




ROUNDTABLE: DECOLONIZING CHINESE HISTORY

Global Maoism and the Decolonization of China's History

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Charu Mazumdar seemed like an unlikely leader for a violent guerilla organization. Born into a family of landlords in India's West Bengal in 1918, his slender frame gave him the look of someone more used to studying than directing armed insurgency. Yet, Mazumdar justified his violent leadership in West Bengal during the 1960s and 1970s by referencing the writings of Mao Zedong – known collectively as Mao Zedong Thought or Maoism – as inspiration for his revolutionary actions. Mazumdar declared that ‘the foremost duty of [Indian] revolutionaries is to spread and propagate the thought of Chairman Mao’,¹ and that ‘China's path is our path, China's chairman is our chairman.’² While Mazumdar had no claim to Chinese ethnic or linguistic belonging, his activities – along with the actions of thousands of others – manifested as a result of the transnational connections and entanglements between Maoism, its translation and propagation by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and its reception by revolutionaries across the world.

To what extent can we consider participants in Maoist praxis outside the borders of the People's Republic of China (PRC), like Mazumdar, as part of a decolonized ‘Chinese’ history? Calls to decolonize academic fields of study join a growing awareness and attentiveness to the uneven power structures that support and underpin our disciplines, with multiple and contending proposals aimed at addressing pervasive issues regarding the ‘coloniality’ of power.³ Yet, these solutions are often unclear in their demands or concern limited, if practical, interventions – a ‘how-to’ guide, if you will – for how to ‘do’ decoloniality. While important, this falls short of what some scholars argue

¹ Charu Mazumdar, ‘Develop peasants’ class struggle through class analysis, investigation and study’, *Liberation*, 2 (1969), pp. 17–21; first published in Bengali in *Deshabrati* on 17 Oct. 1968.

² Charu Mazumdar, ‘China's chairman is our chairman; China's path is our path’, *Liberation* (Calcutta), 3 (1969), pp. 6–13.

³ Aníbal Quijano, ‘Colonialidad del poder, cultura y conocimiento en América Latina’, *Dispositio*, 24 (1999), pp. 137–48. Quijano describes the ‘coloniality of power’ as a pervasive and repeated reproduction of racial, gender, and geopolitical hierarchies over time.

is a struggle for epistemological justice that aims to fundamentally rethink the relationship between knowledge and the academy.⁴

If the discipline of history is to be ‘decolonized’, we must first consider how it has become ‘colonized’. In the case of Chinese history, coloniality broadly attends to two structures: Western imperialism in the form of both historical colonization of China’s territory and people and the persisting knowledge imbalances imposed by the Western academy; and Chinese imperialism in the form of state power and oppression over minoritized subjects within the borders of the territory that the PRC claims as its own. ‘Decolonizing’ in a contemporary Chinese context must therefore attend to two dominant and colonizing hegemonies: the Western academy and the Chinese state.⁵ While often presumed to be at odds with one another, they ultimately are underlined by similar ideas about ‘China’. In both the Western orientalist vision and the Chinese statist one, ‘China’ is defined by an essentialized Han-centric culture, ahistorical geographic borders, and civilizational unity.

While confronting these two hegemonies, the operative question must be: who, ultimately, does decolonization serve?⁶ From the perspective of the Western academy, if colonization is a product of the Global North, then decolonization, one might argue, is a similarly ‘Euro-America’ product and a way for Euro-Americans to ‘manage’ the decline and end of empire.⁷ If, on the other hand, colonization is a process of the PRC state, then decolonization must, as Taomo Zhou argues in this roundtable, centre PRC scholars. Yet these options, too, have the potential to reinforce power inequities. In the case of Chinese history, our field values scholarship that is a product of its own system: scholarship written in English, produced to standards set by North American elite institutions, and premised on an orientalism that reinforces essentializing assumptions about China as a cohesive entity bounded by an ethnicized geographic space.⁸ A reading critical of such decolonization efforts might therefore contend that they are attempts by scholars to demonstrate the

⁴ Heidi Mogstad and Lee-Shan Tse, ‘Decolonizing anthropology: reflections from Cambridge’, *Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*, 36 (2018), pp. 53–72, <https://doi.org/10.3167/cja.2018.360206>.

