
The selective memory of Mao Zedong Thought: *A historical approach to modern China's pursuit of a usable past*

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Introduction

On October 1st, 2024, during the reception ceremony marking the 75th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), General Secretary Xi Jinping asserted that “no challenges can stop China's progress,” and restated Beijing's unwavering opposition to Taiwan separatism.¹ Such rhetoric echoes similar proclamations emphasizing economic development made precisely five years earlier during the PRC's 70th anniversary celebrations.² This consistent political messaging is not new; it mirrors earlier instances such as the 2016 invocation of Mao Zedong's poetic imagery where “a few flies dash themselves against the wall” to characterize Taiwan as helpless in opposition to a stronger power, the Chinese mainland.³ These parallels underscore the enduring relevance and selective invocation of Mao Zedong Thought in contemporary Chinese political discourse, particularly as a rhetorical device to reaffirm ideological legitimacy, project political continuity, and construct a usable past.⁴

¹ Cheng, Evelyn. “‘no Challenges Can Stop China's Progress’ Xi Jinping Says in 75th Anniversary Speech.” CNBC, September 30, 2024. <https://www.cnbc.com/2024/09/30/no-challenges-can-stop-chinas-progress-xi-jinping-says-in-75th-anniversary-speech.html>.

² Cheng, Evelyn. “China's XI: ‘No Force Can Stop the Chinese People and the Chinese Nation.’” CNBC, October 1, 2019. <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/10/01/china-70th-anniversary-xi-says-no-force-can-stop-the-chinese-people.html>.

³ Tse-tung, Mao., Reply to Comrade Kuo Mo-Jo (Guo Mo Ru), <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/poems/poems34.htm>

⁴ Gewirtz, Paul. “XI, Mao, and China's Search for a Usable Past.” ChinaFile, January 14, 2014.

While many Western scholars often depict Mao Zedong Thought as a rigid, omnipresent ideological framework underpinning Chinese politics, this paper proposes a different interpretation. It argues that Mao Zedong Thought is neither monolithic nor immutable; instead, contemporary Chinese leadership strategically selects and modifies specific elements of Mao's ideology that align with current political objectives, while deliberately overlooking or revising others. To illustrate this argument, the paper focuses on Mao's concept of "class struggle," demonstrating how modern leaders have adapted its interpretation and selectively employed it within new socio-economic contexts. By analyzing this selective use, the paper challenges prevailing Western perspectives and offers a nuanced understanding of how the Chinese Communist Party engages with its own ideological heritage to maintain political coherence and legitimacy.

Literature review

In both media and scholarship, Xi Jinping is frequently portrayed as the "new Mao,"⁵ with comparisons drawn between their leadership styles, emphasis on centralized power, and strategic use of ideological rhetoric.⁶ Former US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, recently claimed that "Xi has turned out to be a true Marxist" for these reasons.⁷ This analogy, however, remains highly contested. While some commentators see the revival of Maoist themes in Xi's governance as indicative of ideological continuity, others argue that such parallels are oversimplified, "lazy thinking", and rooted in Cold War-era thinking.⁸ Scholars have also pointed out that Maoist

<https://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/viewpoint/xi-mao-and-chinas-search-usable-past>.

⁵ Coy, Peter. "Xi Jinping Is the Second Coming of Mao Zedong." *The New York Times*, October 7, 2022.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/07/opinion/xi-jinping-mao-zedong.html>. 1

⁶ Daniel Douglas, "Mao Zedong and Xi Jinping: A Trait Analysis," 2017,

<https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:158987567>.

⁷ Condoleezza Rice, "The perils of Isolationism," *Foreign Affairs* 103, no.5 (2024), print edition.

⁸ Karl, Rebecca. "Xi Is Not Mao." *Dissent Magazine*, May 18, 2022. <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/xi-is-not-mao/>.

language has indeed returned to political discourse, but often with altered meanings tailored to China's current political and economic realities.⁹

This paper seeks to reconcile these perspectives by expanding on the idea that the Chinese leadership is not replicating Mao, but rather selectively promoting elements of his legacy.¹⁰ This selective promotion allows the Chinese Communist Party to draw upon the symbolic authority of Mao without embracing all aspects of his complex and controversial legacy. Particularly in light of the more disruptive periods associated with Mao's leadership, Chinese leaders today are careful to invoke only those parts of Mao Zedong Thought that can serve their contemporary objectives. As this paper will show, the legacy of Mao is curated, not copied, reshaped to reinforce the party's present legitimacy without reviving the more radical dimensions of his historical persona.

