The PRC History Review Vol. 8, No. 1 (June 2023): 1 - 4. © The PRC History Group, 2023

A Note on the Origins of Maoism

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It's not entirely clear how Mao got his *ism*. He certainly didn't want it, or so he always said. In 1941, a Trotskyist named Ye Qing published a critical commentary on a selection of Mao's recent writings, and some historians claim that Ye there coined the phrase "Mao Zedongism" (*Mao Zedong zhuyi* 毛泽东主义) by adding the Chinese word *zhuyi* to the proper name. This is how it was done, borrowing from Japanese, to translate other isms, including Marxism and Leninism. Ye used "Mao Zedongism" sarcastically, to deny connections between Mao's ideas and those other isms. "Mao Zedong does not know anything about Marxism-Leninism," Ye sneered, "His only ism is Mao Zedong-ism."[1] In this version of the origin story, it is said that pro-Mao figures later reclaimed the term and began using it in a positive sense. A few historians have suggested that the Ye Qing story is backwards, and that it was Party propagandist Deng Tuo who first spoke of Mao Zedongism, positively.[2] But either way, the term was certainly used by Chinese Communist Party (CCP) members in the early 1940s, even though Mao reputedly disliked the addition of an ism to his name. This was in part because he worried that it did imply, as Ye Qing intended, too great a distance between Mao's ideas and those of Marx and Lenin.

By 1945, Party leaders had settled on Mao Zedong Thought as the formal term for their official ideology, precisely because it excised the ism. As Wang Ning noted, this choice was also related to the fact that "ism" (*zhuyi*) is more generic, more formal in Chinese than "thought" (*sixiang*), which is individual and personal.[3] But the phrase Mao Zedongism remained popular. In August of 1948, for example, the chancellor of Huabei University submitted a draft of his speech for the academic year opening ceremony. In one line, he had written, "Mao Zedongism is the Marxism-Leninism for the era of anti-imperialist, anti-colonial revolution." The chancellor telegrammed his draft to second-in-command, Zhou Enlai, but it was Mao who replied: "There is no Mao Zedongism, so you can't say Mao Zedongism," the Chairman said definitively. Instead, Mao instructed the chancellor to encourage students to "study the theories of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin as well as the experience of the Chinese revolution."[4] Scattered calls to take up the ism continued throughout the 1950s and 60s, but it never caught on.

Today, Chinese versions of Mao + ism do appear from time to time. More liberal minded intellectuals might use the terms to deride the rising "new left" in the PRC, and some Chinese leftists express support for Mao *zhuyi*, or self-identify using the similar term Mao *pai*, both of which might translate as Maoism or Maoist. But the official formulation, also most common in popular expression, remains Mao Zedong Thought, and Maoism tends to be associated with foreigners and to suggest some degree of disconnect between the global Mao and his domestic counterpart.

The coinage of the English word, Maoism, is often credited to China scholar Benjamin Schwartz, who used the term in his 1951 monograph on the rise of Mao within the Chinese Communist movement.[5] Schwartz probably did encourage the widespread use of the term, but if he was the first person to use it, he must have done so before 1951. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) records its usage as early as February 1950, in an issue of *Time Magazine*. The piece, only a few lines long, referred to "China's Red Master Mao Tse-tung." The article noted that Mao had then "entered his seventh week as honored – or harried – guest in Moscow," and the reporter speculated on the relationship between the new People's Republic of China and its senior ally, the Soviet Union. The author wondered whether the two powers were embarking on a collaborative ideological project, with their eyes on conquering the east. The article referred to the Chinese component of that possible project as "Maoism" and imagined that Mao's visit to the USSR might suggest China was about to be elevated to the status of a "junior partner" in "a joint Red drive toward Japan and

Southeast Asia that would bring booty enough for all the comrades."[6]

The meaning of the English-language term Maoism is even murkier than its origins. Although some sources, including Wikipedia, suggest that Maoism is a translation for, or at least roughly corresponds to, Mao Zedong Thought, most experts disagree. In China, Mao Zedong Thought, officially, refers to the collective wisdom of the Chinese Communist Party gained through the revolution and subsequent eras of governance. It is a living body of knowledge, from which should be eliminated ideas (even Mao's own) that have proved erroneous, but which can include contributions by later thinkers as well. The English term Maoism is similarly elastic, in that even specialist scholars use it in different ways. It can sometimes refer solely to Mao's ideas but is also regularly used to refer to things like the entire political culture of the early PRC as well as the thoughts and tactics of revolutionaries outside of China. But despite a shared elasticity, Mao Zedong Thought and Maoism, in all their varied scholarly and official uses, name related but divergent things.

