

Book Review: Maoism and Its Complicated Legacy

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Despite its massive length, Julia Lovell's *Maoism: A Global History* doesn't offer us a clear way to understand Maoism and its legacy.

Fifty years ago, a remote Chinese region, Dao County, was caught in the violence of the Cultural Revolution. In some weeks, [thousands were murdered](#). Most victims were bludgeoned to death, their bodies tossed in the rivers. On the other side of the world, a group of Asian-American street youth formed the Red Guard Party, demanded a dignified life for all, and declared, "We realize that only when the oppression of all people is ended can we all be really free." When Black Panther Party leader Elaine Brown [visited Beijing in 1970](#), she noted with surprise, "Old and young would spontaneously give emotional testimonies, like Baptist converts, to the glories of socialism."

Julia Lovell's new book, [Maoism: A Global History](#), tries to explain the quixotic movement that captured the imagination of millions across the world. Despite its title, the volume is not really a "global history" — it is more of a series of vignettes on aspects of Maoism, most of them concentrating on certain regions or countries.

The somewhat disjointed structure results from how the book circumscribes its topic. The first chapter tries to define what Maoism is — a difficult job, given the contradictions in Mao and the movement he led. Consider their attitude toward women's liberation: the young Mao decried the lack of rights of women and called for abolishing arranged marriages. One of the achievements of the Chinese revolution was the 1950 marriage law that enabled women to divorce their husbands and own land. In 1968, Mao declared that "women hold up half the sky." Lovell points out that Mao's presumed feminism helped popularize his ideas. Yet already in the twenties, "radical women had pushed for birth control to become a front-line," but "their male counter-parts buried the question," women remained a [disadvantaged group](#) in society, and Mao's personal treatment of women was abusive.

Lovell considers other examples of contradictory elements gathered under the banner of Maoism, such as a conception of the "vanguard party" as the carrier of truth but also calling for spontaneous revolts from below; nationalist, and at times xenophobic, tendencies (especially during the Cultural Revolution) versus internationalism and the call for global revolution; and so on. Lovell quotes French writer Christophe Bourseiller: "Maoism doesn't exist. It never has done. That, without doubt, explains its success." In other words, Maoism was whatever people wanted it to be.

This means the subject material for the book is very broad, and Lovell goes even further. Included in the topic as well are responses to Maoism — one chapter looks at the genesis of the Western myth of "brainwashing" during the Korean War. The book closes with a chapter on today's China and the lingering influences of Maoist ideology in state and society.

"Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era," for example, has been

recognized by the Chinese Communist Party as part of its doctrine, making the current Chinese president the third leader, after Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, whose name appears there. Lovell includes the cult around Xi Jinping and his theoretical pretensions among the “Mao-ish” elements of present-day China.

With such a broad understanding of the subject, the book obviously has to leave out many things that could fit within it. Lovell writes that she chose to focus on the most relevant episodes, but it isn’t really clear what standards she used. There is, for example, only a passing mention of the Philippines — even though the Communist Party of the Philippines (“guided by Marxism-Leninism-Maoism,” as the book puts it) remains a significant force there — while Mao’s personal behavior is discussed repeatedly.

Mao’s Influence?

Early in the book, Lovell refers to Western tourists in China snapping up copies of the Little Red Book or Mao-emblazoned lighters as souvenirs, while visitors to Germany “would not dream of buying copies of *Mein Kampf*” or collecting Nazi-style kitsch. It’s clear that the author wishes to dispel lingering illusions about Maoist China and positive portrayals of Mao himself. But this is often done in a less than convincing way.

For example, Lovell repeatedly refers to the biography [Mao: The Unknown Story](#) by Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, as well as the memoirs by his personal physician, [The Private Life of Chairman Mao](#). Both books are not particularly reliable accounts, but they do provide a lot of sensationalist tales.

The appeal of such sensationalism is apparent in the treatment of [Aravindan Balakrishnan](#), the abusive cult leader of the British Workers’ Institute of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought. Several pages of the book are dedicated to him (he even gets a photo) — but he is hardly an influential figure or particularly representative of the movement.

At times, the urge to blame everything bad on Maoism overwhelms Lovell’s analysis. The wars between China, Vietnam, and Cambodia in the late ’70s are blamed on the introduction of nationalism into Marxism-Leninism by Maoist and Chinese influences — but those were hardly needed for that. Already under Stalin, hundreds of thousands of Polish, Korean, Iranian, Ukrainian, Estonian people and others were targeted for deportation on the basis of their nationality. The chauvinism of Pol Pot, who signed some of his earliest articles with the pen name “the original Khmer,” pre-dated the Sino-Soviet split.

The attempt to blame the destruction of the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) on Maoist influences is also far-fetched. Lovell argues that the involvement of some of its leaders in the attack on the army leadership in 1965 (which then became the pretext for the following mass murder of over half a million people by the Indonesian army) were inspired by Maoist voluntarism, and even by Mao himself.

Lovell quotes a conversation between PKI leader D. N. Aidit and Mao that took place only weeks before the bloodletting. But one of the sources she quotes comes from the Indonesian military. As such, it is not just unreliable but, in light of the massive propaganda and disinformation campaign of the Indonesian army, it should not be given any credence at all. The other quote is more reliable, and comes by way of Taomo Zhou, an academic who managed to view classified material during, as Zhou put it, “a brief period of unusual access to the archives.” But, in Zhou’s estimation, the Chinese leadership “remained aloof” from Aidit’s plans while “Mao might have been making an oblique suggestion that Aidit should be prepared for both peace talks and armed struggles.”

