For truly great men
Look to this age alone
—Mao Zedong

SHADES
OF MAO

THE POSTHUMOUS CULT OF THE GREAT LEADER

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When the leaders of the Communist Party were deliberating the official appraisal of the Mao years in 1980, Deng Xiaoping made a number of gnomic pronouncements which determined the tenor of the final Central Committee document on Mao’s “errors” and post-1949 Chinese history.1

The banner of Mao Zedong Thought can never be discarded. To throw it away would be nothing less than to negate the glorious history of our Party... It would be ill-advised to say too much about Comrade Mao Zedong’s errors. To say too much would be to blacken Comrade Mao, and that would blacken the country itself. That would go against history. 25 October 1980

Notes

1. See also Gong Yuzhi, “Deng Xiaoping lun Mao Zedong.”

This extract is taken from the official 1981 Party ruling on post-1949 Chinese history and Mao’s role in it. The formulations in this document—drafted by Hu Qiaomu under the aegis of Deng Xiaoping—remain the Party’s last word on the Chairman. The following passages are taken from the official Chinese translation.

All the successes in these ten years [1956–1966] were achieved under the collective leadership of the Central Committee of the Party headed by Comrade Mao Zedong. Likewise, responsibility for the errors committed in the work of this period rested with the same collective leadership. Although Comrade Mao Zedong must be held chiefly responsible, we cannot lay the blame on him alone for all those errors. During this period, his theoretical and practical mistakes concerning class struggle in a socialist society became increasingly serious, his personal arbitrariness gradually undermined democratic centralism in Party life and the personality cult grew graver and graver. The Central Committee of the Party failed to rectify these mistakes in good time. Careerists like Lin Biao, Jiang Qing, and Kang Sheng, harboring ulterior motives, made use of these errors and inflated them. This led to the inauguration of the Cultural Revolution...

Chief responsibility for the grave Left error of the Cultural Revolution, an error comprehensive in magnitude and protracted in duration, does indeed lie with Comrade Mao Zedong. But after all it was the error of a great proletarian revolutionary. Comrade Mao Zedong paid constant attention to overcoming shortcomings in the life of the Party and state. In his later years, however, far from making a correct analysis of many problems, he confused right and wrong and the people with the enemy during the Cultural Revolution. While making serious mistakes, he repeatedly urged the whole Party to study the works of Marx, Engels, and Lenin conscientiously
and imagined that his theory and practice were Marxist and that they were essential for the consolidation of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Herein lies his tragedy... 

Comrade Mao Zedong's prestige reached a peak and he began to get arrogant at the very time when the Party was confronted with the new task of shifting the focus of its work to socialist construction, a task for which the utmost caution was required. He gradually divorced himself from practice and from the masses, acted more and more arbitrarily and subjectively, and increasingly put himself above the Central Committee of the Party. The result was a steady weakening and even undermining of the principle of collective leadership and democratic centralism in the political life of the Party and the country. This state of affairs took shape only gradually and the Central Committee of the Party should be held partly responsible. From the Marxist viewpoint, this complex phenomenon was the product of given historical conditions. Blaming this on only one person or on only a handful of people will not provide a deep lesson for the whole Party or enable it to find practical ways to change the situation... 

Comrade Mao Zedong was a great Marxist and a great proletarian revolutionary, strategist, and theorist. It is true that he made gross mistakes during the Cultural Revolution, but if we judge his activities as a whole, his contributions to the Chinese revolution far outweigh his mistakes. His merits are primary and his errors secondary. He rendered indelible meritorious service in founding and building up our Party and the Chinese People's Liberation Army, in winning victory for the cause of liberation of the Chinese people, in founding the People's Republic of China, and in advancing our socialist cause. He made major contributions to the liberation of the oppressed nations of the world and to the progress of mankind.
A Typology of the MaoCraze

Zhang Weihong

This excerpt is from a restricted-circulation "sociology" publication produced in Shanghai. It offers a relatively objective and, presumably for the authorities, sobering overview of the Mao Cult among university students in the early 1990s.

Following the Beijing storm of 1989, all books related to Mao Zedong suddenly disappeared from the libraries at Beijing and Qinghua universities [having been borrowed by students]. Now, on the bookshelves of some university students, one can find a recent addition of Selected Works of Mao Zedong, which sits alongside the usual array of works by Sartre, Freud, and Nietzsche.

A considerable number of students began searching out biographies of Mao like Mao Zedong Quits the Altar, Mao Zedong Approaches Divinity, The Tears of the Leader, A Biography of Mao Zedong, Inside and Outside the Palace Walls, History in the Palm of His Hand, The Latter Half of Mao Zedong's Life, His Guards Discuss Mao Zedong, Mao Zedong and His Secretary Tian Jiaying. These and many other biographies are best-selling books, and students have been among their most enthusiastic readers.

On 26 December 1989, on the ninety-sixth anniversary of Mao Zedong's birth, some students at Beijing, Qinghua, Chinese People's, and Beijing Normal universities spontaneously organized a trip to the Chairman Mao Memorial Hall to commemorate this historical giant. A MaoCraze born at the university campuses of Beijing quickly spread to schools throughout the nation. At Nankai University and other tertiary institutions in Tianjin, students organized their own Mao Zedong Study Groups. University and middle school students in the Northeast led the way in reviving the wearing of Mao badges, which had not been seen for years. In Guangdong, Mao badges were soon selling for as much as 20 yuan each...

Although the MaoCraze has been particularly evident at tertiary institutions throughout China, it has never completely surplanted the "TDK Craze" (or TOEFL, Dance, and Kiss Craze) among young people who want to "go overseas, dance, and make love."

The MaoCraze of the 1980s and 1990s is no simple rehearsal of the Movement to Study Mao's Works that we saw in the 1950s and 1960s. The most obvious difference being that, in the past, Mao enthusiasts saw Mao as a god; in the present craze, Mao is regarded as a human being. The Mao enthusiasts of the past were basically of the "protect and respect" type. . . . In the 1980s and 1990s the typology of Mao enthusiasts is far more complex. . . .

Based on my own investigations, observation, and analysis, I would say that university students involved in the present MaoCraze can be divided into two groups: the theoretical-analytical type and the performance-art type. The former have engaged in a relatively systematic and in-depth study of Mao's life and writings, the latter browse through Mao books and enjoy raving on about Mao and thereby reveal a range of political sentiments. The theoretical-analytical group can be further broken down into those who support Mao, those who oppose him, and the pragmatists. The performance-art type can be subdivided into those who respect Mao and those who ridicule him.

The theoretical-analytical pro-Mao type. After achieving an in-depth understanding of Mao, these individuals come to appreciate Mao's character and personality. "He was neither an affected and self-important 'god', nor was he one of those political mediocrities who knew what he should do but could never muster enough courage to act." Second, they affirm his place in history. Third, they recognize the theoretical value of Mao Zedong Thought. In particular, they admire Mao's line that "everything should be done first and foremost for the People." These students are working hard at becoming the young bloods who will invigorate the Communist Party that Mao Zedong created. They want to struggle for the rest of their lives for the cause of socialism in China. This group forms the core of all Mao Study Groups.

The theoretical-analytical oppositionists. These individuals are particularly interested in studying the errors Mao made during peacetime and the erroneous statements he made in his later years. Of course, they do not ignore what he said and did in his younger years either. They are the opposite of the group described above since, first and foremost, they want to negate the personal worth of Mao. They also have a frightening capacity for unearthing historical material. For example, by delving into official publications they have discovered that although Yang Kaihui [Mao's much-praised first wife] was arrested on 24 October 1930 and executed on 14 November of that year, Mao married He Zizhen some two years earlier, in September 1928.
Most oppositionists have availed themselves of the famous contemporary Chinese writer Li Ao's works, which can be found in the humanities collections at major university libraries. Li Ao has written more than a hundred books, many of which have been banned by the Taiwanese authorities. His work on Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek, and Nationalist (KMT) history is meticulous, his ultimate aim being to undermine the KMT itself. In his *Researches into Sun Yat-sen*, Li Ao declared: "Everyone on both sides of the Taiwan Straits snaps to attention in the presence of Sun. Well, Li Ao, am issuing the order for everyone to stand at ease." Oppositionists find that they share a lot in common with Li Ao's style and, like him, study the minutiae of Party history, Mao, and Mao's writings. Their ultimate aim is, when the time is right, to produce a "thoroughgoing theory" that will overturn Mao Zedong Thought and destroy communism. They despise and oppose the Party's Leadership, the Socialist Path, and the Proletarian Dictatorship as first formulated by Mao Zedong. Although the pro-Mao group and oppositionists are completely different, their energy and devotion to their research is strikingly similar.

