

2020

HARVARD-YENCHING
INSTITUTE WORKING
PAPER SERIES

**DEBATING MAOISM IN
CONTEMPORARY CHINA:**
REFLECTIONS ON BENJAMIN I. SCHWARTZ,
CHINESE COMMUNISM AND THE RISE OF MAO

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Debating Maoism in Contemporary China:

Reflections on Benjamin I. Schwartz, *Chinese Communism and the Rise of Mao*

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Nearly a century after its founding in 1921, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) again trumpeted the ideological contributions of its paramount leader. The insertion into the Party Constitution of a reference to “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” in 2018 was the first time since Mao Zedong (in 1945) that a sitting CCP leader received such recognition. Unlike Mao’s successor Deng Xiaoping, who famously pronounced that the (political) color of a cat did not matter as long as it caught mice, Xi Jinping donned the mantle of ideological authority once worn by Chairman Mao. Not surprisingly, contemporary observers ponder the continuing relevance of Maoism in post-Mao China.¹

The discussion of Xi Jinping’s Maoist tendencies evokes a previous debate, conducted during the Cold War, over the authenticity and import of Maoism itself. Benjamin I. Schwartz introduced the term “Maoism” into the English lexicon in his 1951 book *Chinese Communism and the Rise of Mao*.² Tracing the development of Chinese Communism in its early years, Schwartz argued that the essence of Maoist ideology reflected practical lessons drawn from the experience of concrete political struggle rather than derived from pure theory. Maoism, Schwartz proposed, was a pragmatic strategy of revolution that (in its initial iteration) grafted useful elements of Marxism-Leninism, most notably a disciplined and hierarchical Communist Party, onto a mobilized peasant mass base.³

While Schwartz described the CCP as “an elite of professional revolutionaries which has risen to power by basing itself on the dynamic of peasant discontent,” he focused not on the social and economic problems that had created the “objective conditions” for discontent, but on “the ideas, intentions and ambitions of those who finally assume the responsibility for meeting them.”⁴ In other words, Schwartz undertook a kind of intellectual/political/psychological history that situated his elite subjects in the world of strategic struggle rather than in some disembodied dialogue with the Marxist canon. His primary sources were the writings and speeches of the

¹ Roderick MacFarquhar, “Does Mao Still Matter?” in Jennifer Rudolph and Michael Szonyi, eds., *The China Questions: Critical Insights into a Rising Power* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018): Chapter 3; Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth J. Perry, eds., *Mao’s Invisible Hand: The Political Foundations of Adaptive Governance in China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

² Benjamin I. Schwartz, *Chinese Communism and the Rise of Mao* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951).

³ Schwartz, 1951: 189.

⁴ Schwartz, 1951: 199, 2.

principal CCP leaders, the official resolutions and other documents issued by the Party, and the unofficial letters and memoirs of a wide range of participants and engaged observers – in Chinese, Japanese, Russian, German and English. Beginning with the co-founders of the CCP, Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao, and continuing with subsequent Communist leaders Qu Qiubai, Li Lisan and Wang Ming, Schwartz shows how the Party line shifted repeatedly in tandem with the changing political circumstances of the day and the predilections of paramount leaders. Only in the final two chapters (Chapters 12 and 13) does he address the ascendancy of Mao Zedong and his revolutionary strategy.

The discussion of Mao occupies less than 15% of the book, but it was Schwartz's treatment of Maoism as a distinctive strategic ideology that sparked debate. Schwartz observes that Mao's rural revolution was forced to deviate from the dictates of Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy after the Nationalists' crackdown in 1927 cut the Communist Party off from its previous foothold among the urban proletariat.⁵ The CCP's turn to the peasantry in the absence of any organic connection to the industrial proletariat marked "the beginning of a heresy in act never made explicit in theory."⁶ According to Schwartz, then, Maoism originated as an unacknowledged yet highly consequential departure *in practice* from the strictures of Soviet doctrine. A decade later, however, when war with Japan allowed the CCP to "harness nationalist sentiment to its own cause" there occurred a "profound change in the psychology of the Communist leadership which may itself spring from nationalist sentiment." The result was that in wartime Yan'an "Mao was now sufficiently self-confident to take the initiative in the field of theoretical formulation . . . intent on proving that developments in China represented a unique and original development in the course of human history."⁷

