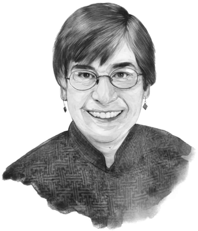
Q & A

Elizabeth Perry on the Secrets to the CCP's Resilience

The Harvard professor explains 'Xi Jinping Thought' and how the CCP's revolutionary heritage may inoculate it against the disease that overtook communism in Europe.

BY EYCK FREYMANN — FEBRUARY 7, 2021

Elizabeth J. Perry is Henry Rosovsky Professor of Government at Harvard University and Director of the Harvard-Yenching Institute. Her research focuses on the history of the Chinese revolution and its implications for contemporary Chinese politics. Perry, who was born in Shanghai, to American missionary parents, is the author or editor of more than 20 books, including, Beyond Regimes: China and India Compared *(Harvard, 2018);* Similar yet Different: Case Studies of China's Modern Christian Colleges *(Zhejiang, 2019); and* Ruling by Other Means: State-Mobilized Movements *(Cambridge, forthcoming). In this lightly edited interview, we discussed the secrets of the Chinese Communist Party's success, how Xi Jinping uses ideology and history to mobilize the masses, and why Mao Zedong still matters.*



Elizabeth Perry.
Credit: Kate Copeland

Q: For decades, Western political scientists predicted that Communist China would either collapse or liberalize as it reformed its economy and got richer. But the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) surprised us. What did they get right that the Soviet communists got wrong? Or, to put it another way, how did the CCP adapt?

A: In terms of its formal institutions, China looks awfully similar to the former Soviet Union and other formerly communist countries across Central Europe that collapsed in the late 1980s. And one major reason that political scientists have given for the collapse of the former Soviet Union and Eastern European communist countries was their formal political institutions. If you look at an organizational chart, China looks mighty close to those. There are few small differences: China has a Standing Committee of the Politburo, for example, which the Soviet Union never had. But basically it's the same.

Many have suggested, then, that China's success is due to its informal institutions: its vibrant Letters and Visits Office, for example. But many of those informal institutions were also shared by other formerly communist countries.

In our book *Mao's Invisible Hand*, Sebastian Heilmann and I suggest that the CCP's success is less about institutions than it is about operations. From the 1920s on, the CCP has had a kind of experimental ethos. Particularly after 1927, when the CCP was forced out of the cities and into the countryside, it had to figure out a way to adapt to its own society, for which there was no blueprint from the Soviet Union. The Russian revolution had been a worker's revolution. Classic Marxist-Leninism focused on the proletariat, the industrial factory worker. After Chinese Communists were forced out of the city, where they had actually done a pretty good job mobilizing workers in factories, they now had to figure out how to deal with peasants in the countryside. They also had to figure out how to deal with — and survive in — very different parts of China. The Kuomintang, and then the Japanese, kept them on the run.

China's was a protracted revolution — 30 years almost. In that time, the CCP became very flexible. It made mistakes, but it never felt as constrained by its institutions as many other communist societies did. Instead, it has always looked at problems and crises as possibilities for different kinds of policies, and also for creating short term organizations to deal with them. It has continued to use this flexible mode of operations for meeting various kinds of policy challenges.

So one very big reason is the revolutionary tradition of the CCP, and, in that tradition, its flexibility and adaptability. Also very important is a style of mass mobilization that is quite different from that of the former Soviet Union or Eastern Europe. Out of the revolutionary period, the CCP developed techniques for involving ordinary people in the party's operations, even if those ordinary people were not party members themselves. It did this in land reform, for example.

That mass mobilization remains a signature characteristic of Chinese communist governance even today. It helps us understand things like, why a huge city like Wuhan would willingly submit to lockdown. There is a kind of alliance between ordinary people and the party that has been built up over generations of incorporating ordinary people into the party's policy implementation efforts. Sometimes it's done coercively. But, usually, it's done with propaganda in order to get ordinary people on board. In the former Soviet Union, when the party wanted to do something that required a very firm hand, it would use the KGB and knock on the door in the middle of the night. In China, it's more likely to be your neighbor than the secret police who's disciplining you for one reason or another — that's a very effective, powerful tool of governance. In those important ways China has differed from other communist countries, and it helps to explain the greater durability, the greater resilience, of Chinese communist rule.

