

## BOOK REVIEWS

### **Mao: The Unknown Story**

Jung Chang and Jon Halliday  
London: Jonathan Cape, 2005, 814 pp.

Mao Zedong, who imprisoned an entire nation for 30 years and murdered tens of millions of its citizens, still has his defenders. In 2003, Colby College professor Lee Feigon published *Mao: A Reinterpretation*. Lee argued that Mao's Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution actually benefited China by forcing the country to break away from its Stalinist past. Surprisingly, the book received positive reviews, including one by Dow Jones's *Far Eastern Economic Review*. Can one imagine a respected scholar publishing and receiving praise for a book entitled *Hitler: A Reinterpretation*? Even a revisionist look at Stalin might raise eyebrows. Mao, however, still has a thin layer of appeal. Or at least he did.

Thankfully, the Mao myth has been receding in the West for 30 years, not least because his machinations have been so thoroughly exposed. While Ché Guevara survives as a romantic figure largely because the average college student is unaware of his reign at La Cabana prison (among other things), the majority of scholars have come down hard on Mao. The latest and perhaps the most complete look into his darker side is *Mao: The Unknown Story*.

In the savagely personal *Wild Swans*, author Jung Chang traced three generations of her family as they survived the atrocities of Communist China. In *Mao*, she and her husband, Jon Halliday, dissect the career of the man most responsible for the murder and destruction that marked communist China from 1949 until his death in 1976 and the rise of the reformist Deng Xiaoping. If the legacy of Mao Zedong has retained any romanticism or legitimacy in the 21st century, Chang and Halliday's monumental work should permanently solidify his place on tyranny's Mount Rushmore, alongside Hitler, Stalin and Kim Jong Il.

The tone of the book is evident from its first sentence: "Mao Tse-tung, who for decades held absolute power over the lives of one-quarter of the world's population, was responsible for well over 70 million deaths in peacetime, more than any other twentieth-century leader" (p. 3). The

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picture of Mao that emerges in the following 800 pages is at once fascinating and terrifying. We see a young man who joined the communist ranks, not because he was a believer, but because it provided a job. Mao would have been happy to move up the ranks of the Nationalists had that route to power looked more promising. Yet, communism, not surprisingly, was much more conducive to Mao's temperament. The worst, as Hayek warned us over 60 years ago, rise to the top of totalitarian regimes, and Mao is no exception.

Much of Mao's reputation rests upon his supposed fealty to the agricultural worker, a myth Chang and Halliday thoroughly smash. In fact, it wasn't until 1925, at the age of 31, that Mao first spoke of the peasantry in a sympathetic voice. And even then, he did so because Moscow ordered priority be given to the issue.

As easily as a player moves chess pieces about a board during a casual Sunday afternoon game, Mao reorganized Chinese society again and again. He had people moved about, often literally, with no concern for their individual rights or merit. If one day Mao decided that steel production needed to be increased, then the people were instructed to build backyard furnaces and to melt down all steel possessions. As a slogan exhorted at the time, "To hand in one pickaxe is to wipe out one imperialist, and to hide one nail is to hide one counter-revolutionary" (p. 450). That virtually all the steel produced in this fashion was impure and thus utterly useless only affected the now-devastated peasantry. Mao easily moved on to his next pet project.

His Cultural Revolution sought to punish those in the Communist Party who had challenged Mao throughout his career, but most especially during the Great Leap Forward. It was also during this period that the "Little Red Book" became the symbol of Mao's deification. Children, in a mixture of fear and revolutionary zeal, beat their parents and teachers over the head with their pocket-size books of Mao's quotations. As Mao's Red Guards sang their battle song ("We will smash the old world and keep our revolutionary state red for ten thousand generations!"), a fire of cultural cannibalism engulfed all of China. Anything deemed "bourgeois" was destroyed and with it, much of China's history.

For Mao, civilian deaths meant nothing. While in Moscow, he once stated that he'd be willing to sacrifice more than 300 million Chinese if it were to further the revolutionary goals of communism. His aim was global power and for him, suffering and death were not only inevitable, but also required. As he noted, "People say that poverty is bad, but in fact poverty is good. The poorer the people are, the more revolutionary they are. It is dreadful to imagine a time when everyone will be rich" (p. 428). Always the optimist, Mao observed in 1958 that the dead could have a fertilizing effect on the soil. Over the course of the next five years, 30 million peasants would starve to death as a result of Mao's Great Leap Forward.

Poverty, however, was not for Mao himself. At the height of his power he commanded villas across China, dined on the world's finest cuisine,

and employed a small army of sexual servants. As parents, mad with hunger, killed their children for food, Mao received sponge baths and snacked on his beloved fish. As utterly disconnected with the plight of the people as any leader has ever been, Mao took no interest in their suffering.

It is hard to read *Mao* without being infused with the emotion the authors obviously feel for their subject. Unfortunately, this passion for Mao that is the book's strength is also its weakness as their hatred for their subject impels them to adopt some oddly derived conclusions. If it was bad and it happened during Mao's rule, you can be sure that Chang and Halliday will find a way to indict Mao. For example, in their discussion of Stalin's death, they speculate, "[Stalin's] obsessive mind may have been revolving around Mao, reflecting that getting rid of Mao would be just as daunting a task as trying to finish off Tito. Mao may have helped cause Stalin's stroke" (p. 391).

Further, Chang and Halliday's estimates of those killed by Mao seem, at times, unsound. As they discuss the rise of suicide in the mid-1950s, they note, "In one not atypical county, Gaoyao, 110 people were driven to suicide. If this figure is extrapolated to China's 2,000-plus counties, the number of suicides in rural areas in this short period would be approaching a quarter of a million." I am not a statistician, but using one county's data to provide an aggregate statistic for 2,000 counties strikes me as dubious. Still, the book is a momentous achievement.

How one man managed to monopolize power and hijack an entire state is a question that will be studied for generations. But as Chang and Halliday forcefully prove, the legacy of Mao deserves the phrase "never again" every bit as much as the death camps of Dachau and Auschwitz.

Jude Blanchette  
Foundation for Economic Education