*The theoretical-analytical pragmatists.* The aim of these individuals is, in their own words, to study Mao Zedong so they "can cut through the excess flab and get to the meat of the subject." A typical example of their attitude was evident in July 1989, after the PLA tanks occupied Tiananmen Square. They started studying Mao Zedong's essay "On Protracted Warfare" and declared that "we must embrace the spirit of the Anti-Japanese War and utilize the strategy and tactics of the Eighth Route Army, the Guerrillas, and the People in their struggle against the Jap devils to oppose the . . ." As the deputy secretary of the Beijing Municipal Communist Youth League commented: "The 'Craze to Find Mao Zedong' does, on one level, reflect a kind of nostalgia, an attraction to the rebelliousness of the past, and a fascination with power politics."

The pragmatists are particularly interested in Maoist strategies like how the weak can take advantage of the strong and defeat them and the confident manner with which he formulated military maneuvers. The pragmatists invariably think they are experienced and world-wise. Since they are regarded by their elders as immature and malleable, they are even more determined to get a hold on Mao Zedong. Some of them are quite hubristic and declare: "Just as Marx overthrew Hegel, so too will we discard Mao Zedong Thought."

*The reverential performance-art type.* They are involved in the Craze but are too busy with their studies to spend time researching Mao Thought. They rely instead on the indoctrination they have received over the years and believe that Mao Thought is a shining achievement and that the Party is a glorious organization. They have all read some of Mao's works and have been moved by Mao's prose. Although they lack the solid theoretical base of the pro-Maoists found among the theoretical-analytical type, they are devoted to the Party and its leader, enthusiastically stating that they will always maintain unity with the Party. Of all the people involved in the Mao Craze, they appear the most stable.

The *irreverent performance-art type.* Some time ago there was a shooting incident at an art exhibition in Beijing which left a deep impression on this type of student. That exhibition featured many strange forms of "performance art," such as a couple who fired a gun at their own artwork resulting in their detention by the police. They claimed that by shooting at their installation they had completed a work of "performance art."

The irreverent types of Mao fan will bedeck themselves with Mao badges pinned at odd angles, enjoy reworking "The East Is Red," a traditional musical for Mao, with frenetic rock music while singing it as though it were a dirge. Or they will sing the moving and sentimental revolutionary song "Nanniwan" in a stentorian fashion. They express their rejection of society and its values in various romantic ways. . . They are particularly active participants in the fad, but their enthusiasm will wane as suddenly as it waxed . . .

From the above it is evident that, in the first place, the Mao Craze of the late 1980s was an indication that China's university students were gradually leaving behind the "crisis of belief" that had been evident before. Secondly, people were moving out of the crisis in different ways and going in different directions. Thirdly, the new belief systems that are being established are mutually unrelated.

**Notes**

2. Li Ao (b. 1935) moved to Taiwan with his family in 1948. A student of the historian Hu Shi, Li has been the most acerbic and prolific critic of Taiwan's political life since the 1960s. Some of his works were published on the Mainland from 1989.
3. Presumably, the author's sense of political decorum led him to expunge the words "Communist Party" here.
4. The "shooting incident" occurred in February 1989 at the "Modern Chinese Art" exhibition held at the China Art Gallery. Tang Song and Xiao Lu, both students of the Zhejiang Art Academy, shot two rounds of ammunition at their own work, a sculpture entitled "Dialogue," which featured a pair of telephone booths. The artists were detained for a short time by the police and the exhibition was closed down. See Barmé and Jaivin, *New Ghosts, Old Dreams*, pp. 279–83.
The Sun Never Sets

Su Ya and Jia Lusheng

Better known for works of reportage that border on the controversial—like White Cat Black Cat—An Insight into the State of the Reforms, Su Ya and Jia Lusheng authored one of the most scathing contributions to the MaoCraze. The Sun Never Sets is a volume of reportage devoted to Mao published in early 1992. In it, the writers plumb depths of tastelessness rarely fathomed even by official propagandists. While less hysterical than Cultural Revolution paens to Mao, the authors' adulation for the Leader would be familiar to the formulatores of the Führerprinzip in Nazi Germany or the Kim Il-song/Kim Jong-il cults in North Korea.

Much of the book is worth quoting, however, due to limitations of space, only a number of short selections have been made for the reader's delectation.

A Corpse That's Like a Constellation

Isn't China just like an ancient architect?

The Great Wall, the Eupang Palace, the Forbidden City, the Ming Tombs, the Temple of Confucius, the Dunhuang Caves. Centuries of work and artistic endeavour have resulted in a uniquely Chinese building style, an insignia of our own.

Opposite Tianamen, the Gate of Heavenly Peace, stands a grave and powerful structure—The Chairman Mao Memorial Hall!

The materials used in its construction are nothing out of the ordinary: There is marble and granite—the skeletons of our mountain ranges; Pine and dragon spruce—the limbs of our forests; And the warmth of our own furnaces—steel and concrete. . . .

Add to that the talent, workmanship, sweat, faith, respect, longing and concern of a massive nation, combine them all into a seamless whole and then this stellar structure shines brilliantly.

The most important thing is its location: Tiananmen Square, the bosom of the People.

This is the final resting place for the wisest and strongest soul that China has seen in her recent history; an abode for the body of a Great Man who saved his nation from disasters unknown anywhere else or at any other time in history.

The People have built this tomb in their heart, in Tiananmen, for this is the place where they entrust their hopes and aspirations, where they go for comfort and consolation.

No one will ever forget that terrible day: 9 September 1976.

On that night a massive star fell from the heavens of the East. It was the greatest funeral in the 5,000 years of Chinese history.

Everyone, from babes in swaddling clothes to old people with walking sticks, judges and convicts, thinkers and illiterates, wore black armbands as a sign of mourning.

Dark clouds shrouded the land.

In the silence that enveloped the nation all that could be heard was crying and funeral music, an expression of collective grief for the life that had left that Great Body.

Amidst the dirges that issued from hoarse throats the whole nation bowed thrice solemnly and the coffin was closed tight.

But the People's hearts have not thereby been sealed.

Fifteen years have passed and still columns of mourners pass by His coffin every day. In those fifteen years over 67 million people have come to view His remains. It is like a dream. People who never had a chance to see him when he called out "Long Live the People" can find satisfaction in viewing His remains today, even if only for an instant . . .

He lies preternaturally still, His body covered with the red flag of the Party. The powerful hammer and sharp sickle, insignia of struggle and symbols of belief, are now forever branded on His chest.

No more need He do battle with the tempests of life. The gravid storm clouds and the unpredictable tides have receded now.

History makes Great Leaders the subject for research because they rule over a whole age and their rule shakes the very earth. For History Mao Zedong possesses a charisma that surpasses that of Qin Shihuang, Emperor Wu of the Han, as well as the founders of the Tang, Song, Ming and Yuan dynasties.
Who can deny it?

He started out as a humble student and went on to create a philosophical system. He founded a political party and developed a powerful armed force. After 28 years, he overthrew the old power structure and sent shockwaves through the world by turning the “Sick Man of Asia” into a force to be reckoned with. These are unique achievements in the annals of Chinese history.

Look! History has its gaze fixed firmly on the body of Mao Zedong, this Great Man. History looks out from the eyes of every mourner and the gaze of the People creates the line of vision of History itself.

