you want instead? Major decisions made in total secret? Very little input from citizens? The leader of the country practically a mystery man, not only to most of the world, but to the Chinese people themselves?

Truth be told: as surely as Trump is overexposed, Xi is anything but. This veteran communist warrior heads a colossus with 1.4 billion people, military muscle hardening by the month, an economy rated second largest – though it is reported to be slumping to a 6 per cent growth rate. Some slump: the US rate is about a third of that.

Nonetheless, Xi does not have a great image. In fact, viewed from the US, he does not come close to what the West, for its part, might want in China's leader. But then, what is our Christmas list? A Mikhail Gorbachev in a Dior dress?

In the absence of the Communist Party's collapse, is Xi about the best the West can hope for or the worst it could possibly have? There is no way of knowing, in dealing with the hypothetical and presently unknowable. But much commentary on the Xi phenomenon suggests an ominous rise of a second Mao Zedong.

To me this seems unnervingly glib. There is no question that the Communist Party chairman has sought to narrow the rules for permissible speech, including exhorting netizens to cultivate "civilised and self-disciplined online behaviour" (good luck with that) and work towards a "full development of etiquette and courtesy" (sounds more like Singapore than North Korea).

But whatever Xi is, a true intellectual (like Jiang Zemin) he is not. US academics, many now anti-Xi, claim to have it all figured out. They imagine these societal directives as an outgrowth of a relatively new cultural nativism and political narrowing that will be comprehensively applied; lawyers, educators and even university students will feel the chill wind.

If the behaviour of 1.4 billion people can be restrained by these morality guidelines, it will be one extraordinary achievement. You might admire the audacity even as you express alarm over the sweep of the laws.

But still, this can't get me to see Xi as the second coming of Mao. I incline to the judgment of University of London professor Julia Lovell, whose comprehensive new book, *Maoism: A Global History*, is anything but comfortable with the spread of Maoist beliefs, which she views as a obnoxious rash that perpetually reappears.

Still, she insists: "...Xi has little personally in common with Mao. An engineer and apparatchik by training, he lacks Mao's self-taught, folksy literary range and philosophical pretensions; he keeps regular hours and has only been married twice."

Surely he feels a terror in his heart and soul, as would any psychologically balanced living Marxist, of a replay of those hellish 10 years known as the Cultural Revolution.

One has to wonder how uncomfortable those young people protesting in Hong Kong's streets make him: while he has not kept this scum from becoming a colossal mess, the feared Tiananmen tantrum has yet to be triggered. Some credit should be given here, for the time being anyway.

Trump may be impeached or upended in next year's election; at most, he gets two terms. China abolished its two-term limit so that Xi can remain president indefinitely, theoretically for life. Yet, insists noted Australian sinologist Geremie Barme, it is Trump who is more Mao-like than Xi. Continually disruptive. Paranoid. Non-consultative.

Trump as the new Mao? That would turn history on its head; but surely, this is the unarticulated fear that is turning America's Congress upside down. Yes, Trump is the closer, more immediate danger.

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