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## I'M SO RONREY

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### He's Back

With the accession of Hu Jintao to the dual roles of State President and General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party's Politburo in 2002, many presumed that the relatively lax ideological rule of the Jiang Zemin years would continue. Ever-optimistic observers even thought that here, finally, China had a Soviet-style reformist of its own (recall putative Sino-Gorbachevs past, Qiao Shi, for example).

It was probably the 2003 commemoration of the 110<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Mao Zedong's birth, and the speech that Hu Jintao made at the Great Hall of the People in December that year, that put paid to such a notion. Ten years earlier, in 1993, the party had also commemorated Mao, using the centenary to extol the virtues of Deng Xiaoping theory and the direction that the country had taken since the Cultural Revolution. In part, the authorities were also attempting to redirect the popular Mao cult that flourished from the late 1980s, especially after 1989 (a cult which had been evident in nascent form in the 1989 mass protests), an unruly outcrop of mass sentiment chronicled in my study of the 'posthumous career' of the Great Leader, *Shades of Mao* (M. E. Sharpe, 1996).<sup>1</sup>

In a speech delivered on the occasion of the centenary celebrations of Mao's birth in December 1993, Jiang Zemin had at least made mention of Mao's errors.<sup>2</sup> For Hu Jintao, on the other hand, the banner of Mao Thought had "always to be held high, at all times and in all circumstances",<sup>3</sup> and he had nothing but praise for the

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<sup>1</sup> Geremie R. Barmé, *Shades of Mao, the posthumous cult of the Great Leader* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Jiang Zemin, "Zai Mao Zedong tongzhi danchen 100 zhounian jinian dahuishangde jianghua (1993 nian 12 yue 26 ri)" [Speech on the occasion of the centenary of Comrade Mao Zedong's birth], *Renmin ribao*, 27 December 1993; and Barmé, *Shades of Mao*, p. 259.

<sup>3</sup> Hu as reported in the Xinhua News Agency release dated 26 December 2003, "Zhonggong zhongyang juxing jinian Mao Zedong tongzhi danchen 110 zhounian zuotanhui" [Symposium held on the occasion of the 110<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Comrade Mao Zedong's birth].

man who, with his death in September 1976, had bequeathed his country a legacy of arrant politics, economic ruination and profound social anomie.

Hu Jintao has pursued a politics that was evident in his pro-Mao speech of 2003, ushering in a period of increased ideological policing. It is therefore perhaps a good time for there to be renewed work and thought devoted to Mao Zedong and his abiding—I would argue inescapable—patrimony, whether it be in Chinese, or some other international language. Chang Jung and John Halliday's *Mao: the Unknown Story* (or *The Untold Story*, as the North American edition is subtitled) promises, among other things, startling revelations about one man's monomania, diabolical ego and tireless cruelty. It is a work that provides the reader with a Mao in verso, a dark negative of the CCP's account. The hyper marketing strategy of its publishers has allowed the book to enjoy a near dream run in the mass media of the Anglophone world. But is *The Unknown Story* a serious contribution to our knowledge and understanding of a crucially important figure of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the history of a country with which his personal story is so profoundly commingled?

### **Bandit Mao**

It was, I recall, in 1980 that I first heard one of my mainland friends use the expression “Bandit Mao”, or *Mao zei* to describe the dead chairman. He was a veteran writer who had suffered terrible persecution from 1957, and whose wife had been brutally beaten and disabled during the opening months of the Cultural Revolution. We had met shortly after the arrest of the ‘Gang of Four’ at a gathering of literary bon-vivants who had been kept apart by two decades of political persecution. From then on this particular friend—a man now lauded in the Chinese media as a great talent abused during the years of ‘leftist’ supremacy—would often refer to Mao as *Mao zei*, even, according to both him and other friends, at meetings where pro-Maoist party elders were present. He was also an early and strident proponent in favour of removing Mao's corpse from his mausoleum, and taking down the portrait that to this day looms over Tiananmen Square.

