

# Editor's introduction: The Chinese communist revolution, Maoism and its global influence

*Evan Smith*

In Alison Macleod's book *The Death of Uncle Joe*, she relays the story of Communist Party of Great Britain General Secretary, Harry Pollitt, telling party members 'not to be discouraged because the British workers had only given 854 votes to John Mahon, our man at the St. Pancras North by-election', declaring, 'We may not have won St Pancras, but we've got China'.<sup>1</sup> This enthusiasm for the victory of the Chinese Communist Party was shared by people all over the world. The Chinese revolution of 1949 and the establishment of the People's Republic of China under Mao Zedong was arguably the second biggest event in the history of world communism after the 1917 October Revolution. It convinced millions of people across the globe that socialism was being built, and it was particularly inspiring that the revolution had happened outside of Europe. As decolonisation began to gather pace in the post-war period, Communist China served as a beacon of hope for both socialism and national liberation. Its use of guerrilla warfare was inspirational to some movements (such as the Malayan Communist Party in the 1940s-50s);<sup>2</sup> and it also offered an alternative to the national paths of the Western communist movement in the early days of the Cold War (as can be seen in the Communist Party of Australia's enthusiasm for China).<sup>3</sup>

After the death of Stalin, and Khrushchev's destalinisation efforts in the mid-1950s, China became the leading socialist power against what was called 'revisionism'. Some of those communists who opposed destalinisation and the self-criticism of Stalin's legacy in 1956 gravitated

towards China, this disaffection coincided with the Sino-Soviet split in the early 1960s. The split was a schism between Moscow and Peking over the geopolitical influence of the two powers, the approach to the use of nuclear weapons and the relationship of both powers with the decolonising world. It was also a battle over the direction and leadership of the international communist movement. All of this had been brewing throughout the late 1950s and came to fruition in 1960. Communist movements, either in power or not, had to choose between the Soviet Union or the People's Republic of China. Most sided with Moscow, but some, such as Enver Hoxha's Albania and the Communist Party of New Zealand, shifted allegiance to Peking. A small number, such as North Korea or North Vietnam, chose to remain neutral at this point.

Most Western Communist Parties followed the Soviet Union in the split, for a number of reasons (including ideological proximity, tradition and financial support); but a number of pro-China groups emerged from within these parties as anti-revisionists. The first wave of ostensibly Maoist groups that appeared in the early-to-mid-1960s were not enamoured with China *per se*, but, as Lawrence Parker has argued, because China and Mao Zedong opposed the Soviet push for 'peaceful co-existence' and the overall 'revisionist' direction of the USSR.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, national liberation movements and communist groups in the Third World saw China as an example to follow in the pursuit of armed struggle.

The launch of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in 1966 fostered a new generation of Maoists across the globe, who saw the Chinese version of socialism as more vibrant, radical and adaptable for contemporary struggles, namely against Western (and at times, Soviet) imperialism at home and abroad. While Maoism outside of China in the era before 1966 was in many ways an upholding of traditional Stalinism, Maoism outside of China after 1966 was more about militant and confrontational struggle, taking inspiration from the youthful radicalism that China displayed to the rest of the world – although, as Julie Lovell had argued, there was a disconnect between the domestic Maoism evident during the Cultural Revolution years and the 'global Maoism' that took off internationally in the mid-to-late 1960s.<sup>5</sup>

As Matthew Galway has written, 'Different Maos and Maoisms resonated for different reasons' around the world, but Maoism generally

chimed with a more anti-imperialist outlook and an eye towards the Third World.<sup>6</sup> As Arif Dirlik has written, the Sino-Soviet split and the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 'brought the People's Republic to the centre of world radicalism and turned the Chinese revolutionary experience, embodied in Mao Zedong Thought, into a paradigm not only in the Third World ... but also in the First'.<sup>7</sup> Dirlik has described the reach of Maoism in this era as spanning from 'the Philippines to Peru and Mexico, to India, Nepal and Turkey', and to 'the United States, France, Germany, Italy, Australia and Japan'.<sup>8</sup> In Latin America, India and Cambodia, for example, it inspired a generation of revolutionaries to take up arms and undertake campaigns of guerrilla warfare.

For the Western left, Maoism became one of the entry points for anti-imperialist activism in the Cold War, alongside campaigns against apartheid in South Africa, against the Vietnam War, against US interventions in Latin America and against the oppression faced by indigenous people under settler colonialism. In the Anglophone world, as well as continental Europe, a variety of anti-revisionist and Maoist groups emerged in the 1960s and 1970s.

