

BOOK REVIEW ARTICLE

The Maoist Legacy of Modern China

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Mao: The Unknown Story

Jung Chang and Jon Halliday
New York: Anchor Books, 2006

The 1994 book *The Private Life of Chairman Mao* by Mao Tse-tung's personal physician of twenty-two years, Li Zhisui, revealed from grueling first-hand knowledge how pitiless a tyrant Mao was. Our review here in the Summer 1998 issue¹ observed that such revelations about Mao and about the nature of Chinese Communism should eventually force a sweeping re-thinking of the history of the twentieth century. The double standard, which persists to this day, that views Hitler as the quintessential demon while taking a rather benign view of Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Castro, Che Guevara, and others, will certainly disappear over time – assuming the world intellectual culture is paying attention. If the double standard vanishes, many of the events and leaders of the century, both Communist and non-Communist, will have to be reassessed.

Other recent books play an important role in this “deconstruction” of Communism. *The Black Book of Communism* by Stephane Courtois and others within a group of French scholars² presented a country-by-country survey of Communist brutalities. Dmitri Volkgenov's *Lenin: A New Biography*³ stripped away the customary gloss that has seen Lenin as a moderate predecessor to Stalin. Martin Amis' *Koba the Dread*⁴ was an extended essay on Stalin. And now although the book under review revisits Mao, it is by no means redundant, since it is a book of broad

¹ This review is available on www.dwrightmurphey-collectedwritings.info as Book Review 52.

² *The Black Book of Communism* was reviewed in this journal in its Fall 2000 issue. That review is available on the just-mentioned web site as Book Review 56.

³ The Volkgenov book was reviewed here in the Fall 1998 issue, and is available as Book Review 45.

⁴ Amis' book was reviewed here in the Spring 2006 issue. It appears on the web site as Book Review 98.

scholarship that supplements Dr. Zhisui's more personal account.

Jung Chang was born in China in 1952 and experienced the Cultural Revolution before leaving China in 1978 to get her doctorate in linguistics at the University of York in Britain in 1982. Her co-author, Jon Halliday, has been a Senior Visiting Research Fellow at King's College, University of London.

Together, they set out on what has to be one of the more extensive historical research projects ever undertaken. The last 150 or so pages are replete with footnotes to innumerable sources. The list of interviewees continues for 14 pages; there is a 27-page bibliography of Chinese-language sources, and a 24-page list of non-Chinese sources. The authors consulted archives in ten countries. The text is an easily readable recounting of what this voluminous research revealed. The interviews themselves, many with now-aged survivors, are a resource of inestimable value. Chang and Halliday have, in effect, established their own archive. Future scholars will hardly be able to study Mao, the Chinese Communist movement or the twentieth century history of China without delving deeply into it.

While this is something of great scholarly value, it poses a not-uncommon conundrum for conscientious historians. When so much of the material comes from interviews that can't be replicated by others (in particular because of the advanced age of many of those interviewed), all of the techniques of critical historiography will be needed to assess and corroborate the information and perspectives that the two authors have gathered. This especially needs to be mentioned in an age when so many accounts on important subjects are accepted at face value – for reasons of ideological partisanship or special interest or perhaps simply out of intellectual lethargy – without any critical scrutiny whatsoever.⁵

Although this need for corroboration by experts working in the field will remain as a caveat throughout this review, it is worth noting how much *Mao: The Unknown Story* corresponds to what Mao's personal physician had to tell us in his book. Each reinforces the other. Needless to say, this later book tells much of what Dr. Zhisui told. As we take up

⁵ In this way, an "age of ideology" soon becomes an "age of illusion." Instead of joining in this, serious scholars will wish to retain their critical sense.

particular points, we will in the main select material that is new, rather than to repeat aspects we mentioned in our review of the Zhisui book. We are impressed by how much valuable information there is that we won't have any hope of touching upon. The book demands a reading of its own.

