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**Personality Cults in Modern Politics:  
Cases from Russia and China**

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## Introduction

The popularization of Area Studies in the USA during the Cold War was driven by international political considerations, in particular the need to produce knowledge about so-called enemy countries – communist states. As the political systems of the major representatives of the communist bloc – USSR, China, North Korea – developed the phenomenon of personality cults, it consequently became an important subject for Area Studies scholars, as well as its new concept. They approached this phenomenon through multi-disciplinary culturally and historically contextualized studies instead of applying macro-historical theories based on the Western experience (Szanton, 2002: 5-11).

The term “personality cult” became popular after Nikita Khrushchev’s “Secret speech” at the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 1956, when he used it to explain the consolidation of Stalin’s personal dictatorship, the ensuing abuses of power and the extraordinary adulation of Stalin (Rees, 2004:3). Since then the term has had a highly negative connotation and is associated with the notorious human rights abuses of Stalinism, as well as the regimes of Mao Zedong, Adolf Hitler and the Kim family in North Korea.

The term, personality cult, when applied to modern politics, usually refers to the practice of non-democratic regimes to promote an idealized image of a leader with the aid of modern mass media in order to generate personal worship in a society.

Although the practice of personality cults in modern states arguably started with the Russian leader Stalin’s decision to place the corpse of Vladimir Lenin on public display after Lenin’s death in 1924 (Rutland, 2011:365), the spirit of the phenomenon is extremely ancient. “The deification of dead emperors and then of living emperors was used to legitimize personal power in ancient Greece and Rome, especially with the dynasty of Augustus” (Rees, 2004:7). However, technology improvements utilized in mass media and police monitoring activities have made modern states more capable of creating and sustaining a personality cult.

The popularity of the personality cult as a research topic in Sino, Soviet and Korean studies can be explained by a specific approach undertaken by foreign scholars studying the policies and politics of these states (these studies are also known as Kremlinology). The lack of reliable information and the highly opaque decision making structures in these communist states have made it necessary for Kremlinologists to read between the lines and employ such empirical data as the physical position of members of the inner circles during parades, the wording in newspaper articles, the presence or absence of slogans and phrases in documents, etc. That also explains why they focused on the visible actors – leaders – and therewith shaped the research of personality cults. “In identifying cleavages and controversies within the Soviet leadership, Kremlinologists have tended to emphasize personal alignments, overstate personal power struggles and downgrade policy issues to mere instruments in the fight for supremacy” (Jönsson, 1977:132).

With the end of the Cold War a new understanding of the personality cult has begun to develop. It has been argued that this concept should be put in a broader context of person-centered modern symbolic politics, opening up vistas for comparisons with Western democracies. According to E.A. Rees (2004:7) “embryonic cults exist even in relatively open, democratic political systems”. These are not personality cults in the full form, but they resemble them in some respects. So the ghost of the personality cult is not peculiar to non-democratic states, but the political and social conditions in non-democratic states serve as a more comfortable hotbed in which it can grow.

The first section of the working paper will provide a theoretic framework for the analysis of personality cults: from Weber’s theory of charismatic authority to theoretical developments specifically

related to personality cults. The following sections will present case studies of subjects of the most famous personality cults: Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong, and also look into more recent developments, such as the idolization of Vladimir Putin in modern Russia.

## 1. Theoretic background

### 1.1 Weber's Charismatic Authority

Most scholarly work on personality cults is based on or at least inspired by the tripartite classification of authority developed by the famous sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920). It has been argued that the leadership systems of the twentieth century which generated personality cults might be seen as embodying what Weber characterized as charismatic authority or its routinization. Therefore this chapter will present an outline of Weberian theory of charismatic authority and its connection to personality cults.

According to Weber, a state is a "relationship of rule by human beings over human beings, which rests on the legitimate use of violence" (Weber, Lassman, & Speirs, 1994:311). This means that for a state to remain in existence, those who are ruled must submit to the leadership claimed by whoever rules at any given time. In Weber's view inner justifications, such as people's belief in the existence of a legitimate order in a particular system, are the main reasons for obedience and provide a reliable basis for authority. Political power is considered legitimate when it is exercised both with a consciousness on the part of the elite that it has a right to govern and with recognition by the ruled of that right (Lane, 1984:207).

Weber famously outlined the three ideal types of legitimate authority, whose validity of the claims to rule are based on traditional, legal-rational or charismatic grounds.

- Traditional authority rests on "an established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of those exercising authority under them" (Weber et al., 1994:312). The legitimacy of such an authority derives from tradition, habit and cultural beliefs, e.g. the divine rights of a king in monarchies or paternal authority.
- Legal-rational authority is "a rule by virtue of 'legality', by virtue of belief in the validity of legal statute and the appropriate juridical 'competence' founded on rationally devised rules" (Weber et al., 1994:312). In such a system, obedience is owed not to a person, but to a set of impersonal principles.
- The basis of charismatic authority is "the entirely personal devotion to, and personal trust in, revelations, heroism, or other qualities of leadership in an individual" (Weber et al., 1994:312). The aim of a personality cult is to generate similar attitudes to the leader.

Weber defined charisma as "a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least especially exceptional powers or qualities" (Weber, Roth, & Wittich, 1978:241). It is not so much what the leader is, but how he is regarded by those subject to charismatic authority, that is decisive for the validity of charisma. In this light, the establishment of personality cult represents an attempt to generate perceptions of a leader as a possessor of superior qualities in society or in other words to "manufacture charisma" to support the legitimacy of his rule. By means of mass media manipulation not only a false appearance of the leader as a person, but also of his many successes and rare failures, are presented to the public.

Wherever charismatic leadership appears, it constitutes a "call", a "mission" or a "spiritual duty" (Weber, Roth, & Wittich, 1978:244). For a personality cult to take shape a leader also has to convey to a society that he has an important "mission" (for more information see chapter 2.3). Followers' responsiveness to such a call implies whether and to what extent there is a special need for it in that society. The social and historical conditions that generate charismatic leadership can be best understood through the

concept of the charismatic situation: perception of crisis accompanied by perceived inability of current political institutions to overcome it (Pinto, Eatwell, & Larsen, 2007). The same logic applies to the historical and social context (real or perceived as a result of manipulation) required for successful generation of a personality cult. "The charismatic leader has to demonstrate his extraordinary leadership qualities in the process of summoning people to join in a movement for change and in leading such a movement" (Tucker, 1968:738).

Although, personality cults in modern political systems follow Weber's theory of charismatic authority in many ways, his claim about the correlation of charismatic legitimacy grounds with a certain structure of rule (absence of bureaucracy and administrative organs) and instability of the system (unstable and transitory character) finds little evidence in empirical cases. This is why personality cults in recent history might be better understood through the concept of routinized charisma. Because charismatic authority cannot remain stable in its pure form for a long time, it will undergo a transformation, a routinization in Weber's terminology, in a traditional or rational-legal direction. Usually as the result of routinization, charismatic leadership transforms from an extraordinary and purely personal relationship into an established authority structure. However, the elements of charismatic authority can be retained through artificial means. After the revolutionary period is over, the old or the new leader might make intentional attempts to establish a personality cult in such a way as to institutionalize permanent leadership roles associated with charisma.

Although different modes of routinization are possible, Weber states that charismatic leadership is most likely to transform into a patrimonial form that will be discussed later in this unit (Weber et al., 1978:244).

