

## **.Mao, the all-too familiar story**

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*Mao, the Unknown Story* by Jung Chang and Jon Halliday is the latest and most dangerous of the spate of Mao biographies that have appeared over the last 10 years. This massive book, which appeared in 2005 in English and is yet to be published in Chinese, has caused much controversy amongst China scholars. Responses have ranged from outright dismissal to cautious or conditional approval. A number of journals have already published assessments of the claims made by Halliday and Chang and more are on the way. Yet these criticisms seem to me to be missing the mark. Scholarly debate seems to be having little effect on public opinion. The western media have been overwhelmingly supportive of *Mao the Unknown Story*. And the book is heading to best-seller status.

The book's blurb claims that 'it is the most authoritative life of Mao ever written' and provides a 'fresh look inside the court of Mao'. The Mao revealed by Chang and Halliday was 'not driven by ideology or idealism' but 'schemed, poisoned and blackmailed' his way into power. During his 'reign' '38 million died in the famine and a total of 70 million perished in peacetime.' The book's fresh approach consists of 'meticulous history combined with the story telling style of the US.' The blurb goes on to claim that 'it will astonish historians and the general reader alike.'

Well, it certainly astonished me! If my undergraduate student handed in such sloppily written and referenced material they would be lucky to gain a pass mark. Astonishment aside, the blurb actually points out the basic reason for this book's success – 'the story telling style of the U.S.' This emphasis on style is important for understanding the basis of the *Mao* book's success. *Mao* reinforces a simplistic view of politics, Mao and politics but it is the genre that underpins its success, Understanding the genre of *Mao the Unknown Story* is crucial in my opinion to formulating successful strategies for countering its claims.

I agree with the view that *Mao, the Unknown Story*, is full of factual errors, poor and misleading referencing, and lacks engagement with scholarly work on Mao and Chinese politics. It is confusing and confused, often contradictory, while making some outrageous and unsubstantiated claims. It is poorly written with inadequate methodology. It mis-uses sources and interviews and relies heavily on unreliable memories and accounts of events without demonstrating a critical and scholarly attitude to the problems of memory. The authors demonstrate a poor understanding of politics, power and policy. Their China is sparsely populated. A cast of only a dozen characters seem to be responsible for everything that happened in China in the 50 years leading up to Mao's death. Chang and Halliday avoid acknowledging that, for Mao's policies and ideas to be implemented, they had to be implemented by someone. At the same time, the authors use under-hand techniques to ensure that their reading of Mao as evil, self-absorbed, and a tyrant will sweep the reader away. The way Chang and Halliday point to Mao's poor oratory skills is

a case in point. Mao is found guilty by a false association: ‘Unlike most founding dictators – Lenin, Mussolini, Hitler – Mao did not inspire a passionate following through his oratory or ideological appeal. (p. 29). In case the reader is unconvinced, the book finishes with this: ‘His mind remained lucid to the end, and in it stirred just one thought: himself and his power’ (p. 654).

For all this, however, it is a best-seller and will overshadow other more reliable and useful biographies such as Lynch’s book *Mao*. Cataloguing the book’s faults and addressing them one by one in scholarly articles will not diminish the book’s appeal. Therefore, in my paper I want to look at the demands of memoir, autobiography and biography to try to pinpoint the most disturbing aspects of the new Mao biography and to raise the question of how to sketch out more effective counter-strategies.

### **Establishing a readership**

To understand why *Mao, the Unknown Biography* was destined for best-seller status even before its release we need to briefly revisit the smash hit *Wild Swans*. Published in 1991, it sold more than 10 million copies to claim the title of biggest seller of any book on China. *Wild Swans’* reach in the west was wide, making its author Jung Chang wealthy and ensuring that future work by Chang would find a ready made audience. Like the Mao biography, *Wild Swans* is full of historical inaccuracies and exhibits a surprising lack of insight into Chinese revolutionary politics. Jung Chang’s idiosyncratic understanding of politics results in some rather bizarre claims. For example, she is critical of her father for not breaking party rules regarding letting family members travel in motor vehicles reserved for officers. Instead of seeing such inflexibility as an admirable character trait (i.e. upright honesty, resistance to corruption and so on) Chang uses this and other examples to claim that the party had turned her father into a cold and heartless man with little feeling for his family. Of course this is precisely the account she gives of Mao himself.

### **Playing on gender: the new genre of ‘faction’**

This is only one very small example of many that I could point to in both *Wild Swans* and *Mao* but the reason I am referring to these examples here is to show that Chang has not even a basic understanding of revolutionary politics. Building a new society required a shift in how power was used, shifting away from power for personal gain. What is more surprising about this example, however, is that Chang’s view of her father as cold rather than honest was accepted by the largely female readership of *Wild Swans*. If we think through Chang’s point, we can see she is effectively arguing *for* corruption. How is this possible?

