

Questions for Jude Blanchette, author of *China's New Red Guards: The Return of Radicalism and the Rebirth of Mao Zedong* (Oxford University Press, 2019)

1. Can you explain the enduring ideological influence of Maoism in China? What is the essence of Maoism and why does it remain a potent ideological force despite Mao's catastrophic rule?

The question of why Maoism endures in China is difficult to extricate from the larger discussion of Mao Zedong as a political and historical figure. This becomes evident in China when party leaders attempt to differentiate “Mao Zedong Thought” (毛泽东思想), which they ostensibly support, from “the thought of Mao Zedong” (毛泽东的思想), which, since Deng Xiaoping, they have largely condemned. According to the official line, the former refers to a body of thought that combines Marxism-Leninism adapted to the exigencies of China's own revolutionary experience. The latter can be described as the political tactics and policies that we more commonly associate with the nearly three decades during which China was ruled by Mao.

Irrespective of how we frame it, the current leadership still relies heavily on Mao Zedong, if not on Maoism. All political leaders in the post-Mao era have praised Mao's legacy and persecuted those who went too far in criticizing him. Deng, in a discussion with leading comrades of the Central Committee in 1980, stated “The mistakes Comrade Mao made in both theory and practice in his later years should be mentioned, but they should be dealt with properly and only in general outline. The main thing is to concentrate on the aspects in which he was correct, because that conforms to historical reality.” Even today, this remains the consensus in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), for the leadership understands that if the Mao era were to face a full historical accounting, the party's basic legitimacy would suffer a tremendous blow.

But this support for Mao goes well beyond a defensive posture. Many of Mao's political and ideological innovations, from the “mass line” (群众路线) campaign to the drive for “self-sufficiency” (自力更生), remain core features of China's formal political culture. Likewise, the great origin story of the People's Republic of China—from a once-proud nation, humiliated and subjugated by the Western powers, and then to an independent and feared great power — is inseparable from Mao Zedong. For those concerned about China's now-staggering wealth gap and embrace of extreme materialism, the Mao era (with some glaring omissions) evokes a time of community and shared purpose.

2. Your book provides a wealth of information on the leading elements among “China's New Red Guards.” They seem to fall into several categories due to their ideological differences. How would you classify the “New Red Guards” based on their core beliefs?

Like many marginalized political movements, China's neo-Maoists can be subdivided into so many differing camps and factions that it becomes difficult to distinguish one from the other. For the sake of simplicity — and borrowing from Chen Ziming's taxonomy — we can think of two primary groupings: the elite faction (*baohuang pai*) and the activist faction (*zaofan pai*). The elite neo-Maoists defend the existing order, and although they may have specific complaints about policy, they generally support the direction that Xi is taking the country. Their rallying cry

is “wealth and power” (富强), and during this period of increasing tensions with the United States, they believe the country requires a strong leader and a unified population. The activist neo-Maoists, on the other hand, argue that the CCP is rotten to the core, corrupted by capitalism and bureaucratism, just as Mao had warned at the outset of the Cultural Revolution. The activist neo-Maoists can be found in those cities that were hollowed out after the party leadership restructured China’s once-sprawling state-owned sector in the 1990s, and their political platform (such as one exists) calls for the abolition of private property and a radical redistribution of wealth.

3. In the post-Mao era, the ruling CCP appears to have two ideological Achilles heels. One is leftism or radicalism, and the other is nationalism. Those who oppose CCP policies can always try to outflank those in charge of the party by being more “left” or more “patriotic.” How did the party cope with such ideological challenges before the advent of the Xi Jinping era?

Given the scope and scale of the current crackdown on ideological pluralism, I’m not sure the party feels that it dealt with these problems very well. Indeed, looking back at the relatively robust intellectual debates just ten years ago, it is extraordinary how closed the current environment is. In the mid-2000s, when neo-Maoist groups were at the peak of their influence and reach, radicalism and extreme nationalism were common features of public debate. Books such *Unhappy China* (2009) argued that China’s political system was failing to protect the country from outside aggression, and events widely seen as moments for national pride, such as the 2008 Beijing Olympics, were in fact manifestations of a “weak nation's psychology.” Such grievances with a “weak” CCP under the rule of Hu Jintao helped fuel the rise of current leader Xi Jinping.

4. In what ways do you think that Xi, in spite of his now-unquestioned leftist ideological credentials, can still be outflanked by the ultra-leftists or the nationalists?

Functionally speaking, this threat does not keep Xi up at night as much as it once did. As he has consolidated his grip on power, he had made it difficult for *any* type of threat to emerge, either from the left or from the right. Grassroots activism and independent intellectual discourse are facing a sustained assault, and the once potent left-flank has all but disappeared. Among the political elite, political and ideological divisions remain (how could they not?), but the room to effectively organize a challenge to Xi’s rule is both organizationally and operationally extraordinarily difficult. A successful coup takes quite a bit of logistical legwork, and even though not impossible, huge collective-action problems exist. No one wants to be the first to raise his/her hand and suggest that Xi should step down.

