The Legacy of Mao Zedong

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Today, China possesses one of the fastest growing capitalist economies in the world, centered on manufacturing and exportation. Yet, plastered on knickknacks, posters, and currency all around China is the face of Mao Zedong, one of the most passionate anti-capitalists in history. Mao Zedong, who lived from 1893 to 1976, was the Chairman of the Communist Party of China. Inspired by his Marxist-Leninist beliefs, Mao was instrumental in the Communist Party’s rise to power, its victory over the nationalist Kuomintang party and the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) on October 1, 1949. As Chairman of the PRC, he made various economic, social, and political reforms which focused on class struggle and freeing the enormous peasant population from exploitation and poverty. Thus, he created a socialist economy by erasing all capitalistic institutions.

However, Mao embraced the notion of a fully industrialized and modern China. His 1958 Great Leap Forward, an economic program to rapidly industrialize China, promoted high production expectations but resulted in mass starvation. Mao then handed the Chairmanship over to Deng Xiaoping and Liu Shaoqi, who reintroduced the market system to the Chinese economy. In 1966 Mao turned his attention to a new initiative: the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, a movement to obliterate ideological deviance. So when he died in 1976, he left a complicated legacy.

Today, Mao’s legacy encompasses both his actions and his egalitarian ideals, leaving Chinese people divided by generation in their views of their former leader. In this study I will first discuss how many members of the older generation who remember Mao view him positively in the context of China’s struggle against Japanese imperialism, nationalism, and economic inequality. Second, I will reveal how the Communist Par-

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ty continues to revere Mao as a godlike figure by separating his actions from “Mao Thought,” which contributes to Mao’s widespread presence in Chinese society. Third, I will illustrate how this leads many young people to feel alienated by the Communist Party, as they are growing up in a more global context, aware of the outside world.

Many older Chinese view Mao positively for his contributions to China’s freedom from Japanese imperialism and desolation under the Kuomintang government, the ruling party in China from 1919 through the civil war in the 1940’s. As Mao said in his report to Communist Party activists in 1935 in the height of Japanese invasion of northern China, the Communist Party’s goal is to “form a broad revolutionary national united front” in which both the “petty bourgeoisie” and “proletariat” must join together.\(^1\) Mao emphasized nationalism as a uniting method for the Chinese people in gaining back their territory. In addition, Mao stated that the Communist Party and the Red Army would be instrumental in China’s future “anti-Japanese government and army, capable of preventing the Japanese imperialists and Chiang Kai-shek from carrying through their policy of disrupting this united front.”\(^2\) Mao used nationalism to create a communal struggle in China, both against Japan and the Kuomintang, leading many Chinese to fight for the Communist Party. Mao’s use of nationalism to bring about the CCP’s rise to power has remained in China today in the people’s strong reverence for the country’s leaders. In a 2013 *Global Times* poll in China, “nearly 90 percent of respondents believe the greatest merit of Mao . . . is founding an independent nation through revolution.”\(^3\) Older people who experienced Japanese subjugation are more grateful for Mao because they recognize the freedom he brought to China through revolution. As Zheng Xiangyu, a high school student from Peking University in Beijing China, describes, many older members of society, specifically those born “around 1940 and 1950 appreciate Mao because of the establishment of PRC and the propaganda following that” but those born in “1980 and 1990 don’t appreciate him,” especially those who “accept some western education.”\(^4\) The younger generation grew up in an already independent China, so they associate Mao with his negative actions.
Many people argue that Mao’s economic policies captured the egalitarian spirit of his rule. As Mao was devoted to the issue of class struggle, he despised the capitalist system under Chiang Kai-shek for its power in dividing people into socio-economic classes. Mao sought to take power away from the bourgeoisie, the wealthy business owners. He stripped landlords of their property, and divided the land into large communes where the peasants labored. Mao strongly emphasized how he represented the proletariat in his rule, stating that “however active the leading group may be, its activity will amount to fruitless effort by a handful of people unless combined with the activity of the masses.”

