Was Mao Really a Monster?

The academic response to Chang and Halliday's *Mao: The Unknown Story*

Edited by
Gregor Benton and **Lin Chun**

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Mao: The Unknown Story by Jung Chang and Jon Halliday was published in 2005 to a great fanfare. The book portrays Mao as a monster – equal to or worse than Hitler and Stalin – and a fool who won power by native cunning and ruled by terror. It received a rapturous welcome from reviewers in the popular press and rocketed to the top of the worldwide bestseller list. Few works on China by writers in the West have achieved its impact.

Reviews by serious China scholars, however, tended to take a different view. Most were sharply critical, questioning its authority and the authors' methods, arguing that Chang and Halliday's book is not a work of balanced scholarship, as it purports to be, but a highly selective and even polemical study that sets out to demonise Mao.

This book brings together 14 reviews of *Mao: The Unknown Story* – all by internationally well-regarded specialists in modern Chinese history, and mostly published in relatively specialised scholarly journals. Taken together they demonstrate that Chang and Halliday's portrayal of Mao is in many places woefully inaccurate. While agreeing that Mao had many faults and was responsible for some disastrous policies, they conclude that a more balanced picture is needed.

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2010
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
270 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

Typeset in Times New Roman by Pindar NZ, Auckland, New Zealand
Printed and bound in Great Britain by TJ International, Padstow, Cornwall

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Was Mao really a monster?: the academic response to Chang and
Halliday's Mao, the unknown story / edited by Gregor Benton and Lin Chun.
p. cm.
"Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada" — T.p. verso.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Chang, Jung, 1952- Mao. 2. Mao, Zedong, 1893–1976. 3. Heads of
state—China—Biography. I. Benton, Gregor. II. Lin, Chun, 1952-
DS778.M3C3839 2009
951.05092—dc22 2008055407

ISBN 10: 0-415-49329-3 (hbk)
ISBN 10: 0-415-49330-7 (pbk)

ISBN 13: 978-0-415-49329-1 (hbk)
ISBN 13: 978-0-415-49330-7 (pbk)

Contents

Acknowledgements

The Publishers and the Editors would like to thank the following for permission to reprint their material:

Delia Davin for kind permission to reprint her 'Dark Tales of Mao the Merciless', first published in *The Times Higher Educational Supplement*, 12 August 2005, p. 22.

London Review of Books and Andrew J. Nathan for permission to reprint Andrew J. Nathan, 'Jade and Plastic', originally published in *London Review of Books*, vol. 27, no. 22 (17 November 2005) pp. 10–13. This article first appeared in the *London Review of Books*. www.lrb.co.uk

The New York Review of Books and Jonathan Spence for kind permission to reprint Jonathan Spence, 'Portrait of a Monster', NYRB, vol. 52, no. 17, 3 November 2005.

The China Journal and the authors for permission to reprint 'The Portrayal of Opportunism, Betrayal, and Manipulation in Mao's Rise to Power' by Gregor Benton and Steve Tsang, *The China Journal*, vol. 55, January 2006, pp. 95–106.

The China Journal and Timothy Cheek for kind permission to reprint Timothy Cheek, 'The New Number One Counter-Revolutionary inside the Party: Academic Biography as Mass Criticism', *The China Journal*, vol. 55, January 2006, pp. 109–18.

The China Journal and Lowell Dittmer for kind permission to reprint Lowell Dittmer, 'Pitfalls of Charisma', *The China Journal*, vol. 55, January 2006, pp. 119–28.

The China Journal and Geremie R. Barmé for kind permission to reprint Geremie R. Barmé, 'I'm So Ronree', *The China Journal*, vol. 55, January 2006, pp. 128–39.

David Goodman for kind permission to reprint David Goodman, 'Mao and *The Da Vinci Code*: Conspiracy, Narrative and History', *The Pacific Review*, vol. 19, no. 3, September 2006, pp. 359–84.

Pacific Affairs and Alfred Chan for kind permission to reprint 'Mao: A Super Monster?' originally published in *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 79, no. 1, 2006, pp. 91–103.

Twentieth-Century China and Chen Yung-fa for kind permission to reprint 'Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story*, A Review', translated by Wenjuan Bi with Christopher A. Reed, published by *Twentieth-Century China*, vol. 33, no. 1 (November 2007) pp. 104–13. With thanks also to the translators Christopher A. Reed and Wenjuan Bi for their permission. This review first appeared in Chinese in the *Bulletin of the Institute of Modern History*, no. 2 (2006), pp. 211–19.

