

BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS

Popular History and the Scholars

MAO

The Unknown Story

BY JUNG CHANG AND JON HALLIDAY

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REVIEWED BY CHARLES W. HAYFORD

If you visit Tiananmen Square in Beijing, you can't avoid the huge portrait of Mao Zedong that presides over tourists, an amazing number of automobiles, and his own mausoleum. Few who see that portrait today think of Mao's classic slogans: "to rebel is justified," "a single spark can start a prairie fire," "never forget class struggle," much less the catastrophic famines of the 1950s. The Party's claim to legitimacy has shifted from Marxism and revolution to economic development and nationalism. Mao is now teamed with Confucius and Buddha as symbols of China's historic national greatness, all in support of the present leadership's program of political stability and economic growth. Ironically, while this leadership calls upon Japan to acknowledge its crimes of the 1930s and 1940s, there is no parallel move to examine Mao's history.

In America, eagerness to explain Mao's revolution, to open relations, and, for some, sympathy for Maoist ideals, once colored scholarship. Richard Nixon's visit in 1972 changed things. Government policy changed from hostile "non-recognition" to dealing with China as an anti-Soviet partner. American scholars, reporters, and government China watchers could live in China; they saw Maoism in practice and quickly realized it was not what they had read about. A new generation of scholarship then reassessed Mao and his revolution.¹ Recent Mao biographies readably synthesize new findings and raise arguments to a new level. While some are sympathetic to the original ideals of the revolution,² all recognize both the considerable gains after 1949 and the price paid in blood.³

Therefore it was surprising that Chang Jung and Jon Halliday's *Mao: The Unknown Story* was greeted as a revelation. The first printing of 65,000 copies met with initial warm reviews in newspapers and news magazines. Reviewers predicted that the book's discoveries would end the residual Maoism on American campuses, without, however, specifying which strains or which campuses. President George Bush savored it for proving the superiority of freedom. The next wave of reviews was written by brand name China scholars, some approving, some reserved.⁴ Eventually, industrial strength specialists took charge. The heavyweight *China Review* ran detailed critiques, the Association for Asian Studies had a roundtable at its 2006

Annual Meeting, and Harvard held a symposium. Most offered critical, even devastating judgments.⁵

Mao is a great vivid tale worthy of the author of *Wild Swans*,⁶ a memoir history of Chang's grandmother, a bound-foot matriarch, and her mother, who joined the Revolution in the 1940s. Chang writes that, as a Red Guard in the 1960s, she sang that Mao was the "red sun shining in our hearts." The redness in Chang's heart is now rage. *Mao* moves at breakneck speed, with the appeal of a gory traffic accident from which we can't avert our eyes. The strengths are obvious: vigor, clarity, engagement.

Why the difference between the warm general reviewers and critical scholars? Were those first reviewers fooled by the strong story and bold assertions? Did their lingering Cold War triumphalism feel confirmed by an Orientalist stereotype of Mao as a Red Emperor

rivaling Fu Manchu? Or, on the other hand, were specialist critics jealous of popular authors who sold too many copies or told inconvenient truths? Did they pander to Beijing? Why did the book get under the academic skin?

One consideration is that there are differing modes of history.

Popular vs. Academic History

The public and scholars both value history but tend to see it differently.⁷ To put it in terms of caricature, the audience for popular history feels that academic historians write "more and more about less and less for fewer and fewer people." Academic histories are abstruse, written in jargon, aimed at other historians, and steeped in theory. Popular histories (and many textbooks) tend to structure their stories around individuals and a clear sequence of events, which are selected because they lead to and justify the present. They tend to downplay complex institutions, social and economic structures, collective action, or long-term trends. Causation is straightforward: Events are explained by the motives and actions of important people. Popular histories are titled "hidden," "true," "unknown," or "forgotten," partly as a public relations gambit, but also from a feeling that political correctness, academic laziness, or tacit conspiracies hide the "real story." If it was possible for something to happen (such as the Chinese discovery of North America), it did.⁸ Events are as concrete and unchangeable as the mountains and hills, so research is simply gathering the facts; to describe events is as straightforward as making a map.

