**Under a Shadow**

Kitsch images have turned Mao Zedong into a seemingly harmless historical oddity. No one, though, should underestimate his continuing influence on China.

By Bruce Gilley/Beijing and Hong Kong

In late July, authorities in the central city of Jiaxing, near the mountains where China's communist revolution was born, brought in bulldozers to demolish a former home of Mao Zedong. The city had listed the house as an important historical building in 1982, but the economic reforms launched at the same time finally got the better of Mao. The land was needed for a new commercial development.

Over the past year Jiaxing authorities had also detained and interrogated dozens of members of the banned Fushan Gang religious cult. Meanwhile, a smoldering peasant protest was snuffed out using armed force in March ... It is 25 years since Mao died. In the years since, China has been convulsed by social and economic change and Mao has been largely shut out to the sidelines of the nation's day-to-day life. And yet, he continues to exert an enormous influence through the system and the policies he left behind. On any given day his revolution can be seen in action, persecuting outspoken intellectuals, lashing out at imagined foreign slights, and jealously guarding his monopoly of power.

This tension between China's modernizing society and Mao's remnant state is growing. Outside China Mao has joined Hitler and Stalin in the pantheon of 20th century evil—but there are at least in part by the work of Chinese scholars and writers working outside of China. This verdict has not gone unmentioned in China.

Today in China the image of Mao is borrowed only selectively by the country's rulers and its people. When it stands in the way of a new shopping centre Mao usually loses. But the system of rule and ideology that he left behind remains under the vigilant protection of the ruling Chinese Communist Party. By that measure, 25 years after his death on September 9, 1976, Mao continues to enjoy a healthy afterlife.

"It would be most short-sighted to be deluded by all the tall buildings, cell phones, Western fast-food restaurants, and ornaments of globalization into forgetting that Mao did, in fact, leave a Maoist-Leninist revolution that up-ended old China; his portrait still hangs on Tiananmen and his body is still exhibited in repose in his mausoleum in the middle of Tiananmen Square," says Orville Schell, dean of journalism at the University of...
In the village department store a bank of televisions plays endless footage from the glory days of the Cultural Revolution, livened by images of Chairman Mao waving his Little Red Book, tourists pour over country scenes glowing with Mao portraits—everything from gold-plated busts and dinner plates to bottle openers and nail-clippers.

This is Shaozhuang, the village in Henan province where Mao Zedong was born and which—98 years on—is the holiday destination of choice for the last of China’s die-hard communitarians and the first of its new revolutionaries.

For many of those touring the village’s 14 Mao-related sites, though, this is not exactly a wholesome pilgrimage. In the school where Mao studied, standing visitors stream stepping over a barrier rope to have their photo taken sitting at the Great Leader’s school desk. Outside the house where he was born, three generations of one family smile for the pose of photos, jostling a chubby baby in front of the camera.

Inside the Museum of Comrade Mao, photos, documents and paintings trace the Great Helmstman’s life from humble youth to leader of China, focusing on the revolutionary struggle and the hyphenated years of the palsies. With the exception of one image of the Helmstman’s embalmed corpse, the Mao on display here is that of romantic hero, part freedom-fighter, part poet. In one wing, visitors don plastic shoe covers and shuffle through dimly-lit rooms where Mao’s personal effects—relics of a madman, but not a bottle, slippers—are on display. There is even a recreation of Mao’s former residence in Beijing, complete with his infamous wooden bed.

Outside, beneath a bronze statue of Mao, another photo opportunity awaits. Shrouded officials, tourist groups and PLA soldiers all lay flowers then pose for photos at Mao’s feet. Most are under 40; “This is my third time in Shaozhuang,” one middle-aged visitor says proudly. “Chairman Mao was a great man.”

Katherine Tinto

California at Berkeley. “Until China finds some way to put its revolution ideologically behind—and that will not be easy—it will be very difficult for the reform movement to truly break out of the constraints that were the heart and soul of Maoism.”

In the weeks leading up to the party’s 50th anniversary on July 1, the capital’s Movie Theatre in Beijing was ordered to drop its normal fare of American blockbusters and domestic crime thrillers in favour of four new movies about Mao Zedong’s life before the communist takeover of 1949. Attendance was poor but the message was clear: the party continues to borrow Mao’s image to justify its continued rule. Indeed, the announcement on the anniversary that capitalists would be allowed to join the party was quickly justified with reference to Mao, who endorsed some role for capitalists in the political system in 1944.

Mao’s post-1949 image is less favours. The party ruled in 1981 that he had committed “major mistakes” in that period, even though these did not outweigh his merits. Translation: the roughly 10 million people who were killed in Mao’s post-1949 political campaigns and the other 30 to 40 million who died as a result of his Great Leap Forward famine of 1959-61 do indeed tarnish his claim that he made China “stand up.” But those stains must not be allowed to blot out the entire man, lest his state be blackened as well. “If Mao is to blame, then the party is to blame,” notes the writer and journalist Jonathan Minkley. “And if the party is to blame, then those who have inherited its revolutionary mantle have no legitimate claim to rule.”

**Survival Strategy**

Without Mao’s state—its coercive apparatus and its system of thought control—China’s present-day rulers would be hard-pressed to survive. Mao Zedong thought remains part of the official ideology, while Mao’s uncompromising treatment of Chinese society continues to inform policy. In that respect, at least, Mao remains wholly in the official favourite.

Ordinary Chinese continue to selectively borrow Mao’s image too. In the countryside, where the economic and personal losses were greatest, he is hated. But urbanites continue to admire him. Reflecting today’s preoccupations Mao is mainly recalled as a fierce anti-American and a foe of business wisdom. Two companies, state glassmaker Jingguang Group in Hebei province and the conglomerate of the neo-Maoist Nanjie Village in Henan province, claim Mao thought helps them do business, although their methods wouldn’t be out of place at the Harvard Business School.

But the degree to which Mao has fallen into kitsch is evident elsewhere. At the Hongqiao market in Beijing hawkers now sell glow-in-the-dark white plastic dinterp shoves in the form of Mao. “You can also use it in the office to relieve stress,” says one seller, squeezing the toy.

The Mao family, meanwhile, is treated to the fascination reserved for other fallen dynasties like the Kennedys. The antics of his feuding daughter Shun Yuan, his richly genre son, Mao Xinyu, takes guff and gag photographs of the family and Mao grandpa’s official Web site. It is unclear how much Mao’s image would suffer if China’s people knew the truth about his

mistakes. In Hong Kong and overseas Chinese communities where information is ample, he still enjoys some respect. Like Pierre Trudeau in Canada, he is remembered as a real man with a big vision, a stark contrast to his dull successors.

“I have Chairman Mao,” I insist to a friend. “We must talk about Chairman Mao. Sometimes I cry for Chairman Mao because of some people misunderstand him,” a person who identified themselves as Ana Xiao of Hawaii wrote on the Mao site chat room.

Still, while many revere his image, few respect the state he left behind, which struggles to deal with the pressing social, economic, and diplomatic challenges of a growing nation. Its shortcomings are rarely attributed to Mao, but in many ways they are none of his making than his successors.

“What I find most interesting is the tension between that part of his legacy which has been allowed to lapse under the pressure of reform and that part which remains as a sometimes stubborn, but still quite substantial,” legacy,” says Schell.

Inevitably, that tension must pull apart Mao’s state. Like Lenin in Moscow, Mao will likely be allowed to remain at rest in Tiananmen Square. Only then will he truly be put to rest.