

Introduction

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Here we are in the twenty-first century, among the shipwrecks of utopian voyages, with faded maps to places that no longer exist. Maoist China seems like one such place, with its dreams, aspirations, and terrors, erased under the shimmering miracle of capitalist development. But contemporary China is also a place of state-backed exploitation of labour that produces cheap commodities for global markets, including the electronic goods that have become the prostheses of modern life. The language of communism and class struggle has long been relegated to the past. When discussions of the staggering inequalities of wealth, corruption, and other adverse consequences of post-Maoist capitalism gain momentum, they are censored. Moreover, to read Marx and debate the legacy of Maoism in China is not permitted outside of highly circumscribed official channels—recently, it has even led to the repression and harassment of idealistic students who took Maoism at its word. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) carefully guards its legacy and vocabulary of legitimation. Against what it labels as ‘historical nihilism’ (*lishi xuwuzhuyi*)—that is to say, the rogue circulation of concepts with the potential to inspire and incite new ways of being in the world—it presents a story of China’s triumph under CCP rule.

This edited volume argues that there is much we can learn by revisiting the complicated and contested legacies of Chinese communism. The dogmatic reification of Chinese communism in China, and its Cold War vilification in liberal democracies, makes this critical excavation all the more necessary. We refer to Chinese communism in the volume’s title, and not to Maoism, because we want to acknowledge that emancipatory ideas in Chinese thought have always been collectively produced. These ideas are the result of countless energetic debates that have taken place in different times and places in China, across the twentieth century and since. It is precisely because of the massive influence Mao has exerted over political thought and discourse in modern China that we must remind ourselves all the more not to confine the ideas, aspirations, and

promises of Chinese communism to an individual or a time. In this volume, Maoism transcends Mao and refers to new ways of thinking, speaking, and practicing politics that involved the participation of hundreds of millions of people. And as is well known, Mao did not author all of the texts signed in his name. Maoism was the shape Chinese communism took for a time, without the two ever fully coinciding.

This book engages with the idea of communism as it was imagined, promoted, preached, and practiced during China's 'revolutionary century'—encompassing the decades from the 1910s (which culminated in the May Fourth Movement of 1919 and led to the establishment of the CCP in 1921) to the onset of the Reform and Opening Up era announced in December 1978. The period from 1949 to 1976, during which Mao Zedong led the People's Republic, is a central focus of this book.

When the CCP obtained control of the state in 1949, China had a predominantly agrarian society lacking in developed industry. The political violence of the Republican period was exacerbated by Japan's occupation of the country from 1937 to 1945, and by the ensuing Civil War, which ended with the defeat of the Nationalist Party in 1949. In the 1950s, China was reliant on Soviet bureaucratic communism, as the fledgling People's Republic struggled to develop economically in the hostile environment of the Cold War. What came to be known as Maoism can be understood as a conceptual vocabulary and way of thinking about, and putting into practice, the idea of communism in the conditions inherited and navigated by the Communist Party during this stretch of time. Responding to its context, Maoism was not an abstract doctrine, but a living body of 'thought' (*sixiang*) requiring the deployment of theory in practice, and the reformulation of theory based on the lessons generated by practice. In its attempt to translate and adapt Marxist doctrine to rapidly changing Chinese contexts, Maoism invented new ways of thinking and practising politics—of being political—which circulated far beyond China's borders.

People have not stopped trying to enlist Mao's discourse for their own cause—to selectively cite, interpret, and invoke Mao. Perhaps the most obvious example of a selective reading of Maoism is Deng Xiaoping's historical conclusion that Mao was 70 percent correct and 30 percent wrong (a verdict that mirrors Mao's assessment of Stalin). In the new era ushered in by Deng after 1978, the Party was unable to reconcile the bifurcated image of Mao implied by this 70 to 30 split. On the one hand, Mao was to be revered as the founding father of the People's Republic. That his embalmed corpse has been carefully maintained and displayed in a mausoleum on Tiananmen Square is indicative of his ancestral significance for the post-Maoist Party. Indeed, people are daily reminded of Mao as his visage now appears on Chinese banknotes (and has done so since 1999). On the other hand, post-Maoist Party leaders in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s also allowed some public space for critical discussions of the Cultural Revolution. Thus, Mao found representation as the provocateur/saboteur who during the Cultural Revolution nearly destroyed the CCP through his injunction to the people to 'bombard the headquarters.' To date, however, the Communist Party has proven unable to monopolise how Mao is remembered, as he continues to lead countless afterlives in China and abroad.¹ As an iconic image, Mao has become a contradictory symbol. For his admirers, he stands for mass emancipation, while for his detractors he is a cause of mass deaths. Mao has also become a pop culture icon rendered in bright colours on Warhol's silkscreens and even tattooed on the boxer Mike Tyson's