*Wild Swans* announced the establishment of a new genre: ‘faction’ – history told by fictional narrative means. Or perhaps that should be fiction dressed up in bogus historical fact. In any case, *Wild Swans* was a memoir but not only of the author herself but also an imagined memoir of her mother and her grandmother. It gained authenticity from being Chang’s memoir. The use of timelines and maps and reference to historical events gave it a cloak of fact. Yet if we examine it clearly we see that most of the detail in *Wild Swans* is the product of Chang’s imagination. Not even knowing her grandmother’s story until

she had already left China in the late 1970s, Chang writes from inside her grandmother's head as if she is witness to feelings, thoughts and events herself. Of course this is fiction. *Wild Swans* is successful because it is, in effect, just a story – China's equivalent perhaps of *Gone with the Wind* – a grand romantic narrative set in a time of political turmoil which is popular because of the way it makes history seem real by personalising it.

However, where *Wild Swans* diverges with *Gone with the Wind* is that it taps into a strong tradition of looking for witnesses to suppressed Chinese horrors. *Gone with the Wind* would never be taken as the *only* story of the American deep south. Yet this is precisely what happens with *Wild Swans*. It is read not as a fictionalised or even partial account but rather the testimony of a witness to atrocities we already suspect.

### **The eye-witness account which confirms what we already knew**

This valuing of the eye-witness account goes back to at least the Travels Of Marco Polo. The genre of traveller's tales supposedly revealing the 'truth' of China is well-established. Since 1949 the account of the witness has become even more strongly valued. China watchers based in Hong Kong after 1949 were reliant on the tales told by refugees fleeing across the border in order to try to piece together what was "really" happening in China. Of course such people have a vested interest in telling certain stories and can no way be taken as representative of all Chinese. This is not the way their accounts are received, however. Witnesses are treated as if they are film cameras – any element of subjectivity is ignored and the witness becomes a recorder of history. Throughout the 1950s, 60s and 70s the endless and repetitious accounts of the travels of various 'friends of China' operate in much the same way – "I went to China and I saw it with my own eyes therefore it must be true."

There are exceptions, however, and these point to the political nature of the eye-witness account. Stories told by Jan Myrdal, William Hinton, not to mention Edgar Snow were dismissed as being propaganda as 'too sympathetic' or ignoring events such as the famine for ideological reasons. The treatment that alternative tales receive show that the 'eye-witness' report has to conform to preconceived positions before being accepted outside China as a true account. Therefore the eye-witness can only witness what we already know.

*Wild Swans* played this out perfectly – from its beginning with the bound feet of the concubine grandmother to the forced labour of Jung Chang the red guard – this book captured Chinese history as it is told in the west. Its narrative strategy of including emotions and conversation operated to sweep away concerns for history. And by telling the story of herself and her family Chang sidestepped criticisms that her experience was not representative of all Chinese. This book cleverly manages to avoid criticism for claiming to represent all Chinese while at the same time doing exactly that – narrowing the story of the last century in China to predictable and comforting tropes.

This notion of the witness is the grounds for Li Zhisui's claims in the *Private Life of Chairman Mao*. Li's account was remarkably reminiscent of the story of the Chinese empress dowager written by the notorious forger Edmund Backhouse, who, on his death

bed in the 1930s, wrote an account of his time as a sexual plaything of the empress dowager. The trope of sexually depraved Chinese emperor has a long history (see Barne).

After *Wild Swans* initiated a flood of similar memoirs – for women *Falling Leaves* and *Red Azalea* were amongst the most popular and can still be bought at airport bookshops today. These books told stories of horror, violence and suffering and found sympathetic audiences in the west. I am not arguing that these memoirs should not be read or published only that of course the one-sided nature of what is accepted as memoir in the west is deeply political, an obvious fact. A less obvious fact, I think, is that these are women's stories and appeal to women. The view of China as deeply patriarchal and male dominated gives these women's tales an added edge and appeal. Not only do they tell the stories of oppressed Chinese but more importantly they seem to be revealing a trend towards feminism in China. To read *Wild Swans*, therefore, is a political act of solidarity.

### **Memoirs, auto/biography – the demands of genre**

This genre of memoir needs examining. A memoir is a telling of a person's story with an emphasis on external events rather than a deeper engagement with identity, meaning and truth for the individual. This is something we expect from autobiography. Genevieve Lloyd argues that it is the relation to the truth of the self that sets the first person perspective of autobiography apart from fiction. Autobiography 'tries to represent the self as an object grasped from its own perspective' (p.170). It has to 'deal with an uneasy unity of narrator and protagonist' which raises philosophical questions regarding subjectivity and objectivity (p.170). The clash between internal and external viewpoints has to be resolved or at least a resolution attempted. Memoirs, in contrast, avoid this tension. Lloyd argues that memoirs 'express an author's subjectivity while being focused away from the self' (p.170). This is certainly how *Wild Swans* operates. Yet what can we say about *Mao the Unknown Story* as biography rather than memoir?

Biography shares the same relationship to truth as the autobiography yet the conflict between the subjective and the objective is removed. A biography attempts to explain a person's life using documents such as letters, memoirs, published and unpublished writings to gain insight into how a particular person became what they did. Interviews with those around them form one corner of a triangle of sources: the other corners being documents and records and also the person's own understanding of themselves as revealed in interviews or writings. A successful biography brings more than new facts regarding a subject. It also brings new insight into how the person operates and weighs up possible causation. A political biography must deal with more than the personal realm although how a person was brought up and formed the way they did can be a highly valuable part of a successful biography.