With our twenty-twenty hindsight, Schwartz's argument about the origins and evolution of Maoism seems commonsensical and incontrovertible. But that was not the situation when his book first appeared. Schwartz's thesis that Mao's revolutionary recipe "was not planned in advance in Moscow, and even ran counter to tenets of orthodoxy which were still considered sacrosanct and inviolate in Moscow at the time" directly challenged the "totalitarian model" that then prevailed in scholarly and popular discourse on the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union alike.⁸ His stress on the significance of Maoism as a distinctive ideology not only contradicted the proclamations of Soviet propagandists; it also disputed the firmly held beliefs of many vehemently anti-Soviet scholars. As Schwartz noted, "An immense effort is currently being made by orthodox Stalinist historiography to present the Chinese Communist success as the result of Stalin's own prescience and masterly planning. It is strange to note that this myth has been accepted and even insisted upon by many who regard themselves as the Kremlin's bitterest foes."⁹

⁵ Fabio Lanza discusses this event in his chapter, "How to Write a Revolution: Harold Isaacs, *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution*."

⁶ Schwartz, 1951: 191.

⁷ Schwartz, 1951: 201.

⁸ Schwartz, 1951: 5.

⁹ Schwartz, 1951: 5.

Schwartz's challenge to the totalitarian model elicited dissent from its defenders.¹⁰ The most acerbic was a series of diatribes penned by Karl August Wittfogel, a former German Communist who had fled Hitler's Third Reich to become a vocal critic of Communism in both the Soviet Union and China. Wittfogel rejected the notion that Mao Zedong had been an innovator in any sense of the word; every strategic move and ideological justification that marked the Chinese revolutionary experience, he insisted, could already be found full-blown in Leninism. In Wittfogel's view, Chinese Communist doctrine did "not exhibit any originality, 'Maoist' or otherwise."¹¹

Mao's revolutionary road, according to Wittfogel, was Russian designed and Russian engineered. Schwartz also credited Lenin with substantial influence on the course of Chinese Communism, but he did not believe that the Chinese revolution was merely the replication of a familiar Bolshevik blueprint. As Schwartz replied, "Now it is, of course, true that Lenin opened the doors to all subsequent developments of world Communism. This does not mean, however, that he marched through all doors which he opened and that all the developments of Stalinism in the Soviet Union and of Maoism in China are simply untroubled applications of Lenin's teachings."¹²

This early Cold War controversy over the meaning of Maoism, rather than an arcane academic exercise, was actually a debate over the future of the Communist bloc. Schwartz's contention that Maoism in China (like Titoism in Yugoslavia) reflected a departure from orthodox Russian doctrine anticipated the advent of fissures within the Communist world stemming from disparate national experiences and attendant "isms": "the fate of doctrine may in the course of time have a profound effect on the relationship among Communist states such as China, Yugoslavia [sic] and the Soviet Union which are not directly subject to each other."¹³ Here was a prescient insight that Chalmers Johnson would later elaborate in *Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power* when he argued that the Chinese and Yugoslavian states' defiance of Soviet domination was a product of their both having risen to power on the backs of peasant nationalist revolutions.¹⁴ By the time that Johnson's book was published in 1962, the Sino-Soviet split was already a visible fait accompli.

Occurring on the heels of the toxic Congressional hearings on the "loss" of China, the debate over Maoism reflected a deep divide in academic and policy circles. Advocates of the totalitarian model such as Wittfogel and his colleagues at the University of Washington implied that Schwartz and his Harvard colleagues, in identifying the existence of an alternative Maoist path,

¹⁰ Peter S.H. Tang, *Communist China Today* (New York: Praeger, 1957); Richard L. Walker, *China Under Communism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955); Richard L. Walker, *The Continuing Struggle: Communist China and the Free World* (New York: Athene Press, 1958); Franz H. Michael and George E. Taylor, *The Far East in the Modern World* (New York: Henry Holt, 1956).

¹¹ Karl A. Wittfogel, "The Historical Position of Communist China: Doctrine and Reality," *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (October 1954): 464.

¹² Benjamin Schwartz, "On the 'Originality' of Mao Tse-tung," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (October 1955): 74-75.

¹³ Schwartz, 1955: 76.