First and foremost they see the mole that is so perfectly positioned on that broad chin of His. And from it issues a series of mysterious questions: are the extraordinary talents of the Leader the mere product of nature? Why was He the one to establish the Republic? How did a peasant’s son from an isolated mountain village become the shimmering Big Dipper in our firmament?5 Fate decreed Him to be the Generalissimo, the Subduer, the Liberator. How did a young boy who studied at a local school develop such a wise soul? Was He really a genius?6 When the Age chooses a genius is it inevitable or accidental?

But the Leader is the Leader, it’s as simple as that. It is a status that can only be bestowed by Time itself.

Mao Zedong’s existence is answer enough to all of these questions.

It is in a state of calm reflection that we must recognize that we have a responsibility to learn from the mysteries of the Leader. It is a responsibility that everyone living in China today shares in common. As we become aware of the material nature of His body, its mystery evaporates. The difference between the earth, mountains, forests, lakes and seas lies entirely in their unique makeup. Perhaps, in the same way, the makeup of the Leader’s soul is different from that of normal people.

He had an oriental face inherited from His parents. Everything about it was big: it was broad, the eyebrows bushy, eyes large. His nose was prominent, His lips thick and He had big ear lobes. He had a massive forehead, too, it was like the door to a treasurehouse; it is as though the energies of the whole race were stored in that one skull. Perhaps He needed a powerful body to hold high that massive head.

The stature of that body is equivalent to the significance He had on the scales of social reality.

He maintained the equilibrium of an age. Without the Leader the People would have been incomplete. Without Him the great mansion of socialism would have collapsed.

Although He went through so much, none of His suffering marked His face with wrinkles. Its skin was smooth and, when He was alive, it “glowed with health and vigour, and he enjoyed a ruddy complexion.”7 He shone with the light of energy. In the crystal sarcophagus His face has lost the sheen of life and appears more solemn. He is majestic and aloof.

He was an awesome Commander-in-Chief who subdued an age of restlessness through will-power alone. The raging torrents of the Yellow River and the Yangtze coursed through His veins. His massive chest rose like a great mountain. No force on earth could withstand Him; none could control Him. He was the enactor of His own will; it was like lightning or a tempest, both majestic and terrifying. He deployed it as a warrior would wield a weapon.

He was a Lord of Destruction: swinging a shovel in His hands he buried Old China in an instant.

He was a Master of Creation: using the methods that eliminated reactionaries He established a new order.

Unity of thought, unity of will, unity of action: in clenching His fist he smelted the loose sands of China8 into a lead ingot, melding hundreds of millions of Chinese into one body.

That profound gaze of His could see through everything.9 Nothing could escape His vision, not even the most subtle changes deep in the hearts of men. Therefore, He was able to discover all plots, starting with Zhang Guotao10 and right up to the time of Lin Biao and the “Gang of Four.”

In His speech He combined the talents of both lawyer and judge. The Hunanese accent sounded particularly powerful and moving when it issued from His lips. He used it to advocate causes throughout His life: for the “movement of the riffraff,”11 for a boat on the horizon, the morning sun and a baby,12 for democracy, freedom and dictatorship, in defence of the “Three Red Banners,”13 in inner party struggles, and so on and so forth. When speaking in favour of something every word would touch His listeners. His unshakable faith made it possible for Him to turn the tide in His favour. He delighted in contradictions, and in the face of conflict He would act as the arbiter of truth, settling the fate of the universe with unflinching certainty.

But His arguments and decisions were never simplistic; they were like the sun that shines into every nook and cranny of society. The brilliant effulgence of His Thought lit up the souls of all Chinese...
none are as delighted as they were in the past to see Him. A transmogrification has occurred: in the past He was respected as a god, today He is revered as a man.

People, therefore, can appreciate His weaknesses and inadequacies. Indeed, He is like the sun that shines down on a brooding, dark land but, because He is the sun, He leaves a penumbra around the objects He illuminates.

For someone to cast a shadow that is the same shape as their body is a type of good fortune.

Transmigration: What If Mao Zedong Came Back... 14

Strange thoughts often occur to a person who is lost in soulful reflection: “What would it be like if Mao Zedong really did come back?”

What a ridiculous idea!

But when a university student questioned a number of people no one thought he was being silly for he had introduced himself by saying: “I am a time-traveller searching for Mao Zedong in my spaceship, ‘The Explorer.’”

You could tell from his thick volume of research notes that everyone had responded to his absurd question with the utmost seriousness.

It was as though we too are driven by a mysterious force that begs us to meditate on the prospect of Mao’s return.

If he came back would everyone still support His authority? Would they still cry out “Long Live Chairman Mao!”? What would he think of China today? Could His genius formulate answers to the problems of modernization? Would He want to revise His Thought? Which of His past policies would He continue to pursue?

People are willing to take this ridiculous hypothesis seriously because it raises a number of sensitive and practical issues. It forces people to compare the past with the present. It undermines superficial harmony and reveals the tension between sentiment and rationality. It forces people to be honest and practical, as opposed to hypocritical and fashionable. Praise and well-intentioned criticism are thereby placed on an equal footing. The penetrating clarity of traffic lights always confronts people mesmerized by flashy displays of neon street signs...

Very well, then, let us look into the logbook of “The Explorer” and see what representatives of various groups of people have said:

A retired cadre replied emotionally as he stared at the portrait of Chairman Mao on his wall:

“I followed Chairman Mao into battle and took part in national constructon after 1949. I suffered quite a lot during the CultRev although I was only following the Chairman’s instructions. But my life is inextricably linked with the name Mao Zedong. If He were still alive I would follow His orders. I often dream of Chairman Mao. Sooner or later I will go to see Him in the afterlife. If I let Him down now how could I ever face Him?"

A theoretician who stood in the front ranks in the struggle against Bourgeois Liberalization said, tired though obviously delighted with victory: 15

“Chairman Mao would be deeply relieved to know that we have undertaken the present struggle against Bourgeois Liberalization. The Chairman was always on the alert when it came to the corrosive influence of bourgeois thought. He never ceased His fight against it and never showed any pity.”

After slight hesitation one intellectual said:

“There’s no denying the fact that intellectuals are much better off now than they used to be. But... Chairman Mao was never against knowledge as such, although He laid greater emphasis on transforming intellectuals than using them. This was understandable. Intellectuals from the old society were deficient in many respects and if they weren’t kept in check there would have been trouble. Most intellectuals today were trained in New China, when the Chairman was alive. He would have approved of them.”

One entrepreneur, the first 10,000 yuan businessman in his district, wasn’t that comfortable with the question:

“There’s no denying the fact that people are better off than they used to be. And the private economy is developing. I don’t know why, even among people who’ve made a bundle, there’s a lot of nostalgia for the days of Chairman Mao. Would He approve of 10,000 yuan households? I wouldn’t dare speculate, but I do know He’d be happy that the standard of living has improved.”

A youngster of primary-school age (in sixth grade, sincere and devoid of all signs of crass acquisitiveness) responded:

“My parents and grandparents, as well as my aunts, uncles and teachers often tell me stories about Granddad Mao. They’re great! He was a real hero. I’d love to have met Him so He could tell me how He led the Red Army in the War. I’ve been to the Memorial Hall to see Granddad Mao. I don’t know why but I cried. He was lying there all still in that crystal case. It was really sad.”

This evidence makes it impossible for us to make any definite claims... There’s an absurd yet heartfelt popular myth: Mao Zedong has reincarnated... It is easy to understand the sincere and well-meaning people who want
Mao to live forever. In life people prayed that He would live 10,000 years; after He died, they hoped He would be reborn.

But do people realize that Chairman Mao hasn’t left us at all? Rather, when He died, He entered our very souls and has merely been enjoying a rest there. After His life-long labours He deserved a respite. Anyway, everyone was so busy with carrying out Reform He didn’t want to distract us.

But this rebirth of History has taken place in response to our present needs, a response to a feeling of dependency.

Mao Zedong exists today not as a physical reality for long ago He was transmogrified into a spiritual force, a belief, an ideal.

It’s a simple principle: He exists, but only if you believe in Him.

If you have faith in Mao Zedong then He will live in your heart forever.

