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978-0-521-19367-2 - Mao Cult: Rhetoric and Ritual in China's Cultural Revolution

Daniel Leese

Excerpt

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## Introduction

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Confucian reformer Kang Youwei set out to describe an ideal future world order in his *Book of Great Equality*. Kang envisioned a society in which emotional bonds had been reduced to a minimum. The creation of a global state was to be realized by overcoming the boundaries of nation, class, or gender, even the distinction between man and animal. Marriage was to be replaced by short-term contracts and care for infants and elderly persons was to fall under the duty of specific state institutions. The assignment of work should follow a standard pattern according to age, covering all types of labor within a lifetime. In the age of great equality, there would be no personal property or family structures. The differences between the races would have vanished over time through constant crossbreeding, the white and yellow race having proven their superiority. By eliminating all racial, social, and national segregation, Kang hoped to circumvent the dangers of emotion and irrational behavior, which so far had prevented the rule of peace and harmony in the world.

Among the few things Kang Youwei feared to have a disruptive impact on the state of perfect harmony were both continuing competitiveness among citizens and overt laziness given the privileges of the ideal society. Yet what he feared most was the rise of “exclusive worship” (*du zun*), the building of a cult around a religious or secular leader. This kind of worship would threaten the very foundations of the global state by arousing the passions that the new order had tried to overcome. The worship of powerful leaders bore the danger of throwing the world back into the previous turmoil and was to be prevented at all costs:

[I]f some leaders are idolized, inequalities will gradually return, they will gradually develop into autocratic institutions and slowly lead to strife and murder, until the world relapses into the state of disorder. For that reason, everyone who leads large masses of people and is excessively idolized by

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them must be vigorously opposed, however enlightened or holy he might be, irrespective of his office or profession, and even if it is the leader of a party. For if someone wishes to become emperor, king, prince, or leader in such a time, he sins against the principle of equality and becomes guilty of the most serious breach of morals. For these worst of all crimes, the public council should incarcerate him.<sup>1</sup>

Roughly six decades after Kang Youwei wrote his tractate on the ideal world order, the People's Republic of China was to be found amid the struggles of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. In the name of cherishing CCP Chairman Mao Zedong, countless factions carried out warfare against each other, sometimes with stones and clubs, sometimes with heavy artillery stolen from army units. Ritual modes of worshipping the “great helmsman” of the Chinese Revolution had come to dominate everyday life. These included the “daily reading” (*tiantian du*) of the Little Red Book (termed the “Mao Bible” in the West); confessions of possible thought crimes in front of Mao's portrait; and even physical performances such as the “loyalty dance” (*zhongzi wu*). Without doubt, Kang Youwei's worst fears had come true and China had relapsed into a passionate state of utter disorder and idol worship.

Explanations of the Cultural Revolutionary Mao cult, in China and the West alike, usually refer back to two conversations of Mao Zedong with journalist Edgar Snow that took place shortly before and after the Cultural Revolution's most violent phases. Snow had first visited the communist areas in northern Shaanxi in 1936 and conducted a series of interviews with Mao Zedong that, through their publication in Snow's world famous *Red Star over China*, exerted a tremendous impact on Mao's image in China and the West.<sup>2</sup> Snow presented a highly favorable picture of Mao: “[W]hile everyone knows and respects him, there is – as yet, at least – no ritual of hero-worship built up around him. I never met a Chinese Red who drivelled ‘our-great-leader’ phrases.”<sup>3</sup>

Upon his return to China thirty years later in 1965, Snow witnessed a completely changed situation. He explicitly commented on Mao's

<sup>1</sup> Quoted from Wolfgang Bauer, *China and the Search for Happiness: Recurring Themes in Four Thousand Years of Chinese Cultural History*, translated by Michael Shaw, New York: Seabury Press, 1976, 323.

<sup>2</sup> See Ding Xiaoping, “Fulu: ‘Mao Zedong yinxiang’ jiubian tushu kaozheng suoyin” [Appendix: Verified Index to Old Editions of the “Accounts of Mao Zedong”], in Ding Xiaoping and Fang Jiankang (eds.), *Mao Zedong yinxiang* [Accounts of Mao Zedong], Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2003, 299.

