

Letter to Time on “Reshooting History in a New China.”

Written by Yi-Chang (Leo) Wang

Wednesday, 21 October 2009 15:20 - Last Updated Wednesday, 21 October 2009 15:37

Dear Mr. Abdoolcarim:

Thank you for the informing and interesting article on the October 19th Asia edition of Time magazine, “[Reshooting History in a New China](#).” However, I write to voice, on the behalf of Tati Foundation, that the Chinese leadership’s thinking has not changed at all since the founding of this totalitarian and Communist regime. As you have mentioned, injustices and corruption are rampant in China today. For an *average* Chinese citizen, life remains tough. Just like the widespread turmoil and ceaseless revolution in first half of CCP’s sixty years. Just like the pre-revolutionary KMT regime, riddled with corruption and brutality. In short, just like the same old days.

Indeed, political rulers everywhere rewrite and use history for their ends. One should not overlook the fact that by portraying some elements of KMT as less “malevolent and capricious,” Beijing is attempting to influence the geopolitical situation on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. By portraying the old and young Chiangs – both of whom are widely known and richly documented as brutal dictators in and outside of Taiwan – more favorably, the CCP is again undermining and insulting Taiwan’s statehood.

Taiwan is not a renegade province. The rest of the world is just too afraid to speak up on the truth of Taiwan’s sovereignty for the fear of the totalitarian CCP’s perceived political and economic power. We are proud of both our state and our achievement in democracy.

Sincerely,
Yi-Chang (Leo) Wang
Taiwan Tati Cultural & Educational Foundation

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Note: Letter was written and sent on Thursday, October 15, 2009. Here is a re-print of Time magazine editor, Zoher Abdoolcarim’s article on the Asia edition’s October 19th issue:

Reshooting History in a New China Film

It's early 1949, China's in the endgame of its civil war and Mao Zedong's communist forces are poised to take Beijing. Just south of the Yangtze, in Nanjing, Mao's archfoe, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, holds court as the leader of the Republic of China and its Nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) government. But Mao believes that winning Beijing first will deal a mortal blow to the morale of the KMT. En route to what will be the future People's Republic's capital, he and his top lieutenants pause in a town that has been deserted by shopkeepers and merchants fleeing the revolution of the proletariat. As Mao laments being unable to buy even his favorite smokes, he soberly says to his comrades-in-arms, "We need the capitalists back."

It seems improbable that Mao would actually have expressed such a reactionary sentiment at such a heady time. His was a movement driven by the cause of the exploited worker and peasant. Yet the scene appears in *The Founding of a Republic*, a slickly produced (though ponderously paced) state-backed film to commemorate this year's 60th anniversary of the People's Republic of China.

The docudrama-style film begins in 1945 with the then temporarily allied communists and Nationalists celebrating the defeat of the Japanese and culminates with the declaration of the

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People's Republic by Mao at Beijing's Tiananmen Square. It purports to tell the true and full story of the tangled dance between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the KMT to forge a new, unified China. As you'd

expect, many — but surprisingly not all — elements of the KMT are portrayed as malevolent and capricious, and the CCP justly triumphs (of course!). Yet

Founding

goes beyond routine propaganda. What's striking is how the film exposes — intentionally, we would assume — some of the thinking of the Chinese leadership today.

China's past 60 years can be divided into roughly two halves. First came the period of ceaseless revolution, with all the widespread turmoil and suffering it perpetrated. Then the time of gradual reform, which has brought greater prosperity and freedom than China has ever known but which is still characterized by grave corruption and terrible injustice under a stern authoritarianism. Today

China

is many things, often contradictory: rich and poor, open and closed, liberated and oppressed, confident and insecure. But it decidedly isn't Marxist — or even Maoist.

Because the CCP now gains its legitimacy almost solely from the material wealth it has created and is communist only in name, it has to recast the past to justify the present. Thus, in *Founding*, class struggle is hardly depicted or mentioned. Mao not only needs a capitalist to provide him with a cigarette; he and his cohorts admit they are ignorant about economics, which they acknowledge is essential to running the country. The message: Mao was great at consolidating the nation under the communist banner, but he was clueless about development; it's today's CCP that made the new new

China

— modern, strong, feared.

With the civil war practically won, Mao is also shown to be assiduously wooing assorted Chinese politicians, most notably intellectuals who saw the revolution as a chance to usher in democracy. This way, the CCP can be promoted as a party with roots in a broad-based political movement and not just in the spoils of war — thus further boosting its authority. Taiwan figures too. Mao tries to persuade Li Jishen, an influential southern

China

figure aligned with the KMT, to join the communist government. Li confesses to Mao that he is responsible for the deaths of many communist cadres. Mao's reply: Let's forget the past and begin a new future. That's directed at

Taipei

— part of

Beijing

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's ongoing charm offensive toward
Taiwan
, once relentlessly denounced as a renegade province.

Then there's the Sinophile John Leighton Stuart, son of missionaries to China and U.S.
ambassador to Chiang's
Nanjing
government. At the time, the real-life Mao vilified Stuart as an agent of American aggression
toward the communists. In the film, Stuart, as well as the U.S. State Department, is lukewarm
toward Chiang and the KMT — reflecting, perhaps,
Beijing
's desire to maintain the momentum of its improving diplomatic ties with
Washington
. (Last November, the Chinese acceded to a four-decade-old request by Stuart's family to have
his ashes buried in a cemetery in
Hangzhou
, near
Shanghai
.)

Political rulers everywhere rewrite and use history for their ends. But as China looms ever
larger in the global consciousness, anything we can glean about its leadership is especially
valuable. There's one moral in
Founding
, however, that
Beijing
probably did not intend. Chiang Ching-kuo, Chiang Kai-shek's son, is briefing his father about
his fight to rid the KMT of corruption and injustice. Chiang praises his son's idealism — and
gently advises him to desist so as not to undermine the KMT at a critical juncture in the civil war.
"If you go ahead," says Chiang, "you lose the party." But, the Generalissimo quietly adds, "if you
don't, you lose
China
." That's a message
China
's present leaders would do well to heed.