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Ode to the Communist Song

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By Zhang Lijia

The massive museum, a modern structure of grey bricks and white-painted cement, stands a little abruptly, halfway up Xiayun Mountain, in Fangshang County, in western skirts of Beijing. It is the ‘Without the Communist Party, There Would Be No New China Museum’, dedicated entirely to this revolutionary song.

On a recent sunny afternoon, when a friend and I descended – or should I say ascended as the mountain, at 2161 meter above sea level, is known as ‘the roof of Beijing’ – we found ourselves the only visitors. The spacious car park was empty. Yao tang shang, a quiet mountain village, isn’t on any tourist map. Now it is poised to go down in history as the birthplace of the most famous revolutionary song in China.

The museum complex felt like a mini-‘Red Base’. By the foot of the mountain, three national flags flapped in the chill wind. In the main hall, staves of the song’s music, in gold, glared on a red wall, behind a golden hammer and sickle. As someone who grew up in China and knows the lyrics by heart, I couldn’t help but start to sing aloud, to the amusement of the museum staff. In the revolutionary spirit and against the market economy trend, entrance is free.

The museum is made up of three separate parts. Here photos, documents, statues and wax figures enlighten visitors of the song’s history, its composer Cao Huoxing, and the glorious history of Chinese Communist Party. It also houses a 400 square meter stage. To liven things up, there’s even an animated slide show, recounting the story of how Cao composed the song.

In October 1943, Cao, a young member of the ‘Iron Blood’ propaganda troupe, was traveling through the village. The troupe had been staging performances in the countryside, to mobilize the masses to join in the revolution and fight against the invading Japanese. In responding to the Nationalists’ claim that “without the Nationalists, there would be no China,” Cao penned and composed the song at a temple in the village where he was staying.

Without the Communist Party, there would be no China.
The Communist Party works hard for the people and strives to save China.
It’s pointed people to the path to liberation.
It’s led China to a bright future.
It’s fought against the Japanese for more than eight years.
It’s improved people’s living standard.
It’s established guerrilla bases behind enemy lines.
It practices democracy and has brought along many good things.
Without the Communist Party, there would be no China.

The villagers sang the song while performing a traditional dance with colourful streamers. As the Communists won the upper-hand against the Nationalists, the perky song, with its rhyming lyrics and upbeat melody, became a big hit and spread across the whole country. One day in 1950 when Chairman Mao heard his daughter singing, he suggested adding a ‘new’ in front of China. This further increased the song’s popularity and earned its position as ‘the number one Party song’.

According to the website, the village and Fangshan County government, a poor area by Beijing standard, have invested more than 10 million yuan in the museum. In 2001, a modest museum was constructed on the same site to mark the 80th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party. After it became a ‘Patriotic Education Base’ in Beijing, the local government decided to upgrade the museum.

As if this wasn’t enough. June 2008 saw another museum also dedicated to the song opened at Cao Huoxing’s hometown in Hebei province.
There are very few museums in the world that are dedicated to one song or one band. Sure, there's the Beatles Museum in London, dedicated to the most-loved band in the world; and hopefully one day before long, there will be an ABBA Museum in Stockholm, dedicated to the music, clothing and history of the legendary Swedish pop group. In this interactive museum, you can live and record your own fantasy as an ABBA lead singer. The organizers have good reasons to be optimistic about its popularity.

But who would bother to track all the way up to a mountain village in the middle of no-where to visit this Party song museum? The museum staff who patiently showed us every corner reveals that it received about 50,000 visitors in 2008, mostly school kids going through patriotic education.

The Chinese Communist Party has about 74 million members, nearly a quarter of whom are under 35. Defying all predictions, it has proven very resilient. While loosening control in certain aspects and granting people more personal freedom, the Party has stepped up its effort to ensure the loyalty of the population, young people in particular. Funds have been allocated to build or upgrade museums that are designed to inspire the citizen’ patriotic feelings or nurture their nationalist attachment. For example, a museum to commemorate the ‘Rape of Nanjing’ was first built in 1985 and upgraded in 1995 to become state-of-the-art. Revolutionary song competitions are still held regularly at schools, universities and government organizations. Popular songs such as ‘The East is Red’ and ‘Socialism is Great’ are featured on Karaoke lists.

During the long drive back to Beijing, I kept finding myself singing “Without the Communist Party, there would be no New China.” Somehow, the melody engrained itself into my brain.

Tags: National Day