'Mao': The Real Mao

The New York Times
October 23, 2005
Sunday Book Review
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If Chairman Mao had been truly prescient, he would have located a little girl in Sichuan Province named Jung Chang and "mie jiuzu"- killed her and wiped out all her relatives to the ninth degree.

But instead that girl grew up, moved to Britain and has now written a biography of Mao that will help destroy his reputation forever. 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.

Almost seven decades ago, Edgar Snow's "Red Star Over China" helped make Mao a heroic figure to many around the world. It marked an opening bookend for Mao's sunny place in history - and this biography will now mark the other bookend.

When I first opened this book, I was skeptical. Chang is the author of "Wild Swans," a hugely successful account of three generations of women in her family, and it was engaging but not a work of scholarship. I was living in China when it appeared, and my Chinese friends and I were all surprised at its success, for the experiences she recounted were sad but not unusual. As for this biography, written together with her husband, Jon Halliday, a historian, I expected it to be similarly fat but slight. Also, the subtitle is "The Unknown Story" - which, after all that has been written about Mao, made me cringe.

Yet this is a magisterial work. True, much of Mao's brutality has already emerged over the years, but this biography supplies substantial new information and presents it all in a stylish way that will put it on bedside tables around the world. No wonder the Chinese government has banned not only this book but issues of magazines with reviews of it, for Mao emerges from these pages as another Hitler or Stalin.

In that regard, I have reservations about the book's judgments, for my own sense is that Mao, however monstrous, also brought useful changes to China. And at times the authors seem so eager to destroy him that I wonder if they exclude exculpatory evidence. But more on those cavils later.

Mao is not only a historical figure, of course, but is part of the (tattered) web of legitimacy on which the People's Republic rests. He is part of the founding mythology of the Chinese government, the Romulus and Remus of "People's China," and that's why his portrait hangs in Tiananmen Square. Even among ordinary Chinese, Mao retains a hold on the popular imagination, and some peasants in different parts of China have started

traditional religious shrines honoring him. That's the ultimate honor for an atheist - he has become a god.

Mao's sins in later life are fairly well known, and even Chen Yun, one of the top Chinese leaders in the 1980's, suggested that it might have been best if Mao had died in 1956. This biography shows, though, that Mao was something of a fraud from Day 1.

The authors assert, for example, that he was not in fact a founding member of the Chinese Communist Party, as is widely believed, and that the party was founded in 1920 rather than 1921. Moreover, they rely on extensive research in Russian archives to show that the Chinese party was entirely under the thumb of the Russians. In one nine-month period in the 1920's, for example, 94 percent of the party's funding came from Russia, and only 6 percent was raised locally. Mao rose to be party leader not because he was the favorite of his fellow Chinese, but because Moscow chose him. And one reason Moscow chose him was that he excelled in sycophancy: he once told the Russians that "the latest Comintern order" was so brilliant that "it made me jump for joy 300 times."

Mao has always been celebrated as a great peasant leader and military strategist. But this biography mocks that claim. The mythology dates from the "Autumn Harvest Uprising" of 1927. But, according to Chang and Halliday, Mao wasn't involved in the fighting and in fact sabotaged it - until he hijacked credit for it afterward.

It's well known that Mao's first wife (or second, depending on how you count), Yang Kaihui, was killed in 1930 by a warlord rival of Mao's. But not much else is known of her. Now Chang and Halliday quote from poignant unsent letters that were discovered during renovations of her old home in 1982 and in 1990. The letters reveal both a deep love for Mao and a revulsion for the brutality of her time (and of her husband). "Kill, kill, kill!" she wrote in one letter, which became a kind of memoir of her life. "All I hear is this sound in my ears! Why are human beings so evil? Why so cruel?" Mao could easily have saved this gentle woman, the mother of his first three children, for he passed near the home where he had left her. But he didn't lift a finger, and she was shot to death at the age of 29.

By this time, the book relates, many in the Red Army distrusted Mao - so he launched a brutal purge of the Communist ranks. He wrote to party headquarters that he had discovered 4,400 subversives in the army and had tortured them all and executed most of them. A confidential report found that a quarter of the entire Red Army under Mao at the time was slaughtered, often after they were tortured in such ways as having red-hot rods forced into their rectums.

One of the most treasured elements of Chinese Communist history is the Long March, the iconic flight across China to safety in the northwest. It is usually memorialized as a journey in which Mao and his comrades showed incredible courage and wisdom in sneaking through enemy lines and overcoming every hardship. Chang and Halliday undermine every element of that conventional wisdom.

First, they argue that Mao and the Red Army escaped and began the Long March only because Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek deliberately allowed them to. They argue that Chiang wanted to send his own troops into three southwestern provinces but worried about antagonizing the local warlords. So he channeled the Red Army into those provinces on the Long March and then, at the invitation of the alarmed warlords, sent in troops to expel the Communists and thus succeeded in bringing the wayward provinces into his domain.

More startling, they argue that Mao didn't even walk most of the Long March - he was carried. "On the march, I was lying in a litter," they quote Mao as saying decades later. "So what did I do? I read. I read a lot." Now, that's bourgeois.

The most famous battle of the Long March was the Communists' crossing of the Dadu Bridge, supposedly a heroic assault under enemy fire. Harrison Salisbury's 1985 book, "The Long March," describes a "suicide attack" over a bridge that had been mostly dismantled, then soaked with kerosene and set on fire. But Chang and Halliday write that this battle was a complete fabrication, and in a triumph of scholarship they cite evidence that all 22 men who led the crossing survived and received gifts afterward of a Lenin suit and a fountain pen. None was even wounded. They quote Zhou Enlai as expressing concern afterward because a horse had been lost while crossing the bridge.

