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Book Review

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This book is a fascinating history of Maoism and its global influence by historian, Julia Lovell, Professor of Modern China, Birbeck College, University of London. Lovell fills an important gap in our understanding of the Cold War period, by describing the role of China and of Maoism in global politics – especially global politics of resistance and revolution. Usually, our understanding of this period is focussed on the relationship between the USA and the USSR and how that steered foreign policy and interventions around the world. Yet, this book reminds us that there was an equally influential third party at the time that deeply influenced events, particularly in Asia.

Given the contemporary growing influence of China in global politics and finance, this book would be of particular interest to scholars and practitioners in the

fields of economics and business. It would help them understand China's past and present foreign policy ambitions and the strategies that are used to position China as a significant global power.

Julia Lovell starts with an introduction to Maoism – what she describes as “one of the most significant and complicated political forces of the modern world” and a “key influence on global insurgency, insubordination and intolerance in the last eighty years” (p. 7). Maoism, writes Lovell, is a “body of contradictory ideas” (p. 8) containing a non-Western, anti-colonial agenda. Hence, it was particularly attractive to newly independent countries in Asia and Africa, emerging from the shadow of colonialism and progressive intellectuals and political activists everywhere. It provided an alternative not just to the imperialism of the USA but also of the USSR. One of the main arguments in the book is how post-Mao, China attempted to build a narrative of its history that attempted to downplay China's global influence. That is, to position China as not having imperial ambitions (in contrast especially with the USA), but rather that China wanted to use its strength and influence for international harmony and that China followed a path of “virtuous neutrality” (p. 11), never interfering in the sovereign affairs of another country. For this, and other reasons, the influence and reach of Maoism has been relatively downplayed in world history. The growing power of China in the contemporary world, however, has renewed interest in China's political history and ideology.

Julia Lovell shows the tremendous global appeal of Maoism by analysing events and contexts as different as the Malayan Emergency, Indonesia's violence in the 1960s, Shining Path of Peru, Zimbabwe, Vietnam, Cambodia, Cultural Revolution in Western Europe and the USA, Black Power Movement in the USA and most recently in Nepal. Particularly, it helps us to understand how political violence or violence for the sake of ideology was legitimised and became acceptable at that time. Of course, violence was not the monopoly of Maoists, but one of Mao's core statements, ‘power comes out of the barrel of a gun’ was a huge source of inspiration for revolutionaries everywhere. Reading of these events from the perspective offered by Lovell certainly places China in quite a different light from what we are generally used to, when we consider this period of global history. It shows, for instance, that USA's concerns with China's influence is certainly not recent. The USA doctrine of the ‘domino effect’, that dominated their foreign policy approach in South East Asia in the 1950s, was primarily shaped by its fear of China's dominance. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) of USA was seriously concerned about alleged ‘brainwashing’ tactics by Mao which led to the covert operation of its psychological programmes and attempts to ‘reverse-engineer’ supposed mind control programmes of the Soviets and

the Chinese. These tactics underpinned much of their dubious intelligence operations during the War on Terror more recently.

According to Julia Lovell, the attraction of Maoism to such a vast and diverse audience lay partly in its inherent contradictions: it was simultaneously about a centralised party structure and mass obedience while also venerating collective leadership and anti-state rebellion. It took very progressive stands on women and drew the admiration of feminists like Simone de Beauvoir – yet, Chairman Mao was notoriously selfish in his own personal relationships with women. Notably, Maoism’s rebellious, anti-colonial, anti-imperialist positioning drew many who were critical of Western super-power posturing and militancy. Maoism came to symbolise resistance for some of the most radical political movements and thinkers in various parts of the world.

Julia Lovell also documents how certain critical ‘translators’ of Maoism, played a crucial role in taking this political creed to the world. In particular, she traces the work of Edgar Snow whose book *Red Star over China (1937/1994)*, became a worldwide bestseller. It was a book with which Mao himself closely collaborated. He gave Snow unprecedented access to his intimate circle and that of the Communist Party. All that Snow wrote was translated into Chinese to be checked by Mao and then translated back into English prior to publication. Snow’s romantic and idealised portrayal of Mao and China attracted many progressives and intellectuals from around the world and helped cement China’s role as a symbol of resistance and rebellion. That this image was maintained even during the purges and terrors imposed by Mao in China during his rise to power and during the Cultural Revolution, speaks volumes for the success with which narratives such as those of Snow travelled through the world.

Julia Lovell finishes the book with an analysis of how China’s contemporary leaders manage Maoism’s legacy as well as their global ambitions. She argues that there is a continuity in China’s foreign policy that displays an ambition to be considered a serious global player. She describes China’s efforts to preserve Maoism as a global ideology and inspiration while suppressing its more violent and non-tolerant features.

Today, China is once again rising as a global power and Western nations and their allies are nervous at the formation of an alternative global superpower. China today follows what Julia Lovell describes as “authoritarian capitalism” and although it is uneasy about the less savoury aspects of Mao’s reign, the influence of Maoism is

unquestionable. Most importantly, China's ambitions of global influence can be traced back to Mao's foreign policy. Neither China's ambitions or the West's apprehensions of China's influence are particularly new. From Sri Lanka's point of view, what has changed is our own policy of non-alignment. At the height of the Cold War, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) ensured that newly independent and developing countries steered a middle path among warring global superpowers. Sri Lanka, and Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike, played a crucial role in NAM. With the fall of the USSR, the significance of organisations such as NAM reduced, but what is evident today is that global and regional rivalries will continue to wield influence on the destinies of smaller countries such as Sri Lanka. Lovell's book highlights the dangers and risks for smaller countries when they become too dependent on global superpowers.

This is a fascinating account of a neglected aspect of global political history and Julia Lovell does an excellent job of bringing alive the appeal, contradictions and continuing legacy of Maoism. However, in her efforts to document the influence of Maoism in the violence experienced in countries such as Indonesia, Vietnam, Korea and Cambodia, for instance, she fails to account adequately for the equally problematic role of Western powers, especially the USA that provided support to right-wing, anti-democratic and violent regimes in those countries. This would have not only enabled a better understanding of the appeal of Maoism but also provided a more comprehensive answer to the important question she lays out at the beginning of the book: "What kind of socio-economic circumstances, belief systems and social structures incubate political violence?" (p. 21). Particularly, it would have helped us answer another question she raises, one that is of great relevance for Sri Lanka: "How can societies battered by insurgency and counter-insurgency mend themselves?" (p. 21).

There are important lessons to be learnt in this book and given the increasingly important role of China in Sri Lanka's political and economic life, no doubt it will be of great interest to many Sri Lankan intellectuals, economists, and political activists alike.

About the Author

Julia Lovell is a Professor of Modern Chinese history and literature at Birkbeck College, University of London. Her research focus has principally been on the relationship between culture and modern Chinese nation-building, and on the wide-ranging impacts of modern China's encounters with the world beyond its borders.

She is the author of *The Great Wall* and *The Opium War*, which won the 2012 Jan Michalski Prize.

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