

6-1-2013

Constructing Heroic Ideologies: Mao and Reagan

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CONSTRUCTING HEROIC IDEOLOGIES: MAO AND REAGAN

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Josef Korbel School of International Studies

University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

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June 2013

Advisor: Jack Donnelly

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“A True Dragon and Son of Heaven has appeared in Yan'an; he's liberated Beijing and now sits on the Imperial Throne.”

– Lao She, *Fang Zhenzhu*

“Grown men don't tend to worship other grown men—unless, of course, they happen to be professional Republicans, in which case no bow is too deep, and no praise too fawning, for the 40th president of the United States: Saint Ronald Reagan.”

–Andrew Romano, “What Would Reagan Really Do?”

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Degree Date: June 2013

Abstract

The political hero cult of Mao Zedong is archetypal in terms of the development of a modern cult of personality. It was centrally planned and used by the Chinese Communist Party as a political weapon. Its development is well-documented, but this paper describes an element of it that has not been discussed, which is the fact that the true object of veneration in the Mao cult was actually his ideology as a distinct entity from the man himself. This ideology's creation was the original purpose of the CCP's participation in his cult because it was a source of political legitimacy. The ideology could also be appropriated by others as a means of attaining power after Mao had shown himself to be out of touch with it and publicly lost face. This is the true objective of political hero cults: a means of perpetuating power and legitimacy for the ruling party by means of its ideology that can be passed from leader to leader. The cult of Reagan was set up as an attempt to fulfill this role, as well.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter I: Mao’s Rise to Power and the Formation of His Ideology	7
Chapter II: Mao Loses Control of His Ideology	22
Chapter III: The Rise of Lin Biao, “Mao’s Best Student”	36
Chapter IV: Official vs. Social Cults of Mao	50
Chapter V: The Formation of the Ideology of Reagan	67
Chapter VI: The Fall of Reagan and the (Attempted) Appropriation of His Legacy	86
Conclusion	98
Bibliography	100
Print Sources	100
Online Sources	102

INTRODUCTION

Cults of personality have always held great power in politics. These cults often spring up around leaders during their regimes as a way of reinforcing their hold on power and increasing their legitimacy in a way. They usually are centered on a superhuman trait of the leader in question, such as great military skill or personal charisma, and elevate the leader as somehow special or greater than other men. The actual quality that is venerated varies, but one thing is consistent: whatever the quality is, it is what makes the person in question a hero who is worthy of being a leader. The Oxford Classical Dictionary's definition of "hero" includes "a class of beings... forming a class intermediate between gods and men"¹. The venerated quality makes a leader worthy of being a member of this class in the eyes of the people. Max Weber called this kind of trait in a leader

a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader².

In politics, however, these cults often have more to do with the needs of the government than with the leader's alleged unique charisma or other superhuman traits. By using the superhuman trait as a justification for the leader's superiority, the leader and his colleagues can then go on to construct an ideology that serves to legitimize their rule.

This ideology or doctrine invariably makes a claim to possess access to the ultimate political truth, which is why it is a source of legitimacy. Ultimately, from the regime's perspective, the cult of the leader in question is useful only as a means of producing this ideology that justifies its policies; the actual personality cult is secondary to the survival of the doctrine. Sometimes the leader is aware of and even complicit in his or her cult's being merely used as a stepping stone to construct this ideology, and sometimes the leader is not. For the political party's purposes, it does not actually matter whether or not the leader is conscious of this as long as the cult's personal rhetorical power does not create obstacles for the political discourse that the associated ideology is intended to maintain. Many political cults of personality have accrued extraordinary personal power for the leader in question without interfering with the party's ideological needs. If and when the personal cult begins to complicate the political requirements, however, the need to maintain the ideology's monopoly on the political discourse can cause the leader to fall out of step with the doctrine that was originally associated with him or her.

The ruling party constructs the ideology as the object of the cult in this way because it opens up the possibility for other leaders to appropriate the ideology as their own after the leader who originally inspired it has outlasted his or her usefulness. This is the crucial idea behind the creation of the doctrine because it theoretically allows the party to maintain its legitimacy past the extent of the life or political career of one person. In this process, as the successors adopt the mantle of the cult as their own, they also warp the cult's ideology for their own benefit even though they were able to appropriate the

cult in the first place due to their alleged worthiness of continuing the original hero's cause.

This appropriation is possible because, as this paper will attempt to show, the true object of veneration in a political hero cult is the doctrine, not the actual leader; as described above, this is the intention of the party and its chosen figurehead all along. The actual leader is merely the vessel from which the useful doctrine originally emerged, and can be discarded afterward while leaving the ideology intact, ripe for appropriation and manipulation by others. There have been several cases of political cults that have outlasted the figures by whom they were inspired due to this focus on ideology over personal power.

In order to define the distinction between the ideology or doctrine that is venerated and the leader who inspires the ideology, this paper will investigate the cults of two major leaders of the twentieth century that were used to inspire ideologies so as to ensure the survival of their parties' legacies. The first of these is Mao Zedong. I will first describe the conditions that led to the formation of Mao's cult and then the formation of his doctrine, which became known as "Mao Zedong Thought" or "Mao Thought". I will spend the greater part of this paper exploring how the doctrine was separate from Mao himself, as that is the crucial point of my thesis. This separation is what allowed it to be appropriated by Mao's peers and then his successors, such as Liu Shaoqi and Lin Biao. Finally, I will show how, the cult having been appropriated, the warping of Mao's doctrine became possible to suit the shifting needs of the Chinese Communist Party leadership after he left power and after his death.

After I have finished exploring the Mao doctrine, I will proceed to apply the same process to the doctrine of Ronald Reagan. Reagan is still a major influential character in American politics because the GOP effectively used him to take personal control of the mainstream conservative ideology in the same way that the CCP took ownership of Marxism-Leninism through Mao. Reagan's legacy has also been appropriated and distorted like Mao's for the personal gain of would-be leaders in the GOP who have come after him; he is an important and powerful example of a contemporary political cult of a doctrine. I will first explore the process through Mao instead of Reagan because Mao's cult and Thought are much more well-known and well-documented than Reagan's; Mao's is the archetypal modern political cult. The application to Reagan, however, will be arguably more important since his ideology is still very influential politically, while Mao's has at this point become little more than a token of respect to the former leader; additionally, Reagan's ideology is, for obvious reasons, more directly relevant to the American political discourse than Mao's. By exploring these two doctrines and their cults together, I neither claim explicitly nor imply in any way that Mao's and Reagan's beliefs, policies, or practices had anything in common; all that matters here is the process of their ideologies' formation and appropriation by successors.

By doing this, I will attempt to shed light on how we interact with our leader figures and how we interpret their legacies. In our current era of "pop" politics, in which cults of personality can spring up overnight thanks to a Twitter post that goes viral or a well-timed op-ed, it has never been more important to understand what causes these cults to form and how they are then used. As mentioned previously, most of these cults are

impermanent, but some do occasionally attain staying power and become important political forces in some circles.

[1](#)Simon Hornblower, ed. *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005)

[2](#)James Myers, “The Apotheosis of Chairman Mao: Dynamics of the Hero Cult in the Chinese System” (PhD diss., George Washington University, 1969), 15

CHAPTER I: MAO'S RISE TO POWER AND THE FORMATION OF HIS IDEOLOGY

After the failure of the first “red state,” the Chinese Soviet Republic at Ruijin, which was plagued by corruption, inefficiency, and lack of popular support due to the Communist government's policy of forcibly extracting as much wealth as possible from all peasants, the Chinese Communist Party had a conference at Zunyi in 1935 to contemplate its next moves. The Ruijin failures were all pinned on Otto Braun, the agent sent by the Comintern¹ to provide counsel to the young and inexperienced CCP. His policies of direct confrontation with Chiang Kai-shek's Guomin Dang forces, which were much better-trained and -equipped than the CCP's army, caused many CCP casualties. Although Mao was personally to blame for many of the Jiangxi Soviet's problems, he and Peng Dehuai pinned the blame on Braun, the unpopular German, so as to emerge unscathed from the Party's soul-searching². Braun and his colleague Bo Gu, a Chinese military leader, were removed from command. Mao assumed Braun's position, gaining a seat on the CCP's Secretariat and thus attaining his first real position of official power.

Years later in Yan'an, Mao took his first steps to consolidate his power in what came to be known as the Rectification Movement (*zhengfeng yundong*). In order to undermine his main rival at the time, Wang Shiwei, Mao declared that the CCP had been infiltrated by GMD spies³. This accusation opened up the possibility of accusing virtually

all members of the CCP of being compromised, which enabled Mao to purge the supporters of his rival. Approximately 10,000 Communists were tortured and/or killed between 1942 and 1944 in this movement as Mao removed all whom he suspected in the slightest of being loyal to Wang.

Having torn down his opponent's power base, Mao next sought to build up his own power. In order to ideologically legitimize himself, Mao began the process of cementing his own ideology as the technically correct one in the minds of the Communist Party members. Yan'an was the primary formative era for what would later become the Mao Cult, which is the main focus of this paper.

It was at Yanan that Mao, aided by Chen Boda, one of the CCP's major intellectuals, began to establish a revolutionary body of thought that was to become the received wisdom of the party. Desperate though the struggle was in the Red areas during the Yanan years, it provided Mao with the opportunity to express himself as the great guerilla leader, military strategist, and ideologist. His writings, which he worked on almost daily, formed the corpus that became 'the Thoughts of Chairman Mao'⁴.

This received wisdom was to become the sole legitimate source of truth in Chinese politics; this is the most crucial element of Mao's authority as he and the Party built it up over the next several decades.

Since the appeal of Marxism-Leninism to Communists was its supposed scientific legitimacy and technical correctness, Mao began to establish himself as the “primary, undisputed leader of doctrinal orthodoxy” in a break from mainstream Marxist-Leninist thought⁵. In order to gain legitimacy, he claimed that he best understood the scientific principles of Marxism-Leninism, which, in the pseudotechnocratic hierarchy of Marxism-

Leninism, would make him the most fit to lead. “[Mao's] position was based upon the assertion that he best understood and applied the allegedly scientific principles and doctrines of Marxism-Leninism”⁶.

Mao's claim of being the most scientifically knowledgeable leader in China had definite moral connotations. Since Mao was allegedly the foremost authority on how best to implement Marxism-Leninism in China, he therefore was the authority on who else in China met that scientific standard, and therefore who was a “good” Communist in a moral sense. This implication drew heavily on the traditional Confucian idea of the *junzi*, or “gentleman” (as opposed to a *xiaoren*, or “inferior man,” who would possess a much weaker moral compass and act only toward his own immediate gain), which was the idea of a morally correct man serving in the government as the model and inspiration for other Chinese civil servants further down the hierarchy.

Confucianism asserts that the key to any and all social improvement, as well as to all social evils, is the personal example and influence of the king... The sage-king is the sun of virtue, from whom all goodness radiates down among the people. It is the moral authority and example of the Prince which rectifies all evils and maintains order in society⁷.

Mao's leadership as the technically and morally correct Sage (*sheng*) was meant to be the model on which the government was based. A good leader, in the Chinese view, was the most important element of a good government. Only through morally correct leaders could a morally correct state come to exist.

If chun-tzu, morally superior men by the Sage's definition, served in government, then peace, order, and justice would result. Mao Tse-tung⁸, too, has long been

concerned with the “superior man,” who is for him the “good communist” – or, more recently, Chairman Mao's “good soldier”⁹.

A Sage would be a genius, a status that would be unattainable by mortal men, leaving only superhuman leaders like Mao to fill the Sage's role. This put him hierarchically in the same position as the Emperor in the ancient Confucian hierarchy, a transition that easily allowed him to assume control of the Chinese state in the eyes of the Chinese people. “The emperor's role as the chief and infallible ideological leader is paralleled by the similar role of the Party Chairman, and the regular lessons in classical exegesis at court by the meetings of the central committee or political bureau”¹⁰. Regular men could potentially become *junzi* by closely following the Sage's proscriptions. This is the cultural origin of the fervent propaganda campaigns that would see repeated use through the decades of Mao's rule to “closely follow Chairman Mao,” to engage in the “living study and application” of Mao Thought, and to be “boundlessly loyal” to Mao; Mao's moral status as the “Great Helmsman” was meant to be held up as an example that would guide all other Communists who wished to serve the people. The idea behind Mao's leadership – and his cult in particular – was that ordinary Chinese would emulate him and thus create a more harmonious state as a result. The “good soldiers” who were held up as examples for the rest of China because of their dedication to Mao were men like Lei Feng, idealized (and apparently fictitious) soldiers who perfectly exemplified the characteristics of the ideal Communist according to Mao Thought.

As the Sage, it must be noted, Mao was the *only* moral authority on Communism in China. Other men could emulate his doctrine, but no one could possibly set up a

doctrine to rival his. This would have created a contradiction since in this Marxist-Leninist technocratic view of morality, there can only be one version of the truth. This interpretation of the possible bounds of morality was crucial to the political success of Mao's doctrine.

The successful leader... is able to proclaim, with authority, his superior scientific understanding of contemporary problems as well as future developments as a result of the superior power position he enjoys relative to his rivals or potential rivals within the ruling elite... in a system based upon the scientific validity of the Marxist world view there cannot be two or more correct ways to reach the final Communist goal. Such an absolute doctrine cries out for one, and only one, authoritative interpretation¹⁴.

Mao's claim of scientific expertise was based not so much on actual proven expertise as on a baseless assertion that his expertise was valid. Repeated enough times, anything can begin to sound like the truth. This meant taking credit for every success of the Party and escaping blame for every mistake; as the bearer of the sole Marxist-Leninist truth, it would literally have been heresy if he were to be incorrect on some issue¹⁵.

“Every day, at the interminable meetings,” Jung Chang wrote, “Mao's simplistic formula was hammered in: for everything wrong in the Party, blame others; for every success – himself”¹⁶. This selective taking of credit allowed Mao to maintain the fiction that he was infallible for years. Before this process, Mao's supporters still viewed him as merely a man, but the Rectification Movement began to cement in the Communists' minds the idea of Mao's being the ultimate authority in all things and not approachable on a human level. Those who survived the Yan'an Terror, as the Rectification Movement is also known by some, were forced via constant and inescapable violence to accept the word of Mao as the true doctrine of the Chinese Communist Party.

People who lived through this period all remembered it as a turning point when they “firmly established in our minds that Chairman Mao is our only wise leader.” Till then it had been possible to admire Mao while having reservations about him, and to gossip about his marriage to Jiang Qing while still supporting him as a leader. When they were first told to “study” a Mao speech, many had responded with an audible groan: “the same old thing,” “can't be bothered to go over it again,” “too simplistic.” Quite a few had been reluctant to chant “Long live Chairman Mao.” ... independent talk – and thinking – was killed off by the campaign, and the deification of Mao established¹⁴.

This was when Mao and the CCP began to build up the idea of *Mao Zedong sixiang*, or “Mao Zedong Thought,” the allegedly superior version of applied Marxism-Leninism that would become the CCP's main guiding ideology. Mao Thought was roughly composed of the published opinions and beliefs of Mao and was not coherently codified in any way at this point. It was

not a set of doctrines, but a manner of thinking revealed in systematic sets of ideas. These ever-changing and ever-expanding ideas, which derive from a fixed body of theory, Marxism-Leninism, constitute the thought of Mao Tse-tung. Mao's creation of thought is a continuing process without any foreseeable conclusion¹⁵.

Mao Thought had several key tenets which Mao and the Party intended to use to maintain control over the political discourse in China:

(1) Mao and his thought are responsible for the success of the Chinese revolution; (2) Mao's thought can work miracles in technology and heroism; (3) “revisionism” in China can be prevented by indoctrinating China's masses, especially the younger generation, with Mao's thought and fixing their hearts and minds on him; (4) Mao is the world's greatest living Marxist-Leninist, the beloved guide for world revolutionaries; and (5) Mao's thought is the one truth [*sic*] faith, no heresy tolerated¹⁶.