Class Struggle: Mao's Original View

During the late 1960s, at the height of the Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong advanced the slogan "never forget class struggle (永远不要忘记阶级斗争)," marking what he saw as a fundamental and enduring pillar of socialist governance.¹¹ Rooted in Marxist-Leninist theory, Mao's articulation of class struggle reflected key adaptations to China's unique revolutionary and post-revolutionary circumstances. These adaptations took two principal forms. First, Mao asserted that class struggle would continue long after the proletariat had seized control of the

⁹ Golden, Sean. "Mao's Place in Xi's 'China Dream.'" CIDOB, October 2015.
<https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/maos-place-xis-china-dream>.

¹⁰ Matson, Emily. "Why It's Misleading to Call Xi Jinping the 'New Mao.'" NüVoices, October 3, 2022.
<https://nuvoices.com/2022/10/03/why-its-misleading-to-call-xi-jinping-the-new-mao/>.

¹¹ Klehr, Eileen. "The class struggle is by no means over" *Index to Class Struggle*, Issue 6, Winter 1676-77.
<https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/periodicals/class-struggle-us/index.htm> p.29

means of production.¹² Second, he argued that class contradictions emerged in two forms: “those among the people” and “those between ourselves and the enemy.”¹³ These claims not only shaped Maoist political campaigns but also formed the theoretical basis for continued political mobilization throughout the PRC’s early decades.

Mao’s insistence on the prolongation of class struggle was not arbitrary. He drew heavily from the perceived failures of the Soviet Union, where post-revolutionary bureaucracies had, in his view, devolved into a new elite class, which he termed the “New Tsars.”¹⁴ According to Mao, these new bourgeoisies were previous leaders in the socialist movement, but after two decades of socialist succession, they restored the capitalist ideology and became “parasites” that benefit from the bloody suppression of the Soviet workers.¹⁵ Though the Soviet state had dismantled the old aristocracy, Mao believed it had recreated hierarchical power structures that alienated the working class and betrayed the revolution. Using the Soviet failure as an example, Mao warned that revolution did not end with regime change but must be actively defended. Consequently, he emphasized that “the state power of the PRC under the leadership of the working class must not be weakened but must be strengthened,” calling for constant vigilance to preserve the revolutionary spirit and resist internal decay.¹⁶ His divergence from classical Marxism, then, lay in redefining revolution not as a terminal event but as a continuous struggle against emerging contradictions.

¹² “Long Live Marxism-Leninism Mao Zedong Thought.” Speech at Sept18 Memorial Meeting in Peking. <https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/peking-review/1966/PR1966-27a.htm>

¹³ Tse-tung, Mao. On Contradiction. https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_17.htm.

¹⁴ Tse-tung, Mao. On Contradiction. https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_17.htm.

¹⁵ Ibid p.30

¹⁶ Mao Tsetung, *Report to the Secondary Plenary Session of the Seventh Central Committee of the CCP*, Foreign Language Press, 1968, p.13.

While Mao remained deeply concerned with imperialism and external threats, his campaigns, particularly during the Cultural Revolution, focused primarily on internal contradictions. Struggles were directed at perceived enemies within society: intellectuals, party officials, and remnants of the old class order. These efforts reflected Mao's conviction that internal enemies posed the most immediate threat to socialism's survival. In contrast, modern Chinese leadership appears to have reinterpreted the notion of struggle. Today, much of the political rhetoric emphasizes external sources of tension, such as U.S.-China competition, while largely omitting the internal class dynamics that Mao prioritized. This shift does not abandon the language of struggle but signals a transformation in how struggle is conceptualized and deployed.

