

Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, Mao: The Unknown Story. New York: Knopff, 2005.

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In late September 2004 I was invited by the Chinese consulate in Calgary, Alberta to a banquet at an elegant restaurant in Chinatown to celebrate the fifty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, a historical event which occurred on October 1, 1949. I attended the banquet, and the grand and formal if somewhat staged and sappy occasion was made more palatable by the bounteous and delectable (how could it have been otherwise?) cuisine served.

A few days later my wife and I went to a much less posh Chinese restaurant (we were paying for it ourselves this time, after all), and while we waited for our food she reviewed the basics of the Chinese horoscope on her placemat while I thumbed through a Chinese newspaper, specifically the October 2004 issue of the monthly *Calgary Chinese Journal (Chengbao Yuekan)*. A cartoon on the eighth page caught my eye, and it was not exactly appetizing. It featured two well-fed celebrants living it up atop a massive pile of human skulls, bones, and gore. The caption read "October 1 National Celebration (sic) Day of Mourning." A couplet in real (i.e., unsimplified and vertical) Chinese script on both sides read as follows: "The wronged spirits of more than 80 million murdered Chinese people haunt mainland China / Why celebrate 55 years of despotic, dictatorial communist rule? Men of principle weep for China!" A passage below the cartoon demanded rhetorically, "Please allow us to ask questions of those of you who attended the October 1 celebratory banquet: Can you face the tens of millions of elders, brothers, sisters, relatives, and friends who were killed and whose spirits in

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heaven have not yet found rest? Can you face your own consciences?" I remember being mildly put off by the cartoon but wondering if its startling numbers and graphic brutality could be anywhere near accurate. I took the newspaper home, clipped out the cartoon, and hung it in my office. It is still there, still giving me pause.

According to Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, authors of the recently published Mao: The Unknown Story, these numbers might not be all that far off the mark. They claim in the first sentence of their long and tendentious book that Mao "was responsible for well over 70 million deaths in peacetime, more than any other twentieth-century leader." Their portrait of Mao is of a brutal and monomaniacal political entrepreneur, an ambitious tyrant who cared much more about his own political and military power than about anything else, including his families and the many children he sired. By Chang and Halliday's reckoning, Mao spent five and a half decades, or nearly all of his adult life, savagely snuffing out the lives of his own countrymen in order to achieve, maintain, and expand that power. They maintain quite seriously that Mao's ultimate objective was to attain superpower status by hook or crook and eventually to rule the entire world.

This blockbuster biography will unquestionably do serious damage to Mao's historical reputation, at least in the West and the free world, and it is certainly the most damaging book to the myth of Mao since the memoirs of Li Zhisui, Mao's personal physician, were published in 1994 as The Private Life of Chairman Mao. Chinese translations of Chang's and Halliday's book will soon be available in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and other areas beyond mainland China where Chinese people can live freely. The coming vilification of the two authors in mainland China is numbingly, eye-rollingly predictable. Jung Chang will be portrayed as a traitor to China who

married a foreigner, lives highly and comfortably in Notting Hill in London, England, and cannot or will not get over what millions of other Chinese also experienced and have since put behind them - the horrors and madness of Mao's Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution (in other words, well over half of Mao's reign as China's dictator from 1949 until his death in 1976). Together Chang and Halliday will likely be pilloried as dishonest and deceptive connivers who long for the glory days of the British Empire and China's supine subservience to the Western Powers and Japan.

This calumnious caricature will of course be too easy. Chang and Halliday are both accomplished biographers. Chang is the author of Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China, a runaway international bestseller first published in 1991 about the life experiences of three generations of Chinese women in the tumultuous twentieth century, the last of whom was Chang herself. Her British husband and co-author Halliday is a historian of Russia. The two have collaborated on the research for their Mao biography for over a decade, sifting through prodigious amounts of Chinese- and Russian-language primary and secondary historical materials and interviewing over a hundred people who knew or dealt with Mao. Their biography is painstakingly researched and written with an obvious combination of relish and a quasi-evangelistic fervour to tell the world the truth about Mao. It all makes for exciting and even exhilarating reading – at least at first. But their doughty iconoclasm and dogged revisionism do eventually wear thin, and by several chapters into the book it becomes quite apparent that much of their historical reasoning is, on balance, much more deductive than inductive. Some of the evidence and documentation they adduce to subvert the orthodox versions of modern history in mainland China is quite tenuous.

For example, they blame the loss of Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists to Mao Tse-tung's communists in China's civil war (1945-1949) on two main factors: the American general George C. Marshall's pressure on Chiang to reach a political modus vivendi with the Chinese communists and Chiang's laxity in ferreting out communist moles within the Nationalist military. But here their case is based almost entirely on a single biography published in Taiwan in 1990 and on an interview with a single high Nationalist official in Taiwan during the 1990s.

I have been hearing these same tired explanations from old Nationalists in Taiwan for the last quarter of a century. The real story of the Nationalist debacle in the Chinese civil war was far more complicated, and among other reasons for it were Chiang's stubborn rejection of American military advice to concentrate his military strength in southern China. In attempting to achieve military control over vast areas of northern China before the Chinese communists could get to them, Chiang spread his forces out much too thin and sealed his doom militarily.