These claims served as the most basic and important foundation upon which the Party leadership would go on to build the cult of Mao Thought. The first known usage of

the phrase “Mao Thought” occurred in an article by Wang Jiaxiang in an article called “The Communist Party of China and the Chinese Nation's Road to Liberation” in July 1943¹⁷. The article, intended to commemorate the twenty-second anniversary of the founding of the CCP, “formalised the concept of 'Mao Zedong Thought' as the CCP's unerring guide”¹⁸. Mao told Wang what to include in this article and distributed copies all throughout Yan'an, making it obligatory reading for all Communists, beginning his lifelong habit of behind-the-scenes meddling in propaganda¹⁹. At this time, Mao also introduced the famous Chinese anthem “The East Is Red” and the metal “Mao buttons” that Communists would wear on their jackets to proclaim their loyalty to Mao.

All Communists were united in their obedience to Mao Thought as it became a common symbol for them. Communist soldiers and other Party members became not so much individuals in the Communist Party as extensions of and executors of Mao Thought, more like mindless worker ants controlled by Mao and set to his purpose than people possessed of their own will.

[Mao] trained the world's largest populace to parrot his world-view in unison, underwriting an often indelible branding of national villains and model heroes as well. Relying on endless repetition and the “big lie,” he linked his message with simple but highly effective symbolism and neo-traditional rituals²⁰.

This was accomplished largely by tremendous invasions of privacy in Communists' everyday lives, encouraging them to report any heterodox thoughts or actions of their comrades. These allegedly heterodox thoughts would be revealed by forcing Communists to write out in great detail the entirety of their daily interactions for approval by Party officials. As a result of the sheer terror of being constantly in danger of

being fingered as a spy or a Nationalist sympathizer during the Yan'an Terror, Communists in these years gradually became unable to think or express anything other than orthodox Mao Thought, even privately.

This resulted in a kind of “exegetical bonding” amongst Mao's followers, clearly delimiting the boundaries of acceptable Communist thought:

The Rectification Campaign resulted in the creation of a distinct “communicative space” centred on the fabricated image [of] Mao Zedong and his texts that served the dual function of internal integration and external signalling. It defined how the past had to be interpreted and thus provided the boundaries of legitimate speech for those within the “inversionary discourse community”²¹.

This communicative space set up the CCP's “authorizing political myth”; that is, the “pattern of basic political symbols” that gives the ruling party some degree of legitimacy due to the basis for solidarity that it provides to the people²². As a result of Mao's various indoctrination campaigns, the Mao Thought cult became the only legitimate auspices under which Communists could engage with each other in any way.

The burgeoning Mao Thought cult was also sponsored by the CCP leadership because they recognized the value of setting up Mao as a symbol to counter the loyalty among the urban elite to Chiang Kai-shek. Chiang inspired loyalty in a small but influential segment of the population, and the CCP knew that they needed their own symbolic leader behind whom to rally if the Party was to gain traction in the minds of the Chinese that they hoped to rule.

The first traces of a public Maoist cult appeared in the Party journal *Jiefang* [Liberation] in 1937, but it was only after 1942 that the cult gained full

prominence, as the CCP leadership realised the potency of “setting up the image of Mao Zedong” against the presentation of Chiang Kai-shek as the sole legitimate “national leader” [*minzu lingxiu*] through the Guomindang (GMD)... The nationalist claims to legitimacy and the accompanying medial campaigns compelled even those CCP leaders who were critical of the instrumental value of the cult such as Liu Shaoqi to subscribe to its rhetorical strategies by extolling the qualities of Mao against the circle of Soviet-trained students around Wang Ming, favored by Stalin, and thus to effectively unite the Party around the “banner of Mao Zedong Thought”²³.

The beginnings of the cult of Mao and Mao Thought were a combination of both actual enthusiasm for the man's leadership and a calculated campaign to deliberately create a cult as a rhetorical symbol and as a living instrument of propaganda.

Even granting the genuine enthusiasm directed at Mao by his Party comrades, however, there was in the first years of the new regime a conscious, motivated, and rationally conceived campaign to build up Mao's image and reputation both within the Party and in the nation at large²⁴.

Mao's cult was, from the beginning, supported by an official drive to create a hero cult with which to bolster the Party's power. “The thought of Mao Tse-tung is the most important of all magic wands and cannot be discarded for generations to come”²⁵.

This was certainly cynical, but the Party leaders knew that they needed something to make the Party strong enough to overcome the vastly better-equipped and -funded Guomin Dang. James Myers summed up the basic purpose of a centrally-planned political hero cult thus:

It has been the objective of the political leaders to transform their political influence (the capacity to influence the actions of other political actors) into authority (legitimate influence) thus allowing them to rule with a minimum expenditure of political resources²⁶.

Thus, through the use of the cult of Mao, the CCP intended to increase the ease with which it could accomplish its political objectives during a time in which it needed to maximize all possible leverage in order to extract the greatest possible returns for its efforts.

The CCP took the next step in cementing Mao Thought in the minds of the party members at the Seventh Party Congress at Yan'an in 1945. The new CCP Constitution at this time included a preamble declaring that

The Chinese Communist Party takes Mao Zedong's thought – the thought of that which unites Marxist-Leninist theory and the practice of the Chinese revolution – as the guide for all its work, and opposes all dogmatic and empiricist deviations²⁷.

Liu Shaoqi, in spite of his aforementioned opposition to the cult's value, praised Mao extensively at the Congress, calling him “not only the greatest revolutionary and statesman in Chinese history but also its greatest theoretician and scientist”²⁸. Liu, putting aside his personal dislike of Mao's cult, participated in building up Mao's reputation as a political scientist in order to bolster the Party's power. This support for Mao, both calculated on the Party's part and genuine on the part of many of the Communist rank-and-file as a result of the extensive indoctrination campaigns, quickly elevated Mao to the status of a virtual demigod. “The glorification of Mao in recent years, in fact... surpasses anything ever enjoyed by Stalin or, for that matter, by the legendary rulers of the past”²⁹.

As during the Rectification Movement, all of Mao's scientific prowess was purely fictional and consisted solely of rhetoric. The claims of his expertise were based on his having brilliantly adapted Marxism-Leninism to a Chinese environment in order to

confront problems originating specifically from China's unique background. Anna Louise Strong, an American journalist who was enamored with the Communist movement in China, wrote in her book *Dawn Comes Up Like Thunder Out of China* that “Mao's great work has been to change Marxism from a European to an Asiatic form... On every kind of problem... in ways which neither Marx nor Lenin could dream”³⁰. Strong was entirely taken in by the CCP's propaganda regarding Mao Thought and fully believed that Mao was as wise as the Party claimed, even though Mao himself adopted a very humble and unassuming character in his interviews with her.

The perceived success of Communism, as a result of the growing association with Mao Thought, was therefore totally attributable to Mao's personal expertise even though no one really knew what his expertise actually was; it had simply been drilled into the minds of virtually every Communist that Mao's word was the only ideology that the Party needed. As the foremost Marxist-Leninist scientist and most accomplished expert on the technical applications of Communist theory, Mao started to become the personal owner of Marxist-Leninist theory in the eyes of his followers. Mao Thought superseded the importance of mainstream Marxism-Leninism for Chinese Communists as Mao was deified by his party.

The Communists attributed all accomplishments, no matter how far removed from Mao, to Mao. William Hinton wrote,

[The Chinese] said, “Chairman Mao gave us land,” even though they themselves had built the Peasant Association, manned the militia, and actively dispossessed the gentry... It was taken for granted that Chairman Mao, whose name was

synonymous with the Revolution, was responsible for every facet of the government, great or small³¹.

Mao's divine inspiration of his followers granted him the credit for everything they achieved simply because they believed that his wisdom was responsible for the impetus to dispossess the gentry in the first place.

As part of his apotheosis in the eyes of the Chinese, soon after the CCP's victory over the Nationalists Mao moved into the Forbidden City in Beijing, which had been the traditional home of the Imperial family prior to the overthrow of the Qing in 1911. Although the government was nominally and effectively Communist, in many ways Mao adopted some cultural trappings of the old Imperial system, thus fitting in even more with the Sage role he had assumed. Traditionally, the emperor would not directly engage with the Chinese populace except for a few extremely formal ceremonial occasions such as the annual reception of omens and proclamation of China's good fortune at the Temple of Heaven. In keeping with these traditions associated with imperial ceremony, Mao's public appearances grew less frequent and, when he did appear in public, he rarely spoke (although this was in large part due to the fact that his high-pitched voice and nearly unintelligible rural Hunan accent made him very ill-suited for public speaking). The result, however, was a decidedly Imperial air.

[After taking up residence in the Forbidden City], Chairman Mao's appearances in public grew gradually less and less frequent, being confined in general to ceremonial state occasions such as the National Day and May Day. Then, from the loftiness of the rostrum in front of the Gate of Celestial Tranquility (T'ien An Men) – high and lifted up above his votaries in the square below – the awesome hero reviewed in silence the cheering hundreds of thousands as they paraded before him.

The infrequency with which even the elect may gaze upon the object of their devotion, the panache and fanfare surrounding his theatrical appearances, the aura of mystery and remoteness around the silent divinity – all help to create the mystique of Mao Tse-tung and to enhance his charisma²³.

As the new emperor of the Chinese Communist Party, Mao's personal power was at its peak. His cult held the entire country in its grasp and he was unquestionably the supreme leader of the government both in name and in fact. The Mao Thought doctrine which all of China held in such awe was seamlessly fused with his personal ambition. Mao's divine status was short-lived, however.

- [1](#)Communist International, an international Communist organization founded in Moscow in 1919 that intended to overthrow the international bourgeoisie and create an international Soviet republic.
- [2](#) Jung Chang and Jon Holliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story* (New York: Anchor Books, 2005), 40
- [3](#)Id., 243
- [4](#)Michael Lynch, *Mao* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 115
- [5](#) Myers, “The Apotheosis of Chairman Mao,” 6
- [6](#) Chang and Holliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story*, 40
- [7](#)William DeBary, “Chinese Despotism and the Confucian Ideal: A Seventeenth Century View” in *Chinese Thought and Institutions*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957) 170
- [8](#)Mao Zedong.
- [9](#)Robert Rinden, “The Cult of Mao Tse-Tung” (PhD diss., University of Colorado, 1969), 16-7
- [10](#)Pingti Ho and Tang Zuo, ed. *China in Crisis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 42
- [11](#)Myers, “The Apotheosis of Chairman Mao,” 35
- [12](#)This kind of epistemic conflict, which will be discussed later, is precisely what ultimately caused him to lose control of his cult.
- [13](#)Chang and Holliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story*, 268
- [14](#) Ibid.
- [15](#)Franz Schurmann, *Ideology and Organization in Communist China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 29
- [16](#)Rinden, “The Cult of Mao,” 149
- [17](#)Lynch, *Mao*, 125
- [18](#)Ibid.
- [19](#)Chang and Holliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story*, 268
- [20](#)Lowell Dittmer, “Pitfalls of Charisma,” *The China Journal* 55 (2006), 8-9
- [21](#) Daniel Leese, “The Mao Cult as Communicative Space,” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* #8 3-4 (2007), 628-9
- [22](#)Myers, “The Apotheosis of Chairman Mao,” 9

[23](#)Leese, "The Mao Cult," 628

[24](#)Myers, "The Apotheosis of Chairman Mao," 29

[25](#)*Selections from Mainland China Magazines*, 612 (Hong Kong, American Consulate General, 1960-73),
12

[26](#)Myers, "The Apotheosis of Chairman Mao," 8

[27](#)Lyn, 2005, 124

[28](#)Rinden, "The Cult of Mao," 72

[29](#)Myers, "The Apotheosis of Chairman Mao," 1

[30](#)Chang and Holliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story*, 337

[31](#)William Hinton, *Fanshen: A Documentary of Revolution in a Chinese Village* (New York: Monthly
Review Press, 1966), 319-20

[32](#)Rinden, "The Cult of Mao," 215

CHAPTER II: MAO LOSES CONTROL OF HIS IDEOLOGY

Eventually, the Party began to gently but firmly push back against some aspects of Mao's cult because they started to feel that his power was beginning to exceed what was necessary for their purposes. The CCP had a general wariness of and aversion to hero cults because of the fear that they could potentially devolve into mindless fawning without question (which is, in fact, exactly what Mao had in mind); as a result of this suspicion, the Party began to be wary of Mao's rhetorical power. In an internal Party memo to the Hebei Provincial Central Committee and Central Propaganda Department in 1956, the Hebei Propaganda Department asked,

[How are we to] correctly estimate the importance of a leader [without] aggrandising the individual; [and how are we to] distinguish between love of the leader and a personality cult? For example, some cadres from Zhangjiakou did not dare to shout 'Long live Chairman Mao' during the 1 May parades, afraid of committing the fault of worshipping [*sic*] the individual⁴.

Although the other ruling Party members had initially supported Mao's cult as a politically useful weapon in the civil war, once the People's Republic of China had been established and was secure they began to be leery of it. Mao claimed that his cult was justified and appropriate by

distinguish[ing] between two types of personality cults, a correct one of emulating individuals embodying the truth like Marx, Engels, and Lenin, and an incorrect worship requesting blind obedience. The problem does not lie in the cult of the

individual but in whether it represents the truth or not. If it represents the truth, then it should be worshiped².

The obvious implication was that Mao's cult was of the first type, since in Party doctrine he represented the source of ultimate truth. In fact, however, Mao conveniently sidestepped the CCP's policy that discouraged cults due to the true nature of his cult. Since the true object of the cult was Mao Thought and not Mao himself, Mao Zedong was not, in fact, worshiped as a hero, as would become all too clear in the next few years. The object that the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese people worshiped was the collected wisdom of Mao organized into the separate entity that was known as Mao Thought. Mao Thought was so vital because it provided an ideological basis around which for Communists to rally; it, not Mao himself, was the source of power. The source of ideological unity was Mao's doctrine, and Mao was in power because he was the creator of and (for the time being) the best executor of the doctrine. His association with it was what lent him prestige, not the other way around; the doctrine did not gain power from being Mao's, but Mao gained power from being the originator of Mao Thought.

Party ideological unity is the spiritual basis of personal dictatorship. Without it, personal dictatorship cannot even be imagined. It begets the [*sic*] strengthens the dictatorship, and vice versa. This is understandable; a monopoly over ideas, or obligatory ideological unity, is only a complement and a theoretical mask for personal dictatorship... Communists are educated in the idea that ideological unity, or the prescription of ideas from above, is the holy of holies, and that factionalism in the party is the greatest of all crimes³.

Since the Party had decided that the cult of Mao had grown too powerful, the ruling members decided to take public steps to demonstrate some degree of disavowal of it. At the second plenum of the Seventh Party Congress in March 1949, the Party voted to

forbid naming of streets, factories, and other public spaces after living leaders; Mao was not named in this law, but it was clearly interpreted as a move against him since no other leader's status approached his own⁴. In 1956, Peng Dehuai, the leader of the military, also advocated changing the army's oath to pledge allegiance to the nation of China instead of to Mao personally⁵.

The Party's growing aversion to the Mao cult's power was conveniently timed with a series of events that severely tarnished Mao's reputation. The first of these was the Hundred Flowers Campaign in 1956. This was a political relations initiative conducted by the CCP at Mao's behest in which the Chinese government encouraged the Chinese populace to openly air their grievances with the regime, ostensibly to encourage suggestions for different policies so as to find the ideal resolutions for the problems that the country was facing at the time. The name of the campaign came from a statement uttered by Mao:

The policy of letting a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend is designed to promote the flourishing of the arts and the progress of science and a flourishing socialist culture in our land. Different forms and styles in art should develop freely and different schools in science should contend freely. We think that it is harmful to the growth of art and science if administrative measures are used to impose one particular style of art or school of thought and to ban another. Questions of right and wrong in the arts and science should be settled through free discussion in artistic and scientific circles and through practical work in these fields^{6,7}.

The appeal to “scientific circles” clearly was meant to include politics, since Marxism-Leninism was thought of as a scientific pursuit. The idea was to increase the chances of coming up with better policies by allowing the intellectual elites to weigh in.

