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PRINT & PIXELS

## The King of Masks

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*How the “Xi change” in China is causing an invisible earthquake.*

**T**he Chinese film director Wu Tianming was born in 1939, but because of the times that he lived through, he did not achieve prominence until the early 1980s, when he was made head of the Xian Film Studio in Shaanxi Province. In that position Wu became a mentor to younger directors such as Tian Zhuangzhuang, Zhang Yimou, and Chen Kaige, who created a body of work — *The Horse Thief*, *Red Sorghum*, and *King of Children*, among others—that reconnected the Chinese audience with the pre-communist past, thereby repairing some of the ravages of the Cultural Revolution while also raising China’s international prestige.

That golden age ended with Tiananmen. When the massacre occurred, Wu was in the United States. Labeled a “dissident,” he did not return until 1995. He then directed a brave, beautiful film called *The King of Masks*, about an elderly street performer in 1930s Sichuan Province, who practices *bian lian*, a dramatic dance involving incredibly swift changes between brightly colored silk masks. *Bian lian* (“face-changing”) is an ancient secret art that the old man wishes to pass on. But being childless, he must buy an orphan boy to groom as his heir. All goes well until he discovers that the orphan is a girl...

Far be it from me to spoil the plot of such a lovely film. Suffice it to say that the only remotely controversial thing about *The King of Masks* is the suggestion that

little girls, or at least *this* little girl, should be allowed to learn *bian lian*. Yet when Wu's producers (the venerable Shaw Brothers of Hong Kong) tried to distribute the film in China, their application was turned down. In a [glowing review](#), the American film critic Roger Ebert failed to note that *The King of Masks* was never released in China. But that only reinforces his astute observation that, "although [the film] has no overt political message, perhaps it is no accident that its hero is a stubborn artist who clings to his secrets."

Wu Tianming died in 2014, two years after Xi Jinping assumed power. Were he still living, the director might well marvel at the General Secretary's prowess at *bian lian*. First up was the reassuring mask of Pragmatic Son of Far-seeing Reformer, followed by the humble mask of First Among Equals on the Politburo Standing Committee. Then came the more assertive Red Aristocrat Defender of the Revolution, followed by Chinese Ayatollah for the Prevention of Vice and the Promotion of Virtue. More recently, the comic relief of twinkly, kindly [Big Daddy Xi](#) has morphed into the more ominous Chairman of Everything.

These changes have been followed closely by the Chinese public, and each new mask has prompted debate and concern. It's hard to gauge public opinion in China, but lately I've come across some pretty compelling evidence that no previous transformation has proved as upsetting as the one that occurred on February 25, when it was announced that the Chinese constitution would be amended to remove all term limits on the office of the presidency. This is not as big a change as some might think, because Xi's weightier titles, such as General Secretary of the Communist Party and Chairman of the Central Military Commission, have never had term limits. But for many Chinese, the title of President is highly significant because it sounds modern, civilized, and most important, *not totalitarian*. This may well explain why Xi's latest mask—let's call it Emperor of Everything for Life—seems to have caused an invisible earthquake among ordinary Chinese.

For example, on March 1 the [Economist reported](#) an online tsunami of "inventive mockery" that surpassed anything posted during the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress last October. Among the items highlighted was a meme showing Winnie the Pooh hugging a jar of honey, captioned "Find the thing you love and stick with it." Less family-friendly were the fake condom ads featuring slogans like "Doing it twice is not enough," and "I like how you're always on top." Other postings compared China to Orwell's *Animal Farm*; punned on the phrase "board the plane" (which sounds like "ascend the throne"); and made numerous references to Yuan Shikai, the government official who in 1915 attempted to restore the Chinese empire with himself as founder of a new dynasty called Hongxian. (That effort was roundly rejected, and Yuan died the following year.)

I've heard similar reports from two young colleagues teaching English in national universities located far from the cosmopolitan centers of Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Beijing. One of them, "Jack," reported that right after the announcement came down, the English-language social media erupted in ways that went beyond mockery. Calling the change "unprecedented," users alluded to "the Emperor," confessed to having "no words," and in one case said, "I've never thought about leaving China, but it seems the only hope now." Jack spent an hour just watching hundreds of these posts appear and then disappear, as the censors did their work.

The other young colleague, "Jill," knows Mandarin well enough to have followed the debate that broke out on Chinese social media between those who found the change "worrying" and those who insisted everything is fine. This debate, too, vanished almost as soon as it appeared—a reminder that in China, online criticism is immediately scrubbed by algorithms continually updated with the latest "sensitive" words and phrases; while any website hosting criticism is deluged with intentionally mind-numbing propaganda. Online

critics who persist are identified and monitored via the latest digital surveillance technology, and if that doesn't work, they are subjected to a finely graduated series of warnings, reprimands, harassments, threats, fines, and penalties that in extreme cases can lead to arrest, imprisonment, and worse.

Nor is there safety offline. The Chinese system of human spies and informants rivals the efficiency and moral corrosiveness of the East German Stasi. My young colleagues Jack and Jill encounter this daily, as university administrators instruct them not to discuss politics in class, and the majority of students and faculty at their universities remain "silent and fearful" on all but the most banal topics. All the more striking, then, to hear about those same students and faculty breaking their silence after hearing about the "Xi change," as Jill called it.

In Jill's advanced English class, the students were discussing the difference between giving personal data to a corporation like Apple and giving it to a government. When Jill pointed out that in China, both corporations and the government must answer to the Party, one student burst out: "Yes, and everything the Chinese *government* does is *illegal!*" "The student repeated this twice," Jill told me, "and the others didn't disagree. In fact, another student asked, 'Why is it so easy to change the constitution?'" Meanwhile, in one of Jack's classes, the question "Who are your heroes?" prompted several students to name Deng Xiaoping—a drastic departure from the usual litany of Mao, Mandela, and Churchill. When Jack responded by saying, "Wow, it sounds like you all like Deng," the students "laughed harshly, as if to say, 'We like his *reforms.*'"

To my American professorial ears, these exchanges do not sound unusual. But Jack and Jill assured me that in China they are very unusual. Indeed, both of my young colleagues shared the perception that "the CCP is losing the young people."

Perhaps the most telling anecdote was about Jack's Chinese tutor, a very serious young Party member from a poor peasant family, whom Jack described as "a poster child for Xi's China: first in his family to be educated, first in his graduating class, recommended to me by the Party Secretary of the university, pugnaciously pro-Xi and pro-CCP, and not very sophisticated." Jack had been working with this tutor for almost two years when the announcement came down about the President no longer having term limits. Here is how Jack described their next session:

At our first meeting after the announcement my tutor seemed dejected, and to my surprise he started explaining the change to me, clearly assuming that I hadn't heard about it. When I told him that I had heard about the change—that indeed, it was front-page news all over the world—he grew very angry. "No one told us about it!" he exclaimed. "No one explained it to us! I still have no idea why they are doing this!" I didn't know what to say. He has never said anything remotely like this before. Then finally, he stopped being angry and said sadly, "Living in China is like having a mask on your face. You can't see the world. You can't even see China!"

Published on: April 9, 2018

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