The chairman will see you now

The myth and thinking of Mao Zedong still influence his country and the world

Maoism: A Global History. By Julia Lovell.

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henamesofthe20thcentury’sbloodi-

estdictatorsaresynonymouswithevil.

Hitler, Pol Pot, Stalin: even to joke about

themisinpoortaste.Yetonetyrant’sname

has a milder impact. Indeed, many still re-

verehim.Hisfaceisonalmosteverybank-

note in circulation in the world’s second-

largest economy. Thousands of people

queue up daily to see his embalmed body

lying in state in a glass sarcophagus. When

Barack Obama was president, a designer in

China produced an image blending the

despot’s garb with the American’s face and

put it on t-shirts. Many people—including

Western tourists—bought them for their

kitsch appeal. It probably did not occur to

them that they were, in effect, equating

America’s leader with a figure who caused

tens of millions of deaths.

Mao Zedong was always thus: a despot

whose global image was moulded and

adapted without regard to the man he real-

ly was. It floated free of the horrors he set

off—the killings of landlords, the persecu-

tions of intellectuals and the mass starva-

tion that swept the country in the early

1960s. His Little Red Book was as eagerly

read by rebellious students on Western

campuses as it was by insurgents in the de-

veloping world. There was no fashion

shame in wearing a Mao suit. No child has

been reproached for asking who is the most

powerful cat in China. (Chairman Miaow.)

As Julia Lovell of Birkbeck, University of

London, describes in “Maoism: A Global

History”, the abstract chairman inspired

revolutionaries around the world, from the

highlands of Peru to the jungles of Cambo-

dia, from the cafés of Paris to inner-city

America. Mao’s ideology, distilled into a

few pithy epigrams (“to rebel is justified”,

“serve the people” and “bombard the head-

quarters” is all you need to know), helped

foster suffering and mayhem not only in

hisowncountry,butaroundthe world. His

was the thinking behind Pol Pot and his

Cambodian killing fields. It was his perso-

nalitycultthatencouragedanenvious Kim

Il Sung to push his own to similar heights

of absurdity; North Koreans remain in its

terrifyingthralltoday.

ThecultofMaodidnotendwith the an-

archy of the Cultural Revolution in the

1960s and1970s. It has enjoyed a tenacious

afterlifethathasnotreceivedthe attention

itdeserves.AsMsLovellargues, the paucity

of study of Maoism’s global impact is not

only the result of inattention. “It is also a

consequence of post-Mao China’s success

incommunicatingaparticular narrative of

itspast,”shewrites.Mao’simage continues

to be manipulated. It still has a powerful al-

lure in China and elsewhere.

The origins of the legend owe a surpris-

ing amount to an American. Ms Lovell ex-

plores the startling role played by Edgar

Snow in creating the Mao myth more than a

decade before Mao seized power in 1949.

Snow was a journalist who managed to en-

ter the remote north-western area where

Mao and his followers ended up after their

epic Long March to escape the forces of

Chiang Kai-shek. The book he wrote about

the guerrilla base and his meetings with

Mao, “Red Star Over China”, published in

1937, became an international bestseller.

No other journalist had enjoyed such

access. Snow’s description of Mao, then in

his early 40s, as an idealist who wanted to

save China from Chiang’s corrupt autocra-

cy and build a democratic country mes-

merised the world. As Snow put it, Mao’s

aim was to awaken the Chinese “to a belief

in human rights” and to persuade them “to

fight for a life of justice, equality, freedom

and human dignity.” What could be objec-

tionable about that?

Snow’s work, says Ms Lovell, “created

Mao as a national and global political per-

sonality before there was such a thing in

the Chinese Communist Party as Maoism.”

A Chinese translation attracted young,

well-educated urban Chinese to Mao’s

cause. Abroad it became a handbook for

anti-Nazi partisans in Russia, for Huk

guerrillas in the Philippines and for anti-

British revolutionaries in India. It was, says

Ms Lovell, a “core text” for thousands of In-

dians who joined a Maoist insurgency

there that still simmers.

Ms Lovell’s descriptions of these (and

other) global strands of Maoism are well-

researched and colourful. She concludes

her book by examining Mao’s afterlife in

China itself. This is where the creed’s im-

portance is most starkly evident.

Chaos under heaven

After many years during which Mao had

become increasingly marginalised in Chi-

nese political culture, China’s current

leader, Xi Jinping, is trying to re-establish

the late chairman’s authority. He has or-

dered party members to brush up on Mao-

ist ideology. China’s successes during the

recent era of “reform and opening” should

not be used to cast aspersions on the pre-

ceding one under Mao, he insists. In this

way Mr Xi has become a darling of Mao-lov-

ing thinkers in China who have long been

chafing at the party’s drift towards free-

market capitalism. They admire his fond-

ness of a more state-led kind of economy.

This becomes all the more significant

when considering Mr Xi’s foreign policy.

Ms Lovell’s book offers a valuable reminder

that, under Mao, China wanted to be the

leader of a global revolution. Subsequent

Chinese leaders tried to downplay that as-

pect of Maoism—fearful, perhaps, of fuel-

ling Western suspicions of Chinese

communism. Mr Xi, however, has made it

clear that he wants to make China a central

player on the world stage. He says Chinese-

style socialism has been “blazing a new

trail” for other countries. There are echoes

of the past in his words.

For all that, the analogy is difficult to

sustain. Mr Xi is not on a revolutionary

mission. He wants to ensure a global safe

space for Chinese communism, not con-

vert the world to it. He is no supporter of in-

surgencies. He is happy to forge friendly re-

lations with non-communist powers if

they do not challenge his right to rule.

At home Mr Xi uses Maoism as a way of

enforcing party discipline: mouthing the

chairman’s words shows loyalty to the

party he helped create. Mr Xi would not

wish its members to take Maoist ideology

too literally; after all, as Ms Lovell notes,

Mao “possessed a genius” for theories that

justified inconsistency and contradiction.

When “there is great chaos under Heaven,

the situation is excellent,” he said.

Mr Xi does not want Red Guard-type an-

archy of the kind unleashed by Mao be-

cause he fears the party would not survive

it. In many ways he is the antithesis of Mao.

He wants stability at any cost. Yet as Ms

Lovell’s book advises: “Like a dormant vi-

rus, Maoism has demonstrated a tena-

cious, global talent for latency.”