Pluto Press for permission to reprint Mobo Gao, '*Mao: The Unknown Story*: An Intellectual Scandal', originally published in *The Battle for China's Past: Mao and the Cultural Revolution* by Mobo Gao, London: Pluto Press, 2008.

Commentary Magazine and Arthur Waldron for kind permission to reprint Arthur Waldron, 'Mao Lives', first published in *Commentary Magazine*, October 2005, pp. 31–8. 'Reprinted from *Commentary*, October 2005, by permission; copyright © 2005 by Commentary, Inc.' (http://www.commentarymagazine.com/searcharchive.cfm?authorKeywords=Arthur%252520%252520Waldron)

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Introduction

Gregor Benton and Lin Chun

In 2005, the British publisher Jonathan Cape launched Jung Chang and Jon Halliday's *Mao: The Unknown Story*, to great fanfare. The book pictures Mao as a liar, ignoramus, fool, philistine, vandal, lecher, glutton, hedonist, drug-peddler, ghoul, bully, thug, coward, posturer, manipulator, psychopath, sadist, torturer, despot, megalomaniac and the greatest mass murderer of the twentieth century – in short, a monster, equal to or worse than Hitler and Stalin. He cared nothing about the fate of the Chinese people and his fellow human beings, or even his close friends and relatives. He was driven by bloodlust and the craving for power and sex. He ruled by terror, led by native cunning, and defeated Chiang Kai-shek by leaning towards Stalin and treacherously insinuating moles and sleepers into the Guomindang.

The book rocketed to the top of the best-seller list in the UK and elsewhere and was hailed as a bombshell, triumph and irrefutable authority. Its success was due in part to the popularity of *Wild Swans* (1991), a family biography of Chang herself, her mother, and her grandmother, which sold 12 million copies and made her an international celebrity; but also due to the rapturous welcome press reviewers gave the expertly marketed *Mao*. The media ferment was in turn part of the larger political context of selective China-bashing in the long aftermath of the Cold War, with Mao still haunting the intellectual debates beyond China's borders about the legitimacy of its post-Mao order. Non-specialist commentators marvelled at the 'authenticity' of the book's scholarship and its 139 pages of references. In *The Guardian*, Lisa Allardice predicted that it would 'shake the world'.[1] In *The New York Times Book Review*, Nicholas Kristof wrote: 'Based on a decade of meticulous interviews and archival research, this magnificent biography methodically demolishes every pillar of Mao's claim to sympathy or legitimacy.'[2] In *The Sunday Times*, Simon Sebag Montefiore called the book 'a triumph … a barrage of revisionist bombshells, and a superb piece of research' and concluded that 'Mao is the greatest monster of them all – the Red Emperor of China'.[3] For Donald Morrison in *Time* magazine, the book had the power of an 'atom bomb'.[4] In *The New York Times*, Michiko Kakutani wrote that it makes 'an impassioned case for Mao as the most monstrous tyrant of all times'.[5] Media commentators, establishment politicians and representatives of the publishers lined up to say the book would completely change the way in which people think of Mao, and indeed change history. George Walden went so far as to call it 'the most powerful, compelling, and

revealing political biography of modern times'. 'Few books are destined to change history', he concluded, 'but this one will'.[6] Some, including Chang herself, voiced the hope it would change even China.

A Chinese translation was issued by Kaifang Publishers in Hong Kong in September 2006, after tortuous negotiations. In Taiwan, the Yuanliu Publishing Company cancelled the contract for another translation because of unrelenting protests by the family and former subordinates of the Nationalist general Hu Zongnan (described in the book as a communist mole) and experts' objections to some of its assertions.[7] In mainland China, the book remains banned – which is ironic given that the authors' general line could be said to support the current official position of abandoning Mao and his revolutions.

