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## Xi Jinping's Faustian moment

'Only he deserves freedom as well as life who must conquer them every day' -  
Goethe's Faust

by [Spengler \(David P. Goldman\)](#)  
July 1, 2021



A youthful Xi Jinping in a 1989 file photo. Image: Xinhua Press

Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution caught up with the 15-year-old Xi Jinping, as Edward Luttwak [recounted recently in the London Review of Books](#).

The young Xi, son of a Communist luminary disgraced by the Red Guards, was "sent to work in Liangjiahe, a miserably poor mountain village of windowless cave houses in a barren landscape of deforested hills in northern Shaanxi.

It was there that another teenage exile lent him a copy of [Goethe's] *Faust*, which Xi read again and again till he knew it by heart, as he credibly boasted on meeting Angela Merkel."

That is the single most important data point we have about a man whose public persona consists of Brobdingnagian billboard images and speeches in turgid officialese. The second data point, of course, is that he married Peng Liyuan, a popular singer of sentimental *Heimatslieder*.

Goethe's great drama is the definitive work of modern literature. Virtually all of it is in rhymed verse, in a language at once so colloquial and so sublime that it defies translation.



The young Xi Jinping. Photo: Twitter

For a century after its completion in 1832, *Faust* commanded the attention of the whole literary world. Samuel Taylor Coleridge published a partial translation in 1821, and Percy Shelley tried his hand at a few scenes. The most influential Victorian critic, Matthew Arnold, took it for granted that Goethe was the greatest writer after Shakespeare.

The malign influence of T S Eliot, not to mention the Anglo-Saxon aversion to Germany after two world wars, buried Goethe's reputation in the English-speaking world, and today it is unusual to meet Americans who know the work. That is a pity, because *Faust* may be the best window that Western analysts have into the mind of the world's most powerful man.

(For more discussion of *Faust* and its modern reception, [see this recent essay](#) in Tablet.)

The Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment, Goethe explains, gave us material security and personal choice. But security breeds complacency and the arbitrary exercise of freedom makes us disgusted with life itself.

Goethe's protagonist does not make a deal with the Devil, as in the popular Faust legend from which Goethe took his raw material. On the contrary: Faust bets the Devil that none of his blandishments – not money, sex, love, beauty, or even material progress – can lull him into complacency.

*Faust* begins with a paraphrase of the biblical Book of Job, in a prologue set in Heaven, in which Satan asks permission to tempt God's servant, Faust.

But the whole of *Faust* recasts the subject matter of Job in terms unique to the modern world. Goethe guilefully inverts the biblical premise. To tempt the righteous man of Uz, the biblical Satan takes from him all that ancient man might want. Goethe's Mephistopheles tempts Faust by offering him everything that modern man might desire.

By his pact with Mephisto, his soul is forfeit should he be so satisfied by the Devil's gifts as to regret the passing of the moment.



Doctor Faustus signing the pact with Mephistopheles with his blood: engraving by Knesing after Delacroix. Photo: AFP / Roger-Viollet

The 2006 Nobelist in Economics Edmund Phelps sketched what might be called a “Faustian” economic philosophy in an essay published a dozen years ago:

I personally hold that the classical spirit of challenge and self-discovery is a fundamental human trait. By showing how the risk-taking activity of individuals contributes to social benefits, economics helps societies to accommodate what Augustine called our “restlessness of heart.” This is the better part of our human nature. Societies that suppress this restlessness stagnate and die. The issue of morality in economics is neither the fairness of income distribution nor the stability of financial systems. It is how human institutions can be shaped to correspond to human nature—to man’s nature as an innovator.

Phelps’s meditation on human striving brings us full circle to Xi’s fascination with Goethe’s *Faust*.

Western commentators routinely dismiss Xi as an old-school Communist thug. In the cited article Luttwak opined, “Xi made his own Faustian bargain not merely with the Communist Party but very emphatically with Mao’s party: he has been assiduous in restoring Mao’s authority, which his predecessors had cumulatively reduced.”

