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Mao & the Maoists

by Keith Windschuttle

A new look at the legacy of one of the twentieth century's most brutal killers.

In the summer of 1936, the American journalist Edgar Snow left Peking for China's northwest to visit the new territory taken over by the Chinese Communist Party. There he conducted a number of lengthy interviews with the party leader Mao Tse-tung. He wrote them up and published them as *The Mao Tse-tung Autobiography*, the first and only extensive account of his life Mao ever gave. Snow interviewed other Communist leaders and then converted all his material into his own book, *Red Star over China*, published in English in 1937–38.

At the time, Snow was thirty-two years old. Born in Kansas City, he had gone to China soon after he graduated from the University of Missouri. There he became a moderately successful correspondent for the *New York Herald-Tribune*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, and other newspapers. Overnight, his book transformed him into a bestselling author and an international celebrity.



Red Eagle Corps of the Air force, Nanjing, Chinese propaganda poster "All peoples of the world, unite, to overthrow American imperialism!"; 1969, Landsberger collection.

Red Star over China was an account of the civil war in China between the Communists and Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists. It examined their response to the 1931 Japanese invasion and occupation of China and told the story of the Long March of Mao and his army in 1934–35 from their base in the south to a new home in the north. Until then, the rest of the world knew the Chinese Communists only through the denunciations of their enemies, but Snow transformed their reputation. He portrayed Mao and his supporters as heroic figures, dedicated to liberating their country from both the foreign invaders and the hopelessly corrupt Nationalists. Snow depicted them less as socialist revolutionaries and more as agrarian reformers, determined to break the shackles of feudal agriculture and liberate the peasants from their rapacious landlords. The Communists, he wrote, were not tied to the Soviet Union and sought friendship with the U.S. In defense of their ideals, they had been subject to ambush and massacre by Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists. Only 26,000 of the march's original 80,000 troops survived. They had endured an almost superhuman 7500-mile exodus across the country. Mao had walked alongside his rank and file foot soldiers almost all the way.

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 within China itself, where it had a profound influence on radical youth. *Red Star over China* and the Mao autobiography were quickly translated into Chinese and widely distributed. Many young, urban, middle-class Chinese men and women who read Snow's books were converted. They cut their long hair short — still a daring and eyebrow-raising gesture in the 1930s — and joined the Communist Party. By 1941, thanks to the reputation Mao had earned from the Long March, party membership had grown to some 700,000.

Attracting volunteers from urban youth had been an important objective for Mao. His surviving troops were mostly illiterate soldiers drawn from the peasantry. The Communist Party needed young, educated administrators for its future regime. From 1937, they congregated at Yenan, Mao's new capital in Shaanxi province, eager to emulate the heroism of the veterans.

The story that drew them there, however, was a fiction. The new biography *Mao: The Unknown Story* by Jung Chang and Jon Halliday shows that every major claim made by Snow was false.^[1] Rather than opposing the Japanese invasion, Mao had welcomed it. He hoped the Japanese would engage and destroy his rival, Chiang Kai-shek, and would also draw Soviet troops into China. Mao avoided armed conflict not only with the Japanese but also with the Nationalists. Rather than being a champion of independence for his country, Mao since the 1920s had been an agent of the Soviet Union, taking its arms and money, doing its bidding, and accepting its control of the Chinese Communist Party. He knew his only hope of gaining power in China was with Soviet support, a belief ultimately confirmed in his takeover of the country in 1949. Mao was no agrarian reformer. He redistributed no land and liberated no peasants. His initial "red base" at Ruijin in Jiangxi province, southern China, had been achieved not by a revolutionary uprising of the masses but through military conquest by the Red Army, armed and funded by Moscow. His rule was

identical to that of an occupying army, surviving by plundering the local population and killing anyone who resisted.

Much of Snow's account of the Long March was also untrue. The march's objective was to establish a new base in the north, near the Mongolian border, in order to have ready access to Soviet supplies and arms. Many of Snow's tales of outnumbered Communist forces bravely breaking through Nationalist lines were pure invention. Chiang Kai-shek, in fact, largely determined Mao's route by giving him free passage through selected regions, while blocking alternative routes. Chiang's aim was to use the arrival of the Red Army in the territories of otherwise recalcitrant provincial warlords to coerce them into joining him, thereby exploiting the Communist presence to unify the country under Nationalist rule. Some of the most famous battles of the Long March never took place. The celebrated crossing of the suspension bridge over the Dadu River at Luding, for instance, had not been in the face of Nationalist machine gun fire. No Communists were killed there at all. And Mao shared few of the privations of his troops. Instead of trudging over mountains and through swamps, he and the other leaders were borne throughout most of the march in litters, shaded by tarpaulins, carried by long bamboo poles on the shoulders of their bearers. In fact, Mao arrived at the end of his journey in northern Shaanxi province with only 4,000 of his original 80,000 force still intact.

