

The Mao Cult

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Contents

The Emergence of the Mao Cult	2
The ‘Secret Speech’ and the Partial Liberalization of 1956-57	4
The ‘Great Leap Forward’ Disaster of 1957-1959	5
Flattery Inflation and Cult Anarchy: The Cultural Revolution	7
The End of the Cult and its Resurgence as Red Nostalgia in Contemporary China	11
References	11

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The idea of a ‘cult of personality’ is in some ways a very modern one. Practices of ‘leader worship’ were of course not unknown in the past; one might almost say that they were basically the default way in which peoples related to leaders in pre-modern state societies, from the recognition of Egyptian Pharaohs as god-kings to emperor worship in China, and from the cults of Hellenistic monarchs and Roman emperors to the sacralisation of monarchs in Medieval Europe. But such cults could only become a theoretical and political problem in the context of societies which claimed to be socially or politically egalitarian, as most societies do today. It is only against a background expectation of relative equality that the practice of leader worship appears as an aberration, in need of special justification or explanation. And though cults of personality are known in many modern dictatorships, the problem these cults presented was especially acute in communist societies, where even formal terms of address had been consciously engineered to express the idea of equality (‘comrade’), yet nevertheless appeared to be embarrassingly plagued by forms of leader worship, from Lenin and Stalin (Tumarkin 1983; Plamper 2012) to the three generations of the Kim family in North Korea (Myers 2010).¹

Among these Communist leader cults, the cult of Mao Zedong, at its peak during the early years of the Chinese Cultural Revolution around 1967-68, is one of the best studied. Mao Zedong (1893-1976) was a central figure in the revolution that led to the foundation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, and the one person we could uncontroversially call the ‘ruler’ of China in the more than two and half decades following. As Chairman of the Communist Party of China (CPC), he concentrated power in his person to a degree unparalleled in the history of the People’s Republic while presiding over both great successes (most obviously the foundation of the PRC itself) and terrifying catastrophes: the famine during the ‘Great Leap Forward’ industrialization campaign of 1957-59, which may have killed upwards of 30 million people (Walder 2015, 169; Dikötter 2010) and the ‘Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution’ of 1966-1976, a vast social convulsion instigated by Mao to produce a revolutionary change in Chinese culture, with a death toll also numbering in the millions (Dikötter 2016). And yet until his death in 1976 he appeared to be the object of intense popular adoration. The rest of this appendix describes how the Mao cult emerged and how it changed in response to events and specific actions by CPC leaders.

The Emergence of the Mao Cult

A moderate cult of Mao first emerged during the later years of the Chinese civil war, when Mao had not yet consolidated power within the CPC (Leese 2011). At the time, the top leadership of the party consciously began to promote Mao’s image as a mobilizing device that could usefully counter the use of Chiang Kai-shek’s image on the Guomindang (Nationalist) side. As in Russia during the early years after 1917 (Tumarkin 1983), this sort of personalization of the message of the Communist Party met with some theoretical objections, but these were quickly swept away given Mao’s demonstrated ability to unify the party against its enemies.

¹An earlier version of this piece, with more links and pictures, appeared in my blog at <http://abandonedfootnotes.blogspot.co.nz/2012/10/ten-thousand-melodies-cannot-express.html>

At this point in time the ‘cult’ of Mao appeared mostly as a form of what Leese calls ‘branding’ (Leese 2011, 17), and directed primarily towards party members; it was not yet a full-fledged form of leader worship that demanded much of ordinary people. Indeed, it was specifically nurtured within the party through the practice of ‘group study’ of party history, which presented a mythical narrative of the Long March under Mao’s ‘correct’ leadership. (The ‘Long March’ refers to the retreat of the Red Armies in 1934-35 into the interior of China under pressure from the Nationalist armies, a seminal event in the CPC revolutionary mythology). Group study among committed cadres focused on Mao-related symbols is an archetypical example of what we have called an *interaction ritual* [Collins (2004); see also 8]. Since participants in these rituals already identified with Mao and the CPC, they could be used both to marginalize certain factions within the party (e.g., the group of Soviet-trained cadres around Wang Ming, another influential member of the CPC, who had Stalin’s favour) and to motivate party and army members in the continuing struggle with KMT forces.

