

Book Review: China and the New Maoists by Kerry Brown and Simone Van Nieuwenhuizen

In China and the New Maoists, Kerry Brown and Simone Van Nieuwenhuizen examine the endurance of Mao as a figure with continued, albeit controversial, resonance in contemporary China, with particular focus on the emergence of 'new Maoism'. This compelling book is a must-read for those looking to get a better understanding of China's recent history and its internal politics, writes Raj Verma.

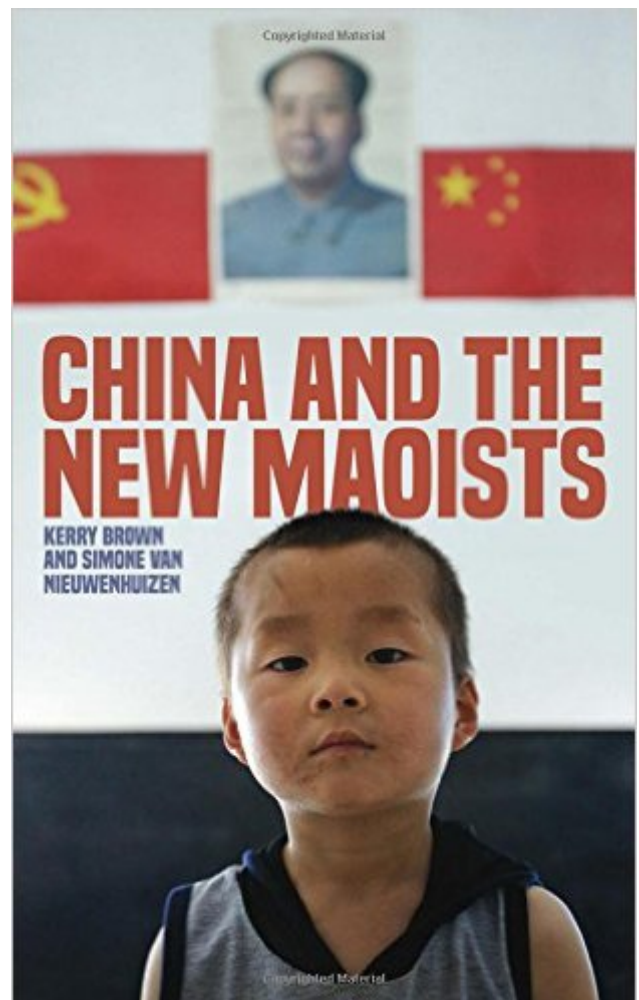
China and the New Maoists. Kerry Brown and Simone Van Nieuwenhuizen. Zed Books. 2016.

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The People's Republic of China (PRC) was founded in 1949 by Mao Zedong. Although it was a collective effort in which 'immortal eight elders' such as Deng Xiaoping and Bo Yibo also played a major role, Mao was chosen as the face of China's Communist Party (CCP) until his death in 1976. Between 1949 and 1976 and especially during 1966-76, Mao had a larger-than-life persona and was worshipped across China.

Mao was, however, both directly and indirectly responsible for disastrous economic policies like the Great Leap Forward (1958-60). Ideology and politics triumphed over economic logic in the establishment of communes and light industry in villages, which led to inefficiency, falls in productivity and output and the famines of 1959-62 that resulted in the deaths of tens of millions. The Cultural Revolution from 1966-76 – also described as China's 'spiritual holocaust' (Ba Jin 10) – was launched by Mao to preserve 'true' communist ideology by purging the remaining capitalists and traditional Chinese elements from Chinese society. This brought Mao to the centre of power after the disastrous Great Leap Forward. It had momentous socio-economic and political ramifications, leading to the torture, harassment, imprisonment, forced displacement and the death of millions of Chinese people, including senior members of the CCP.



After Mao's death, China undertook reform under the leadership of Deng. China's economy grew at approximately ten per cent per annum from 1978-2012; at the end of 2014, it surpassed the US to become the largest economy (in terms of purchasing power parity) in the world. According to the [United Nations Human Development Report 2015](#), China has consistently risen in human development indicators to become classified as a country with high human development (it is ranked 90 whereas India, which had similar levels of development as China at the beginning of the 1980s, is ranked 130). The Chinese economy is thus characterised as 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'. However, despite China's transformation, China remains under the grip of 'Mao

fever', with people still punished for derogatory comments about Mao. For instance, in 2015, CCTV presenter **Bi Fujian** apologised when his irreverent remarks against Mao at a dinner were captured on social media. He was later suspended by CCTV.