So far I have talked about the common understanding of biography. Now I want to throw down a challenge to biography as developed by the French ethnographer Pierre Bourdieu.

Bourdieu argues that the notion of life-history used in both biography and autobiography is an illusion. It is a 'common sense notion that has been smuggled into the universe of knowledge.' It presupposes that life *is* a story, a journey along a road or path with crossroads, pitfalls, and a beginning and an end. Such common-sense notions presuppose that a life can be grasped as a whole and that it can be unfolded in the way of a fairy-tale in a chronological and logical sequence.

All of these notions, argue Bourdieu, are wrong. How we give meaning to our lives and events in our lives is forever unfolding and open to change. As he says, anyone who has tried to collect oral history knows that people do not narrate their lives in such a linear fashion. At the same time meaning is always being made and remade. For example, if I walk out of this room and drop my pen and it is picked up by somebody I won't put this into my autobiography. But if I later marry the person who picked up my pen then how we met becomes important. Events become significant *after* the event as meaning is made later. With biography, therefore, we start not at the beginning but at the end. We know that person x is a brilliant sportsman so we write the story of his life to show how this happened. We look for examples of precocious sporting ability in childhood and thus over-determine what we are looking for. We ignore childhood dreams, musical ability, poetry etc if these do not reflect on the final person – the sportsman.

We know Bourdieu's point instinctively and recognise something similar though expressions such as 'history is written by the victors.' History is not set in stone.

Thus biography constructs a life and tries to establish meaning and logical order, and this is why context, ideas, other scholarly work and wide understanding is important in a biography. A biographer has to have a good grasp of how people change and develop – *Mao: The Unknown Story* has a very fixed view of Mao which never changes. This sets an impossible standard - who could stand up to being judged by what they wrote and their understanding of the world when they were 20 years old?

For a political biography, the starting point is with a view of the person as political significant. In the case of *Mao the Unknown Story* this is with Mao as an evil, cold and calculating tyrant who ruled China with an iron will. Chang and Halliday therefore go back over Mao's life in order to build up to this point. By starting with an understanding of Mao as driven by personal gain rather than ideals they effectively dismiss the need to engage with any of Mao's ideas, writings or thought. Their book is an example of how *not* to write a biography. Their over-reliance on interviews without a healthy critical attitude towards the vagaries of memory combined with a selective approach to written sources has resulted in a deeply flawed work. So why should we engage with it? And how?

### **Engaging with *Mao***

*Mao the unknown Story* works at the level of imagination. It is comforting for western readers looking to have the same old story of Mao as tyrant confirmed. But it is successful for more than this – it is the use of imaginative writing that gives the reader an illusion of insight. Whereas scholarly biographies, by necessity, often offer conjecture

regarding motives, feelings and emotions, Chang and Halliday seem to possess a crystal ball which allows them to chart the impossible: what Mao thought and felt, even on his death bed. Their poor referencing makes it impossible to tell exactly what they have been told by observers and what they themselves have assumed. We know that their attitude to memory is cavalier. Chang claims to be able to render into English 4 pages of writing in Chinese after just one reading is evidence of this (Mao's second wife's letter regarding Mao was seen by Chang in an archive and re-written from memory – an impossible feat!)

I believe that *Mao* is **not** actually a biography in the sense accepted by the genre but the use of 'story' in the subtitle should alert us to how *Mao* works. *Mao* is a fairytale or a morality tale which confirms pre-conceived notions of Mao and even takes them further. Chang and Halliday claim Mao was never interested in politics thus removing the need for any reference to or understanding of Mao's political writing. Mao was only concerned with power, according to the authors. Thus the story told here is one which is aimed at a general reader, it is aimed at a population already softened up by *Wild Swans*.

Our response, therefore, should perhaps rather be a spate of entertaining novels and plays rather than heavy intellectual critique.

### **Responding to *Mao***

Many academics have taken to *Mao* with a fine-tooth comb and have found dozens of problems with facts, dates, names, references, events, evidence and so on. These criticisms – erstwhile and worthy – will not touch the popularity of Chang and Halliday's book.

Popular work such as *Mao* needs to be taken seriously for the wide-spread impact it has on the public perception of not only Mao and the communist party but China itself. But how best to respond? The efforts of the many critics of the book collectively draw attention to the myriad errors omissions and unsubstantiated claims. These efforts are less than the sum of their parts in that the larger story remains. *Mao*, by capturing the public imagination, captures discourse. The answer, therefore, it seems to me is to engage at that level of public imagination with suitably popular works either written or visual, published or filmed.

The story of Mao Zedong is more interesting and more complex than that presented by Chang and Halliday. The competing explanations of Mao's actions and motivations (misguided idealist or evil tyrant) need to be explored with a deft hand within the paradigm of political biography. Yet capturing the public imagination with political biography is no easy task.

Perhaps what the world needs is *Mao, the Musical!*

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