

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article856>



China

# Mao in Question

- IV Online magazine - 2005 - IV369 - July-August 2005 -

Publication date: Wednesday 17 August 2005

---

**Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved**

---

**Thirty years ago this book would have been dismissed as a work of anti-Communist fantasy, not just by people in the Communist movement, but by most of the left and even many liberals. But since the death of Mao Tse-tung in 1976, and especially since the defeat of the 'Gang of Four' and the coming to power of Deng Xiao-ping in 1978, much more of the real story of Mao and the Chinese Communist Party in the struggle for power and exercising power has become known. Little of this story reveals Mao, Maoism or the Chinese Communist Party in a positive light.**

Jung Chang, author of the best-selling *Wild Swans*, and Jon Halliday, formerly the East Asian expert of the New Left Review editorial board, spent 10 years researching and writing this book. Their sources are not just written records and memoirs, but hundreds of interviews with participants, in China itself and internationally.

If even 20% of the facts about the modus operandi of the CCP and Mao [1] presented in this book are true (and that's an absolute minimum) it is going to force many leftists - even those who were always critical of Mao and Maoism - to re-evaluate their views.

It seems obvious now that many of the opinions expressed in the pre-1976 period, even by critical Marxists, let alone Maoists and liberal Mao groupies like Edgar Snow and William Hinton [2], were wildly optimistic about the regime in general, its attitude to the popular masses, its alleged 'egalitarianism' and the supposedly radical and revolutionary forces within sections of the student youth and workers during the Cultural Revolution.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/mao-glowing.jpg>]

However, while constructing an irrefutable charge sheet against Mao, Jung Chang and Jon Halliday are unable to build their own explanatory framework for why the Chinese Communist Party took power in 1949 and what the basic social forces at work were. Thus they inadvertently make Mao seem not just evil, but a Machiavellian political genius of unparalleled proportions.

## Mao Indicted

The Jung- Halliday charge sheet is formidable, and only a representative slice of it can be reproduced here, to give the general flavour. The authors charge that:

a) In the late 1920s and early 1930s Mao carried out serial unprincipled manoeuvres to attempt to gain control of the different Red Armies, denigrate and humiliate their successful leaders, gain rank and position in the eyes of the Shanghai party headquarters and Moscow and callously send thousands of Red Army soldiers to their deaths in militarily useless actions aimed at discrediting other commanders. This reached its peak in his successful subjugation and humiliation of Zhu De, the most successful Red Army commander.

b) The first 'red base' ruled over by Mao and his army (in Hunan) operated on the basis of terror and pillage, of which the main victims were the peasants - a continual theme in Mao's progress. When Mao's army left after 15 months the area was bled dry and the locals hated the Reds. Wounded men and civilian Communists left behind were massacred.

c) Between 1929 and 1931 Mao unified his own small army with the much larger and more successful armies of Peng De-huai and Zhu De, manoeuvring to become overall commander. Trying also to subjugate the Communist-controlled province of Jiangxi to his command, Mao met stiff resistance from local Communists. He responded by launching a massive purge against 'Anti-Bolsheviks' (ABs). The authors allege that 4,400 Communists were identified as ABs, that most were killed and all were tortured, and Mao later admitted that this. They further allege on the basis of the testimonies of survivors, that the wives of 'AB' leaders were sadistically tortured.

d) The first 'Red State' in Jiangxi (1931-34, capital Ruijin), where Mao was not (yet) the sole, supreme leader, but where the basic institutions and security apparatus had been put in place by Chou En-lai, was a state based on the extraction of the maximum surplus from the local population, to support the Communist apparatus and military machine.

The area was the site of the world's then largest known deposits of tungsten, a source of huge income, but this huge income did not restrain the attempts to maximise extractions from the population, in the form of ceaseless labour, forced purchase of 'bonds', donating family jewellery and other valuables. Peasants and workers were forced to give literally everything, even losing their houses and furniture and being reduced to penury.

The local regime was also one of constant political mobilisation in the form of endless, mind-numbing, meetings and rallies which consumed what free time was left over from labour.