Notes

1. Su Ya and Jia Lusheng, Baimao heimao—Zhongguo gaige xianzhuang toushi.
2. Epaang gouq was built by Qin Shihuang.
3. Mao offered the masses of adoring supporters who lined the Yangtse to greet him on his famous 1966 swim the response: “Long Live the People!” (renmin wansui). See the editorial “Genzhe Mao zhuxi zai daifeng dalangzhong qianjin.”
4. These are the historical figures listed derisively by Mao in his poem “Snow.”
5. The Big Dipper or Northern Dipper (Beltouxing), a group of stars in Ursa Major, represents the God of Longevity and is a traditional object of veneration. Other stars are said to revolve around it.
6. A tiancai. Lin Biao claimed that Mao was a genius, a status from which Mao himself resided.
7. In Chinese shencai yiqi, hongguang manic. This standard propaganda formulation was used to describe Mao in his declining years.
8. In the past the Chinese were spoken of as being like a “plate of loose sand” (yi pan sansha) that could never be formed into a whole.
9. “To see through everything,” or dongcha yiqi, was commonly used in the Cultural Revolution to describe Mao’s supposedly uncanny ability to uncover plots against himself and, in the same token, the Party.
10. Zhang Guotao (1897–1979), a Party leader who split with his fellows over the route of the Long March in 1936, established his own Central Committee. In 1938, he sided with the KMT and was purged from the Communist Party.
11. The “movement of the riffraff” (piizi yundong) was the Hunan peasant movement Mao wrote about in 1927. See “Report on the Hunan Peasant Movement” (Hunan nongmin yundong kaocha baogao), Mao Zedong xuanji, yijuanben, p. 18.
12. This is a reference to Mao’s debate with the early Communist Party leader Chen Duxiu and others who doubted the speed with which a revolutionary movement could develop in China. Mao claimed that a revolutionary high tide would soon be upon them and that it was approaching, like the mast of a ship visible on the horizon of the sea, like the morning sun seen from a mountain peak, or like a baby anxious to be born. See Mao’s 1930 letter, “A Spark Can Start a Prairie Fire” (Xingxing zhi huo, keyi liao yuan), Mao Zedong xuanji, p. 103.
A Star Reflects on the Sun

Liu Xiaqing

Liu Xiaqing is an actress from Sichuan. Although her fame was eclipsed in the early 1990s by Gong Li, director Zhang Yimou’s leading lady, Liu remained one of China’s most popular performers. She was also remarkable for her brash and outspoken personality—something with which few of her rivals could compete, and she was denounced during the 1983 Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign for producing an autobiography entitled I Did It My Way (Wode wu). Among her numerous screen roles her portrayal of the Empress Dowager Ci Xi in Tian Zhuangzhuang’s film “Li Lianying” (1990) was, perhaps, most noteworthy.

Liu’s memoir, from which this excerpt is taken, was written at the height of the Mao Cult. Its sentiment was shared by many of Liu’s generation as they looked back on a youth spent in the thrill of Cultural Revolution zealotry. Regardless of the horrors of those years—and there is no dearth of material concerning the devastation wrought by Mao’s rule—for many his was an age of passion, excitement and social engagement. Maoism was suffused with religiosity and it catered to young idealists who yearned for sincerity and altruism, things unknown and unthinkable in Deng Xiaoping’s China. This memoir shows that Liu’s longing for a lost moment of “beauty” had grown more intense with the passage of time and stronger in the atmosphere of the cynicism that enveloped the People’s Republic now that it was bereft of anything other than a faith in economic might. It also reveals a level of objectification of Mao that brings to mind the German book Love Letters to Adolf Hitler.1

I have only seen Mao Zedong twice. On the first occasion he was standing, the second time he was flat on his back. The first time he was on Tiananmen Gate to review the Red Guards who, like me, had traveled to Beijing to see him. The second time was at the Chairman Mao Memorial Hall where I lined up to view his body.

Everyone says that you never forget your first love. I cannot really say that I ever had a first love, for in my childhood and youth the man I loved and admired most of all was Mao Zedong. I gave him everything I had: my purest love, as well as all my longing and hopes. He was an idol I worshipped with all my heart.

Chairman Mao, you were my first object of desire!
The first song I learned to sing was “The East Is Red.” I knew what Chairman Mao looked like from the time I could recognize my parents. When I was a Red Guard I could recite all his quotations word perfect. My brain was armed with Mao Zedong Thought. During the unprecedented Cultural Revolution I used Chairman Mao’s words as my weapon to fight opponents. My prodigious memory and quick tongue always meant that my “enemies” would retreat in defeat.

If I ever had any problems I would search Chairman Mao’s writings for an answer. When we lost one of our chicks I looked for help in his works. When, not long after, the chick reappeared, I knew it was due to the intercession of our Great, Wise, and Correct Chairman Mao.

When, as a child, I played games with my friends, our pledge of honor was: “I swear by Chairman Mao.” If someone said that, even if they prefaced it by claiming that they had just come from Mars, we would believe it without question. Naturally, no one ever took this oath lightly.

I worshipped and loved Chairman Mao so utterly that there was absolutely nothing extraneous or impure in my feelings for him. When I grew a bit older and learned the secret of how men and women made babies, I had the most shocking realization: “Could Chairman Mao possibly do that as well?” Of course, I immediately banished these sacrilegious thoughts from my head....

Then Chairman Mao set the revolutionary blaze of the Cultural Revolution alight. It also ignited our youthful enthusiasm. We were like moths drawn to a flame, and we threw ourselves into the inferno en masse. We were in a frenzy and utilized every ounce of energy at our disposal.

We would have given anything to protect Chairman Mao, including our very lives. Our love for the Chairman consumed us body and soul. If anyone had dared to try and harm our beloved Chairman, we would have pounced on him, bitten his hand off, gouged out his eyes, screamed in his ears until he was deaf, spit on him until he drowned in a lake of spittle, and would have happily died in the effort just like [the revolutionary martyr] Dong Cunrui.

On 18 August 1966, Chairman Mao reviewed the Red Guards for the first time. I was too young to become a Red Guard, but I spent all my time dreaming of joining the organization that was sworn to protect Chairman Mao. After making extraordinary efforts, I was finally allowed to take part
in a peripheral grouping called the "Red Brigade." They gave me a red armband too. It was like a dream come true. Although it was not the same as the Red Guards, the difference was only one word. I put on the armband so that the word "Brigade" was hidden under my arm. I stuck out my chest and, just like a real Red Guard, strutted around the school yard incredibly proud of myself.

Soon after that, Chairman Mao called on the Red Guards to travel around China on Revolutionary Link-ups. Our group of Red Brigade members decided to respond to Chairman Mao's call too. Without a penny to our names, and each carrying a yellow-green PLA knapsack that we had all done our darndest to get a hold of (including some who had dyed their own bags), we set out. I had cut off my beloved pigtails so I looked like the revolutionary Sister Jiang. At the train station, we fought our way past all the people who tried to persuade us to "return to the classroom and continue the revolution there." Pushing them aside with determined urgency we boarded the train. With a great clambor the train moved out of the station. We were in very high spirits, our hearts throbbering with revolutionary ardor. Then one of my classmates asked: "Where are we going?" I was stunned and asked the others: "Where's this train headed?" We took out a map of China and put our heads together and, doing our best to put to use the elementary geography we had just learned in class, we scrutinized the map and finally worked out that we were on the Baosheng line. There would be a change of locomotive at Baoji and the train would then head for Beijing.

Beijing! The city where Chairman Mao lived! We went wild.

Over the next few days, we were so excited about going to Beijing that we did not sleep a wink. But where would Chairman Mao be? Would we be able to see him? We all stood atop the "Gold Mountain of Beijing" which we had dreamed of for so long, tormented by these questions.

We imitated the Red Guards of Beijing scrupulously, literally aping their every move. When we got on a bus we would take out Quotations from Chairman Mao and start reading in really loud voices. "Revolution is not a tea party. It is not like writing an essay, painting, or embroidering flowers... revolution is an act of violence, it is the violent overthrow of one class by another." We did our best to make our heavily accented Sichuan voices sound as much like Beijing dialect as we could. We read one quotation after another right to the end of the trip... .