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China and the New Maoists, co-authored by Kerry Brown and Simone van Nieuwenhuizen, seeks to explore why Mao still appeals to some as well as his continued resonance for political life in present-day China. The authors distinguish between Mao the person and his ideas, also referred to as Maoism or 'Mao Zedong thought'. The authors assert that the CCP wants to distance itself from Mao the leader who was responsible for the numerous upheavals in China: for instance, in 1981, the CCP proclaimed in a resolution that Mao was 70 per cent correct and 30 per cent incorrect with merits being primary and errors being secondary. Mao also did not figure in the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The CCP clearly does not want a resurrection of Mao's cult of personality status. Bo Xilai followed Mao's mass campaigns, appealed directly to the people and their idealism and followed populist measures. The popularity his measures garnered and the ways it was used for propaganda were suggestive of Mao. CCP was appalled by this and he was accused of reinstating Cultural Revolution in Chongqing, leading to his downfall.

However, the CCP has espoused Mao's ideology. This is particularly true of the fifth generation leadership in China, headed by Xi Jinping, which struggles for legitimacy. Xi has maintained an ambiguous position regarding Mao: there has been no mention of Mao being 30 per cent wrong, but Xi was criticised by leftists for stating in the 2013 Plenum that markets were necessary for reform, contrary to 'Mao Zedong thought'. Yet, Xi's critics also refer him as the new Mao because he has used propaganda such as the slogan '**China Dream**' to win the hearts and minds of people.

The reform era has given rise to leftism. The emergence of the neo-Maoists can be divided into two time periods: 1978-89; and post-Tiananmen to the present, which is referred as 'new leftism' or neo-Maoism. The authors define 'new leftism' as the remnants of 'Mao Zedong thought' that were rejected by the CCP in 1981. Neo-Maoists consider themselves the true believers and followers of Mao. It should be pointed out that not all neo-Maoists express their admiration of Mao the person; they also venerate other revolutionary martyrs. However, all espouse his ideology. Unlike in the past, in modern China the CCP does not have full control over public discourse. Neo-Maoists use various sources like the print media and the internet to disseminate Mao's ideology and his continued significance and role in China's political life. Thus the CCP and its leadership compete with the neo-Maoists in the battle to gain legitimacy from the figure of Mao to be his true successors and heirs.

The neo-Maoists want China to revert to Mao's ideology of 'true' communism: that is, greater state control of the economy; less privatisation; a more equitable distribution of income and wealth; a classless utopian society; and the rule of the proletariat. They are therefore extremely critical of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'. In contrast, CCP's legitimacy is largely driven by economic growth and its use of Mao is at odds with the neo-Maoists. Because the CCP nonetheless utilise Mao, who remains linked to communism, it is difficult for the party to attack the new leftists who threaten social harmony and systemic stability, which is valued extremely highly by the CCP. Neo-Maoists have appeal because of the growing distance between the CCP and society as well as the crisis of faith in socialism, communism and, most importantly, the CCP. Thus, according to the authors, it is not liberals like Liu Xiabao, the 2010 Nobel Prize winner, who pose a threat to CCP's legitimacy, but the neo-Maoists who base their appeal on Mao.

In the near future, although Mao's memory will fade, he will continue to play an important role in China's politics, society and intellectual thought. He will continue to evince different memories from people – some consider him an ideologue, others as the strongest nationalist leader that China has had and others as an activist and a guerrilla leader. He will continue to perturb the CCP and its leadership because they will not be able to bury his influence and will be wary that his supporters do not grab power again. He will continue to frustrate his followers because they will be unable to bring his ideology into the mainstream.

This compelling book about Mao and his different manifestations has some limitations. The authors state that Bo was accused by the CCP of reverting to neo-Maoism in Chongqing and was subsequently convicted for this reason. They also mention his ambition to succeed Hu Jintao as China's leader. However, they do not take into account the power struggle between Xi and Bo as another reason for his conviction. The authors mention that Maoism as an ideology is still prevalent in Nepal where the Communist Party led an armed struggle and formed the government at the centre. However, they completely ignore the prevalence of Maoism in India and how Maoism has led to the **Naxalite Movement**, which has resulted in thousands of deaths and is responsible for the failing of the writ of the state in large parts of the nation.

Nonetheless, the book is a must-read for those who want to get a good grasp of China's recent history and the different ideologies prevailing in the nation.

Dr Raj Verma is Assistant Professor of International Relations and Foreign Policy at the School of International and Public Affairs, Jilin University. He is the author of 'India and China in Africa: A comparative perspective of the oil industry', Routledge, and Series Editor of Routledge Series on India-China Studies. [Read more reviews by Raj Verma.](#)

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