## 1.2 Personality cult as a relationship: Response of followers

A personality cult is not complete with only charisma on the leader's side. It requires certain mental conditions on the part of both the leader and the followers. Weber points out that the response of followers is a necessary condition for charismatic authority to function, as no single person, however charismatic, can be worshiped unless his charisma is acknowledged by followers. Tucker identifies the gathering of "a group of persons who cluster around the charismatic personality and accept his authority" as the initial phase in any charismatic movement (Tucker 1968: 739).

Personality cult is the same. To further understand the phenomenon, it is helpful to see it as a social relation between the two parts. Foucault's (1980) metaphor of power relations is illuminative in thinking about cult as a pattern of interaction:

"Power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localized here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power (p. 98)."

In this light, personality cult is not an entity that can be "possessed" and "used" whenever and wherever the leader wishes. It is not a unidirectional dynamic, in which only the leader dominates or only the followers worship. Rather, it is a combination of two directions: a leader-follower direction of charisma displaying and adherents gathering, and a follower-leader direction of charisma perception, acknowledgment, and devotion. Followers must accept the leader as "supremely authoritative". Although

the code of conduct between the leader and followers may vary under different political circumstances, a common hallmark they share is that the leader can effectively exercise a kind of real “domination” or “control” over the followers.

What makes it possible to establish and sustain relations of this kind? Tucker (1968) provides one explanation that involves societal conditions and social feelings. He argues that a personality cult often arises when prevailing dissatisfaction over the current situation deepens to the point of “distress”, and when “extraordinary leader-personalities come forward with appeals of a salvationist character, persuasively proclaiming the possibility of overcoming the situation of distress, pointing to ways of doing so, and offering their own leadership along this path to those who are willing to follow (p. 743)”.

The “distress” can be induced by ongoing social injustice, economic difficulty, threat to national integrity or to other forms of group identity, etc. Also, it can be an expression of anxieties brought forth by modernity: people used to village community life suddenly are thrown into urban- or nation-oriented life in which sense of belonging blurs, and many habits and traditions regulating life since time immemorial are disrupted or discarded. At this juncture, if one person appears with the ability to grant meaningful identity and sense of belonging to the society, with asserted capability and promise to lead the people to that new life, he or she will certainly find an overwhelming number of followers.

### **1.3 “What for?” The mission**

Each personality embodies a mission to be realized. The mission is usually a vision of the future based on a certain ideology that the leader represents. There is an academic dispute about the relative importance of the mission compared to the leader’s personal charisma. Do followers commit themselves to the leader because of leader’s personal charm, or because of the stirring content of the mission the leader represents? Scholars have different assessments regarding this question (cf. Wolpe, 1968). But the consensus is, without a mission behind it, a personality cult can hardly form. Even if it can, it is highly vulnerable to criticism and will quickly abate. The mission is both a critical element bonding the leader and followers together, and a direction in which they intend to proceed.

Missions are generally novel and radical and cannot possibly be achieved within the reach of an ordinary human being, thus undergirding the value of the leader (e.g. Trice & Beyer 1986, Bryman 1992). But to woo programmatic support, the mission should be accompanied by more detailed and practical aims that satisfy the needs of society and its individual members. In real practice, such missions are oftentimes depicted as an ideology that promises a final solution to the problems of modernity, or to the more imminent difficulties the society or nation faces. A utopian future of a united and content public is provided to the distressed and anxious crowd. The articulation of the mission must also take the potential followers’ frame of reference into consideration, otherwise it risks not being understood or believed. Followers are also prone to accept an account expressed in a way they feel at ease in understanding. Missions delivered so are more attractive and desirable. It is unsurprising that a well-conveyed mission of the leader can bolster the cult into a religious kind of mass movement.

### **1.4 Institutionalization of the personal cult**

The reception of a leader’s charisma and the embodiment of a higher mission in the leader are not sufficient to ensure the cult’s endurance. In a modern political system, once a cult has been erected,

institutionalizing it as part of everyday practice with defined code to follow is necessary to sustain it.

A cult will always diminish if it is not sustained, it may decay or diminish even before the death of the leader. Periodical proof must be furnished of the powers claimed by the leader. So leaders see institutionalization as an inevitable phase in the development of a personality cult.

The institutionalization of the personality cult refers to a wide array of practices to codify the commitment to the leader and the mission he/she embodies as an integral part of the political, social, economic, and cultural systems the followers live in. Codification is the process in which disciplines in behavioral and intellectual practices relating to the leader and the mission are defined. The aim is to insert practices of the cult of personality into the indispensable working and living systems of its followers, so that the spirit of the cult is continuously repeated and reaffirmed, and eventually becomes psychologically persistent in the followers' minds.

Institutionalization includes commemorative events and formularized practices. A wide variety of measures can be taken to institutionalize the cult, ranging from choosing the leader's successor(s), establishing an organizational structure for routine reiteration of devotion to the leader and the mission, and integrating the spirit of the cult with daily economic and living practices.

The institutionalization of the personality cult functions mainly by generating "institutionalized awe" (Kanter, 1968) of the personality through "organizational sagas" (Clark, 1972). Organizational saga refers to the processes whereby odes to the leader and his/her contribution to the mission become embedded in all working institutions of the society, and eventually engraved in the minds of the entire society. Stories, depictions, any fragments attesting to the superiority of the leader are so dispersed and deeply rooted that the cult develops as an omnipresent part of all institutions. To live in such a context is to be submerged by an "institutionalized awe", which is dispersed throughout the entire society.

### 1.5 Patrimonialism and the personality cult

Patrimonialism and neopatrimonialism are other important theoretical concepts that denote personalized aspects of state administration. According to Max Weber patrimonialism is a sub-type of traditional domination that occurs when authority is based on ties of personal loyalty and personal dependency between a leader (patron) and his administrative staff (clients). Neo-patrimonialism is used to describe modern regimes, in which power, material resources and rents are distributed personally by the leader as if they were his/her private property. This system of authority exists behind some formal, impersonal elements of governance, such as the legal system or the administrative code (Kelsall, 2011:76-77). "Neopatrimonial regimes are based not only on patriarchal values and norms, but on rationally driven exchange of services, when a patron buys the loyalty of a client in exchange for protection of client's interests" (Ilkhamov, 2007:66).

According to Richard Pipes the existence of patrimonial features in modern states (in the USSR in particular, but his theory can be applied to other states as well) can be explained by historical continuity and enduring cultural patterns. "Through much of her history she (Russia) was ruled by an extreme form of autocracy, under which the tsar not only enjoyed unlimited legislative, judiciary, and executive powers but literally owned the country, in that he could, at will, exploit its human and material resources" (Pipes, 2001). The patrimonial political system (also called political culture) was formed in the Muscovite state<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Muscovy – is another name of the Grand Duchy of Moscow, a medieval Russian polity, which existed between 1283 and Ivan IV's proclamation of Muscovite Tsardom.

and endured through the Bolshevik regime, because there was no counterweight to autocracy in the society with a large, passive working class and a small and weak middle class (Pipes, 2007:181). After democracy was rejected, Bolsheviks had nothing but to return to well-known tsarist practices, one of them being the veneration of cult of the tsar.

In China “the patrimonial model had been developed and consolidated during the Warring States Period through the Han period, and thereafter was retained as a dependable, satisfactory means of organizing the polity” (Eisenberg, 1998:98).