Few works on the Chinese Revolution by writers based in the West have ever achieved anything like the impact of *Mao: The Unknown Story*. Its sole competitor in sales terms is Edgar Snow's *Red Star over China*, which was reprinted five times within a month of its publication in London in 1937 (by Gollancz) and led to China taking over from the Spanish Civil War as the international focus of European and American antifascism. Keen (like Chang) to change opinion about the Chinese communists not just in the West but in China, Snow relinquished his copyright on the book and encouraged its translation into Chinese and its underground publication in China, where it also went through many reprints and helped persuade hundreds of patriots to join Mao in Yan'an.[8] But here the likeness ends. The politics and content of the two books contrast starkly. Whereas Snow's helped create Mao's image, in China and the world, Chang and Halliday's seeks to destroy it, from the minutest details of his character and personal life to his grandest schemes, including the very idea of a revolution.

Another difference is in the books' reception. *Red Star Over China* set Snow at odds with political establishments both in the West (where he was blackballed and blacklisted) and in China, while Chang and Halliday's endeared them to mainstream media and the powers that be everywhere except in China (at least for now). The Chinese authorities banned *Mao* not because it comprehensively contradicts the official position but because that position is itself ideologically and politically ambivalent. A comprehensive repudiation of Mao is difficult, because of important historical continuities between his regime and theirs as well as widespread social discontent with some of the post-Mao changes. The party's Propaganda Department knows demonizing Mao would be unpopular and could backfire, given that the legacies of the revolution are still a source of regime legitimacy. Mao is inseparable from China's national and social progress, with which most Chinese identify, and with China's delivery from semicolonialism and backwardness. This is why even many Chinese highly critical of Mao as an individual despise the book.

In the West, the same considerations do not apply. Admirers of the book on the right included George W. Bush Jr, who 'thrilled' Chang by recommending it as 'a good book' that showed Mao to be 'a bad man'. On the centre-left, Labour's Roy Hattersley and *The Guardian*'s Will Hutton also wrote praising it. In China, the picture is more complicated. An indirect rebuff by Pang Xianzhi, Director of the Party Documents Research Office, appeared in the official media.[9] Although

the book is not available to the general public, many Chinese have criticized it on unofficial websites. Some welcomed it. On the right, Xu Youyu, an influential thinker in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, saw the book as 'the truest of all the Mao biographies ever written' and 'a huge, historic contribution'.[10] On the left, however, Huang Jisu, a well-known commentator and playwright, called it 'a trash heap of old news and senseless rumours … lacking minimal maturity in its presentation, understanding and perspective'.[11] Chinese students abroad also denounced it.[12]

Because the book has sold so many copies, was so widely and favourably reviewed in the commercial press, and has such ambitious political goals, we thought it would be a good idea to bring out a collection of commentary on it by experts and thus give its many readers the chance to view its subject from other angles. The collection is also intended as a resource for use in classroom discussions. Chang and Halliday's findings and conclusions have begun to figure increasingly in essays by students on China courses, impressed by its apparent solidity and authority. Some teachers and scholars who distrust the authors' methods and approach see this development as a disaster for modern China studies. To them, we offer this work as an antidote.

Most writing about Mao is of three general sorts: standard academic studies of his life and career, personal memoirs (published mainly in China), and political screeds – either demonographies (usually by Chinese exiles) or hagiographies (also published mainly in China). Chang and Halliday's book has characteristics of all three genres. Its chief author, Chang, drew some of her material from her own interpretation of events she lived through. She makes no secret of her loathing for Mao – she incessantly demonizes him. Yet the book has the trappings of massive scholarship, citing more than a thousand sources and interviews with hundreds of people ranging from George Bush Sr to the Dalai Lama, Wang Guangmei (Liu Shaoqi's widow), and various non-Chinese ex-Maoists. The authors are, of course, entitled to their opinion and memory. Where critics can legitimately take issue with them is in their methods and judgement.[13]

It would be interesting to know how people interviewed in China react to the words Chang and Halliday attribute to them. Would they approve of the book's message? In many cases, probably not. Wang Guangmei, for example, herself a victim of the Cultural Revolution, showed respect for Mao before she died in 2006. In 2004, with the help of Mao's and her own children and grandchildren, she organized a gathering at which the two families celebrated their shared feelings about Mao and Liu and the extraordinary experiences of China's first communist generation.[14] It is hard to imagine she would have agreed with Chang and Halliday's portrayal of Mao.

Nearly all the essays in this volume are by internationally known scholars in the China field, most of them specialists in Chinese communist history. Geremie R. Barmé, Professor at the Australian National University, works on Chinese culture and intellectual history and published a book on Mao's posthumous cult. Gregor Benton, Professor of Chinese History at Cardiff University, has published books on Chinese communist history, Chinese Trotskyism, Chinese dissent, and Mao.