Mao expected to receive constructive criticism – much more constructive than critical – but the result was a torrent of acerbic condemnations from China's intellectual elites regarding the government's out-of-control corruption and woeful inefficiency. Having been invited to express their concerns in a seemingly safe environment, the intellectuals and political dissidents took the opportunity to finally vent their anger at the regime.

In their excitement people came out with the sharpest criticism of the Communist Party and its rule. Thus, one playwright, Ho Chih, a member of the Communist Party, wrote a play entitled *Disease of Unity*, in which he poured scorn on totalitarian regimentation... Li Shi-chun, Director of the Nanking Bureau of Civil Administration, at a forum called by the Communist Party Kiangsu Provincial Committee on May 23, severely attacked the Public Security Organisation. He said that the Public Security Personnel were as numerous as “the hairs of a tiger” and were “dreadful and hateful.”... Ko Pei-chi, lecturer of physics and chemistry in the China People’s University stated: “The Party members behave like plain clothes police and place the masses under their surveillance – China belongs to 600,000,000 people – it does not belong to the Communist Party alone. It is good for the Party members to behave as masters, but your adoption of the ‘I am the State’ attitude cannot be tolerated.”... One, Liu Tseng, declared that “Party members are secret agents and they are worse than the Japanese agents during the occupation period”... Hsu Hsing-chin, Councillor of the State Council, wanted “to end the practice of making the high-ranking cadres a privileged class”... Again, while complaining of the generally low standard of living of the people, one Ko Pei-chi stated that not *all* suffered: “Who are the people who enjoy a higher standard of living? They are the Party members and cadres who wore worn-out shoes in the past [*sic*] but travel in saloon cars and put on woollen [*sic*] uniforms now”⁸.

This outpouring of extremely negative commentary took Mao totally by surprise and greatly angered him. He quickly responded by claiming that the invitation to criticize his regime had, in fact, been, a trap for counter-revolutionaries to reveal themselves. Mao immediately purged those who had spoken out and did his best to pretend that the Hundred Flowers Movement had never happened. The blow to his status, however, was significant.

With the failure of the Hundred Flowers campaign, Mao faced two “credibility gaps”. It had tarnished his image as omniscient helmsman of the Chinese Revolution among Party members, and the indecisive enactment of his policies led non-Party members to question his authority over the CCP⁹.

Mao and the Party immediately tried to reinforce Mao's credibility with media campaigns to glorify the Chairman by, for example, reporting that he had been swimming in the Yangtze, one of China's great rivers, which would have been a superhuman feat for a man of 65. All of this media hype served the purpose of reinforcing the idea that Mao was superior to other people and could do no wrong¹⁰. The Party may have been concerned that Mao's personal power had grown too great, but the catastrophic loss of face that Mao suffered as a result of the Hundred Flowers campaign was not at all in its interest. The propaganda was clearly meant to be a preemptive attack on Mao's critics: “In retrospect the glorification campaign looks less like the prurient self-flattery of an ageing autocrat and more like a rationally conceived and directed campaign to cut the ground from under those who would oppose Mao in the top circles of the Party”¹¹.

The second major event that undermined Mao's authority was the ill-conceived Great Leap Forward. In 1958, still stumbling from his very public shaming after the Hundred Flowers disaster, Mao launched a massive infrastructure development program with the goal of making China a military superpower within his lifetime. To accomplish this goal, he determined to sell Russia much of China's grain output in return for military development aid and nuclear consulting. He intended to overtake Great Britain in steel production within fifteen years and then America after that¹².

To this end, Mao demanded high steel quotas from communes, believing that ignorant and unskilled peasants could triumph over more advanced western countries simply by acting as so many vessels of Mao Thought all set to one purpose. Peasants made backyard forges to meet their steel quotas, melting down every piece of metal they could find. The result was tons of useless scrap metal that could not be used for any industrial purpose as well as the total destruction of all metal household tools.

Mao also implemented extreme communal agricultural policies, virtually eliminating all private production of grain. He also encouraged communes to compete with each other in production, resulting in an escalating series of boasts in which communes egregiously over-reported their harvests in order to gain face. The communes were then tithed to feed the urban populations based on these exaggerated reports, leaving the peasants with far too little to survive. Making matters worse, since this over-reaching infrastructure project's main goal was to provide grain to Russia in exchange for munitions plants and nuclear technology, the urban Chinese never even saw the majority of the grain that was ostensibly earmarked for their consumption. The result was a massive, completely man-made famine in which approximately thirty-eight million Chinese died. In return for sufficient materials and technical knowledge to create China's first atom bomb, Mao exported enough food to the Soviet Union – approximately \$4.1 bn in 1957 dollars' worth of grain – to have saved the lives of every single person in China who starved from 1958 to 1961¹³.

The reports of starvation were initially dismissed by Mao and the rest of the Party, resulting in a doubling down of propaganda as the Party leadership insisted that Mao Thought could not be so wrong. At this time, there was

a compensatory stepping-up of propaganda depicting Mao Tse-tung as the infallible leader whose foresight, practical wisdom, and correct analysis of the future were bound to produce satisfactory solutions... To trust his vision of the future was frantically built up into a mass reflex; remarkable claims were made to extol his clairvoyance and omniscience¹⁴.

Robert Rinden observed that “the Mao cult was intensified in periods of conflict, struggle, and dissension; in short, when the people's sense of insecurity was most acute”¹⁵. James Myers also noted this increase of propaganda that coincided with Mao's fall, remarking that “the growth of the cult is a reflection of the real decline of its object”¹⁶. The propaganda had to be increased in order to erase any possible doubts in the minds of the Chinese during this extremely troubling time because the Party could not afford to have the masses lose faith in the Chairman and, by extension, the Party.

Immediately after a major conference in March 1958 in Chengdu, there was a huge upsurge in mentions of Mao and Mao Thought in the media¹⁷. Mao claimed that “there has to be a personality cult... it is absolutely necessary” and the Shanghai Party boss Ke Qingshi affirmed that China “must follow the Chairman like a blind herd”¹⁸. To ensure that the explosion of propaganda was sufficiently disseminated throughout the populace, including those who couldn't read, there were regular newspaper-study sessions in which the propaganda denying the famine's existence and encouraging the peasants to keep working harder was read out loud to illiterate workers¹⁹.

Before long, however, Mao, Liu, and the rest of the ruling cadres were forced to admit that the overzealous communization had created serious problems. The blame for the famine was largely pinned on Mao, who had clearly shown himself to be just as fallible as any other human being. Mao's reputation had been so seriously damaged that he was forced to retire from formal active leadership roles, which inevitably resulted in a “general weakening of his personal leadership,” which opened up spaces for other Party figures to step forward and fill leadership roles²⁰. In 1961, Mao produced a self-criticism, a Communist form of public humiliation in which an unpopular political figure would be forced to publicly shame himself by reciting a list of all his mistakes and errors, as Liu Shaoqi rallied the cadres against him²¹. Mao also had no choice but to reduce the food levies for 1962, brutally forcing him to officially and publicly admit that his Great Leap policies had been an unmitigated disaster. Liu, long Mao's second, assumed the Chairmanship and control of the regime.

In spite of Mao's fall from grace, the Mao cult retained all of its power and, in fact, even gained power. Simply because Mao had made a series of serious errors in his leadership, the Party could not allow the cult to lose power because the cult was the Party's source of legitimacy; if the cult were to be called into question, then so would the Party's right to rule. The convenient way out of this conundrum was directly made possible due to the nature of Mao Thought as separate from Mao himself. Since Mao Thought existed independently of Mao, the conclusion at which the Party arrived was that Mao had simply interpreted his own doctrine incorrectly and acted accordingly. As President Jiang Zemin said on the centenary of Mao's birth at a ceremony to mark the

occasion, “Comrade Mao's achievements are of primary importance; the errors he made in his latter years are secondary. His errors came about because he ignored his own correct principles”²². In other words, Mao Zedong made the Great Leap errors because was no longer properly aligned with Mao Thought. It may have originally come from him, but Mao the man was no longer the worthy executor of his own doctrine.

After Mao's humiliating departure from office in April 1959, the position of Mao Thought executor was opened up for the arrival of his successor. In the period after Mao stepped down, Mao was left on the sidelines of Party politics. Richard Walker, writing in 1962, observed that Mao did not make “a single significant statement [or] publish a single work of any importance” from 1960 to 1962²³. Having assumed direct control, and having particularly strong personal feelings on the matter, Liu Shaoqi began to tackle the most immediate problem that China faced at the time, which was the famine. This was a politically delicate endeavor since much of the country was in chaos, with thousands of confirmed cases of cannibalism in particularly hard-hit areas²⁴. Liu had gone to visit his rural home village in Hunan during the famine and had seen firsthand the horrifying circumstances in which most of China's peasants were living at the time, so he was particularly driven to ameliorate the situation nationwide.

Even though Mao's policies were clearly the cause of the famine, it would have seriously damaged the Party's authority if Liu had openly and publicly repudiated them by opposing his ideology. Therefore, in order to preserve the integrity of Mao Thought

and, by extension, the Party's authority, Liu had to use Mao's doctrine to justify opposing Mao's doctrine in a convoluted series of intellectual acrobatics.

Without openly opposing Chairman Mao or abandoning his slogans, Liu, Teng²⁵ and company 'waved the red flag to oppose the red flag' and quietly went about the business of dismantling Mao's grandiose programs... These developments, which were contrary to Mao's philosophy, would indicate that Liu and Teng were in effective control of the Party and the states²⁶.

The “developments” were to gradually restore the right to cultivate private plots and sell surplus produce in “free” markets, allow the labor force more time for rest, restore some degree of production authority to smaller communes, and re-establish normal procedures in heavy industry²⁷. Returning to “normal procedures” was a crucial step toward recovering from the famine. If China had remained on the path set by Mao's policies, the result would have been even greater catastrophe than the people had already suffered.

Liu was very popular with the Party and with the Chinese people thanks to his handling of the famine, forever earning Mao's hatred. During his presidential reappointment in 1965, Liu's portrait was carried alongside Mao's – never shown as taking precedence over Mao, of course, since the cult's primacy could not be challenged – as many firecrackers were set off in celebration to show his status as the current champion of Mao Thought. On 27 May 1965, Liu ran an article in a state-run newspaper that included a picture of himself swimming with Mao²⁸. Swimming was well-known by the public to be one of Mao's favorite activities, so for Liu to show himself participating in it alongside Mao emphasized his closeness to the idealized Mao that everyone

remembered – the Mao that had created and was most in tune with Mao Thought. Mao, as a godlike figure, could swim in the mighty Yangtze in order to emphasize his closeness with the powerful spirit of China; for Liu to swim alongside Mao was comparably glorious.

While serving as the preeminent champion of Mao Thought, Liu used it to enhance his own power, publicly praising the idealized Mao that no longer existed, conveniently forgetting his shameful political stumbles in favor of propagating the cult and ideology on which the Party's power depended. Mao complained that his instructions were unenforceable, his opinions were ignored, and Liu and Deng did not consult him on important issues, treating him “like a dead father at a funeral”²².

Moving forward from the famine recovery, Mao Thought continued to be praised above all else in Chinese politics. On 16 October 1964, China successfully tested its first atom bomb. At the official announcement of the test results, Mao appeared but gave no speech, allowing Zhou Enlai to announce China's recent transition to a nuclear power. Mao was not allowed to speak because the responsibility for China's successful nuclear program was ascribed to Mao Thought and not to him even though it had been the result of policies that he had initiated. This is because, ultimately, in the eyes of the Party, the party responsible for the policies had been Mao Thought; Mao had merely been properly executing the Mao Thought doctrine at the time that he had instituted those policies, since it had been begun before his public mistakes that showed him to have gone astray.

This public act was in accordance with Mao's earlier policy of having all praise for success go to the idealized Mao while Mao escaped from all blame for failures. Whereas Mao's public stately silence in the years immediately following the founding of the People's Republic had lent him an air of imperial majesty as a result of his being on high and removed from the People, in this and other instances following his falling out with the Party, it now instead gave the impression that he was dead and no longer relevant.

From the time of the failure of the Great Leap until 1966, in fact, [Mao] seemed to have withdrawn from day-to-day affairs. He spent much of his time away from the capital; his public appearances were rare; and he made fewer and fewer important pronouncements³⁹.

1Leese, “The Mao Cult,” 626

2Ibid.

3Milano Dilas, *The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System* (New York: Praeger, 1957), 75

4Leese, “The Mao Cult,” 625

5Id., 626

6Zedong Mao, “Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung: ON THE CORRECT HANDLING OF CONTRADICTIONS AMONG THE PEOPLE,” Marxists.org, http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-5/mswv5_58.htm (accessed April 28, 2013)

7The “Hundred Schools of Thought” was an early, diverse, and expansive era of Chinese philosophy in the Spring and Autumn period (about 770 to 221 BCE) in which many different philosophical schools vied for primacy in Chinese intellectual circles. It was in many ways the Golden Age of Chinese philosophy; Mao clearly meant for his campaign to be similarly glorious and innovative as a result of the competitive environment – a sort of political take on extreme free-market philosophy – that he imagined would organically occur.

8Tony Cliff, “China: The Hundred Flowers Wilt (May 1959),” Marxists.org, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1959/05/chinawilt.htm> (accessed April 28, 2013)

9Leese, “The Mao Cult,” 626

10Myers, “The Apotheosis of Chairman Mao,” 80

11Id., 81

12William Harms, “China's Great Leap Forward,” *The University of Chicago Chronicle* 15 #3 (1996)

13Chang and Holliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story*, 485

14Tibor Mende, *China and Her Shadow* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1962), 138

15Rinden, “The Cult of Mao,” 212

16Myers, “The Apotheosis of Chairman Mao,” 13

17Leese, “The Mao Cult,” 630

18Chang and Holliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story*, 424

19Ibid.

20Rinden, “The Cult of Mao,” 241

[21](#)Chang and Holliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story*, 477

[22](#)Geremie Barme, *Shades of Mao: The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader* (New York: East Gate Books, 1996), 259

[23](#)Richard Walker, “China's Ancien Regime” *New Leader* 15 #21 (1962), 20

[24](#)Jisheng Yang, *Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine 1958-1962*, trans. Stacy Mosher and Jian Guo (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2012), 14

[25](#)Deng Xiaoping.

[26](#)Rinden, “The Cult of Mao,” 244-5

[27](#)Ibid.

[28](#)Chang and Holliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story*, 495

[29](#)Rinden, “The Cult of Mao,” 242

[30](#)Arthur Barnett, *China After Mao* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967)

CHAPTER III: THE RISE OF LIN BIAO, “MAO’S BEST STUDENT”

Liu briefly ruled in his official capacity of Chairman, but in 1966 he was denounced as a “capitalist-roader” and purged; Mao had taken revenge for Liu's years of opposition to Mao and his policies. Liu died sick and alone in prison. This allowed Lin Biao to rise. Lin, the Party's military leader, promptly initiated a program for extensive study of Mao Thought in the People's Liberation Army. This program gave rise to the infamous “Little Red Book” of quotations from Mao Zedong, the closest thing there ever was that could have been said to be a concise summary of the ideology of Mao Thought. This book contained musings by Mao on virtually every subject and was treated literally as the inscripturized holy text of the CCP; Lin made it part of the PLA's mission to proselytize on behalf of Mao Thought.

The vigorous mass movement among the young Chinese for study and application of Mao's works has been under the summons of Lin Piao¹ and under the leadership of the People's Liberation Army. The young are indoctrinated with the idea that it is their supreme task to master, apply, and defend Mao's thought and pass it on from generation to generation².

The Book was regarded in much the same way as the holy texts of the world's great organized religions, read aloud ritualistically with great ceremony and pomp. The quotations contained within were even sung while set to music in a format not unlike hymns and sold on tape.

The reading in unison from the Chairman's writings is reminiscent of Christian liturgical services, but the sacred character attributed not merely to Mao's words but to the little red book containing them recalls rather the Koran, and the title (Mao Chu-hsi yu-lu³) is characteristic of the Buddhist scriptures⁴.

