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China

Political Zombies: Devouring the Chinese People

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- **From January to June 2024, more than one million food and beverage-related businesses closed.**
- **In May, among the 70 large and medium-sized cities of China, the sales prices of new residential properties rose in only two cities, according to the National Bureau of Statistics. Prices declined in the remaining 68 cities.**
- **In early July, a report published by The Beijing News about the tanker trucks transporting both cooking oil and industrial oil triggered public panic about food safety.**
- **As of mid-July, there had been 20 floods since the start of the year.**
- **A worker showed his payroll stub on social media: after working six days a week, 11 hours a day: he was paid 3723 yuan (about US\$521) a month. Despite his long work hours he is unable to provide his family a decent life.**
- **In August, a story about a 33-year-old female graduate of a prestigious university who starved to death in a rented apartment sparked public empathy.**

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The Chinese Communist Party's Third Plenary Session, which had been significantly delayed, either turned a blind eye to all these crises or simply downplayed them in its documents. This has undoubtedly caused great disappointment to those who held expectations for this conference. Note that after the release of the conference resolution on July 21, the CSI 300 index of China's stock market fell three days in a row, with a cumulative drop of more than 3%.

The CCP has not only ignored the people's hardship, but in proposing to expand the sources of local governments' tax revenues, are intensifying its efforts to extract more from the population. According to some experts, the document produced by the Third Plenary Session may mean that the new taxes include a consumption tax and a "data asset tax" based on the digital economy.

During the first half of the 2024, even before the Plenary, water, electricity and gas rates skyrocketed. In Shanghai, after 10 years of raising water prices, there was a 50% increase while in Guangzhou a water price "reform" program imposed nearly a 34% increase. Xianyang, Wuhu, Nanchong, Ganzhou and Qujing saw price increases ranging from 10% to 50%.

Gas prices increased in Shenzhen, Fuzhou, Zhenjiang and 125 other cities. Chongqing residents complained that

gas meters “ran faster,” which served to double their gas fees. Electricity prices rose as high as 30% in Guangdong, Hunan, Anhui, Jiangsu and other provinces.

Although the downturn in the real estate market has hampered the introduction of property taxes, over the last year a mandatory housing inspection fee has been implemented in rural areas. And on August 2, the Ministry of Housing and Construction announced that it would speed up the promotion of several housing regulations, including inspection and insurance fees as well as a housing maintenance fund.

All these proposed measures are very unpopular as people see them as nothing but extortion.

The concept of “new quality productive forces,” as recently emphasized by Xi Jinping, can hardly improve the livelihood of the general public. In fact it will aggravate unemployment.

For example, the hasty introduction of unmanned AI driving in the cab industry has sparked discontent among drivers when it was introduced in Wuhan. The company, Baidu, has announced that it will expand this service to 65 cities by 2025 and 100 more cities by 2030.

This massive displacement of workers pursues the self-interest of the ruling party and its business cronies; it reminds people of the (late 1950s) “Great Leap Forward.” Will the result of today’s adventurist move be the same as the bitter consequences of that fiasco?

Zombies Eat People, People Eat Grass

Does the CCP really fail to realize the serious crisis that is developing? Do they believe that even if the economy collapses and social unrest grows, the regime will not be jeopardized? Can the Chinese people live for three years by only eating grass, as some high-ranking party officials predict?

If you come into contact with party members in daily life, you will find that they are not fools (at least not all of them). When they talk with close friends, they lament the difficult situation just as we do.

Therefore, I think we can describe the world’s largest party with its 90 million members as losing its ability to criticize, change and renew itself. More and more they are becoming like the zombies you see in movies.

Although there are many kinds of zombie films with different settings, moviegoers can still agree on one commonality of zombies: their original human consciousness, desires and goals in life have been lost, replaced with one obsession — biting people!

If we see the CCP as an organism, its past desires included overthrowing the Kuomintang’s rule and becoming a beacon of revolution in the world. Later its goal was to reintegrate into the capitalist world, fight against the wave of democratization, make a fortune together with others in the bureaucratic clique, and build a strong military power to struggle for world hegemony.