¹⁴ Chalmers A. Johnson, *Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power: The Emergence of Revolutionary China, 1937-1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962).

constituted a dangerous cabal that – if not guilty of Maoist sympathies themselves – were at the very least naïve about the Communist monolith. In the inaugural issue of *The China Quarterly* in 1960, Wittfogel’s “The Legend of Maoism” referred to the Harvard scholars as a “‘Maoist’ group” and detailed their inter-connections in a quasi-conspiratorial tone: “Suffice it to say that in substance the ‘Maoist’ thesis was first outlined in 1947 by John K. Fairbank; that Prof. Fairbank was the ‘teacher and guide’ of Benjamin Schwartz who in 1951 coined the term ‘Maoism’ and elaborated on its meaning; that Prof. Fairbank fulfilled editorial functions in the preparation of the *Documentary History of Chinese Communism*, a collection of documents with explanatory introductions mainly written by Prof. Schwartz and Conrad Brandt and published in 1952; and that in 1958 Prof. Fairbank reasserted the ‘Maoist’ thesis . . . “¹⁵

Even after Soviet advisers had abruptly withdrawn from China following Mao Zedong’s announcement of his radical Great Leap Forward in 1958, Wittfogel continued to dismiss as “fictitious” the suggestion that the CCP might act contrary to the desires of Moscow. To Wittfogel’s mind, the claim that China’s alternative revolutionary tradition had facilitated a tendency toward nationalistic independence, although ostensibly academic, betrayed a nefarious political motive: “This argument, known as the ‘Maoist’ thesis, is historical in form, but political in content.”¹⁶ Chiding Schwartz and company for an “inadequate understanding of the doctrinal and political Marxist-Leninist background,” Wittfogel accused them of having concocted a “legend of ‘Maoism’.”¹⁷ Former Communist and member of the Frankfurt School of critical theory that he was, Wittfogel assumed the role of doctrinal arbiter: “The authors of the *Documentary History*, who created the ‘Maoist’ myth in 1951-52, had ample opportunity in subsequent studies of Chinese thought to correct their errors. But instead of doing so, they kept repeating their key conclusions . . . based on an inadequate reproduction of Lenin’s ideas . . . and on the misrepresentation of Mao’s behavior.”¹⁸

The “faulty views” of Schwartz and his colleagues were politically dangerous, Wittfogel contended, because they undermined American resolve to win the Cold War: “Their damaging consequences are not restricted to their impact on purely academic understanding. For the political confusion they have engendered has strongly affected opinion-molders and policy-makers in this country, and has thus hampered the development of a clear, consistent and far-sighted policy for coping with the Chinese Communist threat. In this important respect, these

¹⁵ Karl A. Wittfogel, “The Legend of ‘Maoism,’” *The China Quarterly*, No. 1 (January – March 1960): 76, 73. On the occasion of his sixtieth birthday in 1967, John Fairbank would “confess” to this “conspiracy” by composing some humorous doggerel that concluded with the lines:

The files, when examined, will demonstrate
That this “Fairbank” so-called was a syndicate
Who were busy writing memos and in other ways
During Benjamin Schwartz’s earlier phase.

John King Fairbank, *Chinabound: A Fifty-Year Memoir* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982): 448.

¹⁶ Karl A. Wittfogel, “Peking’s ‘Independence,’” *The New Leader* (July 20-27, 1959): 13.

¹⁷ Wittfogel, (Jan-March) 1960: 75.

¹⁸ Wittfogel, (April-June) 1960: 28-29.

views have done a distinct disservice to the free world The survival of the free world hangs in the balance.”¹⁹

In Wittfogel’s account, the dangers posed by “Maoism” had spread far beyond the ivory tower, yet his proposed solution was essentially academic:

It has been said that the battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton. Today, the ideas which the scholars and opinion-molders hold are no less crucial for the decisions the policy-makers will make. Where, then, we may ask, are the schools, the universities, the foundations and research centers that will determine victory – or defeat – in the present cold war?²⁰

Public intellectuals imbued with the proper political outlook, he suggested, were needed to fill the breach.

With Harvard having allegedly concocted a dangerous “‘Maoist’ thesis,” another academic institution would have to produce the antidote. Thankfully, such a remedy was close at hand due to the scholarly efforts of Wittfogel and his cold-warrior colleagues (George Taylor, Franz Michael, Donald Treadgold, and others) who had assembled at the University of Washington’s newly founded Far Eastern and Russian Institute. Wittfogel claimed to speak for the group: “It is vital to our survival that the record be set straight, and a small but growing number of Far Eastern specialists are doing just that. A realistic comparative study of the historical roots of Chinese and Soviet Communism is possible. And such a study enables us to remove the widespread misconceptions regarding the character and intent of the present Chinese and Soviet regimes.”²¹ Among the many publications by scholars at the Far Eastern and Russian Institute expounding on the totalitarian model, no doubt Wittfogel had in mind above all his own forthcoming *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power*.²² As Matthew Linton explains in his chapter in this volume, Wittfogel’s study attributed the origins of Chinese and Russian totalitarianism to age-old traditions of state domination in both societies.