Professional historians, on the other hand, argue that the apparatus of footnotes, reviews, and specialization is necessary because, like physicians or lawyers, they operate not simply as individuals but as a profession. Scholarship is not self-contained but part of a discourse in which what is a fact or event changes as new concerns and questions arise; events are facts called into being by present inquiry.⁹ Narratives are perilous because they depend on who is telling them. For professional historians, revisionism is necessary and honest; to the public, it is anathema, comparable to a cartographer shifting the Rockies from Montana to Vermont. These differences help explain why academics visiting popular-history-land suffer culture shock; the place looks familiar but operates by foreign rules.

Mao: The Unknown Story fits this pattern. The conception of events, facts, and evidence fit into the popular history category, and



Mao's character and actions explain the hidden story of modern China. Chang and Halliday do not so much argue their case as offer facts that illustrate their initial position. Bravely battling culture shock, Andrew Nathan, an academic denied entry to the People's Republic because the government objected to his publications, conceded in his review that research is difficult when archives are closed and interviewees cannot speak safely. But in the end, many of their discoveries come from "sources that cannot be checked, others are openly speculative or are based on circumstantial evidence, and some are untrue." Nathan concludes that Chang and Halliday are "magpies: every bright piece of evidence goes in, no matter where it comes from or how reliable it is. Jade and plastic together, the pieces are arranged in a stark mosaic, which portrays a possible but not a plausible Mao."¹⁰

Still, academic critics did not dismiss *Mao* generically. Popular history is not by nature bad history, but still depends on evidence and argument. Let us choose a few salient points of contention.

Seventy Million Deaths in Peacetime?

The most striking and widely repeated assertion in the book is the first sentence:

Mao Tse-tung, who for decades held absolute power over the lives of one-quarter of the world's population, was responsible for well over 70 million deaths in peacetime, more than any other twentieth-century leader.

Arithmetic and morality make troubling partners. Laura Hein confronted the "really hard math" of what we might call competitive holocausts. Which is worst: the Rape of Nanking? Stalin and Hitler's murders? Atomic bombs? She observes, "the traditional scholarly methodologies, statistical and archival research, just seem inadequate to this comparative task. Do we add? Multiply when most of the dead are children? Subtract the ones in uniform?"

Hein goes on: "I have a different standard depending on who is speaking. It does not bother me when survivors insist that their particular brand of hell on earth was uniquely inhumane. In their own experience, that statement is the literal truth. But the same words are more suspect from those who viewed from a distance."¹¹ Yet Hein also insists that getting the numbers right does matter; exaggeration or selective use of evidence is wrong even (or especially) when your cause is right.

One prominent researcher on twentieth century "democides" (mass political killings) accepts Chang and Halliday's estimate, but in an undergraduate seminar at University of California at San Diego, Tom Worger tried to do "the really hard math," to find where the figure of 70 million came from. He found no explanation or breakdown in the book, only a scattered series of guesses, double counting, fabrications, and circular reasoning.

Still, if "only" 30 million died, would it weaken the case against Mao? Scarcely. But Worger concludes that "statistical inflation to prove a point," ironically, was the "very reason for much of the famine of the Great Leap Forward."¹² Instead of learning from Mao's mistakes, did Chang and Halliday echo them?

A Short History of the Long March

Political control depends not only on punishments and rewards, but also on a sense of legitimacy embodied in stories, myths or legends.¹³ The heroic story of the Long March in Edgar Snow's *Red Star Over China* (1937) was central in creating revolutionary legiti-

macy, but it has now been shown that the Party crafted this story and fed it to a credulous Snow, who then published it in both Chinese and English versions which shaped perceptions in China and abroad.¹⁴

Chang and Halliday dispute Snow at virtually every point: Mao, they say, was nearly left behind; was carried on a palanquin in the style of an emperor; there was no fight at the famous Luding Bridge; and the Red Army, far from bravely vanquishing enemies, escaped only because of moles in Chiang Kaishek's camp. This revisionist version impressed the initial reviewers who did not check other recent works. These contend that Snow's version was exaggerated but not fabricated, that moles (for whom there is no clear evidence) could not explain Mao's escape, and that in any case the March produced cohesion among the survivors. Even women marchers, who resented their bad treatment and neglect, felt that the March was heroic.¹⁵ What is troubling in Chang and Halliday's account is that it looks only for confirming evidence, which is accepted at face value, and does not engage other important scholarship.