While Marx’s “dictatorship of the proletariat” implied that the proletarian masses should be the true leaders of a nation, Mao interpreted this phrase to mean that the nation’s ruler should be a dictator in the name of the proletariat, so he took ultimate power. Mao sought to connect with the rural peasantry to help free them from exploitation of the upper class. According to Li Rui, one of Mao’s secretaries, in order to achieve this connection with the peasantry, Mao “put on a straw hat, straw sandals, a coarse jacket, and short pants,” dressing like the farmers. Before the Great Leap Forward, “until the late 1950’s [Mao] spent six months of every year touring the countryside.” In doing so, he attempted to comprehend the conditions of the masses to truly embody a dictator in the name of the proletariat. For example, “to understand the conditions among rail workers on the YueHan line, he spent several days in a teahouse...drinking tea with the workers.” According to Zhang Binggui, a clerk at a candy store in Beijing, Zhang “was essentially a slave, not a human being, before liberation” under Mao. Zhang notes that under Kuomintang rule, he “[worked] 16 or 17 hours a day, with never enough rest or enough money or enough food,” but “now [he has] security and enough to take care of [his] family.” Coming from a background of poverty, Zhang appreciates how Mao’s egalitarian reforms provided him the security of basic necessities that were not available in pre-communist China.

Economically, Mao remained connected with the people until the Great Leap Forward. Starting in the mid 1950’s, “Mao believed that the selfless, socialist enthusiasm of the people could accelerate the pace of eco-
nomic development to a level higher than any economy had previously achieved.”¹¹ Some may argue that Mao relinquished his value of egalitarian and came to crave power through a globally dominant economy more than the betterment of the rural poor’s working conditions. By 1957, “all enterprises were under state control, as most private commercial activity was outlawed and suppressed,” which allowed Mao to gain political power in controlling the economy.¹² A great amount of the output produced by the peasants contributed to the government’s investment into heavy industry. In order to sustain this industry, the government’s expectations for agricultural output were dramatically increased, and could not be fulfilled especially in the harsh winters following 1957. In fact, “grain output fell in 1959 and in 1960 to a level 25 percent below production in 1958, but state acquisitions of grain jumped almost 40 percent in 1959, leaving many communes without enough food to get through the winter.”¹³ The government’s detachment from the laborers demonstrated by its unrealistic expectations for production caused even greater levels of poverty and famine than China experienced previously. By stripping ‘experts’ of their roles in society, the CCP had to take leadership in areas where they were not qualified. For example, Mao instituted the Great Sparrow Campaign where he required all peasants to kill sparrows that were eating grain.¹⁴ As Mao was not an expert in agriculture, this backfired, and the locusts that the sparrows normally ate obliterated the grain. In the famine that spread through the countryside, “20 to 30 million people” died.¹⁵ Thus, many people still resent Mao for his destruction of the Chinese economy, believing that the widespread poverty and starvation Mao brought to the Chinese masses overshadows the egalitarian goals of his socialist economic policies.

The modern economic system in China has exposed a generational divide in people’s views of Mao’s economic policies. Currently, China has drifted away from Mao’s economic plan, increasing exportation and deregulation of the economy. This new system has brought prosperity to China; the “[GDP] quadrupled between 1980 and 2000.”¹⁶ This has enabled Chinese citizens to increase personal spending on consumer items, thus boosting their sense of individuality and personal freedom.
Many members of the younger generation, who have only experienced this modern system, therefore see capitalism as superior in providing people personal freedom. However members of the older generation recognize that workers today do not receive some of the same benefits as those did under Mao. For example, under the old system, “workers did not have to pay for medical care or put money into pension funds” and they “were assigned positions and then could not be fired.” As Zhang, the clerk from Beijing, echoed in his statements, Mao’s socialist system provided job security and stability for the future, whereas today the future for many workers is unknown. Zhang reflects how the “600 million Chinese born since 1949…have wearied of the self-sacrifice demanded by the party and now are impatient to sample the freedom and material success available in the West.”