⁵ Justin Jacobs, ‘The many deaths of a Kazak unaligned: Osman Batur, Chinese decolonization, and the nationalization of a nomad’, *American Historical Review*, 115 (2010), pp. 1291–314, <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr.115.5.1291>; Stuart Ward, ‘The European provenance of decolonization’, *Past & Present*, 230 (2016), pp. 227–60, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtv044>. For further discussion on how formerly colonized states themselves participate in colonizing action, see Connor Woodman, ‘The West Papuan Liberation Movement, Indonesian settler colonialism and Western imperialism from an international solidarity perspective’, *International Journal of Human Rights* (Oct. 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2022.2132235>.

⁶ Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On decoloniality: concepts, analytics, praxis* (Durham, NC, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822371779>.

⁷ Franz Fanon speaks to the (im)possibility of decolonization as being institutionally and structurally constrained. Frantz Fanon, *The wretched of the earth* (New York, NY, 1961). Kuan-Hsing Chen, by contrast, distinguishes between de-imperialization (a process of colonizers and the Global North) as a necessary precursor for decolonization (a process of indigenous peoples). Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as method: toward deimperialization* (Durham, NC, 2010).

⁸ It is no small irony that debates about the decolonization of our field are most prominent among the very networks that are themselves the subject of its critiques (including this author).

value of their work to one another within their existing institutional structures, rather than to serve the interests of the marginalized individuals that they claim to centre.

Is it perhaps the case that the question we seek to answer is not how to decolonize knowledge – is that even possible? – but rather, how does such an enquiry prove productive in fundamentally reshaping our perspectives towards knowledge production, the subjects on which we focus our research efforts, and the contemporary politics that our work speaks to? How do we incorporate these shifts into established structural and intellectual constraints? How do we go beyond an understanding of the need for diverse voices or of the acknowledgement of Western-centricism in our field and meaningfully incorporate those voices into the core of the field? Is this an anachronistic attempt at reconciliation for present grievances, rather than being borne out by the historical archive? How then might scholars of China's past contribute to these debates in a productive manner that pushes our field towards productive outcomes while remaining aware of the structural limitations within which individual interventions must contend?

Fundamental to our collective enquiry is to answer the question of what a decolonized world might look like. Taking cues from Gayatri Spivak's argument that post-colonialism is not a call for a return to nativism or pre-coloniality,⁹ as well as arguments that warn against decolonization as the replacement of one dominant power structure with another,¹⁰ I posit that a decolonized field seeks to best understand how power operates in its multidimensionality and unevenness. One potential solution to addressing criticisms of Han cultural supremacy as reinforced by both PRC state-sponsored history and by the orientalist assumptions within the Western academy, is the recentring of non-Han and diasporic subjects that maintain ethnic or heritage ties to the Chinese mainland, as discussed by Taomo Zhou in this roundtable. This essay, by contrast, explores how Chinese history might be expanded in terms of who 'counts' by looking *beyond* the inclusion of non-Han or diasporic subjects. Rather, by detaching questions of ethnic belonging and instead centring dynamic networks of shared, if uneven, transnational interactions, this essay prioritizes those who saw the PRC as a symbol of anti-colonialism and self-determination but who themselves have no connection to 'Chinese' ethnic categories. In other words, can 'Chinese' history include individuals outside the geographical boundaries of the PRC who associated with China as their source of ideological inspiration, but who are themselves not 'Chinese'?

I

While a contention might be that Chinese history needs to have *something* Chinese about it – be that the Chinese state, geographical location within

⁹ Gayatri Spivak, 'Can the subaltern speak?', in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (Chicago, IL, 1988).

¹⁰ Shzr Ee Tan, 'Whose decolonisation? Checking for intersectionality, lane-policing and academic privilege from a transnational (Chinese) vantage point', *Ethnomusicology Forum*, 30 (2021), pp. 140–62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17411912.2021.1938447>.

