

THE BAD MAN SCHOOL OF HISTORY

Mao: The Unknown Story, by Jung Chang and Jon Halliday.
Alfred A. Knopf, 832 pages, \$35

THIS HUGE BIOGRAPHY OF THE 20TH-century political giant is based on prodigious research and contains fascinating new material. Jung Chang, who is of Chinese origin, and Jon Halliday, her British husband, offer plenty of passion and detail in their unremittingly negative but engrossing portrait of Mao Tse-Tung. Overall the book is less the "unknown story" promised by the subtitle than a known story distilled into a polemic.

Seven decades ago an unknown story of Mao did appear in journalist Edgar Snow's *Red Star Over China* (1938). Coming from the dusty caves of remote Shaanxi Province, where Mao had recently concluded his Long March in flight from Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist forces, Snow's report arrived like a capsule from another planet. *Red Star* presented Mao's life from Mao's point of view. (Snow eventually called Mao a friend, and the People's Republic of China returned the favor.) In 1967, Stuart Schram, the pre-eminent scholar of Mao's writings, pieced together Mao's life and analyzed his thought in a scientific way in *Mao Tse-Tung*; part of this was also an unknown story. But in a half century of scholarship, Schram, like many other Sinologists, seldom moralized about Mao. To be sure, Sinologists recorded Mao's murders, lies, betrayals, and envies. But until Chang and Halliday, even sturdy critics have seen both achievements and failures in Mao; brilliant traits and blind spots; good intentions and evil intentions. This however is a slash-and-burn biography, a dossier against all Mao stood for, a bitter cry of rage against everything Mao did and tried to do. "Absolute selfishness and irresponsibility lay at the heart of Mao's outlook," they declare. Their assertion that "Mao's peasant background did not imbue him with idealism about improving the lot of Chinese peasants" denies a near-consensus in Sinology that Mao empathized with rural China. The "destruction of Chinese culture," they say, "typified his rule."

A common approach to Mao has been to draw up a "balance sheet" of his deeds and misdeeds. This was Deng Xiaoping's solution to his own Mao problem in 1980, four years after Mao's death. Deng declared Mao 70% correct and 30% mistaken, hoping this would forestall perilous debate. "Great aims but terrible costs" is another popular approach to Mao, especially

among Sinologists. The omelet was worthwhile even as one regrets the collateral damage to the eggs. There is also a "good Mao up to the later 1950s, bad Mao thereafter" approach, as if the Cultural Revolution of the late 1960s was a departure from Mao's otherwise defensible social engineering. My own biography of him asked the question, "What went wrong with Mao and why?" The young Mao was after all an individualist; his descent to totalitarianism cried out to be explained. I predicted that the evaluation of him within China might one day be, "Good Mao, Bad Marxism." He unified and strengthened China, it will be said, but embraced an illusory doctrine.

CHANG AND HALLIDAY SIMPLY DENOUNCE Mao: "To the whole of China, Mao's rule brought unprecedented misery." Calculating the cost of developing the atomic bomb (first tested in 1964) in terms of resources wrenched from the rice bowls of hungry Chinese during the terrible Great Leap Forward of the late 1950s, they write, "Mao's Bomb caused 100 times as many deaths as both of the Bombs the Americans dropped on Japan."

By locating China's misery in one man's perfidies, Chang and Halliday have written a rather Confucian book. In Chinese tradition, good rule occurred when the emperor was virtuous; troubles (even earthquakes and floods) suggested the emperor was a bad man. The authors' thesis is that Mao was utterly lacking in virtue—toward his family, staff, and colleagues, as well as the broad Chinese public, not to mention the globe's non-Chinese inhabitants. Everything follows from that. Lacking human feeling, or *ren qing*, he could not possibly do good.