Irritated by the barrage of criticism directed at him and his colleagues, the usually unflappable Benjamin Schwartz returned fire with a sharp rejoinder entitled “The Legend of the ‘Legend of Maoism’.” “For some years now,” he wrote, “Prof. Wittfogel has been obsessed with the view that Fairbank, Schwartz and Brandt (an indivisible entity) have committed an ‘error’ (not an accidental error!) which has led to incalculably evil results in our struggle with world Communism.”²³ Schwartz rejected “Wittfogel’s conception of Marxism-Leninism as a ‘doctrine and strategy of total revolution,’ as a ready-made science of power with established recipes for dealing with all situations – a science which is never surprised by new contingencies.”²⁴ Instead of this formulaic totalism, Schwartz reminded readers that his primary goal in *Chinese*

¹⁹ Wittfogel, 1959: 17.

²⁰ Wittfogel, 1959: 17.

²¹ Wittfogel, 1959: 17.

²² Karl A. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957).

²³ Benjamin Schwartz, “The Legend of the ‘Legend of Maoism’,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 2 (April – June 1960): 35.

²⁴ Schwartz, 1960: 36.

Communism and the Rise of Mao had been to trace the actual process by which Mao gained control of the Chinese Communist movement, creating the conditions for Maoism to become the dominant strategic and policy line within the CCP. The implications of Maoist departures (in practice if not always in acknowledged ideological doctrine) were, moreover, continuing to unfold: “the end of the story is not yet in sight.”²⁵

Schwartz gamely acknowledged that “in dealing with the obscure history of Chinese Communism, we have all committed errors,” but he emphasized that his own conception of Maoism derived from an effort to understand the lived experience of Mao and his comrades as they groped in fits and starts toward a workable strategy of revolution. As such, his empirical method differed fundamentally from Wittfogel’s theoretically-predetermined mode of scholarship, whose claim for correctness resided in a supposedly authoritative grasp of Marxist-Leninist doctrine. Schwartz called on Wittfogel to discard his superiority complex in favor of a less rigid approach: “It is in fact high time that Prof. Wittfogel overcame the illusion that his particular experiences and his particular ‘theories’ vouchsafe for him some peculiar access to an understanding of Communism not available to the rest of us.”²⁶

Published some seven decades ago, Benjamin Schwartz’s study of Maoism has remarkable resonance today for our understanding of ideology in contemporary China as well as for our methods of scholarship. His grounded yet dynamic conception of ideology –as an articulation of practical strategy on the part of individual leaders with important implications for subsequent political developments – is a useful corrective to arguments that Xi Jinping Thought can be ignored simply because it does not make major theoretical advances beyond Mao Zedong Thought, to say nothing of classical Marxism-Leninism. Xi himself presents his ideas as building on three core concepts of Mao Zedong Thought: “seeking truth from facts” (pragmatism), the “mass line” (populism), and “independent sovereignty” (nationalism).²⁷ Manifestly motivated by a desire to avoid what he regards as fatal missteps of Soviet leaders from Khrushchev to Gorbachev that led to the eventual collapse of the USSR, Xi – much like Mao at Yan’an – strives to sum up key lessons extracted from the CCP’s own experience as it has departed from the Soviet prototype. Benjamin Schwartz was ahead of his day in realizing that Communist leaders were not necessarily more restrained by doctrinal orthodoxy than other politicians. But, he insisted, this did not mean that their utterances were insignificant; on the contrary, their speeches and writings provided critical insight into the origins and long-term implications of their political strategies.

For Schwartz, in the end the crucial point was less Mao’s doctrinal deviation and innovation than the *claim* to ideological originality on the part of a leader whose concrete political accomplishments had made him confident enough to seek to project his and his country’s influence on the world stage. As Schwartz observed in 1965, this process of asserting the CCP’s ideological independence, first evident in Yan’an, accelerated after 1956 following Khrushchev’s

²⁵ Schwartz, 1960: 36.

²⁶ Schwartz, 1960: 42.