China, or concerning an ethnicized subject of (Han) Chinese heritage – this appeal arguably encounters essentializing claims about who or what ‘counts’ as Chinese. Notably, it reinforces the Chinese state’s claim to ethnic, cultural, and geographical ‘ownership’ that pervades contemporary discourse and, as the other essays in this rountable convincingly suggest, is itself a colonizing act. It also, importantly, encounters Western orientalist presumptions that similarly presume that ‘Chinese-ness’ is an ahistorical Other. This is perhaps a controversial approach; after all, if interactions with China are considered part of ‘Chinese’ history then where do we draw the boundaries of our field or avoid criticisms that these interactions also rely on essentialisms? One approach to avoid committing similar structures to those that we are criticizing is to understand a subject’s identity and their perceived connection with China on their own terms, rather than as imposed categories.¹¹ I argue that it is precisely this expansive interpretation that facilitates, on the one hand, the decentring of Western imperialisms, and on the other, of the Chinese state, Han ethnicity, and Sinophone languages as the primary vectors through which we understand China.

Taking the example of how Mao Zedong Thought or Maoism became a global phenomenon beginning in the mid-twentieth century, this essay suggests that the networks and connectivities of Maoist solidarities around the world serve as an example of a decolonized approach that pushes the limits of what can be defined as Chinese history.¹² From this perspective, decolonization reshapes the foundations of our field from being a collective of national histories towards fluid connections between a diverse range of actors. These ‘transnational alliances’ – to use Taomo Zhou’s term – help us to think far more broadly about the question of ‘who decolonizes’. They aid our understanding of how global ideological connections that, while cognizant of the Chinese state’s active role in promoting Mao Zedong Thought overseas, simultaneously attend to the multiple and iterative attempts at decoloniality by political radicals across the world who were fighting against what they considered to be the ‘neo-colonization’ of post-colonial states. Beyond an understanding of decolonization as grounded in geography, this argument, inspired itself by the global Maoist networks that have proliferated since the 1960s, aims for a Chinese history that can simultaneously decolonize *multiple* national histories and imperialisms. By shifting our focus away from the Chinese state and the boundaries of knowledge categories imposed by the academy, and instead towards those who embraced Maoist affinities outside the geographical borders of the PRC, I

¹¹ For a more detailed interrogation of avoiding essentialisms, see Kyle Shernuk, ‘Embracing the xenophone: Siu Kam Wen and the possibility of Spanish-language Chinese literature’, *Prism: Theory and Modern Chinese Literature*, 18 (2021), pp. 501–25.

¹² ‘Global’ or international history has received criticism in recent years that overlaps with decolonial critiques of the field as Eurocentric, Anglophonic, and as failing to include diverse subjectivities even while it expands the subjects of enquiry. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: postcolonial thought and historical difference* (Princeton, NJ, 2000); Leslie Witz, ‘Africa [not] in world history: a review from the south (Part 1)’, *Journal of World History*, 27 (2016), pp. 103–20, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jwh.2016.0077>.

therefore argue for a decentring of *both* the Chinese state *and* of Western ideas of what counts as China Studies.

How does decentring China and moving towards a relational model of in-flux spaces and globalized networks change how we think about our field? Despite their affinities for Maoist ideology, self-identified Maoist organizations – spanning almost every country in the world – created highly localized interpretations of Mao Zedong Thought and constructed networks of like-minded organizations separate from the CCP's own outreach efforts.¹³ From the perspective of many of these Maoist organizations outside of China, the PRC was but one source of inspiration among many in an imagined revolutionary world.¹⁴ If we think of Maoism less as a Sinocentric philosophy and as more of a diverse and politicized space, in other words, one that foregrounds the interconnected spaces within and between peripheries, new formulations emerge as to how we conceptualize China's transnational role in the construction and maintenance of transnational solidarities.¹⁵ In doing so, a global Maoist perspective prioritizes fractured subjectivities, alternate perspectives, and identities that are missed by dominant narratives within our field.

