

With Odes to Military March, China Puts Nationalism Into Overdrive

By JAVIER C. HERNÁNDEZ

BEIJING — It took all of five minutes for Wang Lei, a gruff veteran of the People's Liberation Army, to start humming and stomping his feet.

The curtain had just risen on "The Long March," a new opera celebrating the early days of the Chinese Communist Party, and a rifle-toting chorus of performers dressed as soldiers was rushing onstage at the National Center for the Performing Arts in Beijing.

"We come from different places," they sang as they took their places. "Some wear straw sandals. Some wear gowns. Some are barefoot. Some are hungry. We differ in status, but we have the same aspiration: to join the Red Army. To change the world!"

Mr. Wang, 73, seated next to me in the upper balcony, closed his eyes in bliss. "These are the songs of our homeland," he told me at intermission. "They might be lost now, but they reflect the true feelings of the Chinese people."

These are triumphant times for the Communist Party. President Xi Jinping, the general secretary, governs with seemingly unobstructed authority. The balance of power in Asia and the Pacific appears to be shifting in China's favor. Extreme poverty, especially in rural areas, is nearing eradication.

And yet the Communist government seems intensely vulnerable at times as it confronts a slowing economy and a society in the throes of staggering change. In a country still working to find its place in the world, the party whips up nationalism as an elixir. Lately, it has gone into overdrive, inventing new forms of agitprop.

Across China this fall, the party is turning the obscure anniversary of a cherished political touchstone into a cause for passionate celebration. It has been 80 years, we are told again and again, since the end of the Long March, the 6,000-mile retreat of Communist forces that established Mao's pre-eminence and gave the party its soul. More than 80,000 people died in the march, which began in 1934, but the bravery of the soldiers inspired generations of Chinese people to rally behind the party and its leader.

On television, Long March soap operas, documentaries and variety shows abound. Tour agencies offer packages retracing the soldiers' routes. Students put on virtual reality goggles to relive famous battles. Joggers use a Long March-themed fitness app to measure their steps against the Red Army's.

In Beijing, it is impossible to miss the patriotic fervor. Outside my office, a giant LED screen flashes every few minutes with scenes from "Red Star Over China," a new mini-series about the Long March.

At home in Beijing on a recent Saturday night, I was bombarded with Long March coverage on nearly every TV channel. On one network, a troupe of child performers, dressed in gray military uniforms, sang of the power of the "bright red star to shine through the generations." On a financial channel, commentators offered analysis of the economic impact of the march.

President Xi has been making the case for a "new long march," using the anniversary to rally the public and warn against creeping complacency, especially among



LONG MARCH

A performance of "The Long March," a new opera that celebrates the early days of the Chinese Communist Party, above and below left, and a map of the soldiers' route, left.

the young. "A nation that forgets its origins will find itself in a blind alley," he said in a speech late last month.

On the whole, the spirit of the propaganda campaign is unambiguous: Chinese citizens should seek to emulate the ideals of self-sacrifice and perseverance that the soldiers of the Long March embodied. Above all, the messaging makes clear, people should show unwavering loyalty to the Communist Party.

The Long March allowed the Red Army to escape defeat at the hands of the Kuomintang forces of Chiang Kai-shek in southern China. The Communists regrouped in the north before going on to victory in the civil war in 1949.

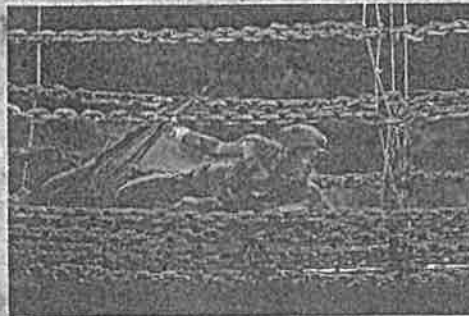
Anne-Marie Brady, a professor at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand, has challenged the official narrative, which portrays the march as a victory for the Communists and a turning point in their efforts to win over the public. Pointing to testimonials of foreign missionaries captured by Communist soldiers, she argues that it was instead a humiliating moment in which Red Army soldiers ransacked villages and abused peasants.

But by invoking the journey, she said, Mr. Xi is betting that the party's idealized version of history will resonate across generations.

"This is a heroic narrative that is meant to inspire young people in China," Professor Brady said. "Xi wants to remind people what is unique and distinctive about China and to ask: 'How did we get to where we are today? What is this journey that we're on? What are we aiming toward?'"



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LONG MARCH

Mr. Xi has used the Long March more expansively than his predecessors, linking it to his signature slogan of a "China Dream," a call to build a prosperous, more powerful nation with a deeper respect for traditional culture.

The propaganda might help

rally the public behind the party as it asserts Chinese military might abroad, in the disputed South China Sea and elsewhere. And the Chinese government has also tried to draw connections between the Long March and modern-day social issues.

A book released in conjunction with the anniversary promotes the Red Army's support for gender equality. ("Women demand liberation! Who says they are inferior to men?") A concert to mark the anniversary showed the Red Army being greeted by an adoring crowd of ethnic minorities, a stark contrast to the ethnic tensions that plague parts of China today, including Tibet and Xinjiang.

Some hope the Long March will become a call to arms that helps China overcome challenges such as a slowing economy and rampant social inequality.

A new opera about the early days of the Communist Party strikes a chord.

"Nowadays, the younger generation is very fickle and impetuous," said Xie Hailian, 32, an employee at a social welfare organization in Beijing who attended the opera and a Long March museum exhibit. "Many people are shortsighted and lack the kind of commitment seen during the Long March. That's what we need nowadays."

"The Long March" opera, in development for four years, is a highlight of the government's un-

folding spectacle, featuring a cast of nearly 200 and a cymbal-heavy score that blends Chinese folk songs with Italian-style arias. It is one of the grandest political operas to debut in Beijing since the Cultural Revolution, when Mao and his wife, Jiang Qing, made works celebrating the Communist Party a mandatory part of the repertoire at Chinese concert halls.

Yan Weiwen, a prominent tenor who plays the leading role of Communist Party leader Mao, said the tenacity of Red Army soldiers set an example for all Chinese people.

"The Long March spirit will help Chinese people forge ahead," he said in a telephone interview. "Our lives will only be better if we have conviction and dreams."

Near the end of the opera, as Red Army soldiers confront the scourges of disease and starvation, eating tree bark to survive, a young soldier named Ping Yazhi is poisoned by wild vegetables. He becomes lost in a swamp, firing a shot into the air to warn away his fellow troops.

"I'm not afraid of death," he sings, sinking underground. "I'm just reluctant to leave the Red Army."

Soon after, red lights illuminate the theater, revolutionary flags fill the stage, and a song-and-dance routine breaks out. "Long live the Red Army!" the soldiers sing. "Long live the Long March!"

Mr. Wang, the P.L.A. veteran sitting next to me, rose to his feet. He looked to the stage, squinted his eyes and shouted, "Bravo!"

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