He was only one of many men and women of conscience, people who had endured the brutalities of the Mao years, who would speak out in various forms against the Chairman and his baneful legacy. There was Wang Keping of the Stars avant-garde art collective, who produced the memorable sculpture of Mao as Buddha in 1978; Bai Hua who published the scenario ‘Unrequited Love’ in 1979; and then, in January 1980, the Sichuan writer Sun Jingxuan who wrote a powerful poem on the lingering leader. In it he ominously warned his readers that, “A loathsome spectre/ Prowls the desolation of your land ...”

Despite Deng Xiaoping's canny move to put Mao in his place, and Party Central's decision on post-1949 history that provided a final official ruling on the leader's historical role (and mistakes)—a ruling that Hu Jintao used to his own ends

in his 2003 commemorative hagiography—throughout the 1980s Chinese writers and thinkers continued, as best they could, to excoriate and interrogate the burden of Mao. Among my favorites is Li Jie, who used his particular adaptation of psycho-analytic theory and cultural studies to pierce the “fog that Mao shrouded himself in, both intentionally and unintentionally”.<sup>4</sup> This Shanghai author’s analysis of Mao paralleled the Russian philosopher Alexander Zinoviev’s cogitations on Stalin and Stalinism, in which he considers the powerful and complex psycho-political intermeshing of the Russians with their Soviet ruler. As Li says of China’s own leader, “...Mao utilized the weakness of the Chinese to further his own Mao-style revolution ...”<sup>5</sup>

I mention here in summary some early attempts by mainland Chinese cultural figures to deal with Mao, despite the pressures of intermittent and egregious official censorship, because if there is one overarching flaw in the Chang-Halliday tome, it is that the authors give scarcely a hint of the complex binding relationship between Mao, his colleagues and those who participated in, created, benefited and suffered from the Chinese revolution, especially following the founding of the People’s Republic of China.<sup>6</sup>

Another reason that 1980s and 90s Chinese-language works on Mao, many of them colorful and fanciful, seem relevant to a review of this book is that in many ways *Mao: the Unknown Story*, with its histrionic tone and its unwavering certainty, is reminiscent not of, say, the more balanced prose of other recent popular dictator biographies like Ian Kershaw’s work on Hitler, but rather of the bitter glee of so much post-Cultural Revolution mainland Chinese historiography and pop sensationalism. While anyone familiar with the lived realities of the Mao years can sympathize with the authors’ outrage over the atrocities of the time, one must ask whether a vengeful spirit serves either author or reader well, in the creation of a mass market work that would claim authority and dominance in the study of Mao Zedong and his history?

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<sup>4</sup> Li Jie, “The Mao Phenomenon: A Survivor’s Critique”, in *Shades of Mao*, p. 141.

<sup>5</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 143.

<sup>6</sup> I would note in passing, however, that given the use of powerful “moral-evaluative” terminology in Chinese historiography, the Chang-Halliday book will read more “naturally” in Chinese translation. On the importance of moral-evaluative language in modern Chinese, see my *In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp. 326-28.

## Troubles with the Telling

Having spent some long years working with colleagues in Boston to make a film, and create a website, related to the history of the Cultural Revolution era,<sup>7</sup> and having encountered many knotty issues in the process, I began reading with some anticipation the relevant sections of Chang-Halliday's *Mao*, entitled 'Unsweet Revenge' (pp. 523-654) which the editors of *The China Journal* have asked me to concentrate on here. Given the authors' avowed in-depth research into the machinations of the party elite, and Mao in particular, I was looking forward to at least some new information or consideration of the questions related to the origins and unfolding of the Cultural Revolution, Mao's motivations, and the history of that period.

My problems and doubts began on the first page of 'Unsweet Revenge', and they just kept increasing.