While this view decentres the Chinese state, this is not to say that China is unimportant in the history of global Maoism. The formation, adaptability, and perseverance of many of these groups relied on the active promotion and translation of Mao Zedong Thought in the 1960s and 1970s. Consequently, China simultaneously provides the ideological source material necessary for imagining these groups at the same time as these newly imagined groups downgraded China to a single point among a constellation of influences beyond China's control. Yet, histories of these Maoist groups still overwhelmingly prioritize their status in relation to nation-states and national histories. The Maoist 'Naxalite' movement in India that Charu Mazumdar participated in, for example, is predominantly framed by scholars, politicians, and journalists as an *Indian* movement; that is a movement that is engendered by its geographic location within India and its engagement with the Indian state.¹⁶ Indeed, many studies of Maoist movements continue to centre national histories as the primary prism through which we consider these groups, rather than the interconnectivities that such groups suggest.¹⁷ By contrast, a global and

¹³ Christopher J. Lee, 'Decolonizing "China–Africa relations": toward a new ethos of Afro-Asianism', *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 33 (2021), pp. 230–7, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2020.1824770>; James Gethyn Evans, 'Maoism, anti-imperialism, and the Third World', *Made in China Journal*, 6 (2021), <https://madeinchinajournal.com/2021/11/08/maoism-anti-imperialism-and-the-third-world>.

¹⁴ I use 'is' rather than 'was' as many Maoist organizations persist to the present.

¹⁵ For more on how we might conceptualize solidarities between non-state groups, see Darryl Li, *The universal enemy: jihad, empire, and the challenge of solidarity* (Stanford, CA, 2019).

¹⁶ Former Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, for example, framed the Naxalite movement as an inherently Indian movement, and declared that 'Naxalism and Left-wing extremism pose the greatest threat to [India's] national security'. Robin Jeffrey, Ronojoy Sen, and Pratima Singh, eds., *More than Maoism: politics, policies and insurgencies in South Asia* (New Delhi, 2012).

¹⁷ To name but a few examples: Prakash Adhikari and Steven Samford, 'The Nepali state and the dynamics of the Maoist insurgency', *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 48 (2013), pp. 457–81, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12116-012-9125-4>; Eduardo Abad García, "'Serving the

decolonial approach proves productive in detaching these groups from the national histories within which they currently reside and in considering how solidarities, rather than states, might reshape our understanding of how spatiality operates outside of the neat boundaries of both countries and academic disciplines.

II

Including actors who are usually excluded from considerations in Chinese history is a necessary step, but the lived experiences of the individuals in question must also be taken seriously.¹⁸ Maoism is often disregarded outside of the PRC, with scholars and pundits alike relegating it to fanciful, radical idealism rather than a legitimate political force. Moreover, a pervasive issue in studies of Maoism outside of China is the claim that it is ‘not really Maoism’, but rather a diluted derivative of an original ‘pure’ ideology in China. These assumed hierarchies of Maoist groups – both in terms of what is original versus derivative, and which groups are more ‘worthy’ of scholarly consideration – reinforces established power relations and territorializations of our field without consideration for how multiple perspectives might be equally valid.¹⁹ It also discounts the very real connections that participants in many global Maoist organizations built with the CCP and, importantly, with each other in ways that often traversed the diplomatic barriers of the Cold War. In rewriting our field from a decolonized perspective, we must therefore interrogate entrenched assumptions about China, its place in the world, and the roles of sub- and non-state actors in constructing China from without.

Stated differently, it is incumbent on us as scholars to do the necessary work of not only *talking* about decolonization, but also making changes in what we *do*. Micro-level changes such as alterations to syllabi, reconsideration of the canon, and the inclusion and serious engagement with new actors are all productive steps, insofar as they help to diversify knowledge production and reframe the periphery without replicating entrenched power hierarchies.²⁰ Furthermore, continuing to re-evaluate what ‘counts’ as an archive, indeed

people”. A short history of Spanish Maoism (1964–1980), *Twentieth Century Communism*, 22 (2022), pp. 94–116, <https://doi.org/10.3898/175864322835917883>; Max G. Manwaring, ‘Peru’s Sendero Luminoso: the shining path beckons’, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 541 (1995), pp. 157–66; Shivaji Mukherjee, ‘Colonial origins of Sons of the Soil insurgency: Maoist rebellion in Central India’, *Asian Security*, 17 (2021), pp. 366–97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2020.1854228>;

Hans Petter Sjøli, ‘Maoism in Norway’, *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 33 (2008), pp. 478–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03468750802519982>.

