

Selling Chairman Mao: Chinese Nationalism and the Cultural Economy of the Late Twentieth Century

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Introduction

Under Mao, nationalism, embedded in the rhetoric of revolution, was the predominant source of loyalty to the state. With the demise of Maoist leadership following his death, and hastened by Deng Xiaoping's de-Maoification initiatives of the early 80s, a relative lack of commitment to public, state-sponsored goals has become increasingly apparent among the people of China. For the past twenty-five years the Chinese Communist Party has struggled to establish a new foundation for itself, which, in the absence of revolutionary zeal, could serve the Party as an alternative source of legitimacy. Since 1978, when Deng Xiaoping, at the Eleventh Central Committee meeting, launched the first reform initiative, the Party has staked its legitimacy on its ability to guide China toward economic growth and material prosperity.

In order to get ahead economically China has needed to get along internationally, a course of action that has been accompanied by significant, often unwanted consequences. While the formula, "wealth follows openness," has guided China's state policy throughout the 80s and 90s, at the heart of reformist policy there is a worrisome dilemma that has not escaped the attention of Party leadership. On the one hand, the Party must anchor its legitimacy in national pride and foster it through a China-first rhetoric. On the other hand, in order for China to progress economically and thereby demonstrate its competency, the party must continually accommodate its policies to international treaties and regulatory schemes—joining the WTO in 2001 for instance. Consequently, the very thing that would provide evidence of the Party's successful transition to the modern age, namely, economic growth, demands a genuine openness to the international community that threatens both the political and cultural cohesiveness of the nation. Put simply, when people in Yunnan are wearing Reeboks, watching *Friends* and drinking Sprite, will the Party's "democratic dictatorship" suffice?

But, of course, internationalization is much more complex than this and its effects are often divergent. As Jonathan Ungar has noted, "the very success of the current thrust to make China rich and strong has begun to feed [a different sort of] Chinese pride"¹—a pride that is the result not of public programs, but of private ventures. While the entrepreneurial boldness of modern China must be seen as the direct result of early 1990s admonitions to "not be too cautious" in pursuing economic reform (the core principle behind the eighth Five-Year Plan launched in 1991), and was embodied best in Deng's infamously pragmatic statement about economic growth: that "It doesn't matter if the cat is

black or white, as long as it catches mice," through all of this the Party has actively maneuvered to reclaim this new entrepreneurial pride as its own creation. Attempts to use technological and economic successes to foster national solidarity have been numerous—seen perhaps most visibly, and recently, in China's space program and the PCR's successful bid to host the 2008 Olympics. But the pride generated by China's newfound economic development is broadly viewed internally as less and less the result of state programs, and more as the reward of individual entrepreneurship. It is, in other words, the pursuit of personal wealth and not a desire to "lift the nation" that increasingly motivates these ventures.

The threat posed to Party leadership by increasing individualism is clear: if the economy were to falter the residual, often cynical loyalty that the Party now enjoys would likely evaporate and blame for economic trouble would be placed squarely on the shoulders of a political party that for over a decade now has merely pretended to be socialist. The charade, in other words, would be at an end and with it the leadership of the CCP. As long as annual domestic growth hovers near 9% the prospects of unseating the Party would appear remote, but once the economy begins to stagnate, Beijing's leadership will become an obvious target. The Party, in other words, is living on borrowed time, and it knows it. As Sameena Ahmad stated in a recent article for *The Economist*, "Domestically, the government is well aware that its political acceptance derives solely from rapid economic growth, and is willing to do whatever is necessary to meet its internal benchmark."² Consequently, as political controls loosen and non-statist social forces assert themselves, the state is losing its ability to define the content of nationalism. As James Townsend observes, "the official gloss portraying a united people striving together for China's modernization does not jibe with the realities of Chinese behavior."³

In what follows, I will discuss the Chinese response to these domestic changes and to a new set of internal and external circumstances that occurred in the early nineties, including the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and, of course, the mass popular movements of 1989—not only in Beijing but also in major urban centers across the country. Rather than break with the past, as the Soviets had done, the state had to find a way of transforming itself without jettisoning the historical sources of its legitimacy. While the Soviet Union could re-invent itself under the rubric of de-Stalinization, China could not as readily "de-Maoize" since Mao represented both the "Lenin" and the "Stalin" of China.⁴ His legacy could not be expunged without endangering the ideological foundations of both the party and the nation. An array of cultural responses—some engineered by the state, but most produced by non-state actors—arose in the wake of these events. Among these responses, one of the most pervasive, and the one I will discuss here, was the transformation of the image of Chairman Mao. The Party had, of course, utilized Mao's image for many years, most notably during the years of the Cultural Revolution, but the content of this symbol was