## Bureaucratic Privilege from an Early Stage

e) During the Long March Mao did not march or ride on a horse, as frequently depicted, but was carried on a litter. As usual he lived a life of extreme comfort, while conditions for the ordinary soldiers and other on the march were terribly hard. Mao had collected a secret horde of confiscated money and other valuables, which was taken with him on the march.

By the time of the Long March bureaucratic privilege for the leaders was firmly established in a finely-graded and precise hierarchy. This included for example access to medical treatment and food. Mao was indifferent to the suffering of the rank and file, to which his own irrational military decisions often contributed. Some of these were deliberate, to undermine potential rival commanders and ensure they suffered significant losses.

f) Mao excelled at publicity, which ensured him constant attention by the party centre and in Moscow; this was aided by the hagiographic writings of US liberal journalist Edgar Snow.

g) Mao's armies did virtually nothing to fight the Japanese invaders; rather he preserved his armies the better to fight the Nationalists. This drove Stalin to distraction during the Second World War, when he was desperate to tie up the Japanese, to prevent them invading from the East while the Soviet state tried to repel the Nazi invasion.

## Executions and Torture

h) Mao's Second World War base in Yen'an was built through terror. Again it was an exemplar of gross bureaucratic privilege, with even a Rolls Royce sent by Chinese laundry workers in New York to be an ambulance for wounded

soldiers, appropriated by Mao for his personal use. Thousands of idealistic youth went there to join the fight against landlordism and imperialism; once there they were not allowed to leave and subject to forced labour. Executions and torture were common.

Discontent with this was articulated by the writings of Wang Shi-wei (who had translated some of Trotsky's works into Chinese) and a political opposition began to emerge, although it never had time to crystallise. The result was brutal, almost unimaginable, repression in which thousands were brutally tortured and murdered and a regime of constant interrogations and 'confessions' was established.

i) Mao came to power mainly through Russian backing in terms of arms, and also the Russian invasion of Manchuria at the end of the war. He further benefited from the incompetence of Chiang Kai-shek, who was much more popular than the Communists, but unaccountably let Mao and the Communists off the hook on many occasions. The actual seizure of power was followed by the execution of hundreds of thousands, mainly to instil in the population and appropriate understanding of the need for obedience

j) The central dynamic of post-revolutionary China revolved around Mao's determination to make his country into a first-rate military superpower. To do this meant huge purchases of arms and technology from Russia and Eastern Europe, which was paid for by massive exports of food and agricultural produce to those countries, while the peasantry in China starved.

Ever more unrealistic targets were given for peasant production and millions were reduced to starvation and penury. This was the source of the first political battles with Peng De-huai and Liu Sao-chi in 1956, when their alliance with Chou En-lai actually forced some temporary retreat on Mao's priority to heavy industry.

## Mao's Forced March to Industrialisation

This conflict over Mao's unrealistic attempt to force-march China into superpower status through insane extractions from the peasants and the even more insane Great Leap Forward (1958-9) led to a split in the party leadership which precipitated the Cultural Revolution, an attempt by Mao to circumvent party structures by unleashing the hero-worshipping youth to carry out more mass murder and mayhem. This split was only finally resolved by Mao's death, the defeat of the Gang of Four, and ultimately the reforms of Deng Xiao-ping.

This brief attempt to sum up some of the main themes of a lavishly-documented 800-page book leaves out thousands of details and hundreds of crimes, but hopefully the main gist of it can be grasped. It seems obvious however that whatever the truth of the Jung-Halliday charge sheet (and about the repression and violence it's clearly mainly true) their overall 'story' lacks focus and conviction.

"One very bad man took over China because he was a megalomaniac who wanted all the power, all the luxury and all the women for himself" is not a convincing story: it might (just) explain the rise of a gangland Mafia boss, but the conquest of the most populous nation on earth requires a little more explanation.

Two things need explaining: a) why did thousands of idealistic youth, workers and peasants rally to the Communists? b) What, socially and politically, did Chiang Kai-shek and the nationalists represent?

