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Book Review: Maoism: A Global History by Julia Lovell

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Maoism: A Global History
by Julia Lovell, London: The Bodley Head, 2019.
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reviewed by

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While China's current influence in the World is heavily discussed, the early People's Republic of China (PRC) under Mao Zedong has often been depicted as isolationist. However, several scholars have recently pointed to the various attempts by Chinese communists to shape the World order and to influence other countries' domestic politics at the time. Julia Lovell's new book adds to this research analyzing the multiple ways in which Maoist ideas and language traveled the world from the 1920s until today. Lovell sheds light on both sides of this history, the efforts to spread ideas and to support like-minded governments and groups, and the different adaptations and usages of Maoist language and thinking in a variety of local contexts.

Lovell starts the book with a conceptual look at the term "Maoism". While using the term analytically as an umbrella word for all the ideas and practices attributed to Mao Zedong, she stresses the diversity and often changing and contradictory nature of what people understood as "Maoist". However, the author names several distinct characteristics: Violence as a political instrument, peasants as a key favorable social group, the primacy of practice in each specific situation, brutal rectification campaigns, emphasis on the importance of anti-imperialism and feminism, rebellion as a leitmotif and contradiction as a model of thinking. In the following case studies, she illustrates how these aspects recur in different places and at different times.

In the next three chapters, the author looks at the development of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its role within the global political system from the late 1920s until Mao's death in 1976. The book describes in detail the importance of the first international propaganda success in 1936 when American journalist Edgar Snow visited Yan'an, where the communist army was in hiding after the "long march". Mao, who had recently become the *de facto* leader of the CCP, devoted a lot of time for private interviews with the young journalist and made sure that he and his comrades would be described favorably. In the next year, Snow wrote a book about his trip to Yan'an. *Red Star over China* depicted the young communist guerilla fighters as idealistic patriots and egalitarian democrats. The book became a surprise bestseller in Britain and the United States and made Snow an authority on Chinese politics. Later, it was translated in various languages and became a source of inspiration for many activists, from Chinese patriotic youths in the civil war to Soviet female partisans in the Second World War, to anti-imperialist revolutionaries like Nelson Mandela in the Global South.

Following the triumph of the CCP in 1949 after a long civil war, China became an important player in the Global Cold War. The US government feared that the PRC would ignite communist revolutions throughout Asia. These concerns were warranted as many communist movements,--in Malaysia

and Korea set high hopes in the newly founded Chinese state. And the new government established political training sites in Beijing, where Mao's teaching was taught to anti-imperial activists from all over Asia. Moreover, North Korea and North Vietnam received massive material aid and military support for their wars. However, Western governments overestimated the coordination between the communist movements in Asia and overlooked the importance of existing tensions. As the most significant conflict in the communist camp between the Soviet Union and the PRC escalated in the late 1950s, the Chinese government's foreign propaganda radicalized. From the 1960s on, China portrayed the Soviet Union as a traitor to the communist cause and depicted itself as the leading power for a soon-to-come world revolution. To push for a global insurgency, China drastically increased foreign aid and--in addition to technical and military experts--sent millions of copies of printed publications abroad.

The followings seven chapters analyze the effects of these efforts in specific contexts. These case studies are generally very well-balanced explanations of the successes or failures of this endeavor and illustrate how local agents adopted Maoist ideas and codes to specific contexts with different results. For instance, In Nepal, a Maoist guerrilla movement wrested eighty percent of the country's territory and negotiated a peace process in 2006 resulting in

the election of a former guerrillero as prime minister. Lovell points out that various factors, like the fractured communist movement, the combination of bourgeoning education rates, political, social, and economic frustrations and, finally, a China-friendly government that tolerated Chinese influence, created a very receptive environment for the Chinese foreign propaganda during the Cultural Revolution. But later, the brutal state response against Maoist insurgencies led to a polarization in the countryside. Additionally, the weak, dysfunctional Nepali state offered the Maoist guerrilla movement the possibility to take control of large rural areas. Using single personal examples, the author can explain how discriminated social groups, like women and Dalit, were especially attracted to the Maoist movement, being one of the rare political groups which voiced their concerns and offered them a role in society. At the same time, she shows how the Nepali Maoist movement systematically used violence and coercion against the local people to gain support and to implement their political and military strategy, for example by using brutal forms of forced labor to build the so-called Martyr's road, a ninety one-kilometer route in west Nepal.

Even though Lovell's multi-dimensional explanations are mostly convincing, the individual case studies do not do justice to every single aspect and sometimes simplify terms or chronologies. Looking at the European Maoists,

for example, the author calls the communist group *Vive la révolution* “the more liberal wing of French Maoism” (p. 300) and argues that European Maoists discovered the authoritarian side of Mao only after 1968. Yet, *Vive la révolution* radically opposed liberalism and many French Maoist groups active before 1968 were indeed authoritarian, deciding sometimes on the jobs and potential marriages of their members. Furthermore, Lovell argues that these groups showed little inclination to subject China to the same criticism applied to their societies. While definitely true for some groups, many French Maoist groups engaged in heated discussions with the Chinese government, for example in regard to the May 1968 movement in Paris, the incoherent collection of quotes in the *Mao-Bible* or China’s position in the Indo-Pakistani War leading in some cases to a definitive break between these groups and the CCP. (Cf. Christophe Bourseiller, *Les Maoïstes. La Folle Histoire des gardes rouges français*, (Paris: Plon, 1996), pp. 111f., 272f.) However, in light of the book’s broad approach, such occasional simplifications should rather be considered a starting point for further discussions than a general point of criticism.

A real strength of the book is its ability to look at many contemporary developments out of a rarely invoked historical perspective. In her analysis of Maoist ideas in Zimbabwe, Lovell points out that some influential Maoist ideas such as the systematical use of violence

and mass mobilization, partly explain the political and economic horror of Robert Mugabe’s dictatorship. Furthermore, the strong connection not only Mugabe but, also his successor Emmerson Mnangagwa, have to China—the latter being trained in China in the 1960s—puts a long historical connection in a new light.

The legacy of Maoism is also discussed in the last chapter looking back at China. The chapter called “Mao-ish China” sheds light on the revival of Mao in the last decade. Lovell exhibits how Maoist thinking prevailed after the reform era in the 1980s and why many aspects of it have been revived today. She argues that the current Chinese government invokes Mao’s historical prestige to underpin a new nationalistic narrative and renormalizes Maoist tools like self-criticism sessions, mass rallies, and the personality cult, to tighten political control.

To sum up, the book helps to understand the historical relations of the CCP in the world and their present repercussions. In times, in which the Chinese government again aspires to export its worldview outside of China, it helps to understand the historical roots of this aspiration.