changing. Faced with the dilemma of having to alter its policies to meet the demands of an increasingly market driven world and yet, at the same time, obliged to preserve the continuity of its claim to leadership, the Party effectively redefined the *content* of Mao's symbolic representation without altering the *form* of this symbol, namely, the Mao-image itself. Mao was quickly re-mythologized by the Deng leadership, turned into a patriarchal figurehead whose Marxist, anti-market philosophy—now subject to a degree of official public criticism—was replaced by a familial devotion often expressed in an oddly pop-culture manner. Mao the political theorist was being replaced by Mao the founding father. In tandem with this, the Chinese leadership repackaged Mao's ideas as “preparatory” and “foundational,” enabling the state to avoid the wholesale disposal of its communist heritage by finessing Maoist doctrine in such a way that, for instance, market economics could be relentlessly pitched as “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” To render the transition from communism to capitalism seamless, China's leadership reshaped Mao's legacy, gently bringing it into line with an increasingly market oriented population who likewise had to be convinced that, while “to get rich is glorious,” to do so did not mean straying from Mao's vision.

As I mentioned above, while the changing symbolic meaning of the Mao-image was only partially orchestrated by the state, much of the transformation was carried out by the private sector which got caught up in the so-called “Maocraze” of the early nineties. The undoubtedly complex interplay between state policies regarding Mao's legacy and private sector fads covers far too much ground to examine carefully in this paper, and the range of knowledge required to do so is in any case, beyond my capacity. What I will do is pose a few questions and hypotheses to suggest that the selling of Mao in the 1990s helped preserve Party legitimacy in the midst of economic globalization, and remains today an important component of Chinese nationalism—fifty years after the founding of the PRC.

Nationalism and Culturalism

Before I discuss how the representation of Mao in the 1990s helped finesse Chinese national identity, it is important to take a moment and be clear about what exactly one means by a “nation.” One must bear in mind that nations need not be thought of exclusively in terms of states. The two terms have no internal or natural connection. Though frequently associated, as in the use of the term “nation-state,” this association is conventional, not essential. Consequently, any discussion of the nation must bear in mind that, while the state is fundamentally a mode of political organization, the nation is primarily a cultural phenomenon—a group of people who differentiate themselves from others on the basis of a set of perceived cultural differences. While this is certainly *not* to say that nations and national sentiment are apolitical, certainly they are, it is nonetheless important to recognize that nations are more deeply associated with a people's shared cultural self-understanding than they are with political institutions or even citizenship. To the extent that

the nation is a necessity of state-building, its character is ultimately determined by the practical need for the state to represent something other than itself.

Having said this, however, the scholarly literature on Chinese nationalism very often speaks of the nation as being synonymous with the state. Scholarship concerning the modern history of China repeatedly references the strong and exceptionally durable cultural tradition that dominated two thousand years of Chinese history. The pervasive influence of this tradition on Chinese society is referred to in the literature as “culturalism” and is generally discussed in *contrast* to “nationalism” which, it is argued, does not appear in China until the waning years of the Qing dynasty. “The core proposition,” Townsend writes, “is that a set of ideas labeled culturalism dominated traditional China, was incompatible with modern nationalism, and yielded only under the assault of imperialism and Western ideas to a new nationalist way of thinking.”⁵ And as James Harrison explains, “the traditional Chinese self-image has generally been defined as culturalism, based on a common historical heritage and acceptance of shared beliefs, not as nationalism, based on the modern concept of the nation-state.”⁶ The traditional Chinese self-image, therefore, attaches supreme loyalty to the culture itself, not to the state, and thus “there can be no justification for abandoning or even changing the cultural tradition in order to strengthen the state.”⁷

While I will not spend time here discussing the merits of this view or, for instance, whether it is indicative of a sort of Chinese exceptionalism, it does seem that discussions of Chinese nationalism have largely used the term culturalism to substitute for, and to serve the same role as, nationalism. Either way, and despite the notorious definitional confusion concerning nationalism—that between “statists” and “ethnicists,” for instance—I will follow Ernest Gellner's general sentiment that nationalism is the “striving to make culture and polity congruent.”⁸