Snow presented his book as the work of an intrepid reporter who had made a risky journey to get his story and to tell it like it was. He wrote in the first edition that no censorship had been imposed on him. The truth, however, was that the initiative for the book came from Mao himself, who in 1936 decided he needed a friendly foreign journalist to give him a more benign and positive image. The party's Shanghai underground vetted and approved Snow and arranged his passage, accompanied by a secret Comintern agent. Snow had to submit his interview questions for approval in advance. Mao checked everything Snow wrote and amended and rewrote parts himself. After Snow left to arrange publication, his wife, Helen, remained in Yanan, mailing him further corrections to the manuscript made by the Communist leadership.

Snow was the first and the most influential of a long line of Western supporters of Mao Tse-tung and the Communist takeover of China. On the left of politics, Snow is still widely regarded today as a heroic figure, both for his writings in the 1930s and for the persecution he suffered in the 1950s from investigations by J. Edgar Hoover and Senator Joseph McCarthy, which forced him to flee the United States for Switzerland. He is still held up in schools of journalism as a model practitioner. In the past decade he has been the subject of no fewer than three book-length biographies, all published by American university presses and all favorable. The University of Missouri proudly advertises that it holds his collected papers in its archives.

The Chang and Halliday book demolishes utterly the reputation of Snow and all who have followed him. It is the most exhaustive analysis of its subject yet written and makes especially good use of the Soviet archives to reveal how Mao's rise to power was largely directed by Joseph Stalin. The book's analysis of the real politics behind the Long March is entirely convincing. It exposes how the small number of Western writers with access to the regime in the 1930s, especially Snow and the American radical feminist Agnes Smedley, became its willing dupes. These writers not only perpetrated a grotesque distortion of reality but also contributed in a very real sense to the successful career of the man who must rank as the greatest monster in human history.

Chang and Halliday calculate that over the course of his political career from 1920 to 1976, Mao was responsible for the deaths of 70 million Chinese. This is more than the total killings attributable to Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin combined. The biggest single number of Chinese dead was the 38 million who perished in the famine of the four years from 1958 to 1961, during the so-called Great Leap Forward. Westerners have known since Jasper Becker's path-breaking 1996 book *Hungry Ghosts: China's Secret Famine* that the famine killed between 30 and 40 million people. Becker attributed this to Mao's ideological folly of conducting an ambitious but failed experiment in collectivization. Chang and Halliday produce new evidence to show it was more sinister than that.

Mao's regime confiscated Chinese harvests in these years so it could export food to Communist-controlled Eastern Europe in exchange for armaments and political support. Food and money were also exported to support anti-colonial and Communist movements in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In the first year of famine, 1958–59, China exported seven million tons of grain, enough to feed 38 million people. In 1960, a year in which 22 million Chinese died of starvation, China was the biggest international aid donor in terms of proportion of GNP in the world. Thanks to Chinese agricultural exports, East Germany was able to lift food rationing in 1958, and Albania in 1961.

In China, at the same time, a major food source for the urban population became the “food substitute” chlorella, a disgusting substance that grew in urine and contained a little protein. In the countryside, starving Chinese peasants were reduced to eating bark and compost and, in Anhui and Gansu provinces, to cannibalism. In Chinese cities in 1960, the maximum daily intake was 1200 calories, compared to the 1300–1700 calories a day fed to the inmates of Auschwitz.

Mass homicide on the scale of the Great Leap Forward was something that Mao prepared for. He told the 1958 party congress it should not fear but actively welcome people dying as a result of party policy. It was a common theme of his at the time. In Moscow in 1957 he said: “We are prepared to sacrifice 300 million Chinese for the victory of the world revolution.” On the prospect of another world war, he told the party in 1958: “Half the population wiped out—this happened quite a few times in Chinese history. It's best if half the population is left, next best one-third.” Hence, Mao's eventual career tally of 70 million deaths was actually much less than he anticipated.

The huge size of the Chinese population, around 600 million in 1960, gave Mao many more potential victims than were available to either Hitler or Stalin. What made Mao the greater monster was not just the sheer quantity of his killings. It was because so many of his victims came not only from his real and imagined enemies but also from his own supporters. Chang and Halliday make it clear

that Mao built his political power out of a life-long strategy that easily outdid even Stalin in waging murder and terror among his own Communist Party comrades.

