The Maoists and Modern China

Professor Kerry Brown
Preface

On the 120th anniversary of Mao Zedong’s birth in December 2013, the whole of the Chinese Communist Party Politburo Standing Committee, led by new installed leader Xi Jinping, attended commemorations held in Beijing. Commentators inside and outside China were calling Xi a new kind of Mao, noting his eagerness to use some of Mao’s political techniques to mobilise people, and often referring to the supreme leader of the People’s Republic from 1949 to 1976 in highly complementary ways.

As I try to show in this paper, Mao Zedong’s legacy today remains profound, but complex. That so many were critical of Xi’s willingness to refer to the former leader is one indication of this. Mao was perhaps the modern leader of China who forged the deepest emotional link with people in the country. But he was also someone associated with campaigns from the 1950s onwards that carried huge social costs. The most epic of these, the Cultural Revolution, was one that Xi himself suffered in, becoming a send down youth in 1969 and moving from Beijing down to the Shaanxi countryside. Many, many others have similar experiences.

Those that appeal to the Chairman these days tend to do so not because, like Xi, they want to make a clear link between pre and post-1978 history, when the reform and opening up process is meant to have started, but because the feel that modern China has lost its path. It has forsaken the Utopian, idealistic goals that Mao set it, allowing elites to re-emerge, and the Party to end up as the sort of self-serving, bureaucratic entity that he strove so much to avoid it turning into. The language contained in documents like the statement put out after the Third Plenum in Beijing in October 2013 of ‘perfecting the market’ in China and saying that a free market is necessary for implementation of socialism with Chinese characteristics alienates and antagonises them. They want public ownership of assets restored, and a welfare system that covers everyone and drives for equality imposed again. They feel that while some have gained form the post 1978 deal, there are many more Chinese who have suffered, been pushed into poverty and injustice, and betrayed.

Some of these voices find their way onto the internet, and have social influence. I look at these in this paper, and try to answer just how influential and representative they are. For the question of Mao and his continuing impact, the answer is partly that he continues to escape the boundaries that people claiming his name try to put on him. For this reason, understanding him and those that try to speak in his name even to this day, is important. I hope this study helps a little in understand just why the red sun of Mao Zedong is still very much alive in some Chinese people’s hearts, and why people as senior as Xi chose to appeal to Mao when they conduct politics in the era when China has become the sort of economic and political powerhouse that Mao could only ever dream about.

Kerry Brown

Director, China Studies Centre.
The Maoists and Modern China

Kerry Brown, University of Sydney

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To be called a ‘Maoist’ in contemporary China has the same critical tone as being branded a ‘Thatcherite’ in the UK or a ‘Reaganite’ in the US. While no one disputes the historic impact that Mao Zedong, Chairman of the Communist Party of the People’s Republic of China from 1949 to 1976, had on the country he was so instrumental in founding, his legacy remains complex and controversial. Those who try to claim his historic mantle are often playing with fire, with some of the most fervent consigned to jail in recent years. Members of this group run the gamut from old style leftists who regard anything linked with the private sector as anathema, to those who assert that the Chairman was a closet supporter of human rights and democracy and that the current leaders of China have betrayed his true intentions. That two figures as different as felled former Politburo member Bo Xilai, and the current Party Secretary and President of China Xi Jinping have both been labelled Maoists and accused of prosecuting Mao inspired campaigns shows how slippery the term is.

Much of this confusion stems from the loose way in which the term ‘Maoist’ is sometimes used, both inside and outside China. As will be shown later in the discussions around Bo Xilai and his fall, while the ‘Sing Red’ campaigns in the city of Chongqing conducted while he was party leader there from 2007 to 2012 were given this label, the connections between these modern mass campaigns and those conducted during Mao’s period in power were at best highly tangential. Maoism, Bo Xilai-style was much more benign than the real thing. It largely concerned deploying the rich array of symbols and propaganda assets that Mao bequeathed the Party rather than anything else. It is the fight for these symbolic resources and their continuing propaganda value which is perhaps at the heart of the controversy around Maoism today. This is why there is still such argument about who, in the end, the Great Helmsman’s true heirs actually are and being recognized as a legitimate modern heir to Mao is a status worth struggling for. To understand this issue, however, we need to look a little harder at the man who ostensibly inspires them to see if this will help explain why the term is still so contentious, and what it might mean nearly four decades after his death.
First Things First: An Assessment of Mao Zedong

One hundred and twenty years after his birth, Mao Zedong remains the great inspiration for modern Maoists, the best known of modern Chinese historical figures, but also one of the most contentious. He is perhaps the sole political figure of the 20th century, apart from Chiang Kai-shek, who has name recognition outside China amongst a mass western audience. However, he is also viewed with ambiguity. The extreme poles of this attitude can be seen in two different biographies of him produced by prominent Western experts on China in the last decade. The 2005 ‘Mao Zedong: The Unknown Story’ by Jung Chang and Jon Holliday portrayed the Chinese leader as treacherous, brutal, and ruthless.1 However, a 2012 work by Alexander Pantsov from Russia and Stephen Levine from the US, mischievously called ‘Mao: The Real Story’ to slightly echo and rebuff the previous work was more nuanced, much of it based on newly available material in Russian archives. The work linked his development to the personal traumas that he experienced in his early life including the loss and separation from his first three wives and other catastrophes that befell him2.

There is little consensus amongst the scholarly community either inside China or in the West about precisely how to place Mao as a politician. His achievements in bringing the Communist Party (CPC) to power, and then in establishing the People’s Republic (PRC) in 1949 are weighed against his direct involvement in the Great Leap Forward of 1958 and the economic collapse after this which led to the devastating famines from 1959 to 1962. Works translated into English like Yang Jisheng’s ‘Tombstone’,3 along with Hong Kong based historian Frank Dikotter’s own version of the famines, paint a picture of huge policy failure, though Dikotter places the blame for this directly with Mao, and imputes him almost omnipotent powers to do evil4. Dikotter has pursued this line of thought in a recent history of post 1949 China where he argues that, far from being a period of reconstruction and rebuilding, the 1950s was only the start of a process of brutalization and mass campaigns that led to social turmoil. This is a controversial argument, and is linked to Dikotter’s strong prior defense of the Republican era from 1911 to 1949. Perhaps the most contentious issue for any historian trying to assess Mao now is his connection to the Cultural Revolution. This vast and complex movement spanning the decade after 1966 up to Mao’s death in 1976 was judged by the writer Ba Jin as something akin to a ‘spiritual holocaust’ for the Chinese, with widespread violence and mass unrest. But it was also an event that Mao

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himself regarded as one of his key achievements, and something that he was intimately involved in planning and directing.

Mao is often placed alongside Hitler and Stalin as one of the great dictators of the twentieth century. In this context, his continuing influence within the PRC is often hard to understand for outsiders. Most feel that the Chinese government and the ruling Communist Party should now simply repudiate him and undertake a debunking and revision of his historic importance and standing. Yet as the continuing resonance of some of Mao’s ideas makes clear, this oversimplification of his impact and importance even today derives in part from a general misunderstanding of the structure of politics and power in China as he became a leader and then led the country. There is little nuance over the approach to his historic role, with him largely being seen simplistically as evil and his influence negative. This is not helped by the accounts of foreign visitors like Henry Kissinger and US President Richard Nixon during his final years in power, in which he is portrayed as a fiendishly clever, highly successful manipulator, someone who impressed his visitors through what they claimed was the raw emanation of power coming from him. The most unpalatable fact for many is that Mao was a popular leader, and one who is still much too dangerous for contemporary leaders in China to disown. In late December 2013, speaking at the 120th anniversary events held in Beijing to mark Mao’s birth, current President of China and Party Secretary of the CPC, Xi Jinping simply stated that ‘Revolutionary leaders are men but not gods. We should not worship them like gods … but we should not negate them completely because they made mistakes. [We should] move forward, but can’t forget the path that we have travelled.’⁵ This remains the default position of CPC elite leaders in their public comments on their epic predecessor – a great man who made great but forgivable mistakes.

Part of the continuing desire to acknowledge Mao is simply because of his role in bringing the CPC to power. He was, after all, the man who ‘sealed the deal’ at the crucial time in 1949 and made the CPC dominant. There is little understanding, beyond specialist historians, of the precise role that Mao played in the early foundation of the Party, neither from 1921 and the foundation first Congress of the CPC at which he was present, nor from 1941 during the key period of the struggle both against the Japanese invasions and then the Civil War with the Nationalists. Mao’s imputed brutality, for example, is often judged without regard for its context: a very turbulent and unstable era in which almost every major political figure was similarly associated with the use of physical violence in order to achieve political ends.