Items of Particular Interest

Mao's personal characteristics, and details of his life. Born in Hunan in 1893 as the son of a successful farmer whom he hated, the young Mao was averse to physical labor and poor in mathematics and economics, but developed a life-long love of reading. Oddly enough, he never read Marx or Engels, the two progenitors of the Communism he espoused; and it remains for another book to tell us just what authors he did read; but it is apparent from his attitudes that as a young man he came strongly under the influence of the strident socialist thinkers of nineteenth-century Russian nihilist bent – such men, we would think, as Chernyshevsky and Nechayev. For example, he picked up their extremity and radically unconventional views when he held that all marriage “is licensed rape.” (This didn't keep him from marrying four times, followed by an uncaring disregard of wives and children. And the “rape” feature didn't prevent him from using his power to recruit an interminable string of young women as bed partners.) By his twenties, he had made “I” the center of his thought, with a totally egocentric ideology reminiscent of Max Stirner's. He embraced nihilism when he declared, as the nihilists did, that “the country must be... destroyed and then re-formed.” He said “we adore the times of war,” and had a ready acceptance of death. All his life, he placed no value on the lives of others, not blanching at the thought of tens or even hundreds of millions of deaths.⁶ It was consistent with this (but inconsistent with Communist ideology) that he had no sympathy for either peasants or workers. Chang and Halliday eventually sum up his life by saying that his “most

⁶ The reference here to “hundreds of millions” relates to Mao's expressed willingness to see nuclear war, not caring how many were killed. The authors quote Mao in 1957: “There are 2.7 billion people in the world...I say that, taking the extreme situation, half dies, half lives, but imperialism would be razed to the ground and the whole world would become socialist.” He told Khrushchev that “we are willing to endure the first [U.S. nuclear] strike. All it is is a big pile of people dying.”

formidable weapon was pitilessness.”

He was recruited early as an operative of the Soviet Union. To a large degree, his advancement within the Communist movement was as a creature of Stalin, to whom he was devoted. But although that was true, he never failed to consult his own power, which he pursued with both guile and unspeakable brutality. In the mid-1920s, he was involved in a Soviet-ordered campaign of “class struggle,” with this result: “What really happened was that Mao discovered in himself a love of bloodthirsty thuggery.” He developed his love of violence even before he became a party to Leninist theory. His soon-acquired affinity for Lenin led him to say that Lenin’s “law has no detail. It just kills all opposition.” This, together with cultivating cronies who wouldn’t challenge him, was Mao’s *modus operandi* throughout the decades of his rise and rule. Those whom he didn’t kill, he terrorized.

Mao’s allegiance to Moscow “shot him into the core of the [Chinese Communist] Party” in the early 1920s. But his pursuit of his own power was so assiduous that he was often on the outs with his fellow Chinese, over whom he was not yet dominant. When in 1927 Moscow ordered the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to form an army, it was typical of Mao that instead of joining in the common effort he formed an army of his own. This led to a series of steps that took him to the top of the CCP within four years. (Moscow itself wasn’t disturbed by his opportunism; it valued Mao precisely for his brutality and energy.) It was during this time that he developed his knack for “organized execution rallies,” which “made killing compulsory viewing for a large part of the population.” He conducted repeated purges, all of them murderous. When Moscow named him “head of the future state,” he followed the promotion with another vast purge to assure there would be no future opposition. He was made president of the “Red State” that was founded within a part of China in 1931.

The “Long March” of over 10,000 kilometers began in late 1934 as Chiang Kai-shek closed in with one of his many offensives. Mao started with a force of 80,000, but this was down to a mere 4,000 by the time he arrived in northwest China a year later. One of Chang and Halliday’s revelations is – very much contrary to the Mao myth – that Chiang, out of a variety of motives, wanted “to weaken them significantly along the

way, but not kill them off entirely.” This led him to, in effect, “let them through.” The journey was made much longer than necessary by the gyrations Mao went through in jockeying for power with his rivals. From 1935 to 1945, Mao was stuck in the remote Yellow Earth Plateau of northwest China, where he fought the Nationalists (but not the Japanese, despite orders from Moscow to do so) but mainly spent the time building his force and molding it into “an unquestioning machine.”