So, if I were an aspiring communist revolutionary in the early 20th century, knowing what you know now, you would advise me: (1) Start an agrarian revolution, rather than an urban workers' revolution; (2) Engage the grassroots to make people feel like their interests are aligned with the party's; and (3) Develop a culture of experimentation and adaptability that might exist in parallel to or even on top of my formal institutions. All together, this will give me a leg up in my chances of survival?

BIO AT A GLANCE

AGE	72
BIRTHPLACE	Shanghai, China
CURRENT POSITION	Henry Rosovsky Professor of Government at Harvard University, Director of the Harvard-Yenching Institute

Yes, I would say that. Although I also would not underestimate the importance of what the party did do in cities and in factories. That's where the overwhelming opposition from the Kuomintang and the Japanese came. Mobilization of workers was very important. The CCP's toeholds in the cities, which underground party cells developed in the 1930s and 1940s, were also important. But certainly the main thrust of the revolution was in the countryside. China was an overwhelmingly agrarian society. Having cadres who were willing to adapt to the countryside was critical. Those who came from the countryside, like Mao, tended to have an advantage.

The CCP's rural wing was the more important in terms of explaining the ultimate success of the party. They were forced to explain what they were up to, in terms that resonated and made sense with ordinary people.

After Xi Jinping came to power, in 2012-2013, many Western observers predicted that he would be a liberalizing reformer. To be fair, the China community was probably less confident. But relatively few of us would have predicted just how aggressively and quickly he would centralize control. Why did we get this wrong?

I'm not sure how wrong we got it. I remember getting into a very spirited argument with several reasonably high ranking Chinese officials, just after Xi Jinping took over. They insisted that he was going to be a reformer. I, personally, never thought he was going to be a reformer. Now, I perhaps didn't expect that the rest of the party would fall into line so quickly. But I did expect that he would carry out a major anti-corruption drive. There was enormous unhappiness, not just within party circles, but within society at large about the corruption within the party. It seemed to me highly likely that if he was going to survive, he was going to have to carry out a successful anti-corruption campaign. I certainly did not expect it to last for as long as it has — this is the longest anti-corruption campaign in the history of the CCP.

We did not give Xi credit for his personal skills of hardline politics. Behind the scenes, it is most surprising how quickly the rest of the top level elite has fallen in line, how there was really so little opposition to Xi Jinping declaring an indefinite term for himself as party leader. That would have been hard to predict. Most of us didn't expect him to play hardball quite as successfully as he has.

But I wouldn't say that we got it that wrong. A lot of political scientists expected that Xi would attempt to draw on the traditions of the revolution. They noticed that there was a lot of unhappiness in China about how soft the party seemed to have become under Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao. To those of us who have always seen the revolution as a resource that leaders can tap into, it was not that surprising that he would tap into it. When my book with Sebastian Heilmann came out, some people in the field thought we were out of step with the situation. They said that nobody thinks about the revolution or Mao or

Maoism anymore. And we begged to differ. Now, of course, everybody is saying Xi is invoking Mao all the time and going back to the revolution.

If you look at his biography, and what was said about him when he was first promoted into the Politburo, Xi was kind of seen as a guy who could get along well with other people, not someone with a backbone of steel who would completely re-staff the military and get people like Jiang Zemin to back off.

You anticipated my next question, which is, what exactly does Mao mean, as a symbol, in Chinese elite discourse today? And how might that differ from how common Chinese people, say in the countryside or in smaller provincial cities, might think about Mao?

I don't know if it's an elite-mass difference, an urban-rural difference, an educated-uneducated difference. Certainly, there are lots of different views of Mao. Some view Mao as the great nationalist — I think that view of Mao is shared by most Chinese. That one thing that you have to applaud if you're a patriotic Chinese is the fact that, under Mao, China reunited and got rid of foreign domination. Although China had not been overtly colonized, it had been semi-colonial. In 1949, Mao really reclaimed the sovereignty of the Chinese nation. Whether they like him or dislike him, most would give him credit for this.

When you get beyond that, not too many would give him credit for the Great Leap Forward, or the Cultural Revolution. The Great Leap, of course, was the worst famine in all of history, in which maybe 30 or 40 million people perished. The Cultural Revolution set people within the universities, within factories, and even within villages against one another. These were both efforts to carry on the revolution, but in ways that ended up being extraordinarily destructive.