Mao had already undergone his apotheosis years before, but the addition of the Book to his cult and addition of the final remaining trapping of religious formality completed the transition of the Mao cult into a full-blown official religion – notably absent Mao himself.

Lin started the campaign of the Little Red Book in order to strengthen the Mao cult and make it invulnerable to political attack; the cult had been used to justify policy decisions prior to this time, but Lin was perhaps the first to consciously use the power of the cult as a weapon since the civil war against the Nationalists. Just as during the Yan'an Terror, questioning Mao's wisdom was viewed as tantamount to treason and potentially as grounds for purging, torture, and execution.

Lin Piao's exhortation to give primacy to politics did not mean political education in general was to be emphasized; rather it meant that Mao's thought was to be exalted. It was Mao's teachings that were to be studied in all work and activities... From 1960 onwards, in the Army and among the masses, Mao's utterances were sanctified and her [sic] personality glorified, thus forging the cult of Mao Tse-tung into a formidable political instrument and creating a climate of opinion in which attacks on Mao's leadership or his ideology would amount to sacrilege⁵.

At the 11th Plenary Session of the 8th Central Committee, the Party issued a communiqué stating that Mao Thought was “the guiding principle for all the work of the Party, the army and the country,” reaffirming the statement made earlier at the Seventh Party Congress at Yan'an in 1945⁶. Mao Thought was absolved from blame for the horrendous economic failures of the Great Leap period⁷. Echoing previous comments

from years earlier that stressed the urgent importance of following Mao Thought with necessarily blind faith, Lin proclaimed in an editorial in the Peking Review that “China... needs unified thinking, revolutionary thinking, correct thinking. That is Mao Tse-tung's thinking”³. Another article in China Daily made a similar proclamation:

We must always take Mao Tse-tung's thought as our Party's ideological guide, the common ideological foundation of the entire Party's unity and of the revolution... Only the power of the thought of Mao Tse-tung can unify the thinking of all the people in the nation... Comrade Mao Tse-tung's thought is the compass for all work in the whole of our Party and in the whole of the country⁴.

The major difference between this exhortation and the eerily similar one from years before is that previously Mao was actually in power and in control as the Great Helmsman, actively issuing commands; at the time of Lin's writing, however, the only Mao to which Lin could appeal was the abstract body of Mao Thought, the impersonal doctrine that had sprung from Mao. Whereas Ke Qingshi and others who had advocated mindlessly adhering to Mao's proscription had had the luxury of actually appealing to Mao personally since he had not yet fallen out of favor, the only Mao to whom Lin could appeal was one that didn't really exist except in the minds of the Communist Party and the people.

By taking on the mantle of Mao Thought, Lin gained the prestige that had formerly been associated with Mao. As Liu had done before him, Lin crassly used the Mao Thought cult to increase his own power.

Lin lauded Mao to the skies in public, although he felt no true devotion to Mao, and at home would often make disparaging and even disdainful remarks about

him, some of which he entered in his diary. It was out of pure ambition that Lin stood by Mao and boosted him – the ambition to be Mao's No. 2 and successor¹⁰.

Lin accomplished this by demonstrating that he was the most worthy of the cult's objectification; this was done simply by being the best at propagating Mao Thought.

The rise to great power by Lin Piao... seems attributable in no small degree to his public adulation of Chairman Mao, his distinction as Mao's 'best student,' and his energetic promotions of the Mao cult¹¹.

It is important to note that Lin did not gain – and could not have gained – prestige from promoting Lin Thought while Mao Thought still held sway ideologically; there could not have been more than one deity in the Communist Party. As Edgar Snow, a foreign journalist who was extremely sympathetic to Communism and to Mao personally, wrote, “Mao has... become an Institution of such prestige and authority that no one in the Party could raze it without sacrificing a collected vested interest of first importance”¹². This would have meant throwing out the Party's authorizing political myth, a move that could only have ended in disaster while the Chinese people still took this myth as the gospel truth.

If the Party had tried to suddenly adopt a different authorizing myth, the abrupt change of ideological gears would have caused a massive political identity crisis and resulted in a great deal of chaos and violence. In fact, this is exactly what happened during the Cultural Revolution when China was presented with two separate Maos: the abstract Mao Thought and the concrete Mao Zedong. The only feasible approach for Lin, therefore, was to attempt to gain power through promoting the already-entrenched cult of Mao Thought. He did this by building up his own reputation as Mao's “best student” and

thus presented himself as worthy of taking the idealized Mao's place at the head of the Marxist-Leninist ideology. The abstract Mao was still the Sage of the Communist Party, but Lin built himself up as the *junzi* that was as close to the Sage's model as humanly possible.

Lin therefore linked his political fortunes to his association with Chairman Mao as closest comrade-in-arms, and to the underpinning of TMTT¹³ which would 'creatively' develop. Indeed, eventually he sought to make TMTT his personal property, the orthodoxy upon which he alone could pronounce with authority. In the latest stages of this development it is almost as if Lin Piao had become 'Chairman Mao,' and Chairman Mao the physical figure become the silent instrument of Lin's plans and ambitions¹⁴.

Even though Mao was still alive and present while Lin was in power, he had shown himself to be unworthy of his own cult, so it moved to the next most powerful political figure, which Lin had shown himself to be by virtue of his impressive dedication to its propagation. Since Mao Thought was an abstract, disconnected doctrine not inherently connected to any particular flesh-and-blood figure, even though it had originally come from one, it could be passed from leader to leader relatively painlessly. Whoever could demonstrate himself to be most worthy of its glory at any given time would be the new official standard-bearer of Mao Thought, and in the period after Mao withdrew from politics and after Liu's purge, that man was Lin Biao.

Mao, in fact, actually predicted this struggle over his cult by his peers who desired to use it as a means of attaining power and influence, as both Liu and Lin had done after his fall. In a letter to his wife Jiang Qing in July 1966, Mao wrote,

I predict that if there is an anti-Communist right-wing coup in China they won't have a day of peace; it may even be very short-lived. That's because the Revolutionaries who represent the interests of over 90 percent of the people won't tolerate it. Then the Rightists may well use what I have said to keep in power for a time, but the Leftists will organize themselves around other things I have said and overthrow them¹⁵.

Mao realized that his contemporaries would seize particular quotes of his over others and use them to try to assert their status as the proper inheritors of Mao Thought. As often happens with major religions – the requirements for which the Mao Thought cult has already been shown to have met – Mao predicted that different sects would break off from the main body and claim the monopoly on truth based on their interpretation of various edicts. Since part of Mao Thought's claim to legitimacy was its supposed monopoly on truth, anyone who would presume to take Mao's place must by nature make the same claims.

This caused rival claims to Mao's mantle to spring up, Liu's and Lin's foremost among them. All contenders for Mao's succession adopted the regal characteristics of the idealized Mao in their attempts to live up to him.

Anyone who had a modicum of power as a rebel leader would turn into a mini-Mao. The way they talked, their enunciation, speech patterns, and even grammar were all a la Mao. The most convincing evidence of this was the use of Mao quotes by both sides as a weapon during every debate and bloody skirmish. They all cried, "We swear an oath to protect Chairman Mao with our lives." The Chinese were not fighting with one another; two Mao Zedong's [*sic*] were locked in mortal combat¹⁶.

Mao the man, in fact, was determined to reassert his authority over the cult that had originally sprung from him; to accomplish this, he had to demonstrate once again that

he was worthy of it. At the very least, he had to make China think that he was worthy – or, more accurately, group-think that he was.

When Mao was ready to begin making his comeback, he initiated the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. As with his previous great purges, the stated goal of this Revolution was to remove capitalist and heterodox influences from China and restore Maoist orthodoxy. Mao's usual bogeyman, the bourgeoisie, figured prominently in this purge, and Mao advocated more violent class struggle to punish and remove them. Mao also introduced new targets for the purge, the “Four Olds” – culture, habits, customs, and ideas – which he claimed were holding China back and preventing it from becoming a truly modern power.

To enforce his resurgent ideals of Mao Thought, Mao created the “Red Guards,” a sort of honor guard, all of whose members were dedicated to Mao Thought, but also to Mao personally. The Red Guard members, both male and female, carried the Little Red Book everywhere, fervently recited quotations from it, and wore red armbands over old olive green army uniforms to display their allegiance and keep up the appearance of a quasi-military corps. The Guards were mostly young university students who were disillusioned with the current state of Chinese society; Mao capitalized on their resentment to ignite a metaphorical powder keg. The resulting decade of conflict and class struggle was so horrendously violent and destructive that many elderly Chinese today who lived through it cannot bear to directly speak of it, simply referring to it as “The Ten Years”.

A great proportion of the violence in the Cultural Revolution was directed at China itself, with temples and artifacts being smashed or vandalized as part of the campaign against “old culture”. Many people who were perceived to be part of the “old” China, such as students of traditional Chinese martial arts, medicine, and philosophy, were publicly humiliated, tortured, and killed, while many others fled the country, never to return. Property was seized by the state in great quantities. The social order was also turned upside down by the “Down to the Countryside Movement” in which urban Chinese were sent to rural areas to learn about communes from farmers in order to reform their bourgeois ways, effectively barring them from their former lives in the cities. These “rusticated youths” were essentially exiled in order to quell the unrest caused by Mao's attempted resurgence.

At first Mao did not immediately return to public life; Lin Biao continued to speak on his behalf. In August 1966, Mao stood by silently while Lin exhorted the Red Guards to “smash... old culture”; in September, Lin ordered the Red Guards to “focus on denouncing those power-holders who are inside the Party pursuing a capitalist road”¹². Lin was still in charge of the Mao cult at this time even though Mao's intended purpose in launching the Revolution was to reclaim his former power. As the Cultural Revolution began to get into full swing, much of Chinese society ground to a halt. Chinese universities were closed indefinitely as students joined the ranks of the Red Guards and attacked professors and other intellectuals in the latest class struggle.

Since the Red Guards were effectively indoctrinated with Mao Thought, they had no capacity to think non-Mao thoughts. The Cultural Revolution introduced a conflict for the Mao Thought-indoctrinated. As described above, the original Mao Thought propaganda machine during the PRC's formative era had transformed Communists into creatures more resembling copies of Mao Thought than individual human beings; such people were not easily receptive to new ideas, and this resulted in conflict. Each Red Guard – and each dedicated Communist – had an idea in his or her head of what consisted of Mao Thought so that, when Mao began to reappear and introduce new ideas, the result was great violence as the Chinese struggled to reconcile the resurgent human Mao with the disembodied, amorphous Mao Thought that had been firmly installed in their minds. Li Jie, a prominent political dissident and cultural critic from Shanghai, summed up the resulting chaos thus:

The decade-long Cultural Revolution is often described as a period during which Chinese killed Chinese, or Communists fought Communists. It would be more precise, however, to say that it was a melee in which Mao Zedong became entangled with Mao Zedong. This is because, by 1966, the Chinese could only think Mao Zedong Thought; they had suffered a complete stupefaction of their own thought processes. Hundreds of millions of people were turned into clones of Mao himself. They all believed they belonged to Mao, regardless of whether they were rebelling against the authorities or protecting the powerholders, regardless of whether they declared themselves to be revolutionaries or were branded counter-revolutionaries. They all believed there was only one Mao and they belonged to him¹⁸.

These clashes, far from being reserved for Mao's personal enemies as in previous times, took on new dimensions as the Red Guards and Communists in general struggled to reconcile the Mao in their minds with the words of the actual Mao. When Mao targeted the so-called “Million Peerless Troops,” a 1.2 million-strong group of political moderates

who opposed the purges in the Cultural Revolution, and Chen Zaidao, a popular Wuhan-based general who supported the group, many Chinese pushed back violently against Mao¹⁹. Mao attempted to vilify Chen and the “Million Peerless Troops” because they opposed his purge, and in this instance, rather than comply with the commands of the man to whom they were ostensibly sworn, soldiers and civilian protesters actually stormed one of Mao's villas in an unprecedented attack on the man himself²⁰. This happened because the Red Guards obeyed the Mao Thought that lived inside their minds in direct opposition to what Mao, the living man, had commanded; the doctrine took ideological precedence over the man from whom it had originated, and this was the source of much of the conflict during this decade.

Mao began to re-emerge as a political player not long after the Cultural Revolution's beginning. At the Ninth National Party Congress in April 1969, the Party reaffirmed its dedication to Mao Thought:

The Chinese Communist Party takes Marxism, Leninism, and the Thought of Mao Tse-tung as the theoretical basis guiding its thought. The thought of Mao Tse-tung is Marxism-Leninism of the era in which imperialism is heading toward total collapse while socialism is heading toward world-wide victory²¹.

Mao revised his earlier works to give the impression that he had always been correct, so as to ease the transition in his followers' minds from the disconnected Mao Thought doctrine back to his personal thought and to give the impression that they were once again the same. Robert Lifton wrote in 1968 that

Mao's active participation in the creation of his own cult has become clear. His rewriting of earlier works is consistent with the practices of other modern

Communist leaders, and also with those of pre-modern Chinese emperors in the process of enthroning themselves and establishing new dynasties²².

This showed Mao's efforts to reintegrate himself into the Party's political religion and make himself its true center again – not only in name, as the case had remained when he was out of vogue, but personally.

In spite of his efforts to reassert control of his cult, Mao was not able to fully redirect the religious adulation to himself. He began to make public appearances again, but he still did not speak, giving the impression of being stifled. On May 1, 1970, when China successfully launched its first satellite into orbit, the satellite played the old Mao cult anthem “The East Is Red” from space, thus characteristically giving credit to the Mao Thought cult²³. Mao himself was not allowed to take credit, however. Later that same month, Mao stood with Lin and Samdech Sihanouk, the leader of Cambodia, on Tiananmen and was not allowed to read his own statement, “People of the World, Unite, and Defeat American Aggressors and All Their Running Dogs”; as usual, Lin still read it on Mao's behalf while Mao stood by, silent and impotent²⁴. At this time, in inter-party politics, Lin's patronage was still much more important than Mao's. At the Lushan Conference in 1970, Lin wanted Mao to become president so that he could become vice-president and thus be formally written in as the Party's number two; Mao was resistant and attempted to unilaterally force Lin to write a self-criticism and shame himself before their colleagues in the Party²⁵. Lin refused, however, and Mao was totally unable to force him to obey.

This clash of wills caused Mao and Lin's understanding – that Lin could use the Mao Thought cult as his own springboard to power – to quickly erode. Eventually Lin began to fear for his life; he feared the growing risk of retribution from Mao for defying him, and began to plan an escape. Although Mao's power was a shade of its former self, it would still have been an easy thing for him to organize an assassination, if that was indeed his intention. Finally, in September 1971, Lin and his family fled the country in a small plane which mysteriously crashed²⁶.

Lin's death allowed Mao to regain some of his former power as he attempted to fill the void left by the late Vice-Chairman. By the time of his death in 1976, Mao was officially China's leader but had not quite regained all of his former prestige. His massive stumbles during the Great Leap Forward era ultimately proved too great for him to overcome. He regained personal power, but the Mao Thought cult, once lost to him, kept gaining its own steam outside of his influence; he was never quite able to fully redirect it to himself and completely restore his status as the “Great Helmsman,” seamlessly fused in the minds of the Chinese with the cult and ideology that bore his name. Mao is an archetypal model of how a political cult of personality can grow out of a political figure at first but then grow apart from him or her and take on a life of its own, independent from the leader who birthed it. In Mao's case and in others, once this separation occurred, the leader was no longer the object of veneration but the independent disembodied doctrine itself.