The Sino-Japanese war between Chiang’s Nationalists and the Japanese from 1937 to 1945 cost some “twenty million Chinese lives.” This greatly weakened Chiang, while Mao’s forces continued to grow. Much of the time, Chiang had to balance a three-front war: with the Japanese, with the Communists, and with assorted warlords within China. The part played by Communist “moles” (also called “sleepers”) planted at high levels of Chiang’s government and army was highly instrumental in Mao’s eventually having defeated him in 1949. The role played by these moles was in part made possible, the authors say, by Chiang’s own trusting naivete.

The role of the United States in Mao’s defeat of Chiang. One of the most important features of *Mao: The Unknown Story* is the extent to which it bears out the long-standing thesis among critics of the Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry Truman administrations that those presidents and their administrations “lost China” by a series of steps that were guided by ideological illusions toward the Communists.

The authors give considerable detail about the United States’ role. It conditioned aid during World War II upon Chiang’s restricting his war against the Communists. They tell about the crucial concessions to Stalin at the Yalta Conference that in effect gave Stalin control over Manchuria, which Mao saw as the key to his “victory’s being guaranteed.” And, most importantly, they reiterate how, when Chiang had nevertheless won almost a complete victory in Manchuria, the Truman administration (by way of General George Marshall’s repeated interventions to “try to stop the civil war”) stepped in to prevent the Communists’ defeat.

As to this latter, Chang and Halliday say that “Marshall was to perform a monumental service to Mao. When Mao had his back to the wall in what could be called his Dunkirk in late spring 1946, Marshall

put heavy – and decisive – pressure on Chiang to stop pursuing the Communists into northern Manchuria.... Had [Chiang] pressed on, then at the very least he might have prevented the Reds establishing a large and secure base on the Soviet border, with rail links to Russia, over which huge amounts of artillery were brought in.” Instead, after a prolonged cease-fire insisted upon by Marshall and by President Truman himself, “the tide had turned.” The effect was that “Marshall’s diktat was probably the single most important decision affecting the outcome of the civil war.”

We know, of course, how fateful this has been for the United States. Without Mao’s victory in China, there would have been no Chinese intervention into the Korean War and no massive Chinese aid to Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia (where Pol Pot was a “creature of Mao”).

The role of Western intellectuals in cloaking Mao with a benign ideological aura. Chang and Halliday don’t give an exhaustive account of the ubiquitous influence that the leftist intellectual culture in the United States and the West (given resonance by the willing acceptance of its influence by many prominent Americans) had on attitudes toward Mao, the Chinese Communists, and their opponent, Chiang Kai-shek. But they do mention several things that reinforce our broader understanding of that influence: The American journalist Edgar Snow, in effect a Mao mouthpiece, authored *Red Star Over China*, which was published in English in 1937-38 and “played a big role in swaying Western opinion in favor of Mao.” The American journalist Anna Louise Strong went on “a world tour to promote him” in 1947. A variety of Western persona – among them, Simone de Beauvoir, Pierre Trudeau, Ernest Hemingway and his wife, British Field Marshal Montgomery, Henry Kissinger, and even Julie Nixon (who sported a Mao button) – lavished Mao (or in the Hemingway case, Chou En-lai, whom the authors describe as both enormously suave and just as brutal) with affection and respect. John Paul Sartre not surprisingly praised Mao for his “revolutionary violence,” which Sartre declared “profoundly moral.”

Puncturing the Maoist myth. Chang and Halliday tell us that “today, Mao’s portrait and his corpse still dominate Tiananmen Square... The current Communist regime declares itself to be Mao’s heir and fiercely

perpetuates the myth of Mao.” The fact that the myth is has been continued, leaving undisturbed decades-old falsehoods and crucial omissions, makes *Mao: The Unknown Story* particularly significant.

