

REASONABLY INFORMATIVE, BUT DOWNPLAYING THE RAVAGES OF DICTATORSHIP

RECENT PRE-COLLEGIATE US TEXTBOOK TREATMENTS OF MAO ZEDONG'S RULE

By Philip F. Williams

Although the 1960s have often enjoyed a reputation for youthful ferment, that decade's US published pre-collegiate history textbook still focused mostly on Western civilization and American history in particular. Asia east of the Levant seldom entered the picture, except occasionally through a current-events context in social studies courses. While some contemporary back-to-the-basics intellectuals express nostalgia for a simpler era when Euro-American civilization was studied to the virtual exclusion of Asian cultures, most scholars find the contemporary turn to world history a welcome development in the rapidly shrinking global village of today.



This essay's discussion of the two textbooks, to which I shall refer in abbreviated manner by their authorial teams of Ellis and Esler and Beck et al., properly view history as having global dimensions and a multi-tiered structure. Various Asian cultures that arose in relative independence from the West are rightly portrayed as major players on the world stage. For example, Beck et al. turn from an initial chapter on the European Renaissance and Reformation to a subsequent chapter on the Islamic empires of the Ottoman Turks and the Central Asian Mughals, and later cover aspects of China, Japan, and India along with the usual discussion of Euro-American dynamism in the wake of the Age of Discovery. Ellis and Esler take a global survey approach, moving from prehistory through the cradles of civilization in Asia and Africa all the way to highlights of post-World-War-II history on all five major continents.

This essay hones in on these textbooks' tendency to portray the history of powerful modern non-Western nations in the manner of Thomas Carlyle—with a focus upon the influential feats of one or two “Great Men,” such as China's Mao Zedong, India's Mohandas Gandhi, and Soviet Russia's Lenin and Stalin. Their photos adorn the pages, and some of their notable sayings are highlighted in large-font type in eye-catching boxed formatting. The human interest within the struggles and triumphs of these individual leaders' life stories tends to draw in youthful readers who might otherwise read little or no history, but a major pitfall of this approach is its relative neglect of broad societal and cultural developments whose impact looms larger than that of any single leader.

The following criticisms of these textbooks are provided not out of disparagement of the writers' efforts, which are laudable, but instead stem from the hope that future textbooks might attain a higher standard.

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EMPHASES IN COVERAGE OF MODERN CHINESE HISTORY

Both textbooks devote several paragraphs, an unusually large amount of coverage within the few pages allotted to modern Chinese history—to the dramatic epic of the so-called Long March. This “march” was actually a desperate and protracted retreat by Mao Zedong’s Communist Red Army from doggedly pursuing Nationalist Chinese or Guomindang forces during 1934 and 1935—all the way from Ruijin in Jiangxi province within southeastern China’s rustic uplands to northwest China’s hilly Yan’an in Shaanxi province. Each textbook also provides a map that illustrates the route Mao Zedong’s Red Army took in fleeing as far west as Tibetan-speaking regions before turning north and eventually northeast to what would become the Communist wartime capital of Yan’an.

Although the long retreat of 1934–35 manifested the Chinese Communists’ determination and resourcefulness, a more significant point that both textbooks missed is how Mao’s ideological apparatus and adroit use of public relations cleverly transformed this loss of over two-thirds of the Red Army into a glorious moral victory over the Nationalist Chinese government. Chinese intellectuals and writers tended to lean leftward and sympathize with some Communist ideals during the 1930s due to the obvious shortcomings of market economies during the Great Depression, along with lingering disgust over the dictatorial Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek’s bloody attacks on Communists and labor activists in Shanghai and some other Chinese cities during 1927–1928. The legend of the Long March soon grew larger than life—to the extent that a dozen years after the genesis of Long March lore, Chiang Kai-shek (or Jiang Jieshi) ineptly diverted his armies from rational military operations to capture the mythologized provincial town of Yan’an in 1947 during the peak of the civil war between the two party-states—only to discover that the Communist armies had alertly made a temporary withdrawal from Yan’an to regroup for more strategic and ultimately decisive battles in North China against Nationalist armies.

A more satisfactory area of emphasis by both textbooks is the degree to which the initial successes of the first Five-Year Plan of the early-to-mid 1950s were followed by Mao’s disasters of rural communization and the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s and very early 1960s. However, it was not “merely” 20 million Chinese who starved to death in the wake of these destructive policies, as Beck et al. claim (484). An estimated thirty million rural Chinese starved to death during the resulting record-breaking famine of 1959–1962, making this by far the deadliest famine in the world’s recorded history. Furthermore, it was a man-made famine, not the result of freakishly bad weather, as has been often claimed, including by Ellis and Esler (863). Weather patterns throughout East Asia were

actually quite favorable during the Great Leap Forward famine years, according both to meteorologists in China’s neighboring countries and to accounts from even pro-regime writers such as Zhang Xianliang. Official mismanagement and the misreporting of grain harvests are among the main factors that led to the famine, when grain warehouses were often mostly full even while rural folk in the vicinity were starving.

OVERESTIMATIONS OF MAO AS AN INNOVATOR, EXCEPT IN PSYCHOLOGICAL MANIPULATION

The textbook authors overemphasize the supposedly innovative dependence of Mao Zedong on rural recruits or “peasant” soldiers to form his Red Army (and later the “People’s Liberation Army” or PLA). At first glance, Mao’s move appears to be innovative within the context of Marxist dogma, which points to the urban proletariat as the core of any Communist revolution, while dismissing any progressive tendencies among farmers afflicted by “rural idiocy,” to quote Marx’s insulting put-down. Yet the best of Mao’s biographers have long known that he was far more fond of reading centuries-old Chinese novels and histories about rural uprisings and Sherwood-Forest-type brigandage than he was in poring over repetitious and dry Marxist-Leninist tracts that eulogize the urban proletariat. Mao Zedong could be better understood as the modern-day version of a strategically shrewd Chinese emperor-to-be who was carried to his imperial throne on the backs of a largely rural-based rebel army—a sort of latter-day Zhu Yuanzhang, a similarly coarse provincial man who founded the Ming dynasty in 1368 and was also known for his harsh and demeaning punishment of any scholars and officials who displeased him.