With the victory of the CPC these mobilizing and unifying functions of Mao and his thought became less important, though the party of course continued to control the public display of his image, and attempts by other CPC leaders to build up their own prestige at the expense of Mao’s could be used against them. For example, in 1954, Mao charged Gao Gang (another favourite of the Soviet communists) with cult-building, which threatened the unity of the Revolution, and succeeded in purging him. From Mao’s point of view, the problem was not the cult-building *per se*, but the fact that only Mao could represent the Revolution; as he memorably put it, quoting Lenin, ‘it is better for me to be a dictator than it is for you’ (Leese 2011, 69).

There were also certain pressures ‘from below’ that fed cult practices among party members. Since the CPC was in part a huge hierarchical patronage machine with few formal mechanisms for promotion, signalling loyalty to the party through praise of its top leaders – sending congratulatory telegrams to Mao, for example, even when these were discouraged by the CCP leadership – was a useful means of career maintenance and even advancement (for similar dynamics in contemporary China, see Shih 2008). Such praise was not necessarily disingenuous; the party was undoubtedly popular, and Mao was genuinely admired during the early 1950s for his role in leading the Communists to victory. And in any case it was tempered both by the recognition that Stalin, not Mao, was the pre-eminent leader of the communist world, and by the fact that the top leadership of the party seems to have consciously discouraged extreme praise, perhaps because it feared (not unreasonably, as it turns out) concentrating power in Mao’s hands.

The death of Stalin in 1953, and the subsequent cooling of relations between China and the Soviet Union, however, had the effect of displacing foreign leaders from their pre-eminent position in public displays, leaving Mao to monopolize an ever larger and more central share of public space. Local cadres organizing parades and other festivities after 1953 faced the question of whose portraits and what slogans to display, and in what order, and yet directives from the central party organization became ever more confusing. Indeed, a directive of April 1956 essentially declared that no guidance would be provided to local party committees regarding whose portraits to display and in what order during public events. Eventually the confusion seems to have been resolved in the obvious way: portraits of foreign leaders were no longer handed out to marching crowds at official events. Mao and other top leaders of the CPC now had the field all to himself.

The ‘Secret Speech’ and the Partial Liberalization of 1956-57

Three years after the death of Stalin in 1953, the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev delivered the so-called ‘Secret Speech’ to the 20th Party Congress (Khrushchev 1956).² The speech, which attacked Stalin’s ‘cult of personality’ and condemned his purges of the Soviet Communist Party, triggered a political earthquake throughout the Communist world. In particular, the speech fed into a process of liberalization of the public sphere which had begun somewhat earlier in China. Criticism of the cult and other forms of ‘dogmatism’ was aired in high places, and support for collective leadership expressed (Walder 2015, 135).

Though Mao was initially thrown on the defensive (after all, he also had developed a personality cult, if not one as extreme as Stalin’s at this point), he was confident enough in his own prestige to encourage a certain amount of de-Stalinization with the ‘Hundred Flowers’ campaign of 1957. – which led to an outpouring of criticism that he came to see as dangerously destabilizing. He later claimed the campaign had been a trap, a way to ‘lure snakes out of their holes’, though there is much evidence that contradicts this self-serving interpretation (Leese 2011, 62–63; Walder 2015, 136). Whatever the original intention might have been, both Mao and groups within the party came to think that liberalization had gone too far: cadres became demoralized and confused, critics started attacking the party and Mao directly (worryingly for Mao, even senior party figures joined in), and Mao’s prestige suffered:

The failure of the rectification campaign [the ‘Hundred Flowers’ campaign] led to a self-generated crisis of faith in ... the CCP’s governance, and the responsibility was clearly to be placed on Mao. He thus faced two ‘credibility gaps’: The campaign had tarnished his image as omniscient helmsman of the Chinese Revolution among party members, and the campaign’s indecisive enactment led non-party members to question his authority over the CCP (Leese 2011, 63).