Mao as Stalin's Puppet

On other questions Chang and Halliday score better. Many early academic studies, perhaps to counteract knee jerk Cold War charges, attributed too much independence and originality to Mao. Chang and Halliday's charge, that Mao in effect enrolled in Stalin's correspondence course, is haphazard in its documentation and reasoning, but is in the end convincing. Still, to my mind, Philip Short's *Mao* better describes Soviet direction and Chinese initiative. For instance, his chapter "The Comintern Takes Charge" shows that the CCP in the 1920s at first ignored Stalin's orders to rely on the peasantry, and only after Mao visited his home turf in Hunan did he discover peasant revolutionary potential. This was a Chinese response to a Chinese situation with Soviet tools. Chang and Halliday do convincingly show that Stalin gave Mao crucial support to become leader of the party. But in the years before Pearl Harbor, the Soviets focused on the Japanese menace, and gave more support to Chiang Kaishek than to Mao. Both biographies agree that, in the 1950s, China was Sovietized from the Constitution down to the design for street lamps. Questions remain: Did Sovietization spring from Mao's personality, from fear and rejection of American power, from the need for nation-building ideology, or other assorted possibilities?

The Cultural Revolution

The charge in the book's opening sentence that Mao "held absolute power" is an example of explanation by personality, or rather, avoidance of explanation. True, only Mao could have started the Cultural Revolution. But once the genie was out of the bottle, nobody, even Mao, could get it back in. Maybe "a single spark can start a prairie fire"—but not if you throw it in a water bucket instead of a gas tank. We must go beyond Mao to understand why his action produced an uncontrollable conflagration.

Bad Breath, Bad Sex, Bad Father, Bad Mao?

Mao's refusal to take baths or brush his teeth, his sexual use of young women, and his rapacity towards both enemies and old comrades are well documented in the memoir by Li Zhisui, Mao's physician,¹⁶ but Chang and Halliday's assertions of his neglect of his family, delight in violence, and ambition to rule the world seem speculative. Did they do to Mao what he did to his enemies—deny their humanity?

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Perry Link, another scholar denied entry to the PRC, conjectures that Chang and Halliday “may have feared that to acknowledge anything beneficial would weaken their case against Mao or would play into the hands of those who argue that, despite all, the emergence of New China made it worthwhile to pay the price of Mao.” This fear, suggests Link, leads them to “omit the good that happened during the Mao years, even if it was not of Mao’s doing,” and to ignore those Chinese who were idealistic followers of a most non-idealistic leader. Chang and Halliday thus “feed the assumption, which is deeply embedded in Chinese political culture, that if only the good people can gain the upper hand, everything will be fine.”¹⁷

Mao Zedong Thought

In Chang and Halliday’s view, Mao was moved only by power, sadism, and money (and not so much by money). Many reviewers concluded Mao was a madman. This gets us off the hook. We don’t have to explain the complex history of the time because, by definition, a madman’s actions are mad and can’t be explained. Ideas don’t come into it.

Yet ideas were crucial. Politically aware Chinese in the 1930s and 1940s yearned for national strength to attack exploitation, backwardness, and political weakness, and were united in opposing foreign aggression. In effect, they reasoned, if you want to smash a big stone you need a big hammer. Mao convinced them that Revolution was that hammer (they did not see that a power strong enough to attack those problems was too powerful to control). Timothy Cheek’s anthology¹⁸ suggests Mao had a knack for framing political and social issues, ideological perceptiveness, adaptability (though not great originality), and ruthless organizational talent. His ideas and strategies were ultimately disastrous, but their appeal cannot be ignored, as saying “he was mad” would lead us to do.

Can We Teach It?

The problem now is not Maoism but how to teach about it¹⁹ and whether we can use Chang and Halliday’s book. One strategy would be to take specific topics, compare them with the sources in the notes or with other accounts, and let students work out their own conclusions. They could test the observations about academic and popular history I sketched above. But few classes will have time for this. The book could be one of several resources for Deborah Pellikan’s imaginative lesson plan on the Cultural Revolution.²⁰ Students could use William Joseph’s Web site to find reviews, then analyze them for points of view, use of evidence, and modes of argument. But again, this would be possible in only a few classes.