Yet despite its limitations, the book enriches our picture of Mao. For example, it brings out Mao's awkwardness as a culturally narrow Chinese in international Communist circles. We see his secret dealings with the Japanese invaders in the 1930s and Stalin's suspicions on that score. Chang and Halliday strengthen the case made by Lucian Pye in *Mao Tse-tung: The Man in the Leader* (1976) that Mao was a "borderline personality," supplying stories of his deviousness, fascination with burning books, and fetish for killing and violence. A Moscow document unearthed by Halliday (who knows

Russian) skewers the buccaneering American leftist Agnes Smedley as a Comintern agent. In 1936, the Comintern amazingly sent half a million dollars to Mao in Shaanxi Province via Sun Yat-sen's widow Song Qingling and a New York bank. Mao's hatred for and appalling treatment of number-two figure Liu Shaoqi is made clear as never before.

In particular, Chang and Halliday offer two new, well-supported arguments about the Long March of 1935-36. At the time, Chiang Kai-shek's son was in the Soviet Union; his father feared the boy was becoming Stalin's prisoner. A *pas de deux* began between Stalin and Chiang Kai-shek, with the former nudging the latter to be softer on the Communists (Moscow was then skeptical of the Chinese Communist Party's near-term prospects), while Chiang Kai-shek sought his son's return. It may well be that this bargaining contributed to Mao's ultimate success in the Long March.

The book also suggests that Chiang limited his attacks on CCP forces during the Long March in order to lure them westward into the arms of warlords; the two forces would thus fight and weaken each other. In effect, this ploy helped Chiang subdue southwestern warlords while allowing the Long March to proceed and finally place Mao in the safe (but distant) redoubt of Yanan. Of course, to Chang and Halliday, the significance is that the Long March was not a great achievement of Mao's after all, since Chiang had, in fact, let him off the hook.

The authors give a brilliant account of Mao's arrogant foreign policy in the 1960s. The aging tyrant simultaneously, and riskily, alienated both the Soviet Union and the United States. He indulged Chinese chauvinism in Asia and Africa as if the world were China's backyard. He seemed to draw psychic satisfaction from making enemies and displaying China's supposed class purity.

MAO: THE UNKNOWN STORY CANNOT be dismissed, as Beijing has tried to do, as a Western attack on Mao in particular and Communist China in general, because it is PRC sources that were largely the focus of Chang and Halliday's interviews and research. Scores of mainland China witnesses testify to Mao's lack of virtue through every decade of his adult life. A doctor who observed

his treachery first-hand says Mao poisoned his great rival of the Yanan years, Wang Ming. In Jiangxi Province during the 1930s, Mao built up a treasure trove of gold, silver, and jewelry—an equivalent of a Swiss bank account—to secure his personal position. A playwright ridicules Mao's efforts to transform culture: "Why is it necessary to have 'leadership' in the arts? Who led Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Beethoven, Molière?"

Strikingly, and most unfortunately, there is hardly any discussion in these well-written pages of Mao's flawed ideas. Zhou Enlai was "in thrall to his Communist faith," but Mao, according to this book, was not. This is difficult to accept—and yields contradictions that are not explained. One moment the authors offer fresh writings by Mao's early wife, Yang Kaihui, showing how much she loved Mao and Mao loved her. The next moment they argue that Mao cared only for himself. Did his wife somehow miss that for years?

Repeatedly, we are told that Mao was so virtuous that no one liked or agreed with him. Yet he survived and his opponents either fell or pulled back. We read many times that he was found intolerable by Moscow; yet Chang and Halliday also say Mao was "indispensable" to Moscow. Left unexplained is the wide variety of political outcomes from Mao's clashes with others. Sometimes colleagues criticized Mao and got away with it. Why was this? Sometimes Mao retreated in a sulk and the opportunity arose for a coalition of colleagues to overthrow him—but they never did. When Mao quarreled with the powerful Zhang Guotao and his sympathizers during the Long March, everything the authors say about the quarrel makes the reader expect a coup, but it does not happen. Soon we have Mao "burying alive" 200 of Zhang Guotao's followers; the triumph of evil goes inexplicably on.

The monster approach to Mao would have worked better if Chang and Halliday had integrated their moral stance and arresting new material with the complementary analyses in such sources as Pye's book and (Mao physician) Li Zhisui's *The Private Life of Chairman Mao* (1996). The public Mao and the private Mao need to be more subtly linked. The authors should have asked: What made Mao an exceptional man? Why did he become a leader? What happened to his personality and private life as power accrued to him?

