Mao Today: A Political Icon for an Age of Prosperity

Mao Zedong in Contemporary Chinese Official Discourse and History

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ABSTRACT: Rather than repudiate Mao’s legacy, the post-revolutionary regime in China has sought to recruit him in support of “reform and opening.” Beginning with Deng Xiaoping after 1978, official historiography has drawn a distinction between Mao the Cultural Revolutionary and Mao the architect of “Chinese Marxism” – a Marxism that integrates theory with the circumstances of Chinese society. The essence of the latter is encapsulated in “Mao Zedong Thought,” which is viewed as an expression not just of Mao the individual but of the collective leadership of the Party. In most recent representations, “Chinese Marxism” is viewed as having developed in two phases: New Democracy, which brought the Communist Party to power in 1949, and “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” inaugurated under Deng Xiaoping and developed under his successors, and which represents a further development of Mao Zedong Thought. The Hu Jintao leadership has made an aggressive effort to portray “Chinese Marxism” as the most advanced development of Marxism that might also serve as a model for others. These interpretive operations have salvaged Mao for the national revolution and the legitimacy of the Communist Party. But it also presents a predicament in keeping alive memories of Mao’s policies, which the Party is not always able to control in political memory, as has been illustrated most recently in the Chongqing experiment.


Mao Zedong is once again back in the news. He was resurrected by Chongqing (inequalities created by the Communist Party, whose reason for existence theoretically was to abolish in-

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2. My use of “official” here needs some explanation, as it determines the coverage of the discussion. In some basic sense, all discourse and history in China is official, as both are closely watched and censored by the authorities. There is considerable leeway within limits, but the limits matter. The most important of such limitations are sensitive matters relating to leaders. I was personally acquainted with those limits when my book Anarchism in China was banned and collected almost immediately after its Chinese translation was published, apparently on the grounds that “it insulted our leaders.” My use of "official" here is limited in coverage to officially-produced works that establish those official limits to interpretation that then provide a guide for permissible interpretation for society at large but most importantly for the Party – at least that is the intention. Also excluded from the discussion are works produced by officials after they have left office, some of whom have been quite harsh in their departures from the official line. For a brief but useful general survey of recent Mao scholarship, see Xiao Yanzhong, “Recent Mao Zedong Scholarship in China,” in Timothy Cheek (ed.), A Critical Introduction to Mao, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 273-287.


(1) To recall the Cultural Revolution if only symbolically is to draw attention to a problem that is far more severe at present than it was in the 1960s. And that is not permissible; talk of class difference and division has been largely silenced in the PRC as it has in other contemporary societies, and perhaps for more easily understandable reasons.

The same, however, is not the case with Mao – not the Mao of the Cultural Revolution but the Mao of the Chinese revolution and founding of the PRC. I argue in this essay that salvaging Mao from the Cultural Revolution to appropriate him for “socialism with Chinese characteristics” has been one of the strategic ideological concerns of the post-Mao leadership from Deng Xiaoping to the present. My analysis is based on the contemporary con-

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struction of Communist Party history and its ideological articulation in a "Chinese Marxism," which are structured around a distinction between a Mao of the New Democratic Revolution and a Mao of the Cultural Revolution. These texts condemn Mao the Cultural Revolutionary but assign to the Mao of New Democracy a foundational historical role, and to Mao Zedong Thought a living historical significance as an expression of collective Party identity. The distinction is ideological, made possible by the denial of the history that links the two Maos. The texts point to a contradiction that may be essential to grasping the political and ideological dynamics of the Party. The appropriation of Mao for the reforms (to the point at the popular level of making him into an object of consumption) suggests the possibility of the return of the more radical Mao should the reforms run into trouble. This may very well be the significance of the Chongqing experiment, as well as what Wen Jiabao had in mind in his observations on a possible return of Cultural Revolution-type disorder. What Wen did not say was that the contradiction is inherent in the ideology that keeps Mao alive in the legitimation of the Party, therefore risking the return of the radical Mao should it lose its ability to sustain the distinction upon which it has gambled its ideological credentials. (4) Being products of Party culture, Chinese leaders are quite aware of the risks, even if the same culture might hold them back from doing anything about it. (5)

