

While the US presidential and congressional elections loom on the horizon, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has just finished its Sixth Plenum of the 18th Party Congress. This plenum has left many with the feeling that Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平) primarily used it to consolidate his control of the party and its direction.

Certainly party discipline has been a salient issue, and one that is closely tied to Xi's anti-corruption campaign. However, since Xi has held off naming any successor, loyalty to him looms even more prominently as a concern above any party ideology.

Thus, in this plenum, while Xi did earn the title of being a “core” part of the party, the uncertainty of his successor still muddies the waters. For in China, as in any one-party state, control of succession as well as control of media is a crucial factor.

However, although this decision on succession remains up in the air, pundits are nonetheless ready to give their interpretations and comparisons with past sessions. Even Mao Zedong's (毛泽东) name was brought up after Xi got tabbed as “Mighty Uncle Xi” (习大大).

Across the Taiwan Strait, Taiwanese see these results and the whole process in a totally different light. For them, it once again points to the many differences between one-party states and democracies. China is, in addition to being Taiwan's neighbor, probably the best example for insights into how succession works behind closed doors in any one-party state system.

Look first at the mammoth size of the CCP in China. With more than 88 million members, the party is larger than the population of Germany, the 16th largest nation in the world. Thus, if one wants to go anywhere or get anything done in China with its 1.3 billion people, CCP membership and allegiance is a must.

In effect, this makes the CCP a country within the larger country of China. What better example of one-party state manipulations is available?

Elections, history and cyclical views

Written by Jerome Keating
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In democracies, on the other hand, to succeed in gaining office, candidates of the various political parties must appeal to all the people to be elected. This means both going out to them and also running a media gauntlet, the likes of which you would never see in China.

One-party state control does not mean that Xi does not have to face challenges. Neither he nor any of the other current leaders in China possess the “Long March credentials” to rule that Mao and others in the past have had. For this reason, the anti-corruption card is a visible card that Xi can both play and play well but again, as long as he controls the media.

In the US, since the matter of succession is in the hands of voters, and candidates are subject to media examination, the media consistently plays a more crucial role. And in this year, perhaps more than in any other year, the wide-ranging media reports have made the election an open donnybrook of competition. Scandals, leaked videos and leaked e-mails, etc, you name it, they are all found in the unending media barrage.

If the US were a one-party state and the Republican Party were the only party, the swift and ruthless way that presidential candidate Donald Trump mowed down his competition in the primaries would have settled the deal.

However, fortunately one might say for the US, Trump’s challenges were only beginning. He then has had to face former US secretary of state Hillary Rodham Clinton, the candidate from the other major party. They squared off not only in debates, but also under the constant and more focused scrutiny of media examination.

In China, Xi is now called “Mighty Uncle Xi.” Whoever emerges victorious in the US, one can bet that there will not be any references to “Mighty Aunt Hillary” or “Mighty Uncle Donald.”

The people of the US will then give their president the respect due the office, but they will know that their president was a flawed candidate. However, they will also feel that they are closer to the truth in presidential character analysis than anyone in China.

A third and different insight that Taiwanese reap in this US election, is ironically provided by

one of the campaign slogans of Trump, namely “Make America Great Again.” This slogan, while catchy, raises an important question: How does a country define its greatness? This is a question that must regularly be put to both one-party states and democracies.

In this regard, nations, like people, follow the dictum of Heraclitus: “You cannot step in the same river twice.”

What Heraclitus meant, of course, is that life is linear and not cyclic. Time flows like a river, and its circumstances and atmosphere are constantly changing. No two situations are ever exactly the same. The river that one once stepped into in the past is gone, a new one is in its place.

When Trump supporters are asked what period of US history they consider was the time of past greatness, most harken back with nostalgia to the late 1950s. At that time World War II had ended and the US with its strong untouched manufacturing base prospered. The US had lost many youths in the war, but the land and infrastructure had been left untouched. Nothing had to be rebuilt from the ravages of war.

It was a happy time in the US if one did not look deeply beneath the surface.

However, other problems, long buried there, could now rise to be addressed. The turbulent 1960s followed the halcyon 1950s, and with good reason. Racial tension and discrimination still existed; the time had come to focus on Civil Rights legislation.

A second issue was the extent to which the US should be involved in the problems of other nations. The US would get embroiled in Vietnam, and this gave rise to the peace movement.

Few realize that the so-called glorious period of the 1950s that some now nostalgically see as a period of greatness was only a lull. History is linear, not cyclic. The river of time constantly moves on. One cannot go home again.

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Taiwanese understand this perspective, but Chinese do not. Because in China, they do not have a challenging media, thus people can never fully escape a cyclic view of history and greatness. This sheds light on why Mao is still idolized in many parts of China. Mao is revered because he allegedly made China great again.

If one were to ask Chinese what period and what time they consider was China's greatest, without revisionist history or a questioning media they would no doubt reference a dynasty like the Han (漢) or Tang (唐).

This is cyclic myopia, and what prevents the people of China from facing up to the disasters that Mao caused in the Great Leap Forward, its subsequent famines and of course the divisive decade of the Cultural Revolution.

These are scars that most Chinese do not openly want to face and admit. Mao's disasters set China back decades; they could have been avoided with better leadership, but they are glossed over because Mao supposedly made China great again.

On the other hand, the actual rulers understood this within the confines of their one-party state, but even they had to wait until Mao's death before they could set matters right. The swiftness with which CCP leaders dealt with the Gang of Four is proof of their awareness. Once Mao's protection was gone, the Gang of Four was quickly dispatched. Average citizens again accepted what the state media told them.

And where is Taiwan in all of this? The outstanding insight that continues to prevail in Taiwan is that Taiwanese know that history is not cyclic. Taiwan does not need to seek to revive a mythic glorious past; it finds its glory in the linear and in its sense of progress. Taiwanese look to a continuously developing future. This remains Taiwan's strength; it is always progressing.

Certainly a past glory for Taiwan is its achievement of democracy. However, once that is done, the next step is to preserve it and defend it.

Taiwan does not look to restore a past to be great again, it looks to its future and new

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challenges.

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