The dominant narrative of Western comprehension of Mao from 1949 is one which often places him at the centre of all decision making in China, as someone who was wholly in control. There is little appreciation of how circumscribed he was by other important figures in his own party, and also by the Soviet Union leadership whose technical and political help were important to the

⁵ Keith Zhao, ‘Mao Zedong was no god says Xi Jinping in difficult balancing act,’ South China Morning Post, 27 December 2013, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1390533/mao-zedong-was-no-god-says-xi-jinping-delicate-balancing-act?page=all>
People’s Republic in its early years. ‘Maoism’ in the writings of Dikotter and others is accepted as something well defined and operational from 1949. In their view, the whole nature of the Chinese economy, society and politics changed from this date, with Mao sitting at the heart of a system which became increasingly autocratic and intolerant. In this new order, the proclivity to use violence never ceased and the Party was unable to properly transition from an agent of revolution to one of governance. The CPC continued to operate like a state within a state basing itself on guerrilla war strategies, frequently at war with large sections of its own people.

In the works of historians like Australia-based Mobo Gao or the veteran scholars Frederick Teiwes and Warren Sun we do get some deeper appreciation of the vast political challenges that faced Mao and the leadership around him from the revolution of 1949. In their accounts, Mao is depicted as part of a consensus seeking elite who needed to rebuild a country where infrastructure, institutions, and basic human security had been decimated by two decades of external and internal war, and then international isolation. The picture of Mao sitting in the midst of a policy-making apparatus from which all decisions flowed and where every major action was centralized through him is replaced in these accounts by something much messier and less cohesive – an apparatus which often did not have the right technical experience or expertise to be able to deal easily with the huge problems of an economy that was still pre-industrial, a lack of adequate social and educational infrastructure, and a governance which was only just restarting. Rather than a clean break pre-and post-1949, a more granular historic view shows that far into the 1950s the new government in Beijing had real challenges asserting its authority over territory in China. By some accounts for instance, Russian forces did not withdraw from northeastern parts of the country until the middle of this decade. The struggle to create a functioning nationwide administrative and governance system was often painful. In many ways the Chinese leadership in which Mao played such a key role were not equipped to deal with the demands being made on them. The skills they needed as war and peacetime leaders were different. This was a phenomenon which was made clear elsewhere: Winston Churchill in the United Kingdom was a great war leader but widely seen as a poor peace time one.

In the earliest period of Mao’s coming to the attention of a wider Western audience, during the Cultural Revolution of the late 1960s, a whole new series of misperceptions arose. Mao was regarded as a romantic revolutionary, someone referred to by the Beatles and the French students protesting in Paris in 1968. Those who took inspiration from what they loosely called Maoism in the West frequently understood little of his adaptation of Marxism to the agricultural situation in China, and did not see the underlying pragmatism which he often exercised. It is really from this period that the Mao as a rigid pursuer of doctrines and pre-set principles appeared. Maoism became a creed in the West amongst those who were protesting against their own governments,
and quotes attributed to him about unleashing revolution and creating chaos were commonly invoked.\textsuperscript{6}

The contrary sense of Mao as a pragmatist is one of the hardest to embrace now, but research has shown that his approach through the late 1960s, even as the Cultural Revolution intensified, was to pursue surprisingly flexible objectives. In 1969 it was Mao’s approval of a top secret report on US–China relations by three generals who were imprisoned at the time that led to the possibility, three years later, of a US President visiting Beijing.\textsuperscript{7} His concern then was to protect China against a USSR seen as increasingly threatening and bellicose. The suspicious side of Mao’s nature, intensified during the revolution and war period, eradicated any lingering idealism. So while Mao’s language often skilfully invoked ideals and emotionally stirring principles (he was, after all, an admired poet), this sat against disciplined, cold-eyed action in pursuit of specific objectives. Trying to balance Mao the romantic idealist with Mao the pragmatic realist, has proved a hugely difficult task for most analysts and observers. For many of them, the temptation to show him as one rather than the other has been too great.

**Mao the Nationalist**

What helps in better understanding both Mao’s historic role and also his continuing traction for neo-Maoists is his nationalism. Mao was a profoundly domestic leader who went abroad only twice in his life, on both occasions for brief visits to the USSR. The true basis of his authority must be located in the rural areas of China, where he had come to power and from where the vast majority of the armies who had fought for the CPC and won its final victories came. His appeal to the Chinese peasantry was profound throughout his life, and his antagonism to urban elites famous. Viewing Mao as a nationalist links him with Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kai-shek and with movements for national liberation dating back to the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. This is also perhaps his deepest attraction to contemporary leaders in the PRC. In continuing to show support for his historic importance, they are also laying claim to his great nationalist credentials, for he incontrovertibly believed in a rich, strong China, even if it was one that would only be delivered by socialist strategy. He framed his ideological utterances firmly in terms of how they created a more powerful PRC, a country that would be able to resist foreign interference and oppression. The universal appeal of this strident nationalism is understandable in a context in which the bullying by the Japanese during the war and the colonial aggression of the previous century were fresh in people’s minds. However contentious Mao may appear from an external perspective, domestically we can see a figure whose most consistent position was his articulation of his

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\textsuperscript{7} See Margaret MacMillan, *Seize the Hour: When Nixon Met Mao*, John Murray, Edinburgh, 2007 for an account of this process.
country’s national interests. This is why he is still admired by many within China. Broadly the achievement of these interests meant that the PRC would never again suffer foreign oppression, either at the hands of regional bullies or colonialists, that it would be in charge of its own destiny, and that it would have the economic and military strength to resist any external interference. In defence of these key areas Mao was ruthless, and his greatest success was derived from identifying himself so closely with them to the point where they almost became synonymous with the ideology that eventually came to bear his name.

Reconciling Mao the nationalist who in 1956 declared that the vision of the leadership he led was to create ‘a rich strong, socialist country’ with the Mao who was seen as instigating the bizarre campaigns from 1966 on that destroyed many members of the Party and the intellectual elite is not easy. The latter seems in many ways to impede, rather than to promote, the former’s goals. Many struggle with balancing Mao’s often stated vision of building a new, strong, unified China, able to face the world as an equal and take its place at the main table next to the other great nations, with the reality of internal turbulence that in effect left China’s economy decimated by the year of his death. Once more, nuance is important. Few understand that, even from the 1950s into the mid-1970s, China’s economy grew most years, expanding by an average of about 6 percent. In terms of human development, life expectancy in China in 1949 was 32 years, and by 1976 it had risen to the mid-60s. Few would appreciate the construction of a basic education and health system that China undertook over the three decades of Mao’s rule. The failure, or reluctance, to see these achievements means that the continuing popular rural image of Mao as a respected and admired leader that many come across today is hard to understand. To many analysts, the strongest images of China over this period are of victims being persecuted, starvation and people wearing Red Guard uniforms. There is little understanding that movements like the Cultural Revolution or the earlier anti-Rightist clampdowns affected only a relatively small group of people, and that for many Chinese, life had been hard before 1949 and continued to be hard after 1949, but at least they suffered less violent disruption than in the dark war years of the 1940s. Chinese people’s sole desire was for stability, and for many of them that is what the Maoist governments delivered.

One of the great challenges is that Mao’s most complex relationship was with intellectuals, the very people who were able to write about and promote their memories of his period in power after he had died. This means for instance, that much of the translated material about Mao and the Cultural Revolution describes a period in which the whole of China was consumed by violence and chaos. While it is clearly true that this was a harsh and disordered time for many, the element of idealism for a large number of Chinese activists in this period has been forgotten, along with the ways in which Mao, perhaps uniquely amongst his generation and any subsequent group of elite leaders, was able to appeal to people’s emotions and to speak in ways they found inspiring. All the evidence shows a leader who had an instinctive understanding of the power of

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8 A good representative of this more positive material about the Cultural Revolution can be found in Mobo Gao, *The Battle for China’s Past: Mao and the Cultural Revolution*, Pluto Press, London, 2008.
images and words in politics, and of how important it was to get these right in order to mobilize and control people. In that sense, Mao was unique to his era in being able to create the image of a public political persona and a language that accompanied this. He was also able to recruit talented writers like Hu Qiaomu or Chen Boda to construct such an image and language.