- Jiang Qing is immediately dubbed "police chief for stamping out culture nationwide" (p. 523). Further on the authors tell us that: "In the annihilation of culture, Mme Mao played a key role as her husband's police chief in this area. And she made sure that there was no resurrection of culture the rest of Mao's life ..." (p.542). This reduces to a parody the long-term and important debates about reform versus revolution, and mass as opposed to bourgeois values, in the Chinese arts that can be traced back to the May Fourth era (1917-27) and which found a clear, if shrill, re-articulation in Jiang Qing's speech at the PLA arts forum of 1966 (which Chang-Halliday call a "kill culture manifesto"). But then, some sixty pages later, the authors contradict themselves and speak of the partial revival of culture years before Mao's death (p. 586). One would have thought that given the energy devoted to trouncing Jiang Qing in this book (indeed, a whole chapter is devoted to her role in the Cultural Revolution, see pp. 622-33), it is curious that the authors overlook her role in the denunciation of the film 'A Life of Wu Xun', a key moment in the cultural ructions of the 1950s. More generally, their lambasting of cultural debates (no matter how convoluted or driven by power they were) make it hard, no, well nigh impossible, for the interested reader to discern any sense or logic to the Cultural Revolution, or its origins outside of Mao's supposedly twisted pathology, and Jiang Qing's mania;
- The reader is presented with a confusing rehearsal of the history of the Hai Rui incident and the involvement of the Ming historian and deputy mayor of Beijing, Wu Han, in the complex prelude to the Cultural Revolution proper (see pp. 525-26);

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<sup>7</sup> *Morning Sun* (Boston: Long Bow Group, 2003). For the related website, see [www.morningsun.org](http://www.morningsun.org)

- The account of how high-school students became involved in the early phase of the Cultural Revolution, and how the crucially important Red Guards came into being, is perfunctory (p. 532);
- The authors claim that teachers and administrators “were selected as the first victims [of the Red Guards] because they were the people instilling culture...” (p. 534). This overlooks the fact that the first victims of the young rebels included some of the rabid Maoist pedagogues who instilled violent and radical ideas in the minds of the young people in the first place. Chang-Halliday remark that “the seeds of hate that Mao had sown were ready for the reaping” (p. 535), failing to acknowledge the existence of a collective enterprise devoted to social engineering, or to appreciate that Mao was hardly the only gardener who tilled the rich field of mass discontent and rebellion;
- The way the writers deal with the fascinating and complex case of Song Binbin, the young woman who famously pinned a Red Guard armband on Mao at the 18 August 1966 mass rally at Tiananmen, is glib (p. 537). Commonplace sources are relied upon and there is no consideration of Song’s view (one that she put on the record for the first time in the film *Morning Sun*, a full two years prior to the publication of this book);
- Here and elsewhere in the text the authors indulge in unprovable or factually incorrect generalizations such as “there was not one school in the whole of China where atrocities did not occur” (p. 538); or, again, “virtually no new dwellings had been built for ordinary urban residents under the Communists” (p. 541);
- The complex, and fascinating, relationship between Mao and Confucian thought (and indeed the century-long tussle between Confucius and the Chinese intelligentsia) is summarized in what can only be described as burlesque: “Mao did, indeed, hate Confucius, because Confucianism enjoined that a ruler must care for his subjects” (p. 542);
- Etcetera, etcetera, etcetera ...

The text of the book is supported by a panoply of devices, presumably employed to assure the reader of its academic authenticity, even though the authors aver that they are writing a popular biography, not a scholastic work. There are sixty-seven pages of footnotes and a large bibliography of books and articles cited in various languages, and archives used. The particular sources for ‘Unsweet Revenge’ cover a wide range: standard works by scholars in the field, the occasional unpublished paper, numerous books and articles produced on the mainland, some by more sober writers, and many issued by what is little more than the gutter press. Added to these are the numerous ‘insider’ interviews which were conducted in many places over

many years, and through which the authors have gathered a veritable cornucopia of detail.