On the former question it seems obvious that the Communists put forward a programme of national independence and anti-imperialism, together with anti-landlordism (land reform), anti-warlordism and social egalitarianism, capable

of attracting tens of thousands. Jung-Halliday don't attempt to measure what Chiang and the Nationalists represented, nor their relationship with imperialism. They seem to think it adequate to say that Chiang was the real nationalist, the one who was popular, and really represented "the nation". But whose nation? What social classes backed him? What social programme did he represent?

Double standards operate even on the details of crimes and human rights. Mao's many crimes are lavishly documented and commented on in gut-wrenching detail, by crimes by the Nationalists are mentioned in a matter-of-fact, detached way.

## Historical Contradiction

The authors can't seem to deal with a paradox, an historical contradiction, and a tragic one of course: that an elemental struggle of revolutionary proportions of the ultra-exploited Chinese workers and peasants was channelled by an organisation formed in the school of Stalinism, which established a brutal, totalitarian political tyranny, one which needed no lessons from Stalin in how to stay in power through the unremitting use of murderous repression. And the authors are incapable of looking at the overall social results of the revolution.

One conclusion from the book seems obvious; the argument that the revolution was a 'peasant' revolution and the CCP was a 'peasant' party is contradicted by virtually every fact the book offers. Mao and the party leadership had complete contempt for the peasants. The 'countryside to the cities' theory was an ex post facto invention (by Lin Biao, not Mao). Mao was always concerned to take power in the cities. The CCP leadership had its roots in the radicalised petty-bourgeoisie in the cities, and of course those sections of the working class in which supported the party.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/CulturalRevolutionA2.jpg>]

Cultural Revolution: Red Guards denounce 'capitalist roaders'.

The class that became the privileged interlocutor of the ruling bureaucracy after the revolution was the working class. If the peasantry was subject to persistent super-exploitation in the 'Red Bases' and then at an all-China level, the working class had installed the minimum social backup of the 'iron rice bowl' and some basic social provision, albeit primitive, in the same way as the working class in Russia and eastern Europe.

This of course represented real social progress, but it is not discussed. Indeed the real conditions of the workers (and peasants) in non-communist controlled China before 1949 is not examined - no mention of the carts going around (Western-dominated) Shanghai each morning to pick up the 80-100 bodies of the homeless who had died overnight, and indeed no real examination of the fate of the landlord-dominated peasant millions.

Although there is not space to elaborate this here, the book poses serious questions for simplistic, formulaic and circular theories of Stalinism, which identified it unilaterally as always 'popular frontist', always opposed to taking power as against keeping the bourgeoisie in power, and always subservient to the interests of the Soviet bureaucracy (and in any case why was it true that the Soviet bureaucracy was always against Communists taking power, after the experience of eastern Europe?). Of course the word 'Stalinism' is not important in itself, provided that not using it is not a way of implying 'more democratic', 'less repressive', 'more egalitarian' etc.

On the basis of the facts enumerated in this book, it is very difficult to sustain the view that the CCP suffered bureaucratic degeneration after the seizure of power. Once the CCP had conquered territorial spaces, it proceeded to set up a bureaucratic tyranny with immense social privileges for the leaders, in each and every case. The political police, the Chinese KGB, was well-established by the early 1940s in Yenan.

# Super-exploitation of the Peasantry

There is one central aspect of the argumentation in the book which I find utterly convincing - the quest from the early 1950s onwards for rapid industrialisation and arms accumulation, in order to force-march China into becoming a superpower. The dynamics of this seem to me to be irrefutable.

Stalin himself remarked that China's arms requirements were "excessive" and that the Soviet Union had never allocated such a large proportion of GDP to arms, even during the war against the Nazis! By even 1954-5 Mao was arguing that the peasants were eating too much (a constant refrain from Mao), and that appropriation of grain and other agricultural products by the state had to be stepped up. It wasn't so much that the state appropriated the *surplus*, more that it tried to accumulate just about everything.