¹⁸ This echoes what Nicholas Mirzoeff frames as allowing the subjects of (de)colonization to ‘appear’: ‘Empty the museum, decolonize the curriculum, open theory’, *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, 25 (2017), pp. 6–22, <https://doi.org/10.7146/nja.v25i53.26403>.

¹⁹ Christopher J. Lee, *Making a world after empire: the Bandung moment and its political afterlives* (Athens, OH, 2019).

²⁰ Mogstad and Tse, ‘Decolonizing anthropology’.

what counts as scholarship,²¹ and expanding those categories to include ‘non-traditional’ sources or ‘garbology’²² may help to erode the monopoly on validity perpetuated by the continued reverence of state archives. These changes fall short, however, of transforming the power structures preserved by the academic institutions that inform, evaluate, and fund research according to the defined categories that decolonization seeks to address.²³ Macro-level structural change generated through the repeated questioning of disciplinary boundaries, the detachment of disciplines from states, and a rethinking in how our institutions reward certain types of knowledge production therefore present bolder approaches to apply Maoist-inspired decoloniality to the academy.

Taking inspiration from how Maoist networks construct dynamic connections that are both spatially and temporally separate from state understandings of geography and time, this essay suggests a potential formula to help us to detach history from coloniality. This extension of the ‘Maoism of PRC History’ – to borrow Aminda Smith’s phrase regarding the need to take Maoist projects on their own terms²⁴ – beyond the borders of the PRC presents a potential method to rethink not only what we mean by China as an analytical category, but also what we mean by approaches to history that continue to prioritize geography and geopolitics as the primary vectors for understanding communities. While this essay’s limited intervention cannot achieve its own ambitions of fully realizing a ‘decolonized’ history, it nevertheless aims to identify and deconstruct some of the traditional power hierarchies in our field and to provide the initial foundations for an ambitious attempt that – to paraphrase Gail Hershatter and Wang Zheng’s analysis of early gender studies work – goes beyond ‘add decolonization and stir’.²⁵

²¹ For a comment as to what ‘counts’ as history, see the ‘Author’s note’ to James H. Sweet’s presidential column for the American Historical Association: ‘Is history history? Identity politics and teleologies of the present’, 17 Aug. 2022, www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/september-2022/is-history-history-identity-politics-and-teleologies-of-the-present. For a questioning of how archives shape and are shaped by power structures, see Sadiya Hartman, ‘Venus in two acts’, *Small Axe*, 12 (2008), pp. 1–14, *Project MUSE*, muse.jhu.edu/article/241115.

²² Jeremy Brown, ‘Finding and using grassroots historical sources from the Mao era’, *Dissertation Reviews*, 15 Dec. 2010, <https://dissertationreviews.wordpress.com/2010/12/15/finding-and-using-grassroots-historical-sources-from-the-mao-era-by-jeremy-brown/>; Elizabeth J. Perry, ‘The promise of PRC history’, *Journal of Modern Chinese History*, 10 (2016), pp. 113–17.

²³ Phillip M. Ayoub, ‘Not that niche: making room for the study of LGBTIQ people in political science’, *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 5 (2022), pp. 154–72, <https://doi.org/10.1332/251510821X16345581767345>.

²⁴ Aminda Smith, ‘Foreword: the Maoism of PRC history’, *positions: asia critique*, 29 (2020), pp. 659–74, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10679847-9286636>.

²⁵ Gail Hershatter and Wang Zheng, ‘Chinese history: a useful category of gender analysis’, *American Historical Review*, 113 (2008), pp. 1404–21, <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr.113.5.1404>.