At times Chang and Halliday seem willing to accept and believe virtually any account or recollection that contradicts the official version of modern Chinese political history. Nonetheless, they almost always seem quite confident, and sometimes even cocky, about the probity and reliability of the materials they have marshalled to debunk the standard tales of Mao's rise to power. In their book there is precious little give and take, no judicious weighing of evidence, no generosity with the reader about what we do and do not know. In their crusade to overturn just about every historical verdict or piece of conventional wisdom on Mao ever conceived, however trivial, Chang and Halliday ironically enough remain needlessly tethered to mainland China's official version of

recent political history. In so doing they waste much ink and effort; it is quite unnecessary to dispel every Chinese communist historiographical myth and then replace them with strained or contrived alternate ones in order to establish that Mao was a cruel and heartless despot.

David Hackett Fischer, an important authority on the use of logic in historical inquiry, has written that "...there are two ways of manifesting an intellectual subservience...slavish imitation and obsessive refutation." Chang and Halliday engage in the latter subservient enterprise – they obsessively refute Chinese communist historiography and thereby allow, perhaps unwittingly, the Chinese Communist Party to define their research and writing agenda. Or, in Robert Hall's memorable phrase, their historical work "moves not on wheels, but only on hinges." Their historical scholarship usually goes nowhere linearly and proceeds only along semi-circles to points 180 degrees opposite of what most mainland Chinese today believe and accept about Mao and his rise to power. They have not unhinged their historiography and considered Mao's life from fresh new interpretive perspectives. Instead, they have been content simply to flesh out the skeletal sketch of Mao's spectacular misrule and to conclude that he was an exceedingly brutal and callous tyrant, something most competent historians have long known or at least strongly suspected.

Chang and Halliday do not merely flirt with political reductionism – they embrace it frankly and wholeheartedly. For them, virtually everything in Mao's life is reducible to political ambitions and imperatives. It would probably be unfair to characterise their perspective as a one-dimensional view of Mao, because he was indeed a political animal. But even in two dimensions, a purely political view of Mao is inadequate to size

up the entirety and complexity of the man. Ultimately, theirs is a two-dimensional view of a three-dimensional tyrant, and Chang and Halliday should have done more than they did to develop a reasonably telling picture of who and what Mao really was. To what extent, for example, did the formative experiences of Mao's childhood shape his character and adult life? How influential were both Marxism-Leninism and traditional Chinese imperial ideology over his long political career? Who in fact was Mao ideologically? Was he more traditional than revolutionary? Chang and Halliday decline to ask or answer any of these questions. They dismiss out of hand any notion that Mao was driven by idealism or ideology and portray him not as an ideologue who valued socialism for socialism's sake but as an insatiably power-hungry dictator who valued power for power's sake, a relentless political survivor who crushed anyone who ever challenged him, a self-absorbed reprobate who "remained lucid to the end, and in his mind stirred just one thought: himself and his power."

This picture of Mao is accurate but incomplete. Mao was a ruthless despot and a tenacious, visionary ideologue (if not always an orthodox one, at least in Moscow's view). He wanted to live to see China make the transition from socialism to true communism and saw any sacrifice encountered along the road to communism as both necessary and negligible. Chang and Halliday seem to assume that in refusing to discuss Mao's ideology, they have by that fact alone established its irrelevance and unimportance to him. But this assumption is unwarranted; Mao's ideological and political writings are extensive, and they can certainly illumine important aspects of his political life. Nevertheless, Chang and Halliday mention Mao's writings exactly once in their book, on page 333, and that in connection with royalties he earned from sales of

his books! All of this stubborn myopia on their part is lamentable because it will ultimately work against their larger picture of Mao as a megalomaniacal dictator who simply did not care that his policies and madcap adventures led to the deaths of tens of millions of his countrymen, who made a dog's breakfast of his country's economy, and who lived well nigh unto autistically in his own little (or rather, very big) world of personal political power.

Party hacks in mainland China will pick up shortcomings like these, pounce on them with all the fear and loathing of unelected oppressors afraid of losing their political power, and then characterise the entire book and its depiction of Mao as a sloppy and ill-intentioned political hatchet job cobbled together by fanatical overseas Chinese dissidents and foreign anti-Chinese elements. Chang's and Halliday's book will not be sold in mainland China for the foreseeable future, but one or more responses to their book, largely in these terms, will appear there within a year or so.

Hitler, Stalin, and Mao are now fairly widely recognized as the three biggest butcher-despots of the twentieth century. Chang and Halliday, however, clearly want to place Mao at the head of this terrible troika because, by their reckoning, he was responsible for the deaths of the most people. Many readers have agreed with them, including the famously acerbic New York Times book critic Michiko Kakutani, who in a recent review called Mao "China's Monster, Second to None." The grisly and astronomical numbers of dead for which each member of this triumvirate of evil bears responsibility will probably always be hotly debated. But in addition to attempting measurements of relative degrees of moral turpitude, it might also be useful to distinguish quantitative evil from qualitative evil and to ask whether intention is relevant

to moral judgment. As bad as he undeniably was, Mao never set out to eliminate an entire people like Hitler or an entire class like Stalin. Mao was not a monster who deliberately set out to butcher 70 to 80 million of his fellow countrymen, but rather a monster who did not care if that many, or even a great many more, had to die in order to achieve his political objectives and visions.

These are questions and challenges for future biographers. To date a full and definitive biography of Mao has yet to be written, and perhaps one never will be. For now the best available is probably still British journalist Philip Short's long Mao: A Life, published in 2000. (Yale historian Jonathan Spence's mini-biography Mao, published in 1999, is really more of an epitome than a life of Mao.) Chang and Halliday have, with moral courage and a sustained singleness of purpose that does not always compensate for their want of historiographical judiciousness, forcefully and compellingly limned in two dimensions the solipsistic über-tyrant who was Mao. But we still need a senior historian of China to execute a more textured and less reductive sculpting in the round of Mao and the evil he wrought.

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