²⁷ Xi Jinping, “Uphold and Properly Apply the Spirit of Mao Zedong Thought” (坚持与运用好毛泽东思想活的灵魂) in *Talks on Governing the Country* (谈治国理政) (Beijing: 2014): 25-31.

denunciation of Stalin and Mao's launch of the Hundred Flowers Campaign, as the PRC gradually distanced itself from the Soviet orbit in favor of declaring an alternative "Maoist vision."²⁸ Roderick MacFarquhar would describe the events of 1956-57 as "a major turning point in the history of the People's Republic," marked by Mao's advocacy of a "new militancy at home and abroad" that would ultimately result in the Cultural Revolution.²⁹

Schwartz's characterization of the Maoist vision of 1956 could easily have been written of the work report delivered by Xi Jinping at the 19th Party Congress some sixty years later:

The vision involves not only a conception of the good society of the future but also a sanctified image of the methods by which this vision is to be achieved. Certainly Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist ideology is one of the main sources of this vision, but this does not preclude the possibility that in some of its aspects it coincides with certain traditional Chinese habits of thought and behavior.³⁰

Xi's three hour and twenty minute work report touted the value of "Chinese wisdom" and the "Chinese approach" in crafting political solutions for global challenges. As he put it, "We have every confidence that we can give full play to the strengths and distinctive features of China's socialist democracy, and make China's contribution to the political advancement of mankind." Xi took a page right out of Mao's Hundred Flowers playbook by zeroing in on what he identified as the "principal contradiction" (主要矛盾) currently facing Chinese society; namely, "the people's ever-growing need for a better life" versus the country's "unbalanced and inadequate development."³¹ Setting a date of 2035 for the full attainment of "socialist modernization," the CCP's paramount leader offered a familiar formula for reaching this future vision: the Communist Party must continue to "lead in everything."³²

History does not repeat itself, but contemporary CCP theoreticians and propagandists do comb the historical record for ideological inspiration and legitimation. Studies of the Maoist past are therefore of more than academic interest in understanding current and future political developments. While it would be facile to equate the disquiet generated in the Communist world at the time of Mao's Hundred Flowers Campaign, due to destalinization and the Hungarian Revolt, with the current disarray in the capitalist world, brought about by Brexit and Trump, catalytic moments of international disorder do seem to create opportunities for the assertion of an

²⁸ Benjamin I. Schwartz, *Communism and China: Ideology in Flux* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968): 171ff.

²⁹ Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution: Contradictions Among the People, 1956-1957* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974): 317.

³⁰ Schwartz, *Communism and China*: 171-172; Chris Buckley, "China Enshrines 'Xi Jinping Thought,' Elevating Leader to Mao-like Status," *New York Times* (October 24, 2017).

³¹ http://news.dwnews.com/china/news/2017-10-18/60018047_all.html; on the central role of "contradictions" in CCP ideology, see Franz Schurmann, *Ideology and Organization in Communist China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970): Chapter I.

³² <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/19th-party-congress-7-key-themes-from-president-xi-jinpings-work-report>).

alternative Chinese ideological authority.³³ Such openings merit systematic comparative attention.

Schwartz's work has much to teach us not only about the legacy of Maoism, but about research methods more generally. His admonitions against a doctrinaire mindset that makes truth claims based on adherence to theoretical orthodoxy are well worth remembering. While these days few scholars attempt to force their analyses into the old procrustean bed of Marxist-Leninist Theory, newer theoretical straightjackets can be found in abundance. From Rational Choice Theory at one pole to Post-Modern Theory at the other, social scientists and humanists alike advance arguments on grounds of established theoretical authority rather than innovative research discoveries. While Schwartz's scholarship was certainly not atheoretical, his theories – like Maoism itself – derived from empirical investigation. Citing a Hunan proverb, Mao Zedong once likened the Chinese revolution to straw sandals; with no preset pattern, they “shaped themselves in the making.”³⁴ Benjamin Schwartz's *Chinese Communism and the Rise of Mao* adopts a similarly open-ended and responsive approach.

General Secretary Xi Jinping has often invoked the adage “吃水不忘挖井人” (When drinking the water, don't forget those who dug the well) – a phrase associated with Mao's revolutionary legacy. At the opening ceremony of the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, he called upon delegates to bow their heads in silence to remember the contributions of Mao Zedong and other early leaders of the CCP. Taking a cue from those whose history and politics we study, we too might be advised at this advent of a “new era” – which in certain respects looks remarkably like an older one – to recall the achievements of our own intellectual ancestors.

³³ The historical parallel is far from exact, however: at the 8th Party Congress in 1956, Mao's Thought was dropped from the Party Constitution.

³⁴ Mao Zedong, “Speech at a Supreme State Conference” (January 28, 1958). Quoted in John Bryan Starr, *Continuing the Revolution: The Political Thought of Mao* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979): ix.