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# Chairman Mao's Reign of Terror -Finally the Truth Comes Out

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Our moral imagination is haunted by monsters—and the greatest aspect of this horror is the fact that so many monsters are real. Is the world ready to face the reality of Mao Zedong?

For the last seven decades or so, Mao has been a focus of admiration among many on the Left. Many Americans have known Mao primarily through the work of sympathetic biographers who became champions of the Chinese Communist regime. For many others, Mao has remained a man of mystery, whose true character and legacy have been hidden from Western eyes. All that is about to change. The publication of *Mao: The Unknown Story* by Jung Chang and her husband Jon Halliday will force a radical reformulation of Western understandings of Mao—and the book is virtually certain to exercise a vast influence within China as well.

Ms. Chang, author of the much-acclaimed novel *Wild Swans*, has—with her husband, historian Jon Halliday—produced a devastating analysis of Mao and his legacy. They do not present a pretty picture.

“I decided to write about Mao because I was fascinated by this man, who dominated my life in China, and who devastated the lives of my fellow countrymen,” Ms. Chang recounts. “He was as evil as Hitler or Stalin, and did as much damage to mankind as they did. Yet the world knows astonishingly little about him.”

Why would this be so? Writing in the October 2005 issue of *Commentary*, Arthur Waldron, Professor of International Relations at the University of Pennsylvania, draws a distinction between the popular rejection of Adolf Hitler and the celebration of Mao.

“The 20th century was remarkable not only for the number and scale of the atrocities it witnessed but also for the slowness with which these frightful events were recognized for what they were, let alone condemned,” Waldron observes. This was certainly true of the Holocaust, but Adolf Hitler is almost unanimously acknowledged as one of the greatest criminals in history. His name is met with revulsion, and those who would celebrate Hitler's legacy are rightly considered the enemies of humankind.

Not so with Mao. As Waldron notes, “Today, no one in his right mind would put a portrait of Hitler in his house. Yet, in many places in the West, Mao kitsch—posters, badges, busts, and so forth—is still considered not only acceptable but even fashionable.”

Mao's positive reputation in the West was made possible largely through the nefarious efforts of historians and writers who sacrificed the truth in order to further Mao's interests. The prime example of this propaganda literature is *Red Star Over China* by journalist Edgar Snow. We now know that Snow was duped by Mao and that Maoist authorities edited the book in order to meet their own purposes. Beyond this, many of the events detailed in the book are now known never to have happened. As historian Keith Windschuttle recounts, Snow transformed the reputation of Mao and the Chinese Communists. “He portrayed Mao and his supporters as heroic figures, dedicated to liberating their country from both the foreign invaders and the hopelessly corrupt Nationalists.” According to Windschuttle, “Snow's book played a major role in converting public opinion in both America and Europe towards a more favorable view of Mao. Its biggest impact, however, was in China itself, where it had a profound influence on radical youth.”

Edgar Snow would eventually be discredited as a journalist, and his book would be revealed to be little more than baseless propaganda. Nevertheless, the book remains in print and its impact continues.

Other leftist writers and figures joined Snow in praising Mao and his regime. John K. Fairbank, a Harvard professor, returned from a visit to China and remarked: "The Maoist revolution is on the whole the best thing that has happened to the Chinese people in centuries." Feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir excused Mao's murderous regime by arguing that "the power [he] exercises is no more dictatorial than, say, Roosevelt's was." John-Paul Sartre, de Beauvoir's consort, celebrated Mao's "revolutionary violence," declaring it to be "profoundly moral."

Waldron points to the fact that there has been no repudiation or reevaluation of Mao's leadership within China. "China has never repudiated Mao as Khrushchev did Stalin at the Party Congress of 1956," he notes. Mao's face continues to shine over Tiananmen Square, and his cult of personality continues, even as his embalmed body remains the nation's central object of veneration.

