



Alexander Cook, ed. *Mao's Little Red Book: A Global History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. xvi + 287 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-107-05722-7; \$27.99, ISBN 978-1-107-66564-4.

Reviewed by Alex Zukas

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Big Deal about a Little Red Book

2014 is the fiftieth anniversary of the initial publication of *Quotations from Chairman Mao*, better known as the Little Red Book (LRB). To mark the occasion, Alexander C. Cook has assembled papers originally delivered at an October 2011 conference on the origin, production, distribution, and influence of the LRB that have been revised for publication. The result is the first scholarly attempt to understand the LRB as a global historical phenomenon which, at the height of its popularity in the decade from 1964 to 1974, was the most printed book in the world: over a billion official copies in thirty-six languages were sold in addition to unofficial copies in over fifty languages. The foundational premise of this edited volume is that, given its worldwide circulation but quite different local appropriations, a global history of the LRB could not be adequately presented by one individual; such a history needed to be a collaborative scholarly effort by national and regional experts. This is a reasonable premise given the scope and complexity of the topic.

The editor does terrific job laying out the logic of the book's structure in the preface and introduction. The chapters are grouped thematically: the first four chapters set the stage by examining the LRB in China while the fifth chapter deals with the preparation of the volume for translation and export from China. Subsequent chapters consider the impact of the LRB in the Third World, Second World, and First World, and a conclusion offers some

new perspectives. The editor maintained good structural control: there are fifteen chapters and each chapter is between fifteen and twenty pages long with footnotes and a bibliography consisting of the works cited in the chapter. The book's organization is clear and each chapter's title and subheadings guide the reader to the main argument and key points.

The first chapter is the editor's introduction which is an original essay that subtly highlights themes that will be picked up in subsequent chapters. Its subtitle is "The spiritual atom bomb and its global fallout" and it argues, based on Lin Biao's preface and Mao's other writings, that the LRB aimed to explode the Cold War order by exploiting fissures in and between the developed capitalist First World, the socialist Second World, and the underdeveloped but emerging Third World with which China identified. The second chapter, by Daniel Leese, "A single spark: origins and spread of the Little Red Book in China," focuses on the (ad hoc) origins, production, dissemination, and demise of the LRB in China. He explains that the LRB resonated with the Chinese people because it aligned with the traditional genre of collected sayings (*yulu*) as well as communist truth claims, had an ingenious physical format, was released in a favorable political environment, and could be used for different aims. Andrew F. Jones's chapter 3, "Quotation songs: portable media and the Maoist pop song," examines LRB quotations set to song during the Cultural Revolution

claiming that they were a deliberate product of cross-platform marketing (p. 45). The next chapter, Guobin Yang's "Mao quotations in factional battles and their afterlives: episodes from Chongqing," considers the role of Mao quotations in Red Guard factionalism in a Chinese city during the Cultural Revolution. His main argument is that LRB quotations were not meaningless propaganda but a constitutive element of factional dynamics in the Cultural Revolution. The volume's fifth chapter, "Translation and internationalism" by Lanjun Xu, examines how the LRB was translated for export and his main argument is that the global success of the LRB rested on China's efforts to build a global book distribution network and to translate Chinese literature, revolutionary theory, and Mao's works into foreign languages where they could serve as a common and universal currency of revolution (p. 76).

The sixth chapter, Priya Lal's "Maoism in Tanzania: Material connections and shared imaginaries," starts the section on Maoism in the Third World and argues that the introduction of the LRB was part of the circulation of Chinese cultural, political, and economic resources in socialist Tanzania during the Cultural Revolution. Chapter 7, Sreemati Chakrabarti's "Empty symbol: the Little Red Book in India," argues that, while Third-World Maoism had great influence in India during the Cultural Revolution and is still formidable today, interest in the LRB was short. According to David Scott Palmer (chapter 8), "The influence of Maoism in Peru" was malignant as Shining Path Maoists in the 1980s, little influenced by the LRB and warping Mao's concepts and practice, became dogmatic and violent and harmed the very people they purported to defend.