## 1.6 Totalitarianism and personality cult

The modern political system best suited to institutionalize a personality cult is a totalitarian one. And in fact, most personality cults in modern history originated from totalitarian regimes—most notably Germany under Adolph Hitler (1933-1945), the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin (1922-1953), and China under Mao Zedong (1949-1976). Totalitarianism refers to a political structure in which the state monopolizes authority over the nation and controls public and private activities in every possible way.

In their seminal work, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*, Friedrich and Brzezinski (1956) identify the main traits peculiar to totalitarian regimes: (a) a single mass party led by one man, embodying an elaborate guiding ideology, (b) the state’s monopoly of violence, plus a terror system centered on secret police organizations that engage in omnipresent surveillance and punishment, (c) total control of information and communication to promote propaganda in support of the regime and to mute opposition, and (d) use of force and economic activity via a controlled and planned economy. Such traits can be identified especially in those regimes of Hitler and Stalin, and are also referential to analyzing other cases.

Needless to say, the latter traits can effectively facilitate the creation and sustaining of the cult of personality, usually by the leader of the regime. However, there is still a deeper reason why totalitarianism is closely connected with personality cults. The cause is to be found in genetic theories of totalitarianism. In this regard, Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) must be noted. She argues that totalitarianism is a product of modernity. Colonialism and the emergence of mass society undermine the distinctiveness of the individual while it strengthens the significance of the group identity, be it racial, ethnic, or national in essence. Thus, expansion and advancement of the interests of the group took the paramount priority, and sacrificing the individual for this aim became moral and necessary. And totalitarian regimes— Germany under Hitler and the Soviet Union under Stalin in Arendt’s analysis — are examples of the fanatical creation of political systems, induced by a unique set of factors, to materialize this goal. Political life is marked by perpetual movement and fading of the line between the private and the public, and between the individual and the collective. So Arendt thinks totalitarianism can be sustained only in a closed logic system, in which the interests and goals of the group are unified and personalized into the political leader. The social mind works in singularity rather than in plurality, and any alien idea or information is forbidden or minimized. This all, in effect, breeds the cult of personality.

Totalitarianism is generally considered to be an undesirable political system because it emphasizes an indisputable group ideology, an oftentimes irrational cult of the leader and centralized control over every aspect of the society, in which individual personality and independent thinking is depressed, but from a utilitarian viewpoint, it can be quite effective for some economically “backward” countries, especially for those on the stage of industrialization and modernization. Alexander Gerschenkron (1963)

argues that the economic and political requirements for early industrialized countries are rather different from those facing late industrialized countries. The former face less competition and a simpler, lower-capital market context; while the latter face fiercer competition and much more complex, massive and expensive market conditions—the entry costs for the world economy have increased. To afford those costs requires greater collective mobilization, which in turn requires greater central control and coordination. To this end, a strong personality cult, sustained and strengthened by a totalitarian regime, can prove to be far more competent to swiftly mobilize resources, unify social ideology, discipline the bureaucratic system, and coordinate different economic and social sectors. This argument also has found resonance in Russia and China (Moore 1966).

## 2. Case 1: USSR/Russia

### 2.1 Stalin's personality cult

*"Sunny prospects are open to us,  
The flames of victory blaze over the country,  
Comrade Stalin lives for our happiness,  
Our wise leader, our teacher dear."*

– "The song of Stalin" by M. Blantner and S. Surkov (Heller & Plamper, 2004:45)

The song quoted above is an example of how by the end of the 1940s Joseph Stalin symbolically figured in Soviet public life in myriad ways as an object of reverence. The extraordinary cult of veneration around the figure of the leader burst on to the public scene in 1929 and reached its climax with the seventieth anniversary of Stalin's birth in 1949. Although it is impossible to evaluate how people actually perceived Stalin back in the 1920-1950s, it would be wrong to say that devotion to him existed only in state propaganda and wasn't shared by the public. Research conducted by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace found out that even in 2013, sixty years after Stalin's death and more than twenty years after the collapse of Soviet Union, he still commanded worryingly high levels of admiration among Russian people (Lipman, Gudkov, & Bakradze, 2013).

How was it possible for such a worship of Stalin to develop in the materialist regime of USSR? Why and for what was it created? One popular explanation holds that Stalin, like other dictators, was a glory-seeker fond of displaying his power and enjoyed the adulation of the Soviet people and communists abroad. This is contradicted by another existing opinion, that the cult is best understood as an attempt to mobilize support and construct legitimacy for the post-revolutionary, post-Lenin rule of Stalin. To understand the historical and political context of its development, it is important first to have a closer look at Stalin's predecessor – Vladimir Lenin.

#### 2.1.1 The charismatic predecessor: Vladimir Lenin

In many ways Lenin's role in Russian history supports the theory of charismatic authority. In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, events in Russia resembled very closely what has been described as the charismatic situation by continuators of Weberian theory. Nationwide crises erupted in political, economic and social spheres, while the dissatisfaction with autocratic monarchy of the Romanov family and later on with provisional government, which took over after February revolution, created a demand for alternative leadership. In this situation Lenin's aim to change an oppressive regime into a communist society was a revolutionary "mission" typical for charismatic authority.

Initially Lenin had a small group of followers – Bolsheviks: "to be a Bolshevik in the early years was not so much to accept a particular set of beliefs as it was to gravitate into the orbit of Lenin as political mentor, revolutionary strategist and personality" (Robert N. Tucker quoted in Jowitt, 1993:5). So, although Lenin didn't have any "supernatural qualities" as described by Weber, he was perceived to be superior by his supporters and therefore can be claimed to have had "charisma". Lenin's charisma was reaffirmed after the success of October revolution, which gave him "a form of popular legitimacy directly related to the ideological zeal of the revolutionary period itself, perpetuated into the post-revolutionary period and projected into his image" (Strong & Killingsworth, 2011:400).

Typical for charismatic authority, the rule of the early Bolshevik leaders was lacking in formal structure. The political power derived more “from informal, personalized power bases than from occupation of specific positions in the party/state hierarchy. Lenin stridently denounced bureaucrats, and bureaucratic methods and attitudes, for impeding the implementation of the communist program” (Andreas, 2007:441).

### **2.1.2 ‘Lenin lived, Lenin lives, Lenin will live’: retaining Lenin’s charisma and the rise of Stalin’s cult**

The death of Lenin in 1924 put the legitimacy of the newly established Soviet political system in question. In order to legitimize his personal rule Stalin and the Party tried to retain elements of Lenin’s charismatic leadership and transfer them to his successor. According to David Brandenburger, the society was too poorly educated to grasp the philosophical tenets of the Party line, and there was no middle class, so party ideologists decided to cultivate tsar-like personal devotion as a new way to mobilize loyalty. Built on association with Lenin, Stalin’s personality cult was a manufactured application, not something that spontaneously emerged throughout the population during the course of the transformational period (Strong & Killingsworth, 2011:402).

Another version holds that the Stalin cult was the result of a power struggle in the Bolshevik Party inner circles (Ennker, 2004) and disagreements about the economic and political policies of the USSR. The personality cult served Stalin to eliminate influential party members who were oppositional to him, such as Trotsky, Zinoviev, Kamenev, etc.