- 1Lin Biao.
- 2Rinden, "The Cult of Mao," 169
- 3*Mao Zhuxi Yulu*, "Quotations from Chairman Mao"
- 4Rinden, "The Cult of Mao," 140-1
- 5Rinden, "The Cult of Mao," 246-9
- 6 Biao Lin, "Foreword to the Second Edition: Quotations from Chairman Mao," The Art Bin, <http://art-bin.com/art/omaotoc.html> (accessed April 28, 2013)
- 7Id., 247
- 8Biao Lin, "Letter From Comrade Lin Biao," *Peking Review*, June 24, 1966, 6
- 9Biao Lin, "Long Live the Thought of Mao Tse-tung," *People's Daily*, July 7, 1966
- 10Chang and Holliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story*, 504
- 11Myers, "The Cult of Mao," 207
- 12Edgar Snow, *The Other Side of the River* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1962), 14
- 13Thought of Mao Tse-Tung.
- 14Myers, "The Cult of Mao," 116
- 15 Barme, *Shades of Mao*, 51
- 16Barme, *Shades of Mao*, 144
- 17Chang and Holliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story*, 518-522
- 18Barme, *Shades of Mao*, 143-44
- 19Chang and Holliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story*, 537
- 20Ibid.
- 21Rinden, "The Cult of Mao," 153
- 22Robert Lifton, "Mao Tse-tung and the Death of the Revolution" *Trans-Action* 5 #9 (1968), 53
- 23Chang and Holliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story*, 577
- 24Ibid.

[25](#)Id., 554

[26](#)Id., 561

CHAPTER IV: OFFICIAL VS. SOCIAL CULTS OF MAO

It has been shown that the cult of Mao Thought was deliberately built up by the CCP in order to be used as a political tool – first as a direct counter to Chiang Kai-shek's influence and then as a means of maintaining the Party's legitimacy – but it eventually spun out of the Party's control. After it had outlived its usefulness, in a sense, the Party made the decision to scale it back in order to keep it from taking on a life of its own and thus escaping the Party's influence; a cult of personality that was not directly under the CCP's thumb would be a far less reliable tool for them, and very likely a dangerous influence on the Chinese political discourse, so the Party sought to prevent this from occurring. However, the Party was not entirely successful, as the cult had firmly taken root in the popular Chinese mind as a result of the years of Mao's thought-conditioning in which people learned to “only think Mao Thought”. This transition had a major impact on the cult's legacy, and it can be argued that this often happens with political cults of personality: even though they at first begin under the ruling party's guidance, they can often grow faster than expected or in unanticipated directions and thus become a thorn in the government's side, or at the very least no longer politically useful.

After Mao's death, the CCP needed to gently reign in his cult and allow its influence to ebb away to reach a more acceptable level of zeal. These measures were intended to prevent as much as possible Mao's further deification after he had outlived his

political usefulness, especially since the Party was starting to drift away from his policies in ways that he would have deemed anathema to his vision of Communism. Under Deng Xiaoping, China was beginning to pursue a more open economy, calling it “socialism with Chinese characteristics”; this new economy was basically a form of market socialism. Some degree of capitalistic free enterprise was allowed, but always under Beijing's watchful eye.

Deng's era of leadership was one in which he and the top Party brass recognized that China desperately needed to properly develop economically and industrialize in order to survive and avoid a second “Century of Shame”; even if this ran counter to Mao's Marxist-Leninist policies, it was a price they would gladly pay. Deng believed that China could not survive if it blindly adhered to Mao's doctrine – a sharp change from previous Party policy of advocating exactly that out of a need for survival, as described above in Ke Qingshi's “blind herd” comment. Deng once summed up this approach in reference to China's chosen method of development – market socialism – quite succinctly: “It doesn't matter if the cat is white or black; if it catches mice, it's a good cat”¹. Even the red Maoist cat wouldn't be useful if it couldn't help the country overcome the new challenges it faced, so it had to be abandoned to some degree. Deng Thought was the new guiding light of the Party in this era, but not openly or under that name. President Jiang Zemin defended the economic revision thus in a speech on December 26, 1993, the centenary of Mao's birth:

Comrade Deng's theory concerning socialism with Chinese characteristics is an enrichment of Mao Thought and has allowed it to attain even greater heights. By

following this path in the future and through the struggle of a number of generations we will surely build a rich, democratic, and civilized modern, socialist country².

Naturally, the Party could not openly repudiate Mao Thought; doing so would cause an unprecedented existential threat to Chinese political identity and culture, since during the last several decades the government (and Mao in particular) had consistently hammered home the idea that the idealized Mao possessed a monopoly on truth.

Therefore, in 1980 Deng Xiaoping reiterated the importance of the Mao cult in spite of the significant economic changes he brought:

The banner of Mao Zedong Thought can never be discarded. To throw it away would be nothing less than to negate the glorious history of our Party... It would be ill-advised to say too much about Comrade Mao Zedong's errors. To say too much would be to blacken Comrade Mao, and that would blacken the country itself. That would go against history³.

China had just barely survived the clash of two Maos when Mao tried to reassert control of what was nominally his ideology; the chaos resulting from renouncing all possible versions of Mao would probably have been even more violent and destructive. Continuing to follow Mao Thought's doctrine would lead the country in precisely the opposite direction from where it wanted it to go, however, so Deng needed a way to change course as painlessly as possible. Therefore, Deng and the rest of the Party simply opted to quietly work within the bounds of Mao Thought as much as possible and subtly hobble it where feasible and desirable. The Department of Propaganda reminded its cadres that “Mao Zedong and Mao Thought were the concrete manifestations of Marxism in China”⁴.

The Party began with this passive restriction by simply finding ways to reduce the emphasis placed on the cult. In 1978, just two years after Mao's death, the Party issued a circular on no longer using bold quotes from Mao and other Communist leaders:

In accordance with a directive from Party Central, bold type is no longer to be used when citing quotations from Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Chairman Mao in newspapers, periodicals, books and documents⁵.

By including the other great leaders of Communism in this memo, the Party leadership showed a return to the old fear of all personality cults, again rejecting the idea of blind devotion to any one leader. This action also belied Mao's earlier claim that his cult was not truly a cult of personality because Mao Thought, rather than being a cult dedicated to him, was simply the scientific truth.

The government also implemented a plan to remove from circulation and destroy many unsold copies of "Quotations from Chairman Mao"; there were many warehouses full of copies of the little red book, the storage of which both cost a great deal of money and presented a potential obstacle to the Party's current efforts to walk back the level of zealotry that it had previously deliberately built up. The Party leadership affirmed in another internal circular that

Quotations from Chairman Mao was produced by Lin Biao in an attempt to amass political capital. In it Mao Zedong Thought is taken out of context and distorted. Since its publication this book has had a widespread and pernicious influence. To eliminate the impact of Lin Biao and the 'Gang of Four' the Xinhua and Guoji Bookstores will ban all sales of *Quotations* in Chinese, minority and foreign languages forthwith⁶.

A few copies were kept, but the vast majority was pulped. Other posters and quotations from Mao printed on single sheets were dealt with in the same manner, and any other merchandise dealing with the Mao cult was quietly destroyed to the extent that the Party was able².

The reason for this was the Party's desire to continue using Mao Thought as a tool while avoiding epistemic contradiction in the minds of the Chinese. By quietly restricting access to Mao Thought paraphernalia, and thus reducing the likelihood of the propagation of original – now heterodox – material, the Party was much more easily able to revise it to support their new policies of market socialism. This made it much easier for the government to paint a sympathetic view of a more open economy, something that Mao would have abhorred if he had still been alive. Since the Mao cult had been a tool deliberately built up by the government from the very beginning, after all, it is fitting that the Party decided to reduce emphasis on parts of the doctrine that hurt its current mission while stressing other parts that were still helpful.

In fact, it was unknown to the public at the time (and still to a great extent today outside of certain highly academic circles within China) just how much the Mao Thought Cult was deliberately built up by the government and not Mao himself through direct interference in his official texts. The writings and speeches which were ascribed to Mao and which formed the basis of the Mao Thought cult were, in many cases, actually written by others and simply attributed to Mao in order to build up his cult. Even some primarily influential texts were not Mao's own work. This discovery started to become

known in some academic circles in the early 1990s after several projects involving research of historical Party documents were published.

Reports filtered out that Mao Thought was literally the result of a collective effort... it was found that of the 470-odd speeches, reports, committee decisions, articles, telegrams, editorials, editorial notes, and directives previously attributed to Mao, more than 250, or nearly half, were neither drafted nor revised by Mao himself. Produced by “comrades in the Center, the Central Secretariat, or workers in the Center” in many cases Mao had merely read sections of the final work and written “I agree” (*tongyi*), “good” (*hao*), or simply signed “Mao Zedong” on them. Of the 120 or so military essays, telegrams, orders, and messages ascribed to Mao from the years prior to 1949, only 12 were actually authored by him. The rest were produced by various Party or army instrumentalities or individuals including Zhu De, Zhou Enlai, Chen Boda, Kang Sheng, and Ren Bishi.

As for the post-1949 Maoist works, it was revealed that many crucial documents and speeches were... merely approved by Mao. Indeed, from 1962, Mao instructed Chen Boda, Kang Sheng, Ai Siqu, Hu Qiaomu, and Deng Liqun to act as the collective authors of Mao Thought. It was even revealed that Mao's most famous three essays, the “Three Standard Articles”... were the work of Hu Qiaomu, Mao's political secretary. Mao himself is supposed only to have made a handful of corrections to Hu's original drafts:

Similarly, there are doubts about the authorship of Mao's two major theoretical works... It is claimed that these two pillars of Mao's philosophical contribution to Marxism-Leninism were the result of a collaborative effort between Zhang Wentian, Wang Jiaxiang, and Chen Boda, although Ai Siqu's family had argued for some time that Ai was the real author³.

It is widely known that after Mao's ascension to Party and cult leadership, much of his personal history was heavily revised to give the impression that he had always been the godlike figure which the Party made him out to be. In order to shore up the impression that he had always possessed the monopoly on truth, the Party leadership extended his visionary characteristics far into the past to make the origins of his charisma seem more permanent and believable, as if he had been destined to become the “Great

Helmsman” from the very beginning of his life and hadn't just ended up there as a result of political machinations and Party necessity. This included not just portraying him as having had a much more magnetic personality, having been the center of attention by virtue of his precocious wisdom even at a young age, and having been a leader figure at jobs early in his adulthood that were in reality sinecurious, but also revising all of his writings from his early life in order to reflect current Party orthodoxy. Rather than being done by Mao himself as the author of his own pre-ascension writings, the Party leadership and their legions of ghost-writers had direct control over this process. For the sake of maintaining control of the Party's pre-PRC history, Mao's omniscience was extended backward through history.

Hu Qiaomu⁹ remarked in 1980 that if the CCP were to make public the original versions of Mao's works from the 1920s and 1930s, it would become clear to everyone how “very heavily revised” the texts included in the *Selected Works of Mao Zedong* were (Hu himself had participated in the revision of those texts in the early 1950s) there would probably be a “very strong reaction.” Since this is undesirable, Hu said, it is “important” that the Party strengthen “the uniform censorship” of materials related to the history of the CCP and not release unrevised versions of Mao texts already published in revised form in the *Selected Works*¹⁰.

With the release of the reports concerning the true authorship of Mao's works in the early nineties, it turned out that the Mao Cult was even more of a top-down, centrally-planned tool than it seemed at the time. In addition to whitewashing Mao's past to make him a more credible leader, the Party also controlled his voice in the present in order to keep the overall message of Mao Thought under their thumbs. The Party's ghost-writers were an integral component of the policy articulation process, in fact. Party leaders would present their aides with ideas that were vague to varying degrees in their current

execution and ask for their concepts to be articulated in officialese in order to be approved for public dissemination. The ghost-writing teams would then prepare several drafts building on the original idea passed down by the leader, carefully framing it in current Marxist-Leninist and Maoist ideological buzz phrases. This filtering process helped to ensure that no individual figure such as Lin Biao, Peng Dehuai, or even Mao would make the grave error of issuing a statement that was against the Party's current "line" (and in the event that such a thing did happen, it could always be blamed on the ghost-writing team).

The ghost-writers take note of what the leaders around them appear to think and want. They deliberate upon the implications of each idea put forward and each desire expressed. Eventually they create a semblance of order in what may at first have been chaos. Notions are stripped of their vagueness. Hunches are dressed up in words – appropriate, carefully chosen "scientific" ones. At some point, the ghost-writers represent the now organized and systematized ideas *of* the leaders *to* the leaders. The leaders, in turn, make the texts in which this representation has been made for them their own... With the continued help of their ghost-writers, [the Party leadership] could continue to be sure their own "intentions" and "collective will" would never figure in the discourse as anything but "the desire of the people," and their own vision of the future as nothing but "an inevitable historical trend"¹¹.

This further emphasizes the extent to which the Mao Cult was simply an implement used by the Party to achieve its goals; knowing full well what the goals of the Party were at the time, no ghost-writer or team of ghost-writers would dare submit a heterodox speech or other text. Mao himself of course must have known at the time that he was essentially a glorified messenger on the Party's behalf; his cult was simply used as the Party's focal point through which for them to express their goals to the Chinese people. "In the reminiscences of CCP speech writers, the activity referred to as the textual

embodiment of the intentions (*yitu*) of the leader and collective will (*jiti yizhi*) of the leadership is also very much the administrative 'center of gravity'¹².

This “center of gravity” was really whatever message or idea the Party wanted to communicate at any given time; it was the most important task of the leadership. Mao Thought could be said to have been CCP Thought, more accurately; Mao was, in many ways, simply the vessel. As Ye Jianying remarked in 1979 at a ceremony celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of the PRC's founding,

We hold that all our victories were achieved under the guidance of Mao Zedong Thought, without which there would be no New China today... Of course, Mao Zedong Thought is not the product of Mao Zedong's personal wisdom alone, it is also the product of the wisdom of his comrades-in-arms, the Party and the Revolutionary people, and, as he once pointed out, it emerged from the “collective struggles of the Party and the people”¹³.

Within the CCP, speech-writing was just viewed as a tool for communicating the will of the Party leadership, which often depended on the overall political climate (what was orthodox at any given time, which was not immune to change) – even, it seems, in cases where documents were ostensibly written by important individual high-profile leaders such as Mao. In 1990, around the same time as these revelations concerning Mao Thought documents' authorship came to light, Chinese copyright law was revised to stipulate that ownership of a collective work legally belonged to the person in whose name it was published because it was written under his or her supervision¹⁴:

Where a work is created according to the will and under the sponsorship and the responsibility of a legal person or entity without legal personality, such legal person or entity without legal personality shall be deemed to be the author of the work. The citizen, legal person or entity without legal personality whose name is

indicated on a work shall, in the absence of proof to the contrary, be deemed to be the author of the work⁴⁵.

Mao's bare minimum of participation in the form of writing “agree” as described above was enough to give him credit as a joint author. This law change provided a very convenient legal justification for continuing to ascribe the important writings in question to Mao.

The official Mao ideology was from the beginning an extension of the government leaders' wills, not Mao's individual will. This is one reason that after Mao's death Deng and the rest of the Party leadership found it so easy to drastically change the course of China's economy while still paying lip service to Mao Thought: because Mao Thought was simply whatever they wanted it to be, and always had been. “While Mao's physical remains were palatially accommodated in a crystalline display case, his political career and works were remodeled to suit the shifting exigencies of Party policy”⁴⁶. Cults of personality are dangerous and to be avoided since they depend too much on whoever is viewed as the person in control of it, but venerating what was essentially the idealized embodiment of government policy – the “collective will” – was extremely convenient for China's ruling cadres.

In order to provide justification for its more market-focused policy shift, the Party updated Mao's collected works in 1991 with new additions that could be said to favor such policies (again, even though Mao personally abhorred the kind of economic policies in question)⁴⁷. As always, the “collective will” of the leadership was what determined the form that the official representation of the Mao Thought cult took on. The Party knew

that it needed to maintain control of the Mao cult as much as possible in order to retain dominance over China's political and economic dialogue and thus maintain popular approval.

It became evident, however, that Mao and the Party may have done their job too well in the early years of Mao Thought. While the Party intended the Mao cult to be simply a means to an end in order to sell policy to the people, many Chinese took the cult and ran with it much further than the government might have preferred. Many Chinese had household shrines to Mao even in the years after the Cultural Revolution, reflecting his long-established nature as a kind of household god, but the new social cult lacked the orthodox political lockstep of the old one. Whereas the old Party-controlled cult depended on spouting propaganda that was carefully matched against what was politically in vogue at the time, the new social Mao cult had a certain vagueness to it that did not lend any authority.