Playing off the Cook's "spiritual atom bomb," Elizabeth McGuire's chapter, "The book that bombed: Mao's Little Red Book in the Soviet Union," begins the volume's section on the reception of Maoism in the Second World and contends that the LRB was seen as a weapon in the Soviet Union that presented a rival ideology, inspired physical assaults, and opened the way for an unprecedented critique and mockery of Soviet communism in the guise of attacking Chinese communism. The tenth chapter, Elidor M'Chilli's "Mao and the Albanians," explains the ambivalence that Albanian leaders, particularly Enver Hoxha, had toward the LRB, the Cultural Revolution, and their Chinese ally: these could help Albania resist Soviet domination of the Second World but they seemed to point toward diminishing the authority of the Communist Party, an outcome Albanian communists did not want.

The next set of chapters compares the reaction to the LRB in neighboring Second and First World countries. Chapter 11, Dominique Kirchner Reill's "Partisan legacies and anti-imperialist ambitions: the Little Red Book in Italy and Yugoslavia," argues that the differing experiences of Partisan warfare in World War II ensured that the LRB and the Maoist message fell flat in socialist Yugoslavia and found resonance in capitalist Italy while the LRB's anti-imperialist message found strong resonance among the youth of both countries. The twelfth chapter (Quinn Slobodian's "Badge books and brand books: the Mao Bible in East and West Germany") discusses the LRB as a material object and places it within the print culture of the two Germanys and contends that it was received and treated as a political "badge" in East Germany and a commercial commodity "brand" in West Germany with its "badge" character not completely, but mostly, effaced.

Chapter 13 moves us squarely into the First World as Julian Bourg's "Principally contradiction: the flourishing of French Maoism" argues that French Maoism flourished during the period of the Cultural Revolution due to the convergence of favorable international and domestic circumstances; that it was subject to the problems of "traveling theory," or the dislocation, creative appropriation, and translation of a theory into other cultural contexts; and that French theoretical reception of Maoism played a decisive role in key intellectual developments over the past forty years. Bill V. Mullen's contribution "By the book: *Quotations from Chairman Mao* and the making of Afro-Asian radicalism, 1966-1975" (chapter 14), examines the historical conditions and political objectives that helped popularize as well as limit the LRB as a tool for building left-wing movements around Third World anti-imperialist internationalism and national self-determination in the United States.

The concluding chapter by Ban Wang, "In the beginning is the word: popular democracy and Mao's Little Red Book," takes us full circle back to China and the fundamental premise of this edited volume that the meaning of the quotations in the LRB was not fixed but open to divergent interpretations at the time and by subsequent scholarly inquiry. Unlike most of the chapters in this volume, Wang argues that the discursive practices associated with the LRB during the Cultural Revolution in China released social energies that set in motion a reformation with the promise of genuine protest, agency, emancipation, and democracy.

These chapters are wide-ranging and come to very different conclusions about the origins and impacts of

Maoism and the LRB since 1964. Its richness in approach, diversity of findings (usually based on regional differences), and geographic scope are the major appeals of the volume. Some common themes run through the chapters: as an international phenomenon, the LRB was a product of post-World War II globalization and reflected the complexities and contradictions of the global 1960s and the coming of age of the postwar generation, disenchantment with liberalism and state socialism, the drive for national liberation in the postcolonial world, and the connection of politics to popular culture.

The editor notes that the chapters are products of original research in a dozen different languages and the contributors are experts in their fields, but some chapters tend to repeat older interpretative tropes rather than break new ground. In particular, the chapters by Leese, Yang, Chakrabarti, Slobodian, and Wang tend to repeat older interpretations which frame the LRB and the Cultural Revolution in well-trodden religious categories of analysis like *âbible,â* *âsacred icon,â* *âworship,â* *âcult,â* and *âsacred scriptâ* that found great currency in the First World during the Cultural Revolution, usually as a put-down, as Slobodian points out for West Germany. While historians can show how people at the time understood political and other phenomena, they do not need to incorporate those terms and perspectives into their own analyses and thereby replicate past prejudices and biases. Critical distance from one's sources is crucial for scholarly work. This is not to say that there is no truth in calling aspects of the Cultural Revolution and the reception of the LRB cultish. It is to ask that scholars move beyond what has become, if I may be forgiven the use of a religious term, an interpretive fetish. The use of religious terms gives some of the chapters a polemical tone. One would hope for greater rethinking of old categories in a global history of the LRB and more expansive theoretical approaches. It does seem that the authors who focused more on primary sources and resorted less to secondary sources (Cook, Jones, Xu, Lal, Palmer, McGuire, MÃ«hilli, Reill, Bourg, and Mullen) broke new ground and refrained from religious analogies—perhaps because the authors' imaginations were less limited by a reliance on secondary sources that employed religious framings. In some cases, like Wang's, reducing political categories to religious ones is a conscious choice and a result of Weberian theory that inserts religious categories into political analysis (e.g., charisma) and treats powerful political conviction as irrational. Wang wants to give *âpolitical theologyâ* a positive spin.