But this doesn’t completely negate the risk of a “left-flank” from thwarting Xi’s drive for total political obedience. As long as China’s development path prioritizes growth over equality, the voices of socialism will remain active. Maurice Meisner, in his beautifully written and often infuriating book, *The Deng Xiaoping Era* (1996), captures this tension well: “As capitalism further develops, and as more recoil from its ‘icy waters of egotistical calculation’ new socialist movements will rise in opposition, drawing support from the democratic strivings of the Chinese

people and perhaps from the rudimentary socialist values inherited from earlier periods of Chinese communism and other revolutionary movements.”

5. The activism of the “New Red Guards” described in your book appears to belie the relative tolerance (especially for those espousing leftist ideas) during the pre-Xi era. Now that Xi has imposed stricter ideological control, has the space for the “New Red Guards” declined?

Xi’s campaign to break the back of independent thought has affected neo-Maoists and liberals alike. No group — even one supportive of the CCP and Xi Jinping — is granted the degree of autonomy such groups received a mere 4–5 years ago. Whereas the neo-Maoists once organized street marches and Cultural Revolution–style denunciation meetings, such activities are unthinkable today. That being said, there are still areas where the neo-Maoists are given a wider degree of latitude than other groups, in particular in their efforts to troll the so-called “liberals” and to call out instances of “historical nihilism” in popular culture and in academia. But these activities merely reinforce the current trajectory of Chinese politics rather than challenge it, as the neo-Maoists did a decade ago.

6. Ideologically, Xi Jinping has appropriated much of the rhetoric and ideas of what one may call “leftists.” But have these ideas, nearly all them so contrary to the party’s pragmatic instincts in the post-Mao era, been transformed into policy?

When we talk about Xi as a “leftist,” we are really talking about a very particular strand of state-nationalist leftism, not anything that would be recognizable to a democratic socialist in China or elsewhere. Indeed, as we’ve seen with the recent surge of student Marxists who are now positioned against the regime owing to their bona fide commitment to socialism, any formal declaration of leftism from the ruling powers is surface level, at best. And yet, Marx once wrote, “the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas.” Independent leftism or a genuine aspiration for socialism in China remains the dream of those activists and intellectuals *outside* of the Communist Party. When the CCP declared its aim to transition from a revolutionary party to a governing party — a natural evolution for *any* political party — the goal became regime stability, not the realization of communism. Thus, strictly speaking, there’s not much that is genuinely “leftist” about Xi, invocations of Marx and Mao aside. That being said, — and I think this is an important point — I have no doubt that Xi firmly believes he is a leftist through and through, just as the party leadership no doubt believes it is striving for socialism, even communism. This point is reinforced when internal speeches are published in journals like *Qiushi*, where we can see that even behind closed doors, Xi and the party leadership speak in a language that would be eminently familiar to Mao, or even Stalin. This isn’t a façade, even if it might be a sham.

7. Xi may have appropriated Maoist symbols and rhetoric. But ideologically he is a quintessential Leninist or a “party supremacist” who does not believe in what you call “radical romanticism.” Leninism is an ideology of power that, aside from asserting the party’s supremacy, provides little programmatic guidance for policy. Based on your

observation of Xi's record, what are the central ideas aside from Leninism that animate his domestic and foreign policies?

In many ways, Xi is merely following a path laid down by his predecessors, most importantly Mao and Deng. Like Mao, he embraces the idea that China must adopt measures that comport to its own unique dynamics and realities. From Deng, he recognizes that development cannot occur in an environment of instability — political, ideological, or otherwise.

But unlike Deng, Xi has no patience for an undefined future date at which China can take its rightful place as a global superpower. Xi is driving the country toward an international reach that is unprecedented in modern China, motivated both from an offensive view that the rivalry with the United States will be conducted globally as well as from a defensive posture that requires the party to reach across China's national boundaries to ensure political stability at home.

Domestically, Xi acts in the spirit of Adam Smith's "man of system" who, Smith wrote in 1759, "seems to imagine that he can arrange the different members of a great society with as much ease as the hand arranges the different pieces upon a chess-board." Sitting at the head of the 91-million-member organization, which controls the commanding heights of the economy, has its own military, and can dictate what appears on televisions and in newspapers, it is not surprising that Xi believes he has the power to control China's destiny. But the limitations of this worldview are increasingly on display, and the question then becomes, how much longer and at what costs will Xi be able to push the country in the direction of his vision before he relents.



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Blanchette has written for a range of publications, including *Foreign Affairs* and *Foreign Policy*, and his Chinese translations have appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Financial Times*. His book, *China's New Red Guards: The Return of Radicalism and the Rebirth of Mao Zedong*, was published by Oxford University Press in 2019.

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