Alfred Chan, Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Western Ontario, has published studies on Mao and the Great Leap Forward. Timothy Cheek, Research Professor at the University of British Columbia, has published books on China's intellectuals and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) history, including documentary studies on Mao. Chen Yung-fa, Distinguished Research Professor in the Institute of Modern History at Taiwan's Academia Sinica, is the author of major studies on Chinese communism. Delia Davin, Emeritus Professor of Chinese Studies at the University of Leeds, has written a pioneering study on women in the Chinese Revolution and books on migration and on Mao. Lowell Dittmer, Professor of Political Science at the University of California at Berkeley, has published studies on Chinese politics, including a book on Liu Shaoqi. Mobo Gao, Professor of Chinese Studies at the University of Adelaide, is best known for his books on rural life and on the Cultural Revolution. David S. G. Goodman, Professor of Chinese Politics and Director of the Institute of Social Sciences, University of Sydney, is the author of books on Deng Xiaoping and on provincial politics and local social and political change in China. Lin Chun, Senior Lecturer in Comparative Politics at the London School of Economics, has published books and articles on Chinese socialism and development. Andrew J. Nathan, a Professor at Columbia University, publishes in the fields of Chinese politics and foreign policy, the comparative study of political participation and political culture, and human rights. He co-edited *The Tiananmen Papers* and is the author, with Bruce Gilley, of *China's New Rulers*. Jonathan Spence, Sterling Professor of History at Yale University and former President of the American Historical Association, is an authority on Chinese civilization and the rise of modern China. Steve Tsang, Reader in Politics at Oxford University, is a widely published author and expert on China's foreign and security policy and its governance. Arthur Waldron, Professor of International Relations in the Department of History at the University of Pennsylvania and vice president of the International Assessment and Strategy Center in Washington DC, co-edited the Civil War volumes of *Mao's Road to Power* together with Stuart Schram.

Only Jin Xiaoding and Bill Willmott, Emeritus Professor in Sociology at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand, are not directly engaged in academic study on the Chinese Revolution, but both are deeply familiar with the issues Chang and Halliday raise and well qualified to comment. Jin is a freelance journalist. Willmott, born in Sichuan, is an expert on the Chinese communities in the Pacific Islands and a long-standing observer of Chinese politics.

Most of the essays are largely critical. The two exceptions are those by Dittmer and Waldron. Dittmer finds the 'cumulative picture' of Chang and Halliday's chapters on the People's Republic of China (PRC) before the Cultural Revolution convincing and even devastating. However, he criticizes their 'incessant imputation of evil motives' and their 'vacuum-cleaner' approach to every titbit conceivably damaging to Mao's reputation. Apart from these two, the rest are generally quite damning. One condemns its 'histrionic tone and unwavering certainty'.[15] Another calls it a Maoist-style denunciation 'done in the florid style of the Cultural Revolution denunciations … a Chinese version of a TV soap opera'.[16]

It must be said that Chang and Halliday reciprocate the disesteem. A barely suppressed theme of the biography is that established Mao scholarship is incompetent and uncritical. 'Bits of the information were around', said Chang, 'but they were like pieces of a jigsaw that didn't make any sense. Nobody has put them together into this coherent picture of Mao. People looked but they didn't see'.[17] David Goodman, writing in this volume, classes *Mao* with good reason among a clutch of recent 'revisionist' China books that imply 'a conspiracy of academics and scholars who have chosen not to reveal the truth'. He likens this view to the conspiracy theory in the *Da Vinci Code* (adding that the 'facts' in the thriller are about as reliable as Chang and Halliday's). The implication that China scholars have failed to maintain a strict critical distance from Mao and his regime is regrettable, not least in the case of contributors to this volume. Far from acting as Mao's apologists, they have criticized his views and actions, often savagely, and consistently defended his victims. Some were even prevented for a while from doing research in China as a result of their criticisms – at a time when Halliday was among those praising Mao.

