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Asia in 2019: Escalating international tensions and authoritarian involution

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Nicola Mocci
Filippo Boni

viella

A large, light-colored decorative mandala graphic is positioned on the right side of the cover, partially overlapping the text. It features intricate, repeating geometric and floral patterns.

CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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When this Asia Maior issue was finalized and the Covid-19 pandemic raged throughout the world, Kian Zaccara, Greta Maiorano and Giulio Santi, all children of Asia Maior authors (Luciano Zaccara, Diego Maiorano and Silvia Menegazzi), were born. We (the Asia Maior editors) have seen that as a manifestation of Life, reasserting itself in front of Thanatos. It is for this reason that we dedicate this issue to Kian, Greta and Giulio, with the fond hope that they will live in a better world than the one devastated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

CONTESTED LEGACIES OF CHINESE COMMUNISM:
WORDS, CONCEPTS AND PRACTICES FROM MAO TO XI

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Christian Sorace, Ivan Franceschini, Nicholas Loubere (eds.), *Afterlives of Chinese Communism. Political Concepts from Mao to Xi*, Acton: ANU Press and Verso Books, 404 pages, (ISBN 9781788734769).

Well before the founding of the People's Republic of China, the communist leadership was aware of the great importance of propaganda as a tool for educating and mobilising the masses¹. It considered language and rhetoric as fundamental assets to mould the people's thinking, and when it took power it initiated and consolidated a rewriting of public discourse which also quickly permeated the private discourse.

Michael Schoenals was one of the first few scholars to analyse how «things were done with words» in Chinese politics, and to stress the «remarkable consensus»² within the Chinese Communist Party about the central role played by perlocution in building, consolidating and maintaining state power. The simple, repetitive and formalised language that «help[s] constitute the structure of power within China's political system»³ has later fascinated and attracted the attention of other scholars, who have focused particularly on the Mao era (1949-1976). At that time, and especially during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), keywords and slogans were ubiquitous and people were required to repeat them on the most varied occasions and contexts. Ji Fengyuan has written about the «extensive, systematic and bureaucratically controlled program of linguistic engineering» put into practice by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to «make the population use those verbal formulas that seemed most suited to produce a correct thought»,⁴ while Lu Xing has worked on the formalised language, charac-

1. In 1943, in his essay *Some questions concerning leadership methods*, Mao referred to the traditional belief that education and persuasion are more effective in maintaining social stability than the use of force and coercion, and that, once the «right» thinking conveyed by the models is absorbed, each person tends to put it into practice with appropriate behaviour. Mao Zedong, *Selected works of Mao Tse-tung*, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1967; Stefan Landsberger, *Chinese propaganda posters. From revolution to modernization*, Amsterdam and Singapore: The Pepin Press, 1995.

2. Michael Schoenals, *Doing Things with Words in Chinese Politics: Five Studies*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992, p. 5.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

4. Ji Fengyuan, *Linguistic Engineering. Language and Politics in Mao's China*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004, p. 54.

terised by particularly acute rhetorical violence, and has argued that it was partially responsible for the violence of political action during the Cultural Revolution.⁵ Finally, Perry Link has reconstructed the principles of musicality and rhythm that made the formulations beautiful and easy to remember, in a volume where he also emphasised how the language of the private sphere was substantially replaced by official political language, particularly in the years of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).⁶

Keywords and formulations that were relevant in the Mao era are also the core subject of *Afterlives of Chinese Communism*. Even if Raymond Williams' seminal work *Keywords* is not mentioned by the editors of the volume, it is an obvious reference that comes to mind when reading *Afterlives*.⁷ In fact, Williams' definition of what is a keyword, his admission to the «difficult relations between words and concepts»⁸ and his approach belonging to historical semantics are implicit to the book's project and to many contributions that are part of it. Readers should be familiar with Williams' ideas to fully grasp the ambition of the project of *Afterlives*.

The book, that the editors describe as a study of «concepts» and «practices» of the Mao period, is presented as the result of a collective endeavour to identify and engage with the «main concepts underpinning Chinese communist thought» (p. 7), each one explored in order to trace their «origins, lives, and afterlives» (p. 6). As detailed in the Introduction, the undertaking began as a special issue of *Made in China*, an open-access quarterly edited by the same editors of the book. With more and more authors from different disciplines and continents being involved, the project developed into the 404-pages volume that can be purchased in hard copy or retrieved online, in accordance with the open-access policy characterising the journal that started it off.

Each of the 53 chapters is dedicated to a concept or a practice in order to describe what it meant at the time and what it has become in present Chinese politics. In doing so, the book offers both a recognition of the use of those formulations in China's political discourse, as well as an evaluation of their meaningfulness and usefulness in a critical rediscovery of Maoism that «take[s] it seriously as a revolutionary project» (p. 3).

Concepts, however, can hardly be separated from the words used to express them – and that is especially true in the People's Republic of China.

5. Lu Xing, *Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution*, Columbia: South Carolina University Press, 2004.

6. Perry Link, *An Anatomy of Chinese. Rhythm, Metaphor, Politics*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013.

7. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Rev. ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. See also Alan Durant, 'The Significance Is in the Selection: Identifying Contemporary Keywords', *Critical Quarterly*, 50, 2008, pp. 122-46.