The mixture of opinions and approaches in coming to terms with Mao’s historic legacy, and the phases that this evaluation went through, both during his long political career and subsequently, along with a general lack of good archival material to help develop a credible account of his life, has meant that Mao is going to remain a contentious and divisive figure, one about whom there is unlikely to be an easy scholarly, political or public consensus. The differences in China after the Reform and Opening up period of 1978 add to the complexity, because for many these changes are seen as a clear repudiation of what Mao stood for, rather than any kind of affirmation. The 1981 `Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of our Party since the Founding of the People’s Republic of China’ is largely seen as a denunciation of Mao delivered under the pretence of being a document supporting him. The mantra of ‘70 percent right, 30 per cent wrong’ (widely misquoted as coming from the 1981 resolution, though it never actually occurs in that formulation there) is interpreted as a sign that the Party under Deng was unable to fully break the bond with Mao, even though they were willing to implement ideas and policies that were wholly opposed to those he had been associated with. Indeed, Deng himself was to speak steadfastly in support of Mao throughout his life, never once demanding that the man who had caused him to fall three times in his career be historically marginalized.

**Mao Today: Down But Not Out**

During the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics in 2008, the most striking feature of the vast celebration of China’s claimed ‘five thousand years of history’ (a favourite trope of the elite leadership) was the absence of any image of or reference to Mao. Mao was man, not God, people were eager to say, and in some ways the whole propaganda effort of the opening ceremony was to reclaim the narrative of ‘1949 and all that’ (to coin a phrase) and show that it was not due to the epic contribution of one single man but of a collective leadership. This sat at odds, however, with the appearance of Mao on, of all places, money – something that had never actually happened even during the most intense period of Mao worship from the late 1960s onwards. But every day, for every Chinese in what remained largely a cash economy, the Chairman’s image stared from every denomination of notes, from the yellow-green of the one RMB ones right up to the ubiquitous light red 100 RMB notes. Ironically, only the small currency notes of five and less have no image of Mao on them. The new notes were brought in in 1999, and could be viewed by the cynical as a covert way of bringing the Chairman down to size, plastering him on the very thing that was central to Chinese society and as intense an object of worship as he had once been during his life – money!

Dicing with the Chairman’s image however, remains a toxic issue. In May 1989, during the upheavals of the summer, three men from Hunan province, Yu Zhijian (a teacher), Yu Dongyue
(a journalist) and Lu Decheng (from a bus company) spattered the vast portrait of Mao hanging in Tiananmen Square with eggs filled with red, blue and yellow paint. Sentenced to 16 years, 20 years and life respectively (with the member of the supposed proletariat, Lu, given the harshest treatment due to his ‘class crime’) they were sent to prison in their home province where, according to a Human Rights Watch report issued in 1992, they were tortured, placed in solitary confinement and starved. The three were subsequently released in the late 1990s or early 2000s, with Lu escaping to the US in 2006. But the price they paid for attacking the sacrosanct image was a dizzyingly high one. It seemed that, even after the Cultural Revolution was long over, taking the Chairman’s image or name in vain was for the foolish or the courageous – unless, apparently, you wished to commercialise and commodify it, where there were apparently no prohibitions.

Australian academic Geremie Barme had pointed out only a few years later that the return of a popular cult of Mao was going strong into the 1990s, with taxi drivers having lucky charms of the Chairman’s image hanging from their rear view mirrors, and people creating small shrines in their homes. Part of this might be associated with the wave of redundancies in the state sector during the era of Jiang Zemin and his Premier, the pugnacious Zhu Rongji, and the nostalgia these new tough times created in people for a halcyon past under Mao when everyone was seen as being looked after. From 1998 Zhu undertook an overhaul of the huge state companies, leading to the lay-off of many millions of workers. The symbolic importance of what Zhu was doing, however, was more important perhaps than its initial practical impact. The state was withdrawing from key areas of welfare and social provision where it had once been integral. Suddenly, the Chinese version of cradle-to-grave state care was gone. In its place, work units which once ran like tiny worlds of their own, with schools, hospitals, and employment arrangements, were wound down and a brave new world of people having to find their own jobs, sort out their own employment and generally look after themselves, was ushered in. For many, this was a repudiation of the core tenets of Maoist state control. While it is unwelcome for some to remember, for the vast majority in the countryside or in the working classes in cities, Mao had always been a hero, someone who had created a paternalistic state structure where everyone was looked after – except a few pernicious bureaucrats or intellectuals who had spoken out of line.

Jiang and Zhu won their restructuring battle, and remarkably mass unrest was avoided despite the widespread pain of former state workers losing their pensions and welfare rights and needing to look after themselves. Jiang and Zhou achieved this largely by unleashing forces of productivity in the whole economy so that the private sector and other areas managed not only to mop up those laid off, but also to generate more and more wealth. Even if people weren’t directly able to get their hands on the money being churned out by China’s new growth model

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today, at least they could hope something good would fall into their lap tomorrow. For this reason, the incentives to buy into the Jiang-Zhu economic model, one largely continued by their successors Hu and Wen, were strong enough to keep most people on side.

The Modern Maoists – Dangerous People for Dangerous Times?

While Western audiences like the idea of Mao being consigned to history as a tyrant and enemy, there remains the issue of how his followers, even in the second decade of the 21st century, remain so passionate in their declarations of faith in him and his memory. A highly orthodox example of this comes from no less a figure than Li Junru, former vice president of the Central Party School in Beijing and one of modern China’s leading Marxist scholars. ‘When will the portrait of Mao Zedong be taken down from the Tiananmen rostrum?’ Li asks rhetorically in a book published in English about the CCP in 2011. ‘It will never happen!’ he answers. He then supplies three reasons why: first, because Mao was a national hero and ‘it was under his leadership that the CPC and the Chinese people saved the nation from disaster and humiliation’; secondly, because Mao ‘was a great thinker’; thirdly, because Mao ‘was a gifted scholar’. Li summarises: ‘The people will not negate or forget him for his mistakes during the Cultural Revolution in his later years for the three above mentioned reasons. Instead people’s affection for him will grow over time.’

Li may have had a point when he stated in this account of Mao’s lasting influence, ‘You will know I am right if you ask ordinary Chinese people.’ But here things became somewhat complicated. In the Cultural Revolution during its most turbulent period from 1966 to 1969, rebellious groups all fought for legitimacy by appealing to Mao and saying that they and they alone, in their actions and ideas, were his true followers. Mao’s words however were famously mercurial and ambiguous, and the shoals upon which many political careers were destroyed. Even US President Nixon and his wily advisor Henry Kissinger found Mao’s statements bewildering when they met him. In this way, he appears more like a religious leader than a political one, able to inspire loyalty and fierce dedication in people, even as he evades specificity and being pinned down. Li articulates the establishment view, where Mao has a carefully defined place as leader, thinker and national symbol. However, there has been a lively ongoing war among many others, from the grassroots up, who have wanted to attach themselves to Mao and use him and his words to defend their ideas. This report from 2004 is symptomatic of this grassroots Maoism and its living legacy:

‘On December 21, 2004, four Maoists were tried in Zhengzhou for having handed out leaflets that denounced the restoration of capitalism in China and called for a return to the

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“socialist road.” The leaflets had been distributed in a public park in the City of Zhengzhou on the occasion of the 28th anniversary of the death of Chairman Mao Zedong. Two of the defendants, Zhang Zhengyao, 56, and Zhang Ruquan, 69, were both found guilty of libel, and each given a three-year prison sentence on December 24, 2004. The case has since generated a lot of expressions of solidarity in leftist circles within China. Postings to a leading leftist website in China in the last few days have set out an abridged translation of the incriminating leaflet, the commemorative piece titled “Mao Zedong forever our leader,” plus a commentary whose author went to Zhengzhou to show solidarity on the day of the trial on December 21.’

The leaflet that the Maoists handed out in Zhengzhou was a distillation of the key claims made against the reform process since 1978:

`From their direct experience, the Chinese people realized that Mao Zedong and they themselves were intimately bound together, in good times and bad, in victory and defeat: with Mao Zedong as their leader, Chinese people were the masters of the country, and enjoyed inviolable democratic rights. They lived a happy life, confident, optimistic and reassured of ever better days ahead. But after Mao Zedong passed away, the working class in China was knocked down overnight by the bourgeoisie; they are no longer the masters of their own country. In this society of “Socialism with Chinese characteristics,” money means power and social status. The wealth polarization has driven working people into abject poverty; as a result, they have lost their social status and all the rights they had enjoyed previously. They are no longer dignified socialist laborers; instead, they are forced to sell their labor power as commodities for survival: they have become tools that can be bought freely by the capitalists.’

Almost a decade later, and a writer called Li Tie was jailed for ten years for subversion in Wuhan. Li, a self-branded Maoist, had used Mao’s writings to defend human rights and greater equality. ‘[Li says] he studies Mao’s writings every day, and that Mao runs through all his writings, and that he is a protector of the Chinese Communist Party. He says Mao called for a democratic society, but that something he wrote back in the 1930s is of no use in the 21st century.’ Perhaps the most unpalatable aspect of Li’s actions, at least for the authorities, was that he was doing this democracy promotion during the Jasmine revolution period, when the government was extremely sensitive.