Alleged resistance to state accumulation of most agricultural products led to another massive purge with thousands of executions and probably many thousands of suicides in 1955. It also led to the setting up of the Peoples Communes, so that the whole of the agricultural product would come under the direct and immediate purview and control of the party. The Peng-Liu-Chou En-lai resistance to this insanity, based on their direct experiences visiting villages and the widespread knowledge that disenchantment with and hostility to the party had become endemic in the population, led to a tactical retreat by Mao in 1956, but Mao came back strongly with the Hundred Flowers campaign and the Great Leap Forward. [3]

## The Hundred Flowers and the Great Leap Forward

Jung-Halliday see the Hundred Flowers campaign as a deliberate trap. In February 1957 Mao invited criticism of the party under the banner of "Let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools of thought contend." An extraordinary outflowing of wall-posters and primitive samizdat appeared denouncing the regime.

Only five months later, when many oppositionists had shown their hand and come into the open, the Hundred Flowers were shut down and the brutal purge of "rightists" was launched, with hundreds of thousands of "intellectuals" denounced and imprisoned and many thousands executed. Whether the Hundred Flowers was a deliberate ploy to force the opposition into the open to be purged its difficult to know. Maybe Mao just got scared about the extent of the opposition it revealed. Either way, the closing down of the Hundred Flowers and the launching of the anti-rightist campaign resulted in creating the conditions for consolidating Mao's position in the leadership and the next insane bid for rapid industrialisation, the Great Leap Forward.

The Great Leap (1958-61) combined demands for impossible levels of agricultural production, huge forced-labour projects like dams and canals, and of course the infamous and useless back-yard steel production. The conflicts over the super-exploitation of the peasantry, and the insanities of the Great Leap which cost more than 30 million lives through starvation and over-work, led directly to the Cultural Revolution, a systematic attempt by Mao to go outside the structures of the party by mobilising millions of Red Guards to "Bombard the headquarters", ie attack Liu Shao-chi and anyone who might harbour similar criticisms.

Jung Chang has modestly claimed this book will transform the way that China sees Mao and the Mao legacy. I suspect tens of millions of Chinese already have a highly critical view of Mao and the Mao period. The problem is that merely by adding up the catastrophes and crimes of Mao leads to an unspoken conclusion, but one which is obviously the position of the book's authors - that it would have been better if the revolution had not taken place. Jung-Halliday would have obviously preferred it if not Mao but Chang Kai-shek and the Nationalists had come to

power.

But it is highly speculative to believe that democracy and prosperity would have resulted. China would still have been in the grip of imperialism, the peasants would have been under the landlords and the Kuomintang would probably have instituted a military dictatorship. Despite all the errors, crimes and fearful economic waste, major progress towards industrialisation was made under Mao, national unity was created and the country broke with imperialism. Contrary to the contemporary myth that China's runaway economic growth was created by globalisation, the infrastructural basis for it was created through industrialisation following the victory of the revolution in 1949, and the stabilisation of the economy in the 1950s.

But the tragedy is that the Jung-Halliday discourse is all too credible to the younger Chinese generation in the light of what we now know about the political tyranny under Mao. It will take a long time, and many new experiences in the Middle Kingdom and internationally, for socialism to become a major force in China again.

*A shorter version of this article appears in the special autumn issue of Socialist Outlook on China.*

---

[1] This review uses the transliteration conventions of the book, hence Mao Tse-tung and not Mao Zedong.

[2] In books like Snow's *Red Star Over China* and Hinton's *Fanshen - Report from a Chinese Village*

[3] The authors have long and interesting sections on China's acquisition of nuclear bomb technology from Russia, arguing that Mao deliberately caused confrontations with the US over Taiwan/Quemoy, and unnecessarily prolonged the Korean war, to frighten the Russians into thinking they had no choice but to give the bomb to Mao, or get drawn into providing a nuclear umbrella themselves, thus risking Russia being drawn into a nuclear confrontation with the US. There isn't any proof for this type of speculation; moreover it's clear that in the late 1950s Khrushchev wanted to repair relations with China and not risk a split in the international communist movement (although China effected the split anyway), and this might have been the reason for Russia's generosity with the bomb. The authors say no country has acquired the bomb with less effort, although it seems that does not hold true for Israel, who were also donated nuclear technological know-how, courtesy not of the US as often alleged but by mainly by France and also by Britain.