I will never forget 31 August 1966. On that day I joined all the Red Guards who had come from throughout China to be in Beijing to see him, to see Chairman Mao, the leader we dreamed of and thought of twenty-four hours a day.

A few days earlier we had been told by the Revolutionary Committee of the Agricultural Museum [our billet] that some Central leaders would see us on August 31. When we heard this, everyone exploded in excitement. Speculation was rife: Which leader or leaders would be there? Would Chairman Mao come? The result of our group deliberations was that Chairman Mao was sure to be too busy to come. Since we were not from Beijing, there was even less reason for him to see us. But there was a small and adament group who were sure that Chairman Mao would appear. Naturally, I wanted to believe them. Truth, after all, is often the prerogative of the minority.

It was 6:00 A.M., August 31. We all woke with a start. Although we were all at the age when it is impossible to wake up in the morning, everyone had been especially excited the night before. People had woken at the slightest noise and looked around to see that nothing was going on, before drifting off to sleep again. But this time it was for real. We all got dressed in record time and, armed with the food and water we had set aside the night before, ran into the courtyard.

Once assembled, we climbed into our bus and were driven to Tiananmen Square. We lined up and sat in ranks; the Square was turned into a massive sea of green. We waited wide-eyed and expectant. Morning broke slowly, and we saw the majestic outline of Tiananmen Gate. As the sun rose, we began to get hot. But we waited and waited. Our eyes were popping out of our heads. The sweat trickled down our brows and into our eyes. Everyone was constantly wiping the sweat away with their hands. We took out our food and water and started chatting as we ate. Some people nodded off to sleep, heads cushioned on their knees. As a person nodded, his or her head might slip off the knee and they'd awake with a shock, look around, and then nod off again. This happened repeatedly. Some people simply lay down to sleep, using their caps and satchels as a pillow. I stood up and looked out over the Square, a massive expanse occupied by an army of battle-wearied Red Guards. I sat down and was overcome by drowsiness myself and, despite my best efforts to keep awake, I was exhausted and fell asleep.

Suddenly drums could be heard, a weak sound at first that grew louder. After the drum roll, all the loudspeakers on the Square resounded with the opening chorus of "The East Is Red," followed by the tumultuous sound of the orchestral arrangement of the song. The very earth shook with the volume of the sound. Everyone jumped to their feet. My heart was in my throat; I could feel my pulse around my lips, in my head and neck. The eyes of a million Red Guards were riveted on Tiananmen Gate.

The leaders of Party Central had appeared! But who was behind them? It was Chairman Mao himself!! Everyone threw down their hats, satchels,
began shouting as we surged toward Tiananmen. All those acres of green-clad bodies that had been sitting passively only a moment before turned into a solid wave of human flesh, like a wall of football players. We all shouted "Long Live Chairman Mao!" At first it was an uncoordinated cry, but slowly the chant issued forth in unison. The love that tens of thousands of Red Guards felt for their leader burst forth like lava flowing from Mount Vesuvius. It was a torrent, an explosion of liquid steel. Without a second thought, I joined in and tears streamed from my eyes. I hated the people in front of me who blocked my line of vision and kept Chairman Mao from me. I resented the fact that I was nearsighted, that at this most precious moment I could not see the Chairman clearly. I begged a Red Guard in front of me to lend me his telescope. He was staring into it looking intently at the rostrum on the Gate. Tears had flowed down his cheeks to the corners of his mouth and were dripping onto his clothes. His face was ecstatic. I pleaded with him to let me have one, quick look. "Just for a minute or even only a second. I'll give it back immediately," I swear. I swear by Chairman Mao," He finally gave in and handed me the telescope. I put it up to my eye as quickly as possible but I could not find the Chairman anywhere. What was wrong? He wasn't there. Then suddenly the human wave surged in my direction and I was thrown to the ground. I was held down by a mass of hysterical Red Guards. I pressed down with both my arms to keep myself from being crushed, still the breath was squashed out of me. I struggled for all I was worth, but I could feel my strength being sapped away. I could not keep myself up and my face was being forced against the ground, my cheek crushed downward. I could hear my bones cracking, but I could not scream out because the breath had been knocked out of me. I was afraid I would die without ever having seen Chairman Mao. What a wasted life! But my instinct for self-preservation took over and I started fighting my way out, regardless of the cost. Miraculously, the crowd in front of me parted and a wide road appeared. In that instant I saw Chairman Mao. He was in an open limousine that was moving slowly in our direction. He was like a statue, as tall as the heavens. He was dressed in military uniform, and he waved at us. Tens of thousands of eyes turned toward us, saw our faces, our bodies, and saw into our hearts. I went limp, but I was held up by the mass of other Red Guards. I felt warm all over; I was drunk with happiness. My tears soaked the front of my army-green uniform. I forgot everything, my studies, my future. Life seemed so unimportant, irrelevant. Nothing could compare with this instant, because I had seen him!

I did nonetheless have one major regret. I did not get a chance to shake Chairman Mao's hand. How I wished I could have become a spirit or a martial arts expert and flown over the crowd to sit next to Chairman Mao! But I couldn't. The people who shook Chairman Mao's hand that day were our heroes. We all rushed up to them so we could hold them by the hand, reluctant to let go. We nearly tore them to pieces.

Even today, whenever I hear "The East Is Red," that incredibly familiar tune, my heart beats faster. It is because that moment was so profound, so exciting and happy. I have only felt like that once in my whole life. I am sure I will never, ever feel like that again.

Some years later, I went to Beijing with my mother. One day, we visited the Chairman Mao Memorial Hall. Over the years people have ceaselessly gone to see the Chairman's corpse. Our line was like a coiled dragon that wound around the center of the Square.

We entered the stately and solemn foyer of the Mausoleum. The stream of people made up a slow circumambulation. This was the second time I had seen Chairman Mao. He was the undying idol of my heart, the man who possessed and ruled me throughout my adolescence and youth. If the truth be told, I had lived solely for him for two decades.

Mao Zedong was lying there so still and quiet, at repose in his crystal sarcophagus. The flag of the People's Republic was draped over his body, his face had a peaceful expression on it. I experienced a strange cocktail of emotions: bitter, sweet, sour, and hot. I could not take my eyes off him, my leader.

In my mind's eye, I saw him make the announcement: "The People's Republic of China is hereby established. The people of China have stood up!"

I saw him dressed in a military uniform waving a cap in his hand as he said: "Long live the People!"

I saw him in his limousine driving toward the hysterical Red Guards. I saw him standing there with that expression on his face that I was so familiar with from all the photographs, extending his massive hand in my direction.

I could not help reaching out for his hand in return, just as I had so many times before in my dreams. But there was nothing there. The Chairman was still lying there, and we inched forward with the rest of the crowd. We moved past the bier that was surrounded by fresh flowers and made our way slowly to the exit.

I bid farewell to Chairman Mao. I bid farewell also to twenty years of my life, the most precious, enthusiastic, and impressionable time of my youth.

We walked out into Tiananmen Square, which was bathed in bright sunlight, in the direction of Tiananmen Gate where we could see [the portrait of] Chairman Mao, although Chairman Mao was not there himself.
Even now the songs I most often sing, the songs I am most familiar with, that I can sing from beginning to end, are ones written in praise of Chairman Mao. The works I can still recite by heart are Chairman Mao’s poems. And I still quote Chairman Mao at the drop of a hat. I know and hold it to be true that Mao Zedong will live on in my heart forever.

This year I am in Shenzhen for Spring Festival. During the holiday I happened to take taxis a number of times. None of the taxis had the usual talismans for good fortune hanging from their rear-view mirrors. What hung there instead was Chairman Mao’s portrait. I asked the drivers about it and they all said that they hung the Chairman because he could ward off evil.

Dear Chairman Mao, people throughout China miss you.4

6 February 1992, Shenzhen

Notes

1. See Stephen Kinzer, “‘Love Letters’ to Hitler, a Book and Play Shocking to Germans.”

2. Subsequent to the publication of Li Zhisui’s memoirs in 1994, one Beijing-based writer questioned whether Liu Xiaoping had re-evaluated her innocent view of the Chairman. See Xue Yu, “Zhile pengMaozhen renzhen yidu,” p. 39.