Mao’s record on moving China towards national sovereignty and gender equity is also a mixed one. By 1943, the previous Chinese Nationalist regime had already successfully pressured foreign governments such as Britain and the US to abrogate what little remained of the unfair or “unequal” treaties that had given various foreign governments and foreign interests special perks such as extraterritorial privileges in China. Therefore, Mao’s claim on 1 October 1949 that China had finally “stood up” in the world’s family of nations with the founding of the People’s Republic was at least six years too late. Furthermore, while the Maoists’ new marriage and divorce law seemed to even the playing field between men and women, this law was not dissimilar to the same “bourgeois” body of civil law that the Maoist regime had mostly swept out the door, erasing decades of gradual progress in Chinese jurisprudence that dated back to the late Qing dynasty. It was only after Mao’s death in 1976 that his successors in the PRC government were gradually able to bring back a comprehensive legal code, which was belatedly estab-

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lished in 1979 for the first time in the PRC's history—three decades after the government's founding in 1949.

A far more innovative achievement of Mao Zedong was his insight into how to alternately intimidate and cajole potential and imagined adversaries into submission through such psychological pressure tactics as "thought remolding" and "struggle sessions." Psychologists such as Robert Lifton have interviewed numerous refugees from Mao-Era jails and prison camps where these techniques of manipulation were applied in their most concentrated and sophisticated form, and have remarked upon how even highly educated and rational ex-prisoners have often had a difficult time deprogramming themselves after their release from confinement. These Maoist techniques of psychological manipulation have often taken advantage of innate human suggestibility, particularly when an incarcerated individual has been separated from his support network of family and friends and is surrounded by veteran inmates who are trying to curry favor with the prison warden and obtain possible early release—in return for the meritorious achievement of having pressured another inmate to confess his crimes, real or imagined.

LINGUISTIC ERRORS

Nobody expects high-school world history textbook writers to know all the languages of the cultures they describe, but a certain amount of double-checking of spellings and pronunciations is obligatory—by press copy editors, if not by the authors themselves. Both textbooks make gross errors in the pronunciation of the last two syllables in Jiang Jieshi's trisyllabic name—which sounds like "Jeeahng Jyeh-shur" but is mistakenly rendered as "Jyawng jeh-shee" [sic] in Ellis and Esler (736) and "Jee-ahng jee-shee" [sic] in Beck et al. (402); the latter rendering also gives the reader the misleading impression that Jiang's monosyllabic surname has two syllables. Beck et al. also misspell the given name of one of Mao Zedong's wives (403) and both syllables of the Communists' former stronghold of Ruijin in Jiangxi as "Riujan" (sic, 404).

What these errors in spelling and pronunciation suggest is that the authors are all either basing their guesses about how a Chinese vowel ending like "-ie" should be pronounced on French or on some other inappropriate analogue, or else repeating an error in pronunciation that some other non-Chinese author has already made. Admittedly, China's standard Pinyin system of romanization is seriously flawed in the way that the vowel "i" has several different pronunciations, depending on which consonants and vowels precede or follow it. However, Chinese language courses are nowadays taught at scores of universities nationwide and in virtually every state, and there are Chinese pronunciation tools on many Web sites, so it

would not be so difficult for a textbook author or press editor to find a knowledgeable resource person to double-check Chinese pronunciations and spellings.

AN INACCURATE CONTRAST BETWEEN MAO THE "LEADER" AND STALIN THE "DICTATOR"

Mao Zedong promulgated a cult of personality in the 1960s that far exceeded in intensity what his fellow dictator Josef Stalin had managed to achieve in the 1940s or early 1950s. Chinese songs and medallions represented Mao as a sort of Sun God who radiated warm rays of sunlight. And when Mao insisted on having his way in a given policy decision, he would brook no more dissent than Stalin would have—to the extent of forcing some of his most loyal generals (e.g., Peng Dehuai) and dedicated Party leaders (e.g., Liu Shaoqi) into the disgrace of cashiering, house arrest, and an early death through subsequent mistreatment in prison. Demographers such as R. J. Rummel have concluded that the overall lethality of Mao's famine-riddled and purge-happy reign could be compared only to those of Hitler and Stalin in the twentieth century.

Unfortunately, the writers of these textbooks carefully avoid referring to Mao as a dictator, instead using a bland title like "leader of the Chinese Communist Party" in Beck et al., even when referring to Stalin on the same page as "dictator" (410). The inconsistency whereby Stalin is frankly termed a dictator while Mao is characterized as something much more palatable and bland has become so common in and out of academe as to go almost unnoticed. It is depressingly rare to find a leading scholar in Chinese studies such as Andrew Nathan of Columbia University who dares to apply the "d" word to Mao Zedong, such as in Nathan's comments about the hair-raising biography of Mao by his long-time personal physician Li Zhisui, "perhaps the most revealing book ever written about a dictator." Overall, one cannot blame our textbook writers for having assumed the same sort of cautiously deferential stance toward Mao Zedong that they have noticed in a great many academic secondary source materials on the "Chairman." ■

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