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In 2009, an event in Taiyuan, Shanxi province, held by nine Maoists declaring their allegiance was broken up by police. A report quoted one of the participants as stating that `Today, the structure of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) isn’t the same as what it was under Mao. Before, most members were peasants and workers, now they’re all bureaucrats. Just as Karl Marx had predicted, China’s society is breaking up into different classes. One small group of about 3,000 Chinese leaders and several dozen foreign entrepreneurs controls the country and exploits the rest of the population. The Maoists want to return to a real Communist party, not one that exploits the working class.’ From these three events over the last decade one can see the same competition for the mandate of Mao that occurred amongst revolutionary Red Guard groups during the Cultural Revolution a generation before the events described above. One can also see a general diversity of opinion parading under the banner of Maoism, some of them promoting ideas like multi-party democracy and legal reform that are usually be seen as distinctly un-Maoist. The one thing they have in common is anger at the rising inequality in society, and at the bureaucratic, enclosed elitist nature of the current Communist party. Some of these ideas were truly unsettling and subversive to the CPC in its new guise in the 21st century.

The Fundamental Problem

The notion that in the second decade of the 21st century there might be a cohort of diehard Maoists still banging the Great Helmsman’s drum in China, despite the daily avalanche of news showing that the country that exists today is almost like another planet compared to that which existed prior to 1978, is an unsettling one. Maoists seem like stranded Japanese in the South East Asian jungles, struggling out of the thick forests decades after the Second World War had ended to find that they had been battling for all this time in vain and their struggle was long over. But there is a very serious side to why Mao remains so potent in contemporary China, and why invoking him is so combustible politically, despite the fact that his mandate remains as slippery and hard to capture after his death as it did when he was alive. The crucial, incontrovertible difference anyone can accept between the China of Mao and the China of today is the spiralling level of inequality now. It is this that the most serious supporters of Mao invoke in their attacks.

In 2012, the Development Research Centre (DRC) under the State Council (China’s main governance entity) and the World Bank co-produced a report on the challenges facing the country in the coming two decades. The report, ‘China 2030: Building a Modern, Harmonious, Creative Society’, was a bible of modern reform, proposing deeper marketization of the economy and the factors of production, a much larger role for the non-state sector, a wider reform of government and administrative functions, and a more aggressively green agenda. If there was a coherent, lengthy statement (the report came to over 350 pages) of Western-style neo-liberal

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economic values imported lock, stock and barrel to the PRC; this was it.  

15 ‘Direct government intervention may actually retard growth,’ the report stated. ‘Instead, the policy emphasis needs to shift even more towards private sector development.’  

16 Arguing for a scaling back and redefinition of the role of government and state, the report continues: ‘The expanding middle class is increasingly vocal in its demand to participate in the discussion of public policy… The government should respond proactively to these needs and grant rights to individuals, households, enterprises, communities, academia, and other non-governmental organizations…’  

17 This crisp statement encapsulated all the great red lines for the more socialist-supporting contingent in Chinese society, most of whom regarded 1978 not as Year Zero for the renaissance of China but as a catastrophe from which the country looked likely never to recover. For them, these celebrations of the market, of an emerging middle class, of the non-state sector, and the surrender of the state, were stages in a capitulation to Western-inspired capitalism being sneaked in by bribing and seducing Chinese people with slightly improved living standards, while allowing a new elite to become obscenely rich.

A group of 1644 prominent economists within China responded to the report with an open letter on the 15th July 2012. Their political target was the then Premier Wen Jiabao, firstly because he was regarded as the most zealous liberal reformer in the Standing Committee of the CPC, secondly because he was viewed as the primary political patron of the report, despite its falling more under the immediate jurisdiction of the Vice Premier in charge of macro-economic affairs at the time, Li Keqiang. Thirdly, and as further proof that despite its often abstract public veneer, politics in China is almost always intensely personal, the Premier was targeted because of the widely known fact that Wen Jiabao’s family were amongst the most venal and rich of the political elite, with his wife Zhang Peili in particular and his two sons being associated with dizzying fortunes. This was to be very publicly documented in the New York Times only a few months later.  

18 For Maoist and leftist complainants, therefore, there couldn’t be a better combination than this sort of report, with this kind of content, produced by these partners and under the patronage of this specific individual. They launched their salvo.

The letter identified ’China 2030’ as a direct challenge to the Chinese socialist system. It was, the author’s said, ‘an attempt by Wen Jiabao to introduce multiparty capitalist politics’ into…


16 Ibid, p 17

17 Ibid, p 17

China, and to attack public and state owned enterprises. The signatories stated that this had been the consistent trend of Wen-supported policy throughout his period as Premier. In 2010, they stated, only 27 per cent of the economy was in the hands of the state sector, and the remaining 73 per cent under the control of the non-state sector. This statistic was testimony to the surrender of the economy into the hands of entrepreneurs and business people who had self-concern rather than concern for the country at heart. The 1644 economists argued passionately that to downgrade the state enterprises in this way was fatuous. In the energy, chemicals, materials, telecoms and construction sectors, the state had to maintain its guiding role, because these ‘were critical to preserving the independence of our economy’ and could not be watered down by non-state agents. The advantages of state enterprises had been ignored in the report, including the fact that they were the most competitive in taking on enterprises outside of China, and, importantly, the major source of revenue for the central state so that it could discharge its welfare duties. Of tax revenues to the central government, which made up 70 per cent of all government fiscal revenue in the PRC, over half came from state owned enterprise contributions, with the rest being a mixture of individual tax, foreign enterprise tax, consumption tax and, embarrassingly, tobacco tax. To downgrade the state system was politically and economically to ‘bite the hand’ that was feeding you. More importantly, as figures like fellow Politburo member Wu Bangguo had stated during his powerful defence of State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) at the National People’s Congress in 2012, the meeting of China’s annual parliament, SOEs had been a source of stability for China during the global financial crisis of 2008 onwards, when the export markets in Europe and North America had dried up. Without SOEs at this time, China would have been sucked into the same collapse as happened elsewhere in the developed world. Control over SOEs by the government therefore was considered a critical mechanism in times of crises like these, ensuring that external folly did not jeopardize China’s economic stability.

Yet there was a far more virulent strain in the letter, and one that drew from the rich tradition of nationalism in Maoist thought. The authors of the letter stated that the DRC and the World Bank were nothing more than ‘stooges’ for Western-led (for which largely read American) capitalist infiltration into China. Their tactic was simple: they were covertly seeking to weaken and destabilize China in precisely the way that had happened after the fall of the Soviet Union and its central planning system in 1991. When the USSR collapsed, consultants and representatives of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and other organizations had trouped to Moscow and foisted on it disastrous policies that had seen its strategic government assets carved up and handed over to oligarchs, its welfare system collapse, its mortality rates soar, and its national prestige plummet. While the West celebrated this moment as the end of the Cold War and the time when Russia liberated itself and returned to its senses after 74 years of Communist folly, for many in China it was an existential disaster, a capitulation by Russia to harmful policies and decline, unleashing the anarchy of the Yeltsin years and showing that the West in the end was never a true friend of anyone except itself. The consensus of the many seminars, roundtables and consultations in the PRC right up to 2013 on the collapse of the Soviet Union
therefore was overwhelmingly critical, with the one agreed point being that the whole story showed precisely what China should not do, not what it should emulate.¹⁹