Jeffrey Wasserstrom (Director of East Asian Studies at Indiana University) also found that the book crossed the divide between biography and fiction and compared it to Elizabeth Kostova's novel about Vlad the Impaler. Like a thriller, it presents Mao 'in a sensationalist manner', moves at a brisk pace, and reads as if written by an omniscient narrator with direct access to his or her character's innermost thoughts and feelings. But Wasserstrom thinks Chang and Halliday's *Mao* lacks the complexity and multidimensionality of Kostova's Dracula, whose motivations appear more plausible.[18] Frank McLynn, a well-regarded biographer of Pancho Villa, Emiliano Zapata, Carl Jung, and Napoleon, commented that it is 'axiomatic that a good biography (never mind a great one) of a towering political figure cannot be written from a stance of pure hatred'. Thus *Mao* 'has a certain entertainment value. But it is neither serious history nor serious biography'.[19]

Reviews of the book fall into two broad categories: substantial responses by China scholars writing from a position of expertise; and lighter commentary by China scholars specializing in fields other than the Chinese Revolution, writers generally knowledgeable about China, and journalists, commentators and publicists. The non-experts tend to welcome or denounce the book in line with their general views on the Chinese Revolution. Those hostile to Mao find their prejudices confirmed and praise it as a 'triumph' of scholarship. Those friendly or less hostile to him question its methods and findings. On the other hand, China scholars of the sort represented here are less divided. Although a minority praise it, most find little to redeem it and much to censure in it. This goes both for political opponents of Mao's revolution, either mild or outright, and for its supporters, equivocal or enthusiastic. This selection includes the Chinese Revolution's critical supporters and its relentless adversaries, as well as others who take an intermediate stance. Most wince at the authors' methods and repudiate many of their findings.

There is no point in rehearsing or summarizing the reviews, which better speak for themselves. Two champion the book's findings. The rest, taken together, form a comprehensive indictment of it. The critical studies argue that Chang and

Halliday distort small details of history to 'prove' their point. The studies charge that evidence is used selectively, where it serves the authors' purpose, and otherwise ignored. Slurs and innuendos are made to look like hard fact. Judgements seemingly based on strong evidence cited in footnotes collapse on closer scrutiny of the sources. Citations are garbled. Sources are inadequately referenced or uncheckable. Speculation is presented as certainty. Sweeping generalizations are found to rest on flimsy evidence, or no evidence. 'Myths' the authors 'bust' turn out not to be myths, in the cold light of facts. 'Sensational' findings turn out to be old hat, revealed years ago by others. (Even the idea of Mao as monster is not new but was around all along, perhaps most notably in the controversial portrait of Mao published by Li Zhisui, one of his doctors, in 1994.[20])

On the whole, Chang and Halliday are disinclined to tackle and sometimes even to reference the work of others, preferring to present their conclusions as original even where they are not. Most scholarly books engage with 'the field', but Chang and Halliday ignore established work – except, occasionally, when it coincides with their own preconceived ideas. Many academic studies in English or Chinese that deal with Mao's character and career are absent from their bibliography. Where they do cite existing work, they sometimes bend its meaning and draw unfair and untrue inferences. Where expert opinion is irreconcilable with their prejudices, they apparently dismiss it. This approach is unacceptable in a book promoted as serious scholarship, especially one as contentious as this. Despite Chang and Halliday's academic pretensions, they show little inclination to follow basic scholarly procedure. Scholars' duty to engage with one another's work is not just a professional formality but a necessary step in the testing of their findings. They must be able to show that their own arguments are either truer and more authoritative than those of others working on the same subject or at least equally legitimate. Chang and Halliday do not do this.

For the most part, the reviewers in this volume confine themselves to questioning Chang and Halliday's methods and approaches, their treatment of specific issues and events, and their judgement. On the whole, they do not tackle the wider question of whether the Chinese Revolution was, on balance, good or bad for China. Chang and Halliday's answer is, of course, that it was irredeemably bad. The Chinese Revolution was not only unnecessary and undesirable but a disaster. This theory is comforting for opponents of radical change everywhere and explains why Western conservative establishments hailed the book with such glee and deference. In what remains of this introduction, we make a counterargument in the revolution's critical defence at a time when revisionist histories of the great social revolutions are in the ascendancy.

