

Maoism at the Grassroots: Everyday Life in China's Era of High Socialism

Jeremy Brown and Matthew D. Johnson, eds.

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This fascinating and empirically volume begins with the provocative assertion that, “[w]hen analysed as history, the Mao Zedong era (1949-1978) looks different than it did when scrutinised by social scientists.” Such analyses of the period, in the editors’ view, “have been mainly top-down and state-focused,” and less focussed on explaining “processes of change and continuity over time from the perspective of unknown historical actors” (1), a broad characterisation of that sets to the side the fine-grained and nuanced bottom-up approaches adopted by social scientists like Elizabeth Perry, Andrew Walder, Neil Diamant, Elizabeth Remick and many others. Nonetheless, this truly impressive collection goes a long way in enriching our understanding of and appreciation for the diversity and variety of experiences of individual life at the social grassroots during the period of “high socialism” that lasted from the mid-1950s until 1980, and sets a new standard for interdisciplinary historically grounded research in the field.

The volume is divided into four sections. The first, on crimes, labels and punishment, begins with Yang Kuisong’s study of Zang Qiren, an erstwhile model factory worker and acting branch secretary sentenced to prison for his sexual behavior and condemned as a “bad element” (*huai fenzi* 坏分子), despite the lack of criminal activity. Jeremy Brown’s chapter on the malleability of class labels in rural society highlights the vulnerability of individuals to shifting systems of classification over repeated rectification campaigns. Cao Shuji documents the surprisingly large number of “rightists” who willingly and knowingly sacrificed themselves to voice their opposition to Maoist policies. Daniel Leese insightfully analyzes the cases of forty citizens whose verdicts were reversed by Beijing’s Fengtai District Court to shed light on how the concept of counterrevolutionary crime was redefined, and legal norms reinstated, after 1978.

The second section revolves focuses on mobilization. Jacob Eyferth examines rural women in Guanzhong over time as both producers for and consumers of the national market in textiles, finding that their lived experiences of scarcity and overwork overshadowed their memories of mass campaigns. Sigrid Schmalzer details how the “sent-down educated youths” of the 1960s and ‘70s popularized scientific experimentation as an integral part of revolutionary engagement during the late Mao era. Sha Qingqing and Jeremy Brown reconstruct the account of diarist’s attempt to cope with stress and uncertainty in the wake of the 1976 Tangshan Earthquake.

The third section, on culture and communication, begins with Matthew D. Johnson’s rich and complex chapter documenting the myriad ways in which state-created official culture was received, interpreted and resisted in Shanghai. In his contribution, Michael Schoenhals examines in careful detail how the revolutionary mass organizations that sprang into existence during the Cultural Revolution collected, disseminated and exchanged information. Xiaoxuan Wang’s chapter traces out the impact of vacillations religious policy at the social grassroots in Ruian County.

The fourth and final section maps violence, conflict and expressions of discontent over the course of the Mao era, beginning with a chapter by Wang Haiguang on the Party’s response to the Mahsan rebellion of 1956 in Guizhou. Zhe Wu documents the widening rift between Han chauvinism and non-Han “local nationalism” from 1952 to 1963 in Xinjiang. Steve Smith’s impressively conceptualized chapter comprehensively reviews the regime’s policies toward what the CCP dubbed

“reactionary sects” after 1952, and describes how so many redemptive societies managed to survive despite severe repression.

Vivienne Shue, an eminent political scientist whose historically nuanced work has documented the dimensions of conflict, accommodation, and variation Mao’s China and beyond, provides an incisive epilogue for the volume that takes up the implicit challenge set by the introduction’s provocative assertion. She notes that the rich historical approach represented by the contributors invites the reader to reflect not only on the prosaic ordinariness of everyday Maoism, but also on the emphatically extraordinary nature of the times. Shue asserts that while “ ‘Mao’s China’ —a truly massive social field over which a simply monumental effort was made, repeatedly, to put militant revolutionary politics in command—most certainly did exist,” it did not and in fact could not do so in “the ways in which it was imagined to,” either by the PRC propagandists who lauded the achievements of the era, or by Western onlookers who reacted with fascination and alarm (377). The lesson for the social scientist is to strive to bring an approach “as multivalent and dynamic” as is represented in this terrific volume to put “ ‘the political’ in China—and even ‘the economic’ for that matter—into proper perspective” (379). And it is that perspective that makes this wonderful volume essential reading for anyone interested in Mao era.

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