A sample of interview citations alone will give the reader some indication of the difficulty that any historian faces when dealing with sources for what is often quite sensational new information. Take the notes on pp. 731-33, for instance. Here we have, among others, an “interview with Mao’s personal staff, 19 Apr. 1999”; “with a local official, 13 Apr. 1996”; “interviews with locals”; “interview with the girlfriend of Mao, 2 Nov. 1995... ”; and, “interviews with many high officials’ children”. Often the source is simply given as an “interview with an insider” followed by a date; or an “interview with a member of Mao’s personal staff”, followed by a date; “interview with an economic manager”, followed by a date. Or, in regard to Li Na, Mao and Jiang Qing’s daughter, and the crucial details of her Cultural Revolution career, information is based on, among other things, “a conversation with Li Na”, an interview “with a colleague”, “interview with a friend of hers who visited her”, “interviews with a friend and former servant”, “interviews with members of Mao’s personal staff”, and “interviews with people close to Mao’s family” (p. 742), with various dates supplied.

All this is fascinating stuff, to be sure, and much may well be credible. However, without providing readers and specialists with more detail, or the wherewithal to verify, crosscheck and interrogate the credentials of these materials, I would suggest that Chang-Halliday seem to be wending their way through a territory profitably traversed by the noted American political biographer Kitty Kelly. Perhaps when the Chang-Halliday archive of interviews (detailing the time and place of interviews, the interviewees’ names and relevance to the subject matter under discussion, with full, not selected recordings, and transcripts, etc.) is opened to public scrutiny, these churlish quibbles will be swept aside.

When considering the authors’ eclectic, and sometimes idiosyncratic, use of sources, in particular Chinese language materials, I believe that we should be mindful of a grand, if not always palatable, tradition of Chinese historical writings, that of *waishi*, or ‘informal histories’. These are exogenous, non-official, or salacious accounts of the workings and machinations of court politics, or heterodox versions of historical incidents. Such works are also known as *yeshi*, or ‘stories from the wild’, that is unofficial histories, or *baiguan yeshi*, which are opposed to or can be contrasted with officially condoned and scripted narratives. The *yeshi* or *baishi* have, from their origins, been linked to novelization or semi-fictional accounts. Nonetheless, *yeshi* have sometimes been used to provide alternative material on events, people and historical moments. Some have even treated them with a measure of credence more usually accorded archival sources. *Yeshi* accounts of events, while not necessarily of value in the writing of reliable historical narratives, have upon occasion acquired a certain cachet. It is in light of this tradition of Chinese historical

writing that, perhaps, *Mao: the Untold Story* will gain currency in Chinese, allowing it to enjoy a greater longevity in that language than in English.<sup>8</sup>

As I write this, I unavoidably think of another famous account of Chinese court politics, one that also caused an international sensation when it appeared nearly a century ago. This is *The Diary of His Excellence Ching-shan*, supposedly an insider's record of events surrounding the Boxer Rebellion of 1900. This work had an inordinate impact on international views of late-imperial China and in particular the life, attitudes and activities of the Empress Dowager, Cixi. However, the *Jingshan Diary* was a confabulation, a mystification, the product of the fecund imagination of Edmund Backhouse. It is contained in its entirety in the book Backhouse co-authored with J. O. P. Bland (who edited Backhouse's 'translation' of the diary), *China Under the Empress Dowager* (Heinemann, 1910). The forgery was only uncovered in 1936 (a final, fatal blow, being struck in 1940), after having enjoyed exultant praise in the Western press and long years of influence.<sup>9</sup> The excited international media response to the *Jingshan Diary*, what Lo Hui-min called "the tidal wave of eulogies", is worth recalling here:

The popular press led the way in ensuring the book's success: newspapers and journals in which China had hitherto found no place now rushed into print to hail its appearance. Critics everywhere, not to be outshone by their peers, showered it with extravagant expressions of appreciation, as if no praise were high enough. In a seemingly unending crescendo, readers from Glasgow to Dunedin, from Toronto to Johannesburg, were told that this was "an indispensable guide through the bewildering maze of Chinese politics"; that it was "the most informing book on Chinese affairs that has appeared within a decade"; that it "throws more light on the internal history of Peking than all the books written about China during the last quarter of a century"; that it was "without question one of the most important contributions to contemporary historical literature which has been made in our time" . . .<sup>10</sup>