Chang and Halliday explain the Chinese Revolution as the evil product of one man at the head of a conspiracy of dupes and slaves. Their book is essentially the story of a court intrigue, what Barmé calls 'despot-centred history'. They erase the active contribution of men and women other than Mao from the events they describe – even major leaders like Zhou Enlai are discounted, as Mao's servile tools. Mao is shown to win out over his fellow conspirators by exercising greater viciousness and cunning. The authors talk almost exclusively about conspiracy

and manipulation. They say practically nothing about the revolution's social, economic, political and cultural setting. The intellectual context that shaped Mao's and his fellow leaders' ideas vanishes almost entirely from sight in their view of it. In contrast, serious studies treat the Chinese Revolution as a complex, creative process in which millions of ordinary Chinese pursued their transforming visions in interaction with the party and its leaders.[21] When others' agency and the historical context are restored to view in this way, the revolution appears in a quite different light.

At the time of its founding in 1921, the CCP was inspired by noble aims. Its founders had stepped out of the New Culture Movement of the late 1910s, which campaigned for enlightenment, democracy, women's liberation, social justice, internationalism and the resolution of China's crisis of sovereignty. Its first General Secretary, Chen Duxiu, pioneered China's democracy movement in the early twentieth century. In the 1920s, the humanist and universalist values for which he stood continued to inspire the party. In 1929, however, he was expelled as a Trotskyist. At the time of his expulsion, he reminded the other party leaders that 'democracy is a necessary instrument for any class that seeks to win the majority to its side' and warned against the suppression of dissident viewpoints.[22] Although his former comrades dismissed these ideas as 'bourgeois', the party carried on its struggle for a 'new democratic revolution' with the support not only of the rural and urban poor but also of many educated Chinese. Li Dazhao, another founder of the CCP who died a martyr in 1927, also championed the idea of national, social and individual liberation and insisted on the necessary coherence of individualism, socialism and liberalism in a democratic system of 'commoners' politics'.[23]

The party's drift towards bureaucratic centralism started in the mid 1920s with its 'Bolshevization' – the imposition of 'iron discipline' and extreme centralism of the sort promoted by the Communist International in Moscow, particularly under Stalin. Bolshevization of this sort was speeded by the communists' defeat in the cities in 1927 and their immersion in the countryside, where they switched to a strategy of armed struggle. Geared up for war, party leaders stressed the need for regimentation, secrecy and top-down command. In the villages, they came to see themselves as the sole source of decision and authority. The administration they formed in Beijing in 1949 reflected this experience of infallible command. It was run from above, along authoritarian lines, and based explicitly on a statist model, despite Mao's efforts to combat bureaucracy and Stalinist dogmatism.

However, it is important to contextualize these turns in the party's strategic thinking and organizational methods, for it faced powerful enemies on all fronts and constant white terror. To historicize the revolution is not to defend its weaknesses, mistakes and crimes. Although tragically deformed by its militarization, rustication, and Stalinization, the party continued to retain many of its founding goals and characteristics. After the Long March, when the Red Army battled its way north at the cost of enormous losses, the party spearheaded the resistance in the Sino-Japanese War of 1937–45. In the rural areas after 1945, it led the poor in transforming their local communities. In the villages in the revolutionary years and in the cities after 1949, it changed women's lives for the better – not completely,

but nevertheless massively. Chiang Kai-shek, by comparison, failed to reform the agrarian economy, was an ineffectual leader against Japan, did little to improve women's status, ruled over an unjust society, and headed a brutal, corrupt and reactionary regime.

Chang and Halliday focus exclusively on the failures of the revolution, including the disastrous outcome of the Great Leap Forward and the excesses of the Cultural Revolution. The picture they give is thus distorted and incomplete. Rounded studies of the Mao years argue that the CCP's achievements outweighed its failures. Stuart Schram, the doyen of Mao studies, concluded in an essay published in 1994 on Mao's legacy that

> at other times during his years in power, impressive rates of growth and technological exploits … were recorded.… Though the Great Leap Forward brought the peasants widespread misery rather than the promised collective prosperity and happiness, the successive phases in agrarian policy from 1946 onward destroyed the old landlord economy and thus laid the foundations for the emergence of a system of peasant smallholdings in the 1980s.[24]

The historian Maurice Meisner, a rigorous critic of Mao, argued in a lecture in 1999 that the Chinese communist victory and China's subsequent socio-economic development 'must be seen as one of the greatest achievements of the twentieth century'. He concluded that despite 'all the horrors and crimes that accompanied the revolution, … few events in world history have done more to better the lives of more people'.[25]