This pattern was established in 1931–34 at Mao's initial "red base" at Ruijin in Jiangxi province. The system of control was introduced by Chou En-lai, sent there by his Moscow controllers from party headquarters in Shanghai. It was based on the model of the Stalinist state in the USSR. The whole population was organized into various committees whose role was to carry out party orders. Anyone suspected as an ideological enemy was dispossessed of all property, sentenced to limitless forced labor, or executed. Mao's innovation to the Soviet system was to turn this persecution into public display. Mass rallies, public denunciations by informers, and public confessions of being AB (anti-Bolshevik) became the order of the day. Mao used this accusation to purge the party hierarchy of anyone who disagreed with him or whom he thought potentially disloyal. The first to be charged were Red Army military officers and Mao's rivals for leadership. Most of those murdered were party members. Men were conscripted into the army. As a warning to those who objected, army deserters were tried and executed in public. Army recruiters who failed to conscript enough soldiers were publicly denounced at mass rallies and executed on the spot.

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Everyday social intercourse and hospitality could bring death. "No family was allowed to have visitors or stay overnight," veterans recalled. "Any family found to have done so was killed, together with the visitor." When Mao and Chou En-lai prepared for the Long March, they drew up a list of party officers they rated as unreliable. Their parting gift to the region was to execute thousands of these party members, including the majority of teachers at army schools. Chang and Halliday calculate that between 1931 and 1934 some 700,000 people died at the

Ruijin red base, half of them murdered as AB or “class enemies,” the rest worked to death or dying from other causes attributable to the regime. Mass graves and derelict villages littered the landscape. In four years under Mao, the population of this once rich and prosperous region fell by 20 percent, the greatest decline in all China.

The young, educated middle-class men and women who cut their hair and took their idealism to Yenan in the late 1930s hardly knew what hit them. They quickly found themselves trapped within a regime they could only leave by forfeiting their lives. Those caught trying to run away were immediately executed. The party structure in Yenan was grossly inegalitarian, with party officers enjoying a much better diet and better clothing than the volunteers. The only car in the settlement—donated by Chinese laundry workers in New York to act as an ambulance—was confiscated for use as Mao’s private limousine. Anyone criticizing these arrangements, no matter how privately, found themselves denounced as Trotskyites and sentenced to solitary confinement. In 1942 Mao accused all the volunteers who had come from Nationalist-held areas of being spies. He ordered thousands arrested and tortured to make confessions. Executions, both real and mock, were an everyday affair. Life at Yenan came to be centered on interrogations and terrifying mass rallies where volunteers publicly confessed to being spies.

Unlike Hitler and Stalin, who used secret police to arrest and interrogate victims, Mao used all those not yet accused to spy on, guard, interrogate, arrest, and punish those already accused. The Yenan settlement became a self-perpetuating totalitarian state. No outside press or radio communication was permitted. No letters could be sent or received from the outside world: Indeed, letters were construed as evidence of spying. Humor, sarcasm, and irony were banned. The regime invented a new catch-all offence, “Speaking Weird Words,” which meant any comment that could be interpreted as a complaint or a wisecrack could have its speaker accused of being a spy or traitor. Two years of this regime transformed the once young and passionate volunteers into robots,

capable of enunciating nothing but bland echoes of the party line. A visiting journalist observed: “If you ask the same question of twenty or thirty people, from intellectuals to workers, their replies are always more or less the same. There always seems to be a point of view that has been decided by meetings.” Not surprisingly, “they unanimously and firmly deny the Party has any direct control over their thoughts.”

Mao used precisely the same model in the so-called Cultural Revolution of 1966–68. Party historians and sympathetic Western academics, then and now, rationalize this event as Mao’s attempt to revive the revolutionary spirit and arrest pro-capitalist and anti-socialist tendencies. In reality, Chang and Halliday show, it was yet another purge of Communist officials designed to terrorize the party and secure Mao’s leadership. Indeed, Mao himself thought of it as the Great Purge. Its principal targets were those party leaders who thought Mao’s attempts at collectivization and industrialization during the Great Leap Forward were a disaster. Chief among them was Liu Shao-chi, long Mao’s second-in-command in both army and party, but who had made several mistakes, including confessing to a Soviet politician that more than 30 million had died during the 1958–61 famine. Liu also publicly apologized to famine victims and successfully urged a reduction in the seizure of crops and other foods. Mao launched the Cultural Revolution in May 1966 and deposed Liu at a meeting of the Central Committee in August that year.