The latest twist in the *Jingshan Diary* fraud is that you can now buy a classical Chinese translation of the text (one based presumably on the 'original' that was

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<sup>8</sup> See also Linda Jaivin's "Wild History", a review of *Mao: the Unknown Story* published in *The Bulletin*, 9 August 2005.

<sup>9</sup> See Lo Hui-min, "The *Ching-shan Diary*: a clue to its forgery", *East Asian History*, No. 1 (June 1991), pp. 98-124. The diary and its notoriety resonate with the advent and influence in the early years of the new century of *The Tiananmen Papers*, but that is another subject, one that the Melbourne-based scholar Adam Driver is pursuing in his research.

<sup>10</sup> Lo, "The *Ching-shan Diary*", op. cit., p. 104.

deposited in the British Museum) touted by its publisher as being an important *yeshi* that contains information about the inner history of the late-Qing court.<sup>11</sup>

But as I read Chang-Halliday's *Mao*, I was also reminded of another rollicking romp through the workings of a post-imperial totalitarian inner court; an account that describes in great detail the cupidity, cowardliness and bullying of Josef Stalin. Simon Sebag Montefiore's 2003 biography of the Soviet leader, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson), is based on official and personal accounts, and although it dwells on the horrors of a tyrannical regime and indulges in the kind of flip hyperbole familiar to us from the Chang-Halliday screed, the author does at least show what layered depth is possible when archives are trawled in tandem with a careful reading of the correspondence and diaries of key historical figures. With the addition of interviews with family members and a careful attention to the politics of the era he is describing, Montefiore's Stalin is no less a monster, but his pathology is made clearer to the reader, not obfuscated as is the case with the present text.

Back in China, I would recommend rather the work of a true insider: the treat-and-tell account produced a decade ago by Mao Zedong's physician, Dr Li Zhisui. Although that text was generated for international consumption, with a gimlet authorial eye trained on the Roderick MacFarquhar rendition of the Maoist era, Li Zhisui and Anne Thurston's *The Private Life of Chairman Mao* (Random House, 1994) can be usefully re-read as a corrective to the book under discussion. The Li-Thurston narrative enjoyed the attention of a number of reviewers, including myself, in these pages in January 1996. For all of its faults, and possible lapses of veracity, the Li-Thurston book is an atmospheric account that provides some hint as to the awe Mao inspired, as well as affording some insights into the world he and his fellows created in the sequestered environment of Zhongnan Hai during his years at the helm.

As for the abiding valency of Mao in the popular realm of China, and the need for writers of serious intent to return to him, both in historical detail and through cultural analysis, I still believe that, "Li Zhisui's book will not alter the fact that Mao is, to many people, EveryMao: he is the peasant lad made good; warrior-literatus as well as philosopher-king ..."<sup>12</sup> Moreover, I would question the contention voiced by a number of prominent reviewers of *The Unknown Story*, regardless of whether they

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<sup>11</sup> See Yun Yuding, Jingshan, *et al*, *Guangxu huangdi waizhuan, Jingshan riji*, [An informal biography of the Guangxu emperor, Jingshan diary] (Chongqing: Chongqing chubanshe, 1998), published in the series *Qingmo baishi jingxuan congshu* [Selected informal histories from the late Qing]. In fact, the fake diary was accepted by communist writers cum-historians like Deng Liqun in the 1940s, so the present 'recuperation' of the work in China has a history of its own. See Lo, "The *Ching-shan Diary*", p. 112, n. 71.

<sup>12</sup> Barmé, "Private Practice, Public Performance: The Cultural Revelations of Dr Li", *The China Journal*, No. 35 (January 1996), p. 126.



found worth in the historicity of this account or not, that this book will make any significant contribution to some future, second wave, of Chinese de-Maoification.