In response, Mao attempted to reassert control over his image. He not only placed loyal supporters in control of the propaganda apparatus, but also formulated a distinction between a ‘correct’ cult of personality and an ‘incorrect’ cult that made it possible for him to arbitrarily punish insufficiently loyal supporters. This distinction sidestepped the theoretical problem raised by Khrushchev’s criticism of personality cults in Marxism by redefining ‘good’ cults as a worship of ‘truth,’ but it was transparently driven by Mao’s understanding of the cult ‘as an extrabureaucratic source of power that did not rely on its recognition within the party elite’ (Leese 2011, 69). (Much later, Mao told Edgar Snow that Khrushchev’s failure to develop a cult had led to his eventual purge by Politburo members).

Mao clearly saw that, in a context where most cadres were susceptible to the appeal of the symbols of the revolution (including symbols related to himself), encouraging the cult would provide him with a source of authority that was independent of the party and cudgel against intra-party rivals. Moreover, he also thought that the intensification of leader-focused rituals would be a good instrument for promoting a ‘lively, emotional climate’

²Though the speech was widely circulated throughout the Communist world, it was called the ‘secret speech’ because it was delivered at a closed session of the Congress, without members of the press present, and its official text was not published until 1989.

that would motivate people to take a ‘great leap forward’ toward communism, just as the cult had served to motivate party members and soldiers during their struggles against the Nationalist forces in the 1940s. Mao thus understood that interaction rituals can serve as powerful emotional amplifiers, cementing particular identities and commitments.

As noted above, the leadership of the party had until then tried to hold extravagant manifestations of loyalty in check; but now Mao made clear that such praise was useful as a signal of commitment, indeed was doctrinally required. The result was a classic example of ‘flattery inflation’ (Chapter 8). As Leese puts it:

... with the validation of a correct cult it was not necessary any more to ‘praise the king the whole time, but, so to say, without explicit praises’, as Paul Pellisson, court historian of Louis XIV, once wrote. During the early years of the PRC, praise of Mao Zedong in public discourse had by and large been curbed with Mao’s consent. But after March 1958, references to the Party Chairman and his thought witnessed a huge upsurge in the media, although in comparative perspective the excesses were dwarfed by the Cultural Revolutionary rhetoric (Leese 2007).

Cadres wishing to prove their loyalty could now stop worrying too much about the question raised by Khrushchev of whether cults of personality were compatible with Marxism-Leninism, and hyperbolic praise of Mao and his latest ‘line’ soon became a necessary instrument of career maintenance and advancement within the CPC, though at the beginning such praise was still carefully defined as praise of the ‘truth’ (which just happened to be embodied in the person of Mao and his works). The repression of the ‘Anti-Rightist’ campaign of 1957 further made it difficult to express any views in opposition to Mao within the party.

The ‘Great Leap Forward’ Disaster of 1957-1959

The CPC launched the ‘Great Leap Forward’ campaign in 1957 - a gigantic production drive that was supposed to achieve its goals through sustained and enthusiastic mobilization of the people (see Walder 2015, ch. 8 for a full account). Though the ‘Great Leap Forward’ was flawed as economic policy, it was not inevitable that it would result in famine and disaster (Walder 2015, 152). The problem was that the repressive campaigns launched after the failure of liberalization and the encouragement of the cult made it very difficult for Mao to understand the consequences of his actions and change course in response to accurate information. Cadres had too many incentives to report false information and to show loyalty through ideological adherence to Mao’s doctrinaire views, since they could otherwise be denounced as ‘rightists.’ Indeed, the burst of flattery encouraged by Mao led to a flood of ‘completely fictive numbers of both agricultural statistics and cultural artifacts in order to signal adherence of the provincial cadres to the Party Centre’ (Leese 2011, 73; see also Kung and Chen 2011, for more on the consequences of Mao’s implicit encouragement of radicalism).

But the great famine of 1958-59 could not ultimately be hidden by mere propaganda; for those affected by the catastrophe, the evidence of the senses was of course in direct contradiction with the claims of Mao and his flatterers, which again challenged Mao’s prestige and credibility and offered opportunities to disaffected people within the party.