According to the literature, it is generally agreed that the critical transition period from culturalism to nationalism occurred in the late Qing and early Republican periods, particularly the years between 1895, when defeat by Japan galvanized Chinese patriotism, and 1919, when the May Fourth movement brought culturalism to an end. The recent post-Mao period, I would like to suggest, represents an equally significant transition during which nationalism was reconfigured in response to the increasingly “outward” orientation of China during the 1980s and 90s, helping to create a more confident, often assertive form of Chinese nationalism which, among other things, has had to overcome the residual prominence in communist doctrine of class struggle and its considerable impact on national solidarity. And one should not forget that the PRC is a multi-cultural, even multi-national state with its non-Han Chinese population, approximately 8% of its overall population, divided officially among fifty-five minority nationalities—some of which, like the Tibetans and, increasingly, the Muslim minorities groups in the far west, brandish a strong ethnic consciousness. But despite these exceptions, China has

managed to transition out of the Maoist era and it has done so, in part, by repackaging aspects of its national self-image.

The MaoCraze

I recall that in spring of 1992, while on my regular bike ride into downtown Jinan, I was confronted by a set of new, state-sanctioned billboards that had sprung up along my route. They boasted of China's unbroken 5,000-year history (a history which less than two decades earlier, during the height of the Cultural Revolution, was in the process of being eradicated), and in the process of celebrating China's past these large signs graciously invited tourists to visit China and see this history for themselves. But it struck me: presumably these signs were not displayed for the benefit of would-be foreign tourists who would have to *already* be visiting China to see them. Instead, I suspect, these signs were for internal eyes. I mention this because it is indicative of an effort on the part of China to repackage itself, to brand itself as an open nation committed to things international. But the selling of China had to take place not only overseas, but at home as well—indeed, in a small but telling event, the name of the state's Propaganda Department was recently changed to the Publicity Department. And one of the ways in which this repackaging was accomplished, as I have mentioned, was to redefine the dominant symbols of Chinese nationalism during the Mao years, but to do so without threatening the legacy of communist China and, most importantly, the political Party that had emerged from it.

With the end of the Cold War and the subsequent rollback of superpower influences throughout the developing world, countries across the globe were being gripped by renewed national aspirations and China found itself affected by this global trend. The rapid dismantling of strict Maoist ideological beliefs after 1991 and the undeniable end of the communist era compelled Party leadership to draw upon China's long history, cultural heritage and other traditional forms of national sentiment to serve as a new unifying ideology. But despite these state sponsored initiatives, the Party had lost much of its capacity to embody the spirit of patriotism. By the mid-1990s patriotic sentiment was no longer exclusively in the hands of the Party and its propagandists, and soon symbols of national pride were beginning to appear in non-state arenas, beyond the control of official culture.

During this time, from the late 1980s and on into the 90s, China experienced a nationwide revival of interest in Mao which came to be known as the "MaoCraze." Unlike the first Mao craze of the Cultural Revolution, this one was not heavily state sponsored, but was largely a popular movement that rose from the streets. In the aftermath of both Tiananmen and the Soviet Union's demise, many within China hungered for strong leadership and, more specifically, for a powerful figure capable of guiding China through this period of crisis. Put simply, China's masses wished for a leader who could to square off against the United States given the pervasive belief that China would be forced to step into the shoes left by the Soviets to play out the last chapter of

the Cold War. To an extent, the early ninety's nostalgia for Mao Zedong was a reflection of these mass sentiments; for Mao was a figure who, despite his flaws, stood firm against western influences. And while the collapse of Soviet Russia was a political blow to China on the world stage, the social and economic plight that Russia experienced soon after its liberalization served as a potent reminder to those who supported the 1989 student movement, that if China had undergone a similarly sudden political change the nation may well have succumbed to the same disorder that so quickly devastated communist Russia.⁹

For the Party, the new enthusiasm for Mao's image was welcomed as a symbol of economic and social stability, egalitarianism, and national pride at a time when, in addition to external pressures, Chinese society was becoming increasingly characterized by new set of class divisions. The exact origins of the Mao Craze are uncertain, but most commentators locate its inception in South China when laminated images of the chairman began to appear hanging from the rearview mirrors of trucks and taxis. The trend caught on quickly and, as Geremie Barmé explains, soon spread throughout the country,

According to a story that was to become one of China's most widely told urban myths, the driver of a vehicle involved in a serious traffic accident in Shenzhen that left a number of people dead, survived unscathed because he had a picture of Mao on the dashboard. . . . Shortly after the tale began spreading, laminated images of Mao appeared in vehicles in cities, towns and villages throughout China.¹⁰

Mao's image, in other words, was widely attributed with powers of supernatural protection—a Saint Christopher of the new China.