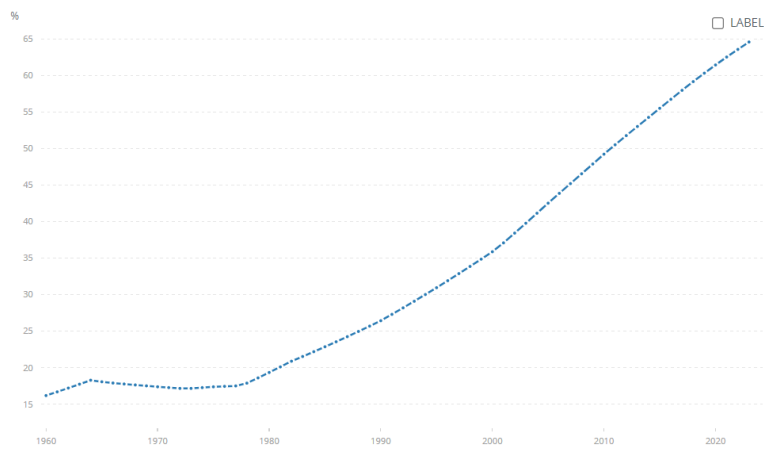
The New Chinese Society

Compared to the Maoist era, Chinese society has undergone significant transformation. The structure of its population, economy, and social expectations no longer mirrors the conditions that originally shaped Mao's ideas on class struggle. In the mid-twentieth century, Mao declared that leadership by the poor peasantry was "absolutely necessary."¹⁷ At that time, more than 70 percent of the population lived in rural areas, and peasants were widely viewed as the engine of revolutionary potential. Naturally, Maoist policies prioritized the countryside over cities, emphasizing that rural populations held "a potentially inexhaustible enthusiasm for socialism" and the largest population for Mao to mobilize.¹⁸

¹⁷ Mao Tse-tung, Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_2.htm

¹⁸ Mao Tse-tung, Introductory note to "This Township Went Co-operative in Two Years" 1995, *The Socialist Upsurge in China's Countryside*, Vol 2.

Today, however, the demographic and economic landscape is dramatically different. The proportion of China's urban population has increased from 16 percent in 1960 to over 65 percent in 2023, accompanied by a growing middle class and major investments in poverty alleviation. As rural migrants increasingly integrate into urban life, Mao's emphasis on rural mobilization no longer aligns with the country's socioeconomic reality.



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This rising rural immigrants to urban areas is also highly correlated with the growing Chinese middle class.²⁰ Due to these drastic changes, continuing Mao's preference on the rural areas and poor peasant class no longer served usefulness in maintaining stability and legitimacy for the party. Programs like the hukou system, housing relocations (拆迁), and targeted poverty relief reflect a new understanding of "struggle",²¹ one that is no longer framed as class warfare, but as a process of upward social mobility within a rapidly urbanizing state.

¹⁹ World Bank, Urban population (% of total population) -China, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.URB.TOTL.IN.ZS?end=2023&locations=CN&start=1960&view=chart>

²⁰ Song, Yu-Ling. "From Newcomers to Middle Class: The Social and Spatial Mobility of New Urban Migrants." *China Review* 16, no. 3 (2016): 121-147. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/634717>.

²¹ Chen and Qin, "The Emergence of China's Middle Class: Social Mobility in a Rapidly Urbanizing Economy." (Note: some studies show Hukou system restricts social mobility for some households, but in general some upward mobility is gained for the new immigrant middle class as a whole).

The ideological shift is also evident in the decline of slogans like “Up to the mountains and Down to the countryside” (上山下乡), once central to Maoist ideology.²² Once intended to mobilize revolutionary fervor and reassert class consciousness, such slogans have lost their resonance in a society shaped by consumer aspirations, urban lifestyles, and market reforms. With urban areas now forming the core of political and economic life, contemporary Chinese leadership has redefined what it means to struggle. Rather than inciting revolutionary zeal against an internal enemy, struggle is now associated with modernization, state-led development, and managed reform. This ideological transition is not merely rhetorical; it serves to maintain the Communist Party’s legitimacy in a society that has moved far beyond the world Mao once knew. Chinese leaders, aware of these profound social changes, have made conscious efforts to adapt their rhetoric and policies to ensure the Party remains relevant. In doing so, they have not rejected Mao Zedong Thought outright but have selectively drawn from it to craft a version of struggle that fits contemporary circumstances, affirming once again the Party’s strategy of sustaining its legacy through selective ideological inheritance.