Maoism was also a diverse influence in the United States, fostering a plethora of anti-revisionist and Maoist groups amongst the primarily white left. It also inspired a wave of Black, Asian and Latino radicalism. Keisha A. Brown has written:

Post 1949, the CCP foreign relations agenda placed American Blacks within the category of an oppressed people within the US ... During the Cold War, the CCP placed the struggles of non-White people and countries into two main categories. The first is the broader general category aligning non-White continents (Asia, Africa, and Latin America are most often cited) in solidarity movements. The second is the more defined category of supporting specific oppressed countries in their struggles against some biased system or imperialist country ...<sup>9</sup>

African-Americans were viewed as part of this second category, with the Chinese seeing them as 'an entity within the larger international colored solidarity movement engaged in struggle with the common enemy

of American imperialism'.<sup>10</sup> A number of scholars have outlined the inspiration that China and Maoism gave to black radicals in the United States in the 1960s and early 1970s, and similar influence can be found in other diaspora communities in the US.<sup>11</sup> Similar processes have also been noted amongst diaspora communities in Britain during the same period.<sup>12</sup> From this, Robeson Taj Frazier has argued that an awareness of race and racism became 'a primary lens through which China differentiated its model of global power from that of the United States and the Soviet Union, influenced oppressed populations of color, and increased the aura and power of Chinese communism on Chinese citizens.'<sup>13</sup>

Anti-imperialism and the concept of mass struggle maintained their importance for Maoist groups and movements around the world, even though events inside China during the decade of the Cultural Revolution changed dramatically. But the rapprochement between China and the West from the early 1970s onwards, such as President Nixon's visit to China in 1972, the recognition of Pinochet's Chile in 1973, and emphasis on the Soviet Union as a 'social imperialist' power, eventually had a debilitating impact upon Maoist movements globally, as China was seen in some circles as siding with the forces of capitalism.<sup>14</sup> This was further exacerbated by Mao's death in 1976 and the battles inside China over the country's direction, with the Gang of Four and Deng Xiaoping both finding adherents amongst a plethora of Maoist, Chinese-influenced and anti-revisionist groups, particularly in the West.<sup>15</sup>

In 2021, Fabio Lanza wrote that 'we should try to "take global Maoism seriously" ... by asking what people in very different social and cultural contexts found so appealing about the experience of Maoist China – no matter how misunderstood, idealized, or reimagined it was.'<sup>16</sup> In her wide-ranging exploration of Maoism across the globe, published in 2019, Julia Lovell argued that 'the global spread and importance of Mao and his ideas in the contemporary history of radicalism are only dimly sensed', and rhetorically asked why a book on global Maoism did not already exist.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Perry Johansson commented in 2017 that it was 'paradoxical how little China appears as actor in the historiography on the European 1968'.<sup>18</sup> The varied ways in which the influence of Mao Zedong and Chinese communism was taken in and adapted by

movements around the world – as, for example, reflected in the size of Lovell’s monograph (over 600 pages) – demonstrates the difficulty in adequately tracing the history of global Maoism. But the last decade has seen a great increase in the scholarship that has explored Maoism as ‘a global phenomenon’, as described by James Gethyn Evans.<sup>19</sup>

Several scholars – such as Zachary A. Scarlett, Quinn Slobodian and Kun Zhang and Xiaoxiao Xie – have framed the advent of global Maoism as part of the wider historical turn towards a global 1960s, and a heterogenous political ideology that linked the West with the Third World/Global South across a number of vertical and horizontal intersections.<sup>20</sup> Most of the scholarship attests to the most influential period for Maoism as coinciding with the Cultural Revolution in China, during the late 1960s and early 1970s – although various aspects of Chinese communism and Mao Zedong’s political thought also inspired activists outside of China in the decades before and after this period. As Lovell and others have noted, even after Maoism as an ideology faded away, China has had an increasing presence on the world stage since Mao’s death in 1976.<sup>21</sup>

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Building on this diverse range of scholarship, this special issue of *Twentieth Century Communism* brings together new research into the influence that Chinese communism and Maoism had upon movements outside of China. While most of the articles concentrate on various forms of anti-revisionism and Maoism in Europe, the first article, by Yang Yang, Pik-ka Lau and Ip Po Yee, looks at the Maoist activists that existed in Hong Kong during the 1970s. The article shows how the Cultural Revolution inspired activists living in the British colony across the water from mainland China, during the ‘Fiery Era’, in which there was increased confrontation with the British authorities, as well as with Trotskyists in Hong Kong.