Then the attack got really personal: "As a member of the Standing Committee of the Politburo, and for a decade Premier of the State Council, Wen Jiabao in his time in power has pushed forward revisionism, and surrendered national interest to foreigner colonialists," the letter declared. He had 'promoted privatization, turned over socialism and committed a series of massive mistakes.' In his decade as a leader in the Centre Wen had never once, in a speech, report or interview, mentioned the name of Mao Zedong: "In his time as leader, management problems in our society have increased, and criminal acts risen to a level never seen since the period of liberation [in 1949]." Quoting figures from the Chinese Annual Legal Yearbook (Zhongguo Falu Nianjian) from 2003 to 2010, the critics of Wen stated that in 2003 there were 4.8 million "social management" issues, but that this had increased over 2.5 times to 12 million. In 2003 there had been 730,000 crimes prosecuted in China, but by 2010 this had risen to 1.05 million, up 1.4 times. This, in essence, was the Maoist critique of China in the 21st century: that it was a country led increasingly by revisionists who were surrendering to precisely the sort of Western influence that Mao had resisted so heroically throughout his career, that the state was turning its back on the common people and precisely the sort of bureaucratic business elite was appearing that Mao had waged successive campaigns to beat back, culminating in the Cultural Revolution. Mao himself had wearily admitted to the US journalist Edgar Snow towards the end of his life that he had failed to change much in China, and that future Cultural Revolutions would need to be waged to dig out the profound problems of elites and bureaucratic power holders left over from history. But in the China of Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping, the bureaucrats and their patronage networks linked deeply to business and money had come back with a vengeance. The families of the 'Eight Immortals', the leaders who had been active in the Communist Party from the earliest period of its founding up to the first decade of the 21st century (Bo Yibo was the last to die, in 2007 at the age of 99) were symptomatic of this, with most of them accruing wealth and property inside and outside China, and monetarizing their revolutionary family inheritance. The struggles during the foundation and rise to power of the Party, and then its stewardship of the country after 1949, were not meant to end up here. The nadir of this came with the announcement in May 2013 that Kong Dongmei, granddaughter of the Chairman, came 242nd on the Forbes China Rich List that year, thanks to the fortune she and her husband Chen Dongsheng had made in insurance. Even more stomach churning was the fact that despite this vast wealth, she had run a bookshop in Beijing promoting Communist culture and written four books about her grandfather. Major General Mao Xinyu, also a grandson of Mao, had stated in 2009 while he was part of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Commission that 'The Mao family

heritage is honest and clean. None of the Mao family members have entered business. They all live on their modest salaries. If the direct family of the great man himself could not keep clean, then what hope for the rest of the country?

Maoism in Motion: The Red Campaign of Bo Xilai in Chongqing

Mao’s direct descendants might have gone to the dogs of wealth and greed, but for pure Maoists there was still hope, and it was delivered in the late 2000s by no less a figure than a man widely agreed to be the country’s most charismatic politician, Bo Xilai. Even more pleasing was that Bo was himself offspring of one of the great dynastic families, the son of Bo Yibo mentioned above. Bo Yibo had a career spanning over seven decades in the CPC, and experienced the heights and the depths of Party membership. Joining when the CPC was only four years old in 1925, he was imprisoned by the Nationalists in the 1930s, active in the resistance movement against the Japanese from 1939, and then, at different times, Minister of Finance and Chair of the State Planning Commission once the Party came to power in 1949. In the Cultural Revolution he had been felled and placed in prison and his family persecuted, his wife probably, though this is not known for certain, committing suicide. Only under Deng Xiaoping did he return to power, becoming one of the most influential figures throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s and part of the leadership group that authorized the repression of the protesting students in 1989. Bo Senior’s service to the Communist Party of China was a stellar one. But it was the career of his second eldest son, Bo Xilai, that most excited neo-Maoists in the 2000s.

Bo Xilai had been a popular and successful leader in Dalian City in the late 1990s, and then Governor of Liaoning Province in the northeast of China from 2001 to 2004. His international profile had been helped by becoming national Minister of Commerce in 2004, during which his excellent English and smooth ways won plaudits from many of his overseas interlocutors ranging from the EU Commissioner, Peter Mandelson, to heads of American and European Corporations. It was as Party Secretary of the huge but sprawling city of Chongqing in the southwest of the country from 2007 that Bo really raised the hopes of the Maoist contingent. While Party leader of this province-level centre he promoted campaigns aimed at addressing the menu of dissatisfactions outlined above about inequality and injustice in a Chinese society enjoying rapid but uneven growth.

The essence of Bo’s approach can be seen in a debate he had, indirectly, with his predecessor in Chongqing, Wang Yang. Six years younger than Bo, Wang had been one of the most open minded of rising officials and from the mid-2000s had been marked as someone with great potential. From a modest background, and with a low key demeanour, Wang had been moved to the economic powerhouse of Guangdong province in 2007, and replaced in Chongqing by Bo. In Guangdong, Wang had promoted two debates. One of them was simply that the Party itself had

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no divine right to rule. It had to earn its prestige in society. China did not belong to the Party, and the Party’s stable hold on power was only justified through secure and competent governance. To believe, as in the Cultural Revolution of four decades earlier, that there was some revolutionary blood-line of party leaders and that these had an intrinsic right to be in power, was erroneous. This belief had created a generation of enormously arrogant princelings and their female equivalents, who treated the Party like a personal possession, leveraging off their connections to the power elite to make money. Instead, Wang Yang referred to the need for the Party to renew its mandate with the people each day by performing efficiently according to specific targets. All this language could have been, and in many ways was, a clear attack on a figure like Bo Xilai, from the most elite of the elitist families, and someone whose imperious airs meant his critics could accuse him of treating the Party as his own chattel.

The second argument was a more theoretical one, despite the fact that it involved cakes. Cakes have proved risky territory for politicians in more places than China. In Australia in 1993, there was the famous case of leadership contender John Hewson from the Opposition Liberal Party being felled by a bizarre argument over what tax one would pay on a birthday cake. In China twenty years later, the argument was more over how one would divide the cake. Of course, the real meaning of ‘cake’ in this instance was metaphorical. What people were referring to was the vast and growing riches coming from the Chinese economy, and who was going to reap the benefits. For Wang Yang, the strategic position was clear. One had to continue growing the cake and pumping out good GDP growth. China remained, in per capita terms, a poor country, coming in close to 100th on the global rankings despite its aggregate wealth. So remaining on the track of GDP growth at all costs, and dealing with the issues of equality and sustainability later was key.

By contrast, for Bo, and for the Maoists, it was now truly time to change direction and simply divide the cake more fairly. Large slices were going to a small number of people in Hu-Wen China. In 1984 the Gini coefficient, an internationally accepted measure of inequality in society, had shown that China was largely an equitable place where there was little gap between the rich and the poor, but by 2005 it had become one of the most divided societies in the world in the space of a generation, with measures of inequality akin to those of Latin America. This was an obscenity in a country still calling itself socialist, and the pressure now, which Bo recognized through campaigns to promote better social housing and improve welfare, was to get the knife out and cut up the cake a better way.

Bo’s real acknowledgement of Maoist strategy was through a campaign of public mobilization. Here he truly antagonised his Politburo colleagues. Mao was the master of public propaganda. He was able to reach over the heads of the Party and connect directly with the great mass of the people. His genius in speaking directly to them was the source of his power until the day he died. His fearless use of public mobilization campaigns from the early 1950s right up to the Cultural Revolution, the Gotterdammerung of them all, was the central feature of vast campaigns in which his charisma was the great bonding element. The outcome was what came to be called a cult of personality in which he gradually penetrated almost all areas of daily life in China.
through his appearances in the media, through his control over public forms of language, and through his ability to simply capture symbolic space. Mao was the great mythmaker of contemporary China, and someone who, like him or loathe him, motivated and energized people in vast numbers to follow him and believe in him.

The leadership after his death regarded this genius to mobilize and emotionally reach people with great caution. While they may have been envious of the Chairman’s symbolic link with the people and his ability to reach them, many of them had borne personal costs as a result of this. Deng Xiaoping had spent much of the Cultural Revolution in a tractor factory in Jiangxi, mourning the crippling of his son who was manhandled by Red Guards at the end of the 1960s. Xi Jinping, Party Secretary from 2012, had been rusticated for the period of the Cultural Revolution, his father largely imprisoned since 1962, and his family sidelined and impoverished. Perhaps the most tragic of all these stories was that of Yu Zhengsheng, party boss of Shanghai until 2012 and his final elevation to the Standing Committee of the Politburo at the 18th Party Congress that year. He had the misfortune of having a father who had briefly been the lover of Mao Zedong’s fourth and final wife, Jiang Qing in the 1930s. During her ascendancy in the Cultural Revolution, Yu’s family had been viciously bullied, his sister perhaps even driven to suicide. This accounts for Yu’s somewhat ambiguous position about Mao years later. A great man, but someone who also made great mistakes, was the wistful tenor of Yu’s comments.

Bo, by rights, should have fallen into the camp of the resentful. His father Bo Yibo had been unceremoniously felled in the late 1960s and he had spent time in prison. Later Mao had visited nothing but ill-fortune on his family, possibly resulting in his mother’s suicide. However, consummate politician that he was, Bo either instinctively or explicitly took one important lesson from the Chairman, and that was to influence people by appealing to their emotions: the best campaigns in post-1949 China in terms of winning public support through arousing passions were, like it or not, those waged during the period under Mao.

This approach was behind the much lauded campaign in 2011 waged in Chongqing to promote red culture. Quoted in a report in the Guardian, Bo was recorded as declaring ‘Red songs won public support because they depicted China’s path in a simple, sincere and vivid way… There’s no need to be artsy-fartsy … only dilettantes prefer enigmatic works’21 Along with mass public sing songs of such Maoist classics as ‘Road to Revitalisation’, ‘Love of the Red Flag’ and ‘Good Men Should become Soldiers’ Bo made canny use of modern media by texting people daily with edifying Mao quotes, by promoting dramas on TV based on classic Maoist values of selfless service to Party and country, and by supporting campaigns to send students down to the countryside.