Reform and the re-invention of Mao Zedong Thought

Contrary to the impression left by the radical transformations since 1978, the Chinese Communist Party has never officially repudiated Mao. Despite the demotion he has suffered over the past three decades in and out of the People’s Republic of China, Mao Zedong continues to occupy a central place in official and officially sponsored histories of the Chinese Revolution, its past and present. Whatever personal feelings they may harbour, Chinese leaders officially propagate the line that the Communist Party continues the work that Mao started: to build a strong socialist state informed by a Marxism that has been adjusted to national circumstances in keeping with the demands of the times. As might be expected, they view this work as having gotten under way sometime in the 1930s, then having gone astray for more than two decades from the mid-1950s to the late 1970s with the left-extremism of the Cultural Revolution before being revitalised by his successors.

This official line has shown remarkable consistency since the post-Mao regime reversed the policies of the Cultural Revolution, although it has undergone elaboration and consolidation. Attitudes toward Mao have likewise undergone shifts among the public, along with what officialdom has deemed appropriate in celebrating Mao. But the basic line, and the justification given for it, has remained much the same.

Continued fealty to Mao’s legacy despite the reversal of his radical policies may be attributed at the most obvious level to the legitimacy needs of the Communist Party. This no doubt is not far from the truth, but calls for more in-depth exploration for what it may have to say about the Party’s ideological self-representation. The Party claims the mantle of the revolution. Given the prominent part Mao played in the revolution as its leader and chief theoretician, it would be rather a difficult task to uphold the historical significance of the revolution and its achievements while repudiating his legacies. The examples of Russia and Eastern Europe provide ample testimony of what happens to the legacies of socialist revolutions once their founding leaders have been discredited. The post-Mao leadership in China has avoided this mistake despite, or perhaps because of, the upheaval it experienced during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s, which made Party loyalty an overwhelming consideration. As Deng Xiaoping {
leaderships of Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin ( 
retical work that was quite significant in contributing to socialist reconstruction. As the quotation above indicates, there was no questioning his role as the leader of the Chinese Revolution.

The most interesting part of the 1981 Resolution related to Mao Zedong Thought. The “Resolution” reaffirmed the distinction between Mao’s thought and the Mao Zedong Thought that had been part of Party ideology since the origins of that formulation in the early 1940s.14 One referred to the thinking of an individual leader, the other to the crystallisation of the collective wisdom of the Party’s revolutionary experience as articulated by the leader of the Party. What it had to say is worth quoting at some length because of its implications not only for placing Mao in the ideological reconstruction in the past, but also for the part Mao Zedong Thought would play in the unfolding of “socialism with Chinese characteristics”.

The Chinese Communists, with Comrade Mao Zedong as their chief representative, made a theoretical synthesis of China’s unique experience in its protracted revolution in accordance with the basic principles of Marxism-Leninism. This synthesis constituted a scientific system of guidelines befitting China’s conditions, and it is this synthesis which is Mao Zedong Thought, the product of the integration of the universal principles of Marxism-Leninism with the concrete practice of the Chinese revolution. Making revolution in a large Eastern semi-colonial, semi-feudal country…cannot be solved by reciting the general principles of Marxism-Leninism or by copying foreign experience in every detail. The erroneous tendency of making Marxism a dogma and deifying Comintern resolutions and the experience of the Soviet Union prevailed in the international communist movement and in our Party mainly in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and this tendency pushed the Chinese revolution to the brink of total failure. It was in the course of combating this wrong tendency and making a profound summary of our historical experience in this respect that Mao Zedong Thought took shape and developed. It was systematized and extended in a variety of fields and reached maturity in the latter part of the Agrarian Revolutionary War and the War of Resistance Against Japan, and it was further developed during the War of Liberation and after the founding of the People’s Republic of China. Mao Zedong Thought is Marxism-Leninism applied and developed in China; it constitutes a correct theory, a body of correct principles and a summary of the experiences that have been confirmed in the practice of the Chinese revolution, a crystallization of the collective wisdom of the Chinese Communist Party.15