Among non-experts, the meaning of Maoism gets even fuzzier. Of course, Mao himself was a distinct figure, singular even, the man who led China through a revolution and then presided over the newly communist country for almost thirty years, until his death. But even during his life, he seemed to be so many different men to so many different people. After his death, he became a conveyer of all manner of meaning. In popular discourse even Mao himself, let alone his ideas, can seem a bit like a sheet of blank paper, or a sheet of loose sand, something onto which could be projected many things, out of which might be molded many forms. Sometimes it appears that Maoism and Mao Zedong can be made to take any form at all, retaining no connection to their origin and no trace of their history. Often, different people reference Mao to say and do things that appear to contradict one another. Self-identified neo-Maoists can rebel, in Mao's name, against the state that holds the living soul of Mao Zedong Thought as its ideological foundation. Pundits can suggest that the much-reviled US president, Donald Trump, resembled Mao Zedong, while Donald Trump Jr. can say the same of his father's critics: "Mao would be proud," Trump Jr. proclaimed on Twitter, when the social media forum banned the former president from their platform.

For reasons to do with that elasticity, the French commentator Christophe Bourseiller once proclaimed that "Maoism doesn't exist," It never has done," he continued, adding "***That***, without doubt, explains its success."[7] This quotation became the epigraph and the thesis of Julia Lovell's *Global Maoism*. Lovell reckons with Mao and Maoism, as many have, by asserting that they were influential in large part because they simply came to serve as empty concepts. According to this line of reasoning, Mao and Maoism could be anything to anyone, and the ability to mean anything is also, often, to mean nothing.[8] While this view is persuasive and analytically useful to a certain degree, it's also important to note that Maoism, even just as a word, cannot *really* be anything to anyone. It is true that the man and his ideas could be something to almost anyone and just as easily be nothing to almost anyone as well. But there are plenty of things that Maoism simply could not be. And even in the most bizarre invocations, there are still reasons that Mao is referenced and not someone or something else.

To say there was no ***there*** *there* is not only wrong – it isn't that difficult to lay out the logics of Maoism. But more importantly, to say there was no such thing as Maoism devalues the experiences and the ideas of all the people who found that Mao helped them think powerful things and create profound change in their lives and in the world, often with results that Mao himself would not have wanted. At the same time, saying Maoism never existed turns the historical trauma at the heart of mid-twentieth-century modernity into senseless tragedy; it masks the social and material causes of the suffering that Maoism sought to address and the suffering that it left in its wake; it leaves those tensions unresolved and makes the Chairman and the history of the revolution seem almost supernatural, instead of quintessentially human and political. Great masses of people made Mao what he was, as man and myth, because he led them to think and to act in radical ways. Those people changed the course of history, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse.

Maoism is what Tani Barlow calls a historical catachresis, a noun which cannot but be misused

because its "referent is, theoretically or philosophically speaking, inadequate."[9] Maoism is a "loaded term" that cannot signify all of the material and affective experiences associated with its invocation. But it was invested with meaning by none other than those experiences and invocations and thus cannot be separated from them either. For a time, I was convinced that we needed a slightly different term to name the catachresis of Maoism, something akin to the word "Marxian," which connotes an affinity without necessarily a faithfulness to Marx's particular ideas. And I still like the term *maovian*, but I'm not sure we need it: Maoism is already a word that was born with and deeply connected to Mao Zedong Thought and the Chinese revolution, and yet Maoism implies a certain distance from those other two as well.

Maoism is the kind of historical category that Frederick Jameson described (speaking about the related category of "The Sixties") as something that has enough homologies and resonances within it to constitute a coherent subject. It was perhaps Jameson's own Maoist thinking that led him to this analysis, in which he claimed that "The Sixties" as a coherent "period" is "understood not as some omnipresent and uniform shared style or a way of thinking and acting," but "rather as the sharing of a common objective situation, to which a whole range of varied responses and creative innovations is then possible, but always within that situation's structural limits."[10]

Michael Schoenhals has suggested we might think of Maoism in a similar way. At a recent meeting where historians were attempting to grapple with Maoism as the name for something so broad, he reminded us of a passage from *The Quotations of Mao Zedong*, better known internationally as *The Little Red Book*.[11] It records a remark Mao apparently made in 1934: "It is not enough to set tasks; we must also solve the problem of the methods for carrying them out. If our task is to cross a river, we cannot cross it without a bridge or a boat. Unless the bridge or boat problem is solved, it is idle to speak of crossing the river. Unless the problem of method is solved, talk about the task is useless."[12] Perhaps Maoism, as distinct from Mao Zedong Thought, was most meaningful as a method for arriving at methods to accomplish revolutionary tasks.