Chinese still commonly felt very strongly about Mao, but they often could not articulate why; they lacked the “moral revival, sanctity, and the general religiosity and fervor” of Mao cultists of the Cultural Revolution and earlier¹⁸. Even as the government continued to act under the supposed auspices of Mao Thought, albeit in a more subdued and careful manner due to the new economic policies that contradicted many of the socialistic tenets of the old Mao Thought, it could not get the people to react as strongly as before.

This Mao Cult was largely nonofficial and spontaneous. It continued up to the time of the government-orchestrated centenary of Mao's birth in 1993, and it would appear that popular enthusiasm for the Chairman waned in direct proportion to the authorities' promotion of Mao as the founding father of the Party, army, and state. The new Mao Cult was markedly different from the "personality cult" ... of the CR¹⁹.

The Mao cult of the 1960s took the form of formal ancestor worship, but the social "Mao craze" (*Mao re*) of the 1990s was more like the folk tradition of worshipping folk ghosts and deities: more an unthinking nod to tradition as a part of the culture than a well-organized religious worship²⁰. The social cult was more notable for its pop culture aspects, such as obsession with Mao-related merchandise and trinkets, than for any real political association: "Mao in pigtails, Mao on musical lighters blaring the 'East is Red'; Mao's picture hanging from the walls of affluent Cultural Revolution theme restaurants; and Mao badges displayed on shirts of university students"²¹.

In studies of the *Mao re* phenomenon, it came to light that many people did not actually know what Mao had done (or, more importantly for the purposes of a cult, was supposed to have done). 65% of respondents in nationwide polls knew neither Mao's birth date nor his death date, while others were unsure who he actually was and what his major contributions to China were supposed to have been²². Many youths who had not lived through the chaotic Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution were skeptical of the things they had heard about these times and did not seem to pay any mind to them in any serious way.

Mao's legacy at this time had been reduced to little more than an afterimage on the cultural retina of China. Since the younger generations had not gone through the

thought-correction processes suffered by their elders, they did not possess any of the drive to obey Mao Thought that the old guard had had. Mao Thought was merely an object to which for them to show the smallest of token acknowledgments; it no longer possessed any serious political clout, which had always been its intended purpose. It had become a cult with no real object of veneration, just a remnant of a past era. Mao without Mao Thought was just an impotent memory. Lacking all political influence over the younger generations, it had outlasted its usefulness in that regard. Mao Thought is still explicitly acknowledged in the PRC's Constitution as the inspiration for its policies, but there is currently a fierce debate in Chinese intellectual circles over whether this continued acknowledgment is necessary or beneficial any longer given Mao Thought's current state of irrelevance and the fact that its interpretation has changed so drastically.

This may be something that is unavoidable with cults of personality; it would make sense that indoctrination can only be reliable in the cases of those who actually went through the process and lived during the time of the leader in question. Political indoctrination, it seems, does not always transfer to new generations even if it is the dominant political force in a country for decades. This seems to indicate that the Party's ultimate goal may have been unachievable: the desire to make Chinese Marxism-Leninism able to survive any political revisionism (that is, revisionism by any but China's legitimate rulers). According to the CCP's original intentions,

Once clad in the armor of Mao-thought, the young of China would be worthy warriors in the cause of revolution, eternally loyal to Mao, his thought, and his revolutionary line. The study, application, and defense of Mao's thoughts is, in fact, held to be the great task of Chinese young people, who, having

revolutionized their thinking, will pass on Mao's teachings to coming generations and so guarantee that no shift will take place in China's political orientation²³.

The use of the word “armor” is especially apt given Mao Thought's intended use as a defensive weapon politically. After having been so securely implanted into the minds of those who grew up during Mao's reign, the idea was for it to protect their minds against any political influences other than that of Mao Thought (or what the Party claimed Mao Thought to be). The Party set up the minds of the Chinese to only accept as truth doctrine that fell under the auspices of Mao Thought and to rebuff anything else as heresy. “By seeking to enshrine Mao's ssu-hsiang²⁴ on the Olympus of ideological immortality, the present leaders of China are, in effect, providing themselves with a form of insurance against the risk of future 'revisionism’”²⁵. As has been shown, this tactic worked very well with those who were actually indoctrinated, but the political aspects of the cult were not as self-propagating as the Party would have preferred.

The cult clearly can transfer to later generations in some form, however, and this reduced version can serve as some kind of common ground for the estranged generations, even absent the strong political connotations.

There was an unbridgeable gap between those who had lived through the Mao years and those who had not; the Cult provided a common ground and a hazy realm of consensus in a society in which the generation gap was increasingly making its impact felt²⁶.

This “hazy consensus,” however, is not inherently enough to create a stronger political understanding between those on either side of the gap.

It is not enough for a leader's doctrine to be passed from leader figure to leader figure as long as they show themselves to be worthy of it; the doctrine must also retain its relevance with the populace. This effect of merely adopting a political cult as a token gesture by people who did not actually experience the relevant historical events can be observed with many other figures that were at one point relatively influential in politics. The most prominent example of this phenomenon is arguably the Argentinean Che Guevara, a major leader in the Cuban Revolution; his visage can often be seen gracing the t-shirts of college-aged people who have no real political affiliation with or deep understanding of his ideals. The culmination of this gradual irrelevance effect is the meta-humor of a t-shirt graphic depicting Guevara wearing a shirt showing Bart Simpson (another famous rebel) in the typical "Che" pose: a major political figure reduced to nothing more than a blip on the radar of pop culture for the sake of a few laughs on the internet. It may be inevitable for political cults to lose power due to the generational divide and the unstoppable effects of time. It is certainly evident that this has happened with Mao, and it may well happen with Reagan, as well, who is the subject of the next section of this paper.

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CHAPTER V: THE FORMATION OF THE IDEOLOGY OF REAGAN

The preceding sections of this paper have shown how a political cult of personality and its ideology can be centrally planned and developed as a political tool through the extraordinarily well-documented rise of Mao Zedong. Mao's cult is, in many ways, the archetypal modern political hero cult; through his rise and partial fall, we can easily grasp how such cults come to form and what can happen with them. Mao's power, as mentioned above, has already been relegated to a primarily ceremonial role in the Chinese political discourse. The Party still gives him nods in order to maintain their authorizing political myth but with very little real political fealty. Mao Thought at this point is very subordinate to Deng Thought, which is to even the most casual observer of China the true priority of the country's ongoing development. Although very useful as an example of this type of development, it is not very politically relevant anymore. Therefore, in order to show relevance to current political discourse, the remainder of this paper will be devoted to showing how the heroic ideology characteristics developed above apply to a contemporary cult that wields considerable power in US politics: the ideology of Ronald Reagan.

Unlike Mao's doctrine, which was deliberately built up specifically to be used as a political weapon during Mao's reign, Reagan's doctrine did not begin to show signs of real power until after he had already left office; it was not centrally planned like Mao's, either, but more an organic development in the Republican party leadership. It might seem as though this would

immediately disqualify his ideology from being compared to such a deliberately created instrument as Mao's, but the circumstances surrounding its creation were, in fact, remarkably similar in other ways despite the lack of central planning. As with Mao's ideology, those responsible for Reagan's ideology were his Party leadership who desired a political tool. Mao was surely much more complicit in his ideology's creation than Reagan was, but the two of them shared the status of being the model from whom the doctrines that bore their names were extracted. Reagan Thought – to borrow the CCP's naming conventions – is simply the political doctrine that was created by distilling Reagan's principles and beliefs, much like Mao Thought. The major difference between Mao Thought and Reagan Thought is that Reagan Thought arguably skipped the phase where Reagan was in control of it and went straight to the phase in which his colleagues attempted to appropriate it.

The fact that Reagan's doctrine was created and used without his direct involvement does not serve to disqualify him from this comparison because, just as Mao was treated “as if he were a dead father at a funeral” at the height of his own cult's power and not generally allowed to speak in public for years previously (i.e., essentially treated as if he were already dead), while his cult was appropriated by Liu Shaoqi and Lin Biao, Reagan's cult and ideology were appropriated right out of the gate by his contemporaries in the Republican party. Reagan's absence, like Mao's, simply served to more easily allow his colleagues to use his doctrine as a springboard to power, which was always the true objective of its creation. The fact that Reagan did not directly participate in his Thought's creation from the beginning does not drastically affect the nature or purpose of it. In fact, it arguably makes Reagan's ideology an even better example of the true purpose of political cults of personality, which, as has been shown, is simply to create a doctrine

that can be passed from leader to leader for the purpose of accruing power for as long as that doctrine and the leader from which it originated can maintain relevance.

As with Mao's doctrine of allegedly scientific Marxism-Leninism with Chinese characteristics, Reagan's cult is based on the idea that his particular political philosophy was what the country needed at the time. Mao's success, as Anna Louise Strong (quoted above) and many others argued, stemmed from his ability to present the right political philosophy that China needed based on its history and situation at the time, and he constructed it based on his understanding of the Chinese psyche. The philosophy that made Reagan famous, according to his cult, originated in his understanding of the root of America's problems and a unique background that allowed him to perceive how to address them.

Like Mao, the idealized Reagan was uniquely suited to confronting his country's problems at the time that he came to power. Machiavelli wrote that men “flourish when their behavior suits the times and fail when they are out of step”⁴; Mao and Reagan both came to power at times that allowed them to use their unique backgrounds to provide political rallying points. These rallying points can, in fact, be referred to as such due to the symbolism used by their supporters that consistently evokes images of military standards. The Thoughts of the two leaders are not just shared concerns but can be thought of as vital military standards around which for supporters to gather in force so as to better resist political revisionism and heterodoxy together. For those under the standard, the ideological soul of the country is at stake in what is viewed by the party's supporters as an endless battle to maintain purity against dire odds. The CCP frequently referred to Mao Thought's “banner” as the rallying standard for Chinese

Communism; Reaganism has made use of the same urgent rallying-based terminology. “Reagan is the name on the *banner* carried by conservatives who have largely taken over the party. Even George W. Bush ignored his father to swear ideological fealty to him” (emphasis added)⁴.

When Reagan entered office, the United States faced a serious problem called “stagflation,” which Reagan claimed to be able to solve. He believed that he was equipped for this task because of his view that “common sense” should prevail over unwieldy technocracy and that the government needed to be shrunk in order to decrease waste. At his gubernatorial inauguration in 1967, Reagan claimed, “For many years now, you and I have been shushed like children and told there are no simple answers to the complex problems which are beyond our comprehension. Well, the truth is, there are simple answers”⁵. He also famously claimed in his first presidential inaugural address that “government is not the solution; government is the problem,” arguing that a smaller government would help the nation recover from its current economic woes; this idea that smaller government is inherently better, while not originating from Reagan, would go on to become one of the core tenets of American Reaganism and conservatism.

As Rachel Maddow points out, Reagan actually said “In *this present crisis*, government is not the solution; government is the problem” (emphasis added). In spite of this significant contextual difference, this idea became the holy of holies of Reaganism, the first major node of the web of principles that would become Reagan Thought. “[Reagan] wasn't saying that the government was always 'the problem,' let alone that it would always be the problem in the same

way that it was in 1981”⁴. Regardless of this important caveat, the idea of smaller government as inherently better stuck and has remained part of Reagan's legacy ever since.

Reagan's solution to stagflation was something variously called “supply-side economics,” “trickle-down economics,” and “Reaganomics”. This is based on the theory that giving tax breaks and other incentives to the wealthiest members of society will encourage them to invest in the economy, creating more jobs for the middle and lower classes. By reducing regulation and tax rates, supporters of supply-side economists argue, “consumers will then benefit from a greater supply of goods and services at lower prices”⁵. Reagan was not the first proponent of supply-side economics, but it has been heavily associated with him and with American fiscal conservatism since his time in office. Hence the coining of the term “Reaganomics,” inextricably binding that economic philosophy with Reagan's legacy. The idea of less economic regulation's being good for the health of the country, like the idea of smaller government, is a crucial tenet of Reagan Thought.

Reagan's banner, like Mao's, served to unite disparate groups under one orthodox belief system in a time of great need and existential confusion in the Republican Party. Conservatives in America prior to Reagan's time were splintered into several different groups with different priorities. Some were primarily concerned with social issues, some with fiscal problems, and some with foreign policy. The banner of Reagan, however, served to unite them all. Reagan's very public misstep in the eyes of social conservatives when he passed the Therapeutic Abortion Act in 1967, increasing California's abortion rate from about 518 to 100,000 over the course of his two gubernatorial terms, served as a springboard for his rebirth as a social conservative⁶; his

aggressive stance on the Panama Canal impressed those who favored a strong foreign policy; and his supply-side policies, of course, gave him strong credentials in the eyes of many fiscal conservatives.

Ronald Reagan papered over these differences with a happy anti-big-government nationalism. His patriotic imagery inspired the nativists and social conservatives. He gave big business and Wall Street massive military spending. And his anti-government rhetoric delighted the Party's libertarians and right-wing populists².

Reagan was able to bridge this gap because of his unique understanding of the government's ideal role in all of these issues. As with Mao Thought, the idea that Reagan possessed a monopoly on truth is central to his ideology. Reagan's position as a Republican leader worthy of being granted demigod status stems from his reputation as a kind of scientific genius of political philosophy. While Mao Thought was “a magic wand that can never be discarded” for the CCP, Reagan Thought was similarly a magically useful tool for Republicans. Reagan was famously sure in his judgments, never wavering from a decision once he had committed to it. “Once [Reagan] had made an emotional commitment to this or that policy or story, no amount of disproof would cause him to alter his belief in it”³. His priorities, most importantly, were useful to the Republican Party: strong defense and low regulation of the economy. This is why Reagan's cult has been a politically useful tool to some degree, allowing it to survive.

Reagan, like Mao, perpetuated an authorizing political myth which became the source of his party's political legitimacy. Voting for Republicans, in the minds of many Americans, was associated with voting for strong defense, financial responsibility, and, for some, strong social values. Association with this authorizing political myth continues to be a source of legitimacy for

Republicans today. However, like, Mao, the myth does not entirely match up with reality: Reagan's reputation as a small-government fiscal conservative among his followers is belied by the fact that he spent a great deal on defense during his time in office, increasing the gross national debt from \$995 billion to \$2.9 trillion – nearly tripling it². However, instead of damaging his reputation as a fiscal conservative, Reagan's defense expenditures, when they are acknowledged, serve to further cement his legacy because he is remembered as a leader who put defense first, which was more important than fiscal conservatism to many.

Therefore, in 1981 Reagan passed his 20% defense increase, causing the deficit to soar: from 1980 to 1985, the federal government's defense spending increased 35%¹³. Although Reagan personally acknowledged this miscalculation on his part, calling the massive debt increase his “greatest disappointment” from his time in office, this mistake is often ignored by those who propagate the ideology that bears his name because to acknowledge it would be tantamount to contradicting the authorizing political myth, which is that Reagan strengthened the country while pursuing fiscally conservative policies. There is a kind of cognitive dissonance here: giving the man credit for his strong security priorities while overlooking the colossal price tag attached to those policies. As with Mao, it is only permitted to remember the good things that he accomplished – never the bad. Without the authorizing myth, there can be no ideology because there would be no source of legitimacy. Just as Mao's mistakes were judged to have been made as a result of his falling out of step with his own doctrine and ignoring his own wisdom, Reagan's budget misstep – when it is acknowledged – is viewed similarly. It reflects poorly only on Reagan – never on Reaganism.

Just as Mao Thought was viewed as the perfect crystallization of Chinese Marxist-Leninist doctrine, and just as Mao is metonymically invoked by the CCP as Mao Thought's idealized creator when they really mean his doctrine, so is Reagan invoked by the GOP as a sort of stand-in for the orthodox ideology on which the Republican Party is currently centered.