right bicep. Others celebrate Mao as a signifier of youthful rebellion. In the lyrics of American Indie band The Mountain Goats: 'Put on your Chairman Mao coat, and let me clear my throat, let's turn this whole town upside down, and shake it 'til the coins come falling out of its pocket.' A Mao for all seasons.

New Interpretive Possibilities

This book seeks to open up interpretive possibilities regarding the Chinese Revolution as it was envisaged by the Chinese communists. Put simply, they sought to create a new world by destroying an old one. Under Mao's leadership, the CCP set about establishing new modes of organising political, economic, social, and cultural life down to the minute details of people's habits of perception and manners of speaking. How China's revolutionary century is viewed depends to a large degree on one's mode of relation to it: does one look back on it with nostalgia, horror, or ambivalence? Does one turn to it out of political fidelity, historical curiosity, or morbid fascination? To approach the Chinese Revolution is to stand in relation to it, and to *feel something toward it*.

As an edited volume, each author in the book takes up the question of Chinese communism from their own perspective and in their own idiom. Even the editors of the volume constantly argue with each other about the legacy of the Mao era. We suggest that this is one of the book's strengths. But like every other book, whether edited or single-authored, this volume is constructed on the basis of parameters of inclusion and exclusion. As editors, we are interested in critical perspectives on the Maoist legacy that *take it seriously as a revolutionary project*. This criterion still leaves a wide room for disagreement, but rules out perspectives on Maoism that are presumptively dismissive and ideologically entrenched in Cold War mentalities that pass themselves off as objective social science.

Inspiration for the volume comes from a range of positions along the political spectrum with regard to Mao's legacy: from Simon Leys at one end to Alain Badiou at the other. Simon Leys—the literary alias of the late Pierre Ryckmans—was one of the earliest and most stringent critics of the Cultural Revolution, an attitude that exposed him to vicious attacks by other scholars throughout the 1970s. To cite only a brief passage from his much-discussed 1974 book *Chinese Shadows*:

If the destruction of the entire legacy of China's traditional culture was the price to pay to insure the success of the revolution, I would forgive all the iconoclasm, I would support them with enthusiasm! What makes the Maoist vandalism so odious and so pathetic is not that it is irreparably mutilating an ancient civilisation, but rather that by doing so it gives itself an alibi for not grappling with the true revolutionary tasks. The extent of their depredations gives Maoists the cheap illusion that they have done a great deal; they persuade themselves that they can rid themselves of the past by attacking its material manifestations; but in fact they remain its slaves, bound the more tightly because they refuse to realise the effect of the old traditions within their revolution.²

Leys' unsparing condemnation of Maoist communism can be understood as a mode of *taking the revolution at its own word*. In Leys' despair at the methods used by the Maoists we can nonetheless discern a disappointment in which a trace of the communist promise still lingers.

Despair and disappointment do not exhaust the range of reactions that the Cultural Revolution has elicited. Many authors have also tried to see fragile revolutionary gains that were made and that were then undone by countertendencies within the dynamic process of the Revolution's unfolding. For Alain Badiou, the Cultural Revolution marks the end of a sequence of the revolutionary process: a Leninist Party organisation, formed as a vehicle of emancipation, descends into extreme violence and chaos in a failed transition of power from the hands of the Party bureaucracy into the hands of the people. The impasse that has resulted opens up a space of critical questioning. As Badiou puts it: 'What problems do we and Mao still have in common? In what sense is a reading of his texts anything more than an exercise in nostalgia or critique? To what extent can Mao's texts still be a point of reference in our search for a new direction for emancipatory politics ... ?'³ Badiou's questions presuppose that we are inescapably inheritors of emancipatory traditions with uncertain futures.