Importantly, as Schoenhals also noted, Mao's association of methods with bridges and boats stands in contrast to a famous quotation from Deng Xiaoping, Mao's successor who led China's post-Maoist (and many would say neoliberal) reforms. Deng claimed that China should cross the river into the next stage of its future by "groping for stones." While the phrase was not Deng's own and had a longer history in Chinese Communist rhetoric, it became associate closely with Deng' pragmatism.[13] For Deng, people ought to cross a river by wading into the water and using the stones that were presumably already there. The prior placement of those already-existing-stones would also presumably guide people in a particular direction and toward a specific point on the other shore. Mao's boat-bridge metaphor, on the other hand, called on people to chart their own course, to identify a future destination, assess the obstacles standing in their way, and then create something that transforms the material and technological world (such as a boat or a bridge). The right innovation could take people wherever they want to go, regardless of any structures (stones) that might already be in place, regardless of how deep or wild the river, regardless of whether anyone had ever crossed before. If some future goal seemed unachievable, Mao suggested, it might only be that people had not yet figured out what kind of boat or bridge or other human creation would be needed to get there.

If Maoism is a way to build a boat and to chart a course to all sorts of points and across all sorts of rivers, then following Mao's instructions, especially in different times and under different material and historical conditions, would necessarily mean moving well beyond and even away from anything Mao might have thought. Thus, it may be true, as many have argued, that the word "Maoism" is inaccurate, imprecise, and misleading as a descriptor for the body of thought Mao articulated or for the government or the era that he led. But Maoism seems the perfect name for the vast constellation of things that were produced, not always in his name, but somewhere in his orbit.

[1] San Mu, “Ye Qing: Zhong Gong lishi shang zui juejue de pantu,” 中共历史上最决绝的叛徒, *Tongzhou gongjin* (2010, issue 8), 51 – 52. Mao Zedong “Working Principles of the Seventh Congress of the Chinese Communist Party,” April 21, 1945.

[2] Sun Zexue, “Mao Zedong, ‘Mao Zedong zhuyi,’ ‘Mao Zedong sixiang,” 毛泽东与‘毛泽东注意’‘毛泽东思想,’ *Lilun tantao* (2008, issue 1), 105. Sun notes that Ye Wanjun has made the Deng Tuo argument, but Sun insists that it is untrue.

[3] Wang Ning, “Introduction: Global Maoism and Cultural Revolutions in the Global Context,” *Comparative Literature Studies*, vol. 52, no. 1 (2015), 2.

[4] Sun, 106.

[5] Elizabeth Perry, “Debating Maoism in Contemporary China: Reflections on Benjamin I. Schwartz, Chinese Communism and the Rise of Mao,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, vol. 19, iss. 1, no. 1 (January 1, 2021) https://apjjf.org/2021/1/Perry.html; Karl August Wittfogel, “The Legend of Maoism,” *The China Quarterly* 1 (January – March 1960), 73.

[6] “Communists: Between Comrades,” *Time Magazine*, 6 Feb 1950.

[7] Fabio Lanza, *The End of Concern: Maoist China, Activism, and Asian Studies* (Duke University Press, 2017), 143 (italics mine). Christophe Bourseiller, *Les Maoïstes: La folle histoire des gardes rouges Français* [The Maoists: The crazy story of the French red guards] (Paris: Points, 2008).

[8] Julia Lovell, *Maoism: A Global History* (Knopf, 2019).

[9] Tani Barlow, *The Question of Woman in Chinese Feminism* (Duke University Press, 2004), 1.

[10] Frederic Jameson, “Periodizing the 60s,” *Social Text* 9/10 (Spring – Summer 1984), 178.

[11] Schoenhals made these comments at a meeting of the “How Maoism Was Made” Working Group, organized by Jennifer Altehenger and Aaron Moore, June 2020.

[12] Mao Zedong, "Be Concerned with the Well-Being of the Masses, Pay Attention to Methods of Work" (January 27, 1934), *Selected Works*, Vol. I, p. 150. https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_10.htm

[13] Han Zheneng, “The Pedigree of the ‘Crossing the River by Groping for Stones’ Method of Reform,” ‘摸着石头过河’改革方法的来龙去脉 *Guangming ribao*, April 9, 2014 https://epaper.gmw.cn/gmrb/html/2014-04/09/nw.D110000gmrb_20140409_3-14.htm