Moving to Europe, the next article, from Cyril Cordoba, looks at the small Communist Party of Switzerland (Marxist-Leninist) or KPS (M-L), which emerged in the mid-1960s and tried to find commonality between Chinese communism and Swiss politics, which found

particular purchase in the ‘Three Worlds Theory’ era of the 1970s. Following China’s international zig-zags and its claims that the Soviet Union threatened Swiss independence, the KPS (M-L) used Maoist rhetoric to support nuclear power and compulsory military service, which were traditionally right-wing positions.

The next two articles, by Christos Mais and Eduardo Abad Garcia, explore the influence of Maoism amongst communist movements in countries that experienced right-wing dictatorships in southern Europe in the post-war period. Mais charts the rise of the anti-revisionists in Greece in the 1950s and 1960s, and the pro-Chinese factions that split from the Greek Communist Party during these decades. He shows that the Marxist-Leninists in Greece were particularly active in the mid-1960s, but were unable to withstand the military coup in 1967. On the other hand, Garcia’s survey of Spanish Maoism provides a history of a movement coming out of decades of dictatorship, as the Franco regime lingered on until the mid-1970s. The various anti-revisionist and Maoist parties in Spain had existed since the mid-1960s, and Garcia shows that these groups, although often overlooked, were part of the movement against the Franco dictatorship, offering an alternative to the Communist Party of Spain (PCE), particularly as the PCE moved towards Eurocommunism in the 1970s.

Authors such as Julia Lovell and Cagdas Ungar have shown how China worked hard on soft power techniques to promote itself as at the forefront of the dual revolutions of socialism and national liberation from the 1950s to the 1970s.<sup>22</sup> Anne Hedén’s article analyses another way in which China exerted its soft power – through organising visits for sympathisers and fellow travellers. Hedén draws on the story of Elsa Larsson, a Swedish social worker, who travelled to China in the 1970s and made a film about Chinese life in the post-Mao era. Hedén has conducted interviews with Larsson in more recent times, and these prompt reflection on what was the purpose of Larsson’s film, and what the Chinese authorities wanted to be shown to the world.

As well as analysing the explicit influence of Maoism and Chinese communism upon politics around the globe, scholars have also pointed to the impact of Maoism on the production and consumption of culture outside of China. The final two articles, by Lawrence Parker and Daniel

Frost, consider how Maoism influenced culture in different ways in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s. Parker charts how anti-revisionists inside the CPGB maintained an opposition to mass popular culture in the post-war era. Taking cues from the CPGB's earlier hostility towards Americanised pop culture, the anti-revisionists inside and outside the party took objection to the increasingly liberal views of the Communist Party towards pop and youth subculture in the 1960s, using Chinese communism as an alternative guide. Taking up the story in the following decade, Frost shows how artists working around the magazine *Suburban Press* mixed Maoism and situationism to create shock culture in the era before punk, taking aim at British suburbia in places like Croydon. For Jamie Reid, the leading figure behind *Suburban Press*, Maoism represented the post-1966 idea of youthful rebellion, and Maoist aesthetics were incorporated into his works prior to his collaboration with the Sex Pistols.

These seven articles demonstrate that Chinese communism and Maoism served as an inspiration and influence for different movements around the world, especially during the 1960s and 1970s, as radical politics flourished seemingly everywhere. The scholarship on global Maoism highlights its diversity and the articles in this special issue seek to add to our understanding of this diversity, spanning from Hong Kong to Greece to Britain in the long 1960s.

## Notes

- 1 Alison Macleod, *The Death of Uncle Joe*, London, Merlin Press 1997, p16.
- 2 See Marc Opper, *People's Wars in China, Malaya and Vietnam*, Ann Arbor, MI, University of Michigan Press 2020, pp173-203.
- 3 See Evan Smith, 'For Socialist Revolution or National Liberation? Anti-Colonialism and the Communist Parties of Great Britain, Australia and South Africa in the Era of Decolonisation', in Y. Beliard & N. Kirk (eds), *Workers of the Empire, Unite: Radical and Popular Challenges to British Imperialism, 1910s to 1960s*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press 2021, pp254-258.
- 4 Lawrence Parker, *The Kick Inside: Revolutionary Opposition in the CPGB, 1945-1991*, London, November Publications 2012, p69.