Mao was a man of ideas and of action, who disliked full-time intellectuals. He was also part tiger and part monkey, as he said of himself. His ruthless side knew how to crash through from point A to point B, but his quixotic side had doubts that B was really any better than A. His cyclical sense of history made him dissatisfied with any plateau of achievement after 1949, puzzling his less tempestuous colleagues. Above all, the flaws of Marxism-Leninism trapped Mao. As socialism kept failing to deliver the beauties he expected ("We started socialism, and everything disappears," said Liu Shaoqi), Mao pursued phantom enemies. All these themes and others must supplement Chang and Halliday's simple line that the unifying element in Mao's career was his lack of virtue.

TO BE SURE, BIOGRAPHIES ARE SELDOM objective. Snow's *Red Star Over China* was worse than polemical. In common with most journalists, diplomats, and Roosevelt Administration officials in the late 1930s, Snow's agenda was anti-fascism. For him there could be no enemy on the Left; any anti-fascist was *ipso facto* a democrat. In thrall to this agenda, Snow was repeatedly duped by staged interviews. By comparison, Chang and Halliday's one-sidedness is straightforward and unapologetic.

In any life story, a tension exists between the remarkable or unique in the person—the reason for the book—and those universals that induce in the reader a pang of recognition. To my taste there's too little of the latter in this book. In Peking Opera, you can make a unity of a character by creating a villain uniformly villainous and a hero unfailingly heroic. It's less appropriate to a biography. There's a distressing lack of paradox, evolution, and tragedy in *Mao: The Unknown Story*.

Yet the opening was there for this book. Sinology has tended to focus on Mao's aims, upholding their consistency and discovering in his texts justifications for what he did. Many of his outrageous statements ("poverty is good") have been given a pass by most Sinologists. China specialists have by no means denounced *Red Star*. They have overwhelmingly shied away from comparisons between Mao and Hitler. (Hitler won a large number of votes at an election, which is more than can be said for Mao). Yet as early as the Hundred Flowers outbursts

of 1956, numerous Chinese voices have likened the two dictators. To their great credit, Chang and Halliday hold up a universal standard, implicitly asking their English-speaking audience not to condescend to the Chinese, not to excuse Mao in the name of Chinese uniqueness or exoticism. In whatever national dress, dictatorship is dictatorship, cruelty is cruelty, lies are lies.

Seldom has a huge book ended with such a short final chapter. Here it is in its entirety:

Today, Mao's portrait and his corpse still dominate Tiananmen Square in the heart of the Chinese capital. The current Communist regime declares itself to be Mao's heir and fiercely perpetuates the myth of Mao.

The authors insist that Mao's state remains China's state today. They hope their book will contribute to the end of Communist rule in China. Is it extreme or one-sided to foresee the end of Communist rule?

Let me answer with an anecdote. A well-known liberal publication said it was "one-sided" of me in *The New Chinese Empire* (2003) to predict that Communist rule will soon collapse in China. What, I wonder, are the two sides of that issue? Perhaps liberals mean that one extreme is to say a regime, say Castro's Cuba or today's China, is a terrific success, while the other is to say it is ultimately going to fall. Hence the reasonable liberal middle, according to the *New York Times*, *Publishers Weekly* and other left cultural gatekeepers, is to conclude that the mixture of success and disappointment in Havana and Beijing will go on indefinitely. Happily, at least for those who live under these regimes, Marxism's history in the late 20th century makes that unlikely. But when the Chinese Communist Party does lose its hold on power, it will not be because of Mao's personal evils alone, but also because of Communism's flaws and contradictions.

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Shadow Play, by Martha Bayles



Uncaptive Mind

All my films, from the first to the most recent ones, are about individuals who can't quite find their bearings, who don't quite know how to live, who don't really know what's right or wrong and are desperately looking.

