

Vicious Anti-Mao Biography

Mao Zedong: Not Fairytale Monster But Greatest Liberator of Mid-20th Century

By Raymond Lotta for the Set the Record Straight Project

Mao: The Unknown Story by Jung Chang and Jon Halliday is not historical scholarship but hysterical rant. The purpose of this work is to demonize Mao Zedong and destroy his reputation, pure and simple. The master narrative is that Mao was evil from the day he was born—and committed evil upon evil until the day he died. Chang and Halliday reconstruct and fabricate history to make the case that a scheming and bloodthirsty opportunist hijacked an entire people and country.

Reader beware. You are being lied to. *Mao: The Unknown Story* plays fast and loose with facts, offers far-fetched theories based not on careful investigation but unrelenting hatred of Mao, and twists reality to fit an anticommunist agenda. The message is that the Chinese revolution was not really necessary, and that great revolutionary leaders like Mao are in fact power-crazed tyrants and perpetrators of towering crimes. This book is a brief against revolution and revolutionary leaders. If you swallowed the justifying arguments about “weapons of mass destruction,” you’ll adore this book.

Mao: The Unknown Story employs a methodology that distorts reality:

1) Was a revolution needed?

The authors paint a picture of a revolution based on manipulation and terror. They whitewash the incredible misery and suffering of the old society, and the fact that for more than a century China had been beaten down and dominated by the imperialist powers of the West and Japan. They deny that tens and hundreds of millions of Chinese peasants and workers could possibly take up the revolutionary cause as their own. The masses of people have no agency in the company of Chang and Halliday—they are but pawns and putty.

You would not learn from this book that pre-revolutionary China was a society where arranged marriages and footbinding were widespread social practices. Or that 4 million people died each year of infectious and parasitic diseases. Or that in a city like Shanghai, young women workers were locked in textile factories at night, and one out of five persons was an opium addict. You wouldn’t know

that the revolution in power rapidly transformed these social conditions. The Marriage Law of 1950, one of the first decrees of the new People’s Republic, established marriage by mutual consent, right to divorce, and outlawed the sale of children, and infanticide.

2) Mao as revolutionary theorist and revolutionary leader

It borders on the absurd. The authors are consumed with such venom for Mao that they cannot—in all 630 pages of text—bring themselves to treat Mao’s writings and speeches about the revolutionary process before and after the seizure of power. In the sordid psychohistory of Chang and Halliday, Mao’s ideas are simply hypocritical and manipulative means to attain personal domination. In fact, Mao analyzed the nature of Chinese society and developed programs and policies that spoke to the real material and social contradictions of Chinese society; and Mao brought forth a vision of moving society beyond exploitation and social divisions. All this inspired and motivated great numbers of people in China and around the world. This is what our authors find so reprehensible.

3) Shoddy methods and sensationalistic claims

The authors bask in the glow of a vast arsenal of references and sources—memoirs, hitherto inaccessible archives, interviews—and ten years of research. Boasting more than 125 pages of notes and sources...what the book says must be true—right? No, this is a snow job, and the relationship between claim and supporting evidence is shoddy beyond belief. Let’s take three egregious examples:

- The famous battle at the Dadu River Bridge during the Long March is now declared (pp. 152-55) to be a hoax, a self-serving myth invented by Mao and the Chinese Communist Party. The authors claim that “there was no battle” and “no Nationalist [Kuomintang] troops at the bridge.” They cite as a substantiating source the Kuomintang (KMT) archives. The KMT, which set world standards in corruption, and which suffered defeat at the hands of the Communist Party-led forces, is not exactly the most reliable source. Still, these archives contain useful historiographic materials—but, lo and behold, other

scholars who have studied the KMT archives say they do not at all support the Chang/Halliday rewrite of history. Okay, but the authors furnish what they consider to be additional evidence, and key to this are the recollections of a “sprightly 93-year old” local woman they say they met in 1997! This quality of scholarship would be laughable in any other discipline. But somehow you can get away with this when it comes to Mao and the Chinese Revolution.

- Listen to this gem about Mao’s view on education (p. 438): “Mao’s approach was not to raise the general standard of education in society as a whole, but to focus on a small elite, predominantly in science and other ‘useful’ subjects, and leave the rest of the population to be illiterate or semi-literate slave laborers.” If that were the case, how can you explain the fact that China’s literacy rate vaulted from 15 percent in 1949 to close to 80 percent by Mao’s death? Or that educational resources were vastly expanded in the rural areas during the Cultural Revolution, leading to rise in middle-school enrollment from 15 to 58 million? Or that with the huge opening up of educational opportunities through the Cultural Revolution, worker and peasant students became the great majority of China’s university enrollment by the early 1970s.
- Or take this claim about the Cultural Revolution: “There was not one school in the whole of China where atrocities did not occur” (p. 518). Surely, we would expect to find ample documentation for such a sweeping statement of fact. But you will search in vain for a single source. The method is clear. Repeat the slander often enough...and it becomes fact.

4) The Chinese Revolution on the scales of history

The Chinese revolution was a turning point in the history of the 20th century. As Mao said in 1949, “the Chinese people have stood up.” They stood up to feudal landlords, the Japanese invaders, the U.S.-

financed KMT army, and foreign powers. Despite the authors’ outrageous claims, it was Mao who led in developing a military strategy to surround the cities from the countryside. He led in the development of a socialist society marked by the creative energy and initiative of those who had previously been treated as no more than a pair of hands.

This was a revolution that brought enormous social and economic progress to the great majority of people. Life expectancy more than doubled, from 32 years in 1949 to 65 years in 1975. China under Mao achieved what the U.S. has proven incapable of coming close to: a universal and egalitarian health care system. Industry grew by more than 10 percent a year during the Cultural Revolution. And by the early 1970s, China had solved its historic food problem. This revolution saved untold numbers of lives. The Cultural Revolution, far from being Mao’s “Great Purge,” was a “revolution within the revolution.” It was a broad movement and upheaval aimed at preventing a new privileged class from taking power and turning China into what it has become since Mao died in 1976: a sweatshop paradise riddled with corruption and inequality. China is no longer socialist.

5) What’s at stake in the debate over this book?

Basically two things. First, the truth of Mao and the Chinese revolution—what this revolution was about, what Mao stood for and did, and what the Chinese people accomplished. Second, the question of humanity’s future: can we put an end to the horrific exploitation, oppression, and inequality of the world as it is, and radically transform it—or is this the only world possible? *Mao: The Unknown Story* is character assassination with a reactionary moral writ large: dreams of radical and revolutionary change are doomed; long live the status quo.

*Raymond Lotta is currently on a national speaking tour:
“Socialism Is Much Better Than Capitalism,
and Communism Will Be a Far Better World.”*

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