The conservatives who summon Reagan's ghost for use in today's arguments usually use him as a stand-in for doctrinal purity. He illustrates the alleged axiom that true-blue conservatism — these days we would probably have to say true-red — wins elections¹⁴.

The real Reagan was actually fairly pragmatic and willing to compromise on matters of principle. For example, as mentioned above, he rationalized his massive defense increase because he believed that spending the Soviet Union into oblivion was more important than maintaining fiscal responsibility, saying “I did not come here to balance the budget – not at the expense of my tax cutting program and my defense program”¹⁵. Both strong defense and fiscal responsibility were important priorities for him, yet he was willing to sacrifice one for the sake of the other because it was more important at that time. This shows a degree of leeway in his priorities that is not present in Reagan Thought as it is represented today by many conservative Republicans, who tend to want strong military, no government spending, and tax cuts all at the same time while claiming that Reagan would have done the same.

When [Reagan] was not appearing before movement audiences, his conservatism was rarely explicit. He did not advertise his conformity to a school of thought even when he did, in fact, conform. He did not, that is, sell his policies on the basis of their conservatism. Rather the reverse: He used attractive policies to get people to give his conservatism a look. Hayward notes that Reagan's televised speech on behalf of Barry Goldwater's presidential campaign was “quite ideological,” but that Reagan presented the choice before Americans as “up or down” rather than “left or right”¹⁶.

For Reagan, a policy's perceived effectiveness was much more important than its conservative credentials, unlike many of those who have attempted to follow in his footsteps by searching for conservative policies first and policies that work second. This emphasis on effectiveness over ideology was, in many ways, what gave Reagan such easy mass appeal. By not appealing to ideology, he was able to draw in many people who may otherwise have been skeptical of his intentions. In 1981, Reagan got the highest-ever “index of loyalty” from Republicans since the record was created in 1953¹²; a 1999 CSPAN survey ranked Reagan as the 11st best president ever overall and the 4th best in public persuasion after Franklin Roosevelt, Theodore Roosevelt, and Abraham Lincoln¹³.

When [Reagan] left office, he was deemed an average president at best. Today, polls of historians frequently put him among the top 10. Not in the very top bracket with Washington, Lincoln and FDR, but solidly in the second tier, in the company of Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, Woodrow Wilson and the like¹⁴.

This difference between his initial high approval ratings and somewhat more lukewarm ratings at the end of his term as compared to his current reputation as practically infallible is a reflection of how the cult and its ideology have affected the public's memory of him.

The memory of Reagan is not just more fond than he perhaps deserved based on contemporary judgments of his performance, but also an exaggeration of his ideological faithfulness. Contrary to his arguably pragmatic behavior in office, in his cult Reagan is portrayed as a much more hardline idealist.

The Reagan whom his acolytes worship is a shallow hardliner who doesn't bear much resemblance to the pragmatic and flexible man who occupied the White House for most of the '80s. If you asked the legions of Reagan standard-bearers about his opposition to taxes, for example, they'd reply that he never sanctioned a tax increase. That idea has

taken such hold in the GOP that no Republican politician dares mutter "tax hike" except as an expletive... Staring at a sea of red ink, a Democratic Congress passed a bill in 1982 that raised taxes by \$37.5 billion a year. Reagan could have vetoed the legislation, but he chose to sign it. He also later signed legislation increasing the Social Security tax, which put the program on sound fiscal footing²⁰.

This willingness to compromise did not just include the heated issue of taxes but also the issue of defense. Reagan's reputation as tough on security is mostly deserved but he is often invoked today as a champion of proliferation to a greater extent than he was in life. He actually presided over several measures to reduce nuclear arsenals, such as the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, an agreement to destroy all intermediate-ranged conventional and nuclear ground-launched ballistic and cruise weapons, as a peace offering to Russia in 1987²¹.

The real Reagan was, in fact, rather more pragmatic than the 'Reagan myth' that sprang up after he left office. Real Reagan was willing to raise taxes in extremis, and became a firm believer in arms-reduction talks. Today's American conservatives, who claim the mantle of Reagan, would regard these ideas as treachery and weakness²².

Just as Mao was portrayed as an ideological behemoth, Reagan is portrayed by his cult as much more conservative than he actually was in life. In fact, during his presidency, it was no small source of frustration to actual hardline conservatives that Reagan was not as zealous as some of his colleagues might have preferred.

Liberals deride the Right's fixation with Reagan, and even some conservatives roll their eyes about it. When invoking Reagan, conservatives are prone to two characteristic vices: hero worship and nostalgia. To hear some conservatives talk, you would forget that Reagan was a human being who made mistakes, including in office. You would certainly forget that movement conservatives were frequently exasperated with Reagan's administration²³.

Reagan favored pragmatism over ideology because he knew that having the right message had to be secondary to getting people to agree on his message because otherwise he

wouldn't be able to get anything done. In spite of acting with such pragmatism and willingness to compromise on principle, he still managed to give off an air of sureness, making it seem as if the compromises he made were not just compromises but truly the right thing to do.

Publicly and personally, he gives the impression of a simple, comfortable, and confident decisiveness; there is seldom any doubt by most of the voters that Reagan is sure about what is right or wrong and that he is on the right side²⁴.

This confidence in his decisions while not seeming to adhere too strongly to ideology was a major factor that contributed to his broad, lasting political success. Lou Cannon, a biographer of Reagan, remarked that Reagan's stance on abortion, for example, was “partly a product of political calculation”; rather than come down hard on one side of the issue, he made fairly vague promises and did not allow himself to be seen in public with prominent anti-abortion movement leaders so as to maintain an air of moderation and avoid too severely upsetting social progressives²⁵. He also opposed the Briggs Initiative in 1978 while he was governor of California, a bill that would have banned gays and lesbians, and possibly anyone who was sympathetic to the gay rights movement, from working in California's public schools; his opposition was crucial in defeating it²⁶. Reagan's moderation on some social issues for the sake of maintaining a courteous political dialogue is rare among many of those who call themselves his acolytes today. He also supported measures to curb climate change – something that much of the rank-and-file of his devotees today deny even exists – not because he was ideologically in favor of environmentalism but because he believed that the economic costs of addressing it sooner were preferable to dealing with it later:

Under [Reagan's] leadership, the United States became the prime mover behind the Montreal Protocol, which required the phasing out of ozone-depleting chemicals... How

did Ronald Reagan, of all people, come to favor aggressive regulatory steps and lead the world toward a strong and historic international agreement? A large part of the answer lies in a tool disliked by many progressives but embraced by Reagan (and Mr. Obama): cost-benefit analysis. Reagan's economists found that the costs of phasing out ozone-depleting chemicals were a lot lower than the costs of not doing so — largely measured in terms of avoiding cancers that would otherwise occur. Presented with that analysis, Reagan decided that the issue was pretty clear²⁷.

This calculating behavior contrasts starkly with today's ideologues in the GOP, such as anti-climate and anti-abortion activist politicians who are currently causing trouble for the GOP leadership by tending to make explicit campaign promises in order to get votes in primary elections from a very conservative base; there also have been many instances where these politicians have made public statements that contradict accepted medical and scientific knowledge in order to appeal to this same conservative base, which has proven to be severely off-putting to more moderate voters. This tactic, in many cases, has caused these candidates to ultimately lose against more moderate Democratic candidates in general elections. For example, in the 2012 elections, Todd Akin and Richard Mourdock, firebrand Senate candidates who had both made offensive comments regarding sexual assault and female anatomy, both lost their general elections in spite of having GOP leadership support; it was widely believed that their comments were what caused them to lose public support²⁸. Reagan's tactic of public moderation and compromise in spite of his personal undoubtedly conservative beliefs is what allowed him to get elected twice to the Presidency with such ease. However, he is not portrayed this way in the Reagan Thought cult.

Reagan is portrayed in his cult as an extremist even though in life he was much more moderate because moderation allows too much wiggle-room and space for compromise. Anyone can compromise on ideology in order to arrive at a merely acceptable solution; there is no point

in venerating someone who isn't singularly gifted and in possession of ultimate truth. Reagan was particularly good at this type of compromise in order to arrive at “the truth,” or the ideal solution. In Mao's scientific Marxism-Leninism with Chinese characteristics, which claimed that every hypothetical problem could only have one best solution, Mao was worshiped because he was the only one who knew what that best solution was. This caused the idealized Mao to be portrayed as much more ideological and infallible than he was in real life, as has been discussed previously. Reagan is portrayed in his cult as much more zealously ideological for the exact same reason. Mao's and Reagan's cults worship them because they are vessels through which pure truth is transmitted; this purity cannot allow for any moderation because to do so would contradict the very idea of possessing said unimpeachable truth. If one possesses the absolute truth, then compromising with it is not an option because to do so would only be a political farce with the sole goal of appeasing one's opponents (who, according to the cult's doctrine, must be inherently wrong by virtue of the fact that they oppose the avatar of truth, and therefore are by nature not worthy of appeasing). Without this association with pure ideological truth, a political hero cult would have no purpose. In short, the purity of truth is the reason for which they are worshiped; without it, there would be nothing remarkable about them, and thus they must at all times be utterly sure of themselves and in touch with ultimate truth.

An additional reason for this inflexibility in Reagan's doctrine as portrayed by his cult is the fact that, once he was gone, there could be no second-guessing or attempts to hedge bets with the interpretation of where his values might have stood on various issues. When the man himself is no longer present, the only options available are principled adherence and heterodoxy; obviously, the former is preferable to any who would count themselves among the faithful. The

faithful must do their best to interpret the prophet's available teachings and act accordingly; the faithful after this point are effectively operating within an epistemic vacuum with no completely new input, which can result in radicalization. This effect can be seen in the interpretation of many religious teachings, including all of the world's major monotheistic faiths. Once the prophet who possessed access to the ultimate truth is gone, his followers have no recourse but to do their best to remain faithful to his available statements and teachings.

The prophet (or Sage, to bring back the Confucian term) himself could have continued to present different arguments since anything he said would still by default be part of this monopoly on truth, which would allow for some moderation and potential for compromise. Once his active input is removed, however, all that changes; the potential for radicalization and calcification of doctrine is introduced. “Once the founder is gone, his teachings can become definitive truth to the disciples. Flexibility disappears. No deviation is permitted. No compromise is tolerated”²⁹. This is the same reason that the Mao Thought doctrine became more radical and inflexible after Mao's fall from grace following the Great Leap; although Mao was still physically alive, the Mao of Mao Thought was “dead” and no longer in a position to contribute to and control his doctrine; to compensate for this lack of new input, Liu and Lin simply pressed harder in propaganda with what was currently available. It is also why the CCP could only pick and choose which already-established elements of Mao Thought to use after his death rather than adding new components. This, as far as ideology is concerned, was very similar to Reagan's being physically dead and thus unable to contribute further to his doctrine.

When a leader's actions are placed into a capsule like this and his followers attempt to recreate them precisely, this is dangerous because it can ignore the most important factor in decision-making: context. A successful leader is able to decide how to act based on his principles according to the requirements of a specific situation; acting in the same way in every situation can hardly end with anything but disaster. For example, part of the Reagan Thought doctrine that is propagated by the cult is the idea that taxes should be cut whenever possible. This fits in neatly with the overall “small government” principle of Reagan Thought, but it goes further than just that. Reagan introduced the largest tax cut the country had ever seen because he felt that it was an appropriate response to the problems the US was facing at that specific time. “By cutting taxes,” Reagan said in regards to the stagflation crisis, “I not only wanted to stimulate the economy but to curb the growth of the government and reduce its intrusion into the economic life of the country”³⁰. Now, however, the received wisdom in the Reagan cult is that this should be done as a response to just about any problem, ignoring the fact that Reagan subsequently passed the largest peacetime tax increase in history to try to balance out the previous cut, which was still not enough to prevent the deficit from tripling³¹:

Conservatives once believed both in lower taxes and in balancing the budget. Under Reagan, they simply became the party of tax cuts, without any commitment to fiscal responsibility. Dick Cheney, George W. Bush's vice-president, admitted as much when he told a cabinet colleague: "Reagan proved deficits don't matter." A mystical belief took hold that if you just cut taxes, the economy would grow fast enough to cover the shortfall – or government would shrink, almost by magic. Somehow it would all come right. This drift in Republican thinking was actually profoundly anti-conservative – because it elevated ideology (cut taxes at any cost) over a pragmatic commitment to good governance³².

This loss of pragmatism in favor of ideological severity is precisely what Reagan would have least wanted to happen to his Party; there is actually a beautiful irony in Reagan's followers'

calcifying his doctrine and falling into extremism. Since Reagan was actually so successful due to his ability to compromise on principle in order to achieve a more important overall goal, as has been discussed, trying to follow in his footsteps and live up to the legacy of what he did well by narrow-mindedly resorting to a cult mindset is arguably the complete opposite of how he would have acted. In practical matters, the ability to compromise and bridge conflicting ideologies was Reagan's "most important of magic wands," to borrow the CCP's description of Mao Thought; losing this ability to compromise has been tantamount to discarding the magic wand, which is perhaps why the GOP has had trouble in recent years with connecting to more audiences successfully.

By pushing further to the right and introducing fantastical standards of ideological purity, the party of Reagan has created a political litmus test that Reagan himself would not be able to pass if he were alive today.

Based on their public statements, policy proposals, and accomplishments while in office, none of the modern Republican presidents—not Richard Nixon, not Gerald Ford, not George H.W. Bush, not even Ronald Reagan or George W. Bush—would come close to satisfying the Republican base if they were seeking election today²³.

The ultimate truth of Reagan has grown so different from the man himself that if he were alive, he would be no more in control of his cult than Mao was after the events of the Great Leap Forward. Reagan would probably have abhorred the Tea Party, the most extreme manifestation of his cult's ideological calcification.

It is that contempt for government that today is driving the Tea Party extremists in the Republican Party. Yet, as with many cults, the founder of this one was somewhat more practical in dealing with the world around him, thus explaining some of Reagan's compromises on the debt ceiling and taxes... Possibly never in history has a "populist"

movement been as protective of the interests of the rich as the Tea Party is. But that is because it is really a political cult dedicated to the most extreme rendering of Ronald Reagan's anti-government philosophy³⁴.

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- [23](#)Ponnuru, “Misremembering Reagan,” 33
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- [33](#)Andrew Romano, “Even Reagan Wasn't a Reagan Republican,” *The Daily Beast*, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2010/05/10/even-reagan-wasn-t-a-reagan-republican.html> (accessed April 28, 2013)
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CHAPTER VI: THE FALL OF REAGAN AND THE (ATTEMPTED) APPROPRIATION OF HIS LEGACY

Like Mao, while Reagan's ultimate truth was held up as the ideological example, the man himself strayed from the ideals that he had originally inspired in a disastrous way, permanently sullyng his reputation in the end. Mao's humiliation was caused by the failed Hundred Flowers and Great Leap campaigns; Reagan's was caused by the Iran-Contra scandal in 1986. Reagan became embroiled in a national scandal when it came to light that he had been directly involved in a highly illegal plot to sell weapons to Iran through intermediaries as a method of securing the release of American hostages; at the same time, he was caught diverting some proceeds from these weapons sales to fund anti-Communist rebels in Nicaragua. These arrangements were both unconstitutional and dishonest to the American people. Reagan's public perception was severely affected by these events; like Mao's political stumbles that resulted in his losing control of his cult, they were a serious fall from grace for Reagan.

As with the immediate fallout of Mao's public mistakes, propaganda was ramped up around the Reagan cult to compensate for the real-time decrease of his favorability in the wake of the highly publicized Iran-Contra debacle. Reagan personally apologized on 4 March 1987 with the statement “I take full responsibility for my own actions and for those of my administration. As angry as I may be about activities undertaken without my knowledge, I am

still accountable for those activities”¹. In spite of his personal admission, however, his party, for the most part, steadfastly refused to admit presidential wrongdoing. Just as the CCP propaganda organs praised Mao Thought to the heavens while China starved, those in the American press who aggressively pushed for prosecution and investigation into the Iran-Contra scandal were ridiculed by many sympathetic media outlets and labeled conspiracy theorists; the Washington Post and Times were particularly fervent in vilifying any who had the audacity to question the president's actions². This was not the first time Reagan's political opponents had been shamed in an attempt to cow them; at the 1984 Republican National Convention, in response to accusations that Reagan had allied with death-squad regimes in Latin America, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Reagan's ambassador to the UN, accused critics of Reagan's foreign policy as “blaming America first,” also defending the disastrous and unnecessary Grenada campaign and the president's response to the Lebanon bombings³. The Iran-Contra response was simply a follow-through of the tactic to accuse Reagan's accusers rather than admit wrongdoing on the president's part.