### **The Monkey King**

Reading Chang-Halliday's *Mao*, one is hard pressed to find any cogent account of Mao Zedong's own motivations during the first three decades of the People's Republic (except for the fact that he was a megalomaniac bent on world domination), or why he gained such support then, or continues to enjoy any popular influence today. While Jung Chang has offered a gruesome précis of her findings in media interviews and believes she has gained insights into the workings of Mao's mind, the reader of *Mao: the Unknown Story* is faced with little more than a depiction of a pathological 'evil genius', a monumental ego with an unbridled lust for power. That is not to say, however, that the authors do not essay some explanation of Mao's character.

In 'Unsweet Revenge' one can glean a hint about Mao's contradictory political and personal impulses. On page 565 of the book, for example, the writers describe a famous encounter between Mao and Kuai Dafu, the Red Guard leader of the Jinggang Shan Regiment at Tsinghua University ("Mao's point man" at the institution, p. 549) that took place as Mao Thought Worker's Propaganda Teams moved on the campus. The leader and the Red Guard firebrand met in the Chairman's suite in the Great Hall of the People. After introducing Kuai, who was in a highly wrought-up and tearful state, the authors offer the following: "Mao, too, apparently cried, quite possibly out of frustration at his own inability to reconcile his impulses with practical needs". They then proceed in what for the reader has by now become their trademark clumsy prose to aver that: "The impulse side of Mao wanted the many 'Conservatives' he knew were out there to be beaten to a pulp. But the practical side recognised that in his own interest he had to restore order".

Sadly, even this hard-won observation on the leader's ambivalent motives is little more than a refraction of Mao's own famous evaluation of himself. In a letter to Jiang Qing supposedly written on the eve of the Cultural Revolution (and released for internal party consumption following the fall of Lin Biao), Mao remarked that his personality combined a "kingly air" (*wangqi*), one that demanded to dominate and suborn, with a "monkey spirit" (*houqi*), that urged him to run riot and throw all into disorder.

As for any of the ideas that motivated the Cultural Revolution, excited so many well educated young people and inspired the rather particular culture of the era (and yes, whether you like it or not, it did spawn a culture whose roots far predate Jiang Qing's speech at the February 1966 PLA Forum on the Arts), they are all dismissed out of hand. The Nine Critiques of the early 1960s that articulated the Chinese Communist Party's in-principle divergence from the Soviet Union, the long (and

admittedly tedious) theoretical essays on culture, the discussions and warnings about the fatal mismatch between the country's economic base and its superstructure (the legal and educational systems, the arts and the media) that appeared in the press as the expression 'cultural revolution' (inspired as it was by political theorists in the Soviet Union of the 1920s) gained currency, and the writings of party theoreticians (virtually none of which are even named), or, for that matter, the activities of Mao's secretaries (Hu Qiaomu, Tian Jiaying, *et al*), rate no mention at all.

Chen Boda, a cunning theoretician who wrote many of the key articles in the lead up to the Cultural Revolution, only appears in a cameo role as a co-conspirator, while Zhang Chunqiao, who would come to prominence as a theoretical writer in the 1970s, having promoted the 'Commune of China' at a key moment in the early history of the Cultural Revolution, is blithely dismissed. Someone merely possessed of an "ability to churn out articles that dressed up Mao's self-serving deeds in Marxist garb ... Zhang was the person largely responsible for the texts that caused many people in China and abroad to entertain illusions about the true nature of the Cultural Revolution" (p. 575). Thus, in their haste to evacuate entirely ideas, ideology and non-personal motives from modern Chinese history, the authors effectively cut that country off from the twentieth century, except when its leader is dabbling in international power politics, or besting his foreign rivals in infamy by slaughtering his own people.