3. “Sister Jiang” (Jiangjie) is a pre-1966 opera about the Sichuan revolutionary martyr Jiang Zhuyun. It is based on the novel Red Crag (Hongyan).

4. Liu was far from being the only screen personality to express such sentiments. Jiang Wen, her actor-boyfriend and one of China’s leading actors, made his directorial debut in the summer of 1995 with a CultRev nostalgia film “Under the Radiant Sun” (Yangguang canliande rizi). Mao Zedong is prominent in absentia in this highly popular movie, one that was based on the 1991 Wang Shuo story “Wild Beasts” (Dongwu xiongmeng). See, for example, Sandrine Chenivesse, “For Us, Mao Was a First Love.”
The Red Sun: Singing the Praises of Chairman Mao

China Record Company

The following translations are of songs on Side A of the cassette/CD The Red Sun that became a MaoCraze hit in 1992. It is left to the reader’s imagination to sense what these mindnumbingly simple but heartfelt Cultural Revolution paens to Mao sound like when sung to a saccharine Canto Pop beat.

From the early 1990s many similar collections, imitations and sequels to the original The Red Sun tape were produced as were karaoke versions of the songs with such titles as Sweet Sweet Red Sun. Karaoke adaptations produced on video and laser disk utilized documentary footage of Mao as well as MTV-like montages of young people who, among other things, wander around wistfully thinking of the late Chairman.

In 1993, as part of the Mao centenary, tapes of speeches by Mao were also released. They featured such utterances as Mao’s announcement of the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949, as well as longer speeches made on such occasions as the Preparatory Meeting of the Chinese National People’s Political Consultative Congress on 15 June 1949.

The Red Sun

Odes to Mao Zedong Sung to a New Beat

Singers: Li Lingyu, Sun Guoqing, Tu Honggang and Fan Linlin
With Li Li, Jing Gangshan, Zhu Hua, Wu Ming, Zhao Li and Li Xiaowen
Music Conducted by Jin Wei
Accompaniment: Beijing Choral Orchestra
China Record Corporation,
Shanghai, China, 1992
(Compact disc digital audio)

The Sunshine Is the Warmest, Chairman Mao the Dearest

The Sunshine is the warmest, Chairman Mao the dearest,
Your glorious Thought will forever shine in my heart.
The sun is the reddest, Chairman Mao the dearest,
Your glorious Thought will forever navigate my course.

The Bright Red Sun in the Sky

The Sun in the sky is red, burning burnished bright,
The sun in our hearts is Mao Zedong.
He led us to achieve Liberation,
The people stood up and became the masters.
The people stood up and became the masters.

The Red Sun Shines Over the Frontiers
(In the style of a “Korean minority” folk song)

The Red Sun shines over the frontiers,
The green mountains and clear waters are bathed in the morning light.
The fruit trees stand in rows at the foot of the Changbai Mountains,
The rice on the banks of the Ganglan River is so fragrant.
Rend wide the mountains
and they will offer up their treasures.
Stop the rivers and build dams,
bringing the water up into the hills.
A-you . . .
The fighting spirit of the borderlands’ people is high,
the army and the people on the frontiers are united to carry out construction.
Chairman Mao is leading us forward
in the direction of victory.

The Golden Sun in Beijing
(In the style of a Tibetan folk song)

From that Golden Mountain in Beijing
the sun’s rays shoot out to illuminate the four directions.
And Chairman Mao is that Golden Sun.
How warm, how beatific,
bringing light to the hearts of the liberated serfs [of Tibet].
We are now walking on the great socialist highway of good fortune!
Eternal Life to Chairman Mao

Dearest Chairman Mao,
you are the sun in our hearts.
There are so many private thoughts that we would like to tell you.
There are so many songs of praise that we would like to sing to you.
Millions of red hearts think only of Beijing.
Millions of smiling faces welcome the Red Sun.
We respectfully wish you, Chairman Mao, eternal life!

Notes

2. These include such titles as Guoqile ge, Guiyang: Guizhou dongfang yinxiang gongsi (no date); Renmin wanghai Mao Zezhong, Yanbian yinxiang chubanshe (no date); Zhongguo gexiao Mao Zezhong, Guangdong yinxiang chubanshe (no date); and, Hong taiyang OK, Beijing yinxiang gongsi, 1992.
5. For details regarding Jin Wei’s creative input, see Zhao Xiaoyuan, “Ta tuqile ‘Hong taiyang’.”
6. Located in the southwest of Jilin Province, near the border with North Korea.
7. The original version of this song, along with a number of other popular nationalities’ songs of the Cultural Revolution period, can be found on the LP record Zhufu Mao zhui wanshou wujing—gesu renmin gechang Mao zhui, Beijing: Zhongguo changpianshe, 1967.

A Place in the Pantheon:
Mao and Folk Religion

Xin Yuan

Published under a pen name, the Beijing scholar Wang Yi has written on such diverse subjects as traditional Chinese gardens and elements of folk religion in the political culture of the Cultural Revolution. This article appeared in the Hong Kong press at the end of 1992.

From late last year [1991], China has experienced a craze that has involved the re-deification of Mao Zedong. It started in the South and has spread to the North. People have combined Mao’s image with gold cash inscribed with the words “May This Attract Wealth” or images of the eight hexagrams, and placed them in prominent places. Drivers throughout the country have Mao’s picture hanging from their rear-view mirrors and claim that Mao can prevent car accidents. The cassette tape The Red Sun: Odes to Mao Zedong Sung to a New Beat has been a national best-seller. Mainlanders have variously called this the “Red Sun Phenomenon” or the “Mao Becomes a God Phenomenon.” It has also given rise to numerous interpretations among political and cultural analysts.

Political conservatives are trying to dragoon this MaoCraze into the service of their efforts to “oppose peaceful evolution.” Deng Liqun has remarked “with the unprecedented international wave of revisionist thought coupled with the tide of Bourgeois Liberalism in China, we have indeed seen ‘a miasma of unrest rising.’” But Deng has nothing to say on the subject of why the masses are now treating Mao Zedong like Zhao Gong or the Kitchen God.

Intellectuals, on the other hand, see the MaoCraze as evidence that elements of the Cultural Revolution still hold sway and that there’s been no rational attempt to understand the long-term damage wrought by that period on the people of China. But such views are all superficial and simplistic. No one has tried to discuss the question in terms of the psychology of folk
religion. Therefore, it is obvious that further analysis of the phenomenon is necessary.

The present Mao cult is different from the past in that it constitutes a popular deification of Mao, not a politically orchestrated one. People now seek the protection of the Mao-God when they build houses, engage in business, and drive vehicles. Old ladies place images of Mao over their stoves and in niches built for statues of the Buddha and burn incense to him morning and night. Traditional folk religion provides the real basis for the present Red Sun Craze.

In Chinese culture, the power of the gods is always reliant upon the authority of the ruler. As early as the Zuozhuan, in the Record of the Fourteenth Year of Duke Xiang, we find the unequivocal statement: “The ruler is the host of the spirits and the hope of the people.” Politics and religion formed a mutually cooperative whole or, as [the late-Qing politician and military leader] Zeng Guofan put it, “The way of the kings rules in this world; the way of the gods in the other world.” Both ways witnessed a plethora of rulers, however, with dynasties rising and falling in the human world and, in the other world, rulers like the Jade Emperor, Maitreya Buddha, and so on, gaining ascendency at one time or another. The only thing that did not change was the immutable link between politics and religion.

