



Press Release

The Specter of Maoism

Freiburg Sinologist and historian Daniel Leese receives ERC
Starting Grant worth 1.44 million euros

The Communist Party dictatorship in the People's Republic of China continues to exist – despite the horrors of the Maoist regime, in which millions of people suffered from persecution or were executed for political reasons. How did the perpetrators and victims manage to continue living together after the death of Mao Zedong and the beginning of the reform era in 1978? Was there a reckoning with the Maoist past after all? And how did the Communist Party succeed in keeping hold of its monopoly on power despite its disastrous political record? These are a few of the key questions **Daniel Leese**, professor in history and politics of modern China at the Institute of Sinology of the University of Freiburg, attempts to answer with the help of a 1.44-million-euro ERC Starting Grant for pioneering projects from the European Research Council (ERC). It is the first time a researcher from the University of Freiburg has been successful in this funding scheme with a proposal from the humanities.

Even today, public discussion and scholarship on Maoist crimes is only possible within strictly defined limits. The question of who is responsible for the Cultural Revolution was settled symbolically in the form of a party resolution and a show trial against members of the so-called Gang of Four, led by Mao's widow Jiang Qing. The resolution states that Mao is politically accountable for straying from the "right" path of communist development. In contrast to the Gang of Four, however, he was not found to be guilty of any criminal wrongdoing.

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■ In order to avoid endangering the basis of its legitimacy, the Communist Party did not tolerate more complex attempts at accounting for Maoist crimes in public. Within the party, however, and even outside of it, many victims received compensation and some of the perpetrators were punished through legal or bureaucratic means – such as reprimands, relocations, or exclusion from the party. Even though the archives remain confidential, there is a wealth of quasi-archival material from the Maoist period. Along with internal party documents, local chronicles, and interviews with contemporary witnesses, this material will form the basis of the research project and will be made available on a database.

During the five-year funding period, Daniel Leese and his team of six researchers plan to conduct selected case studies on the political and societal consequences of the break with Maoism with support from project partners including the Max Planck Institute of Foreign and International Criminal Law in Freiburg. In this way, the researchers hope to make this period accessible for comparative research on nations coming to terms with the legacy of dictatorial despotism.

The ERC Grant is one of the most prestigious research grants in Europe. The sole evaluation criterion is the scientific excellence of the applicants and their proposals, which are evaluated in a two-stage selection procedure.

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