

Pooh-poohing ban on Pooh Bear

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
Saturday, 22 July 2017 06:53

“The Communist Party doesn’t do humor.”

That pithy remark from Steve Tsang (譚新明), director of the China Institute at the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies, was his response in a report by British newspaper the Independent on Monday about Beijing banning Winnie-the-Pooh from social media because of repeated comparisons of A.A. Milne’s teddy bear character to Chinese President Xi Jinping (習近平).

It is a seemingly ridiculous move, and yet there is really nothing funny about the efforts by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Xi to limit dissent against his rule or his four-year-long crackdown on freedom of expression.

Tsang told the Independent that the CCP probably would not mind comparisons being made between Xi and superheroes, such as Captain America or Superman. Given Xi’s rule thus far, such comparisons would certainly be in the realm of comic-book fantasy.

The rationale given by China watchers for the crackdown on Pooh is that Xi and his allies are on edge in the run-up to the CCP’s 19th National Congress this fall, when, following precedent, apprentice successor(s) to Xi as party secretary-general are expected to be named to prepare them to take over in 2022.

The rub is that Xi, whose first term has seen the development of a personality cult harkening back to the days of Mao Zedong (毛澤東), seems to be positioning himself to stay in power for more than the two terms that became the norm following Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping’s (鄧小平) retirement.

So while Pooh has been banished once again from social media in China, China Central Television on Monday night began airing a 10-part documentary titled Carrying Reform Through to the End about Xi, his achievements and his aims.

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The series is designed to reinforce Xi's image as the nation's most powerful leader since Mao, a shift in tone from earlier efforts to portray him as a benevolent ruler — the wise and friendly Uncle Xi — which led to memes of Xi as a big smiling panda, cute and cuddly.

Given the vast amounts of money and goodwill that pandas earn China, they cannot be banned; a foreign teddy bear is another matter.

However, Pooh fans should take hope. This is not the first time that Xi's censors have targeted the little bear.

After Xi met then-US president Barack Obama in California in 2013, photographs of the two alongside pictures of Winnie-the-Pooh and Tigger quickly became popular and were just as quickly deleted.

An awkward handshake between Xi and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe the following year was commemorated by pictures of Pooh holding Eeyore's hoof — soon to be erased — while in 2015 it was a picture of Pooh in a toy car, a send-up of Xi standing up through the sunroof in a black limousine during a parade, which became the most consistently censored item on Chinese social media sites that year, according to research by University of Hong Kong professor of journalism Fu King-wa (傅金華).

Yet Pooh keeps popping back up.

It is akin to the difficulty China faces trying to control mentions of Taiwan, Tibet, Tiananmen Square demonstrators, late Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo (劉曉波) and other democracy and human rights activists, Falun Gong practitioners, and so many more.

However, one cannot help but wonder if it is not so much Pooh bear's roundness when compared to the portly Xi that bothers the CCP as much as it is the potential for Milne's writings to inspire or provide comfort to Xi's critics, such as: "There is something you must always remember. You are braver than you believe, stronger than you seem and smarter than you think."

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The world according to Pooh seems like a much nicer place than the one ruled by Xi.

One could almost see how he could feel threatened by a gentle bear.

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