<sup>3</sup> Edgar Snow, *Red Star over China*, London: Victor Gollancz, 1937, 83.

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“immoderate glorification” after having been witness to the staging of the revolutionary epic *The East Is Red* (*Dongfang hong*) in Beijing:

Giant portraits of him now hung in the streets, busts were in every chamber, his books and photographs were everywhere on display to the exclusion of others. In the four-hour revolutionary pageant of dance and song, *The East Is Red*, Mao was the only hero. As a climax of that performance . . . I saw a portrait copied from a photograph taken by myself in 1936, blown up to about thirty feet high.<sup>4</sup>

While attending the Labor Day parade, Snow discussed the subject of the cult again with his Chinese hosts, vice-ministers of foreign affairs Gong Peng and Qiao Guanhua. Their explanations highlighted the popular origins of and demand for the cult. Three thousand years of emperor worship could not be wiped out in an instant because peasant mentalities still lingered behind: “It takes time to make people understand that Chairman Mao is not an emperor or a god but a man who wants the peasants to stand up like men.”<sup>5</sup> Snow’s hosts told him about special guards who had been employed in the early 1950s to prevent peasants from prostrating themselves before Mao’s image at Tiananmen Square, where it had been on display twice a year, on National Day and Labor Day. The level of worship permitted by the authorities should thus be considered negligible given what it might have looked like, if it had not been restrained.

In 1970, Edgar Snow returned one last time to China just as the most chaotic period of the Cultural Revolution had passed. In their discussions, Mao explicitly commented on the publication of Snow’s impressions during the prior visit that had included the portrayal of his burgeoning cult:

[You] say, I am [fostering] a personality cult. Well, you Americans really are [cultivating] a personality cult! Your capital is called Washington. The district in which Washington is located is called Columbia. . . . Disgusting! . . . There will always be people worshipping! If there is no one to worship you, Snow, are you happy then? . . . There will always be some worship of the individual, you have it as well.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Edgar Snow, *The Long Revolution*, New York: Random House, 1972, 68f.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>6</sup> Mao Zedong, “Huijian Sinuo de tanhua jiyao” [Summary of Mao’s Conversations with Snow], 18 December 1970, in Song Yongyi (ed.), *Chinese Cultural Revolution Database* (CD-ROM), Hong Kong: Chinese University Press/Universities Service Centre, 2006.

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Mao in retrospect justified the need for a personality cult at the outset of the Cultural Revolution by claiming that he had been unable to control the party machinery:

At that time I said I did not care about personality cults, yet there even was a necessity for a bit of personality cult. The situation now is not the same anymore; the worship has become excessive, resulting in much formalism. Like those “four greats,” “Great Teacher, Great Leader, Great Supreme [sic] Commander, Great Helmsman” [English in original], annoying! One day these will all be deleted, only keeping the “teacher.”<sup>7</sup>

Mao divided the motifs of the cult supporters into three categories: true believers, opportunists, and fake supporters. He admitted that during the period of anarchy between 1967 and 1968, the distinctions had become hard to discern. While a CCP decision of March 1949 was still being followed, forbidding the naming of cities, streets, and places after political leaders, the Red Guards had invented new forms of worship such as signboards, portraits, and statues, which, according to Mao's description, resisted state control: “This has developed during the past few years, as soon as the Red Guards stirred up trouble and attacked. It was impossible not to conform to it! Otherwise they would say you are against Mao, ‘anti-Mao’!”<sup>8</sup> In his account of the conversation, Snow concluded his observations by underlining the crucial importance of the cult and its manipulation for understanding the Cultural Revolution: “In one sense the whole struggle was over control of the cult and by whom and above all ‘for whom’ the cult was to be utilized.”<sup>9</sup>

#### MODERN PERSONALITY CULTS

The worship of religious or secular leaders in China has not been limited to the twentieth century. The emperor had been worshipped as the Son of Heaven, but besides rituals and ceremonies conducted at the imperial court, the ordinary populace came into little contact with the cult. The emperor did not have temples erected in his name or cities named after him. His legitimacy as a ruler was deeply intertwined with the concept of the Mandate of Heaven, the worship of ancestors, and ritual offerings to various deities that restricted the glorification of the emperor himself. Besides certain taboo words and prostration rules, the cult was confined to a small circle of people in the emperor's immediate surroundings. Yet leader cults in traditional China had not been confined to the court. Within

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Snow, *Long Revolution*, 66.