And what about the 'banner-bearer of the Cultural Revolution', Jiang Qing? What of her notorious involvement, first in culture and then in politics during those long years, or that of Lin Biao's wife, Ye Qun? Why, of course, they both got embroiled in venomous power play because they were not getting enough sex! They took a shine to pitiless revolutionary violence because their concupiscent comrades-in-arms were holding out on them. As the authors opine: "Like Mme Mao, who was also hysterical from frustration, Mrs Lin [*sic*] now sought compensation and fulfillment in political scheming and persecution, although she was less awful than Mme Mao" (p. 533).

It is hard to know how to proceed at this point. Should I applaud the occasional authorial *aperçu*, ponder further the validity and weigh up the relative worth of the writers' archive-based investigations and personal interview 'revelations'? Should I marvel anew at the ghastly toll of Mao's personal and ideological rule? Or should I expend myself interrogating every exaggeration, chide each simplification or point out every factual error? Should I just deride the breezy tone of an obnoxious work whose authors glide cockily between knowing self-righteousness and glib journalese? Or, should I instead do my bit as an historian and talk magisterially about the general problems of writing this kind of despot-centered history, one that elides the agency of all others, treats the reader to a snuff-fest of outrages, and yet leaves us none the wiser as to what the hell it was all about?

## No One Left to Dance With

...Mao danced on. One by one, as the days went by, his colleagues disappeared from the dance floor, either purged or simply having lost any appetite for fun. Eventually, Mao alone of the leaders still trod the floor.<sup>13</sup>

The part of the book I like the most (although it sports a particularly ungainly title: ‘Nixon: the Red-baiter Baited’, pp. 601-13), and one that sits most comfortably with the authors’ ohmygod style of prose, is that related to the clandestine Sino-American rapprochement. Here we have two autocrats—one effective, Mao Zedong, and the other, Richard Milhouse Nixon, a mere wannabe, along with their cunning enablers, Zhou Enlai and Henry Kissinger—negotiating one of the most dramatic shifts in geopolitical relations. This is readable *realpolitik*, comic and grim in turn. The exchanges—all readily available in other sources—are delicious, and the devil dance between the North American superpower and the People’s Republic provide the observer with dialectical delight. It is also the part of the narrative on which I am least qualified to offer an informed opinion.

But when leaders meet sparks may fly. And in Chang-Halliday’s *Mao* we are presented with the Oriental Despot redux.<sup>14</sup> Page after page Mao careens through plots, counter-plots, ploys, machinations and manipulations, whipping up in his wake his very own *Sturm und Drang*. The book details a cavalcade of horrors and lies, and the ‘take home message’ of the volume is clarion clear both on the first page of the narration, and in the numerous media interviews Chang Jung has given in relation to the book: “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).

China becomes thereby something of a world leader in despotic atrocities. But I fear I detect in the sensationalist prose of this book the unmistakable stench of ‘competitive body counting’. There seems to be a certain *schadenfreude* at work here, a sense reinforced by such utterly distasteful sentences as: “It was, it seems, a good day if the boss waived a few million deaths” (p. 504). The horror, suffering and deaths of countless numbers of innocent (as well as not so innocent) people can literally shock the mind into numb incomprehension. Even in my personal

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<sup>13</sup> Chang and Halliday, *Mao: the Untold Story*, p. 546.

<sup>14</sup> As Voltaire wrote of the ‘despot’: “Now, the emperors of Turkey, Morocco, Hindustan and China were called despots by us; and we attach to this title the idea of a ferocious madman who heeds only his own whims”. Quoted in Alain Grosrichard, *The Sultan’s Court: European Fantasies of the East*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 1998), p. 32. My thanks to Adam Driver for bringing this work to my attention.

experience, I well recall the mounting panic, frantic depression and emotional suffocation that I experienced upon encountering dozens of returnees from camps, schools and jails during the late 1970s and early 1980s, and hearing them recount their tales of suffering, loss and death. The deep dudgeon of the authors of *Mao: the Unknown Story* seems to me, however, to serve ill the memory of the victims of this wretched history, encouraging in the reader an unsettling and breezy lassitude in regard to the origins, scale and meaning of the repeated terrors and their impact on real people, families and communities, a history that still reverberates through the lives of Chinese people today.