8. Williams, p. 21.

The editors very briefly stress the relevance of language in the life of the Chinese Communist Party and in the construction and dissemination of the concepts studied in the book, showing that the volume does not aim to focus on linguistic phenomena. References to the so-called «Mao-speak»⁹ and to the lexicon that composed Mao's language are mostly indirect across the contributions, however a few authors do dwell on the words they analyse. Thornton, for instance, traces the history of the term «Cultural Revolution» and its substitution by «Cultural construction»; Yang Long describes the trajectory of the term «Self-reliance» from its historical origins to its descent in the 1990s, to its resurgence (and adaptation of meaning) in Xi Jinping's speeches; and Yoshihiro Ishikawa and Craig A. Smith describe the genealogy and recent oblivion of «Line struggle». In a separate contribution, Smith also elaborates on the Confucian origin and the later development of two terms that retain great relevance in the present political discourse, *Datong* and *Xiaokang*.¹⁰

These studies, based on tracking the terms in classical, modern and contemporary texts from the philosophical and political realms, allow non-specialists to appreciate the cultural stratification and philosophical depth of the CCP language and the density of its political discourse. For specialists, they are an effective reminder about the complexity and richness of China in the ancient past as well as in modern times.

Other contributions do not elaborate on the very words they study, but only on the concepts that the formulations entail, investigating their often ancient origins and their appropriation by Maoism. In many cases they discuss their legacies, assessing their survival, evolution or disappearance in contemporary China. In doing so, they analyse how a concept has been implemented in practice, highlighting relevant connections between events, periods and disciplines. Christian Sorace's chapter on «Aesthetics» is one such example, where he appraises the legacy of the Maoist political and aesthetic criteria on Xi Jinping's guidelines on art. The criteria are also illustrated in the case of Michelangelo Antonioni's 1974 documentary *Chung Kuo*. In a similar fashion, Covel Meyskens looks at the photographic representations of «Labour» from the Mao era to postsocialist China; while Laura De Giorgi analyses the origins and development of «United front» and its use as a strategy to absorb potential opponents into the established structure of the state. Gloria Davies' reflection on the concept of «Immortality» underlines the fundamental betrayal of Mao's thought produced by the crystallisation of his own thought, suggesting an interesting perspective through which to look at the project of *Afterlives* itself.

9. Geremie R. Barmé, 'New China Newspeak', *China Heritage Quarterly*, No. 29, March 2012.

10. While not providing a conclusive definition for the two classical Chinese concepts, the author of the contribution refers to «grand unity» and to «moderate prosperity» as the most used translations for *Datong* and *Xiaokang* respectively.

An original aspect of the volume is the «political» approach and aim that the editors openly state. Far from trying to present their project as neutral, they propose their belief that the «revival of the communist perspective, freed from any dogmatism, is necessary» (p. 7) to transform and improve our world. In light of «the urgent need to reinvent egalitarian organisations of political and economic life» (p. 5), they seek to allow new interpretative possibilities on the Communist experience in China by offering a critical study of the concepts that were at the core of «one of the twentieth century's most radical, and fraught, undertakings to transform and emancipate humanity» (p. 7).

The publication's goal emerges clearly in contributions that aim to dismantle assumptions and misconceptions about key Maoist ideas or practices. A clear example of this is Gao Mobo's study on «Collectivism». It looks at the theoretical and factual application of collectivism in the Mao era, arguing that collective farming was a rational answer to China's problem and goals of the time, and that it should not be discredited on the basis of negative and extreme manifestations such as the Great Leap Forward. On a similar note, Dai Jinhua's chapter analyses the attempt to create a new culture in the Mao era and stresses the centrality of culture in the PCC-led process of creating a new «person», wondering if the legacies of the socialist cultural experiment of the time could be the basis of alternative society or alternative cultural practice in the future. William J. Hurst's contribution is also in line with this attitude when showing that a legal system did exist and function in the Mao era, unlike widespread misconceptions and the CCP's own narrative of China's past tell.

The book is a very valuable resource that can be read at different levels. Since the contributions are titled with the keyword or expression they analyse and are organised in alphabetical order, the book can be searched as a glossary, where the reader can seek for the individual concepts they are interested in. They will find a general understanding of each one of them, as well as their history as far as the authors were able to trace it. In covering this content, many contributions also analyse whether the term studied is part of the vocabulary of Xi Jinping's «New Era» (*xin shidai*) and how it is used at present, offering a critical reconstruction of the contemporary CCP language and of its consistency or transformation through the decades.

The plurality of authors with different backgrounds and varied standpoints generates a diversity of approaches and trajectories that enriches the volume. It also produces an indirect dialogue among a wide range of opinions on the success and future of China's communist project. At the same time, plenty are the inter-connections between contributions, and a number of key concepts clearly emerge from the body of the volume, standing out as independent threads that run throughout the book. Jodi Dean points at some of these relations in the Afterword, stressing concepts such as «revolution», «class struggle», «the people», and «mass line». Dean also

underlines the role of the language of communism, since «language is the weapon in the arsenal of struggle» (p. 336). Similarly, every reader should find, according to their own interests and needs, their own connections and paths to follow.

For these reasons, the volume is a useful reference for understanding contemporary Chinese society and politics. For sinologists, it is also a stimulus for more engaged ways to study contemporary China; and a general call for trying to look at Maoism with new, unbiased eyes.