Office Hours #2

Lesson 20 · *How did Russia and China rise to power, and what keeps them there?* · answered from 8 collections, 3,765 chunks: Hsü, Fitzpatrick, Applebaum, Solzhenitsyn, Shalamov, Branigan, Brook, and *The Chinese Cultural Revolution as History*

The stub for this lesson set the frame: not how they got strong, but which tactics hold the position once it is taken — different routes up, with the retention playbook as the place they converge.

That frame turns out to be half right, and the half that is wrong is the more interesting one. **The routes up do not merely differ. They determine what each regime is afterwards able to admit, and that single difference explains most of the retention asymmetry.**

Q1 · How did they rise? Not the same way at all

> **Russia rose by rupture. China rose by iteration.**
> One regime was founded in a single night. The other understands itself as the sixth attempt in a hundred-and-fifty-year project.

Fitzpatrick is blunt about October, and notes that the Bolsheviks would have hated her saying it. "While the Bolsheviks would have passionately rejected the thought, **October had been an easy victory.** Failure in war had discredited the old regime, and failure to get out of the war had done the same for the Provisional Government. Wartime exigencies concentrated millions of discontented men (with arms) in cities and garrisons, giving the revolutionaries a large" base to work with.

They did not defeat a functioning state. They picked up one that had already been dropped.

Hsü's China is the opposite shape — a list of attempts, most of them failures. His own summary of the century and a half: "a way to survive with honor in the new world that had been forcibly thrust upon it by the West," against "the twin evils of debilitating inertia from domestic decay and humiliating exploitation by foreign imperialism." The stages he names: **Self-Strengthening 1861–95, the Hundred-Day Reform of 1898, the Republican Revolution of 1912, the Intellectual Revolution of 1919, Nationalist Nation-Building 1928–48, the Communist Revolution of 1949** — and "each step was a hard struggle and had its successes and failures, but **cumulatively** each step contributed."

The Self-Strengthening Movement even failed with a published diagnosis. Hsü's own section headings for why: *lack of coordination; limited vision; shortage of capital; foreign imperialism; technical backwardness and moral degradation; social and psychological inertia.* Six named causes of failure, catalogued and inherited.

> **This is your fourth pillar in political form, and it is worth flagging rather than overclaiming.** China's rise is six small-to-medium inputs compounding over 150 years; Russia's is one enormous input in a fortnight. Both reached the full scale of the system. The iterative route simply took longer and arrived carrying a record of its own errors — which turns out to be the asset that matters in Q3.

Q2 · What keeps them there? The convergent playbook

Here the stub is right: the retention methods converge, and earlier analyses in this series have already mapped them. Both regimes authorised violence by fixing a quantity before identifying anybody — a signed quota in the Soviet case, a named enemy with *no criteria* in the Chinese. Both edited their own record. Both were lawful at home throughout.

But retention is not one thing, and separating the two layers matters:

Layer	Soviet instrument	Chinese instrument
Coercion	Quota, camp, exile — guilt allocated by number	Delegated violence; prohibitions issued with no penalty attached
Narrative	"History's mandate" — the future is already decided	"We are what stands between you and chaos"

The coercion layer is cheap and convergent. The narrative layer is where the two regimes diverge, and it is the one that actually does the work — because coercion has to be paid for every time, and a successful story is free.

Q3 · So why did one survive and not the other?

> **Because an iterative founding permits error and a rupture founding forbids it.**
> China can call the Cultural Revolution a mistake, because its founding story is *already* a story of failed attempts. The Soviet Union could not call October a mistake, because October was the whole of the claim.

Fitzpatrick names the asset and declares it destroyed. "The sense of **holding History's mandate**, which inspired Soviet leaders from Lenin to Gorbachev, was **non-recoverable**. Putin, as a good Soviet citizen schooled in Marxism–Leninism, had no doubt once believed in historical inevitability. **Not anymore; not since that knockout demonstration of the irresistible power of contingency in 1989–1991.**" Putin himself, in 2000: "You know there's a lot that seems impossible and incredible and then – **bang!** Look what happened to the Soviet Union. Who could have imagined that…"

A regime whose legitimacy is inevitability cannot survive one counterexample. That is a brittle claim by construction, and 1991 was the counterexample.

China's claim is the opposite kind — it is an empirical one, which is why it is survivable and also why it decays. And China has something Russia never had: an indigenous theory of how regimes fail. Hsü's description of the Ming collapse reads as a checklist — "eunuch domination of the court, moral degradation, political corruption, intellectual irresponsibility, high taxes, and famine." **A tradition that expects dynasties to end can plan around ending. A tradition that holds History's mandate cannot plan around anything.**

Q4 · What is actually keeping them there now?

Branigan's finding is the sharpest thing in the whole corpus on this, and it is a finding about expiry dates.

> *"The Cultural Revolution effect – **the promise of the Party as the guarantor of stability** – was largely generational. **It had decreasing potency**; many had not lived through the torment and, since the Party preferred not to mention it, knew little of it. **Prosperity, too, was a diminishing asset. People needed a better rationale for the Party's rule.** Something had to be done."*

Read the loop in the middle of that quotation, because it is self-defeating.
The "we prevent chaos" claim is backed by the memory of the Cultural Revolution. The Party suppresses the memory of the Cultural Revolution. **Therefore the suppression is consuming the asset the claim depends on** — and Branigan says it plainly: "since the Party preferred not to mention it, knew little of it."

That is the answer to "what keeps them there", and it has a shape neither regime chose. Both are running on depreciating legitimacy assets, and in both cases the maintenance method eats the asset:

- **Moscow opened the archives and lost the state.** The admission was incompatible with inevitability.
- **Beijing closed the archives and is losing the argument.** Each generation that does not remember the chaos is a generation the chaos-prevention claim does not reach.

So the honest answer to the lesson's title is: nothing permanent is keeping either of them there. The rise explains what each can admit; what each can admit determines which maintenance method is available; and both available methods have a cost that accrues. **Retention is not a state. It is a payment schedule.**

The honest limits

> **The strongest claim here — that iterative founding permits error — is an inference from two cases, and two cases cannot establish a mechanism.**
> It is offered as the best available reading of what these eight sources say, and it is falsifiable: find a rupture-founded regime that successfully disowned its founding act, or an iteratively-founded one that could not, and the claim fails.

The two bodies of evidence are not symmetrical. The Soviet material includes an ending and thirty years of hindsight; the Chinese material describes an ongoing arrangement. Comparing a completed trajectory to a live one will always flatter the live one, and some of China's apparent durability is simply that its bill has not arrived.

Hsü's text also stops too early to be a witness to its own conclusion. His Gorbachev material is contemporary commentary written as events ran, which makes it excellent evidence of *what Beijing believed at the time* and poor evidence about what caused what. The companion analysis **The Experiment One Side Watched** states that limit in full, along with the confound that matters most: *if China's choice was informed by watching Moscow, then "China chose better" is partly just "China chose second."*

And one thing in this lesson is argument rather than source. Q1's reading of the two risings as rupture-versus-iteration is mine. Fitzpatrick calls October an easy victory and Hsü lists six cumulative stages; neither draws the contrast, and neither is responsible for where I have taken it.