

Maoism at the Grassroots: Everyday Life in China's Era of High Socialism. Ed. by Jeremy Brown and Matthew D. Johnson. Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA). 2015. vi, 468 pp. \$49.95; £39.95; € 45.00.

In scholarship on contemporary China, it has become widely accepted to refer to the first few decades following the founding of the People's Republic (PRC) in 1949 as the "Mao era", "Maoist China", or the "Mao years". While the definitions and the periodization of these phrases vary to some degree,<sup>1</sup> they invariably conjure up the image of a centrally planned communist state-building project based on – and also disrupted by – a series of violent mass movements that led to a profound politicization of Chinese society. It is part of this narrative to assume that "under Mao" even the trivia of everyday life were heavily charged with political meaning. Yet, when it comes to the question how "ordinary people" in various social contexts and geographical settings within China actually experienced, coped with, and contributed to the historical changes occurring between 1949 and 1978, our knowledge is still rather fragmented. This is why the volume *Maoism at the Grassroots: Everyday Life in China's Era of High Socialism*, the outgrowth of a workshop held at Simon Fraser University in 2010, constitutes a welcome addition to existing scholarship in the field of contemporary Chinese history. Co-editors Jeremy Brown and Matthew D. Johnson have assembled an instructive collection of fifteen essays that confronts us with a panoply of contemporary voices from China's "grassroots".

The case studies presented centre on individuals within different social spheres and scrutinize how they interacted with the PRC's emerging political system and its local representatives. In order to explore "individual and collective responses to centralizing, hegemonic forms of state power" (p. 5), all chapters draw on a variety of "grassroots sources". By the editors' definition, this term comprises archival documents and grey literature along with oral history interviews, unpublished memoirs, and other ego-documents, such as diaries and self-confessions. Brown and Johnson see it as their "main task [...] to explain processes of change and continuity over time from the perspective of relatively unknown historical actors" (p. 1). Ultimately, however, the volume's "grassroots approach", which they define in opposition to earlier "top-down and state-focused" social-scientific research, is aimed at a re-evaluation of the established narratives and timelines of China's post-1949 history. Correspondingly, the chapters that follow are grouped into four thematic sections that expand on familiar research topics but examine understudied aspects and moments from the bottom up.

The four essays that comprise the first part of the volume show how state control and repression by means of social and political labelling impacted individuals at the local level, albeit sometimes in rather unexpected ways. Yang Kuisong relates the tragic case of Henan factory worker Zang Qiren, who was identified as politically unreliable after investigations into his personal history had been conducted during the 1950s and early 1960s. Yet, Zang escaped criminalization until the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, and it was only in 1972 that the factory Party branch and the local Public Security Bureau labelled him a "bad element" – less because of alleged political offences than ongoing homosexual relations with

1. "Maoist China" usually refers either to the period between 1949 and 1976 (the year of Mao's death) or between 1949 and 1978 (the year of the Central Committee's Third Plenary Session that marks the beginning of the reform era). Less often, it is narrowed down to the decade following the beginning of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).

co-workers. Yang's findings underscore that it was Zang's "deviant behaviour" that eventually led to his conviction and imprisonment in 1977 (pp. 46–50). The next three chapters provide further evidence of the arbitrariness and dynamism inherent in the PRC's system of political and social designations and their potential revision. Based on an analysis of class status files of individuals from Hebei and Henan, Jeremy Brown traces the processes of rural class label reinvestigation and classification during the Great Leap Famine and the Four Cleanups Movement (p. 54ff.). Like Yang, Brown emphasizes that personal relationships and personalities determined how and to what extent central policies were implemented by cadres at the village and county levels (p. 76). Additionally, his research shows that the various trajectories of historical change do not necessarily conform to the conventional periodization of the era (pp. 54–55).

This observation is validated by Cao Shuji, who examines the labelling of "rightists" in rural Henan. Due to the fact that the "Anti-Rightist Movement unfolded on distinct timelines at different administrative levels in 1957 and 1958", as Cao observes, most people were well aware of its aims and consequences when it reached the countryside, and it thus progressed as an "overt conspiracy" "meticulously planned by the local leaders" to detect the required quota of "rightists" within their reach of power (pp. 77–78). Still, a small group of individuals would rather have voiced criticism and become "rightists" than acquiesce in systemic injustices, Cao claims (pp. 100–101). How political verdicts like these were revised in "post-Mao China" without impairing the Chinese Communist Party's legitimacy after the events of the Cultural Revolution is the topic of Daniel Leese's chapter. He has analysed more than forty files on "counterrevolutionary crimes" re-examined by the Beijing Fengtai District Court between 1978 and 1979 and concludes that these cases were dealt with "on an individual basis without addressing larger questions about who was responsible for previous injustices" (p. 127).