Many Republicans continued to resist investigation of the issue for years, denying that any more indictments needed to be made or evidence unearthed. In 1991, as prosecutor Lawrence Walsh prepared to indict an old friend of President Bush's from the CIA in connection with the scandal, Bush wrote in a letter, “This matter has been investigated over and over again, this Iran-Contra. It's been going on for years. How long do the taxpayers have to keep paying for the Iran-Contra investigation?”⁴ In spite of the overwhelming evidence of presidential wrongdoing, Reagan was “reimagined and reinvented by conservatives as an executive who had done no wrong; the gold standard of Republican presidents”⁵. Even though the human Reagan had failed spectacularly, the idealized version was already being built up in order to distract the

country from what he had done. Reagan's complicity in Iran-Contra was overlooked in favor of highlighting his accomplishments such as defeating the Soviet Union. As with Mao's policy of taking credit for the good and escaping blame for the bad as a result of ascribing the former to the intangible cult and the latter to the man, the GOP was able to keep Reagan's image virtually untarnished even while investigations were ongoing. Leslie Stahl, one of CBS News' White House correspondents, said during the 1984 campaign that Reagan ducked the bad news and only showed up for the good, "running a campaign in which he highlights the images and hides from the issues"⁴. This practice continued during his second term, including major events like Iran-Contra.

The protection of Reagan's legacy has continued to this day as Republicans warily defend against any attacks on his memory – and, by extension, on their authorizing political myth. Journalists and politicians who criticize Reagan continue to be hounded by their conservative counterparts in their effort to maintain control of the narrative concerning Reagan. It eventually became nearly impossible for Democrats, even, to openly criticize Reagan.

These days, virtually no one in Washington's political or media circles dares to engage in a serious critique of Reagan's very checkered record as president. It's much easier to align yourself with some position that Reagan took during his long career, much like a pastor selectively picking a Bible passage to support his theological argument... The Republicans and the Right have made it a high priority to transform Reagan into an icon and to punish any independent-minded political figure or journalist who resists the group think⁵.

The continued fervent protection of Reagan as an icon is due in great part to the fact that since the Reagan presidency, there has not been a strong Republican president who could credibly take his place at the head of the conservative movement. George H.W. Bush's

presidency was marred by both his failure to decisively defeat Saddam Hussein in the first Gulf War and by his cringe-worthy reneging of his famous “Read my lips: no new taxes” campaign vow. If raising taxes was to be considered heterodoxy by the GOP, promising in no uncertain terms not to do so and then recanting was practically heresy; this has made it difficult for conservatives to hold him up as a model Republican. George W. Bush, too, is not an ideal model Republican due to the very negative public feelings associated with him as a result of the two seemingly interminable wars he initiated and other factors; the GOP has done its best to sweep him under the rug and pretend his presidency never happened, not even inviting him to attend the 2012 Republican National Convention. Appealing to Republican presidents prior to Reagan would be an exercise in futility, as well, since Nixon's legacy is forever ruined by the disgrace of the Watergate scandal. Due to the less than ideal legacies of all of the Republican presidents surrounding Reagan's two terms, Reagan is the only president in recent history that can be idolized with some degree of credibility. Therefore, rather than appealing to the more recent Republican presidents, conservatives have no choice but to appeal to Reagan; his is the only available Republican mantle with a considerable amount of prestige attached to it.

In light of this, Republicans have sought to emulate Reagan in the manner described above in an attempt to appropriate the prestige attached to his name. The Bushes' failures, and particularly George W. Bush's, “have made conservatives cling to Reagan’s memory more fiercely. In 2008, during the first presidential primary campaign since Reagan died, each of the Republican candidates presented himself as his reincarnation”⁸. Candidates engaged in the same ritual in the 2012 campaign. “First in 2008, and again in 2012, they had nomination debates at the Reagan Presidential Library, each candidate jockeying to establish their bona fides as the

most dedicated Che Guevara in something they call the 'Reagan Revolution'³. Newt Gingrich, in his unsuccessful primary campaign, argued that Obama should be fired specifically because he was unlike Reagan (and thereby heavily implying that Gingrich should be elected because he was more like Reagan): “I knew Ronald Reagan; I began working with Ronald Reagan in 1974 when I first ran for Congress. And I hate to tell this to our friends at MSNBC and elsewhere: Barack Obama is no Ronald Reagan!”⁴ Gingrich himself had actually thrown Reagan under the bus after Iran-Contra, solemnly declaring that Reagan “blew it,” predicting that he would “never again be the Reagan he was before”⁴. However, in the GOP's current Reagan fever, Gingrich had to pay homage to Reagan like everyone else who hoped to rise to power in that party, so he conveniently ignored his previous condemnations in order to make his own case.

Virtually all ambitious Republicans in the last twenty years, from Sarah Palin to Mitt Romney, have invoked Reagan at one point or another – in the majority of cases, more than once – as part of their arguments as to why they are worthy of ascension to power in the Republican Party. Just as Mao's comrades in the CCP vied with each other for control of Mao's cult in order to use it as a springboard to power, Reagan's contemporaries and successors have attempted to do the same with his legacy. A marked difference between Liu Shaoqi and Lin Biao's campaigns to ride Mao's coattails and the GOP's Reaganizing, however, is that while Liu and Lin were extremely successful in appropriating Mao's prestige during their times, no Republican has really managed to convincingly assume control of Reagan's cult. It has remained, since Reagan's retirement, a mostly headless political organism. As has been described previously, the two Republican presidents after Reagan were not worthy of being idolized themselves, and neither were they worthy successors to Reagan's cult.

Thus far, only lower-level political figures have been successful in using the Reagan cult to accrue a considerable amount of power. Grover Norquist, for example, while not an elected leader, has attained considerable influence by creating a sort of Reaganite oath of fealty that Republican political candidates often sign as a promise not to raise taxes. According to Americans for Tax Reform, the 112th Congress currently has 236 Representatives and 41 Senators who have signed the pledge, all of whom but three are Republicans, emphasizing the sharp left/right divide over the Reagan cult¹⁴. Given that the Representatives and Senators on ATR's list signed the pledge while campaigning, it is apparent that all of those elected politicians invoked the Reagan cult in some way during their campaigns. According to the website of ATR, Norquist founded it in 1985 at Reagan's request, which shows how strongly this anti-tax pledge is intertwined with Reagan¹⁵. It is extremely important to note, however, that ATR did not begin promoting the anti-tax pledge until the early 1990s, after Reagan left office¹⁶. This is because Reagan's intent in asking Norquist to found ATR was to *reform* taxes, as the name states, not to do away with them entirely. The anti-tax pledge's origins lie in the extremist Reagan cult, not in Reagan himself. This just further demonstrates how the Reagan cult has morphed into an ideology that has little in common with the man himself.

Norquist's tax vow has in the past been the undoing of many Republican candidates who have recanted after signing it, which has been the source of his political influence. However, recently cracks have begun to appear in his anti-tax empire's foundations as politicians who signed the pledge have started to either consider changing their minds or have actually done so because they have concluded that the anti-tax ideology is simply too harmful to the country. The key reason for this reversal is that the politicians in question have acknowledged that different

times and different problems require different solutions, which is counter to the Reagan cult doctrine that effectively orders the same solution for all problems.

Peter King (R-NY), for example, argued that campaign promises should be intended to address problems extant at that specific time, not permanent vows. “A pledge you signed 20 years ago, 18 years ago,” he argued, “is for that Congress. For instance, if I were in Congress in 1941, I would have signed a declaration of war against Japan. I’m not going to attack Japan today. The world has changed. And the economic situation is different”¹⁵. Lindsey Graham (R-SC), another majorly influential conservative, argued that what was good for the country was more important than the pledge. “I think Grover is wrong when it comes to we can’t cap deductions and buy down debt... I will violate the pledge, long story short, for the good of the country”¹⁶. Many other Senators and Representatives have indicated a similar willingness to compromise on tax rates out of political necessity – at least fifty Congressional Republicans have distanced themselves from the pledge in some way¹⁷. Ironically, this aversion to pure doctrine and willingness to compromise for the sake of pragmatism is much more Reagan-like than adhering to the ideological cult that bears his name.

Pledge signers have recanted before, but never in significant numbers; those who have turned their backs on the pledge have always been a tiny minority, often facing political ruin as a result. The current numbers are much higher than they have been before. Conservative politicians, it appears, may be starting to turn their backs on the more extreme elements of the Reagan cult. No ambitious Republican would consider openly criticizing Reagan at this point, but some are starting to realize that answers to the problems currently facing the United States

might not be found in the narrow-minded Reagan Thought doctrine, and are thus seeking answers elsewhere, outside of the cult's influence.

Part of the reason that a Reagan cult candidate has not succeeded in reaching the highest office in the land is that, although the GOP wants a Reagan candidate, the nation as a whole does not seem to – at least, not the same Reagan candidate that the national GOP wants. State-level leaders still can and frequently do get elected on the Reagan platform, but such a success has thus far eluded national candidates. As with the Mao cult after Mao's death, the Reagan cult lacks sufficient political pull to move the whole country. The GOP has been going through an identity crisis since Mitt Romney's resounding defeat in the 2012 election; part of this crisis has been confronting the fact that the Reagan cult no longer has the pull that party leaders intended it to, if it ever did. Just as the Mao Thought cult lost its relevance and became merely a meaningless political ritual, Reagan Thought is no longer relevant because it is unable to deliver politically.

The effects are playing out differently from post-Mao China, however. Clearly it is significant that in China's one-party system, the CCP has been able to keep control of the country through the use of the same authorizing political myth quite simply because, barring violent mass revolution, there are no other options. Beijing dictates the authorizing political myth from the top down and the people go along with it. The US, on the other hand, actually elects its leaders, so it is not enough for the cult of a leader to be forced onto the people; in order to be elected on the Reagan platform, a candidate has to be chosen by a significant enough proportion of the people, and herein lies the problem for the post-Reagan Republican Party. Many Republicans still want a

Reagan candidate, but they cannot agree on what that means. Again, due to the nature of government in the United States in contrast to China, this is in some ways the inverse of the top-down Mao cult model in which the government transmits the authorizing myth to the people on a one-way street through the cult; the reason that Republican America cannot agree on a Reagan candidate is that there are separate groups with different priorities transmitting different authorizing myths to the government through the cult from the bottom up which often conflict with the GOP establishment's top-down transmission.

The Reagan cult seems to be fracturing back into the old divisions that existed prior to Reagan's rise. Reagan united the social conservatives, the war hawks, and the anti-government libertarians under one banner, as has been described above; the Party leadership attempted to use that banner to continue to command loyalty from groups with different priorities after his tenure, and it seems that the ghost of Reagan is no longer strong enough to hold these disparate groups together. There is currently a kind of civil war between the GOP establishment and the Tea Party over the direction the Republican party should take, as well as the demographics it should target. The radical Tea Party conservatives heavily favor the extremist firebrand candidates that tend to lose in high-profile general elections, but also vote based on their perception of which candidates will best protect personal liberties; the GOP establishment prefers candidates who might not have such strong conservative credentials but are electable in general elections due to their relatively more broad appeal; and the "Family Values" wing favors candidates with very conservative Judaeo-Christian social values. There is a lot of overlap between the priorities of the three factions and the candidates that they will elect, particularly between the first and third, but a serious internal struggle is playing out mostly between the Republican establishment and

the Tea Party. Karl Rove, a GOP establishment power player, was portrayed as Hitler by some Tea Party members after he publicly stated that the GOP needed to focus on supporting electable candidates instead of candidates with the strongest conservative credentials in the 2014 elections¹⁸. The use of this symbolism indicates that the rift between these two wings of the Republican Party has grown very serious.

It is entirely possible that in the wake of the collapse of the mainstream Reagan cult, the old divisions will appear again as each group takes the part of the cult that most appeals to it and further revises Reagan's legacy. The Republican Party may once again splinter into anti-government libertarians, religious social conservatives, and neoconservative war hawks. The Tea Party may even form its own party entirely, a totally separate entity from the Republican Party. Either way, the likely result is the reappearance of voting blocs with conflicting priorities. The aftermath of the Reagan cult could force the Republican Party to completely remake itself. The only thing that's for sure is that its current strategy does not seem to be working anymore; there has not yet been a new leader who has been able to convincingly appropriate the Reagan legacy for himself, and there is unlikely to be one since the doctrine associated with that cult is not only becoming less able to solve problems, as is required of a political doctrine, but is also fracturing into its original components, leaving it unable to function as a whole.

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- 8Ponnuru, “Misremembering Reagan,” 33
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- 11Kerry Picket, “Gingrich '87: Reagan 'blew it' over Iran Contra affair”
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- 15Glen Johnson, “Some GOP members of Congress back off Norquist pledge,” The Boston Globe, <http://www.bostonglobe.com/news/politics/2012/11/26/republican-signatories-norquist-pledge-indicate-they-would-break-avoid-plunge-over-fiscal-cliff/C19NqHnojENRTYyLEcfW5L/story.html> (accessed April 28, 2013)
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¹⁸Kenneth Vogel, "Tea party group pictures Rove in Nazi uniform," Politico, <http://www.politico.com/story/2013/02/tea-party-group-pictures-karl-rove-in-nazi-uniform-87793.html> (accessed April 28, 2013)

CONCLUSION

Political cults of personality can be used as extremely effective tools in the right hands due to the powerful influence of a morally and epistemically “correct” ideology. Whether carefully built up and maintained by central planning or organically gathered due to having no better alternative, the cult can act as a powerful focal point through which for a ruling party to transmit its message to the people, thus maintaining its legitimacy. The doctrine that is created by the cult's founder and his or her colleagues can often take on a life of its own, separate from the influence of the founder, since the founder him- or herself is ultimately not as relevant as the ideology.

As the doctrine becomes more fully formed and well-defined in the minds of the populace and the other party leaders, the definition of orthodox behavior for the cult's founder becomes increasingly narrow. This makes it dangerously easy for the cult leader to stumble out of the cult's accepted bounds and commit heterodox acts, resulting in immediate disavowal by the ruling party so as to maintain the ideology's narrative of truthfulness. Additionally, if the personal power of the cult leader grows to be so great that it interferes with the greater political goals associated with maintaining the doctrine, the leader can end up losing control of the doctrine as the party reasserts its influence in order to maintain a more desirable political discourse. When this inevitably happens, the doctrine can become available for others to

appropriate and use not only to keep the party in power but also as a means of attaining personal power.

This is not always easy to accomplish, however; in order to use the cult as a means to power, the cult's relevance has to be maintained. As has been seen with Mao's cult, the failure occurred with the advent of a new generation that had not been indoctrinated like their elders had; Mao Thought was never as good at solving China's problems as the Chinese Communist Party pretended it was, but as long as the people believed it, that was enough to keep it relevant and in the center of China's political dialogue in a meaningful way. Reagan was a strong leader whose policies are believed by many to have been successful in confronting the problems that existed during his time, but his Thought as practiced by his cult's adherents in the years since has proven incapable of successfully resolving the problems of a different time, which is why it has been unsuccessful in producing a comparably strong leader. This is why it has lost relevance and may ultimately be discarded in serious politics the way that Mao's has been. Without the ability to maintain a political ideology that can consistently provide a political party with legitimacy in the eyes of the people, heroic ideologies have no purpose. The cults of Reagan and Mao may never completely die out in name, but in terms of political relevance – the only thing that really matters in the end – they seem to have run their course.

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