Here are some of the details:

- It has been claimed that Mao was one of the founders of the Chinese Communist Party. The authors say he became an apparatchik early, but wasn't a founder.
- The Chinese people haven't been told that Mao's initial rise was greatly aided by the Nationalist chief in Canton, Wang Ching-wei, who gave Mao “a clutch of key jobs” during the period in the 1920s when Moscow ordered the CCP to work with the Nationalists.
- The myth makes Mao into a “great peasant leader” because of his supposed role in the “Autumn Harvest Uprising” in 1927, whereas in fact Mao had for purposes of his own actually tried to sabotage the uprising.
- Even now, the facts have not been revealed to the Chinese people about Mao's having slaughtered tens of thousands of his fellow Communists in 1930-1 in one of his many purges.
- The assistance of Soviet Russia in the 1931 offensive against the Nationalists still hasn't been acknowledged.
- The myth has been perpetuated that the Communists were “more patriotic and keener to fight Japan than the Nationalists were” in the early 1930s. The authors say the opposite is the truth. The Communists were far more interested in fighting the Nationalists and in establishing their own base of power. In fact, they conducted one of the longest “phony wars” in history against the Japanese between 1932 and 1937. The Communists inflated “a minor clash against a non-combat unit” into a major victory over the Japanese for propaganda purposes, even though Mao himself had opposed having even this much contact with the Japanese forces.
- The story of the “Long March” is “one of the biggest myths of the twentieth century.” As we have said, the withdrawal of the Communists from the Red State began in October 1934, with 80,000 Communists making their way toward northwest China where they could have direct contact with the Soviet Union. “There can be no doubt that Chiang let the CCP leadership and the main force of the Red Army escape.”

The authors consider this a major mistake on Chiang's part, but they explain his motivations. One was to cause the warlords,

which Chiang was fighting, to have to worry about the Red Army and for that reason allow Chiang's forces into their areas. Another was to make a goodwill gesture toward Moscow in what for a long time was a futile effort to get Moscow to release Chiang's son, who for several years was held hostage by Stalin.

The authors call the story of the crossing of the Dadu Bridge "the primal myth about the Long March." But the truth is that there were no Nationalist troops at the bridge, there was no battle, the bridge was not reduced to its bare chains as shown in a propaganda film, and neither was it set on fire.

The Long March ended in October 1935 when Mao and the remnant consisting of 4,000 men arrived in northwest China.

- The central role of the Communist "sleepers" in bringing about the eventual defeat of Chiang hasn't been revealed. "Mao's military genius would look a lot less brilliant if it were known that the enemy's top commander had offered up much of his force – and many of Chiang's best troops – on a platter."
- The Chinese people are still given to believe that Mao's willful starvation of millions of Chinese under the Great Leap Forward in 1958-1961 was caused by the cancellation of some large-scale projects. In fact, it was caused by the seizure of food based on deliberately overstated estimates of the harvests, the export of food to Russia to pay for what Russia supplied to help build Mao's "Superpower Program," and the economic devastation caused by Mao's insistence that everyone use backyard furnaces to make steel.

The tens of millions killed. Chang and Halliday conclude that "Mao Tse-tung was responsible for well over 70 million deaths during peacetime." Mao claimed that 700,000 "class enemies" were executed right after the Communist take-over of the mainland in 1949, but Chang and Halliday estimate that some three million died at that time from execution, mob violence or suicide. They say that 38 million died during the Great Leap Forward, although it is impossible to know the exact figure, as we see when we recall that Dr. Zhisui placed the figure at between 25 and 43 million. At least three million died violently during the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976. Most of these killings, the authors say, were committed by the Communist state, not by the Red Guards.

