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The return of Mao: a new threat to China's politics

The dictator is enjoying a surge of popularity. But the rise of this neo-Maoist movement could upend China's stability



Two tourists pose for a photograph in front of a statue of the young Mao Zedong in Changsha, Hunan province. © WassinkLundgren

SEPTEMBER 30, 2016 by: **Jamil Anderlini**

A heavy pall of pollution hangs over Tiananmen Square and from a distance the giant portrait of [Mao Zedong](http://www.ft.com/topics/people/Mao_Zedong) above the entrance to the Forbidden City looks a little smudged. It is 8am and the temperature in central Beijing is already approaching 30C. But the heat and smog are no deterrent to the thousands of people waiting in hour-long queues to pay respects to the preserved body of the “great helmsman”. Since his death 40 years

ago, Chairman Mao's corpse — or, more likely, a wax replica — has been on display in a purpose-built mausoleum in the geographic and figurative heart of the Chinese capital. Well over 200 million people have visited.

In the west, Mao is understood chiefly as China's "Red Emperor" — a vicious dictator who fostered an extreme personality cult, launched the disastrous Cultural Revolution and masterminded a "Great Leap Forward" that resulted in the worst famine in history. Experts estimate that Mao was responsible for between 40 million and 70 million deaths in peacetime — more than Hitler and Stalin combined. However, while Hitler, Stalin and most of the other totalitarian dictators of the 20th century were repudiated after their deaths, Mao remains a central figure in modern [China \(http://www.ft.com/world/asia-pacific/china\)](http://www.ft.com/world/asia-pacific/china). The Communist party he helped found in 1921 and the authoritarian Leninist political system he established in 1949 still run the country. "Mao Zedong Thought" is enshrined in the party's constitution and, since 1999, his face has adorned most banknotes (something he refused to allow during his lifetime).

But this whitewashing of Mao's legacy is a risky strategy. Thanks to the party's tight control over education, media and all public discourse, most people in China know very little of Mao's terrible mistakes. Indeed, the dictator is more popular today than at any time since his death. Last year nearly 17 million people made pilgrimages to his home town — Shaoshan — in rural central China. In the mid-1980s, barely 60,000 undertook the journey.

China has also seen the rise of a vocal political movement of "neo-Maoists" — militant leftists who espouse many of the utopian egalitarian ideas that China's current leaders have largely abandoned. These neo-Maoists are by definition an underground movement, which makes it very difficult to estimate their numbers, but public petitions sympathetic to their cause have garnered tens of thousands of signatures in recent years. Several experts believe a neo-Maoist candidate would probably win a general election in China today, should free elections ever be

allowed. This means the movement could enjoy the sympathy of hundreds of millions of China's 1.4 billion people. As such, it poses one of the biggest threats facing the authoritarian system in the world's most populous nation today.

"Speed up comrades, walk forward," a young man in a clean white shirt with a bullhorn yells at the tourists lined up in Tiananmen Square, many of whom bow three times before a large Mao statue as they enter the mausoleum. Visitors are not allowed to take photos and tall paramilitary officers shoo people along, ensuring nobody gets more than a quick glimpse of the figure wrapped in the hammer and sickle flag and laid out in a crystal coffin behind a glass wall. Just a kilometre away is the heavily guarded compound where China's current leaders work and live.

Chairman Mao was a truly great man but this is not the country he dreamt of, this is not real communism

University lecturer interviewed in Tiananmen Square

Many of the people visiting Mao's remains have been left behind by China's economic boom in recent decades. They see Mao as a symbol of a simpler, fairer society — a time when everyone was poorer but at least they were equally poor. Those who have studied the resurgence in Mao's

popularity in China see it as part of a broader global phenomenon that encompasses the appeal of Donald Trump in the US, Brexit in the UK and populist politicians on the left and right in Europe. At a time of sharp dislocation and intense resentment towards elites, people in many countries are attracted by nostalgia and tradition. For ordinary people in China, that means Mao and the classless society he envisioned.



Tourists in front of Chairman Mao's iconic portrait overlooking Tiananmen Square in Beijing © WassinkLundgren

“Chairman Mao was a truly great man but this is not the country he dreamt of, this is not real communism,” says a university lecturer in his 30s who has travelled from central China to Beijing to pay his respects to the former dictator. “The economy today is dominated by monopoly industries controlled by the children of senior officials. The current government, led by [Xi Jinping](http://www.ft.com/topics/people/Xi_Jinping) (http://www.ft.com/topics/people/Xi_Jinping), is very bad.” In Mao’s time, talking publicly like this about the ruler would have been grounds for summary execution. Under President Xi, who has overseen a [crackdown on free speech](https://www.ft.com/content/613fd2e0-f006-11e5-aff5-19b4e253664a) (<https://www.ft.com/content/613fd2e0-f006-11e5-aff5-19b4e253664a>), it could still result in subversion charges and a prison sentence.