Following the appearance of these images and the craze they started, the statistics regarding official portraits indicate that not only were the people acquiring Mao's portraits at a remarkable rate, but in doing so were also redefining the role of Mao Zedong would play in Chinese social and political life. Regarding the dramatic increase in the production of Mao images, Barmé reports that, while "in 1989 a mere 370,000 copies of the official portrait of Mao had been printed. In 1990 the number rose dramatically 22.95 million, of which 19.93 million were sold. In 1991 and

number hit 50 million.”¹¹ And in addition to printed images, Mao’s likeness appeared on everything from T-shirts to yo-yos, and for a period of time CCTV even ran a Mao quiz show. By the mid-1990s, however, the grassroots popularity of Mao was being utilized by the business community in marketing campaigns and product labeling. The Party acted quickly to prevent this profiteering and in what I take to be a direct attempt to preserve the veneration of Mao as a saint-like figure as well as to prevent the popular interest in Mao from turning into a passing fashion, the exploitation of Mao’s image in advertising was officially banned in 1994 with the passage of China’s advertising law.¹² Although for those who have been to Yangshou outside of Guilin, there was, in 1991, and to the best of my knowledge still remains a café called “Mickey Mao’s” which represents, for me at least, and early and quintessential marketing of the Mao-image.



In conclusion, then, balancing the economic need to engage the outside world with the political need to solidify an internal patriotism remains the fundamental problem of the post-Mao Communist Party. It is the often conflicting need to remain internally coherent and externally opened that has governed the perplexing rhetoric of the CCP during the last 20 years. Remarketing on this the *China Daily*, in a June 1991 quotes the then General Secretary, Jiang Zemin,

The creation of the road of building socialism with Chinese characteristics and the formation of its theory, line, and policies indicate that China’s socialist cause has entered a new stage of development.¹³

And then, in what had become, and remains, a rhetorical balancing act, *China Daily*, reported Jiang’s statement from a March 1992 Politburo meeting:

To judge whether a move is ‘socialist’ or ‘capitalist’ will depend mainly on whether it will benefit the development of the productive forces under socialism, the enhancement of the comprehensive national strength of our socialist country and the promotion of the living standard of the people.¹⁴

The ironic cultural effect of this bifurcated agenda has been the selling of Chairman Mao—that is, a fascination with the quintessential image of national unity that is being fed by the wholesale marketing of the Mao-image according to very straightforward capitalist techniques. The blurring of Mao with capitalism is the cultural effect of a political strategy that seeks to accommodate both an outdated Communist Party dogma and international capitalism. The result has been a precarious equivocation. Terms have been redefined, legacies have been reinterpreted, and histories have been rewritten in a tenuous effort to keep the party leadership and its doctrine relevant. Above all, it is the party’s fear of succumbing to the same calamitous fate as the Soviet Union that has forced it to embark on this hazardous rhetorical strategy. The selling of Chairman Mao, although perhaps not directed from Beijing, has been, and in many ways continues to be, encouraged.

¹Jonathan Ungar, “Introduction,” in *Chinese Nationalism*, ed. Jonathan Ungar (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), xi-xii.

²Sameena Ahmad, “Behind the Mask,” *The Economist* (March 20-26, 2004): 3.

³James Townsend, “Chinese Nationalism,” in *Chinese Nationalism*, ed. Jonathan Ungar (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), 22.

⁴Geremie Barme, *Shades of Mao* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), 13.

⁵James Townsend, “Chinese Nationalism,” in *Chinese Nationalism*, ed. Jonathan Ungar (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), 1.

⁶James Harrison, *Modern Chinese Nationalism* (New York: Research Institute on Modern Asia, 1969), 2. Quoted in James Townsend, “Chinese Nationalism,” in *Chinese Nationalism*, ed. Jonathan Ungar (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), 2.

⁷James Townsend, “Chinese Nationalism,” in *Chinese Nationalism*, ed. Jonathan Ungar (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), 2.

⁸Ernst Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 43

⁹See Geremie Barmé, “To Screw Foreigners is Patriotic,” in *Chinese Nationalism*, ed. Jonathan Ungar (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), 187.

¹⁰Geremie Barmé, *Shades of Mao* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), 22.

¹¹Geremie Barmé, *Shades of Mao* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), 9.

¹²Geremie Barmé, *Shades of Mao* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), 35.

¹³“Jiang: China’s Socialism Enters a New Stage,” *China Daily* (June 1991).

¹⁴“Politburo Meeting Vows to Accelerate Opening, Reforms,” *China Daily* (March, 13, 1992).