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 guerrilla officer of the People’s Liberation Army, to start humming and stomping his feet. The crowd had just risen on “The Long March,” a war epic celebrating the early days of the Chinese Communist Party and a riveting chorus of performers dressed as soldiers was raising the roof 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 caps, others wear gloves. Some are barefoot. Some are hungry. We differ in status, but we have the same aspiration: to join the Red Army.”

Mr. Wang, 24, seated next to me in the upper balcony, closed his eyes in bliss. “These are the songs of our homeland,” he told me in conversation. “They might be lost now, but they reflect the true feelings of the Chinese people.”

These are triumphant songs for the Communist Party: President Xi Jinping, the general secretary, governs with seemingly unassailable 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 remains intensely vulnerable at times as it confronts a slowing economy and a society in the throes of staggering change. In a country still struggling to find its place in the world, the party wields a nationalism as its elite leadership has, is going into overdrive, investing new forms of propaganda.

Across China this fall, the party is touring the tremendous anniversary of a cherished political touchstone into a cause for patriotic celebration. It has been 80 years, we are told over 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 10,000 people died in the march, which began in 1934, but the bravery of the soldiers inspired a new generation of people to rally behind the party and its leader.

In addition, Long March songs and stories spread to the countryside, documenting and diversifying the march’s legacy. Thousands of people are being trained to tell the stories of the march.

In Beijing, it is impossible to miss the patriotic message. 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.

“Nowadays, the younger generation is very Pickle and potatoes,” said Xu Huaian, 23, an employee at a social welfare organization in Beijing who attended the opera and is a Long March aficionado. “Many of the people who survived the march are very old. They want to know the story of the march.”

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WHAT IN THE WORLD

One Music Streaming Site Is Always No. 1 in China

By Michael Gruftotics

Unchanged for decades, China’s No. 1 music delivery service remains a Chinese giant in the face of global competition and piracy. But it’s also facing a new threat: the rise of streaming services.

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