But President Xi himself has done possibly more than anyone to foster the current Maoist revival. Since he became president in late 2012, he has often seemed to channel Mao — quoting him extensively and even echoing some of his ideas. Xi has

made numerous televised pilgrimages to important revolutionary sites, including the mausoleum in Tiananmen Square, and commanded party officials to “forever hold high the banner of Mao Zedong Thought”. He has also railed against “hostile foreign forces” with a vehemence not seen since Mao’s time, when China fought several wars with its neighbours and the west.



President Xi at a symposium commemorating the 120th anniversary of Mao's birth, Beijing, December 26 2013 © Xinhua / Alamy Stock Photo

“Xi Jinping has once again made Mao Zedong Thought a matter of fundamental importance; he uses a great number of Mao’s comments in his speeches and comments,” says Zhang Hongliang, an economics professor at the Central University for Minorities in Beijing and one of the most prominent leaders of the

neo-Maoist movement. “You can see he is very familiar with Mao’s work and Mao’s thought and he worships it very much,” he adds approvingly.

This presidential embrace of Mao has surprised many in China, given that the dictator was personally responsible for the awful suffering experienced by Xi’s own family. The president’s father, Xi Zhongxun, was a Communist guerrilla leader who served as deputy prime minister in the late 1950s. But he was purged in 1962 and spent nearly a decade in prison. Xi Jinping was just 13 when Mao unleashed the Cultural Revolution in 1966. As the son of a “bad element”, he was persecuted, imprisoned and eventually sent to live in a flea-infested cave in the impoverished countryside. His family was not officially rehabilitated until 1978 — two years after Mao’s death brought the Cultural Revolution to an end.



A shop in Shaoshan, Mao's hometown, sells statues of him and portraits of President Xi Jinping © WassinkLundgren

Xi’s embrace of Mao is also puzzling because of the danger inherent in reminding people of the concepts he stood for. After all, Mao was a romantic revolutionary

who called on workers and peasants to take up arms and overthrow the ossified authoritarian system that concentrated wealth in the hands of the powerful. And while it still calls itself communist, the Chinese government has abandoned almost all of the economic and social ideals that Mao espoused. Xi himself, like many of his colleagues, has supported free-market reforms that Mao would have loathed.

There is no doubt that Mao would be horrified by modern China, with its stark inequality, rampant commercialism and the lack of rights for workers and peasant farmers. China was one of the poorest but most equal societies in the world in the 1980s but today it is one of the most unequal, with the richest 1 per cent of households owning a third of the country's wealth. In terms of income, communist China is now far less equal than the capitalist US and the only large countries with worse income inequality are South Africa and Brazil.

[President] Xi has made 'Mao Zedong Thought' a matter of fundamental importance once again; he uses a great number of Mao's comments in his speeches
Zhang Hongliang, economics professor

"Mao would be very displeased at the way in which China became rich, with some making large amounts of money while others stay poor," says Mao Yushi, the 87-year-old "godfather" of modern Chinese economics (no relation to the late dictator). The pro-market economist was labelled a "rightist" in one of Mao's purges

in the late 1950s and spent two decades being tortured as a prisoner in and out of China's gulags. In the past few years, his work has been censored and he has become a prominent target of neo-Maoists, who have called for him to be arrested on subversion charges for criticising Mao.

"Xi Jinping is a 'red princeling' [as the children of revolutionary heroes are known]. So much of his own power comes from the history of the party and because of this he cannot criticise Mao," Mao Yushi says in an interview in his small, cluttered apartment in west Beijing. But, he adds, President Xi also "fears that young people

will begin to believe in Mao Zedong Thought and will want equality”. This contradiction between the party’s need to glorify its founder in order to shore up its legitimacy and the fear that by doing so it could, to quote Karl Marx, “be sowing the seeds of its own destruction” is more than just theoretical.

In February last year a group of self-styled “Chinese Maoist communists” from 13 provinces and cities held a two-day secret meeting in Luoyang City in central China’s Henan province. The manifesto they published afterwards online was nothing less than a call for revolution to overthrow the current system, which they claimed had evolved into a “bourgeois fascist dictatorship led by bureaucrat monopolist capitalists”.