The harder edge of Bo’s reported Maoism was his full-on attack on mafia groups in Chongqing. An increasingly wealthy China had also become one where illegality had prospered, with triads, underground groups, corruption and various other debris resulting from the illicit opportunities generated by rapid development. According to Caixin, a campaigning magazine in China, 3000 people were found guilty of crimes in the campaign from 2008 to 2011 in the city. The rough justice meted out to some of them, and to their associates, lawyers and families, was reportedly staggering. Lawyer Li Zhuang was central to this. Used as a defence attorney by some of the business people mopped up by the campaign, including two brothers named Gong, his clients finally turned on him and he was sentenced to up to 30 months in jail for allegedly promoting perjury. After his release, and the fall of Bo, Li wrote that he had witnessed an entrepreneur taken in as part of the strike hard anti-mafia campaign being put ‘on a kind of torture rack called a tiger bench and pulled his mouth open with an iron chain and yanked out six of his bottom teeth.’

Listing a range of ill treatments meted out to those swept up by the campaign, Li wryly commented ‘Some say that the social order in Chongqing was actually quite good during the crackdown, [but] what I want to say is, during the Cultural Revolution and in Germany under Hitler’s rule, social order reach its highest point in human history. But was that rule of law? That was terror under barbaric tyranny, not rule of law.’

Bo’s Fall and the Role of the Maoists

The flurry of events around Bo Xilai’s fall will no doubt be unpicked for decades to come. The opaque world of elite politics in China, at the unique moment when the fourth generation of leaders under Hu and Wen was finally ceding to a new fifth generation, opened up just a crack when Bo’s security chief, Wang Lijun, a man directly named by the lawyer Li Zhuang, mentioned above, in his testimony as being behind some of the most brutal attacks on suspects in the city to the point where he acted almost like a mafia member in his own right, fled to the US consulate in Chengdu, in neighbouring Sichuan province in February 2012. Wang’s 24 hour refuge in the Consulate caused armed police to swarm around the building, and was only dealt with when agents from the central security apparatus came down to the city to take him away. But reports of Wang testifying to the misdeeds of his former boss Bo soon started to seep out. Central to this was the murder of British businessman Neil Heywood, someone formerly believed to have died of alcohol poisoning, in November 2011. Wang stated that Bo Xilai’s wife Gu Kalai was guilty of Heywood’s murder. Over the ensuing months Gu, then Wang, then Bo were imprisoned, and prosecuted, the first for murder, the second for treason, and the third for corruption.

The lurid details around the tragic Heywood case were bad enough. But there was no clear direct link to Bo himself, beyond claims he had ordered a cover up of his wife’s guilt. What became

22 Luo Jieqi and He Xin, ‘In Bo Xilai’s City, a Legacy of Backstabbing,’ Caixin, 12 July 2012.

clear from the moment of Bo’s denunciation by no less a figure than the then Premier Wen Jiabao during the National People’s Congress that year was that the party secretary of Chongqing’s main crimes, despite his clear popular appeal, were political. Wen himself, while not directly referring to Bo, talked of a new ominous move to reinstate the Cultural Revolution. This was like warning that a nightmare was about to return, with most of the serving and about to be appointed political super-elite in China having sore memories of this period and the treatment of them, or their families, during it. But there was a less overt angle to Wen’s attack. Just as Wen had been the target of angry leftists calling him a traitor to the Mao legacy (see above) so did Wen’s comments figure as some kind of response to these accusations. And Bo was identified as the ringleader of this group, and someone who needed to be dealt with. Wen was getting even.

Bo’s dabbling with mass campaigns that, even vaguely, invoked the spirit of the Cultural Revolution and of Mao himself were incendiary enough, but the way in which Bo was appealing directly to people and speaking in a more vivid, human manner was what marked him out as different from his technocratic peers. Hu Jintao, Party Secretary during this period, was famous for the stiff and mechanical way in which he spoke publicly. His speech at the 18th Party Congress in November 2012 went under the catchy title ‘Firmly March on the Path of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive to Complete the Building of a Moderately Prosperous Society in all Respects.’ Up to two hours of this clunky language spoken in Hu’s monotone, albeit in more standard Mandarin than his predecessors who had regional accents to varying levels of intensity, was enough to beat even the most hardened cadre into compliant passivity. But as Bo had demonstrated during appearances at successive annual National People’s Congresses when he had been mobbed by foreign and local journalists, he had the rarest of rare qualities in contemporary Chinese politics – charisma and star pulling power.

Not only this, but he was also able to connect emotionally with people in ways that other politicians were unable to do, perhaps with the exception of his great nemesis Wen Jiabao. But whereas ‘Grandpa’ Wen’s avuncular image of caring for the people, as demonstrated during the huge snowfalls that affected China in early 2008 showed, was patriarchal and safe, Bo had a far edgier side, as someone willing to smash against the grey consensus and get things done. The most risky of all his moves was to appeal not just to people’s desire to make money and get rich, but to their idealism, and idealism, as the course of Chinese development since the time of Mao has shown, is something in very short supply in the PRC.

Mao, or at least the memory of Mao, is so poignant for many Chinese because of the promise and the Utopian air around the Chairman and his image and language. The programs that he was most closely associated with and that were to turn out so socially costly and destructive – the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution in particular – were initially inspired by high ideals: the first to push China’s economy beyond that of the UK in 15 years and to create a perfect Chinese communist paradise on earth the second to simply remake the very nature of Chinese culture and of the humans within it. Mao’s Utopianism, clear from his views on nature and from his attitude towards the rest of the world, was something that could be controlled and
manipulated by humans for their own ends. His famous poem, ‘Snow’, written in 1936 while he was in Yan’an, testifies to this:

'This land so rich in beauty

Had made countless heroes bow in homage.

But alas Qin Shihuang and Han Wudi

Were lacking in literary grace,

And Tang Taizong and Song Taizu

Had little poetry in their souls;

And Genghis Khan

Proud son of heaven for a day,

Knew only shooting eagles, bow outstretched

All are past and gone!

For truly great men

Look to this age alone.’

This messianic quality flowered into megalomania but, until the day he died, Mao had the ability to inspire unvarying loyalty. This remains a hard issue for his main critics to explain away. The bitter let-down from this period of intense idealism is something China is still recovering from, with post-Mao leaders concentrating on delivering measurable, tangible outcomes and steering away from mobilizing society through loud proclamations about fulfilling destiny and striving towards a future when all contradictions are resolved and the world enters a new golden age. Hard-nosed pragmatism remains the dominant mindset from Deng Xiaoping onwards, with society’s compliance won by material gain and a political realm that is largely, out of people’s daily lives. Post-Mao Chinese live, in many ways, in willing exile from politics, recovering from the bitter-sweet memory of Chairman Mao’s multiple broken promises and his final great betrayal in the chaos of the Cultural Revolution.

Bo broke the pattern by speaking in ways which did inflame idealism. Before his fall in March 2011, he was reported by the Chongqing Evening News as quoting one of Mao’s most famous short essays, ‘In Memory of Norman Bethune’: ‘What kind of spirit is this that makes a foreigner selflessly adopt the cause of Chinese people's liberation as his own,’ he asked, speaking from memory. ‘It is the spirit of internationalism, the spirit of communism, from which every Chinese
communist must learn.’

Directly using the words of Mao himself was a powerful sign of how keen Bo was to appropriate Mao’s symbolic mantle for himself. ‘Singing the praise of redness means supporting what is right,’ Bo was quoted as saying by veteran China watcher Willy Lam. For him, the ‘changhong’ (singing red) campaign was ‘a theoretical foundation for finding ones roots in history, the return of ideals, the revival of the Chinese race, and the rise of the nation.’

This made his removal much trickier. He was a populist, and someone with genuine grassroots appeal, despite his ultra-elite background. Utopia, a prominent left wing website in China (though subsequently shut down – see below) led the charge, posting an entry in which it declared that ‘Utopia believes Bo and Wang [Lijun] are the biggest cases of political injustice since opening up and reform.’ The attack continued that Bo’s trial ‘might be used by the domestic traitorous forces who collaborate with western hostile forces to foment social chaos, split China into pieces and bring it to the abyss.’ The authors finish their stinging rebuke with a slogan: ‘Long live invincible Mao Zedong Thought; Long Live the Chongqing Road.’