Where Goethe is concerned, Luttwak's characterization is simply wrong; as noted, there is no "bargain" in Goethe's drama.

Luttwak's attempt to paint Xi as a neo-Maoist is too simple. In 2012 Xi crushed the power of Chongqing Communist boss Bo Xilai, the leader of China's neo-Maoist "New Left." Bo was convicted of corruption and remains in prison.

Xi threw his support to Premier Li Keqiang and the Harvard-educated Vice Premier Liu He, who befriended Phelps and promoted the translation of Phelps's masterwork, [Mass Flourishing](#), which has become a bestseller in China.

Phelps argues that it is neither scientific discovery nor engineering expertise nor entrepreneurial talent that produces periods of extraordinary economic expansion but, rather, the willingness of people at every level of society to embrace innovation.



Edmund S. Phelps, 2006 Nobel Prize laureate in economic sciences, shown speaking during an inauguration ceremony in Beijing on April 15, 2010, as he became the dean of New Huadu School Of Business, established by Minjiang University with a donation from New Huadu Foundation. Photo: AFP / Zheng Shuai / Imaginechina

[A Columbia University website reports:](#)

Premier Li and Phelps first met in 2014 on the occasion of Phelps receiving the China Friendship Award (the highest award for the recognition of foreign experts who have made outstanding contributions in the modernization of China). At that time, Phelps presented Premier Li with an English and Chinese copy of his book *Mass Flourishing*. Premier Li remarked at the more recent February 5 [2018] meeting that Phelps's *Mass Flourishing* is important for China's new era of innovation.

In February 2021, Asia Times had the honor of publishing a [white paper](#) by Phelps on China's economy.

Faustian economic policy isn't necessarily humane. In the second part of Goethe's drama, Faust directs a vast project to reclaim land from the sea, believing that a people that must fight daily for its terra firma will not fall into complacency. He declares:

By whatever means necessary,

Find masses upon masses of workers,

Inspire them through reward or severity –

Pay them, entice them, conscript them!

I want daily reports on how far the excavations have extended.

There is nothing painless or pleasant about Faust's great project. On the contrary: Faust is capable of great cruelty. His orders have a tragic outcome; an old couple must be evicted to make way for the project, and Faust's overseer, the devil Mephistopheles, kills them.



The ride of Faust and Mephistopheles: lithograph by Delacroix (1828); note the gallows in the right background. Photo: AFP / Roger-Viollet

One wonders how Xi read these lines.

In [an essay for First Things](#), Peter Thiel remarks:

It is too easy for us to make fun of Faust, even in his noblest incarnation in the time of Goethe, when Enlightenment hopes for science and technology were so much greater than today. Admittedly, it does seem slightly ludicrous to forget about one's immortal soul and instead busy oneself, as Faust does, with the project of reclaiming land from the sea.

I don't see the tragic outcomes as a repudiation of Faust's great project. After the death of the old couple, Faust is haunted by a personified Care. Nonetheless, he declares that the vision of "a free land with a free people" might prompt him to embrace the passing moment. (He does not quite violate the terms of his wager, and his soul is secure.)

The "last conclusion of wisdom," Faust says with his penultimate breath, is: "Only he deserves freedom as well as life who must conquer them every day."

In the original that is: *Nur der verdient sich Freiheit wie das Leben/Der täglich sie erobern muß*. I read those words for the first time half a century ago, and they have been my personal motto ever since.

One can only guess what Xi thinks about *Faust*. I conjecture that he thinks of his own regime as a relentless and often merciless campaign against complacency, driving the Chinese 1.4 billion people to achieve and innovate like no other country in the world.

His dynasty will prevail, he may believe, if it does not sink into the self-satisfied torpor that infected so many of its predecessors. If I am right, Xi is the most formidable rival the West has ever encountered.