Zhang argues that those who did not experience the “bitter past” before Mao’s rule cannot understand the freedom Mao brought to many impoverished Chinese; the younger generation sees freedom through a Western capitalist lens rather than a Maoist lens. For example, 76 percent of China’s population today believes that a free market is a superior economic system even if it brings inequality and “85 percent of the public says young people will be better off financially than their parents.” The current society, especially the younger generation who grew up in a capitalistic society has come to value the free market and benefits of a booming economy.

While many younger Chinese aspire to the freedoms of the Western world, many older generation Chinese are nostalgic for the time when Mao ruled. Mao opposed the individual freedoms that coincided with capitalism. Instead, he favored benefitting the group as a whole, and advancing the working class as a unit towards freedom. Liu Yanhan, an ordinary 59-year-old man who collects Mao memorabilia, explained the faults of the modern capitalistic economy in China, noting how “there is a huge rich-poor gap, corruption, moral degradation, drug addiction, prostitution—it’s a mess. They need to relearn from Mao to rectify these poisonous things.” Like many other members of the older generation, Liu believes that capitalism has corrupted China, and he longs for an economy that reflects Mao’s egalitarian class ideals. Leftist members of the older generation believe that in this old society, “people
were more equal and many things, including basic social services, were free or subsidized.\textsuperscript{21} Guo Qinghua, a 46-year-old former cleaner “who has been repeatedly detained for petitioning the government over her dismissal by a former employer” reflects that “Society used to be fairer under Mao. He provided the poor with housing and food...Deng abandoned us, but Mao never did.”\textsuperscript{22} Guo feels connected to Mao; she believes that Mao truly represented the working class and fought for their social and economic equality. Similarly, Wang Yanjuan, a 50-year-old woman from Shenyang China visiting Mao’s tomb with her mother in Beijing, explains, “For us, Mao Zedong is the founder of our country. We deeply admire him. He lives in our hearts...in his day, education was free.” Many older people cherish Mao for bringing true freedom to China through providing all citizens necessities such as education and health care.\textsuperscript{23} These people praise Mao because they see socialism as a superior economic system that erodes class divisions and strives for the equality of all people.

Even though many members of the older generation favor Mao’s economic policies, Chinese citizens of all ages criticize Mao’s actions during the Cultural Revolution. The Cultural Revolution, which began in 1966, was a radical movement where Mao turned against the leaders of the PRC, Deng and Liu, to eliminate all members of society who were not ideologically correct. Mao expressed that the “Communist Party of China was becoming a ‘new class,’ saturated with ‘bourgeois’ values of privilege, status, and comfort rather than the asceticism of self-sacrifice and devotion to the common good.” Many argue however that the Cultural Revolution was simply Mao’s attempt to usurp Deng and Liu on his “quest for revolutionary immortality” rather than a mission to protect the common good.\textsuperscript{24} During the Cultural Revolution, Mao attacked all capitalistic entities, imprisoning and exiling many experts from society. An anonymous musician from Beijing “whose father was purged by Mao and whose family spent years in a remote village” refutes the claim that Mao’s actions in the Cultural Revolution were “mistakes,” saying that they were instead “crimes against humanity.”\textsuperscript{25} In addition, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took numerous children to be trained as members of Mao’s army, called the Red Guard. For example, Ping Fu, an American tech entrepreneur and author of the memoir
**Bend, Not Break,** was taken from her home at age eight and brought to a “government-run dormitory in Nanjing, China, where she lived for nearly a decade. There, she was brainwashed, starved, tortured and gang raped, becoming a factory worker.”

In her memoir, Ping details the atrocities she faced during the Cultural Revolution, being one of many authors who partook in “‘scar’ literature and writings of historical reflection...[seeking] meaning and spiritual healing after the traumas of the Maoist era.”

Many artists, authors, musicians, and filmmakers who experienced hardship in the Cultural Revolution were able to express themselves after Mao’s death, coloring Mao as a cruel leader who inflicted much pain and destruction on the Chinese population. Much of this counteractive artistic expression has combined elements of Chinese art with Western art, such as compositions combining “Western orchestration with Chinese instruments,” revealing how people who are disillusioned by Chinese government may turn to Western culture and government for refuge.

