Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present how in China, a country combating religious beliefs, Mao Zedong has become a cult object and how the fondness towards the “Great Helmsman”, often adjacent to deification, is manifested in the present-day country. During his life, Mao Zedong was the central character of the political and social sphere of the People’s Republic of China. Admiring and, to some extent, identifying himself with the First Emperor of China, Mao was to become his contemporary version. The height of the personality cult occurred during the Cultural Revolution and was manifested in mass adoration of the Chairman. After his death and reckoning of merits and faults (in a 7:3 ratio, with dominance of the first ones), Mao seemed to be evanescing in the shadow in the modernizing China. The Maoists were fighting against religion, the feudal superstitions, however in recent years, in the officially atheist China, some beliefs in supernatural beings, power of religious rituals and offerings for ghosts reappear, as well as the interest in Buddhism, Taoism, syncretic sects and Christianity. Among the hope bringing powers there appears also deified Mao, as the creator of powerful China. The places connected with the Chairman, located on the route of the “Red Tourism” are visited by masses of the Chinese. Talismans with his image are supposed to provide security, good fortune and even prosperity. Mao is becoming a deity in the nationalistic pantheon of the power gaining China.

References

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Zhongguo bu gaoxing: da shidai, da mubiao ji women de neiyouwaihuan, Jiangsu Renmin Chubanshe, Beijing 2009.
As the Cultural Revolution unfolded, Mao became a regular presence in every home, either in the form of his official portrait, or as a bust or other type of statue. Stefan Landsberger, "The Deification of Mao: Religious Imagery and Practices during the Cultural Revolution and Beyond", in Woei Lien Chong (ed.), China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution: Master Narratives and Post-Mao Counternarratives (Asia/Pacific/Perspectives) (Lanham MD, etc.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002), pp. 139-184. Search for Chinese posters in the IISH/Landsberger collections: >> on Mao Zedong. Reprints: You can order high quality reprints of most posters featured on this website at chinesepostershop.com. Mao and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) achieved this by employing "propaganda art" - art that the CCP produced to convey political messages to the public. However, out of the various forms of propaganda art which included music and theatre; propaganda pictures, or xuanchuanhua (宣传画), proved to be the most effective in achieving Mao's personal agendas. Till this very day, art is still a popular and effective way of influencing the public. This highlighted and emphasized on the ever presence of Mao, contributing to the deification of Mao, which would eventually result in people "report[ing] on their accomplishments or failures and announce their resolutions for the next day", every evening in front of Mao's portrait, to thank and ask him for his godly blessings. Whether Mao Zedong approved of the radicality with which the Red Guard set to work remains doubtful. To this day — as we have already reported — the Kundun believes that the Party Chairman was not fully informed about the vandalistic attacks in Tibet and that Jiang Qing, his spouse, was the evildoer. Bauer sees explicit traces of the Buddhist ideal of "emptiness" in this: "The 'blank person', whose presence in Mao's view is especially pronounced among the Chinese people, is not just the 'pure', but also at the same time also the 'new person' in whom all the old organs in the body have been exchanged for new ones, and all the old convictions."