Not only do Chang-Halliday bruise the protocols of serious history writing and reinforce, albeit unintentionally, a callousness in regard to the nature and ongoing problems of China's situation, but they also employ a language that all too readily evokes the image of oriental obliquity. Mao's colleagues are spoken of as a court, the Chinese people are his subjects (pp. 337, 500); the mayor of Shanghai, Ke Qingshi, is "a favourite retainer" (p. 515); PLA Unit 8341 charged with the security of Zhongnan Hai is dubbed "the Praetorian Guard" (p. 274ff). Wang Dongxing is the leader's "trusted chamberlain" (p. 532), and Zhou Enlai his "slave" (pp. 271-72). Even when Mao employs the pronoun of *faux* party collectivity, the authors claim that, as usual, he is using the "royal we" (p. 589). To emphasize Mao's rank inhumanity, however, the writers also observe that his "girlfriends were not treated like royal mistresses and showered with gifts and favors. Mao used them, as he did his wife. They provided him with sex, and served him as maids and nurses" (p. 628). Nonetheless, the admix of courtly Victoriana, Claudio-Julian terminology, along with the echoes of China's own parlance of palace intrigue, leave us with a metaphorical schema that places Mao firmly at some quaint, incomprehensible oriental remove, reducing a complex history to one of personal fiat and imperial hauteur. Although, I should note that there are moments when the terminology of court politics gives way to that of the bestiary: Zhang Chunqiao is "the Cobra" (p. 575) and the 'Gang of Four' are collectively described as "Cultural Revolution Rottweilers" (p. 637).

One must wonder whether readers have been presented a Mao tailor-made for the Age of Terror; though on second thought, Mao's impugned obsession with world domination (*vide* the long descriptions of this in the section entitled 'Launching the Secret Superpower Programme', p. 396ff: "Mao's determination to preside over a military superpower in his own lifetime was the single most important factor affecting the fate of the Chinese population" [p. 397]) brings to mind a lesser oriental despot, one who is dealt with far more adroitly in another pop culture product.

The creators of *South Park*, well known for their debunking satires and knowing parodies, gave birth to their own 'mini-Mao' in what J. Hoberman writing for *The Village Voice* called a marionette-driven "equal opportunity offender", *Team*

*America: World Police* (Paramount, 2004). The dominant personality in this film is not the group of terror-quelling, butt-kicking hi-tech patriots-on-a-string, 'Team America' (fuck, yeah! —as their theme song bellows), nor is it one of the bleeding-heart Hollywood A-B list celebs who are mocked and murdered. Rather, it is the North Korean anti-hero, Kim Jong Il. In one short song sequence in this feature-length spoof, Trey Parker, Matt Stone and Elle Russ manage to create a compelling portrait of a self-pitying and psychologically twisted potentate.

Having dispatched Hans Blix, the UN weapons inspector, in his wide-screen size shark tank, the diminutive dictator wanders through the corridors of his socialist kitsch palace. Moving past frescos of banner-bearing workers rushing towards a communist future, and then by a display case of action figures, Kim is shown lying mournfully on a capacious bed. Finally, he appears at the end of a corridor dominated by a portrait of his father, Kim Il Song, framed by a moon gate.

All the while Kim the Younger sings his own version of 'I'm So Lonely'.

I'm so ronrey, so ronrey,  
so ronrey and sadree arone.  
I have no one, just me onrey,  
sitting on my rittle throne.  
I work very hard, and make a great friend  
But no body ristens, no one understands.  
Seems rike no one takes me seriousree  
And, so, I'm ronrey,  
A bitter ronrey, horrid old me.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> A audio-visual clip of this sequence from the film can be found at [www.teamamerica.com](http://www.teamamerica.com)