This challenge was the most serious yet to Mao's position, in part because the famine fomented dissatisfaction within the People's Liberation Army (PLA), whose soldiers could not be fully isolated from reports coming in from family members about the situation in the countryside. (Not even the Central Bureau of Guards, the unit in charge of guarding the leaders of the CPC, was immune to unrest). Even more seriously, Marshal Peng Dehuai, who had enormous prestige within the PLA, became severely critical of Mao's policies. This was an intolerable challenge to Mao's position, who feared a coup; and though Peng was eventually purged, the need to regain control over the army was pressing. Lin Biao (the youngest PLA Marshal) proved the man for the job.

Lin was not shy about praising Mao, and knew how to wield the charge of insufficient adherence to Mao Zedong thought against his enemies within the party and the military. He was able to shift the norms prevailing at the top of the CPC so that 'adherence to Mao Zedong thought' became the sole criterion of loyalty; the minimum loyalty bid could now only refer to a highly restricted set of symbols. In practice, this meant that any statements critical of Mao – uttered at any time in the past – could be used as incriminating evidence of disloyalty, and used in factional disputes which nearly destroyed the party and served to purge many people at the top. And most of the top party leadership in Beijing found it difficult to coordinate against accusations of disloyalty to Mao and his line because the party was too publicly committed to him. Anyone accused of these crimes – most spectacularly Liu Shaoqi, nominally the president of the People's Republic (head of state), in 1966, who was publicly humiliated and eventually expelled from the Party – could hardly count on help from other top leaders, who would be apt to consider offering help to people accused of disloyalty as a form of disloyalty itself. (By the same token, they could be pretty certain that others would use their words against them).

It is worth noting that Lin himself was not necessarily a true believer in Mao. Though he knew how to signal his unconditional loyalty (in costly, even humiliating ways sometimes), he seems not to have liked Mao much, and to have promoted the cult in part as a way of protecting himself from the treacherous shoals of politics at the apex of the CPC. He had, after all, seen (in Peng Dehuai's case) how even the merest hint of criticism could be turned by Mao (and others) against the critic, with severe repercussions, and was determined to avoid a similar fate (Leese 2011, 90). By 1959 Lin was adept at anticipating Mao's position and changing his opinion as soon as he sensed that the old opinion was no longer operative.

Lin used the cult not only to protect himself from the vicious 'court politics' of the CCP, but also to discipline the army and tamp down dissatisfaction among the soldiers. The main tool he used to accomplish this objective was similar to the original forms of 'group study' that had been used at the very beginnings of the cult, except more narrowly focused on Mao's writings and more formalized. The 'lively study and application of Mao Zedong thought' was in practice reduced to learning to recite and use quotations from Mao's works as persuasive tools. But these interaction rituals nevertheless seem to have been very effective in preventing unrest within the army, if nothing else because they made it difficult for soldiers to express any criticism of Mao or his line.

It's worth taking a closer look at how these rituals worked. To begin with, contacts between the troops and their families were monitored, but they were not necessarily directly censored. Instead, reports of distress in the countryside were turned into 'teaching moments' – focal points of ritual - that extolled the necessity of staying the course and

blamed unfavourable weather or the deviations of local officials from the correct line. Elaborate performances making use of all kinds of media – big character posters, theatre, films, poetry, etc. – recalled the ‘bitterness’ of the past (before the communist triumph) and extolled the ‘sweetness’ of the present [though, as one official noted, ‘most comparisons of the present sweetness referred back to the period of the land reform, whereas remarks about the Great Leap Forward were ‘inclined to be abstract and without substance’,’ Leese (2011), p. 102], while presenting examples of communist martyrs for emulation. The focus was on generating emotion by ‘remembering hardships’ and then channeling that emotion against the enemies of the communist project to achieve bonding. There were also campaigns to emulate ‘soldiers of Mao Zedong thought,’ which encouraged status competition among soldiers who were already disposed to value revolutionary symbols (the heroes of Mao Zedong thought, like Stakhanovite workers in the Soviet Union, received media attention and other rewards), and hence provided a positive incentive to adopt the ‘correct’ sort of identity and behaviour, complementing the negative incentives provided by peer pressure in group study sessions or other collective interaction rituals.