The official party line about Mao presents him as a liberator who emerged as the popular leader of a revolt against oppression, both foreign and domestic. The "Mao Myth" centers in claims of heroism during the "Long March" of 1934-1935, when Mao and his Communists supposedly fled from their base in the south of China to a refuge in the north.

Edgar Snow constructed the myth of the Long March in order to present Mao as an heroic figure who deserved popular support and foreign respect. As it turns out, the account was a total fabrication. Even the famous crossing of the suspension bridge over the Dadu River turns out to have been pure fiction.

This much is clear—Mao wasn't counting on the opening of the Soviet State archives. Jung Chang and Jon Halliday have performed a massive feat of research, drawing from personal research, hundreds of interviews, and years spent researching historical documents—especially those released with the fall of the Soviet Union.

Now, as Ms. Chang makes clear, Mao is revealed as "the biggest mass murderer in the history of the world."

That is quite a statement, of course. Yet, even by the murderous standards of the twentieth century, Mao emerges as the greatest murderer of them all. Chang and Halliday carefully document their claim that at least seventy million people died as a direct result of Mao's policies. They died as victims of his cult of personality, and their lives were sacrificed to nothing more than Mao's desire for bloodlust and personal power.

Reviewing the evidence, Arthur Waldron agrees: "Mao was the greatest mass murderer of the 20th century. Much of the killing was direct, as in the torture and purges at Yan'an. After the Communist seizure of power in 1949, the practice became countrywide. Mao set his numerical targets openly, and stressed the 'revolutionary' importance of killing."

Li Rui, a former secretary to Mao, sent a paper to a conference held at Harvard University two years ago. She declared that "Mao was a person who did not fear death and he did not care how many were killed. Tens of millions of people suffered during every political movement and millions starved to death."

Like so many other mass murderers, Mao developed a taste for killing. After watching peasants kill their landlords during an uprising in the late 1920s, Mao wrote a poem: "Watch us kill the bad landlords today. Aren't you afraid? It's knife slicing upon knife." Mao suggested that the landlords be killed more slowly, in order to magnify their agony.

Being close to Mao didn't help. When Chou Enlai, Mao's closest associate, was diagnosed with bladder cancer, Mao insisted that Chou should never be told of the condition nor treated for it. Thus, Chou Enlai died slowly and painfully.

Mao's cult of personality took programmatic shape in his erratic campaigns. The "Hundred Flowers campaign" was followed by the tragic "Great Leap Forward," which was in turn followed by the "Cultural Revolution." Eventually, all of these movements ended with murderous purges that removed any competitors to Mao's personality cult.

Michael Yahuda, Professor Emeritus at the London School of Economics, provides one of the most concise descriptions of Mao and his legacy. "Mao had none of the skills usually associated with a successful revolutionary leader. He was no orator and he lacked either idealism or a clear ideology. He was not even a particularly good organizer. But he

was driven by a personal lust for power. He came to dominate his colleagues through a mixture of blackmail and terror. And he seems to have enjoyed every minute of it. Indeed what he learned from his witnessing of a peasant uprising in his home province of Hunan in 1927 was that he derived a sadistic pleasure from seeing people put to death in horrible ways and generally being terrified. During the Cultural Revolution he watched films of the violence and of colleagues being tortured.”

The cult of Mao has continued, especially in the West, because the Left has never repudiated the man, his Party, and his tyrannical and murderous regime.

Within China, Mao is still presented as a great man (one Communist Party statement oddly judged Mao to be “70% good” and “a great Marxist.”).

Chang and Halliday have performed a tremendous public service in researching and writing this important book. As Arthur Waldron rightly observes, “This is the book that will wreck Mao’s reputation beyond salvage.” This can’t happen too soon.

Chang and Halliday begin their book with a simple declaration: “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.” We should be thankful that the truth is now known.

*Mao: The Unknown Story* is certain to be banned in China. Nevertheless, in today’s information economy, this book will be difficult to hide. If the truth ever gets out, China is likely to experience a genuine cultural revolution.