The identification of Mao Zedong Thought with the collective wisdom of the Party rather than Mao the individual suggested not only that it was possible for Mao, the leader, to transgress against Mao Zedong Thought, but also that Mao Zedong Thought was a work in progress, “still in the process of development” after the passing of Mao, the leader.16 There was a danger here, too, that the Party might be culpable for the wrong turn that the ideology had taken during the two decades of deviation, which was indeed conceded by the document.17 On the other hand, Mao Zedong Thought as the expression of the collective leadership of the Party has been elevated to a plane where it leads an unblemished existence beyond the errors of individual leaders, having demonstrated repeatedly its ability to correct its mistakes. Making mistakes was inevitable for living people, Mao himself had stated in 1945, adding that only the unborn and the dead don’t make mis-

Mao Zedong Thought is the valuable spiritual asset of our Party. It will be our guide to action for a long time to come…. While many of Comrade Mao Zedong’s important works were written during the periods of new-democratic revolution and of socialist transformation, we must still constantly study them. This is not only because one cannot cut the past off from the present and failure to understand the past will hamper our understanding of present-day problems, but also because many of the basic theories, principles and scientific approaches set forth in these works are of universal significance and provide us with invaluable guidance now and will continue to do so in the future…. Mao Zedong Thought has added much that is new to the treasure-house of Marxist-Leninist theory. We must combine our study of the scientific works of Comrade Mao Zedong with that of the scientific writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin.20

The greatest achievement of Mao Zedong Thought was its integration of universal Marxist theory and concrete Chinese practice. In 1980, Deng Xiaoping insisted that “it is precisely Mao Zedong Thought that the present Central Committee upholds, only we have given it concrete content.”21 The statement elevates Mao Zedong Thought to an ideological plane comparable to that of Marxism-Leninism, but at the same time evanesces it of any substantial content, which also increasingly has come to characterise the rela-

16. Deng, “Drafts,” in SWDWP, op. cit., p. 282. The “Resolution” stated that the ‘erroneous ‘Left’ theses, upon which Comrade Mao Zedong based himself in initiating the “cultural revolution,” were obviously inconsistent with the system of Mao Zedong Thought, which is the integration of the universal principles of Marxism-Leninism with the concrete practice of the Chinese revolution,” p. 19.
17. See also Deng, “Drafts,” p. 281.
18. Zhonggong zhongyang dangshi yanjiushi yishi (ed.), “’Zhongguo gongchandang lishi (shangjuan)’ ruogan wenti shuoming” (”.\n
tionship of Chinese Marxism to Marxism. The development of the Chinese Communist Party beginning with Mao’s leadership in the 1930s has become at one and the same time the historical unfolding of “Chinese Marxism,” with ever fewer references to the theoretical sources it claims as its ancestral origins. In other words, its Marxism has become increasingly self-referential. (22)

In addition to the example it provided in the appropriate handling of Marxism in the national revolution, the reaffirmation of Mao Zedong Thought under Deng Xiaoping had a second, more concrete, significance. Mao Zedong Thought was formulated and reached its fullness in the course of the New Democratic revolution, of which it was the ideological expression. Hence its evocation also invoked the question of the relevance of its policies following the elimination of the leftist zeal of the Cultural Revolution. I have suggested elsewhere that there was much in common initially between reform policies after 1978 and policies of New Democracy that had brought the Communist Party to power: a coalition government under the leadership of the Communist Party and the “dictatorship of the proletariat”; a mixed economy blending private national capital and state management and direction (bureaucratic capital); and a culture policy that sought to integrate a new Communist culture with native legacies, especially popular culture. (23)