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the Chinese popular tradition, there are numerous examples of local leaders cultivating excessive personality cults, the most prominent example being the messianic cult of Taiping Heavenly King Hong Xiuquan, who considered himself the incarnation of Jesus's younger brother. Hong was worshipped as the "sun" during the Taiping Rebellion (1853–64) and would inspire later political leaders such as the young Sun Yat-sen.<sup>10</sup>

The main difference between modern and traditional leader cults is not to be observed with regard to the worship of political leaders but rather rests with the cult's legitimacy, intensity, and reach. Unlike the worship of the emperor that was grounded in his capacity as Son of Heaven, the modern personality cults lacked an external or even transcendental source of legitimacy. Modern political leaders had to establish their preeminent status by claiming to represent popular movements or "the people" in general. The advent of mass society with the institutions of the modern state such as schooling, military, and infrastructure exerted a much more profound influence on the life of every citizen, not least by means of mass media. Modern personality cults have therefore been defined as "godlike glorification of a modern political leader with mass media techniques,"<sup>11</sup> and often came to be accompanied by excessive demonstrations of public worship and the emergence of mass-manufactured, standardized cult products. The rise of the competing nationalist and communist movements in China was highly intertwined with state building, literacy campaigns, and the construction of media networks providing the possibilities of centralized communication and the distribution of national symbols. How far these symbols could be disseminated within the public media depended critically on the level of political control, and thus truly national leader cults in China developed only after the Guomindang and the Communists, respectively, consolidated their rule.

The first modern personality cult in China was the cult fostered around Sun Yat-sen as the founding father of New China. Sun during his lifetime already consciously employed his media image to strengthen the claim of representing the Chinese Revolution.<sup>12</sup> The creation of his heroic image

<sup>10</sup> Harold Z. Schiffrin, *Sun Yat-sen and the Origins of the Chinese Revolution*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968, 23.

<sup>11</sup> Jan Plamper, "Introduction. Modern Personality Cults," in Klaus Heller and Jan Plamper (eds.), *Personality Cults in Stalinism – Personenkulte im Stalinismus*, Göttingen: V&R uni-press, 2005, 33.

<sup>12</sup> For a recent Chinese account of the Sun Yat-sen cult, see Chen Yunqian, *Chongbai yu jiyi. Sun Zhongshan zhuhao de jiangou yu chuanbo* [Worship and Memory: The Construction and Propagation of the Political Symbol Sun Zhongshan], Nanjing: Nanjing daxue chubanshe, 2009.

started in 1896 when members of the Chinese legation in London captured Sun. Sun managed to alert his friends secretly about his imprisonment and imminent execution. The dramatic circumstances drew the attention of the British press and soon of media worldwide.<sup>13</sup> By the time Sun Yat-sen was released from prison, he had risen to celebrity status and quickly sought to draw political gains from the media attention. In a short booklet entitled *Kidnapped in London* that was published in January 1897,<sup>14</sup> his unique capabilities were extolled by friends. Flattering articles entwined his personal qualities with the fate of the Chinese nation: “Dr. Sun was the only man who combined a complete grasp of the situation with a reckless bravery of a kind which alone can make a national regeneration. . . . Beneath his calm exterior is hidden a personality that cannot but be a great influence for good in China sooner or later.”<sup>15</sup>

Sun’s meteoric rise to political stardom had been owed to both personal charisma and contingent environmental factors. Sun held a strong belief in his personal mission to lead the Chinese Revolution, bordering on self-conceit in his later years, and obviously displayed a personal “magnetism”<sup>16</sup> that allowed him to build up a circle of Chinese and Western supporters who were willing to further his cause. Without early Western mentors such as Sir James Cantlie or fervent admirers during his later life, most notably Paul “Judge” Linebarger and his son,<sup>17</sup> Sun would not have been able to catch similar media attention that turned out to be crucial for fostering his public image and likewise to raise funds for his revolutionary activities. The early Sun Yat-sen cult thus was a hybrid product, a blend of Western projections and the Chinese revolutionary mission, but did not automatically translate into political power. Sun’s attempts to topple the Qing government produced a series of failures and

<sup>13</sup> See the incredibly meticulous study by John Y. Wong, *The Origins of an Heroic Image: Sun Yat-sen in London, 1896–1897*, Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1986. See further Marie-Claire Bergère, *Sun Yat-sen*, translated by Janet Lloyd, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998 [1994], 69ff.