Mao joined Stalin in using starvation as a weapon and instrument of

terror. We have mentioned the Great Leap Forward, but it's noteworthy that an estimated 70,000 Tibetans died of hunger between 1959 and 1963. In the early 1950s, Mao "left the peasants to starve" in a pre-Great Leap Forward episode of exporting food to the Soviet Union to pay for military and technical assistance. "By early 1955, requisitioning had brought utter misery," with peasants eating leaves and tree bark. Mao repeated a procedure used by Stalin in the Ukraine in 1932-1933: "...cadres were searching houses, tying peasants up and beating them to force them to surrender food." In 1948, during the civil war against Chiang, Mao starved the city of Changchun in Manchuria into surrender. "The starving people knelt in front our our soldiers en masse," Lin Biao told Mao, "begging to be allowed to go." The city's 500,000 population fell to 170,000. Chang and Halliday report that "the death toll was higher than the highest estimate for the Japanese massacre at Nanjing [Nanking] in 1937."

The Sino-Soviet split, and Mao's desire to lead the "world revolution."

Although the Sino-Soviet split is said to have started in 1960, Khrushchev's 1956 speech denouncing the by-that-time dead Stalin was a severe jolt to the Mao-Moscow relationship. There followed Khrushchev's "rapprochement with the West," which "Mao saw... as a historic opportunity to put himself forward as the champion of all those around the world who saw peaceful coexistence as favoring... the status quo... Mao envisioned a situation where 'Communist parties all over the world will not believe in [Russia] but believe in us.' He saw a chance to establish his own 'centre for world revolution.'"

We are told that Mao's ensuing efforts in Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America were not particularly successful. He urged the Communist governments in Eastern Europe to continue Stalin's legacy of "brutal repression" so they wouldn't need "to rely on Russian tanks," but for the most part this wasn't welcomed. Throughout the world, the Communist parties responded poorly to his importunities that they look to him rather than to the Soviet Union. And many of the leaders, as in Africa, say, who ostensibly embraced him were most interested in their own power (just as Mao himself always was in his dealings with the Soviet Union). His sponsorship of the North Koreans in the Korean War gained him little; and his massive support for the North

Vietnamese Communists turned sour when North Vietnam turned to the Soviet Union and even fought a war with China. In Indonesia, Mao's support for the Communists led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of them there. Peru's Maoist "Shining Path" guerrilla movement wasn't begun until four years after his death.

All of this leads to an important reflection. There has been much talk during the past century of one movement or another's "drive for world domination." There is no question but that Hitler's expansionism, Communism's "world proletarian revolution," and the current militancy of radical Islamism have been matters of concern, meriting response. Even if a series of semi-independent thugs took over much of the world, that would arguably be as bad as for a fully-consolidated movement to do so. But the authors' telling of how "African radicals rather astutely took Mao's money... with a big smile, but his instructions with a deaf ear" reminds us of how very difficult it is to keep so many willful personalities in tow. Conducting a world revolution involves, of course, a much larger scale, but it is somewhat like a college dean's relationship with his faculty: it is very much, as the expression goes, "like herding cats." Mao himself provides the best illustration of this. He was simultaneously "Moscow's man" and a self-centered power-seeker on his own. He followed Moscow's instructions only when he thought it served his interests to do so.

Those who stood up to Mao. Gaining and maintaining his hold on China required constant effort on Mao's part, and the insecurities of his grasp on power are well illustrated by his constant need to conduct sweeping purges and to impose terror, but in the main Mao succeeded in cowing millions into submissiveness and even in creating an adoring "cult of personality."

A couple of amusing episodes (amusing, of course, only from a distance of time and place) show the extent of this submissiveness in the totalitarian states. Martin Amis told us in *Koba the Dread* how in Soviet Russia no member of an audience dared stop applauding after Stalin had finished a speech, leading to a ludicrous mass exhaustion. Chang and Halliday tell about something similar to this that occurred in China after Mao announced to a crowd of 3,000 that China had just detonated an atomic bomb. "The crowd was silent at first, not knowing how to

react, having been given no prior instructions. Chou [En-lai] then provided a cue: ‘You can rejoice to your hearts’ content, just don’t jump through the floor!’ Whereupon they started yelling and leaping up and down in an apparent frenzy.”