Theoretically speaking, reforms after 1978 picked up where the Eighth Conference in 1956 had left off, when the transition to socialism had been completed. As the 1981 Resolution stated in the section just quoted, however, while New Democracy belonged to an earlier phase of the revolution, it was the foundation of Mao Zedong Thought, and its documents would retain their significance for the foreseeable future. It is quite clear in hindsight that the reforms initiated in the 1980s would ultimately go back past 1956 to the mixed policies of New Democracy, especially in economic policy. Cultural policy has abandoned Mao’s stress on popular culture as the source of a new culture except in its more theatrical forms, and there has been a revival of elite traditions reminiscent of Kuomintang (guomindang)
This book follows the correct line established at the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee, and has been written according to the spirit of “The Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party since the Founding of the People’s Republic of China” at the Sixth Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee. It applies the viewpoints of dialectical and historical materialism, is based on historical facts, and seeks truth from facts. [24]

Ideological requirements in the composition of Party history would become more complicated in ensuing years with the addition to Deng Xiaoping’s “theory” of Jiang Zemin’s “important thought of ‘Three Represents’” [26]
“great leap” in Chinese Marxism equal in significance to the emergence of Mao Zedong Thought that produced “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” beginning with Deng Xiaoping’s theory and proceeding through Jiang Zemin’s “Three Represents” and Hu Jintao’s scientific outlook on development. It remains a work in progress in “the continuation and development of Mao Zedong Thought.” (37)

This interpretation of Mao in the history of the revolution is a far cry from that of the Cultural Revolution, which had rendered Mao “the helmsman” of the revolution, and class struggle the core principle of Mao Zedong Thought (and Marxism). If Mao Zedong comes anywhere close under the new historical regime to the revolutionary sagacity attributed to him earlier, it is for the first phase of the revolution before 1949. Even then, the emphasis currently is on Mao “the representative” of the Party, who kept class struggle in moderation and recognised the significance of the forces of production to keep the revolution moving forward. At the same time, Mao is now held to account for what happened during the Cultural Revolution, Volume 2 of the History of the Communist Party of China, and a number of officially-sanctioned works on Chinese Marxism and Mao Zedong Thought published during the last couple of years, usually under the rubric of Make-sizhuyide Zhongguohua (making Marxism Chinese), have broken the taboo on the discussion of the Cultural Revolution now that some agreement has been reached in the Party over the appropriate verdict that does the least damage to the Party. (38) Previous histories, such as the 1990 history mentioned above, either stopped short of the turn to the left in the late 1950s, or simply blanked out the period between 1952 and 1978, as in the film produced on the occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Founding of the People’s Republic in 1999 or in the current historical display at the New Museum of National History.

The gap is now being filled through historical work more open to confronting sensitive issues in the Party’s past. What is genuinely new in these recent texts is not so much the overall interpretation, which largely follows the decisions of the 1981 Resolution, but the discussion in some detail of the period from the mid-1950s to 1978, and Mao’s leading role in the developments surrounding the Cultural Revolution. Mao, the individual, does not fare well in this account, although criticism of his “left-deviation” after 1952 is much more measured than that to be found in some of the more incriminating works published outside of China. Beginning with the “transition to socialism” after 1952, Mao began to ignore the circumstances of Chinese society that were nowhere close enough to fulfilling the conditions for socialism, but also wrongly shifted emphasis in his reading of Marxism from the primacy of the forces of production to continued class struggle. His anxieties about capitalist restoration led to the persecution of so-called “revisionists,” inflicting immense harm on the Party. In the verdict of the new Party history:

As the important leader of the Party and the state, Mao Zedong cannot but bear the major responsibility for the serious and comprehensive errors of “the cultural revolution.” The power of the Party was excessively concentrated in one person, Mao Zedong’s erroneous “leftist” leadership replaced the collective leadership of the Party, and the worship of the individual reached an insane level, undermining the possibility of the Party and the state to prevent and control the initiation and development of “the cultural revolution.” (39)

The authors continue to observe, nevertheless, that the perpetuation of the Cultural Revolution for ten years provides prima facie evidence that it should not be blamed solely on one individual. Not only did many in the Party support Mao’s line, but so did the people at large, who were still under the sway of the feudal practices of the past.