But today these goals seem to be losing their importance. Frequent purges of the military’s top brass will undoubtedly jeopardize the troop’s fighting strength. The repeated suppression of private enterprises only jeopardizes the white gloves of many party bosses, but also harms the country’s overall economy.

What good are these operations to the party? To discover the answer, we need to know what is left in the eyes of the CCP after its infection with the “zombie virus.”

In September of last year, the government-run magazine Half-monthly Talkings published an article on the wastefulness of the promotion campaign on “party building:”

“In a village next to the highway off-ramp in Central China, our reporters saw a huge party building slogan billboard, about 33 meters long and 10 meters high. We asked a local cadre and were told that this billboard was completed in the second half of 2021 and its total cost was more than 440,000 yuan. The person in charge of the enterprise that undertook this project said that there are several other projects that cost millions of yuan in total this year, some of which are being negotiated and some are in the process of designing.

“In a place in North China, our reporters saw a set of 12 huge red Chinese characters in a plaza, with the words ‘to approach party members if you have difficulties and to approach party branches if you need service.’ Mr. Huang, who is the boss of the company that undertook the project, said: ‘Each character is 6 meters long and 6 meters high, and the production and installation costed 311,800 yuan in total.’”

Later it was reported:

“A city in Central China is building a party educational theme park in an integrated urban and rural demonstration zone, covering an area of about 19,000 square meters, with an estimated cost of 15 million yuan. Another party theme park in a place in Southwest China has cost over 70 million yuan.”

And still later this example was cited:

“Since 2020, a province in Central China had begun to build ‘party building complexes’ in villages and urban communities with considerable investment. Our reporters found the relevant information of 10 party building promotion projects in this province, of which two were completed in 2020, two in 2021, and five in 2022. Some of the larger-scale projects’ investments reached 6 million to 8 million yuan; the largest investment was more than 13 million yuan.”

Of course bureaucrats get big fat kickbacks from building these facilities; but even if corruption were reduced or eliminated entirely, it still costs money to build these nearly useless things. At a time when local budgets are tight, why on earth does the party do this?

The Zombie Cultist

In fact, if we take a closer look at these facilities (see the billboard on the previous page), we will find that there is a commonality — the highlighting of Xi Jinping’s speeches, pictures, slogans, writings and so on. The so-called party building campaign is actually a campaign to strengthen the personal cult of Xi.

In June this year, another party-run newspaper, Economic Information Daily, reported the rise of the party building app proxy services:

“Our reporters talked to a Taobao store named ‘micro-power “supervision pass” registration’ and was told that the majority of their customers are grassroots party cadres, who mainly buy the data of registration, CTR, forwarding, etc.

'The price of data of one registration is 1.8 yuan, the price of 1,000 clicks is 15 yuan, and the price of keeping an account active is 1.4 yuan per month.' Our reporters were told that this Taobao store has received over 200,000 orders for this kind of service, including a single order of about 5,000 yuan for buying 4,000 active accounts by a township government.

"In addition to providing 'tailored data forgery' for various types of digital government service promotion tasks, these Taobao stores can also provide 'ghostwriting service' on party educational apps. 'Some grassroots cadres look for us to complete online studying tasks, and we charge 30 yuan for 40 hours' online time. Some government departments require their employees to gain a certain number of points on "Xue Xi Qiang Guo" app, and we can also do it on behalf of the clients for 45 yuan a month.' Another Taobao store stated that, apart from a small number of more strict assessments, they can handle most of the local government's appraisals on public servants."

"Xue Xi Qiang Guo" (literally means "Learning about Strong Country") is the party's national educational app. The name is a double entendre because it can mean "studying to make the nation strong" and "learning from Xi to make the nation strong." Apart from this boot-licking double entendre, every time you open its homepage there will be carefully retouched large photographs of the big boss (as shown on this page). The fact that all public servants and party cadres throughout the country have to spend time on it every day will definitely affect the operation of the state machinery.