First, a cult of personality was developed around Lenin, the founding father of Soviet communism, in order to later shift the focus to Stalin. The aim was to institutionalize the permanent leadership roles associated with charisma. Right after Lenin’s death in 1924, the Party undertook certain steps to “immortalize” the dead leader’s memory. “An institute was established to study his brain, a mausoleum was erected to house his remains, and his relics were preserved in church-like museums” (Rees, 2004:6<sup>2</sup>)

Stalin promoted Lenin’s primacy in philosophy, presenting him as not only the party’s erstwhile politico-ideological chief, but also its philosophical leader. At the same time Stalin himself and the mobilized “subservient, young, would-be disciples” started a critique campaign against other important Soviet Marxist philosophers, such as Plekhanov. “By thus putting supreme philosophical authority into Lenin’s role, Stalin helped the philosophers to grasp this broadened conception of that role as applicable to Lenin’s successor” (Tucker, 1979:352). Indeed Stalin was portrayed as “the foremost interpreter and/or source of post-Lenin communism in the former Soviet Union” (Strong & Killingsworth, 2011). That is how there “appeared the holy quartet - Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin - who together became the symbolic centerpiece of Stalinist thought and culture” (Tucker, 1979:352).

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2 A video about Vladimir Lenin dedicated to his funeral in 1924 can be found at: [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rie3dkLPIRA>]

## Gallery: Soviet Propaganda Posters from 1930s



Source: <http://ostalinea.su/staliniana>

The history of Bolshevism was rewritten in order to present Stalin in the center of revolutionary movement by placing him as the constant companion of Lenin at important revolutionary events: creation of the Bolshevik party, victory in the October Revolution, construction of the first socialist government in the world, establishment of the Red Army, etc (Gill, 1980:168). An excellent example of this type of revision is found in an article published in Pravda newspaper, in which a book on Comintern<sup>3</sup> history was denounced because Stalin's name was only mentioned twice in its analysis (Strong & Killingsworth, 2011:404). Lenin was slowly effaced by his successor.

All the steps mentioned above, such as the 'editing' of history, were possible only because between 1929 and 1932 Stalin attained full control over Soviet media, so there was not a single non-Party publication left, nor any private publishing houses that could have served as vehicles for opposition views (Strong & Killingsworth, 2011:404). The famous Bolshevik newspaper Pravda was no longer an arena for debates between influential political theorists, but the mouthpiece of Stalin's propaganda.

Thus analyzed through the prism of Weber's legitimacy theory, by creating the cults Stalin attempted to legitimize his new leadership position on both traditional and charismatic grounds: 1) as Lenin's successor; 2) as possessor of superior qualities symbolic to the Soviet regime.

### 2.1.3 Progression of the cult: expanding mission, reaffirming charisma

The cult, like any other social relation, was dynamic. If during the first years of his rule Stalin was described as "the apprentice revolutionary and Lenin's pupil and heir", later his role was expanded to "the defender of the state; the prophet, apostle, and teacher; the builder of the new world; the inspirer of his people, whose bounteous good fortune was to live under his rule" (Strong & Killingsworth, 2011:404). So with time Stalin's extraordinary qualities were propagated and adjusted in response to the changing environment of the Soviet Union, regime priorities, and the needs of the "followers". The same thing can be said about

<sup>3</sup> The Comintern, or the Communist International, was an international communist organization, which was founded in Moscow in 1919 and dissolved by Stalin in 1943.

Stalin's "missions", while building socialism was one of the most ambitious and long term ones.

Although the revolutionary period was over, the time of Stalin's rule was certainly not free of distress; some Western scholars have even labeled the period of collectivization and industrialization as "the Third Revolution". Yet the charismatic situation needed for legitimacy of charismatic leadership was also partly "orchestrated". It was done through warnings about cruelty of the capitalist West and cultivating the perception of the nation under threat from malicious enemies. As Benno Ennker puts it, "the propagation of scenarios of threat was internalized by followers of the regime and ultimately created a paranoid culture" (Heller & Plamper, 2004:163). This generated a feeling of weakness and helplessness within the population that significantly helped to maintain the cult.

Stalin's regime also had some real achievements that can be to some extent attributed to the ability of totalitarian regimes to foster mobilization. The impressive buildup of heavy industry, the huge new towns, and the Moscow Metro were all identified with the leader and gave the cult an extra base (Strong & Killingsworth, 2011:407). Victory in the Second World War, more than anything, helped to consolidate Stalin's position as the single leader with the capacity to defend Soviet national interests. State-controlled media glorified his valor and competent leadership in the war as decisive for the victory over fascist Germany. Thus, the charisma of the leader was reaffirmed. At the same time Stalin was never associated with the catastrophic policy failures of the Soviet regime, such as collectivization in 1930, the famine of 1932/3, and the suddenness of the German invasion in 1941, which instead were blamed on local officials (Rees, 2004:14). State propaganda projected an image of the political situation in the Soviet Union such that people would develop a perception that while life might be difficult, only Stalin could fix the problems.

#### **2.1.4 Institutionalization of the cult**

As indicated in the theoretical part of this unit, for a cult to be successfully operating for a long time it is essential that the leader and his/her contribution to the mission become engraved in the minds of all the society members.

In the Soviet Union the omnipresence of Stalin was assured in a great variety of ways. Factories, mines, cities, schools, and sanatoriums as well as different kinds of prizes and awards bore his name. Millions of his portraits and statues adorned public spaces all over the country. The Stalin cult was an overwhelmingly visual phenomenon, tailored to a population with high illiteracy rates. However, not only fine arts and sculpture, but also literature, poetry, music and film works of that period exhibited fawning devotion to Stalin and were later called *Staliniana* (Heller & Plamper, 2004:169).

As mentioned earlier, state-controlled mass media was projecting nonstop the image of Stalin as the indispensable leader of the Soviet Union. Publications of individual and collective letters of gratitude from workers to Stalin in the newspapers were an interesting feature of the period. They were first initiated by the Party to create the illusion of mass support, but later reproduced themselves without coercion from above (Heller & Plamper, 2004:168).

Establishment of Stalin-related rituals and traditions was another technique adopted by Soviet regime. Among the new post-revolution holidays in the Stalinist Soviet Union, the most important date in the calendar was the birthday of the leader. The grandeur and scope of the celebrations, especially on Stalin's fiftieth, sixtieth and seventieth birthdays, were striking. The ceremonies very much recall those

of religious holidays, as during the parades, banners with portraits of Stalin (together with Marx, Engels and Lenin) were carried like icons<sup>4</sup>.

### 2.1.5 Neo-patrimonialism

An important element of Soviet political structure under Stalin was patron-client relationships or neo-patrimonialism. Stalin himself rose to power as Lenin's protégé, advancing the careers of his supporters from whom he required personal loyalty rather than a commitment to their positions. Stalin's personal preoccupation with exceptional control over the party contributed to "revitalization of patronage and neo-patrimonial practices", including cult like veneration (Ilkhamov, 2007:75). Having become an indispensable leader, he was even more appealing as a patron and attracted more clients that were ready to support his rule. Thus, cult of personality constituted a non-bureaucratic form of communication between Stalin and lower rungs of the new bureaucratic administration (Gill, 1980:183). The neo-patrimonialism was reproduced by Stalin's deputies at the lower levels of hierarchy (Brooks, 2003:53). To join the party new members had to get recommendations from an existing member, who as a result, became their patrons. This is how the new ruling class was created "based not on ownership of property but on its control of the state, which in turn controlled the working class" (Agnotti, 1988:14).