The so-called "New Left" in China — most don't consider themselves "new leftists," but that term is applied by others — appreciate Mao's concern for the inequalities in Chinese society between urban and rural areas, between educated and uneducated, mental and manual labor, peasants and workers, and so forth. Inequalities have become extremely evident in the post-Mao period, and so many people look back — with some reason, not simply nostalgically — toward the Mao era as a time when equality was taken seriously. Even though inequality got worse, in some respects, during the Mao period itself, it was not as visible to people because they didn't have the same kind of mobility. At that time, there was more inequality between regions than within regions, whereas, today, it's very, very visible within any particular city or even within many villages, who are the wealthy and who are the poor.

So, different feelings about Mao depend on how important you think this quest for equality is, on how much you think that Mao's often violent methods of trying to reach a more egalitarian society were worth the cost.

Often when I travel around China, I ask people what they think about Mao — especially if there's a little Mao amulet hanging from their rearview mirror. These days, that amulet might be a Xi Jinping one as well. The ones with Mao amulets will sometimes say that he has this kind of spiritual power. That doesn't mean, necessarily, that they liked him or that they wish he were still in power. In some parts of China, Maoism is a kind of quasi-religion. You can go into some peasant homes in Hunan Province and find little Mao-like altars. But, even there, people don't necessarily really worship Mao, in any very serious way. They acknowledge him as somebody who had a lot of power, and it's useful to have that power in your house to keep you safe. So, there are just lots of different ways of thinking about him. It would be hard to classify it by region or by class.

Perry with McLarty Associates' Senior Director John Holden (center left), at the time Associate Dean at Peking University's Yenching Academy, and two students.
Credit: Yenching Academy of Peking University

As the U.S.-China relationship deteriorates, Xi Jinping has given speeches where he talks about the war against the "American imperialists" and he refers often to the revolutionary legacy of the early days of the PRC. Is Xi saying China needs to return to a 1950s style revolutionary attitude if it's going to win this? What does it mean if China

is conceptualizing the U.S.-China relationship in revolutionary terms?

I wouldn't say that Xi's biggest concern in evoking the Maoist heritage is to put the U.S. on notice. His biggest concern is his domestic audience. He wants a domestic mobilization for a new long march to modernization. Just as Joe Biden gets up and calls for unity, and says, let's not have an "uncivil war" in this country. Biden is evoking milestones in the American tradition to create national unity. Of course, there's an international audience, too, but his primary audience is domestic. That's true for Xi Jinping, too, when he talks about Mao.

At the same time, Xi makes very, very clear that he's a real advocate of globalization. He uses the term *zili gengsheng* (self-reliance) in the sense that China should be an innovator itself. China should be at the forefront of artificial intelligence and various new kinds of technological innovation. He's very clear that China does not want to go it alone. The Belt Road Initiative is one example of that. It's certainly not an agenda of "Make China Great Again"; it's an agenda of reaching out to the world and being part of it. In that way it's quite different from the early '50s. What Xi is trying to signal is not that China is necessarily going back to a militaristic or aggressive international stance, but rather that there needs to be unity within the population, since there are a whole bunch of challenges that China is facing for which it needs national unity. Mao is a symbol of that.

With the battle against Covid-19, which is still ongoing, there is a lot of militaristic rhetoric that harks back to 1952 and the first patriotic health movement campaign in China, which was initiated during the Korean War. That first patriotic health campaign was mass mobilization for all kinds of good things like sanitation. But also it was a mobilization against the threat of American imperialism and the view that the U.S. was dropping biological germ warfare on China. It's never been entirely established whether the U.S. did or didn't engage in germ warfare in this period. But I don't think that Xi Jinping really wants to return to that kind of relationship with the United States.

Obviously, there are tremendous pressures, both within China and within the United States, on the top leadership pulling these countries apart. Despite the fact that Xi seems to have very strong control over the military, there are elements within the military that are pushing him towards a more muscular stance than he may always feel comfortable with. It's impossible to know exactly what those internal kinds of pressures may be. Still, I'm not convinced that Xi really wants an antagonistic relationship with the United States. When it comes to issues of fighting a pandemic, or global warming and climate change, and so on, the U.S. and China simply have to find a way to cooperate. China is intensely aware of that.