The story continues in a similar vein: Mao had a rival, Wang Ming, poisoned and nearly killed while in their refuge in Yenan. Mao welcomed the Japanese invasion of China, because he thought this would lead to a Russian counterinvasion and a chance for him to lead a Russian puppet regime. Far from leading the struggle against the Japanese invaders, Mao ordered the Red Army not to fight the Japanese and was furious when other Communist leaders skirmished with them. Indeed, Mao is said to have collaborated with Japanese intelligence to undermine the Chinese Nationalist forces.

Almost everybody is tarnished. Madame Sun Yat-sen, also known as Song Qingling, is portrayed as a Soviet agent, albeit not very convincingly. And Zhang Xueliang, the "Young Marshal" who is widely remembered as a hero in China for kidnapping Chiang Kai-shek to force him to fight the Japanese, is portrayed as a power-hungry coup-monger. I knew the Young Marshal late in his life, and his calligraphy for my Chinese name adorns the Chinese version of my business cards, but now I'm wondering if I should get new cards.

After Mao comes to power, Chang and Halliday show him continuing his thuggery. This is more familiar ground, but still there are revelations. Mao used the Korean War as a chance to slaughter former Nationalist soldiers. And Mao says some remarkable things about the peasants he was supposed to be championing. When they were starving in the 1950's, he instructed: "Educate peasants to eat less, and have more thin gruel. The State should try its hardest . . . to prevent peasants eating too much." In Moscow, he offered to sacrifice the lives of 300 million Chinese, half the population at the time, and in 1958 he blithely declared of the overworked population: "Working like this, with all these projects, half of China may well have to die."

At times, Mao seems nuts. He toyed with getting rid of people's names and replacing them with numbers. And discussing the possible destruction of the earth with nuclear weapons, he mused that "this might be a big thing for the solar system, but it would still be an insignificant matter as far as the universe as a whole is concerned."

Chang and Halliday recount how the Great Leap Forward led to the worst famine in world history in the late 1950's and early 1960's, and how in 1966 Mao clawed his way back to supreme power in the chaos of the Cultural Revolution. Some of the most fascinating material involves Zhou Enlai, the longtime prime minister, who comes across as a complete toady of Mao, even though Mao tormented him by forcing him to make self-criticisms and by seating him in third-rate seats during meetings. In the mid-1970's, Zhou was suffering from cancer and yet Mao refused to allow him to get treatment - wanting Zhou to be the one to die first. "Operations are ruled out for now" for Zhou, Mao declared on May 9, 1974. "Absolutely no room for argument." And so, sure enough, Zhou died in early 1976, and Mao in September that year.

This is an extraordinary portrait of a monster, who the authors say was responsible for more than 70 million deaths. But how accurate is it? A bibliography and endnotes give a sense of sourcing, and they are impressive: the authors claim to have talked to everyone from Mao's daughter, Li Na, to his mistress, Zhang Yufeng, to Presidents George H. W. Bush and Gerald Ford. But it's not clear how much these people said. One of those listed as a source is Zhang Hanzhi, Mao's English teacher and close associate; she's also one of my oldest Chinese friends, so I checked with her. Zhang Hanzhi said that she had indeed met informally with Chang two or three times but had declined to be interviewed and never said anything substantial. I hope that Chang and Halliday will share some of their source materials, either on the Web or with other scholars, so that it will be possible to judge how fairly and accurately they have reached their conclusions.

My own feeling is that most of the facts and revelations seem pretty well backed up, but that ambiguities are not always adequately acknowledged. To their credit, the authors seem to have steered clear of relying on some of the Hong Kong magazines that traffic in a blurry mix of fact and fiction, but it is still much harder to ferret out the truth than they acknowledge. The memoirs and memories they rely on may be trustworthy, most of the time, but I question the tone of brisk self-confidence that the authors use in recounting events and quotations - and I worry that some things may be hyped.

Take the great famine from 1958 to 1961. The authors declare that "close to 38 million people died," and in a footnote they cite a Chinese population analysis of mortality figures in those years. Well, maybe. But there have been many expert estimates in scholarly books and journals of the death toll, ranging widely, and in reality no one really knows for sure - and certainly the mortality data are too crude to inspire confidence. The most meticulous estimates by demographers who have researched the famine toll are mostly lower than this book's: Judith Banister estimated 30 million; Basil Ashton also came up with 30 million; and Xizhe Peng suggested about 23 million. Simply plucking a high-end estimate out of an article and embracing it as the one true estimate worries me; if that is stretched, then what else is?

Another problem: Mao comes across as such a villain that he never really becomes three-dimensional. As readers, we recoil from him but don't really understand him. He is presented as such a bumbling psychopath that it's hard to comprehend how he bested all his rivals to lead China and emerge as one of the most worshipped figures of the last century.

Finally, there is Mao's place in history. I agree that Mao was a catastrophic ruler in many, many respects, and this book captures that side better than anything ever written. But Mao's legacy is not all bad. Land reform in China, like the land reform in Japan and Taiwan, helped lay the groundwork for prosperity today. The emancipation of women and end of child marriages 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 entire assault on the old economic and social structure made it easier for China to emerge as the world's new economic dragon.

Perhaps the best comparison is with Qinshihuang, the first Qin emperor, who 2,200 years ago unified China, built much of the Great Wall, standardized weights and measures and created a common currency and legal system - but burned books and buried scholars alive. The Qin emperor was as savage and at times as insane as Mao - but his success in integrating and strengthening China laid the groundwork for the next dynasty, the Han, one of the golden eras of Chinese civilization. In the same way, I think, Mao's ruthlessness was a catastrophe at the time, brilliantly captured in this extraordinary book - and yet there's more to the story: Mao also helped lay the groundwork for the rebirth and rise of China after five centuries of slumber.

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