### 2.1.6 Stalin's death: dismantling the cult

The death of Stalin in 1953 witnessed scenes of mass public grieving accompanied by widespread panic over the possible collapse of the country, which supports the argument that a personality cult succeeded in generating genuine devotion to the leader in the society. However, steps were soon taken by the Party to curtail the most excessive manifestations of the cult. Finally, Khrushchev's Secret Report and denunciation of the Stalin cult at the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 1956 dealt a major blow to the whole belief system of the Soviet people. Thus, as put by Strong and Killingworth (2011:408), Stalin's death caused a "traumatic crisis of faith". The Party addressed this legitimacy crisis by restoring the semblance of collective leadership, which in part involved a restoration of other cultic objects – "the restoration of Lenin's cult, the reappraisal of Marxism-Leninism, the restoration of the cult of the Revolution, and the new emphasis on the USSR and the people" (Rees, 2004:21).

## 2.2 Putin's personality cult

The legitimacy of Vladimir Putin's presidency in 2000 was formally based on democratic and legal procedures, as the constitution of 1993 created all the institutions necessary for a liberal democratic state. However, over time the political order in Russia has made a significant move in the authoritarian direction<sup>5</sup>, which at least in theory is supposed to undermine the regime's legitimacy and, therefore,

4 A footage of Joseph Stalin 70<sup>th</sup> birthday celebrations in 1949 can be found at: [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7hzkpjntPvs>]

5 One reason behind this turn is the perceived (by Russian society) failure of the representative, liberal democracy that was tried in the 1990s (Cannady & Kubicek, 2014). Lilia Shevtsova argues that Yeltsin's regime was an electoral autocracy and Putin's authoritarianism is only its genuine continuation (Lo & Shevtsova, 2012). In the framework of Pipes' theory this turn can be seen as historical continuity: in the situation of no experience of democracy, the old cultural archetypes, both Czarist and Soviet, began to rise in prominence. The external factors, such as the success of the "colored

would result in “punishment” by the electorate or simply political unrest. One of the main reasons this hasn’t happened in Russia is that the majority of the population finds Putin’s regime legitimate and worthy of obedience.

Viewed in terms of Weberian theory, the regime under Putin developed elements of charismatic leadership – claims to legitimacy based on the personal qualities of the leader. Such an approach was able to work out in Russia, because “the post-communist political terrain was bleak, with long-established parties and few civic associations with the power, resources or willingness to build a dynamic, pluralistic, socially fair and democratic society” (Sakwa, 2004:315). The ‘canonization’ of Putin, once started by the public, was maintained and further developed by Putin and his regime in what many analysts (e.g. White & Mcallister, 2008; Cassidy & Johnson, 2010) call a personality cult.

Putin’s cult rests on the idea that only a strong and tough leader can defend Russia’s national interests, hold the multinational state together and provide economic stability. Although it doesn’t present a novel mission typical for personality cults, it is a very appealing one for the Russian population. In this light Putin is portrayed as the only person able to complete this mission, a leader without whom Russia would simply fall apart, just as Stalin was presented in the Soviet Union. This claim is justified by arrogating the relative economic improvement of the 2000s to Putin’s successful policies, rather than to the skyrocketing oil prices or to Yeltsin’s devaluation of the ruble. The state-controlled television and press project Putin as the man who saved Russia from the economic and political chaos of the 1990s and restored national prestige long lost after the collapse of the Soviet Union, while opposition forces rarely get any good publicity and the failures of the government are blamed on the local administrations. In addition, to maintain the need for a strong leader, the perceptions of threat are cultivated by restoring Stalin-style propaganda about the country being “surrounded by foreign enemies that wish to destroy it, as well as lurid slogans about internal enemies serving their egotistical interests and those of the West” (Shlapentokh, 2008).

Putin’s ‘extraordinary’ qualities, projected in both visual and textual media, typically include “sobriety, intelligence, competence, vigorous physical and psychological health and, above all, his manliness” (Cassiday & Johnson, 2010:686). Machismo, defined as a strong sense of masculine pride, has become an integral part of Putin’s public image aimed to support the idea of his strength and superiority in all spheres of life. The image of a macho man is cultivated by various bizarre testosterone-fueled publicity stunts, such as tagging a Siberian tiger, flying a fighter jet, stopping wildfires, riding a horse bare-chested on vacation, just to name a few<sup>6</sup>. These bizarre displays of machismo appeal to the less educated segment of the population of Russia and project an image of Putin as a strong man in the most direct sense.

To support the new authoritarian political order, Stalin has been partly rehabilitated and brought back into the political discourse to serve as a symbol of the new regime, a despotic leader who nevertheless is still identified with victory in World War II and national unity (Lipman et al., 2013:29). “One of the possible explanations is that the Putin phenomenon constitutes part of a larger cultural trend of stylized expressions of nostalgia for the Soviet past that have flourished in Russia since the Soviet Union’s demise” (Cassiday & Johnson, 2010:695-697).

Although the adulation of Vladimir Putin in contemporary Russia shows many similarities with

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revolutions” in the mid 2010s, together with “tangible domestic threat posed by opposition leaders prepared to flirt with revolutionary politics, the proliferation of youth protest, and the latent disaffection of a mass constituency” led to Putin’s “preventive counter-revolution” (Horvath, 2011:2).

6 A photo gallery of Vladimir Putin can be found at [<http://www.rferl.org/media/photogallery/2266926.html>]

Stalin's personality cult, the development of personal worship to the level as experienced by Stalin is very unlikely. The power of the regime's manipulation has been greatly reduced with the development of internet, which in Russia as compared to China, is still relatively free of control by the state.

The case studies of the personality cults of Stalin and Putin represent a typical example of research done within Area Studies. In-depth analysis of historical, cultural and social contexts of the USSR under Stalin and Russia under Putin help to provide an explanation for a certain pattern of political development – establishment of a personality cult. To the east, China, the second largest communist regime, also underwent a massive wave of the personality cult of Mao Zedong. Beginning in the late 1950s, the cult lasted more than ten years, spanning some major political and social events, including the Great Leap Forward Movement and the Cultural Revolution. Mao was deified and worshiped to an unparalleled extent, leaving an indelible mark on modern Chinese history. The occurrence of the Mao cult was also intricately connected with China's social, economic, and diplomatic situations, as well as Mao Zedong's personal political status and his own perception of it.

### 3. Case 2: China

#### 3.1 Mao's personality cult

##### 3.1.1 Rise of the Mao Cult

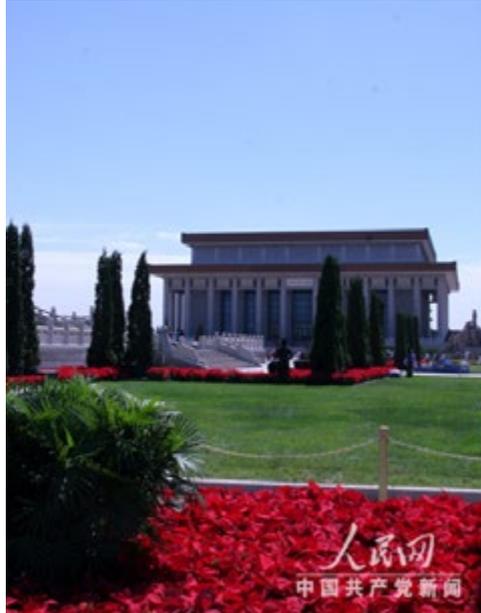


Image: The Mao Zedong Memorial Hall on Tian'anmen Square  
Source: <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/143527/143528/10430933.html>

Mao was the principal organizer and theoretician of the seizure of power and subsequent nationwide regime establishment for the Communist Party of China (CPC). The Chinese regime, at least before the 1980s, was a totalitarian one, with the mass party of the CPC monopolizing control of all aspects of the country. The communist ideology was overwhelmingly propagated, and the flow of ideas and information was tightly dictated by the party. These conditions fit with the main traits outlined by Friedrich and Brzezinski (1956).