There is no reason why one cannot feel both inspired and disgusted by different aspects of Maoism. The legacies of the Chinese Revolution are far-reaching and entwined, impossible to unknot into a verdict of 'for' or 'against,' no matter how tempting it is to simplify the world into reassuring positions. Rather than discuss Mao from a given position, or even enlist Mao to support a given argument, this volume seeks to generate an open-ended project of Chinese communism that allows Mao's legacy to be questioned from different interpretive possibilities.

The book contains chapters by more than 50 China scholars from different disciplines and continents. Each chapter discusses a concept or practice from the Mao era, what it signified in its historical context, and what has become of it since. The authors each respond to the legacy of Maoism in their own way, to consider what lessons Chinese communism can offer today and whether there is a future for the egalitarian politics that communism once promised. The book is structured to encourage a diversity of views. Instead of grouping the essays according to loosely framed thematic sections, we opted for a lexicon-style approach, listing the contributions in alphabetical order. We hope that this mode of organisation will invite readers to find their own theoretical paths among the various chapters and make sense of it according to their own needs.

Reinvention

There is an unspoken pressure that any hint of a positive regard for Maoism must be qualified by an acknowledgment of its violence and the untimely deaths of millions of people. This obligatory self-criticism dooms communism to appear as a discredited ideology rather than as an arc of possibilities yet to be more fully imagined, let alone realised. As Jodi Dean argues: 'Only by supposing such an impossible, invariant, constant, unchanging communism can the appeal to history turn a single instance into a damning example of the failed and dangerous communist experience.'⁴ We typically do not hear people say that Christianity is solely reducible to the crusades, and American liberalism to the lynching of black people in the South. But the insistence

that communism *is* the violent excesses of its first attempts at realisation, which emerged under improbable and embattled conditions, is often asserted by detractors of communist thought as an article of blind faith.

So how do we move out of the present impasse of living amidst a dysfunctional capitalism that will sooner or later destroy the planet, insofar as we frequently find ourselves being ideologically discouraged from imagining a way out of capitalism? Several of today's prominent philosophers have addressed how our political imaginaries are being held hostage to discursive blackmail in which the threat of totalitarianism always has the final word.⁵ But the act of registering this fact also means that we must no longer submit to it: that we recognise the urgent need to reinvent egalitarian organisations of political and economic life. The present volume is interested in fostering this endeavour and is guided by numerous authors who have sought to imagine and theorise life beyond capitalism.

Thus, we refuse to be confined to discussing communism under Mao as a case of being either *for* or *against* it. This way of structuring things is a setup. You are either *for Mao* and are blamed for ignoring the atrocities that occurred under his name, or you are *against Mao* and already on the side of the capitalists and reactionaries. Kristen Ghodsee and Scott Sehon have shown that anti-communist arguments generally rest on the hidden premise that if any ideology 'did many horrible things, then that ideology should be rejected.'⁶ Their response is not to deny the atrocities committed in the name of communism but to extend the same logic to all ideologies, including capitalism. Nothing in Ghodsee and Sehon's argument requires countenancing the wanton violence of twentieth-century communist regimes. In fact, they suggest quite the opposite: that *leftists should be the most critical of these betrayals*. Their argument helps to level the playing field by allowing us to more clearly see the grip that anti-communism continues to have on our political imaginations and discourses. If one can talk glowingly and reverently of the principles of the Constitution of the United States with the latter's history of slavery and genocide, one should also be able to approach Mao's writing as a dynamic blueprint for political organisation.

Communist afterlives are potentialities as much as they are historical realities. On this point, the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead is illuminating: 'A feeling bears on itself the scars of its birth; it recollects as a subjective emotion its struggle for existence; it retains the impress of what it might have been, but is not ... The actual cannot be reduced to mere matter of fact in divorce from the potential.'⁷ In a communist sense, these potentialities are a free inheritance of thought to anyone who wants to seize and use them.

Difference and Repetition

We hope that this edited volume will become a reference for people seeking to understand contemporary Chinese politics and society. In discussing concepts and practices of the Mao period, each chapter also traces how they have evolved into present governance mentalities and techniques. In the spirit of Maoism as a practice-oriented theory, its components have been reassembled and updated to fit present circumstances and needs. Several Maoist ideas and turns of phrase lacking a place in the present world of capitalist development and social harmony have disappeared from the map (but not

without leaving behind traces and virtualities in the present). Just as it was impossible to reify Maoism in the Mao era, it is even harder to draw a direct line of causality from the Mao era to the present—that is, unless you are the Communist Party and in charge of writing and policing official history and orthodoxy.