If the goal is to counter overtly positive ideas about Maoism and the Maoist state, there are better, more substantial examples. There is no doubt that Mao himself authored atrocities and the murder of party members and others. Lovell, for example, discusses party purges in the 1930s and '40s. From mass killings during the Cultural Revolution to abuses in re-education camps like [Jiabiangou](#), there is enough else damning during Mao's rule.

Unfamiliar Aspects

Maoism: A Global History is perhaps best read as a collection of loosely related essays on the impact of Maoism in different regions. In addition to Indonesia and South Asia, the book discusses the influence of Maoist ideas on Western radicals in the 1960s and '70s ("You are old, we are young, Mao Zedong!"), and includes chapters on Peru's Shining Path and the current influence of Maoism in Nepal — the only country where a Maoist party was voted into national government. Lovell is professor of modern Chinese history and literature at Birkbeck College, University of London, and some of the most interesting parts of the book — such as on the worldview of current neo-Maoism in China, or on memories of secret support by the Chinese state for Maoist revolutionaries abroad — are based on original research.

The upside of the wide net the books casts is that it sometimes leads Lovell to explore interesting, relatively unknown aspects of Maoism. One of the first chapters explores the history of the writing of [Red Star Over China](#) by the American journalist Edgar Snow. Published in 1937 during the civil war in China, the book did much to gather international sympathy for the Chinese communists.

Lovell tells the life story of Snow, a former frat boy who moved to New York during the Roaring Twenties with, as he put it, "the firm intention of making a hundred thousand dollars" in advertising before he turned thirty. However, after a few years, he transitioned to journalism, and the adventurous Snow scammed his way to Japan before ending up in China. There, he mingled in radical chic circles and linked up with the Communists through the help of Soong Ching-ling, the wealthy widow of the nationalist leader Sun Yat-sen (and secret party member).

The Chinese Communist Party appreciated the importance of good public relations and arranged for Snow to visit their headquarters. With the help of an interpreter, Snow interviewed leading members, including Mao himself. After Snow transcribed the interviews, the English text was translated into Chinese to be checked and revised, and it was then translated back into English. The result of this process was a book that portrayed Mao and his followers as revolutionary democrats and patriots defending their country against invaders and traitors. The purges were not mentioned — and Snow was probably not aware of them.

Snow had written a book that was both a valuable source of information on a hitherto little-known rebel movement and an advertising masterpiece. In Britain alone, it sold over 100,000 copies, and it would go on to attract readers ranging from German left-wing students to Filipino guerrillas, and even South African leader Nelson Mandela.

Another lesser-known aspect of Maoism that Lovell discusses is the aid given by the Chinese state to revolutionary groups abroad. During the 1960s, the Chinese contended with the Soviet Union for leadership of revolutionary movements in the Third World — not only in terms of ideological influence, but also by giving material aid and training. Such operations were kept secret at the time, and still remain mostly hidden.

Today, the Chinese government talks about the "peaceful rise of China" and demands "respect for the principle of non-interference." The history of the time when the Chinese state was arming and funding revolutionaries to overthrow governments abroad has become an embarrassment. But, as

Lovell shows, especially in her chapter on the failed attempts to foment Maoist movements in Africa, the Chinese state made considerable efforts in this field. By 1975, China was spending 5 percent of its budget on foreign aid. Between 1950 and 1978, China, itself an underdeveloped country, spent an estimated \$24 billion on international aid, 13-15 percent of which went to Africa.

Rummaging Through the Past

For Lovell, Maoism is mostly a thing of the past – with the partial exception of Nepal. The influence of Maoist ideas on today’s Chinese politics is limited. Much more important, of course, is its inheritance of the structure of a one-party state. From its beginning, Maoism, as the expression of the Chinese Revolution, was indeed contradictory. It was a revolution that rescued Chinese independence and brought real social progress to the country. At the same time, from the beginning it was a revolution without democracy, and the one-party regime it produced threw the country into periods of death and destruction.

Abroad, Maoism was not only a banner for movements like the Khmer Rouge or the Shining Path — it also inspired anti-apartheid activists in South Africa, Asian peasants fighting foreign invaders and exploitative landlords, and, to give an example not included in the book, French gay liberation pioneer [Guy Hocquenghem](#).

True, their conceptions of Maoism often had little to do with Chinese realities: Lovell considers the international interpretation of Maoism to often be “distortions.” The German China expert Felix Wemheuer once suggested that the “false theory” of international Maoists might actually be more interesting than the “real Mao.” Still, ideas that can be traced to one version or another of Maoism have become part of the Left’s ideology.

Consider how the idea of base building, originally a military concept, now helps leftists to think about strategies to reconstruct the Left at a time when much of the old infrastructure of dissent has disappeared. And it is no coincidence that in underdeveloped countries, where many people rely not on a wage for income but on informal labor or agriculture for a living, Maoist ideas about “the people” that united all those who are exploited and oppressed against the exploiting classes were more successful than a central focus on the working class.

In the end, whatever its intent, there is a way for the Left to use Lovell’s volume as a reference to better understand our history — even the ugly parts.

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P.S.

Review of Julia Lovell, [Maoism: A Global History](#) (Penguin Random House, 2019).

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