Veneration for Mao started long before that for Stalin. "In terms of longevity alone, Mao dominated the Communist Party of China for almost as long as Lenin and Stalin together exercised control in the Soviet Union" (Thompson 1988: 103). However, Mao himself never publicly endorsed his personality cult until 1958, when he attended a Politburo meeting in Chengdu<sup>7</sup> and stated:

"There are two kinds of personality cults. One is correct, for example, we have to worship the correct things of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin and to worship them forever. Not to worship them is not possible (...). Members of a squad must worship their squad leader. Not to worship is impossible (...). The problem does not rest with the cult of the individual but with whether it represents the truth or not. If it represents the truth, it should be worshipped. If it does not, even collective leadership won't work." (Pang & Jin, 2003: 802)

The conditions for his position change on the personality cult are generally threefold. First, Khrushchev's secret speech on the Stalin cult stimulated increasing reverberations. Upheavals broke out in Poland and Hungary in an attempt to gain more autonomy from Moscow. It prompted Mao

<sup>7</sup> 成都, a city in Southwest China, capital of Sichuan Province.

to reconsider his views on the 20<sup>th</sup> Communist Party of Soviet Union Congress, on the International Communist Movement as a whole, and also on a suitable roadmap for China that could do away with the Soviet model by “self-movement”. He adopted the idea of a “leap” in the economic sphere, later dubbed the Great Leap Forward<sup>8</sup>. To boost the morale of the population to achieve the leap, the personality cult was to play an important part.

Second, Mao had long been dissatisfied with the dogmatism and revisionism of the party system. Under the impression that the CPC rule in China was enjoying overwhelming popular support, he initiated a rectification campaign and loosened up regulations of the public sphere, which had been under strict control. Critical comments were encouraged and even allowed for publication in official media; and the circulation of Xinhua News Agency’s internal publication Reference Information (参考消息), which contained items from capitalist sources, was also widened. Mao’s proposition was that after the socialist revolution, there were no more “antagonistic” contradictions between friend and foe in China, only “non-antagonistic” frictions among the people. This further stimulated public discussion. But soon the criticism escalated and some was even directed toward Mao himself. With the rectification ended in failure, Mao need to rescue his political image.

Third, the Great Leap Forward campaign caused severe disruptions. China was submerged in a cloud of unease and anxiety. Although Mao, who instigated the campaign, displayed gestures of euphemistically acknowledging negligence and made attempts to rectify the problems, he was confronted with much sharper criticism than expected, the most notable being that from the PLA leader Peng Dehuai. Afraid of losing support, especially of the army as a power base, and recalling the situation of the Soviet Minister of Defense Georgi Zhukov<sup>9</sup>, Mao’s reaction was a drastic one. His conciliatory attitude toward correcting his failed policies evaporated. The Great Leap Forward policy, which the party was already about to correct, was re-invigorated. Concerns about his political position made Mao no longer willing to accept criticism from his politburo comrades if it would potentially threaten his power.

Mao’s promulgation of a “correct” personality cult stimulated a wave of massive flattery from other party leaders. The wave later spread rapidly and a cult began to grow and culminated in the Cultural Revolution. References and odes to Chairman Mao and Mao Zedong Thought skyrocketed, first appearing in PLA publications, and later exploding across the country. Soon the cult, even by Mao’s own judgment, became increasingly improper by calling for the worship of an individual at the expense of others. Its primary function was no longer a truth-seeking intellectual emancipation but the securing of personal loyalty to Mao, party unity, and control over the army (Leese 2011: Chapter 4).

### 3.1.2 Mao as embodiment of truth

To lend a mission to his cult, Mao tried to present himself as the spokesperson of Marxism and even of the truth in China, as one who was leading the way to China’s ultimate destination (and eventually that of the whole world) and the way toward it. In the late 1950s, Mao repeatedly emphasized the necessity to overcome slavish respect for the Soviet model and “experts” in general, under the slogan “the

8 大跃进, a nationwide economic and social campaign from 1958 to 1960 that aimed to instantly elevate China from an agrarian society to a fully communist society through rapid industrialization and collectivism. It caused a disproportionate development of heavy industry; agriculture and light industry were largely ignored, inducing severe famine across the country.

9 A renowned commander during WWII, removed from all duties after Khrushchev came to power.

emancipation of thinking and the destruction of superstition"<sup>10</sup>. The destruction of superstition—literally referring to the feudalist past but also insinuating the USSR—was portrayed to be achievable through the worship of “truth”, the nearest approximation of which was defined as Mao Zedong Thought. His distinction between truthful and non-truthful personality cults at the Chengdu meeting finally connected the quest for truth with his personality cult. Since Mao represented the truth, then there should be a personality cult for him rather than for someone that represents something else. To further justify his position, Mao invoked Lenin and said: “Some people opposed Lenin, saying that he was a dictator. Lenin replied flatly, it is better for me to be a dictator than it is for you” (Li, 1999: 188).

Mao and his thought soon were appraised as the “apex” of present-day Marxism-Leninism. As all official discourse on superstition of that period was semantically referring to a blind acceptance of the Soviet model, the study of Mao Zedong Thought therefore ruled out any suspicion of superstitious belief in the individual. Mao was perceived to have brought life to seminal works of Marxism and the communist ideal.

As a document of one party meeting then stated: “Following Mao Zedong from the bottom of our hearts is not worship of the individual or superstitious belief in the individual but the worship of truth; the decades of revolution and construction have proven that Chairman Mao is the representative of truth” (Lin, 2005: 9).

Well into the Cultural Revolution, the significance of truth was no longer remembered. Prevalent assessment on Mao and Mao Zedong Thought had depicted Mao as a genius, who is “much wiser than Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin,” and said Mao Zedong Thought was the third great milestone after Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin. Mao was the “great tutor, great leader, great commander, and great helmsman” (Red Flag Commentator, 1966).

Mao’s selection of “truth” as his mission was prudent and spoke directly to the situation China was facing. With the political turbulence in the Soviet Union and East Europe, China was somewhat perplexed about the validity of the communist ideology. The CPC, bounded in the communist system of logic, had to painstakingly account for the political upheaval in the Soviet Union, their “Big Brother”. Mao at this juncture cunningly evaded the talks of communism per se and instead embarked on a philosophical foundation of Marxism, which is the criteria of truth. By so doing he was able to sustain a connection with the greater ideological environment and thus borrow legitimacy from it, and at the same time erect himself as a level-headed and thoughtful leader.