- 5 Julia Lovell, 'The Use of Foreigners in Mao-Era China: "Techniques of Hospitality" and International Image-Building in the People's Republic, 1949-1976', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 25, 2015, p138.
- 6 Matthew Galway, *The Emergence of Global Maoism: China's Red Revolution and the Cambodian Communist Movement, 1949-1979*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press 2022, p12.
- 7 Arif Dirlik, 'Mao Zedong Thought and the Third World/Global South', *Interventions*, 16/2, 2014, p246.
- 8 Dirlik, 'Mao Zedong Thought and the Third World/Global South', pp246-247.
- 9 Keisha A. Brown, 'Blackness in Exile: W.E.B. Du Bois' Role in the Formation of Representations of Blackness as Conceptualized by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)', *Phylon*, 53/2, Winter 2016, p24.
- 10 Brown, 'Blackness in Exile', p24.
- 11 Robin D.G. Kelley & Betsy Esch, 'Black Like Mao: Red China and Black Revolution', *Souls*, Fall 1999, pp6-41; Bill V. Mullen, 'By the Book: *Quotations From Chairman Mao* and the Making of Afro-Asian Radicalism, 1966-1975', in Cook (ed.), *Mao's Little Red Book*, pp245-265. For the effect of Maoism on Asian Americans, see: Daryl J. Maeda, 'Black Panthers, Red Guards and Chinamen: Constructing Asian American Identity Through Performing Blackness, 1969-1972', *American Quarterly*, 57/4, 2005, pp1079-1103; Karen L. Ishizuka, *Serve the People: Making Asian America in the Long Sixties*, London/New York, Verso 2016, p43. For the effect of Maoism on Latino radicals, see: Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization, 'History of the Development of the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization', August 1974., *Marxists Internet Archive*: <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-1/prrwo-history.htm> (accessed 26 June 2022); Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao and Che*, London/New York, Verso 2006, pp104-110.
- 12 For the effect of Maoism on South Asian activists in Britain, see: DeWitt John, *Indian Workers Associations in Britain* (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1969, pp66-81; Sasha Josephides, 'Organizational Splits and Political Ideology in the Indian Workers Associations', in Pnina Werbner & Muhammad Anwar (eds), *Black and Ethnic Leaderships in Britain: The Cultural Turn of Political Action*, London, Routledge 1991, pp253-276. For the effect of Maoism on African-Caribbean activists in Britain, see: Rosaline Eleanor Wild, "'Black was the Colour of Our Fight": Black Power in Britain, 1955-1976', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sheffield 2008, pp94-95.



- 13 Robeson Taj Frazier, *The East is Black: Cold War China in the Black Radical Imagination*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press 2014, p11.
- 14 See: Zhou Yi, 'Less Revolution, More Realpolitik: China's Foreign Policy in the Early and Middle 1970s', *Cold War International History Project: Working Paper 93*, February 2020.
- 15 A. Belden Fields, *Trotskyism and Maoism: Theory and Practice in France and the United States*, New York, Praeger Publishers 1988, pp124-130; Nick Knight, 'The Theory and Tactics of the Communist Party of Australia (M-L)', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 28/2, 1998, pp244-245; Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air*, pp207-226; Sebastian Gehrig, '(Re-)Configuring Mao: Trajectories of a Culturo-Political Trend in West Germany', *Transcultural Studies*, 2, 2011, pp212-222; Tom Buchanan, *East Wind: China and the British Left, 1925-1976*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2012, pp204-216.
- 16 Fabio Lanza, 'Global Maoism', in Shiping Hua (ed), *Chinese Ideology*, London, Routledge 2021, p170.
- 17 Julia Lovell, *Maoism: A Global History*, London, The Bodley Head 2019, pp7, 10.
- 18 Perry Johansson, 'China, Vietnam and the European 1968: A Note on Chronology and World Revolution', *Monde(s)*, 1/11, 2017, p80.
- 19 James Gethyn Evans, 'Maoism, Anti-Imperialism, and the Third World: The Case of China and the Black Panthers', *Made in China*, 2, 2021, p141.
- 20 Zachary A. Scarlett, 'China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and the Imagination of the Third World', in Samantha Christiansen & Zachary A. Scarlett (eds), *The Third World in the Global 1960s*, New York/Oxford, Berghahn Books 2013, pp39-56; Quinn Slobodian, 'The Meanings of Western Maoism in the Global 1960s', in Chen Jian et al, *The Routledge Handbook of the Global Sixties: Between Protest and Nation-Building*, London, Routledge 2018, pp67-78; Kun Zhang & Xiaoxiao Xie, "'Call Me Comrade Not Mister": Vicente Rovetta and the Spread of Maoism in Latin America's Global Sixties', *The Sixties*, 12/2, 2019, pp205-237.
- 21 Lovell, *Maoism*, pp1-24; see also Fabio Lanza, *The End of Concern: Maoist China, Activism and Asian Studies*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press 2017.
- 22 Lovell, 'The Use of Foreigners in Mao-Era China', p138; Cagdas Ungar, 'Reaching the Distant Comrade: Chinese Communist Propaganda Abroad (1949-1976)', unpublished PhD thesis, Binghamton University/State University of New York, 2009, p5.