The combination of peer pressure, genuine emotional experiences, and threats of discipline for recalcitrance was clearly powerful, yet the party was aware of the dangers of people merely ‘acting as if’ they believed (Wedeen 1998). Indeed, advice from higher ups indicated that ‘cadres were not to insist on formalities such as the weeping of participants as demonstration of their sincerity’ (Leese 2011, 100). But the very fact that such advice had to be given at all probably shows that lower-level cadres did insist on such performances just to be safe (not, perhaps, primarily to ‘weed out’ potentially opportunistic soldiers, but to signal their own loyalty to their immediate superiors). Yet this did not lead Mao to try to dampen flattery inflation; despite the danger of sycophancy, the emotional amplification ritual achieved proved useful.

Flattery Inflation and Cult Anarchy: The Cultural Revolution

From the army, the more intense forms of the cult spread to the broader population, accelerating as the Cultural Revolution started in 1966, and fed by a combination of threats from enthusiastic supporters of Mao and the demands for empowerment of ordinary people. Consider the story of how the ‘Little Red Book,’ which was printed more than a billion times between 1966 and 1969, spread. The Little Red Book (the *Quotations of Chairman Mao*) was at first confined to the army, but demand for it outside its confines was soon enormous. The reasons for this were twofold. First, political study campaigns in the countryside (which increased in the 1960s) required a focal text to mobilize people properly, and the *Quotations* provided one. But, more importantly, the *Quotations* also offered the ‘possibility of empowerment for non-party members’ (Leese 2011, 121). This is not because most people in the general population were genuinely devoted to Mao, but because the book could be used by people whose identities were not so tightly bound to the symbols of the revolution or to Mao to crack the ‘code’ that enabled one to act more or less safely within the highly unpredictable environment of the early cultural revolution.

This was a time where the merest slip of the tongue – and certainly the inability to recite an appropriate quotation from Mao – could result in beatings or worse by the roving bands of ‘Red Guards’ whose formation was encouraged by Mao to shake up the

party and promote the formation of a genuinely revolutionary ‘proletarian culture’. Red Guards would sometimes set up ‘temporary inspection offices’ on the streets and harass pedestrians about their knowledge of Mao’s works (see also Walder 2015, 278; Mittler 2012; Jiang 2010). The book, in other words, provided guidance about how to make a credible loyalty signal, which contributed to high demand for it; and the party enabled this demand by basically diverting the resources of the ‘entire publishing sector’ to printing Mao’s writings, ‘at the expense of every other print item, including schoolbooks’ (Leese 2011, 122).

Other rituals were of course important to the spread of the more intense forms of the cult outside the army. The eight ‘mass receptions’ of the Red Guards in 1966 were the most spectacular of these, though in some ways the least interesting. Though the Red Guards became the vanguard in the spread of the cult throughout Chinese society during the Cultural Revolution, the actual number of people who participated in these receptions would have been quite small relative to China’s total population, most of them impressionable young students who took the advantage of free train travel to get involved in something bigger than themselves. Under the circumstances, it is unsurprising that many of them reported ecstatic experiences on seeing Mao, which in turn cemented their identities as Red Guards; this sort of interaction ritual seems likely to produce this outcome fairly reliably, independently of any characteristics of the supposedly ‘charismatic’ figure.

As cult rituals spread and the chaos of the Cultural Revolution deepened, however, the party lost control over its symbols. Mao was no longer able or willing to ‘take’ a minimum bid as sufficient evidence of loyalty, leading to runaway flattery ‘hyperinflation.’ Different factions of Red Guards started using Mao’s image and words in incompatible ways, and new cult rituals emerged from the grass roots, sometimes from the enthusiasm of the genuinely committed, sometimes seemingly as protective talismans against the uncertainty and strife of the period. Everybody appealed to Mao to signal their revolutionary credentials, but there was no longer anyone capable of settling disputes over the credibility of these signals. Mao himself was not very helpful; whenever he spoke at all, his messages were often cryptic and did not really settle any important disputes.

The cult was now a ‘Red Queen’ race of wasteful signalling, rather than a carefully calibrated tool of mobilization or discipline, driven by a complex combination of genuine desires to signal loyalty and identity and fears for one’s security. Failure to conform to the arbitrary protocols of the cult put people at risk of being sentenced as an ‘active counterrevolutionary.’ There are many documented cases where minimal symbolic transgressions – for example, inadvertently defacing or throwing away a portrait of Mao, or displaying one that had been found ‘defective’ – resulted in incarceration or even death (Walder 2015, 278, 282; Dikötter 2016, ch. 8). In these circumstances, there was no ‘safe’ minimum loyalty signal, and competition to show commitment – both at the level of individual people, and at the level of party organizations – produced ever more bizarre manifestations of ‘love’ for the chairman.