A balanced view of China in the decades of reconstruction after 1949 would also give full weight to the international environment. Blockades and threats by foreign powers created a fear of subversion that degenerated for long periods into cruel hysteria. Political controls tightened even further. Barry Naughton pointed out that resources were massively diverted from production and welfare spending to defence.[26] As John Gittings noted in his review of *Mao*, 'we should ask how far western (effectively US) hostility encouraged Mao's radical turn from the mid-1950s onwards, fostering a climate of chauvinism from which China has not yet completely emerged'.[27]

Even some of Chang and Halliday's admirers question the polemical one-sidedness of their approach. Kristof, for example, felt obliged to remind his readers of Mao's successes:

> Land reform in China … helped lay the groundwork for prosperity today. The emancipation of women … moved China from one of the worst places in the world to be a girl to one where women have more equality than in, say, Japan or Korea. Indeed, Mao's assault on the old economic and social structure made it easier for China to emerge as the world's new economic dragon.

Other triumphs included the steep rise in life expectancy after 1949, despite the famines, and China's emergence as a strong and independent country. Even

before the spectacular reform-induced growth, China was already leading much of the developing world in terms of life expectancy, infant mortality, educational attainment and gender equality.[28] Once 'the sick man of Asia', China awakened under Mao as a world power, a transformation inextricably tied in the minds of most Chinese to Mao's very person.

Because Mao's party never entirely turned its back on the ideals that gave birth to it, it continued to receive the support after 1949 of widely respected humanists like Liu Binyan, Wang Ruoshui and Su Shaozhi who used Marxism to criticize Deng Xiaoping and the post-Deng regime. Worker and peasant activists protested against some of the Deng-ite reforms by appealing to Mao's revolutionary tradition.[29] Among younger intellectuals, 'new left' thinking took off in the 1990s, disseminated by websites and other e-media.[30] These responses from below are worth noting, for commentators outside China often fail to distinguish sufficiently between the CCP before and after 1978. Despite denouncing Mao while praising Deng, many such commentators talk of the Chinese 'party', 'state', and 'regime' as if they had not undergone remarkable transformations. Yet inside China, the post-1978 regime is criticized by some for its institutional and other systemic continuities with the 1949 revolution, while others regret the abandoning of old ideological tenets and socio-economic policies. The legacies of Maoism are highly pertinent to these debates in Chinese critical discourse.

Chang and Halliday start their book with the claim that Mao 'was responsible for well over 70 million deaths in peacetime, more than any other twentieth century leader', principally during the Great Leap Forward, when they say 38 million died. They also say Mao was not only indifferent to the thought of mass deaths but positively welcomed and even celebrated them. On this point of relative despotism, brutality and vileness, we round off this introduction. Apologists for the CCP often seek to minimize the effects of its political crimes and the social disasters it caused by resorting to analogies or comparisons with supposedly worse crimes and disasters perpetrated elsewhere. On the other hand, some of its critics try, through what Barmé calls 'competitive body counting', to cast Mao as the world's greatest monster. But if it is dishonourable to use a comparative framework to disguise the extent of Chinese wrongdoing, it is also unacceptable to put Mao at the top of a league of modern atrocities without due regard for historical perspective, given that the twentieth century is littered with such tragedies and evils. This is especially true in China studies, where the claim that Mao outmonstered everyone risks chiming with the Sinophobic idea of a special 'oriental' despotism. As Bill Willmott points out, 'So many people are keen to believe the worst about China, and this book will reinforce their beliefs. Already prejudiced readers will see the Chinese Revolution as nothing more than megalomaniacs killing each other and millions of others'.

Scholars have offered widely differing estimates of the death toll in China between 1959 and 1962, many of them far lower than Chang and Halliday's. Wim Wertheim, emeritus professor at the University of Amsterdam, reported in his review of Chang's *Wild Swans* that Chinese scholars and demographers in the 1950s privately doubted the accuracy of the Census of 1953 upon which