Over the decades, however, there were many who stood up against Mao – and who paid for it dearly. The horrors of the Great Leap Forward (GLF) gave rise to several examples. We are told that Marshal Peng De-huai was the only member of the Politburo who dissented early. As a result, Peng was among the ten million victims of Mao’s purge in late 1959 and 1960. In 1961, members of Mao’s Praetorian Guard spoke up bitterly about him, and were purged; and we are told that a number of local officials felt pity for the peasants and so held back from seizing their food. In fact, Mao’s “number 2,” Liu Shao-chi, spoke critically of the GLF at a 1962 meeting, which forced Mao to cancel the draconian food levies planned for that year; indeed, the authors say the abandonment of the GLF was due to “collective pressure of virtually the whole Chinese establishment.” (The Cultural Revolution, even though it didn’t start until 1966, was more appropriately called The Great Purge, and this resulted from Mao’s long-lingering hatred toward those who had forced his hand on the GLF. Needless to say, Liu and many others suffered grievously during that purge.)

The Cultural Revolution (CR), also called the Great Purge, started with a campaign to destroy all culture, seeking nihilistically to wipe the slate clean. The mayor of Peking, Peng Zhen, despite being a strong Mao supporter, was purged after he opposed the destruction of culture. Then in early 1967 various Politburo members spoke up in outrage against what the Great Purge was doing to their fellow top Communists, but they were frightened back into submission, with the exception of one who “contemplated organizing a guerrilla force” against Mao and so was executed. One 19-year-old woman sent protest letters to Mao, with the result that “for months on end, her hands were tightly handcuffed behind her back and she had to roll herself along the floor to get her mouth to the food that was just tossed onto the floor of her cell.” Unlike so many others, “this extraordinary young woman survived....”

The Great Purge saw millions of the Party faithful replaced by army men. For this, Mao relied on his decades-long apparatchik Lin Piao,

who headed the army. Lin was made Mao's "number 2" in place of Liu Shao-chi. By 1971, however, Lin's son "Tiger" came to hate Mao's tyranny, and laid plans for a coup and Mao's assassination. At about that time, Mao decided to purge Lin (as he did most everybody in time). Lin, his wife, and Tiger attempted to flee by airplane, but were reported by Lin's daughter, Dodo. This caused the family to rush and in doing so to fail to obtain enough fuel for the trip. They were killed when the plane crashed.

Deng Xiao-ping showed considerable independence from time to time, and went through phases of ostracism and rehabilitation before emerging as the head of China after Mao's death.

Two "incidentals" of interest. We can make no attempt to summarize more than a few points in the Chang-Halliday book. But before concluding, we think two items that caught our eye worth mentioning. The first is interesting because of the ironic, twisted justice it entailed. In 1936, Mao disposed of a rival Communist contender, Chang Kuo-tao, by sending him and his army off on a "doomed mission" to fight "a fierce anti-Communist Muslim army." Only about 400 of the soldiers made it back. Mao, dissatisfied with their return, wanted even them dead. "A local official described what happened: 'At first, we said to them with smiles: "Comrades, dig the pits well, we want to bury Nationalist troops alive.'" They really worked hard, one spade after another, wiping sweat from their faces... After they finished, we shoved them and kicked them all in. At first, they thought we were joking. But when we began to shovel earth in, they started shouting...."

The other item tells how the United States was caused unwittingly to carry out mass killing for Mao. We know that after Gen. MacArthur had defeated the North Koreans in 1950 by reaching the Yalu River, Mao sent great numbers of "volunteers" into the war, driving the Americans southward. This was just a year after Mao had finished his conquest of the mainland. Chang and Halliday tell us "the [Korean] war provided a perfect chance to consign former Nationalist troops to their deaths. These were men who had surrendered wholesale in the last stages of the civil war, and it was a deliberate decision on Mao's part to send them into Korea, where they formed the bulk of the Chinese forces. In case UN troops should fail to do the job, there were special

execution squads in the rear to take care of anyone hanging back.”

This book deserves a wide readership. If it receives it, it may not be so chic in the future to wear a Mao button.