Old Words, New Meanings

Today’s Chinese leadership continues to invoke the language of “struggle,” but its meaning has evolved significantly from the original Maoist formulation. Under Mao, the notion of a prolonged class struggle implied a constant antagonism between the working class and an emergent or resurgent middle class, necessitating continued political intervention to defend proletarian interests. For Mao, this justified ongoing Party consolidation of power to prevent the marginalization of the working class by capitalist tendencies. In this framework, the Party’s role

²² Down to the Countryside Movement | Dartmouth Libraries

was to continually suppress bourgeois elements to uphold its socialist mission. This interpretation, however, no longer fits the socio-economic realities of modern China. The country has undergone dramatic transformations, prompting some scholars to argue that it “is not communist in any genuine sense of that term.”²³

On an ideological level, Mao’s anti-capitalist and anti-feudal revolutions were designed to demonstrate that a socialist system of material and cultural production could rival capitalism. Since Mao’s time, however, China has pursued policies of market liberalization: it has opened its economy under Deng Xiaoping, severed its ideological alliance with the Soviet Union, established diplomatic ties with the United States, and joined the World Trade Organization in 2001. These developments encouraged the rise of a new Chinese middle class, often comprised of individuals who ascended from lower-income backgrounds.²⁴ This emerging social class directly contradicts Mao’s fear of a recurring bourgeois class that would exploit workers. The clever manipulation from “class struggle” to a more generic “struggle” thus represents a strategic redefinition; it preserves a nominally Maoist term while adapting it to modern conditions of upward mobility and national development.

This new conception of struggle supports not only the continued relevance of state power but also reinforces the authority of the Party. In this reframing, the state is no longer solely the defender of the working class against internal class enemies; it becomes the architect of opportunity, guiding the lower classes into prosperity.²⁵ One emblematic example of this

²³ Karl, Rebecca. “Xi Is Not Mao.” *Dissent Magazine*, May 18, 2022. <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/xi-is-not-mao/>.

²⁴ Chen Chen and Bo Qin, “The Emergence of China’s Middle Class: Social Mobility in a Rapidly Urbanizing Economy,” *Habitat International* 44 (October 1, 2014): 528–35, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.habitatint.2014.10.007>.

²⁵ Feng Kaihua, 主席重要讲话 (Selected quotes from Xi), 中国网(Chinese military web), http://www.81.cn/xxqj_207719/jj_207768/9326195.html?tsryakdlrlw

transformation is the Chinese government's campaign to eradicate extreme poverty, often hailed in official media as one of Xi Jinping's signature achievements.²⁶ By facilitating social mobility rather than emphasizing class antagonism, the Party reorients Maoist language toward a more unifying, nationally cohesive narrative. While the rhetoric of struggle endures, its political function and societal implications have been fundamentally reconfigured, revealing both the adaptability of Mao Zedong Thought and the selective inheritance that underpins its modern legacy.

The New Struggles under Xi

The concept of “struggle” has endured within Chinese political discourse, but under current leadership it has been rearticulated in ways that diverge significantly from Mao's original emphasis on internal class conflict. In 2023, Xi Jinping emphasized two forms of political guidance: “to dare to struggle” (敢于斗争) and “to be good at struggle” (善于斗争).²⁷ While Mao positioned struggle as a tool for confronting contradictions within the people, especially between the working and middle classes, today's Chinese leadership invokes the term in reference to national development, economic modernization, and geopolitical resilience. This includes campaigns like the Anti-Japanese War, the U.S.-China trade conflict, and the ongoing push for international recognition. Although the notion of “continuous struggle” remains a consistent theme in official rhetoric, Mao's specific language of class antagonism and proletarian revolution is conspicuously absent.²⁸

²⁶ “China's Xi Declares Victory in Ending Extreme Poverty” *BBC News*, February 25, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-56194622>