calculations of the scale of deaths are often based, on the grounds that it was carried out unscientifically and registered 'an unbelievable increase of some 30 percent in the period 1947–1953'. Wertheim concluded that 'the claim that in the 1960s a number between 17 and 29 million people was "missing" is worthless' if one cannot say for certain that the population in 1953 was 600 million.[31] Others, including Ping-ti Ho, an expert in Chinese demography, have pointed to many flaws in the 1953 'nationwide enumeration'. Further studies either sweepingly or partially at odds with Chang and Halliday's could be cited.[32] It is symptomatic of Chang and Halliday's approach that they largely ignore such counter-arguments, which raise serious questions about their findings. Few would deny that the Great Leap led to a catastrophe of unimaginable proportions. Even admirers of Mao who support the Great Leap's basic goals concede that it failed – because 'the hierarchical, authoritarian party system was totally inappropriate for the leadership of a campaign which could only flourish on popular support', according to Jack Gray.[33] However, many would doubt the assumptions that underlie Chang and Halliday's projections, and their lack of balance and perspective.

A closer look at modern death tolls suggests the record of the British Empire is at least as deplorable as China's. Under the Raj between 1896 and 1900, more than ten million people died in avoidable famines out of a population little more than one third the size of China's in 1960. In the Bengal famine of 1943, between three and seven million died, out of a population of 60 million. The 1943 famine was just one of a series of crises in colonial India that together resulted in millions of avoidable fatalities. Chang and Halliday might wish to object that the Bengal deaths were caused, at least in part, by the war, but Winston Churchill himself famously blamed them on the people's tendency to 'breed like rabbits'[34] and historians attribute the severity of the crisis to British indifference and incompetence (Churchill thought the Indians 'the beastliest people in the world, next to the Germans'). Needless to say, a proportionately far greater number died in Ireland under British rule in 1845–46. On an even larger scale, the Aboriginal population of Australia and the American Indian population were wiped out in many areas. In any case, the Great Leap deaths were unintended: any equation of them with colonial and racist genocides would be preposterous and indefensible.

We note these other tragedies and atrocities not to minimize the Chinese suffering between 1959 and 1962 but to provide the perspective Chang and Halliday ignore. Far from wishing to justify Mao's policies in those years, each of us has, in writings stretching back over many years, rigorously and consistently criticized the crimes and errors committed under his rule. However, we reject Chang and Halliday's indiscriminate approach to the catastrophe and their one-sided refusal to contextualize it or to consider accounts by other scholars and commentators that might undermine their own dogmatic certainty.

An extreme example of the authors' tendentiousness is their portrayal of Mao as a Chinese Hitler.[35] They liken the effects of the famine caused by the Great Leap to the extermination of the Jews at Auschwitz and draw a parallel between Mao's communes and Hitler's slave-labour camps. These analogies display a saddening lack of moral taste and historical judgement. Six million of Europe's eight million

Jews died in the Holocaust. Auschwitz was the chief instrument in Hitler's 'final solution' to the 'Jewish problem'. The Great Leap Forward, on the other hand, was designed to accelerate China's industrialization and farm production. Chang and Halliday show no understanding of the dilemma Chinese communists faced in the late 1950s, as a result of China's severe international isolation and the military blockade. In Chang and Halliday's view, the Great Leap was a crime perpetrated by a madman. Others, however, see it as a fundamentally rational scheme to mobilize surplus rural labour in order to create local industry, improve rural infrastructure, and achieve national self-sufficiency, as a way of resolving the crisis caused by China's quarantine. It also had a utopian dimension, rooted in a belief in the need for popular participation and self-government. That it went so catastrophically wrong was due to the manner of its implementation. No one ordered or desired the deaths. The Holocaust, in contrast, was a deliberate barbarity.

Readers will reach their own conclusions about whether *Mao: The Unknown Story* is good biography or caricature and propaganda, or a bit of both, or more the one than the other. We hope these essays help them make up their minds. Some may object that the selection is prejudiced against Chang and Halliday and therefore of little help in forming an opinion, yet there has been no bending of the stick. What might seem like bias reflects the weight of opinion in reviews by experts. Unlike the worldwide commercial media, which embraced the book with uncritical and even fawning adulation, most professional commentary has been disapproving. Such has been the avalanche of academic criticism that it is hard to fathom why the two authors apparently do not feel moved to answer it. Had they formulated a systematic defence against the many charges levelled at them, we would happily have published it here, but none has as yet transpired, three years after the criticisms first began appearing.[36]

We would like to thank Peter Sowden for supporting the publication of this book and Emma Davis for taking expert care of the manuscript. We greatly appreciated their valuable suggestions and admirable attention to detail.

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