<sup>14</sup> Sun Yat-sen, *Kidnapped in London. Being the Story of my Capture by, Detention at, and Release from the Chinese Legation, London*, Bristol: Arrowsmith, 1897.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>16</sup> C. Martin Wilbur, “Environment, Character, Chance, and Choice: Their Interplay in Making a Revolutionary,” in Eto Shinkichi and Harold Z. Schiffman (eds.), *China’s Republican Revolution*, Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1994, 119.

<sup>17</sup> The best-known examples are Paul Myron Wentworth Linebarger, *Sun Yat-sen and the Chinese Republic*, New York: AMS Press, 1969 [1925], and Paul Myron Anthony Linebarger, *Gospel of Sun Chung Shan, According to Paul Linebarger*, Paris: Editions-Mid-Nations, 1932.

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his role during the revolution of 1911 was marginal at best.<sup>18</sup> His image was transformed into a truly national symbol only after his death in March 1925.<sup>19</sup>

Although China remained fragmented by the time of Sun's death in March 1925, his physical remains and image as "father of the nation" (*guofu*), a title formally decreed by the Guomindang in April 1940 only, came to serve as symbols for a new and united China and formed the nucleus of the Guomindang's claim for power. Sun's mausoleum on Purple Mountain in Nanjing, to which his body had been transferred in 1929 after having been temporarily placed to rest in the Temple of Azure Clouds in Beijing's Western Hills, sought proximity to the tomb of Ming dynasty founding emperor Zhu Yuanzhang and resembled the traditional architectural style of the emperors' mausoleums.<sup>20</sup> The forms of honoring the deceased Sun bore both foreign and distinctively Chinese characteristics. Besides massive media campaigns eulogizing the importance of his teaching, there were broadcasts of Sun's speeches in public parks and obligatory weekly remembrance meetings in schools, factories, and Guomindang offices. Sun's portrait was even displayed above the former emperor's throne in the newly established Palace Museum on the first anniversary of his death<sup>21</sup> and he continued to be honored during the following decades. Both Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong were to rely on the Sun cult to legitimate their own positions as heirs of the Chinese Revolution.

The history of the early Mao cult has been researched in great detail and can be traced back to the late 1930s, when after the disastrous Long March Mao had slowly gained supremacy within the CCP. Despite his being among the party's founding members, Mao did not hold truly important posts within the party hierarchy until the Long March. At the Zunyi Conference in January 1935, Mao became a member of the Politburo Secretariat and the Military Council, but his ascent to power was by no means inevitable. There are only sporadic instances that hint at a public

<sup>18</sup> Joseph Esherick, "Founding a Republic, Electing a President: How Sun Yat-sen Became Guofu," in Shinkichi and Schiffrin (eds.), *China's Republican Revolution*, 129–52.

<sup>19</sup> On this point, see especially Henrietta Harrison, *The Making of the Republican Citizen: Political Ceremonies and Symbols in China 1911–1929*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, 207–39.

<sup>20</sup> For a recent Chinese account of the mausoleum as political symbol, see Li Gongzhong, *Zhongshan ling. Yi ge xiandai zhengzhi zhubao de dansheng* [The Sun Yat-sen Mausoleum: The Making of a Political Symbol in Modern China], Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Lyon Sharman, *Sun Yat-sen: His Life and Its Meaning*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968 [1934], 316.

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display of a leader cult before 1942. During Mao's struggle with his Soviet-trained and -supported rival Wang Ming in mid-1937, a woodcut of Mao Zedong was published in the Communist Party newspaper *Liberation Weekly* (*Jiefang zhoukan*) that, as Raymond Wylie observed, already embodied motifs of the later cult: moving masses, flags, and sunrays, as opposed to the static portrayal of other CCP leaders such as military leader Zhu De (see Illustrations 1 and 2).<sup>22</sup> Mao's image closely resembled the photograph taken by Snow the previous year and is a first proof of the interrelation between the national and international dimensions of the cult.

