



REVIEW ESSAY

King Lear And China's Big Leader Kultur

Shakespeare has much to teach us about the hubristic fragility of despotic leaders, from the tyrants of the mid-20th century to those of today. But are we learning the lesson?

ORVILLE SCHELL — JANUARY 15, 2026

FICTION HISTORY

Reviewed: *The Chinese Tragedy of King Lear* by Nan Z. Da (Princeton University Press, June 2025).



The tragedy of Maoist and post-Maoist China and Shakespeare's *Tragedy of King Lear* are uncannily similar," announces Nan Z. Da at the beginning of her idiosyncratic but wonderfully original book *The Chinese Tragedy of King Lear*. She continues:

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The most 'Chinese' of Shakespeare's plays, *Lear's* comparability to China goes beyond themes of filial piety, ingratitude, scalar disharmony, and merit-blind retribution. The two also share a logic of gaslighting, a pain inflicted in real withholdings, and other crimes and cruelties that come from the empty forms that pop up when the personal totally collapses into the political.

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Born in Hangzhou, China, Da now teaches literature at Johns Hopkins University. She turned to *King Lear* in part to help her make sense out of the tragedy that befell her own family and birthplace during China's communist and cultural revolutions. What impels her exploration is a recognition that the imbroglio King Lear brings down on his family and kingdom shares a symmetry with the revolutionary holocaust that Chairman Mao visited on his people. Both cataclysms were generated by the perverse human impulse to abuse, and Da sees Lear as illustrating what happens when the keystone of any human arch — a family, country or global order — fails. As "disfigurement leads to further disfigurement," a cascade of malefactions and cruelties follow.

"Some parents and states are, of course, truly abusive," she writes, equating the damage done to children by abusive parents with the far larger scale of damage done by abusive leaders to their subjects. "Parental tyranny leads to childish tyranny leads to state tyranny leads to parental tyranny," she warns. Once such a spiral develops, it is hard to arrest:

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Let's say that your parent, your state, your sovereign, is being abusive. They falsely accuse you or others of inane offenses, or they force you to accept foolish and illogical plans. They ask you to accept wrong as right, to pretend to love when you really do love.

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Da suggests that when wounds become too deep, fundamental human operating systems become so corrupted that immediate remedy, even if effected by well-intentioned leaders, can prove no more than epiphenomenal. "Can history recover from betrayals between families and children?" she asks — and, she infers, between tyrants and citizens?

I vividly remember when, two years after Mao's death in 1976, Deng Xiaoping unexpectedly reappeared to try and transform China under a bold agenda of "reform and opening" (改革开放). Alas, it did not prove that easy. Mao's word had been made flesh, and the toxin of his revolution had become so infused into the bloodstream of the Chinese people that — as is demonstrated by Xi Jinping's latter day Maoist *reign* — the past is not so easily expunged.

In the Confucian scheme of things, the family is a microcosm of the state's hierarchical filial order. Da emphasizes how disorder in one realm not only infects the other, but cascades through future generations. The result is that an acceptance of abusive behavior that allows no remonstration becomes almost autonomous, and responses such as sycophancy become the currency of politics. Such are the consequences, she suggests, of the "kind of state [that] does not trust its own people to know what is in its heart" and embraces "those who will say only flattering things," much like Lear's daughters Goneril and Regan — a syndrome that is equally emblematic of China's state-society relationship.

Da is drawn to Shakespeare because she sees plays such as *King Lear* as holding the key to a psychological understanding of the historical tragedy of China that her own family suffered. After coming to the U.S. in 1992 and studying Western literature in grade school and university, she began to see that China's tragedy was not unique, except in scale. (Some 30-40 million perished in the Great Leap Forward, before the ruinous Cultural Revolution even began.) The magnitude and severity of this self-inflicted catastrophe left hundreds of millions more struggling to explain how such an apocalypse could have happened, and how they might begin to manage the physical and emotional consequences.

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China had never developed an explicit theoretical construct or psychological framework for understanding human motivation, as Western writers including Sophocles and Euripides had when, more than two millennia ago, they explored what the Greeks referred to as the human "psyche." This exploration took an evolutionary leap forward in Europe with the advent of Christianity and its emphasis on an individual soul, or spirit, capable of connecting directly to God without mediation from outside authority. Shakespeare was influenced by both, before the study of psychology crescendoed with the analytical works of Sigmund Freud and Karl Jung as they sought to understand, and treat, the complex psychological syndromes to which human life inevitably gives birth.