The responses of many Chinese artists reveal a looking outward, in response to the fierce nationalism and inward orientation of Mao’s China.

Despite Mao’s unpopularity surrounding the Cultural Revolution, the current Communist Party of China continues to praise Mao by focusing on his positive actions. The CCP does not agree with Mao’s actions in the Cultural Revolution, but says that “his contributions to the Chinese Revolution far outweigh his mistakes, and his immense contributions are immortal.”

The CCP separates Mao’s negative actions from “Mao Zedong Thought,” which is the positive “crystallization of the collective wisdom of the CCP.” Thus, Mao embodies the egalitarian, nationalist attitude that the CCP endorses, leaving Mao’s legacy a symbol of ideal communism in China. Mao’s memorial speech given by Hua Kuo-Feng similarly names Mao an “immortal” symbol of communism in China, connecting him with all Chinese citizens in declaring that the “Chinese people” and “progressive mankind all deeply mourn the death of Chairman Mao [and]‘trust and esteem Chairman Mao from the bottom of their hearts.”

By saying that any progressive member of society reveres Mao, the CCP welded Mao into a godly, universal symbol of progression. The immortalization of Mao may partly be credited to the Confucian value of reverence for a leader and respect for the superior, even in
death. Confucianism is often questioned as a religion because of Confucius’s emphasis on worship for elders and leaders; the CCP’s worshiping of Mao emanates from this Confucian value.\textsuperscript{32}

The current government not only vocally supports the ideas of Mao, but it also uses propaganda and censorship to protect his legacy. In her memoir, \textit{Red Scarf Girl}, Ji-Li Jiang, a Chinese woman whose family suffered during the Cultural Revolution, describes the censorship and propaganda the government used to deceive the people from recognizing Mao’s abuses: “To us Chairman Mao was God. He controlled everything we read, everything we heard, and everything we learned in school.”\textsuperscript{33} She explains that her family did not hate Mao because “[they] were all brainwashed.”\textsuperscript{34} In this way, Mao played a large role in controlling the outcome of his own legacy; by brainwashing his people, he dictated their perceptions of him until he died. In continuing this censorship, the current CCP perpetuates Mao’s self-created legacy. The current Party “sanctioned Web sites, school textbooks and the official media make little or no mention of controversial Mao policies like the Great Leap Forward that cost millions of Chinese lives”\textsuperscript{35} By censoring information and public discussion, the government preserves Mao’s legacy as untainted and purely ideological, allowing Mao Zedong Thought to prevail. The current government still possesses one dictatorial leader, and through censorship of information about foreign governments, the CCP retains the central power that Mao held.

With the rise of Western education and exposure, the younger generation has begun to resist Mao and perceive him more negatively. Mao focused heavily on nationalism and protecting China, due to the context of long-term exploitation from Japan. However, as Zhou Yan, a high school student from the Peking University in Beijing China expresses, “many people in China today are so passionate about their nation that they ignore any mistakes China makes, and that’s dangerous,” which allows many people to fall victim to the starkly positive image of Mao propagated by the CCP.\textsuperscript{36} Zhou says that nationalism is, most importantly, a person’s ability to “be critical” of the nation, not simply his or her love for it.\textsuperscript{37} Many members of the younger generation have gained information that allow them to be critical of the nation. The 2012 World
Values Survey revealed, “Since 2010, China has had more Internet users than any country in the world” and “nearly 83 percent of the country’s Internet users are under the age of 35.” The younger generation therefore has more access to ideas of the rest of the world, and is exposed to other forms of governance as well as alternate perceptions of Mao. Additionally, the survey shows that “more than 75 percent of Chinese age 29 and younger believe that ‘having a democratic political system’ is important;” the younger generation values the western idea of democracy and individual liberty. In 1989, many young Chinese gathered in Tiananmen Square to partake in pro-democracy revolts, and today younger Chinese “are more than twice as likely as their elders to sign a petition, join a boycott, join a strike, [and] attend a peaceful demonstration.” Zhou Yan reflects that her classmates are easily able to dismiss the lingering propaganda about Mao, but she does acknowledge the CCP’s role in regarding Mao as a heroic figure. In a 2013 Global Times survey, “those respondents aged from 18 to 29 were most likely to believe Mao’s era still has an influence today, with figures of 96 percent.” Many members of the younger generation are more aware of Mao’s influence and prevalence in society, as they possess opposing values of democracy and capitalism.