### 3.1.3 Institutionalization

Although Mao had enjoyed overwhelming reverence throughout China, a nation-wide cult of him had never before been an official policy. Mao’s cult of personality was successfully initiated and sustained partly due to the institutionalized propaganda behind it. Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China, every time the Communist Party launched a new policy, it was accompanied with a propaganda campaign to spread word of the policy and be able to enforce it. At the center of these propaganda campaigns was always Chairman Mao.

When Mao started the Cultural Revolution, he was not fully in control of the state propaganda machine. When he felt the need to take his cult of personality to new heights to strengthen his power,

<sup>10</sup> Mao first suggested this slogan on the Chengdu Meeting in 1958, and reaffirmed it in Beijing on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Meeting of the CPC 8<sup>th</sup> Central Committee later the same year.

Mao had to make use of other means such as official radio, newspapers and magazines (Schrift, 2001). One measure he used was big-character posters, which were simple white canvases with black revolutionary slogans. These were widely adopted by Mao to convey his political messages and helped expand his cult. Badges of Mao's bust were widely worn as a powerful, accessible and portable sign of devotion (Schrift, 2001). Toward the later periods of the Cultural Revolution, Mao's cult had spread to the most remote areas of China, raising public support for his preaching and sending a clear message to his adversaries in the party and other communist leaders of the world - that he was firmly in power.

Another way Mao's personality cult was sustained was through the nation-wide publication of the book "Quotations from Chairman Mao", otherwise known as "Red Book of Treasure", because of the portable size and red color of the cover. The pamphlet was the product of an intense propaganda campaign started by Mao's supporters years before the Cultural Revolution began. The Red Book of Treasure, initially published in 1964 for use by the army to tighten intellectual control of the military, helped indoctrinate the population with Mao's preaching. During the Cultural Revolution, some 10.8 million copies of the pamphlet and posters carrying Mao's quotations were printed, making Mao one of the best-selling authors ever (Leese, 2011:108).



Image: Book cover of the first edition of Quotations from Chairman Mao published by the People's Liberation Army General Political Department, 1964.  
Source: <http://book.douban.com/subject/2064814/>

Rituals that originated in the People's Liberation Army were introduced to the public sphere through two repeated propaganda campaigns: the "Three Loyalties"<sup>11</sup> and the "Four Boundlesses"<sup>12</sup>, prodding people to commit to Mao intellectually on any occasion. The propaganda was carried out by a nationwide hierarchy publicity organ, in cooperation with the party system in every location. These rituals were accompanied by daily practices such as "asking for instructions in the morning and reporting back in the evening", in which people would ask the Great Helmsman (Mao) for guidance and then report back

11 "三忠于", namely loyalty to Chairman Mao, loyalty to the Mao Zedong Thought, and loyalty to the proletarian revolution route laid out by Chairman Mao.

12 "四无限", namely boundless worship of, boundless love for, boundless belief in, and boundless loyalty to Chairman Mao, Mao Zedong Thought, and Mao's proletarian revolution route.

on their progress under the watchful eye of Mao's portrait (MacFarquhar, 2008). Mao's godly portrait - in addition to posters - was reinforced by his public appearances, which were not frequent and were usually in the form of speeches to millions of young "revolutionaries". A notable example of was when Mao swam across the Yangtze River on 16 July 1966, an act which received nationwide publicity. This symbolic activity took place happened a month after the start of the Cultural Revolution to convince the people that Mao, although senior in age, still enjoyed good health and had the willpower to lead the country and to carry out the communist feat.

It should be noted that in light of institutionalization, Mao even had his own domestic "army". During the Cultural Revolution Mao never relied on a secret police force to silence his opponents. Instead, he relied on the Red Guards to take charge of the punishment, making the mechanism subjective but extremely effective (Chang, 1992). "Criticizing conventions<sup>13</sup>" were held against those considered anti-revolutionary, or just not faithful enough, in the later period of the Cultural Revolution. Public torture and insults, sometimes violent, proved to be an effective way to temporarily sustain and strengthen Mao's cult, as they could be used on peasants as well as on Politburo members. Some top-ranking officials in the communist party also had to attend "denunciation meetings", where they would be accused of their wrongdoings. This tactic was also used to eliminate Mao's political enemies.

### 3.1.4 After Mao's death

Mao's death during the Cultural Revolution came almost as a shock to most Chinese people, as his health problem had not been publicized. The purge of the Gang of Four<sup>14</sup> - which included his last wife Jiang Qing - came soon after. Remaining leaders immediately engaged in a series of political struggles and disputed the legacy of Mao. The CPC's Resolution on "Certain Questions in the History of Our Party Since the Founding of the People's Republic of China", issued later, lend insights into the final consensus. The resolution carried sharp criticism of Mao, deemphasizing him and stressing the contributions of other individuals. The Mao Zedong Thought was still largely acclaimed, but no longer seen as the contribution of Mao alone, but rather as a collective effort by many people, and Mao just happened to be the most noteworthy contributor (CPC 11<sup>th</sup> Central Committee, 1981). However, probably to leave room for successors to claim some continuity with Mao and thereby to establish legitimacy, the Resolution refrained from a total repudiation of Mao.



Image: Sample of a Chinese 100-yuan banknote in circulation (front)

Source: People's Bank of China Website

[http://www.pbc.gov.cn:8080/publish/huobijinyinju/668/1590/15906/15906\\_.html](http://www.pbc.gov.cn:8080/publish/huobijinyinju/668/1590/15906/15906_.html)

13 "批斗大会", a form of public criticizing and torture, in which the alleged class enemy or political rival are forced to confess to various unfounded accusations of crimes.

14 "四人帮", a political faction composed of four high-ranking CPC officials of Jiang Qing, Yao Wenyuan, Zhang Chunqiao, and Wang Hongwen. Its political power culminated in the later period of the Cultural Revolution.

Today, Mao's legacy still lingers throughout China. His portrait is printed on banknotes of various values, he has been compared to the Sage Kings of the classical period, and his successors repeatedly refer to him to reinforce their own ideological legitimacy. Today there is even a school of intellectuals dubbed "Maozuo" (毛左, Maoist Leftists), advocating a return to planned economy, collectivism, etc.—policies characterizing the Mao period<sup>15</sup>.

### 3.2 Xi Jinping: An emerging personality cult?

Xi Jinping's prestige in China has surged since his inauguration (Lu, 2013). To say he is deliberately creating a personality cult is baseless, but he has taken strategies and measures that strongly resemble those associated with personality cults. With high popularity sparked by his tough stance against corruption, his prospect of a "Chinese dream", and his closer interactions with the public, it is illuminating to scrutinize the record of China's new boss from the perspective of the personality cult.

Xi Jinping came to power as China's top leader in November 2012. From 2013, he has been General Secretary of the CPC, President of the People's Republic of China, and Chairman of China's Central Military Commission. With this trinity of posts he is China's paramount leader. Xi faces a mega-country vexed by various deep-rooted challenges: corruption, slowing economy, and separatism-related disturbance, etc. To tackle these challenges requires a combination of complex measures. In a political system like China's, it also requires, as agreed by many senior CPC officials, "a more agile and forceful leader to cope with difficult economic restructuring, foreign policy pressures, and domestic challenges", and Xi seems to concur (Buckley 2013).