In other words, you believe we should not read too literally into Xi Jinping's invocation of historical metaphors. The domestic audience understands that analogies are not supposed to be precise.

Yes, exactly. Xi has been very clear that one should not divide the history of the People's Republic of China into a Maoist and post-Mao period. He sees that there is a lot to be gained from drawing on the propaganda of that era — metaphors, rhetoric, symbolism, cultural resonances — and not only for the older generation, but for the younger generation as well. Xi has been adamant that there is only one People's Republic of China.

> **"It's certainly not an agenda of "Make China Great Again"; it's an agenda of reaching out to the world and being part of it."**

Clearly, Xi believes that the strength of the CCP comes largely from its revolutionary history. He does not want to view the current party as somehow a revisionist party, like Khrushchev in the Soviet Union, who rejected the Stalinist revolutionary tradition. In Xi Jinping's view, Khrushchev's actions marked the beginning of the decline of the Soviet Union. In order to prevent that kind of development in China, Xi believes it's important to keep reminding Chinese people of their own distinctive communist traditions. The idea is that this revolutionary heritage will inoculate the CCP regime against the disease that overtook communism in Europe.

But at the same time, Chinese elite discourse these days is permeated with the phrase "new era" (*xin shidai*). Xi's ideological doctrine is called "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era." What makes this new era "new"? Why does China need a "new era"?

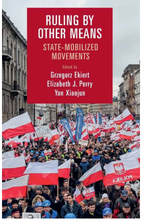
From Xi's point of view the "new era" means that China is now on the road to national rejuvenation and emerging from the long shadow of imperialist exploitation that dates back to the Opium Wars. This is part of his so-called China dream, a collective dream in which China once again becomes a rich and strong nation that enjoys international respect.

On the one hand, this is a revivalist rejuvenation, putting China back into its rightful place in the world. On the other hand, there's the recognition that to do this, China has got to be a leader in science and technology, to be ahead of other countries in this race for a kind of new knowledge-based economy of the 21st century.

The so-called New Age also involves something that Deng Xiaoping and his successors spoke of often: this notion of the *xiaokang shehui*, a "small happiness society" or "moderately well-off society" in which ordinary people have enough to get along. In this light, Xi's "new era" is closer to the American dream with a focus on the middle class.

What is Xi Jinping Thought? And why is it so important in guiding the party in the new era?

If you read Xi's volumes on the *Governance of China*, they're mostly essays on his own experience and China's experience — not philosophically deep by any means. Not that Mao was terribly deep, either, but Mao was relatively more interested in reading the Marxist classics and relating what he was doing in China to that theory. One gets the sense that Xi Jinping doesn't spend a lot of time sitting around either reading or thinking about Marxist or Maoist classics. But, similar to Mao, his ideas are thinking back on what his experience has been and what works and what doesn't. There is a pragmatic quality to Xi's writings. And, again, there is the sense that the Chinese road to modernization is a series of experiments that need to be studied.



Perry's most recent book, *Ruling by Other Means* (2020), examines state-mobilized movements.

And just as with Mao, it is probably less about the actual content than the idea that the top leader is a kind of sage who embodies certain characteristics associated with wise leadership in the Chinese tradition. The Central Propaganda Department is providing seemingly limitless sums for faculty members and research projects to explore "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era." Xi's writings are being taught not only in the party schools, but in ordinary schools as well. The leader is supposed to be an intellectual, someone who writes and thinks and pontificates about philosophical and political matters. That's what statecraft is all about. A lot of this is developing a kind of aura around Xi. If I ask my colleagues what is the most important idea in Xi Jinping Thought, I have yet to find someone who can really give me much of an answer. But they all know that it is important — Xi Jinping Thought is now enshrined in the party constitution in a way that only Mao's thought was enshrined before him. It's a way of establishing the importance of the central leader.

So should we think about Xi Jinping Thought as something that has to do with ritual and informal organization within the party? There's an essay by Heike Holbig called "Ideology after the End of Ideology," in which she argues that in communist systems, phrases can stay in use long after they have lost their original meaning, because they are a way of signaling. Is Xi Jinping Thought performative?

There's a lot to be said for that view. Xi Jinping Thought does have a sort of ritualistic power; if one is deferential to it, it suggests a kind of personal submission to party authority. The fact that people signal that they have been reading Xi Jinping's ideas in their Xuexi Qiangguo ("Study the Strong Country") app, for example, clearly is an effort to make clear where the authority is coming from and that ordinary people have to spend time on it, even if they think it's kind of silly.

