The Enduring Power of Maoism

Maochun Yu reviews 'Mao's Invisible Hand.'

By MAOCHUN YU

Sebastian Heilmann of the University of Trier and Elizabeth Perry of Harvard, both well-known political scientists, want to answer an important question about China. To wit, why has China's Communist government so far escaped the fate of collapse that befell other such governments in Eastern Europe and in the former Soviet Union?

Their answer is something of a shocker, to experts and non-experts alike: The key to the survival and thriving of the Chinese Communist Party lies in its inheritance and continuing practice of Maoist "guerrilla-style policy making." That is, Beijing's ability to avoid collapse is not because of the abandonment of the core elements of Maoism but rather due to the continuing practice of it.

This is a rather bold argument. And it needs to overcome a few empirical and theoretical hurdles to be convincing.

Mr. Heilmann and Ms. Perry enlist a group of China scholars to help them prove that Mao's invisible hand, as the title goes, is responsible for the Party's prosperity. In the volume they edit, the main objective of all nine essays is to provide an alternative approach to what these scholars perceive as the prevailing tendency in Western scholarship to "reduce [China's] politics to an unremitting interplay of repression and resistance."

Instead, it is the Chinese leaders' "creative adaptation of key elements of China's revolutionary heritage" that has helped China thrive. This "revolutionary heritage" stresses "ceaseless change, tension management, continual experimentation and ad-hoc adjustment," which is why Mao's successors have been so politically resilient.

But the first question any reader will ask is: If the book's main argument is true, why didn't this same guerrilla-style policy-making mechanism work wonders when China was ruled by the Great Helmsman himself? He created some of the most spectacular governance disasters in human history, including the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution.

The editors readily admit that "the erratic and idiosyncratic course navigated by the Great Helmsman in his quixotic quest to continue the revolution after 1949 was terribly disruptive and
destructive." But this, they argue, does not matter because Mao did create an adaptive process that works under a new leadership and different policy priorities.

The problem is Mao's "erratic and idiosyncratic" course was directly related to his refusal to carry out policies under a semblance of the rule of law, as well as his disdain for "regularized" governance. The book doesn't address this point.

The book represents an intense scholarly inquiry into a question at the back of many observers' minds as Beijing grapples with its next leadership transition. Each chapter in the book shows impeccable research that marks an advance in China studies.

Indeed, even some contributors to this volume display a sense of doubt about the longevity, even validity of this "guerrilla-style policy-making" thesis, despite the editors' less ambiguous pronouncement of the book's conceptual framework. A majority of the contributors end their analyses on various aspects of the Chinese politics with dire pessimism. Joseph Fewsmith of Boston University, who authored a fine essay on China's sub-county governance, concludes his analysis with the sentence "Good-governance at the sub-county level so far has proven elusive." Benjamin Liebman of Columbia Law School writes about China's legal reform but states in the beginning of exhaustively researched essay that "The party-state has continued to view law primarily as a tool for achieving policy goals. Legal reforms have not imposed significant restraints on the party-state."

In the final analysis, however, the book is unable to do justice to the question the editors pose. Part of the problem is the enormity of the issue. But even so, there are some obvious flaws.

Let's start with the fact that there's nothing particularly Maoist about Beijing's ability to "cross the river by feeling for the stones," in Chen Yun's famous phrase. Contributor Patricia Thornton of Oxford University in her formidable chapter seems to have found a source for this "adaptive governance" philosophy in Lenin, not Mao.

Perhaps that helps answer why China's Party didn't collapse when world-wide Communism suffered an ideological shock in 1989. Lenin survived the civil war after the 1917 revolution by ruthlessly using force and destroying dissent, and true to form, Beijing's was the only Leninist regime that successfully clamped down in 1989. Deng Xiaoping didn't hesitate to use force in Tiananmen Square and his successors have since thoroughly eliminated organized opposition in any form.

The more difficult part of the question is why China's Leninist regime has survived the inordinate amount of corruption and social discontent it's generated. This is a problem all authors agree exists in China.

The explanation here has to take into account the spectacular rise of an "internal security state" that has an annual budget bigger than that of its national defense (and Beijing's national defense budget is already the world's second largest). This ensures dissidents are constantly harassed, discontented villagers kept in check, while potential trouble-makers nipped in the bud.
More importantly, unlike the Soviet Union and its satellites in Eastern Europe, China isn't the target of an all-out Cold War conducted by the West. Some of the chief American architects of the Soviet Union's demise were among the defenders of China's crackdown in Tiananmen and the following repression.

This inadequacy of Western support, which has translated into China's gradual inclusion into the international economic order, gives the Party international legitimacy and demoralizes Chinese dissidents. The Soviet Union collapsed partly because of the West's economic blockade while Communist China has enjoyed the fruits of economic engagement.