Tourists in Shaoshan © WassinkLundgren

What China has today is “exactly the worst kind of capitalism that Mao warned would result from revisionism”, and “a new socialist revolution is the only method to reverse the restoration of capitalism”, the group warned in its manifesto. It pledged to mobilise the masses and said the best chance of success lay in fomenting

rebellion among workers and peasants in China's large cities. Even more ominously for President Xi, the group also claimed to enjoy "loving care, support and guidance" from "old comrades" and "proletarian revolutionary families from the earlier generation— — an apparent reference to backing from party elders and powerful political families.

A decade ago, even the suggestion of a Maoist revolutionary uprising would have seemed preposterous. But those who have studied the neo-Maoist phenomenon say these groups pose a big threat to the modern Communist party. "Over the past decade the so-called neo-Maoists have grown to become the most significant political movement in China, and one that attracts support both from within the party and at the grass roots level," says Jude Blanchette, author of an upcoming book on the rise of China's neo-Maoists. "For the ruling elite, an increasingly powerful leftwing flank brings with it the threat of delegitimation. So the Chinese Communist party finds itself in a Catch-22: crush the neo-Maoists and it is negating its own revolutionary roots, yet allow them to operate untethered and it risks a populist revolt."

The party is in a Catch-22: crush the neo-Maoists and it negates its roots; allow them to operate untethered and it risks a populist revolt

Jude Blanchette, author

In response to the group that met in Luoyang last year, President Xi's government cracked down fast, hard and also very quietly. Several supporters and one opponent of the neo-Maoists said many of those involved in the meeting were detained and some sentenced to

prison. For now, the "revolution" is being fought mainly in the realm of ideology and there is no evidence that any neo-Maoist groups have access to weapons or are capable of launching the kind of guerrilla war that brought Mao and the Communist party to power. But China's leaders are well aware of how a potent political movement can start from very humble roots. "Guess how the Chinese

Communist party started?” says Blanchette. “It was 12 dudes in a room in Shanghai talking about taking over the country.”

Given this context, President Xi's emulation of Mao looks more like an attempt to placate powerful critics on the left and neutralise an embryonic popular uprising than an effort to return to the Mao era. While he has gone further than any other Chinese leader in the past four decades in praising Mao, Xi has still tried to strike a balance. “Revolutionary leaders are not gods but human beings. We cannot worship them like gods,” he said in a carefully calibrated speech to mark the 120th anniversary of Mao's birth on December 26 2013. But “neither can we totally repudiate them and erase their historical feats just because they made mistakes”.



The chair in which Mao received foreign leaders, among them Richard Nixon (middle photograph), Shaoshan museum © WassinkLundgren

It is an uncomfortable and, to some, unfathomable fact that the rise of the neo-Maoist movement and Mao's soaring popularity actually predate President Xi's tenure and his attempts to lionise the dictator. Mao's ideas fell out of favour almost immediately after his death. As recently as a decade ago, most educated people thought of him as an embarrassing anachronism at best.

A few nouveau-riche people with grudges to bear have worked tirelessly to vilify Mao. The garish aspects of modern Chinese society, those things that make ordinary folks indignant... this hideous mess could not have been when Mao was alive!

Sima Nan, leading neo-Maoist

But in 2003, several of the most influential neo-Maoist websites in China were established, just two years after the Communist party formally allowed capitalists to join its ranks. Today these sites have tens of millions of visitors and the most public advocates of neo-Maoism attract millions of followers on social media.

Sima Nan is a leading neo-Maoist and celebrity pundit with a million followers on China's equivalent of Twitter. "In recent years a few nouveau-riche people with grudges to bear have worked tirelessly to vilify Mao Zedong, to fabricate a lot of nonsense, to smear Mao's image," he says. "Those garish aspects of modern Chinese society, those things that make ordinary folks indignant . . . this hideous mess could not have been when Mao was alive!"

Most neo-Maoists and the people who study them see the ability to reach China's more than 700 million internet users as the most important factor driving this phenomenon. "Ironically, without the internet there would be no modern Maoist movement," says Blanchette. "Hailed in the west as a tool for liberating oppressed peoples from outdated ideologies like Marxism, for the neo-Maoists it presents the means to wage an asymmetrical war with the 'capitalist roaders' who have invaded the once-revolutionary Communist party and now control the levers of state power."