Mao’s propaganda-centered presence continues to penetrate everyday life in China. Mao propaganda can be found “in art, ornaments, collectibles, postcards and flea markets.” Restaurants even compete to serve the best pork dish that Mao loved. In souvenir shops all around China, “visitors can haggle for a range of Mao posters, Mao ‘Aristocrat’ lighters, Mao plaques, statues, pens, bracelets, stamps, watches, and bags.” This propaganda does not just remain from the Cultural Revolution, when all art was strictly political and stores had to hang posters praising Mao. Instead, these collectors’ items are mostly new, reflecting the reverence that many older Chinese citizens still have for their former leader. For example, in 1968, Mao received mangoes as a gift from a foreign leader and asked that mangoes be distributed to the Chinese workers, who saw the fruit “as material proof of a godlike ruler’s love for his subjects, and it was treated with religious awe.” Mangoes were worshiped with fervor during the Cultural Revolution, and were present in many propaganda posters at the time as seen in Figure 1. Still today,
mangoes are holy fruits, displayed on cigarette cases (Figure 3), teacups (Figure 2), and more. Through this current day propaganda, Mao remains a god-like figure in the eyes of the people who represents the egalitarian ideals of communism.

Mao’s complicated legacy has separated the older generation and the CCP, who continue to revere Mao for his egalitarian ideals, from the younger generation, which has gained access to global resources and come to resent Mao for his actions. In the context of Japanese imperialism and widespread desolation under Kuomintang rule, many older Chinese people respect Mao for uniting China as an independent nation. The older generation also supports Mao’s socialist economy aiming to better the conditions of the rural peasantry. However, in the Great Leap Forward, Mao’s policies led to great famine, killing millions of workers, leading many people to resent the means by which Mao carried out his goals. Furthermore, Mao’s legacy appears negative due to his actions in the Cultural Revolution, where he purged and imprisoned many members of society. The current CCP however continues to endorse Mao, focusing on “Mao Zedong Thought” and avoids his faults through censorship. Mao is still present today through the propaganda that celebrates him. Younger Chinese citizens however have begun to learn more about the Western world and resist Mao’s presence and the government’s censorship; they have not dismissed his actions in the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution. The selective method in which much of the Chinese population and government has chosen to remember Mao reveals how significant leaders, even after they die, hold an immense power over people. Even though more than 40 million people died as a result of Mao’s policies or killings, a great amount of the Chinese population still reveres him, and remains “brainwashed” by his ideals. Like leaders such as Hassan Rouhani in Iran and Kim Jong-un in North Korea, Mao was able to completely overpower his people and prevent them from learning about the outside world. It was only after Mao’s death that Chinese people could begin to immerse themselves in the practices of other cultures.
Appendix

Figure 1

Figure 2
Notes


2. Ibid.


4. Zheng Xiangyu, e-mail interview by the author, Beijing, China, December 6, 2014.


10. Ibid.

11. Robert André LaFluer, China (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2003), 92.

12. LaFleur, China, 89.

13. LaFleur, China, 92-93.


15. Ibid.


17. Ibid.


23. Tatlow, “Mao’s Legacy Still Divides.”


33. Ibid.


36. Zhou Yan, e-mail interview by the author, Beijing, China, December 6, 2014

37. Ibid.


39. Ibid.

40. Ibid.

41. Yan, e-mail interview by the author.

42. Yiwei, “85% Say Mao’s Merits.”

44. Ibid.


47. “The Power of Mao.”


50. Ibid.

51. Ibid.

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