With the communist takeover in 1949, popular religion in China underwent the most violent change in its history. First, in the 1950s, there was a movement to wipe out superstition, which was followed in the 1960s by the call to “eliminate the Four Olds” and the suppression of virtually all forms of religious activity in the country. The effects were particularly devastating as both movements took place in tandem with the creation of grass-roots Party cells and nationwide Thought Reform. In traditional society, at the county level and lower, political life was ruled by popular clan bodies that also had responsibility for other activities including religious observances. The post-1949 organization of society, however, saw this traditional arrangement uprooted and the monopoly rule of Party committees at every level. Folk religion was deprived entirely of the social and organizational basis for its activities. Nonetheless, habits and practices that have weathered changes over the millennia and provided spiritual succor for people for so long are not so easily obliterated. Frustrated in its traditional form, it is only natural that popular religious sentiment would find new ways to express itself. In post-1949 China, the only sanctified form it could take was in worshipping the Red Sun, Mao Zedong.

The legacy of this intermingling of political and religious life is that the people tend to view divine providence and spiritual power in political terms. Not only were the sage-like figures of King Wen and Duke Zhou respected and worshipped as religious personages, all other rulers with life-and-death power over individuals were cloaked in an aura of religiosity. Historical records show that from the time of [the legendary tyrant] Chi You, and in the case of [less than benevolent figures like] Qin Shihuang, Xiang Yu, Wang Mang, Dong Zhuo, Cao Cao, and Su Jun, harsh rulers were treated with awe and commemorated in special temples with religious observances by later generations. Because of this venerable tradition Mao’s actual sentiment for the people, or his munificence, or even his tyranny that was expressed so succinctly in his line that “for the 800 million Chinese, struggling is a way of life,” is not really a major issue. With the consolidation and expansion of his power it was inevitable that he become deified.

Mao’s deification was synchronous with his political apotheosis. According to reports in the Beijing Evening News, Mao badges made an appearance in and around Yan’an as early as 1945. After 1949, Mao’s transfiguration continued apace.

In 1950 the famous writer Lao She produced a play called “Fang Zhenzhu.” It was a story about a performer of traditional theater who benefits from communist rule. Lao she was particularly pleased with the opening line: “A True Dragon and Son of Heaven has appeared in Yan’an; he’s liberated Beijing and now sits on the Imperial Throne.” Although the personality cult of the Cultural Revolution was dressed up in revolutionary garb, in essence its well-springs can only be found in traditional folk religious belief and practice. To speak of Mao [as in the lines of the song “Sailing the Seas Depends on the Helmsman” in terms of being “the Sun, sustainer of all things” is no different from the ancient belief in the nourishing powers of divinity.

Faith in the omnipresence of nonworldly power was reinforced during the Cultural Revolution. When everything else—all belief systems and cultural norms—was swept away and overthrown, Mao Zedong became the supreme and all-powerful super god, the “Sun that never sets.” Mao was invested with a type of power equal, if not superior, to all other religious systems, expressed in such beliefs that he was the Sun, “sustainer of all things,” a being who “turned the universe red.” Because he was both omnipotent and omnipresent, people felt they could invest themselves with an “ever victorious” power through quasi-religious practices not dissimilar to shamanistic ritual and self-flagellation. They therefore paid homage to his image, sang Mao quotation songs, chanted his sayings, performed the Loyalty Dance, “struggled against self-interest and repudiated revisionism,” and so on.

Faith in the power of the Red Sun in the Cultural Revolution was very much like ancient shamanistic belief. Both held that the power of the spirit
could exercise evil. In the past, people thought they were surrounded by malevolent forces that had to be subdued or expunged. Similarly, in the Cultural Revolution, there was a general belief that the world was full of evil subsumed under such rubrics as Imperialism and Revisionism, the Five Black Categories, as well as the grab-all expression Cow Demons and Snake Spirits. People lived in constant fear that there could be “a restoration of capitalism,” or that they would “have to suffer the bitterness of the past again,” or that “millions would die” because of a disastrous counterrevolution. Since the Red Sun was a “Spiritual Atom Bomb” that could dispel all those evils, there is little wonder that the level of popular adoration and worship was so hysterical. The creation of a Red Sea (the ubiquitous display of Mao’s portrait, his quotations, slogans, and images that represented devotion to him) was a direct result of the “sweeping away of all Cow Demons and Snake Spirits” and “the rebellion against Class Enemies” that had seen the exorcizing of evil in the first place. More recently, Deng Liqun’s attempts to use the new MaoCraze as a weapon to repel the “miasmal mist once more rising” is little more than a continuation of ancient shamanistic practice.

Another feature of shamanism is its proffered power to subjugate nature and foster agriculture. Here again the Red Sun has an awesome power as evinced by the Movement to Learn from Dazhai. One Party Secretary in a Shanxi commune issued the peasants with copies of the Three Standard Articles with the words: “We don’t need to rely on heaven or earth, all we need are these precious Red Booklets and we can dig through the mountains to irrigate our land.” A member of a Tibetan commune even claimed that anyone armed with Mao Zedong Thought would become a Living Buddha.

Although such phenomena have disappeared since the Cultural Revolution, the cultural mechanisms that brought them into being in the first place are still influential. The habit of treating political leaders as spiritual guides is unchanged as witnessed in [the short-lived] praise for “the Wise Leader Hua Guofeng,” or more recently in descriptions of Deng Xiaoping’s [early 1992] trip to the south, an act that has been likened to manna falling from heaven to nourish the whole nation.

Although popular beliefs have gone a long way to undermining political authority since the advent of the Reform era, none of the new cultural developments have anything more than a utilitarian value. “Crossing the river by feeling the stones” can hardly be expected to provide the nation with a new belief system. Traditional deities live on and this is why we see people throughout the country, in particular in the countryside, erecting temples to the God of Wealth, Door Gods, Guan Gong, Bodhisattvas, the King of Death, and other ancient icons to cure illness, for the begetting of male children, for help in making money, finding the right marriage partner, and for scholastic achievement.

The speed with which temples are being restored or built is comparable to the rate at which they were closed and destroyed in the 1950s and 1960s. According to the television documentary, A Record of Modern Superstitions: Incense Burning, broadcast on Beijing TV on 9 February 1990, more than a million people travel to the Southern Peak to burn incense each year and spend some 100 million yuan on incense alone. The Guangming Daily has also reported that in recent years many shamans have appeared in Fang County, Hubei Province. Some of these are state cadres or retired cadres. Similar reports abound. Things are more controlled in the cities where years of centralized education have meant that primitive beliefs have to find new forms for expression. Because Mao has been the only all-powerful figure for so long, he was the obvious choice for popular adulation during the recent religious revival in China. He has become the idol to which the revived worship of the God of Wealth, Guan Gong, Guanyin Buddha, and others is married.

It would seem farcical that Mao, a man who led the assault on capitalism during his lifetime, should in death be put on a par with the God of Wealth and inscribed with traditional imagery. But the misprision and distortion of gods, their reinvention and reinterpretation, is a central element of popular religious activity. As was said long ago: “In a temple that has stood for five generations you can find all manner of strange things.” The [Song dynasty literatus] Ouyang Xiu noted nearly a thousand years ago that people often misunderstand the spirits they worship when he wrote: “Of all distortions in the world those that one finds in a temple are the most extreme.”

Notes

1. In Chinese, zhao cai jin bao.
2. “Peaceful evolution” (he ping yan bian) was officially regarded by the Chinese authorities as being the greatest threat to the communist system. It was supposedly a Western strategy that relied on peaceful rather than violent means—cultural, political, and economic—to undermine communism and eventually replace it with a Western-style, free-market democratic government.
4. Zhao Gong (Zhao Xuantu, or Zhao Gong yun shuai), the God of Wealth. The Kitchen God (Zao jun, Zaoshen or Zaowang), the spirit who rules over the hearth, was said to report back to Heaven every Chinese New Year’s Eve.
5. The Zhouhuans is a Confucian historical text of considerable antiquity. For this quotation, see James Legge, The Chinese Classics (The Chu Chiu Ts’e with The Tso Chuen), p. 466, col. 2, and p. 462 for the Chinese original.
6. The Four Olds (sijiu) were: old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits, the elimination of which was formalized in the Party's 16 Articles on the Cultural Revolution promulgated in 1966.