But I wouldn't entirely deny the importance of actually reading the stuff. If we want to understand who Xi Jinping is, we should take seriously what he writes. Some of his little vignettes about successful and less successful case studies inside China are worth spending time with. It may be the Central Propaganda Department that chose them; it may be Wang Huning. But content is not beside the point. In the 1950s, Benjamin Schwarz at Harvard was one of the few people who thought that it was important to read Mao's writings carefully. And as a result, Schwartz saw that Mao was actually trying to take China in a rather different path from the Soviet Union. Mao's writing wasn't all deep philosophy, but it was important politically, because it showed that he was putting forward ideas that China had a distinct road and role in the world. It's important now for realizing that China, once again, is trying to put itself forward as a model.

Some leading scholars of Chinese foreign policy — Elizabeth Economy being one example — argue that Xi's China is increasingly interested in exporting its governance model. Do you accept this premise? Can the CCP's model be exported? And if so, what are the features of this model that other countries might be able to learn from?

It's very unclear whether there really is a Chinese model, and if so what it means. That's partly why so much money is going into the universities to study Xi Jinping Thought — to try to figure that out. Is there something that is of interest and replicable outside of China? There are major debates among China scholars within China, and I'm sure within the Chinese leadership and the Chinese propaganda apparatus, in trying to answer those questions.

If there is a China model, what exactly is it? Is it those things that we talked about at the beginning of our conversation: this model of an authoritarian state that nevertheless is more flexible, and relies more on ordinary people than many other authoritarian regimes have? Is it an authoritarian state that is particularly supple because of its revolutionary past, and more open to experimentation, and more innovative? All those things are there.

In the Mao period, there was a desire to export the Chinese model. In Tanzania, Chinese money and expertise built the Tazara railroad. There were efforts to take the Chinese model of "barefoot doctors" and implement it in the Tanzanian countryside and so forth. They didn't work very well, because there wasn't the same historical experience, and there wasn't the same sort of relationship between ordinary people and the state. Maoist political parties all over the world haven't been terribly successful, because they really have not been able to resonate with the experience and the expectations of the local population.

Will it be different under Xi Jinping? I think when Xi talks about drawing upon the revolutionary model, it's obviously not because he wants another revolution in China. Quite the opposite. The idea is to use those techniques from the revolution, but to use them for political *stability* and political legitimacy. Will that same kind of model resonate in other countries that don't share China's revolutionary experience? I rather doubt it. That's not to say that people won't be very interested in certain inventions that China has come up with and technological lessons that China can teach. But in terms of a political model, that's pretty unlikely. This really is a very unusual system and it's unlikely to be easily exported.

China understands that. First of all, although it has a very large economy, it's not a rich country at this point, and arrogance can be a recipe for disastrous international relations. Most Chinese diplomats and government officials are inclined to be reasonably modest in suggesting that there's a China model or a China experience that can be exported. But on the other hand, there is more hubris in elements within the Central Propaganda Department, and within the leadership. There are elements here that really would like to see how far they can push the notion of a "China model" out beyond China's own borders. And there are individuals in the Chinese academy that are certainly thinking about those kinds of questions.

There's also a lot of money going into bringing students from developing countries to China through Belt and Road Initiative fellowships, presumably to take knowledge about China back home. There is clearly a desire to make China more of a center of new ideas that will be appealing to people outside of China's own borders.

And you have people like Zhao Tingyang at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, a philosopher who writes about *tianxia* — the "realm under heaven" — the traditional term for China. He argues that, once again, there needs to be a *tianxia*; China needs to be an all-under-heaven kind of cultural center to the world. But, is that kind of image really going to have much appeal beyond China's own borders? I rather doubt it.

In recent years, many scholars have written about democratic backsliding, with strong men emerging everywhere from the U.S. to Brazil, India, the Philippines, and Poland. This illiberal turn to populism, it is generally said, is

MISCELLANEA

BOOK REC	*Protestants Abroad: How Missionaries Tried to Change the World but Changed America* by David Hollinger
FAVORITE MUSIC	Katy Perry's "Fireworks," as performed at the Biden inauguration
FAVORITE FILM	*Manchurian Candidate* (original version)

PERSONAL HERO Elizabeth Blackwell

caused by globalization, economic inequality, the fraying of community, and so forth. How does China fit into this global trend? Is China's illiberal turn an independent event or is it riding the same wave?