Rice farmers during the Great Leap Forward, a policy that caused famine rather than economic development © Keystone-France/Getty

The neo-Maoist message does appear to be striking a chord among vast numbers of Chinese in a way that calls for western-style democratic reforms have not. In polls run on four of China's largest web portals last year, more than 80 per cent of the 1.1 million respondents said they supported the Cultural Revolution or were nostalgic for it.

Part of Mao's surging popularity is due to very real achievements. Even some of his staunchest critics admire how he ended more than a century of weakness and colonial domination by Japan and the west. He also oversaw a period in which life expectancy in China nearly doubled and literacy and women's rights improved dramatically. But nostalgia for the Mao era also reflects the fact that younger Chinese have never been taught the whole story. The Cultural Revolution, Great Leap Forward and 1989 Tiananmen massacre are some of the many topics forbidden in Chinese classrooms. Academics say it is effectively impossible to publish anything other than sanitised hagiographies of Mao, while state-media-

produced TV shows focus on the heroic revolutionary period before he came to power.



Mao speaking at Kangdah Cave University, 1939 © Hulton Archive/Getty Images

“Anyone younger than 50 in China basically has no idea what happened under Mao and they all believe he was great and good because that is what they see on TV and read in books,” says Yang Jisheng, a former state media journalist whose book *Tombstone* is a definitive account of the famine caused by the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s. Yang estimates up to 36 million people died of starvation as Mao ordered peasant farmers to melt their tools in backyard furnaces to make useless steel and officials reported ever-higher fictional crop yields. Other historians estimate up to 45 million died in the famine. Yang’s book is banned in China and he is under orders from the government not to speak publicly.

The only official verdict on Mao’s devastating legacy came in 1981, when the party issued a “resolution on certain

The neo-Maoists say the Great Leap famine never happened, that it was a rumour started by the CIA
Yin Hongbiao, professor at Peking University

questions in the history of our party since the founding of the republic". While it glossed over the Great Leap Forward, the resolution did say the Cultural Revolution

"was initiated and led by Comrade Mao Zedong and was responsible for the most severe setback and the heaviest losses suffered by the party, the state and the people". It concluded, however, that Mao's "contributions to the Chinese revolution far outweigh his mistakes. His merits are primary and his errors secondary."

Today, many of the neo-Maoists and their powerful supporters would like to see a reappraisal of this resolution to erase even that limited criticism. "The neo-Maoists say the Great Leap famine never happened, that it was a rumour started by the CIA," says Yin Hongbiao, a professor at China's elite Peking University and one of the leading experts on the Cultural Revolution. Yin was himself a member of the Red Guards, the gangs of students who humiliated, attacked and in some cases killed teachers and government cadres on Mao's orders between 1966 and 1969. He later spent nine and a half years in a coal mine after Mao sent more than 17 million Red Guards to the countryside to "learn from the masses".



A wax-figure representation of Mao proclaiming the People's Republic of China, October 1 1949, Shaoshan museum © WassinkLundgren

“For the Communist party of China, Mao is both Stalin and Lenin combined; they say the mistakes he made in his later years were Stalin but they still want the Lenin part, the founding-father figure; they don't have anyone else but Mao,” Yin says in an interview in his office on the university campus. He says many older intellectuals and officials are wary about the current Maoist revival because of their own experiences in the Cultural Revolution.

But it is precisely the fact that Mao encouraged workers and peasants to attack the elites — political leaders, intellectuals, professionals and well-educated people from formerly wealthy families — that makes many ordinary people so nostalgic for that period of political chaos. Like many of those attracted by populist political movements in the west, the people turning to neo-Maoism in China have mostly missed out on the fruits of globalisation. They are angry at the establishment, at rising inequality and the failures of capitalism and they long for an earlier, simpler time, even if that never really existed.



Cups in a Tiananmen Square souvenir shop depicting Mao (left) and President Xi © WassinkLundgren

A tendency to vilify foreigners and appeal to narrow nationalism is obvious among the neo-Maoists, who believe Mao was much more willing than current leaders to stick up to other countries, in particular the US. “Mao freed China from colonialism and he stood up to the west, he was really great,” says Guo Nianshun, a 24-year-old student at Peking University. “Without him we would not have the modern, strong China we have today.”

The Maoist revival also has a pseudo-religious, mystical dimension, which seems particularly incongruous given Mao's hatred of organised religion. “Mao Zedong stood for the people, for the folks of the lowest level, so Mao has become the people's Mao,” says Zhang Hongliang, the neo-Maoist leader. “This is somewhat like Jesus of Christianity; at the start, Jesus was a poor person's Jesus, the public's Jesus. With the strength of this public force, Christianity came to rule and be the western powers' guiding ideology.”