7. Wen Wang and Zhou Gong were wise and righteous rulers honored in Confucian tradition.

8. Chi You, Qin Shihuang, Xiang Yu, Wang Mang, Dong Zhuo, Cao Cao and Sun Jun were renowned as tyrannical rulers.

9. This Mao quote was published in a People's Daily editorial marking the tenth anniversary of the Cultural Revolution. See "Wenhua geming yongfang guangmang—junian Zhonggong zhongyang 1966 nian 5 yue 16 ri 'Tongzhi' shizhoulian."

10. In Chinese, the title of the song is Dahai hangxing kao dieshou. It was an alternative national anthem during the Cultural Revolution.

11. The Loyalty Dance (zhongzi wu) was a clumsy choreographic group dance designed to add rhythm to the adulation of Mao. To "struggle against self-interest and repudiate revisionism" (dousi pixiu) was a popular mantra that summed up the avowed aims of the Cultural Revolution.

12. The Five Black Categories (hei wulei) were: landlords, rich peasants, counter-revolutionaries, bad elements, and rightists. Cow Demons and Snake Spirits (niu gui shechen) was a classical Chinese expression reinterpreted for the denunciation of people in the early stages of the Cultural Revolution.


14. The Three Standard Articles—"Serve the People," "In Memory of Norman Bethune," and "The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains"—found in Mao's The Selected Works became prescribed devotional texts that were committed to memory and recited ad nauseam.

15. Deng's January-February 1992 "tour of the south" (nanxun) during which, among other things, he visited Shanghai and Special Economic Zones in Guangdong Province sparked off a new wave of economic reforms. It was reported by the national media with gauntlet enthusiasm. See, for example, Zong Jun, Zongshejishi, pp. 3-26.

16. In Chinese, mohe shizi guo he. This is Deng's much-lauded hit-and-miss approach to reforming socialism.

17. The Southern Peak (Nanyue), is Hengshan in Hunan Province, one of China's Five Sacred Mountains which feature in popular religious belief.
From 1991 laminated Mao portraits appeared hanging in the windscreens or set up on the dashboards of vehicles throughout China. The fad reportedly originated in Guangdong Province after a person or people miraculously avoided injury in a car accident because, it was said, their automobile was protected by a portrait of Mao. Like the door gods and lucky talismans that Chinese have traditionally used to adorn their dwellings, the Mao portrait was now recognized as a way to ensure safety and good fortune.

In Chinese, these laminated Mao mobiles are often simply called guawu, literally “hangings.” They were sold all over the country and by a range of outlets: from street-side stalls and temple stores to the Mao Memorial Hall itself.

In design they varied widely. The more austere simply featured a picture of Mao, the most popular representations being of “the young Mao,” that is, the retouched picture of Mao in a Red Army uniform taken by Edgar Snow in the 1930s, or the official portrait of the aged Mao, although Mao in a PLA uniform dating from the early Cultural Revolution was also common. More elaborate hangings had the Mao picture framed in mock-Chinese temples, or with gold ingots hanging from the picture with more traditional benedictions like “May the winds fill your sails” (yifan fengshun) or “May you make a fortune” (gongxi facai) on the reverse side.

So often these days when looking at the windscreen of a taxi cab I’ve noticed laminated pictures of Mao Zedong hanging from the rear-view mirror. Some drivers simply put a portrait of Mao on the dashboard. So the solemn figure of Chairman Mao travels in these cars around the city, dangling and bobbing with every jerk and movement of the vehicle, like an ever-present tutelary deity.

Car decorations directly reflect the attitudes of drivers. A few years back
it was popular to display talismans with auspicious messages like "May you travel in safety," "May the wind fill your sails" or "May wealth come your way."
Back then no one ever imagined that these would be replaced by laminated pictures of Mao Zedong. What does it mean? It was this question that led me to observe drivers in the bustling heart of the cities as well as in the remote outskirts and I discovered many people hung pictures of Mao in their vehicles. My fascination in the subject led me to interview a number of drivers.

At Xi’an Train Station I came across a taxi driver whose beard really made him stand out from the crowd. He was in a red taxi reclining in his seat waiting for a fare. He was all alone, except for the Chairman who was hanging in front of him.

He jumped up when I tapped on the taxi window, got out and asked me whether I wanted a cab. I handed him a Red Pagoda Hill cigarette and asked him whether he had time for a chat. He had me get into his car and wound up the window so as to shut out the distracting noises of the outside world.

It turned out that he used to work with a building company but he quit because business wasn’t too good. He paid 3,000 yuan to go to a driving school and, with the help of some friends, bought his own taxi. He’d already paid off his debts and was making a pretty good living as a taxi driver. . . .

I asked him why he had a picture of Mao in his car. After a lot of hesitation he eventually said, “I’m just doing what everyone else does.”

“But what do you really think of Mao?” I asked.

“I’m just an average guy. I don’t understand the big picture or anything like that, but I reckon that since he sent Chiang Kai-shek packing off to Taiwan and founded the People’s Republic of China, he must have been pretty amazing. There was something mystical about Mao Zedong. Whenever I get together with my other mates who drive taxis we always come to the same conclusion.

“Have you heard the story about the traffic accident in the south? There was this head-on collision between a truck and a taxi, see, and although the truck driver got hurt, the taxi driver came out of it without a scratch. They say he had a portrait of Chairman Mao in his car and that’s what protected him. So now people reckon the Chairman’s like a guardian god.”

His story reminded me of something I’d heard: officials in a certain area not only inspected all the relevant documentation when a car came up for registration, they also checked to see if it had a Mao portrait hanging over the dash. If not, they fined the driver. . . .

It was warm and relaxing in the sun and not far away you could see part of the old Xi’an city walls that had not been repaired. They were replete with history. The taxi driver introduced me to some of his friends who were all hanging around on the lookout for fares.

This group started chatting and became very animated.

“You ask why I hang Chairman Mao. There’s no particular reason, it’s just that I still miss him. I was victorious throughout China because he had the support of the people. He spoke on behalf of the people and was always thinking about them.”

“If only cadres today could be a bit more like the Chairman.”

“Corruption and dirty government is really undermining their prestige. If they don’t do something about it there’ll be hell to pay. . . .”

One morning I came across a woman taxi driver outside the Tang Dynasty Guest House [in Xi’an]. I got into her taxi and discovered that she too had a Mao picture hanging over the dashboard. It showed Mao as a young man in Baoan; the picture that was taken by Edgar Snow. . . . I really wanted to know why she had chosen to hang the young Mao.

“Where does your husband work and how old is your child?” I asked the usual questions.

She simply shook her head.

“Divorced?”

She still did nothing but shake her head. . . . Later I found out as we chatted that she drove a truck and was only helping out a friend by driving the taxi today.

“So you’re still not married,” I concluded.

She nodded.

“What type of partner are you looking for?”

“One just like him,” she pointed at the portrait.

“You must be joking,” I thought to myself. But I simply said, “You’re being a bit romantic, aren’t you?”

“I’ll wait.” She had her own view of things. She felt that there were too many materialistic people around, so she wanted to find someone with style like Mao Zedong.

What could I say? I recognized the fact that the charisma of Mao’s personality has found a place in people’s hearts. The image of Mao is not simply that of an individual; rather, he is the symbol of an incorruptible, practical Chinese communist who at all times and in all circumstances considered the welfare of the masses.

Quite by coincidence we came across a young man who had drawn a rope between two trees by the roadside and had hung Mao talismans from it for sale. I started chatting with him.
Q: Where did you get all of these?
A: Hunan and Guangzhou. They’re common in the south.
Q: How many would you sell in a day?
A: Only a few dozen.
Q: Who are your customers?
A: Mostly drivers: people who drive taxis, trucks, as well as chauffeurs who work for cadres. Lots of different people.
Q: Do you know why they buy them?
A: Beats me. Maybe they just like ’em.
Q: Then why do you sell them?
A: To make money.

He was being completely frank and sold another seven or eight as we talked.

Notes
1. Yihu ping’ an, yifan fengshun and zhuocai jinbao respectively.
2. Hongtashan xiangyan, a deluxe brand of cigarettes from Yunnan.
3. The expression used in Chinese is “xiang ta lao renjia,” literally “I miss the venerable old bey.”