By 1967, for example, statues of Mao first started to be built, something that CPC leaders, and Mao himself, had discouraged in the past, and still officially frowned upon. The statues were typically built by local factions without approval from the central party, and they were all 7.1 meters high and placed on a pedestal that was 5.16 meters high, for a total height of 12.26 meters. (26 December = Mao’s birthday, 1 July = the Party’s founding date, 16 May = the beginning of the cultural revolution. People arrived at this

precise convention for the statues without any centralized direction, merely through a signalling process). Later ‘Long Live the Victory of Mao Zedong Thought Halls’ were built on a grand scale, again without approval from the central party. Billions of Chairman Mao badges were produced by individual work units competing with each other, which were themselves subject to size inflation (“as the larger size of the badges came to be associated with greater loyalty to the CCP Chairman, ... badges with a diameter of 30 centimetres and greater came to be produced,” Leese 2011, 216); Zhou Enlai would grumble in 1969 about the enormous waste of resources this represented. Costly signalling demands kept escalating; some people took to pinning the badges directly on their skin, for example, and farmers sent ‘loyalty pigs’ to Mao as gifts (pigs with a shaved ‘loyalty’ character). Large black markets in Mao badges sprouted up overnight (Dikötter 2016, 99–100), testifying to their enormous value at the time.

Other rituals and performances were even more puzzling. There were ‘quotation gymnastics,’ a series of gymnastics exercises with a storyline based on Mao’s thought and involving praise of the ‘reddest red sun in our hearts,’ and ‘loyalty dances,’ which, like the quotation gymnastics, was ‘a grassroots invention’ designed to physically signal loyalty, and which spread ‘even to regions where public dancing was not part of the common culture and thus led to considerable public embarrassment’ (Leese 2011, 205). It was dangerous to refuse to participate in loyalty dances – even for the elderly or the graceless (Walder 2015, 281). Though the cult had been encouraged from above, many these new rituals were not authorized by the CPC Centre, and many of the leaders of the Cultural Revolution (for example, Kang Sheng and Jiang Qing of the Cultural Revolution Group, and occasionally even Mao himself) tried to curb their practice, or at best only grudgingly authorized them after the fact. From their perspective, these ‘grassroots’ practices and rituals were objectionable because they could not be controlled directly by them; they were part of a process of flattery inflation that had escaped their control.

Perhaps one of the most interesting manifestations of this inflationary process was the story of Mao’s mangoes, which seems so bizarre that it has received significant scholarly attention (Chau 2010; Dutton 2004):

On 5 August 1968, Mao received the Pakistani foreign minister Mian Arshad Hussain, who brought with him a basket of golden mangoes as gifts for the Chairman. Instead of eating the mangoes, Mao decided to give them to the Capital Worker and Peasant Mao Zedong Thought Propaganda Team ... that had earlier been sent to the Qinghua University in Beijing to rein in the rival Red Guard gangs. Two days later, on 7 August, the People’s Daily, the official news organ of the Communist Party-state, carried a report on the mango gift that included the following extra-long headline in extra-large font: ‘The greatest concern, the greatest trust, the greatest support, the greatest encouragement; our great leader Chairman Mao’s heart is always linked with the hearts of the masses; Chairman Mao gave the precious gifts given by a foreign friend to the Capital Worker and Peasant Mao Zedong Thought Propaganda Team’. (Chau 2010, 257)

An eyewitness then reported the ritual that a Beijing Textile Factory produced:

Mao gave the mangoes to Wang Dongxing, who divided them up, distributing one mango each to a number of leading factories in Beijing, including Beijing