Effectively connecting and mobilizing the public is perhaps Xi's most urgent task (Brown, 2012). To better accumulate mass support, Xi has been trying to cast himself as a plainspoken and amiable leader. On a press meeting of the 19<sup>th</sup> CPC National Congress, Xi's first words were "I've kept you all waiting" when entering the venue (Tejada, 2012). The occasion was the first time standing members of the new CPC politburo met with the press, and so it was eagerly anticipated. Reporters as well as audiences were surprised by the rare occasion of hearing a new top leader express apologies, although implied. The gesture was widely welcomed by Internet users, who were not quite accustomed to the leader using folksy language instead of empty jargon and slogans, which used to be the norm (Chin, 2012). On another occasion, Xi unexpectedly visited a local restaurant in Beijing, waited in line, ordered steamed-buns and stewed chitterlings, and chatted with neighbors while having lunch (Burkitt and Jie, 2013). About four months later, on a heavily-polluted day in Beijing, Xi appeared, not wearing a facial mask, in a local residential area popular among the young demographic (Chin, 2014). Both efforts to reach directly to the masses were well received on the Internet.

These gestures are substantially different from the wooden and opaque manner of public appearances of Xi's predecessors (Wan 2013). Xi realized that in the new age of social media and smartphones, these strategies are no longer sufficient to generate and maintain prestige and they are also prone to backlash. The public now demands more direct, personal relations with their leader, to know what kind of person he is, and where he plans to take the country, so he has to demonstrate more openness and earthiness. By alluding to food safety and air pollution, two very pressing issues that afflict

15 More formally this school of intellectuals are termed "New Leftists". For more info see Mishra, Panka (2006). "China's New Leftist." New York: New York Times, Oct.15, 2006. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/15/magazine/15leftist.html>> (last access: Jan.18, 2014).

regular people, Xi has cast himself to the public as a more caring leader, literally living out the CPC's often chanted slogan "Breathing the same air, and bearing the same fate."

In addition, with regards to personal charisma, Xi did not try the usual strategy employed in a personality cult and present himself as possessing extraordinary intelligence, physique, or stamina. Instead, he opted for an alternative direction away from the emotionless technocratic face his predecessors usually bear. A cartoon image illustrating his work and ordinary hobbies was released by a news outlet affiliated with the Beijing municipal government (Patience, 2014). A remarkable contrast to the typical robotic image of CPC officials, this down-to-earth change in publicity served well to burnish his charisma as a regular bloke. The good public reception prompted a follow-up cartoon image of Xi and his wife Peng, illustrating their state visit to some European countries and the E.U. headquarters.

Like in any personality cult, Xi has carefully chosen a "mission" to establish his centrality. The "Chinese dream", a term reminiscent of the "American dream", has become the hallmark of Xi's reign. Xi interprets the Chinese dream as "the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation", consisting of four parts: strong China (economically, politically, diplomatically, scientifically, militarily); civilized China (equity and fairness, rich culture, high morals); harmonious China (amity among social classes); beautiful China (healthy environment, low pollution) (Kuhn 2013). Under this banner, Xi is intentionally playing down the ideology card, which has largely lost appeal, and instead resorting to a clearly patriotic card, one tone that can resonate across the class-divided Chinese society and provide sufficient social glue to hold the whole populace around him.

Institutional facilitation to boost Xi's prestige remains significant. The CPC's Central Commission for Discipline Inspection is almost the same age as the CPC itself, but it was Xi who has made thorough use of it and launched China's biggest crackdown on corruption since Mao, alleged to spare no "flies" (low-ranking officials) or "tigers" (high-ranking officials) (Oster 2014). Xi's extensive anti-corruption campaign can help restrain CPC's credibility loss, but it adds even more to Xi's personal power and charisma, portraying him as a leader capable of defeating a problem that has induced long-lasting social discontent, a problem that none of his predecessors has successfully solved. Moreover, Xi has been made head of the CPC's Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reforms and the National Security Commission of the Communist Party of China, two new special panels under the politburo, possibly to offer Xi a bypass around bureaucracies and consolidate his power. Whether the power he accrues is intended to clear the path for any reform he wants to push is another question. On media control, although Xi has seemingly adopted a more open stance, that does not mean control has equally loosened up. The regime still maintains scrupulous censorship of the media. Even if Xi's cartoon image was okay, when Xi visited the U.S. in 2013 and met with President Obama in California, Chinese micro-bloggers were forbidden to cite a resemblance to Xi's image with that of the cartoon figure of Winnie the Pooh, and any posted entry was swiftly "harmonized" (deleted) (Phillips, 2013). The comparison contained no obvious harm, yet the joking reference to a resemblance to a honey-loving bear surely dampened the kind of "positive" image Xi wishes to create, and was too much for the authorities to tolerate.

Similar to situations in today's Russia, the possibility of Xi's personality cult reaching the level of Mao's is not very great, as the regime is no longer in total control of education and social media, or flows of people and ideas, meaning there is no closed logic and discourse system. Also, intra-party power struggle and obstacles from vested interest groups impose hindrances when policies are formulated and carried out. A totalitarian regime can best boost a personality cult, but an authoritarian regime like China also offers multiple possible measures to generate and sustain personal charisma, and demands

a strong central control of sorts. With all the measures Xi has taken, including a new P.R. strategy to cast him as a competent, determined, and amiable person, a long-term anti-corruption campaign that serves to restore not only the CPC's legitimacy but also Xi's own prestige, and the prospect of a "Chinese dream", perhaps a latent personality cult for Xi Jinping has been taking shape before people realize it.

## Conclusion

The personality cult is an important and highly interesting research topic in Area Studies. As a theoretic concept it borrows heavily from Max Weber's theory on charismatic authority, but it has also been continuously enriched by many other scholars from the perspectives of leader-follower relations, the leader's mission, institutionalization of the cult in modern regimes, etc. The personality cult is a salient feature in many countries that have been the focus of Area Studies scholars, and since these countries share many similarities in ideology, political system, and social policies, the personality cult serves as a highly illuminating and also fruitful penetration angle for area studies.

Comparing our Stalin and Mao cases, some observations can be made. To generate continuity from predecessors, they both invoke seminal persons and their works, but Mao was less dependent on this, because he had been the original national revolutionary leader. Also, the intensity of both personality cults reached a high point in the period of severe crisis or social disturbance. The Stalin cult culminated during WWII and then largely remained stable, and the Mao cult culminated during the ten-year Cultural Revolution.

On the other hand, there are two major differences that deserve mentioning. First, Stalin's cult had generally been supported by and supportive of the USSR state and party organizations, while the Mao cult during the Cultural Revolution had been increasingly used against the authority of the collective leadership of the Party. This is probably because the Stalin cult had been cultivated long before and had undergone several periods of tremendous external threats and internal problems, so tended to be better integrated into the society, but the Mao cult did not receive official endorsement until the late 1950s, when he perceived a threat to his political power. Second, the extent to which other party leaders' political careers were tied to Stalin and to Mao is different. In Russia, Stalin enjoyed widespread loyalty, with the careers of most (if not all) potential party leaders directly tied to Stalin. But in China, potential party leaders' careers were attached to Mao's support and endorsement to widely varying degrees. This varying degree of neopatrimonialism is also worthy of consideration when comparing the two cases.



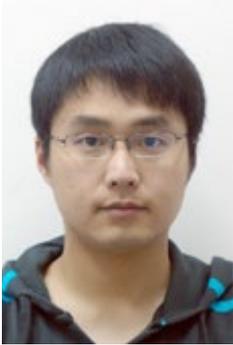
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