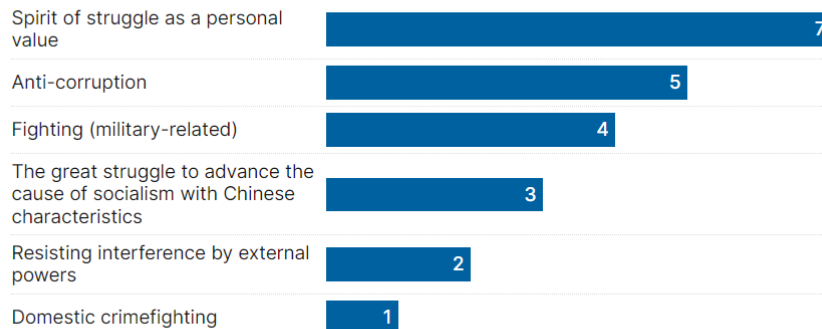
²⁷ Prytherch, Mallie, and Patricia M Kim. “Douzheng: Unraveling Xi Jinping's Call for ‘Struggle.’” *Brookings*, January 18, 2024. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/douzheng-unraveling-xi-jinpings-call-for-struggle/>.

²⁸ The Flag Web, (旗网), 习近平斗争精神 (Xi on talks of the spirit of Struggle).

<http://www.qizhiwang.org.cn/n1/2021/0519/c437183-32107748.html> (This is like a list of quotes where struggle is

This shift reflects a deeper ideological reorientation. Unlike Mao's era, in which revolution was predicated on violent class struggle and the denunciation of the bourgeoisie, today's leadership has embraced a unifying and inclusive vocabulary. When Xi declared the success of China's poverty alleviation campaign in 2021, he referred to it not as a political battle but as "a cooperative program" (一个相互协同的系统工程).²⁹ Such language reveals a fundamental transformation: with the rise of a new middle class and the reconfiguration of China's social hierarchy, a politics based on internal antagonism no longer serves the Party's agenda. In order to maintain national unity and political stability, the leadership now channels the idea of struggle toward external challenges and abstract threats, entities that can be defined and redefined to serve evolving political goals.³⁰

Usage context of *douzhen* in Xi's 20th Party Congress report



Source: Xi Jinping's Report at the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China.

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Indeed, the Party's

interpretive flexibility has allowed "struggle" to encompass a wide range of political objectives.

The 20th Party Congress report, analyzed by institutions such as the Brookings Institution, shows

emphasized)

²⁹ Xinhua news, 习近平关切事|脱贫攻坚 全面胜利. (Xi's matters of concern: Poverty alleviation, full victory!),

http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2021-02/25/c_1127140205.htm

³⁰ Xinhua, Full Text of the Xi Jinping's speech at first session of the 14th NPC.

<https://english.news.cn/20230314/6b2d989ff9f84d35bfcdb0f68edef17e/c.html>

that the term struggle(斗争 *douzheng*) is frequently deployed in contexts including anti-corruption, law enforcement, and safeguarding national sovereignty.³¹ Although some domestic applications remain, such as tackling organized crime or promoting socialist values, most references to struggle now pertain to external domains or state-administered initiatives that avoid invoking sensitive internal divides.

The empirical data demonstrates the enduring strategic value of Maoist terminology in legitimizing state authority. The varied interpretation of “struggle” has grown to encompass more than Mao’s belief that struggle is inherently violent, that it is not a “dinner party.”³² Instead, struggle can be applied to issues in non-violent ways, such as to peacefully stabilizing the U.S.-China relationship, which is a core orientation of the Chinese international relations policy.³³ These new struggles, though originated from Mao’s thinking of contradiction and relied on his strong legacy in China, refer to a different challenge ahead: one of greater scope, lesser violence, and much more variability in the interpretations. Selective usage of Mao’s legacy provides historical depth and revolutionary credibility while allowing the leadership to avoid the destabilizing implications of class warfare. Whether this transformation represents a clever ideological adaptation or a contradictory hollowing-out of Maoist ideals remains open to interpretation. What is clear, however, is that struggle has been recast as a flexible and contextually contingent tool, one that both draws and distances itself from its Maoist origins.

Legacies of Mao Zedong thought without Mao

³¹Prytherch, Mallie, and Patricia M Kim. “Douzheng: Unraveling Xi Jinping’s Call for ‘Struggle.’” Brookings, January 18, 2024. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/douzheng-unraveling-xi-jinpings-call-for-struggle/>.