In October of the same year, 300 supporters, amongst them Li Chengrui former director of the National Statistics Bureau, addressed an open letter to the National People’s Congress, defending Bo, and saying that he was a faithful servant of the Party and of the Maoist inheritance. Even more worrying was the appearance of street protestors just after Bo’s removal, at the time when there were genuine divisions within the top elite of the party over how to handle their disgraced former colleague. In a report on a demonstration by a handful of Bo supporters in the lead up to the trial of Gu Kailai in August 2012, the Financial Times quoted one of them, a retired teacher from Nanjing, stating that ‘The capitalist roaders have taken over this country and Bo Xilai was going to do something against that. This trial is just part of a conspiracy between the CIA and the party leadership to finish off the left.’

Despite this initial display of solidarity, however, the standard Hu tactic of dealing with dissent by tactically isolating it, worked. Bo’s most vocal supporters were silenced or rounded up prior to his trial in August 2013. Sporadic good wishes for him on leftist websites were blocked, amongst them a site called Red China which filled with criticism of Xi Jinping and his treatment of Bo in 2013. Bo’s trial itself was narrowly focused on claims of corruption. His life term and subsequent silence were signs that the person most visibly associated with neo-Maoism from among the current generation of leaders in China had been effectively dealt with. But while Bo might largely be politically dead and buried, that does not mean that the ideas and aspirations of

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27 Katherin Hille, ‘Maoist Protestors Show Support for Bo’, Financial Times, 8 August 2012.
the unruly coalition of Maoists who took inspiration from him, appealed to him, and were dismayed by his fall have been finally dealt with. Far from it.

**Mao Online**

The World Wide Web has entered the life blood of contemporary China and it is almost impossible to imagine that only two decades before 2013 China was a country where the number of mobile phone users and people on the internet was tiny. Now China holds the world record for both. Unsurprisingly, those proclaiming to be faithful Maoists are speaking through various online portals, the most prominent of which was once the Utopia website. Utopia was founded by Fan Jinggang and Han Deqiang in 2003. Fan has been the most prominent face of the website and the small bookshop it is associated with in Beijing. He was born in Hunan, Mao’s home province, in 1976, the year of the Chairman’s death. According to an interview in 2012, what most inspired him to make analysis and debate about Mao’s continuing relevance more widely available was the inequality that he witnessed on coming to Beijing as a student in the 1990s. Fan’s critique of post-1978 reform in China is a simple one: ‘People had more dignity, higher social status and better welfare… In Mao’s era, no one was out there alone; they always had a team to count on. If someone needed to build a house, he could turn to his workmates for help. But nowadays, it’s all different.’

Far from being an era of rampant prosperity, the last thirty years in China had seen a growing army of those who had simply lost out or been sidelined by market liberalization and reform: those laid off from state owned enterprises, those disenfranchised from the welfare system, those from rural areas who had greedy officials steal their land rights from them. This list contains precisely the sort of people of whom Mao is usually asserted champion.

The Utopia website, [www.wyzxsx.com](http://www.wyzxsx.com), was blocked from April 2012, after posting strong defences of Bo Xilai soon after his fall. Attracting, up to half a million visitors a day to Fan’s account, it had become one of the 600 most visited sites in the country. But defences of Bo along these lines made the leadership nervous:

‘Bo’s campaigns like ‘Sing Red Strike Black,’ ‘Officials making poor friends,’ ‘Visiting the grassroots classes’ after coming to power, and a series of actions like building low-rent houses, taking care of ‘empty nesters’ and left-behind children, narrowing the gap between the rich and the poor, follow the Constitution of CCP and the ‘Serving the

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29 At the time of writing (February 2014) this site remains offline, with visitors to the address referred to [http://www.wyzxwk.com/](http://www.wyzxwk.com/) and the website of the bookstore [http://www.wyzxsd.com/](http://www.wyzxsd.com/) where there is active content.
People’ principle, and represent the people’s wish for common prosperity. That’s why I support him.”

The real enemy for Utopia supporters, among them nationalist bloggers and thinkers like Sima Nan, Liu Yang and Zhang Hongliang, were intellectuals who had argued vigorously for burying Mao once and for all, in particular, Mao Yushi and Xin Ziling. Mao (no relative of the Chairman), over 85 when he wrote the blog entry for the online version of Caixin in China in 2011, was to be rewarded with vitriol and anger. But his statements were straightforward enough. Just like Xi Jinping, he started off by stating that Mao Zedong was a man, not a God. He continued: ‘Now, as more and more materials have come to light, we have been able slowly to return him to human form, a person of flesh and blood. But still there are those who regard him as a god, and who regard any critical remarks against him as a mark of disrespect. If you suggest that he committed errors, well that’s something really not permitted.’ Mao Yushi enumerated the standard list of problems: the Cultural Revolution which Mao had directly inspired, and the great famines, stating that ‘Without a doubt, Mao Zedong was responsible.’ Then Mao Yushi got personal: ‘His [Mao Zedong’s] thirst for power dominated his life, and to this end he went entirely mad, paying the ultimate price in his quest for power, even though his power was actually weakened as a result.’ While Mao may have tried to cover his ambitions with class struggle, aimed at the bourgeoisie, the people he was really after were those he considered to be his enemies:

‘National unity, the interests of the people, all were given secondary importance. All the country’s top leaders racked their brains about all day long was who benefitted [politically] from certain matters, and particularly what the [possible impact would be] on Mao Zedong’s power and standing. No one dared give offense to Mao Zedong. All national matters became personal matters of the Mao family.’

According to the Economist, on May 23rd a petition of ten thousand people opposing what Mao Yushi had written and asking for him to be prosecuted by the authorities was presented at a police station in Beijing. Postings on an online version of the article on the Caixin website brought out the worst in the online community: ‘The whole nation is waiting for the dawn, the dawn of a day when Mao Yu-Shit (sic) and other anti-Mao reactionaries who vilify Mao are annihilated,’ stated one. A month later, the flames of the debate were reignited by Mao Yushi’s review of a fellow liberal Xin Zilin’s book on Mao, ‘The Fall of the Red Sun,’ in which he wrote

30 ibid.


on caixin.com that '[Mao] is not a god, and he will be removed from the altar, divested of all the myth that used to shroud him and receive a just evaluation as an ordinary man.'³³ For this, Fan and his colleagues arranged a petition of 40 thousand names, to be presented at the National People’s Congress demanding that both Mao and Xin be prosecuted for sedition. Calling both ‘national traitors’, six months later the Utopia website made Mao Yushi one of China’s top ten traitors along with figures like jailed Nobel Prize Laureate Liu Xiaobo. For Fan, the standard judgement on Mao of ‘70 per cent right, 30 per cent wrong’, and criticisms along the lines of those like Mao Yushi, are wide of the mark:

‘Who can really comment on Chairman Mao? The so-called 3/7 theory [where Mao was judged 70 per cent right and 30 per cent in error] was only a temporary one. Looking back, many people’s opinions are already changing. For example, war heroes like Chen Yun, Wang Zhen, Wei Wei, Ma Bin all agree the “right” (achievement) part is underrated and the “wrong” (mistakes) part exaggerated. On the other hand, some traitors in the Party betrayed communism and created all sorts of rumors to attack Chairman Mao. There’s a guy called Li Rui who claims to be Mao’s ex-secretary and another one called Xin Ziling. Mao, in their eyes, is probably more like “70 percent wrong, 30 percent right,” if not worse.’ ³⁴

Despite this strenuous rhetoric about supporting the true national interest, almost all the Mao sites from Utopia to Mao Flag and Red China were, by early 2014, shut down or inaccessible, inside and outside China. The domain for Redchinacn.com, the former home for Red China was up for sale in early February 2014 for just over $1000 USD. Beyond the group around Utopia, there was a constellation of other Maoist-leaning individuals. There were the old left, mostly conservatives who stood by the command economy and Leninist ideology. Many of these worked in academia and figured in the letter of the 1644 economists to Wen in 2012. There were also writers who focused on more cultural issues. One of these was Beijing Professor of Sinology Kong Qingdong, who infamously branded Hong Kongese "dogs of the British" in 2012, and who, in one of his blogs, aimed particular anger at Ang Lee’s Love, Caution (色戒) and spoke up for films with a stronger Maoist theme. Kong’s aggressive attitude towards most forms of ‘western cultural imperialism’ extended to supporting the award of a Confucian Prize in 2011 to Vladimir Putin, a deliberate attempt to create an indigenous Nobel Prize equivalent, and commenting provocatively that North Korea had never suffered from famine. ³⁵ Figures like Kong occupy the


sort of territory that shock jocks do in the US – marginal but vocal, and representative of a specific sector of opinion in the new China. The menu of irritants on the lists of people like Kong range from Europe-centric views of the world, Orientalism, Western promotion of human rights despite the fact the West has neither the moral right nor the legitimacy to lecture China, talk of Enlightenment values, and liberal democracy.

