

Daniel Leese. *Mao Cult: Rhetoric and Ritual in China's Cultural Revolution.*

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The song “Sailing the Sea Depends on the Helmsman” captures the essential rhetorical elements of the Mao cult. The first verse reads:

Sailing seas depends on the helmsman,
Life and growth depends on the sun.
Rain and dew nourish the crops,
Making revolution depends on Mao Zedong Thought.
Fish can't leave the water,
Nor melons leave the vines.
The revolutionary masses can't do without the Communist Party.
Mao Zedong Thought is the sun that forever shines.

The song dates from the 1950s and its words already enshrined Mao Zedong as leader who could steer China in a turbulent world. The verse, however, also emphasizes that the Communist Party is essential for China. That approach worked well until after the Great Leap Forward when Mao felt he was being pushed aside and launched the Cultural Revolution, attacking his

closest subordinates and destroying the party itself. Daniel Leese's engrossing study of the Mao cult traces its history and places special attention on the terminology and rituals praising Mao.

Leese begins by sketching how this cult of Mao's leadership appeared in China during the war against Japan. In part, this marked the elevation of Mao as what Leese calls a “brand symbol” of the Communist movement. Also the cult provided a counterweight to Chinese Nationalists' elevation of Chiang Kai-shek. Probably of equal importance is that Mao's writings gave a Chinese identity to Communism. Praise of Mao's leadership inspired confidence in the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) authority independent of Stalin and the Soviet Union. Leese provides an excellent first chapter interpreting the importance for China of Khrushchev's February 1956 secret speech. By denouncing Stalin's rule, Khrushchev presented a challenge to Mao's role in China, for if Stalin was at fault, then Mao also could make mistakes. The CCP's response by Mao and his fellow leaders reasserted Mao's special role. Leese quotes Deng Xi-

aooping at the CCP's Eighth Party Congress in 1958: "Love for the Leader is essentially an expression of love for the party, the class and the people, and not the deification of the individual" (p. 48).

Leese's main interest lies in showing how after the Great Leap Forward (1958-60) the cult blossomed into adulation for Mao Zedong as a charismatic, all-knowing leader to whom everyone should display fervent and unquestioning loyalty. Leese draws extensively from the Hebei provincial archives for material that shows how the cult became increasing based on Mao's genius independent of the CCP. By the early 1960s Mao's subordinates felt they could no longer rely on Mao to lead China forward. His response was to strike out at both the individual leaders and the party apparatus in general. The consequence was the dismantling of the Leninist rudder by which Mao steered the ship of state.

Leese pays special attention to the 1966-68 period to show how the exact phrases glorifying Mao became closely defined during those years, producing a "peak of language formalization and the near-merging of public and private speech" (p. 181). The cult encouraged various rituals, including daily morning and evening pledges to Mao, loyalty dances, and what Leese calls the bewildering "episode of worshipping mangos" (p. 223). This refers to nationwide fascination with mangoes as a symbol of Mao's favor following Mao's gift of mangos to a propaganda team attempting to reestablish order at Qinghua University in Beijing in July 1968.

Leese's argument is that such practices represented blind adulation of Mao as a person and could not translate into a means to guide practical policy. Rhetoric and ritual proved no substitute for a disciplined Leninist party. Leese's argument emphasizes the irony of Mao's belief that he could guide China without a Leninist party. Mao attempted find something to replace the bureaucratic but effective structure of the CCP. The Red Guards proved unsatisfactory for they produced

only chaotic conflict among themselves. Then Mao turned to the enigmatic and reclusive Lin Biao in hopes Lin could use the People's Liberation Army (PLA) as a means of control. Leese finds that Lin could not control the PLA and only managed to develop a secondary cult of his own leadership. Frightened that his designated successor might displace him, Mao disposed of Lin. Finally, Mao tried to use his wife, Jiang Qing, and her coterie of followers. None of these attempts worked. Without the disciplined Leninist party that Mao had destroyed, the Chinese ship of state wallowed without direction.

Leese is careful to note that Mao Zedong himself, as well as many of his closest supporters both before and during the Cultural Revolution, disapproved of these rituals and tried repeatedly to reign in the ever-growing adulation of Mao. It is at this juncture that Leese's research into the official archives of these years opens new ground by showing how both Mao and the Chinese Communist Party leaders continued attempting to assert detailed centralized control over policy even after they had dismantled the means for exercising that control. Leese provides several examples. In one, he discusses how in September 1967 Qi Benyu and Chen Boda, acting on Mao's wishes, attempted to stop the building of Mao Zedong statues in Tianjin. Although this was only a minor question in one nearby city during the increasing chaos brought on by the Cultural Revolution, they failed. In another, in 1968 many so-called Mao Zedong miracles (p. 192) were recorded and publicized, especially in medical matters. Mao called these empty boasts and tried to suppress such claims, but could not. The Great Helmsman had lost control of the rudder.

The Cultural Revolution had damaged the rudder of Leninism. To work, the Leninist system needed a centrally based disciplined network through which it could transmit its orders throughout the society. A cult of personal leadership can serve to bolster the Leninist party appa-

ratus. By attacking the CCP, Mao had done away with the essential element of control. He was left with only a cult and a fragmented group of followers. His dream for spontaneous action by the masses was realized, but for control Mao remained dependent on Leninism. He assumed he could retain control over the details of policy even though the Cultural Revolution had cut the lines of authority. Again, Leese provides an example in his discussion of central policy after the Ninth Party Congress of 1969. Mao issued a set of seven instructions curbing many standard practices that glorified him. He was determined to weed out practices that did not meet his approval; however, the means to achieve compliance—a disciplined Leninist party—no longer existed.

In his chapter “Curbing the Cult,” Leese takes up how the CCP regained control of the chaos left by the Cultural Revolution. This is a major question, but Leese’s treatment here falls short of the high standard of his earlier chapters. His account recites the now familiar story of Lin Biao’s fall and the assertion of Deng Xiaoping’s brand of collective leadership. What is missing is the kind of detailed discussion of clashes over policy that made the middle chapters of this book so fascinating. Such clashes must have taken place. That might be the subject of another study.

I can recall several instances during my first visit to the People’s Republic of China in November 1974 that revealed how the cult of Mao still held sway in China. In Chengzhou our trip leader was made to write an apology to the Chinese people for insulting Mao Zedong. One of our delegation had a book whose cover had been seen by workers in a factory. The cover showed Mao and Chiang Kai-shek’s photos as equal rivals during the war against Japan. Never mind that they were actually rivals for leadership then, because in 1974 Mao still ranked as a semi-divine leader beyond comparison with others, particularly Chiang Kai-shek. We also listened to repeated strong denunciations to Lin Biao as an adherent of Confu-

cianism. We understood that Lin was being denounced as a failed successor to Mao, but what in Lin’s background or actions ever hinted that he was a Confucian? These survivals of the cult of Mao came five years after the hopes to reconstitute the Chinese Communist Party after the Ninth Party Congress of 1969. Curbing the cult of Mao has proved a challenge for China down to today.

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