Textile Factory, where I was then living. The workers at the factory held a huge ceremony, rich in the recitation of Mao's words, to welcome the arrival of the mango, then sealed the fruit in wax, hoping to preserve it for posterity. The mangoes became sacred relics, objects of veneration. The wax-covered fruit was placed on an altar in the factory auditorium, and workers lined up to file past it, solemnly bowing as they walked by. No one had thought to sterilize the mango before sealing it, however, and after a few days on display, it began to show signs of rot. The revolutionary committee of the factory retrieved the rotting mango, peeled it, then boiled the flesh in a huge pot of water. Mao again was greatly venerated, and the gift of the mango was lauded as evidence of the Chairman's deep concern for the workers. Then everyone in the factory filed by and each worker drank a spoonful of the water in which the sacred mango had been boiled. After that, the revolutionary committee ordered a wax model of the original mango. The replica was duly made and placed on the altar to replace the real fruit, and workers continued to file by, their veneration for the sacred object in no apparent way diminished. (Chau 2010, 258–59)

'Mango fever' then spread throughout the country. More replicas of the mangoes were produced, and ceremonies were organized to 'welcome' the mangoes (many of which placed in covered reliquaries that can still be found among the memorabilia of the Cultural Revolution). There were posters and badges with the mangoes, and a market in mango-themed products emerged, including a brand of cigarettes still produced today; even a film with the mangoes as a key plot theme was produced, *Song of the Mangoes* (Chau 2010, 259). The mangoes thus became the focus of intense interaction rituals.

Though genuine enthusiasm certainly was one reason for these apparently bizarre practices, it would be a mistake to think that most participation in these practices was motivated by genuine love. People did not suddenly become more devoted to Mao in 1966-1967 than before. Motivations were of course various (including simple curiosity: mangoes, for example, were uncommon in China in 1968, as Chau 2010, 262 notes), and there were certainly some people who were genuinely devoted to Mao – those who adopted the identity of 'Red Guards,' for example – but whatever people's motivations may have been they were clearly dominated by the need to signal loyalty against a background of others who were also furiously trying to signal loyalty for their own manifold reasons.

The clearest evidence of signalling behaviour is in fact the uniformity of the language used to flatter Mao ('down to the level of single phrases' over thousands of texts, p. 184: 'boundless hot love,' [or 'boundless adoration' for a less loaded translation], 'the reddest red sun in our hearts,' etc.); the language of flattery was a code to be mastered, not a way of expressing deeply held emotions. And this escalation of the cult was reinforced by the presence of a small core activist group that was quite capable of punishing real or imagined enemies. After all, the cult reached its heights during the 'Cleansing of the Ranks' campaign against supposed counterrevolutionaries in the party; for most people, 'taking part in public worship became a crucial element of surviving within a completely volatile situation dominated by witch hunts' (Leese 2011, 204–6).

The End of the Cult and its Resurgence as Red Nostalgia in Contemporary China

The party did eventually regain control over the symbols of the cult by increasing coercive penalties for diverging from approved signals. In essence, the party determined that only some arbitrary signals would be accepted as minimum loyalty bids, and all other signals would be rejected. As Leese notes, ‘deviations from the prescribed routines were regarded as disloyal behaviour and thus potentially engendered drastic consequences’ (2011, 199); but by re-establishing clear criteria about which signals would be accepted as credible shows of loyalty and which would not, the party gradually eliminated the uncertainty driving the ‘Red Queen’ races of the earlier period. By 1971, the party had regained some control over cult symbols, Lin Biao had fallen from grace, and the party even engaged in some flattery deflation, helped somewhat by the death of Mao in 1976. (Interestingly, there was not a great deal of spontaneous public grief at the time; most people were probably rather cynically disenchanted with Mao by then. The old rituals of the cult had lost their emotional power, presumably aided somewhat by the ‘standardizing’ efforts of the party, which routinized and formalized them).

Yet the symbols of the Mao cult still circulate today in various sorts of grassroots rituals, though without any clear dominant meaning. People still use pictures of Mao in the place of the traditional ‘stove god’, for example (Steinmüller 2010; Landsberger 2002), and Cultural Revolution memorabilia has enjoyed a certain resurgence. But, despite some recent encouragement of the Mao cult by Xi Jinping, the meaning of these symbols has fragmented, becoming only one of many ways a variety of identities and motivations – nationalism, mild rebellion against the 1989 status-quo, nostalgia, religiosity, etc.

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