A statue of Chinese revolutionary Liu Shaoqi, Changsha © WassinkLundgren

This deification makes more sense when you put it in the context of Chinese folk tradition and the extreme personality cult of Mao's later years. Throughout Chinese history, great emperors and statesmen have often been sanctified: in Mao's case this happened during the Cultural Revolution. In a particularly febrile episode in 1968, much of the country began worshipping mangoes because Mao had given a case of the fruit to some factory workers as a gift. Most ordinary people kept a shrine to Mao in their homes and many structured their day around it: praying for instructions in the morning, thanking the Chairman for his kindness at noon and reporting back to him at night. These rituals were often accompanied by a bizarre, officially sanctioned "loyalty dance".

Everyone around here believes in Mao. It's definitely a kind of religious belief
Peng Kai, a taxi driver

The place where this revival of quasi-religious devotion to Mao is most apparent today is in the village of Shaoshan, in a rural part of Hunan

province in southern China. This is where Mao was born and raised in a well-off peasant farming family and it is one of the most important pilgrimage sites in China — a place where rampant commercial exploitation of Mao's image wrestles with the urge to deify the local boy turned emperor. A talisman bearing Mao's likeness hangs from the rear-view mirror or sits on the dashboard of almost every car and truck in Shaoshan. The locals say it keeps them safe on China's notoriously dangerous roads. "Everyone around here believes in Mao," says Peng Kai, 28, a taxi driver. "It's definitely a kind of religious belief."



Mao's study, Shaoshan museum © WassinkLundgren

During Chinese new year last February, more than 500,000 visitors descended on the town of 110,000 people, prompting a traffic jam that lasted 10 days. Virtually all of those who come here bow, pray and lay flowers before the giant bronze statue erected by the government in the enormous, purpose-built Mao Zedong Square. Cultural Revolution-era songs comparing Mao to the "red sun in our hearts" blast from the base of the statue. Most of the locals speak of Mao in overtly religious

terms and the hordes of commercial tour guides recount various “miracles” that occurred in his life as they try to bully tourists into buying overpriced pictures. Since President Xi took power, a huge new “memorial hall” and separate “relic museum” have opened and a massive transport hub is under construction.

In keeping with Xi's current [anti-corruption campaign](https://www.ft.com/content/81a42068-58eb-11e3-a7cb-00144feabdco) (<https://www.ft.com/content/81a42068-58eb-11e3-a7cb-00144feabdco>), the government-run museums emphasise Mao's frugality and incorruptibility. In the glass display cases are some of Mao's old socks, a belt he supposedly wore for two decades and the “patched trousers” he wore to meet British prime minister Clement Attlee in 1954. The actual house where Mao was born is a large thatched courtyard complex with an atmosphere somewhere between Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity and Elvis Presley's mansion at Graceland.



Mao's childhood home in Shaoshan © WassinkLundgren

In 1957, Mao said “the question of which will win out, socialism or capitalism, is still not really settled”. Today this question has been comprehensively settled in

favour of the latter in his home town, and throughout the country. In a Mao memorabilia shop in Shaoshan, the 53-year-old proprietor Zhou Guanghua speaks of Mao fondly but also remembers when all private enterprise was completely banned and people struggled to feed themselves.

“When I tell my 20-year-old son that we had no rice to eat when I was young, he asks why we didn't eat meat instead,” says Zhou. “The country today is so much richer and young people have no idea what it was like when Mao was in charge.” Zhou grew up in the Cultural Revolution, when the only thing he learnt at school was how to shout slogans such as “Smash American imperialism” and “Long live Chairman Mao”. These days, he does a decent trade selling statues, posters, mugs and other items emblazoned with Mao's image.



*A mass rally outside the Gate of Heavenly Peace, Tiananmen, during the Cultural Revolution, late 1960s
© Bettmann/Getty Images*

For those whose lives were destroyed by Mao's misguided policies and vicious purges, there is a delicious irony in the fact that he has become a symbol of

commercialism and folk religion, two of the things he fought against his whole life. But these people also worry that President Xi and his government are treading a dangerous path by trying to encourage veneration of Mao while suppressing the actual ideas he espoused. "With one hand the leadership tries to cover up Mao's mistakes, while with the other they control attempts to popularise Mao's ideas," says Mao Yushi, the old "rightist" economist. "His ideas have great power, but those ideas should also worry the party very much."

Jamil Anderlini is the FT's Asia editor. Additional reporting by Christian Shepherd

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