³² Mao Tse-tung, Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_2.htm p.28

³³ Shanghai Observer, 外交部：不能“主”整个中美关系, (Ministry of Foreign Affairs: don’t let competition dictate U.S.-China relations), <https://www.jfdaily.com/news/detail?id=805556>

This paper has argued that there exists a selective reinterpretation of Mao Zedong's concept of "class struggle," now transformed into a more generalized discourse of "struggle" under contemporary Chinese leadership. One notable caveat, however, is that since the Deng Xiaoping's era, whose immediate proximity to Mao required an explicit reckoning with his legacy, Chinese leaders have largely refrained from directly quoting Mao when discussing the idea of struggle. This avoidance should not be mistaken for a rejection of Mao's ideological contributions. Rather, it reflects the Chinese Communist Party's reluctance to fully endorse the more controversial aspects of Mao's rule. Deng addressed the legacy by separating the person from his thoughts. He argued "Mao, like any other man had his defects and made errors."³⁴ At other instances, he urged for "holding high the banner of Mao Zedong Thought." This dual approach—acknowledging the man's flaws while preserving the utility of his thought—enabled the CCP to continue drawing selectively from Maoist ideology without endorsing it wholesale.

Since then, Chinese leaders have largely moved away from explicitly referencing Mao when articulating Maoist-inspired policies or ideological positions. This shift signals an institutional strategy: while individuals are fallible, ideological principles can be reshaped and selectively retained. As a result, Mao Zedong Thought has remained a significant part of the Party's ideological toolkit, albeit in an altered and curated form. For example, when Mao's theory of "prolonged class struggle" became untenable in light of China's evolving social structure, the leadership repurposed the terminology into a more abstract notion of "prolonged struggle," thus maintaining ideological continuity while adapting to contemporary needs. In this way, the leadership's silence on Mao's name should not be interpreted as a break in ideological

³⁴ J. Blanchette, *China's New Red Guards: The Return of Radicalism and the Rebirth of Mao Zedong* (Oxford University Press, 2019), <https://books.google.com/books?id=UCSQDwAAQBAJ>. p.33

continuity, but rather as part of a broader strategy of ideological inheritance and adaptation. A more nuanced analysis of this selective continuity offers deeper insight into how modern Chinese governance negotiates historical legacies.

Looking ahead, future research might explore how this semantic transformation of revolutionary vocabulary contributes to the durability or potential instability of the CCP's authority in the present day. For instance, how might the Belt and Road Initiative translate Mao's concept of class struggle into an international framework, especially in relation to Mao's "Three Worlds Theory?" Much of the CCP's current rhetoric challenging U.S. hegemony draws upon Mao's framing of contradictions between "ourselves and the enemy." The evolving use of Maoist discourse in foreign policy contexts presents fertile ground for future inquiry into the lasting significance and strategic flexibility of Mao Zedong Thought.

Conclusion

"Struggle," as invoked in contemporary Chinese political rhetoric, has evolved far beyond the confines of the class-based antagonism envisioned by Mao Zedong. Nevertheless, the enduring ideological construct of prolonged struggle continues to underpin the Chinese Communist Party's narrative of national perseverance. This rhetorical framework reinforces values such as endurance (吃苦), diligence (耐劳), and the imperative of unity under a single party and national identity. Rather than abandon Mao's intellectual legacy, the Party has reinterpreted his language of struggle to suit the priorities of a modernizing state—transforming revolutionary confrontation into a call for collective effort and national rejuvenation.

This process reflects a broader strategy of ideological inheritance and historical adaptation. While class struggle constitutes only one dimension of Mao Zedong Thought, and

Maoism itself comprises only a fraction of China's expansive historical tradition, these selectively curated elements are repurposed to construct a cohesive national memory. Through this approach, the Party draws on the symbolic authority of Mao's thought while deliberately minimizing the more controversial and personalistic aspects of his legacy. In doing so, it preserves Mao's ideological utility without reinforcing the cult of personality that once defined his rule, thereby maintaining continuity without fully confronting the interpretive complexities of the past.

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