

China's 'capitalist communists' happy to cling to a symbolic hero

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Asked this week whether today's China retained anything of the political and economic ideas of late chairman Mao Zedong, communist-turned-consultant Sidney Rittenburg answered by pulling a magnifying glass out of his pocket.

"I have looked everywhere [for Maoism]," said the Great Helmsman's one-time fellow traveller and translator. "But I haven't seen anything."

Certainly, little trace remains of Mao's philosophy of class war and radical egalitarianism in the policies pushed by China's current cohort of business-suited Communist leaders, who stress instead the need for social stability and market-driven economic growth.

But 30 years since his death on September 9 1976, Mao still looms large over the nation, his portrait gazing out of every banknote and from innumerable walls, and reverential references to his "Thought" sprinkled in every significant political speech.

For the Communist party, the late dictator has become an essential unifying symbol that can shore up a claim to political legitimacy badly undermined by the abandonment of Marxist ideology.

That symbolic role is on full display in commemorative events this week.

"Mao Zedong loves the people/He is our guide . . . The Communist party is like the sun/Wherever it shines/The Communist party is there," run the old song lines featured on an anniversary webpage set up by Nasdaq-listed Chinese internet portal Sina.com.

"Crystallising the efforts of countless revolutionary pioneers, Mao Zedong Thought has nurtured a billion Chinese, created the China of today, and will continue to influence China's tomorrow," insists the invitation to a commemorative musical night in Beijing's Great Hall of the People.

That such rhetoric has resonance is clear from a visit to Mao's Tiananmen Square mausoleum, where hushed crowds join long queues to view his putative corpse in a glass sarcophagus astride Beijing's geomantic meridian.

Visitors from all over China echo the official line that Mao was a great leader whose mistakes - such as the disastrous 1966-76 Cultural Revolution - are more than outweighed by his achievements.

"Chairman Mao unified the country . . . reformed society and helped poor people," says Ma Jishen, a manager from the eastern city of Nanjing who at 56 is the same age as the People's Republic and who is on his third visit to the mausoleum. "Two times was not enough. I really miss him."

"Chairman Mao made a great contribution to the Chinese revolution and to China," agrees student Xiao Penglong.

Making Mao the party's most important brand is a strategy with risks, however.

The late leader's place in the "limitless veins of the Chinese nationality" is maintained at least in part by an ignorance of his actual deeds that is maintained by party propaganda commissars.

China's public is shielded from the works of overseas scholars and Mao's own doctor who have portrayed a brutal, hypocritical and duplicitous leader whose policies led directly to the deaths of tens of millions.

When Mr Rittenburg, who joined the Chinese Communist cause in the 1940s, told state television recently that he considered Mao a "a great historical leader and a great historical criminal", he did so in the knowledge it was a comment the audience would never hear.

China's economic opening means censorship could be increasingly hard to maintain, however. Wider public debate could question the very roots of party legitimacy and expose the private anger of many Chinese whose lives were destroyed by Mao's political campaigns.

For Beijing's increasingly capitalist communists, retaining Mao as symbolic leader involves another danger. Praise for his achievements in reducing inequality, corruption, drug addiction and prostitution invites criticism of the current regime's record.

Mausoleum visitor Mr Ma, for example, notes ruefully that such problems have returned in full force in recent years.

Still, as long as the party can keep on delivering economic growth and rising living standards, its contradictory relationship with its revolutionary hero should continue to be manageable.

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