This is indeed the general approach to the evaluation of Mao Zedong in recent histories: he was responsible for what happened, but the responsibility must be shared by others, including other leaders in the Party. This was the case also with the communisation and Great Leap Forward movements of 1958-1960, which are officially acknowledged for the first time to have cost more than ten million lives. As the Party history puts it:

In launching “the great leap forward,” Mao Zedong’s hope initially was to change as quickly as possible the visage of poverty and backwardness, and to truly advance and strengthen China to establish its place among the world’s nations. This was at one with the hopes prevalent among large numbers of cadres and the people. The problem was that it went against the line of seeking truth from facts that the Party promoted...exaggerated the uses of subjective will and effort, advocated leap-frogging over historical stages in purpose and policy, and created in practical work a situation that went against natural and economic laws. This kind of hot-headedness was not restricted to Mao Zedong; it was a prevalent attitude among central leaders and many cadres... (40)

If others shared in Mao’s errors, Mao himself was not completely given to the leftist line he had let loose, but made repeated efforts to correct his mistakes — as in the retreat from the communes after 1960, his purge of Lin Biao (40).
1980 repeatedly enjoined not to exaggerate Chairman Mao’s shortcomings, and those whose disagreements may account for the nearly two decades it took to bring the recent Party History to its final form. The admission makes the Party and many Party leaders complicit in the leftist zeal that culminated in these deplorable events.

And yet, this is very much in line with the Party’s intentions in choosing from a variety of representation of the past: not to condemn Mao and jeopardise the legitimacy the Party draws from the revolutionary past, but rather to provide “lessons” with which to guide the Party into the future. The account of Party history is replete with struggles against the “right” and the “left,” more with the latter than with the former. The lessons of New Democracy are drawn out to stress the present day importance of the united front line, a mixed economy, respect for the past, etc. The Great Leap Forward provides the occasion for stressing the priority of the forces over the relations of production – in other words, class. The Cultural Revolution in its disorderliness provides proof of the centrality of unified Party leadership to national progress and welfare. It even had a bright side in preparing the Party for “socialism with Chinese characteristics” after 1978. The conclusions drawn in the texts after every major episode of Party history are not just summaries but also guides to the reading of the text and the correct “lesson” to be drawn from it.

The recently published history concludes with a chapter, “The great achievements and basic experiences of socialist revolution and construction led by the Party,” that outlines the lessons to be drawn from the six decades of Party history covered in the text. The achievements range from finally unifying the country and bringing together the various nationalities to live in peace, to poverty alleviation, to the establishment of foreign relations and national defence to secure the safety of the nation. Of the lessons to be drawn from the experience, the centrality of economic development and advancing the forces of production take top priority. There is a reminder that sovereignty and self-reliance are preconditions of opening up to the world. In either case, a stable and consolidated Party leadership remains the guarantee for the country’s future. (42)

A spectral presence: Mao and the Party

Mao Zedong leads a double existence in post-revolutionary China. Mao the individual remains a national icon for the role he played in national liberation and consolidation. This is the most widely shared image of Mao. In the official line, he is portrayed as the representative of the collective leadership that achieved the victory of the New Democratic revolution in 1949, and initiated the transition to socialism that was completed between 1952 and 1956. It is also the pervasive popular image of Mao propagated in popular consciousness through education and the popular media. (43) It is likely that these days the majority of the population knows Mao mostly by the endless series of TV movies on the national revolution and the Anti-Japanese War in which Mao figures prominently.