I am very, very sympathetic to that position. Globalization has created a fertile ground, ironically, for strongman populism. People in many countries feel threatened by immigration, threatened by forces that seem to be larger than life. The reaction has been a strongman, nationalistic populism.

I would distinguish Chinese populism under Xi Jinping, because Xi has made very clear that he is not a foe of globalization. Chinese looking at their own history over the last 40 years understand that without globalization China couldn't possibly have made the strides that it's made. In order to keep the modernization train rolling, they need globalization. So it's a little different from our own brand of populism under Trump that is highly parochial and nationalistic and inward-looking.

But it probably isn't just a coincidence that you have all these strongmen — Modi in India, Trump in the United States, Xi in China, Erdogan in Turkey, Putin in Russia, and so forth — in places with both democratic and authoritarian regimes. In some respects, China is part of that. And the Chinese experience starts to look much more interesting to leaders elsewhere in the world who are looking for non-democratic success stories.

What do you think will be the effects of globalization and strongman politics on regional diversity in China? In India, Narendra Modi's majoritarianism is effacing smaller differences in caste or state identity and replacing them with a new pan-Hindu, pan-Indian civic identity. Is China going to experience something similar?

That's a real concern. There is essentially a cultural genocide in Xinjiang among the Uyghurs. Of course, they were never Chinese to begin with, at some level. But they are officially Chinese citizens, and the idea is to make them more similar to what the state expects its Han Chinese to be like.

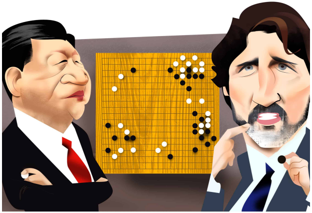
When I first lived in China as an adult, in Shanghai and Nanjing, you would hear local dialects all the time. Now, you're much more likely to hear conversations in Mandarin. It's true all over China. Part of that is due to very happy things. The fact that there's far greater mobility — people can actually move around and have family members from different places. That in some ways creates *more* diversity. But a lot of the regionalisms are in some danger of being washed out by this national pattern.

For the future stability of China, that may have some benefits. Although we talk about Han Chinese as though they're one ethnicity, they're not really. Cantonese and Shanghainese are separate languages; they're not really dialects. They have many cultural traditions that are very, very distinctive. And there's always the possibility that China could fracture along these regional cultural lines. To the extent that you are building a more assimilated and common standard culture, ethnicity, language, and the like, that's probably less likely to happen. So from the point of view of political stability, I can see why the regime might view this as a good thing. But for those of us who really treasure regional and cultural diversity, and think that it's a really important part of the human tradition, it's worrisome.

There also is some pushback. Local areas are trying to revive local traditions. Tourism, to some extent, can only thrive when there's difference. I remember a number of years ago, when I was in Chongqing for some fieldwork, and I attended a township People's Congress meeting, the whole meeting was a debate about how to get back their traditional recipes for cooking tofu that had been lost over the centuries. They were putting a lot of local money into researching ancient recipes and setting up cooking contests and so forth. Why? Because they wanted tourists' money. At the same time that there is standardization, [and] there are other pressures, both cultural and financial, that help to keep alive a sense of difference. And new differences that will develop between these places that may end up being quite important and quite unexpected.

Eyck Freymann is the author of *One Belt One Road: Chinese Power Meets the World* (November 2020) and Director of Indo-Pacific at Greenmantle, a macroeconomic and geopolitical advisory firm.

COVER STORY



Trudeau's Move

BY CHRISTOPHER BEAM

When Justin Trudeau became Canada's prime minister in 2015, he promptly pulled out the same China playbook that his father, Pierre, had used as prime minister in the 1970s. What he didn't realize is that the game had changed.

NEWS AND ANALYSIS

WORLD TRAVEL & TOURISM COUNCIL
The Global Summit
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China's Falling Star

BY DAVID BARBOZA

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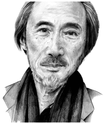
Q & A



Ma Jian on China's Efforts to Extinguish Memory

BY JAMES CHATER

The writer talks about life in exile and why he's pessimistic about his homeland.

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