A couple of the authors do try new interpretive

frames which only partially succeed. Jones starts well in contextualizing the LRB in Chinese history and culture but then begins to lose the reader in postmodern, especially Derridean, jargon which seems forced in a Chinese context. His treatment conflates/elides ontology with epistemology with linguistics with psychology. The result becomes muddled and reductive because he deploys terms from First World marketing to describe Third World phenomena, with no explanation for their appropriateness. His treatment implies a comparability that is asserted more than demonstrated. At the end of the chapter he leaves China altogether and more explicitly subsumes Chinese popular culture to Western sensibilities with long references to and analyses of John Lennon's song *âRevolutionâ* (1968) and Jean-Luc Goddard's film *La Chinoise* (1967) which were produced for First World audiences. This concluding analysis does not support his claim that the Chinese participated in global youth culture. The evidence he provides shows First World appropriation of the symbols of the Cultural Revolution for commercial purposes but no indication that Chinese youth heard, saw, or were influenced by these First World cultural products. (For an interesting comparison that shows how intellectually rich this edited volume is, see Bourg's interpretation of *La Chinoise*. It is less dismissive than Jones's and is properly focused on Europe rather than China.)

Slobodian's chapter is likewise more interesting in its attempt than in its results. He introduces two terms to conceptualize the circulation and reception of the LRB in East and West Germany: *badge books* express meaning through outer forms as much as content and identify political affiliation and sensibilities, while *brand books* are commodities which *âcontained ideas debated within a depoliticized marketplace of ideasâ* where political affiliation was not fixed (p. 208). Some problems with this formulation are that it asserts that badges are purely political, commodities have no ideological content, and markets are neutral or apolitical. The construction and later fall of the Berlin Wall would seem to refute these claims. In fact, the distinction he draws between badge books and brand books becomes less clear-cut as the article continues. That is, he tries to ameliorate what is a hard dualism by arguing that in late 1960s West Germany the LRB resembled an *âaccessoryâ* or *publicâ badgeâ* of the classical workers' movement and a *modish commodityâ* of the educated elite. The problem is that it seems as much a commodity (*âaccessoryâ*) in the first example as it is a badge (*display item*) in the second example. He also points out that West German students

oscillated between using the LRB as political badge and consumerist brand. He further argues that the LRB could only be a badge in East Germany because there was no free market even though he gives an example of a student there wearing a Mao button to be "ultra-modern." The student seemed to be making a fashion (brand) rather than a political (badge) statement. The author's claim that "brands" could not exist in East Germany because it lacked a "free market" (whatever that may mean in the context of modern corporate capitalism) can be easily challenged by the popularity of Levi's on the black market which made them a brand and a badge. One gets the sense that the editor sees the problem when he wonders if the popularity of LRB represents "the appropriation of radicalism by the commodity form or the appropriation of the commodity form by radicalism" (p. 19). Slobodian does not allow for two-way appropriation: brands allow the appropriation of radicalism by the commodity form

which could fold the LRB into the dynamic of apolitical consumption and neutralize it. He calls the LRB a "apoliticized commodity" in the last sentence of the chapter but such a concept, which might have provided a more fruitful approach and bridged the conceptual dualism at the heart of the chapter, did not guide his analysis.

These critiques are not meant to diminish the values of these and other chapters in this volume. The collage of interpretations and the tensions between the chapters and authors' interpretations are almost dialectical and make for interesting and provocative reading. The editor wrote in the book's preface that the volume is intended to challenge and provoke the reader to think about the place of the LRB in global history and to open debate. It certainly succeeds in that goal and provides an opening for new approaches and interpretations of the Chinese Cultural Revolution and the spiritual atom bomb that accompanied it and whose fallout still radiates today.

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