There is also the Mao who was responsible for the Cultural Revolution, who is apparently still controversial. In the official line since 1978, Mao has been held responsible for the Cultural Revolution, although it took 30 years for this responsibility to be spelled out in any detail. A decision was made under Deng Xiaoping not to repudiate Mao as Joseph Stalin had been repudiated in the Soviet Union in 1956, perhaps because Mao was more like a combination of V.L. Lenin and Stalin in stature, and could not be repudiated without irreparably damaging the revolution and the Party. The official line remains ambivalent in stressing the “good” sides of Mao even during the Cultural Revolution. Mao made serious leftist errors, but they were exacerbated by the behind-the-scenes machinations of the Jiang Qing and Lin Biao cliques. Mao was not above recognising and trying to rectify his errors. He played some part in the progress during those years in the economy, technology, and foreign relations, in addition to producing theoretical documents of lasting value. The Party has been quick to suppress any expression of excessive zeal for Mao and his policies, but it also has been cautious in condemning Mao, even as it has reversed his radical policies. Even more so than in the popular celebrations of Mao referred to above, this ambivalence has been apparent in renewed experiments with “redness,” among which the so-called Chongqing Model by the “princeling” Bo Xilai is the most prominent (see fn. 45).

Rather than repudiate Mao, the current interpretation seeks to appropriate his image for its own “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” This is apparent in two important ways. One is the historical linkage between New Democracy and “socialism with Chinese characteristics” that was foregrounded with the bracketing of the Cultural Revolution as an episode in socialist development. The other is the institutionalisation of Mao Zedong Thought. In official ideology Mao Zedong Thought occupies a crucial role as the fountainhead of “Chinese Marxism.”

Interestingly, since Mao Zedong Thought emerged in the midst of the New Democratic revolution, it bears upon it the stamp of both the policies and the theoretical achievements of that phase of the revolution. I have referred above to what these policies generally implied, and how the considerations that had given rise to them would also provide the reform leadership with its initial inspiration. That they were now premised upon a post-socialist situation called for further elaboration of Mao Zedong Thought in keeping with the times. According to the current interpretation, there have been two important periods in the making of Chinese Marxism: the New Democracy period and “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” which represented another “revolutionary great leap” in making Marxism Chinese. The Mao Zedong Thought the Party restored in 1978 returned it to its “true” spirit, that of New Democracy, premised upon class alliance (united front) and development of the forces of production as the primary goals. This was the Mao legacy Deng Xiaoping drew upon to formulate “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” One work writes more strongly that “Deng Xiaoping theory was nourished within the womb of Mao Zedong Thought.” (yunyu yu Mao Zedong sixiang zhong
ciple of collective leadership.” The deletion had been viewed by cultural revolutionaries subsequently as further evidence of Deng Xiaoping’s underhanded opposition to Mao. This time around, Deng recruited Mao for the reforms, while alleviating the anxieties of those within and without the Party who continued to be loyal to the revolution Mao had represented. More to the point here, by claiming Mao for his innovations, Deng incorporated Mao into his theory, which has since been passed down to “the important thought of ‘three represents’” and “the scientific outlook on development.”

In other words, New Democracy was one phase in the formulation of Chinese Marxism, but this first phase has been both a foundation and a paradigm for its subsequent development. These are the two temporalities of Mao Zedong Thought: one that relegates it to the past, as an expression of New Democracy that now has been superseded; the other a long-term reference for Chinese Marxism. In this perspective, there is hardly anything ideologically radical about the recent call by the prominent Party intellectual (and another “princeling”) Zhang Musheng (
Chinese characteristics will definitely be expanded through the innovative practice of the Party and the people, and the system of socialism with Chinese characteristics will surely continue to improve as we deepen reform and open up wider. This process will certainly open up broad prospects for theoretical innovation. In upholding Marxism under the new historical conditions, it is important to promptly address new issues emerging in practice and thus provide scientific guidance for practice. We should have a correct understanding of the global development trend and China’s basic condition of being in the primary stage of socialism, find out more about the features of China’s development at the current stage, review the new experience gained in a timely manner by the people led by the Party, and create new theories with the focus on major issues concerning economic and social development, so as to ensure the vitality of scientific theories. (46)