Increasingly, scholars in Chinese Studies have argued that it is wrongheaded to see Communist Party governance as having changed entirely in the early 1980s with the advent of Reform and Opening Up. The ostensible break from Maoist political campaigns, ideology, and class struggle was widely celebrated in the international media then, at the expense of heeding the ways in which CCP rule continued to rely on institutional practices established under Mao. To see Xi Jinping today as dragging China back to the dark ages of politics and ideology is to reduce China's economic transition to a caricature and to assume, egregiously, that capitalism is ideology-free. We do not need critical theory to unmask the hypocrisy here—even the Chinese government publicly describes market transition as a process of 'engineering' (*gongcheng*) and 'construction' (*jianshe*) in a way that would have made Karl Polanyi blush.⁸ The CCP views the world and everything in it as an artefact of the political. Its guiding documents unabashedly refer to political, economic, cultural, and ecological 'construction' as its main tasks, positing a world of malleable processes rather than fixed categories.

More often than not, anti-communist argumentation presupposes a state-phobic framework—one not shared by most people in China—in which state intervention is perceived as undesirable rather than unavoidable, a violation of individual life, rather than its infrastructure of support. Critics of communism often cherry-pick which instances of state intervention to denounce, and which to dress with pleasant-sounding phrases and justifications. The question of intervention on behalf of whom and in pursuit of what vision is generally given short shrift.

A new vocabulary for the analysis and discussion of Chinese politics is necessary. Since 2017, China's state media and CCP propagandists have been talking up the 'New Era' (*xin shidai*) of Xi Jinping. In Xi's attempt to reestablish Party legitimacy in a postrevolutionary form of ideology that combines Confucian traditions, civilisational pride, and socialist core values, the CCP's language has undergone significant change. Nonetheless, there are distinctive ways in which one-party rule under Xi today remains guided by modes of communicating and governing that developed under Mao. To the extent that the institutional and discursive resources available to Xi and his administration are a direct legacy of the Maoist period, we need a basic 'literacy' in Communist Party discourse to appreciate how the Party-state governs and Chinese citizens experience and negotiate the political realities of China's one-party system. Each chapter in this edited volume contributes to this literacy by offering an interpretive key to how China has become what it is today. That said, the chapters do not add up to a determinable totality. Instead, they trace a fluid set of relations and evolving practices over time.

Message in a Bottle

This volume began as a special issue of the open-access quarterly *Made in China Journal*, of which we are the editors. However, as it took shape, and as more people became involved, the project grew into a full-length book exploring the origins, lives,

and afterlives of the main concepts underpinning Chinese communist thought. It was at this point that we were helped by a generous joint publishing arrangement between ANU Press and Verso Books, which has enabled the book to appear in two formats. It can be downloaded for free and is also available for purchase as a paperback.

The ethos of the *Made in China* project is rooted in accessibility. We are committed to open-access publication for the simple reason that not everyone can afford to purchase books from commercial academic publishers. The business model of academic publishing, which involves the repackaging and sale of publicly funded research, has reached a critical juncture in an increasingly competitive market. The publishing model we have chosen indicates that we are both in and outside this market. Moreover, we felt compelled to think outside the confines of traditional academic publishing as we want our readers to imagine new political possibilities beyond the capitalism we know.

Our modest hope is that the volume will help to revive the reading public's interest in what was one of the twentieth century's most radical, and fraught, undertakings to transform and emancipate humanity. We do this in the belief that, as the twenty-first century portends climate catastrophe, a resurgence in authoritarianism, and obscene disparities of wealth, a revival of the communist perspective, freed from any dogmatism, is necessary to fight for what remains of the world we hold in common.





Xing Danwen, Born With the Cultural Revolution (1995)

The world is yours, as well as ours, but in the last analysis, it is yours.
You young people, full of vigour and vitality, are in the bloom of life, like the
sun at eight or nine in the morning. Our hope is placed on you. The world
belongs to you. China's future belongs to you.

Mao Zedong, 'Talk at a Meeting with Chinese Students
and Trainees in Moscow,' 17 November 1957

This text is taken from *Afterlives of Chinese Communism: Political Concepts from Mao to Xi*, edited by Christian Sorace, Ivan Franceschini and Nicholas Loubere, published 2019 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.