The second part of the book, which draws attention to less coercive measures of public mobilization for China's socialist construction, opens with an illuminating study by Jacob Eyferth. He describes how the revolution impacted the lives of rural women in Shaanxi who tried to accommodate the conflicting tasks of cotton cultivation for the state and textile work for the family through extreme self-exploitation. As Eyferth notes, their "liberation" from "the experience of scarcity and overwork" began only in the 1970s when agricultural innovation and mass production of synthetic fibres ended the PRC's textile crisis (pp. 151–152).

The remaining two chapters focus on young people as another segment of Chinese society whose cooperation and labour power were deemed crucial to the country's modernization. Sigrid Schmalzer delivers a well-structured account of the experiences of "educated youth" in the countryside participating in the mass science movement during the 1960s and 1970s. The subsequent chapter, co-authored by Sha Qingqing and Jeremy Brown, draws on sections of a diary kept by a young man named Tongshan who was on the brink of being "sent down" to a village when the Tangshan earthquake of July 1976 devastated his Tianjin neighbourhood and exacerbated his anxieties about the future. While Schmalzer points out that many youths were enthusiastic about and some even empowered by their involvement in rural projects of scientific experimentation during the 1960s (pp. 168–169), Sha and Brown deduce from Tongshan's diary entries that by the mid-1970s this revolutionary enthusiasm among the young had given way to disillusionment and an increasing ambivalence or even opposition towards political engagement (p. 195).

The contributions to the third and fourth parts of the volume further add to the overall picture of heterogeneity, diversity, and limited state power vis-à-vis local agency. By analysing Shanghai's cultural landscapes between 1949 and 1965, Matthew Johnson explores in

detail “how official culture was challenged by forces internal to the propaganda-culture system” and “how popular attitudes continued to show support for unofficial [...] alternatives to mainstream state culture” (pp. 203–204). Michael Schoenhals provides insights into the organization of translocal information networks by various Red Guard groups who compiled, printed, and circulated internal newsletters from 1966 to 1967. And Xiaoxuan Wang demonstrates for Rui’an County in Zhejiang that despite massive state repression, persecution, and propaganda, religious beliefs and practices continued to flourish in Chinese village life throughout the first three decades of the PRC. Shifting guidelines from above and the involvement of local cadres in the religious activities of their own villages impeded a more efficient implementation of religious policies at the grassroots (pp. 277–278).

The last group of chapters once again brings to our attention the fact that China’s socialist revolution had never been a dinner party, but was marked by the interplay of “routine violence, resistance and repression” from the start (p. 2). That violent forms of grassroots resistance to state control “had a strong ethnic dimension in non-Han areas” (p. 13), as Wang Haiguang and Zhe Wu remind us in their essays on Guizhou and Xinjiang, is perhaps not as surprising as the level and scope of the interethnic conflicts and rebellions they reveal. Another type of popular resistance to the socialist state may be even less known. S.A. Smith acquaints us with the pervasive influence of redemptive religious societies that intermittently flourished after the inception of the PRC despite intense persecution. Smith estimates that the number of followers, among them Party members and local officials, “may have run into the low millions” (pp. 350–351).

Vivienne Shue has aptly noted in her epilogue to the volume that the findings presented here “are, for the most part, based on very partial – even fragmentary – bits of evidence”, but “when read together” they may indeed direct us towards a systematic reassessment of our preconceptions about life in post-1949 China (p. 371). This, however, requires us not only to unearth new sources and “privilege [...] readings that cut against the grain of established narratives” (p. 5), but also to make substantial efforts at a critical evaluation and contextualization of our material, as Alf Lüdtke convincingly outlined in his introduction to *The History of Everyday Life* some twenty years ago.<sup>2</sup>

Susanne Stein

Institute for Eastern European History and Area Studies, University of Tübingen  
 Wilhelmstrasse 36, 72074 Tübingen, Germany  
 E-mail: susanne.stein@uni-tuebingen.de  
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2. See A. Lüdtke, “Introduction: What Is the History of Everyday Life and Who Are Its Practitioners?”, in *idem* (ed.), *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life* (Princeton, NJ, 1995), pp. 3–40, 20ff.