The cult as a combination of rhetorical flattery and omnipresent imagery rose to full prominence during the so-called Rectification campaign of 1942–3 that witnessed the unyielding acceptance of Mao's status as leader and theoretician of the Chinese Revolution. The campaign consisted of a series of consecutive study and (self)-criticism sessions during which the participants were supplied with a common perception of the present development and revolutionary goals, as well as with the suitable terminology to describe it. David Apter and Tony Saich, in their highly influential work on the campaign, have coined the term “exegetical bonding”<sup>23</sup> for the creation of an integrated vision of the revolutionary process. The result of the campaign was the “Sinification” of Marxism-Leninism, to be officially termed “Mao Zedong Thought” after 1942.

While Mao's writings clearly dominated the study schedule and Mao's trusted party members organized festivities in his honor such as the “Zedong Day” on 8 February 1942,<sup>24</sup> the Rectification campaign was not the only factor contributing to the rapid rise of the cult. As the Allied victory over Germany and especially Japan had become only a matter of time, the enmity between the Guomindang and the CCP, which under external pressure had formed the Second United Front against the Japanese invasion in 1937, broke forth again with a vengeance. Both sides intensified their efforts to construct a vision for China's future that was at once “distinctly Chinese and undeniably modern.”<sup>25</sup> Simultaneously

<sup>22</sup> See Raymond F. Wylie, *The Emergence of Maoism: Mao Tse-tung, Ch'en Po-ta, and the Search for Chinese Theory 1935–1945*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980, 41.

<sup>23</sup> David E. Apter and Tony Saich, *Revolutionary Discourse in Mao's Republic*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994, 263ff.

<sup>24</sup> Gao Hua, *Hong taiyang shi zenyang sheng qilai de. Yan'an zhengfeng yundong de lailong qumai* [How the Red Sun Rose: A History of the Yan'an Rectification Movement], Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2000, 606.

<sup>25</sup> Wylie, *Emergence of Maoism*, 199.





ILLUSTRATION 1. Mao woodcut in the party newspaper *Liberation Weekly*, 22 June 1937. (Author's personal copy.)



露出是陳家老二時，也就互相低語着，談論他新近所遭遇的事。就是有許多不滿意他的地方，也因爲三番五次看見他過去過來，人在時間中，又以給了別人憔悴老去的印象，一個差不差的境便也就被猜測出了。一個種田人的倒楣了，不會被一個種田人擬想得太多。

他的父親，陳大爹，正被押在洛城的事，爲了幾年的積欠，幾乎有了一百担，那個主題老爺却告了他的刁頑將他送到牢裏來了，自然還關得有其他許多同樣的囚犯。他被關後沒有十天，便趕出一場刑。就使得在城裏做裁縫工入的陳得福妻子都餓了飯。得福的家裏，都住在趙家莊上的一家，連七七也在內，同時也陷入了絕境。七七是一個童養媳，有十五歲了，只等稍積有幾個錢時就要開闢同得福同房。但兩者人活個似乎早已在一些什林子裏，稻草堆裏面，有了些情懷。他們曾經到趙老爺家去磕過頭，也沒有用。城裏衙門的人告訴他說只要繳去口，繳回狀子，就沒有事了。但趙老爺比死還難的善後還難求。這事一天天使家裏人進入了悲觀。

是一天的傍晚了，得福又發瘋似的從城裏回家，剛剛走到村邊的地方，從這裏跑過去，經過一片樹林子裏，便可以到他莊子上了，忽然從林子裏發出一個聲音：

「得福，你老子的病，怎麼癒了？」

一看，原來是那個趙老爺常常走訪的李八爺，得福覺得有一股東西從心中升起，皮膚底下慢慢發熱。却又不敢先開罪，只好答應他。自然聲音還有點顫。

「年輕伙子，」李八爺穿一件黑夾襖走過來，拍拍他肩膀：「天無補人之路，但得設法呀，

ILLUSTRATION 2. Zhu De woodcut in the party newspaper *Liberation Weekly*, 14 June 1937. (Author's personal copy.)