As part of this lineage of exploration, Nan Z. Da repurposes *King Lear* as a western literary mirror she can hold up to China in order to better understand how such tragedy happened there. For her, the play is something of a Rosetta stone, revealing the universal nature of *hamartia*, the tragic flaws that can cause entire families or kingdoms to collapse. Corroboration from another cultural tradition helps Da to affirm that tyranny is tyranny, no matter when or where it takes place. Ambition, paranoia and distrust, she finds, are human imperfections that, when excited by fears of appearing weak, often lead to an excess of ambition, or *hubris*. And as we know from Greek tragedy, *hubris* leads to tragic consequences, just as it did in Mao's China.

"Will the world appreciate what has happened to the Chinese people, its intensity, its scale?" asks Da. She wonders "what can be set right ... and what cannot." The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is not about to make a meaningful *mea culpa* that might facilitate a reconciliation with its past and begin to set things right. In its view, any admissions of Party wrongdoing would only undermine its pretension as the selfless and infallible "liberator" of China from imperialism, feudalism and capitalism. And the Party can never be anything but "correct." The irony is that all the misery Mao's revolution wrought was done in the name of "correctness," to build a new and more humane socialist idyll. But, as Lear's daughter Cordelia bemoans of her family's fall, "We are not the first who with the best meaning incurred the worst."

When their dreams crash and burn, revolutionary idealists have too often been unable to acknowledge failure and seek course correction. Instead, pride has compelled mendacity and violence in the hope that the realization of their dream lies just around the corner, and only needs an extra organizational boost. This is the rationalization of Leninism as much as Learism. Alas, at such times, anyone like Cordelia — who refuses to propitiate power and instead speaks honestly when asked by Lear to emptily affirm her love for him at the start of the play — is tarred as a dissident. Once such a spiral develops, it is hard to arrest:

"Citizens of authoritarian regimes might accordingly identify with Cordelia's position," writes Da. For she "has denied the tyrant his preferred mode of interaction: a show of love unmarrred by dissent, and acceptance of unreason without any balking."

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Hence, and avoid my sight! Lear banishes Cordelia in a late 19th century etching by Sir John Gilbert to illustrate an 1882 edition of *King Lear*. (Getty)

Like most vain sovereigns, what Lear seeks, even from his daughters, are expressions of devotion and loyalty, whether heartfelt or not. Cordelia is incapable of doing this not because she does not love her father, but because by nature she cannot perform disingenuously on command, unlike sisters Goneril and Regan. For this *esse majestis* she becomes a filial dissident. As Edgar proclaims at the play's tragic end, "Speak what you feel, not what you ought to say." Yet because Cordelia does precisely that, like so many brave Chinese dissidents who have refused to pander to their leaders, she and they are viewed as apostates.

In Lear's eyes, Cordelia has rebuked him. So he responds to her truthfulness with umbrage and vindictiveness — a response with which countless Chinese dissidents who encountered similarly retributive reactions from the Party, such as *Liu Xiaobo* who died in prison after daring to speak truth to power, were all too familiar. A world where candor brings punishment and falsity advancement, writes Da, is a world where "Every circle of relations, from the personal to the cosmic, has been disordered."

Even the cosmology of Lear and that of traditional China have a cruel symmetry here. In both, deranged human relations beget an expanding circumference of disorder that Shakespeare emphasizes with atmospheric evocation. As crazed Lear roams the heath in Act III, having been cast out by his other two venal daughters, the physical environment is beset by raging storms, mirroring his inner state of derangement with a roiled outer world. So too, in Chinese cosmology, an emperor's right to rule was believed to derive from "the will of heaven" (天命), a cosmic sanction conferred on upright rulers. Heaven was said to manifest its displeasure with emperors who lacked uprightness through disorder and disharmony, heralded by natural phenomena like storms, earthquakes, draughts and floods. Indeed, some thought that the Tangshan earthquake in July 1976, months before Mao's death, heralded heaven's displeasure with his tumultuous rule. As the ancient expression goes, "Natural calamities follow the wrong doings of men" (灾从人祸).

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Those born in WWII — the last heyday of "big leader riddling" and Lear-like Hitler, Mussolini and Mao, we find the global stage again with a growing cast of *nouvelle tyrants*. These are not just tin-pot dictators ruling Latin American banana republics or post-colonial African states, but despots with trinity egos and insatiable territorial ambitions. Waiting in the wings for their turn on the big stage is junior-leaguer Vladimir Putin and understudying Alexander Lukashenko, Kim Jong Un and Victor Orban. Da underscores that these are not the first who with the best meaning incurred the worst.

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