The Leftist Critique of Modern China

Fan explicitly referred to the China 2030 World Bank DRC report of 2012 and its liberal agenda as a provocation. The rumour that Utopia itself had been funded by the eminence grise of the left in China, Deng Liqun, author of a number of sour critiques of the Jiang and Zhu strategy towards state owned enterprises in the 1990s and of a particularly virulent attack on Jiang Zemin’s bringing entrepreneurs into the CPC in 2002, remained unproved. But the issue of the left in China, and Maoist links to it, was an important one to think about. Figures as eminent as Deng Xiaoping had warned throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s that while rightism was an evil thing in China the real danger was lurking in the left. Radical leftism was associated with all the great policy disasters of the post-1949 period and, although it was down, it was certainly not out.

The threat of a leftism renaissance, therefore, was always a very uncomfortable one for the Party, and to refer to the spectre of a return of the Cultural Revolution, as Wen Jiabao did when he obliquely attacked Bo Xilai in early 2012, was to summon up the real bogeyman of modern Chinese history.

Despite this, leftists occupied a powerful intellectual position, and the more sophisticated were able to offer some reminders as to why there were incoherencies in the post-reform settlement in China. Wang Hui, a professor of Chinese literature at Beijing University, was one of the most respected of these. In a series of essays over the last two decades since the mid-1990s he has presented a leftist critique of the polity of contemporary China which avoided the visceral and highly personalised simplifications of more populist Maoists like those associated with Utopia. For him, wholesale adaptation of Western-style capitalism was a recipe for disaster. In an interview on the subject of modernity in China with Ke Kaijun, Wang stated that `modern Chinese thought is characterized by an anti-modern modernity. China’s search for modernity began during the time of colonialism, so that its historic meaning involved a resistance against it and a critique of capitalism.’

How odd, therefore, that capitalism seems to run rampant in contemporary China. Wang’s more penetrating remark was simply to acknowledge that under the veneer of consensus, Maoist and Post-Maoist China were riddled with political battles, which

36 Despite strenuous lobbying, Deng was never voted onto the CPC Central Committee because of widespread dislike of his ideas in the Party. He died in February 2015.

were `inextricably linked to serious theoretical considerations and policy debate.' At the heart of this was the question of what, in the end, was the role of the Party. By the time of Mao’s death, the Party had been a personal fiefdom, subject to the all-powerful Chairman’s whims and the tempests of his temper. Under Deng, however, it had transformed into a sort of ‘bureaucratic machine’ (Wang’s words), working and existing in a privileged space in society, but at least a delineated one. The Party’s search for new sources of legitimacy had ended up with it depending almost wholly on economic growth. It was the importance of this which became the mantra of leaders from Jiang Zemin onwards. Wang was rewarded by being enfranchised by the CCP establishment by gaining membership of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, a body of about 3,000 individuals that meets once a year around the time of the National People’s Congress in Beijing, in an advisory capacity.

Wang’s critique had a sting in its tail though. What was the authentic voice of Chinese modernity that managed to escape the taunt of being borrowed from or derivative of the West? This struggle to create something from within China’s own intellectual traditions was a long term one, dating back to the final years of the Qing Dynasty, more than a century before. The desire to have a viewpoint rooted in Chinese cultural identity was strong in the works of figures like Wang and some of the other leftists ranged around him such as fellow academics Pan Wei and Qin Hui. These figures had political and social traction when they fired back at the external critics of China during and after the Beijing Olympics of 2008, arguing that after the financial crisis of 2007 the West had neither the moral nor the political right to start doling out lectures to anyone else. The West, after all, had bullied, subverted and cheated China throughout almost the whole period after the 1840s, including the First Opium Wars. To have the West, and in particular Europe and the US, reinvent themselves after their brutal colonising history as supporters of universalist values was nothing more than blatant hypocrisy. For Wang and those sympathetic to him it was easier to see the West not as some great exemplar, but in a more complicated way, as an unreliable, changeable partner that China had no choice but to work with but did not need to have some vast cultural cringe towards. The antagonism towards purportedly Western values and ideas by the Maoist radical leftists in China and their urging that China rely on itself has not, therefore, wholly evaporated since the Cultural Revolution. Modern theorists, like Wang, simply articulate these themes in a much more sophisticated and elegant way.

Mao for Now?

The images of Maoism are powerful: ecstatic students lovingly looking at their great leader during his dawn appearances in the great rallies of a million or more that filled Tiananmen Square in the late 1960s, the red sun in people’s hearts, a figure who attracted religious levels of adoration. One of the seminal moments of the Red Guard movement was when student Song Binbin pinned an armband with the characters ‘Hong Wei Bing’ (‘Red Guard’) onto the arm of

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38 ibid. p. 6.
Chairman Mao. This was taken as a sign that Mao sanctioned the legitimacy of the movement. The results were to unleash activism across the country. Almost half a century later, in January 2014, Song Binbin, daughter of Song Renqiong, one of the ‘Eight Immortals’ who had been instrumental in the foundation of the CCP and its rise to power, stood in a middle school in Beijing, and apologised. In early August 1966 the group that she had belonged to had beaten, then poured boiling water on the deputy head of their school, leaving the woman to die.39 ‘I did not [intervene] but was unable to prevent the violence towards Principal Bian and other school staff,’ Ms Song stated. ‘If we do not thoroughly understand and examine the mindset behind the entire Cultural Revolution era, similar incidents will happen again.’

Song typifies a generation who are still recovering from the bitter-sweet ecstasy of Mao, and the intense love that many Chinese felt towards him during his life, along with the highly conflicted feelings they now have when confronted with increasing evidence of the terrifying costs of many of the campaigns he inspired and tolerated. A sledgehammer attack on Mao is unlikely to be helpful. He remains a contradictory and complex figure whom historians inside and outside China will be wrestling with for decades, if not centuries. But for those who invoke his name in the China of Xi Jinping, as this essay has tried to make clear, there are no easy narratives or frameworks that he falls into.

Broadly, Maoists who exist today divide into three groups. The first, and the most problematic, are those who appeal to Mao as a great nationalist icon, a representative of a strong, vibrant China that would no longer be pushed around, a restorer of the country’s dignity who could tell the rest of the world to leave China alone to do its own thing. This group of Maoists aim for the same kind of emotional mobilisation and appeal as provocateurs anywhere. They love the Chairman’s genius at image manipulation and his ability to speak directly to the rural grassroots of the country. For this group, Mao is the ultimate standard of those who tell the West with its bullying, manipulative, treacherous track record towards China, to leave them alone and respect them. Those around Utopia are typical of this group.

Those in the second group are more ideological and have firm ideas about the role of the state and the command economy. For them, the real issue is the galloping inequality in China since reform, with the very people the revolution of 1949 was meant to serve – farmers, the proletariat and the underclass – being pushed even deeper into debt and deprivation, their social welfare decimated, as the state has disappeared from people’s lives and left Chinese to fend for themselves. For this group, of which there are representatives right at the top of the Communist Party, the core mission is to support the role of the State and the Communist party’s political guidance in that. For this group the reformist language of someone like Wen Jiabao and his desire to liberalise the economy is even more of an anathema.

The third group of Maoists contains those with a more political mission. For them, Maoist Communism has been a source of unity and strength for the Party and without the CPC China would be disunited and weak. The CPC therefore must maintain the unique role it had in society under Mao and not lose sight of its original political mission, to create a rich, strong, socialist country, a country where socialism serves China’s mission to be stable and modern, but with the Party at the centre of this, its monopoly on power still uncontested. The political Maoists mix some of the elements of nationalism and ideology, but their focus is more Leninist in the end – without control of power the Party is nothing, and without the Party China will fail.

For all their differences, there is one thing that the Maoists of modern China, whether they be supporters of Bo Xilai, or radical grassroots figures who support the Cultural Revolution, have in common - a desire to invoke the historic capital of the Great Helmsman and derive legitimacy from him. Despite all the changes in China over the last decades, this at least has remained the same. Mao remains as elusive a figure to really pin down now as he was during his lifetime. During the Cultural Revolution, the Red Guard groups and members of the political elite who fought so hard to claim they, and they alone, represented his views and were acting according to his stipulations, differ little from the myriad of ‘Maoists’ that exists now, loudly claiming to be the real heirs of his influence. For outsiders, however, the spectrum that they cover, from those who assert they are supportive of true democracy, to those who want a stronger dictatorship of the proletariat, to those who want more equality in society and greater social justice, remains bewildering. Mao’s divisiveness and contentiousness remain decades after his death, and his living legacy confirms that he will continue to be as problematic a figure in the future as he proved to be when he was alive. On that alone, most people will agree.