Sadly, then, I conclude that this compelling narrative is not usable in most college or high school classes as a sole or main source, even when there is time. On the other hand, we are fortunate in having other excellent biographies of Mao in a range of sizes and styles. In the words of Arthur Waldron, “Mao lives.”²¹ ■

NOTES

1. Joseph Esherick assesses these changes in “Ten Theses on the Chinese Revolution,” *Modern China* 21.1 (January 1995), 45–76, reprinted in Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, ed., *Twentieth-Century China: New Approaches* (London; New York: Routledge, 2003), 37–65.
2. For example, Lee Feigon, *Mao: A Reinterpretation* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002).
3. Ross Terrill, *Mao: A Biography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980); Jonathan Spence, *Mao Zedong* (Penguin, 1999); Philip Short, *Mao: A Life* (New York: Holt, 2000); Michael J. Lynch, *Mao* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004).

4. Arthur Waldron, “Mao Lives,” *Commentary* (October 2005), 31–38; Steven Mosher, “The Real Mao,” *Washington Times* (October 3, 2005).
5. *China Review* 55 (January 2006), 95–139. William Joseph has posted links to reviews at <http://www.wellesley.edu/Polisci/wj/ChinaLinks-New/chang-halliday.html>.
6. Jung Chang, *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991).
7. Keith C. Barton, “Research on Students’ Historical Learning and Teaching,” (American Historical Association) *Perspectives* (October 2004), 19–21; Samuel S. Wineburg, “Probing the Depths of Students’ Historical Knowledge,” (American Historical Association) *Perspectives* 30.3 (March 1992); Samuel S. Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001). I have also benefitted from Kristen Stapleton, “Popular Histories of China and the American Reading Public” (Columbia Modern China Seminar, April 20, 2006).
8. Charles Hayford, “Popular History, Academic History, and Bunkum (Gavin Menzies 1421 on H-ASIA),” *History News Network* (November 28, 2005), <http://hnn.us/articles/18698.html>.
9. This is not postmodern invention: Carl Becker, “What Are Historical Facts?” *Western Political Quarterly* 8.3 (September 1955), 327–340, given at the American Historical Association meeting of 1926.
10. Andrew Nathan, “Jade and Plastic,” *London Review of Books* 27: 22 (November 17, 2005).
11. Laura Hein, “Doing the Really Hard Math.” *Association of Asian Studies Newsletter* (March 13, 1998). Posted on the *Critical Asian Studies* Web site: http://www.bcasnet.org/articlesandresources/article4_1.htm.
12. Rudy Rummel, “Reevaluated Democide Totals for 20th C. and China,” <http://www.ciolek.com/SPEC/rummel-on-democide-2005.html>; Tom Worger, “The Lone Culprit for 70 Million Deaths?” <http://sdcc17.ucsd.edu/~twan/LoneCulprit.htm>.
13. See the topically organized and annotated Web site “Stefan Landsberger’s Chinese Propaganda Poster Pages”: <http://www.iisg.nl/%7Elandsberger/>. The Maoist version is performed in the Cultural Revolution pageant “The East Is Red,” clips of which are at the Web site “Morning Sun”: <http://www.morning-sun.org/east/index.html>.
14. Anne-Marie Brady, *Making the Foreign Serve China: Managing Foreigners in the People’s Republic* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 42–50.
15. Andrew McEwen and Ed Jocelyn, *The Long March: The True Story Behind the Legendary Journey That Made Mao’s China* (London: Constable & Robinson, 2006); Shuyin Sun, *Long March* (London: Harper Collins, 2006); Helen Praeger Young, *Choosing Revolution: Chinese Women Soldiers on the Long March* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001).
16. Li Zhisui, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao* (New York: Random House, 1996).
17. Perry Link, “An Abnormal Mind,” *Times Literary Supplement*, August 14, 2005.
18. Timothy Cheek, ed., *Mao Zedong and China’s Revolutions: A Brief History with Documents* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).
19. The problem has been often discussed in these pages: Timothy Cheek, “Mao and China in World History High School Textbooks,” and Philip F. Williams “Reasonably Informative, but Downplaying the Ravages of Dictatorship: Recent Pre-collegiate US Textbook Treatments of Mao Zedong’s Rule,” *Education About Asia* 10.2 (Fall 2005), 19–23.
20. Deborah Pellikan, “(Lesson Plan) The Chinese Cultural Revolution: Dynamic Times, Dramatic Lessons for Today’s Kids,” *Education About Asia* 10.3 (Winter 2005), 50–57.
21. Waldron, “Mao Lives.”

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