This endless development of theory in response to the changing needs of practice suggests that theory no longer serves as a check on, or even guide to, future developments, which are to be determined solely by their efficacy in securing the developmental goals of the regime. It is not that there is no longer any concern for Marxism; on the contrary, the Party repeatedly stresses its loyalty to the essence of Marxism as the thread that runs through the development of Chinese Marxism. Official publications express considerable concern over ignorance of Marxism, indifference to it for no longer being relevant, or feigning interest while undermining it, clearly referring above all to Party cadres. (49) Hu Jintao was responsible for initiating in 2004 a "Marxism project" (Maisizhuyi gongcheng
of its theoretical form. Especially significant is the modernisation of the classics.

Whether or not these new departures point to aspirations to leadership in global Marxism commensurate with the regime’s newfound power in the world as the foremost success story of socialism, or better still as a socialist version of capitalism, there is not much question about the immediate goals of refurbishing Chinese Marxism theoretically and giving it canonical status. What is less obvious but even more significant is that it is the Chinese present – the standpoint of an unfolding Chinese Marxism – that provides the guide to reading the classics and, in a manner of speaking, re-theorising the theory. What will be left of Marxism by the time they are finished remains to be seen. Mao’s successors have arguably gone beyond anything he claimed in making theory their own, subservient to the practices of national development within a context of global capitalism. Ironically, the more they change Marxism to respond to contemporary circumstances, the less connected they seem to an environment in which Marxism carries little weight among the population at large. But they may legitimately claim, as they do, that they are following the example of the Chairman – both in making Marxism Chinese and in silencing critics from the left who would suggest that the more the theory becomes “Chinese,” the less there is left of it that may be viewed as Marxist in any serious sense of that term.

Conclusion

Mao has both an ancestral and a phantom existence in texts on Party history and Chinese Marxism. Like Marx, Engels, and Lenin before him, he is an ancestor to the present, and a source of valuable lessons and principles to draw upon as necessary or appropriate. As the founding ancestor of Chinese Marxism, he commands an even greater immediacy than Marx and Engels as an example in rendering theory meaningful for practice. On the other hand, it is obviously no easy task to de-personalise Mao Zedong Thought, or to safely retire Mao’s policies to a receding past while upholding the “thought” named after him as an exemplary principle of theorising the Party’s changing practice. Continued uncertainty over the future – whether in calls for a return to New Democracy or renewed experiments with “redness,” among others – seems inevitably to play out on a discursive terrain in which Mao is ever present in one form or another. In its very appropriation by the Party, Mao Zedong Thought guarantees to Mao and Maoism a phantom existence that is imminent in Chinese socialism, both in its achievements and its anxieties.

57. This applies even to Party elders critical of the turn Marxism has taken under the regime: “In July 2007, even the ‘Maoflag’ Website was temporarily shut down when it posted an open letter by seventeen former high-level CCP officials and Marxist academics accusing CCP policies of making a mockery of Marxism and taking the country ‘down an evil road.’” Zhao, “Sustaining and Contesting Revolutionary Legacies in Media and Ideology,” p. 228. Party elders, who seem to wait until retirement to go public with their criticisms, are routinely censored regardless of the nature of their criticism. This includes Premier Wen Jiabao, who has not waited until retirement to go public. For a more recent general shut-down of “leftist” sites, see, Keith B. Richburg, “China shuts leftist Web sites as political strife continues,” Washington Post, Friday, 6 April 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/china-shuts-leftist-web-sites-as-political-strife-continues/2012/04/06/gIQAnJLUzS_story.html (consulted on 8 May 2012). For an interesting theoretical discussion of continuities with Maoist language that currently have different consequences for communication with the people than they did earlier, see Maurizio Marinelli, “The Historicity Beyond the Appearance of Words: The Teachery of Images in Chinese Political Language,” conference paper, www.hichumanities.org/Arhproceedings/Maurizio%20Marinelli.pdf (consulted on 30 April 2012).