—Krzysztof Kieslowski

WHEN CZESLAW MILOSZ WON THE Nobel Prize for Literature in 1980, the esteem he enjoyed in Poland blossomed into adoration. And as the struggle against Communist rule intensified during the 1980s, the long-exiled poet found himself cast as the "national bard." Yet as Milosz remarked to many interviewers (including this one), "I am not by nature a political writer." The example he offered was not his youth in Nazi- and Soviet-occupied Polish Lithuania, but his 1960 arrival in America, where his reputation rested solely on *The Captive Mind*, his 1953 study of the corruption of literature under Communism. "Pressed to play the role of the crusading anti-Communist but lacking the ability," he settled for being "an obscure professor in an obscure department" (Slavic literature at U.C. Berkeley). "But," he added with a wink, "I was happy. I had come in search of bread, and I found it."

Most Polish artists worth their salt are obsessed with the tension between individual expression and communal obligation. Not for them the tidy balance articulated by William James: "The community stagnates without the impulse of the individual. The impulse dies away without the sympathy of the community." When for generations one's national identity has been brutally suppressed, and the only way to preserve it is through culture, the artist feels acutely his responsibility to the community. But when the dead hand of ideology squeezes the life out of all communal expression, the

artist feels just as acutely his responsibility to himself. To produce good work amid such cross currents takes not only talent but doggedness.

To some, this is ancient history, because Polish artists now enjoy Western-style freedom, albeit at the price of feeling marginalized by Western-style entertainment. Nevertheless, the international reputation of some Polish artists, notably the film maker Krzysztof Kieslowski, has never been higher. To use a crass commercial yardstick, the DVD boxed set of his *Decalogue* series (ten one-hour dramas based loosely on the Ten Commandments, made for Polish TV in 1988) is currently number 3,700 in Amazon.com's sales rankings (about even with The Alfred Hitchcock Signature Collection). Another Kieslowski boxed set released in 2003, the *Three Colors* trilogy (*Blue*, *White*, and *Red*), is a staple in video stores everywhere. And in 2005 Kino Video released The Krzysztof Kieslowski Collection, a six-disc boxed set including several of the director's earlier films and some fascinating interviews.

Loyalty to Poland

KIESLOWSKI DIED IN 1996 AT THE AGE of 54, while undergoing heart surgery in Warsaw. Accounts vary, but most agree that he turned down the chance to have the operation done in a Western hospital with state-of-the-art training and equipment. Christopher Garbowski, author of *Krzysztof Kieslowski's Decalogue Series*, offers this explanation: "The hospital where he had the operation was supposedly qualified, and he simply didn't seem to have such an unusual problem. He was something of a patriot on these matters, not wanting to go abroad if it didn't seem necessary." This

explanation captures two of Kieslowski's most salient traits: his loyalty to Poland, and his skepticism toward newfangled gimmickry from the West.

The loyalty ran deep. Born in 1941, Kieslowski had an unsettled boyhood, because his father suffered from tuberculosis and had to move from sanatorium to sanatorium. Intense, gloomy, but gifted with wry humor, Kieslowski enrolled at age 17 in the College for Theater Technicians in Warsaw, because it was better than the alternative presented by his father, which was to become a fireman. As he muses in his autobiography, "My father was a wise man.... [He] knew perfectly well that when I got back from that fireman's training college, I'd want to study." The years 1958-1962 were extraordinarily creative in Polish theater, and Kieslowski aspired to become a theater director. But in order to do that, he had to attend another institution of higher learning. After three attempts, he was accepted by the Lodz Film School.

That it took three attempts should not reflect poorly on Kieslowski's abilities, since typically there were 1,000 candidates for five or six places. Nor should it suggest undue political conformity, because the Lodz Film School enjoyed a fair amount of freedom at the time—at least until 1968, when General Mieczyslaw Moczar cracked down on the student movement and purged thousands of Jews from higher education. With bitter sarcasm, Kieslowski recalls how the authorities cloaked their actions in "grand words" about "experimental cinema," which meant in effect that it was better "to cut holes in film or set up the camera in one corner for hours on end" than "to see what was happening in the world, how people were living and...why their lives weren't as easy as the paper described them."