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Who Will Tell the Truth About China?

BY BRET STEPHENS

AMERICANS WILL GET their first close look this week at Xi Jinping, the man who's expected to replace Hu Jintao later this year as China's paramount leader. Mr. Xi is one of the Communist Party's original princelings — his father was a top Mao lieutenant until he was purged in the early 1960s — and press accounts of his life are stuffed with details about the rough years he spent as a farm hand during the Cultural Revolution.

The purpose of Mr. Xi's image-making — helped along by some credulous Western reporting — is to present him as someone who took his knocks in life and understands what it's like to be dirt poor even as he has risen up the party hierarchy.

This, comrades, is baloney.

Thanks to a WikiLeaksed State Department cable from 2009, we know more about Mr. Xi than he would probably be willing to volunteer. Among other interesting details: Mr. Xi “chose to survive [the Cultural Revolution] by becoming redder than red”; his first degree “was not a ‘real’ university education but instead a three-year degree in applied Marxism”; he was “considered of only average intelligence”; and “the most permanent influences shaping [his] worldview were his princeling pedigree,” not his sojourn in the countryside.

Now let's turn to another truth about China.

Shortly after the massacre at Tiananmen Square in 1989, a jailed Chinese dissident wrote a poem to the shy woman who would later become his wife:

When you tell it to the dolls

Avoid the truth

Just use the names

But leave out

The facts

That dissident was Liu Xiaobo, who, while serving

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another prison sentence, would be awarded a Nobel Peace Prize in 2010. His wife is Liu Xia, a poet and photographer who has been held under house arrest in Beijing for over a year. What can they tell us about China?

Plenty, as it turns out — at least if you happen to be in New York City this month and can make time to visit the Italian Academy at Columbia University, where 26 of Ms. Liu's photographs are on exhibit. Most of Ms. Liu's photographs — all of them taken with an old Russian camera; most of them taken in her apartment — are of “ugly kids” dolls that a friend brought her years ago from Brazil. There is nothing political per se in any of these pictures: These are, after all, mere dolls.

Not the image-makers who spin Communist fables about Xi Jinping.

But of course they are entirely political. To look at them is to understand at a glance that Ms. Liu's theme is the reality of modern China as experienced by anyone who refuses to accept the party line: alienation, confinement, repression, mental and spiritual suffocation. This is the essence of the totalitarian state: It makes claims not only on how you may act but on what you may think. Like Soviet-era jokes whose very absurdity brought home the truth about the system, the power of Ms. Liu's photographs lies in their ability to elicit, even involuntarily, an act of subversion by anyone with the simple wit to recognize what they are about.

That's why the Chinese Foreign Ministry couldn't quite register a formal protest — although it did voice its displeasure — when the photos were first exhibited last fall in France: To do so would be to admit that the government understood as well as anyone what these ugly dolls were saying about modern China. It's also why the regime probably understands that it has more to fear from Ms. Liu than it does even from her husband.

When I saw the exhibit on Sunday morning I had as my guide the French polymath Guy Sorman. Mr. Sorman is a friend of Ms. Liu's; he's also responsible for getting the prints out of China one at a time, on the theory that any single confiscation wouldn't compromise the whole lot. Mr. Sorman believes that change is coming to China, but not by way of economic progress (if “progress” is the right word for the increasingly statist tilt of Chinese policy makers) or of the kind of political pamphleteering that landed Mr. Liu in prison.

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Instead, Mr. Sorman is convinced that the change will “occur where you least expect it.” Most Chinese today already get their news from Weibo (Chinese Twitter), eroding party control over the flow of information. American Idol-type singing contests are engendering a taste for democracy. And multiplying acts of cultural subversion are gradually making it impossible for the party to impose its categories of thought, even if it can still impose proscriptions on action.

How will Mr. Xi handle this new China? It’s too soon to say. But no Chinese leader will be able to depend on the controls their predecessors enjoyed — technology simply won’t allow it, and neither will evolving public expectations about what is permitted. Renewed attempts to impose ideological conformity will be met only by the kind of cunning subversion that Ms. Liu has helped pioneer.

Just consider: Ms. Liu doesn’t even know her work is being exhibited abroad. But as a poem she wrote in 1998 suggests, even that barrier may not matter much when it comes to telling the truth about China:

*Living together with the dolls
Surrounded by the power of silence,
The world open around us,
We communicate in gestures.*