With so many military troopers, cops and secret police more or less spending half an hour on it daily, how will it improve catching dissidents and "traitors" which is their job? It is obvious that the priority is to see every cell of the CCP is bathed daily in the newest spirit of the great leader.

The Zombie Bites

The conclusion I draw from the above two examples is that the focus of the "zombified" CCP is to "keep the supremacy of Xi." But unlike in movies where the zombies bite everyone, the party will bite anyone Xi points to, and it will bite as hard as it is told to do so by Xi. Many other observers have come to similar conclusions. Bloomberg, for example, recently published an article, "Xi Jinping Has Made Himself China's Chief Economist." It reports that the past practice of senior party officials was to take advice from experts, whereas nowadays bureaucrats only need listen to Xi's lectures. As Cai Xia, a former professor at the Central Party School, remarked in a recent podcast interview about the guiding idea behind the Third Plenary Session's resolution, it is to "carry out reforms in the style of Xi."

Yet it seems that the CCP's zombification is not yet complete. I draw this conclusion from the criticisms found in the party-run media's stories I've just quoted.

Let's remember that Mao Zedong, the most successful party boss in pursuing a personal cult and autocracy in the CCP's history, could not maintain his political legacy intact. Within weeks after Mao's death, party leaders carried out a coup d'état in order to suppress his cronies.

This is similar to how movies use a shotgun to blow the zombies' brains out. Perhaps the only way that could save Xi from such a fate is by having his scientists break through nature's upper limit for human life.

Of course, there is also a view that the "zombification" of the CCP is not a bad thing. It would supposedly fetter the party, thus reducing its threat to the outside world and eventually causing it to collapse from inside.

But this idea is too passive. It's just like locking yourself in your house and eating canned food in order to survive the apocalypse in zombie movies. Most importantly, according to the usual movie formula, the majority who adopt this strategy don't live to see the credits roll.

Poker Games, Wars of Words

The recent "poker incident" is an example of passive resistance by low-ranking officials. In early August, Beijing Youth Daily — the official newspaper of Beijing Municipal Committee of the Communist Youth League — published three articles in a row criticizing a poker game called "Guan Dan." It writes:

"...The wind of 'Guan Dan' has swept across the country, blowing into all levels and corners. It is a manifestation of the society's loss of motivation and entrepreneurial spirit — a wind of evasion and decadence...."

"The so-called 'lying flat' is a lifestyle of not seeking progress, instead of striving oneself in the face of challenges, it tells people to act like a 'salted fish' without a dream. This unhealthy trend has been very harmful, and with the 'Guan Dan' fad in the past two years, some people just prefer to lay down in a more comfortable position."

It is very understandable that officials are addicted to playing cards. In order to maintain his throne, Xi only appoints his cronies. Officials beyond his circle have no hope of promotion. For the average bureaucrat, by working too hard they may end up making more mistakes. Thus there is a greater chance of being sacrificed in an anti-corruption drama.

Yet reading the writings of Xi is definitely not a good choice of entertainment. Therefore, if poker is banned, bureaucrats will probably choose to play video games, table tennis or sit in meditation. Just as with the symptoms of a zombie virus, the bureaucracy is becoming more dysfunctional.

Interestingly, after the criticism from Beijing Youth Daily was published, a number of local media, including the party committee's official newspaper from Jiangsu Province, have attempted to refute the criticism. They accused the Beijing Youth Daily with fabricating accusations.

Does this war of words reflect the discord among party officials from different regions, the dissatisfaction of grassroots cadres, or both? As an outside observer, I think it is too early to draw a conclusion.

However, it reveals that the great leader's China Dream is making bureaucrats increasingly disgusted. If lying down is not allowed, if playing cards is banned, then what is left but biting people or being bitten?

The nation was exhausted by the mess of a Great Leader's senseless campaigns once before, in the latter stage of the Cultural Revolution. Eventually the whole nation began to passively resist Chairman Mao's "Permanent Revolution," which meant continuing to create Mao as a deity.

The party-arranged "political studies" and assemblies of purges and denunciation are nothing but "seriously going through the motions." And we know what happened in the aftermath of Mao's death.

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