The Cultural Revolution was organized by an inner circle of five men and one woman (Madam Mao), with Mao at its head. It made him the center of a national cult. Mao’s face dominated every issue of the *People’s Daily* and a profile of his head adorned badges that became required wearing. More copies of Mao’s *Selected Works* and more portraits of him were printed (1.2 billion) than China had inhabitants. Some 4.8 billion badges of Mao’s head were manufactured, more than six for each person in China. Every Chinese received a copy of Mao’s *Little Red Book* of quotations, which had to be carried and brandished on all public occasions. In effect, Maoism became the compulsory state religion.

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The first agents Mao used to terrorize society in 1966 were young people in schools and universities. He ordered all schooling suspended and told students to condemn their teachers for poisoning their heads with “bourgeois ideas.” Students were told to “safeguard” Chairman Mao, though from what they never learned. Nonetheless, many were enthusiastic recruits to the cause. Allowed to engage in politics for the first time in their lives, many youth grabbed the opportunity eagerly. Under the name of Red Guards, they rampaged through their institutions, dragging teachers and lecturers into public places, manhandling and beating them up. Many female teachers were sexually assaulted in these incidents, an indignity that produced what Chang and Halliday call “a cascade of suicides.” Teachers and other members of the educated classes were consigned to industrial regions and the countryside to perform manual labor.

Red Guards fanned out into the society at large, attacking and destroying any signs of traditional Chinese culture. Anyone found wearing traditional dress or hairstyle was disrobed and shorn. The only acceptable clothing for men or women was the party uniform of jackets, trousers, and caps. The books of Peking’s major library and the Peking Opera’s traditional costumes and props were all consigned to a great bonfire in the city. The country’s leading writers, singers, and artists were made to kneel before the fire while blows rained on their heads. Red Guards ravaged dwellings in every city and town searching for books or anything else associated with culture. Fearing the consequences of being found with such items in their possession, many families burned their books and art objects or sold them as scrap. The Red Guards also fulfilled Mao’s long-held goal of erasing much of the memory of China’s past by destroying historical monuments erected under previous dynasties. In Peking, of 6,843

public monuments still standing in 1958, Red Guards demolished no less than 4,922.

Chang and Halliday observe that Stalin had carried out his purges through an elite, secret police force, the KGB, which hustled victims out of sight to prison, gulag, or death. Mao, however, enacted his Great Purge through violence and humiliation carried out in public. He vastly increased the number of persecutors by having his victims tormented and tortured by their own direct subordinates. By 1966, Communist rule in China had produced a plethora of people hungry to take revenge against those in authority and eager to seize power for themselves. Once again, Mao used party members to collaborate in their own terrorizing. During the Cultural Revolution, the whole of China was ruled like the initial red bases at Ruijin and Yanan. It eventually chalked up a death toll of more than three million people.

The story brought together by Chang and Halliday is so shocking that reading it literally takes your breath away. This is true even for those familiar with the works of other authors who over the past decade have revealed some of the more gruesome aspects of Mao's career. Chang and Halliday's book is not merely a tale of the evil done by one man. It is a telling comment on the human condition. In the breakdown of civilization on the scale experienced by China in the 1920s and 1930s, any society could end up being ruled by a ruthless and cunning psychopath like Mao Tse-tung. Those who imagine that the cultural traditions of Western liberal democracy would confer immunity against such an outcome should read this book to see just how many Western intellectuals and politicians were eager to further Mao's career. Edgar Snow was the first, but he was far from being the only Western writer or artist to succumb to Maoism.

During the Great Leap Forward, a small number of Chinese escaped by swimming across to Hong Kong where they broke the news about the nationwide famine and the brutality of the regime. The press gave them little credence. Instead, the West was fed a steady diet of propaganda from respectable political leaders and writers who asserted the opposite. The future Canadian

Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau visited in 1960 and wrote a starry-eyed, aptly titled book, *Two Innocents in Red China*, which said nothing about the famine. Britain's Field Marshal Montgomery visited in both 1960 and 1961 and asserted there was "no large-scale famine, only shortages in certain areas." He did not regard the shortages as Mao's fault and urged him to hang on to power: "China needs the chairman. You mustn't abandon this ship." The United Nations was completely ineffectual. Its Food and Agricultural Organization made an inspection in 1959, declaring that food production had increased by 50 to 100 percent in the past five years: "China seems capable of feeding [its population] well." When the French socialist leader, François Mitterand, visited in 1961, Mao told him: "I repeat it, in order to be heard: There is no famine in China." Mitterand dutifully reported this assurance to a credulous world. At the same time, Mao enlisted three writers he knew he could trust—Edgar Snow, Han Suyin, and Felix Greene—to spread his message through articles, books, and a celebrated BBC television interview between a fawning Greene and Chou En-lai.

Among Western intellectuals, Mao's most enthusiastic supporters came from the French Left. Simone de Beauvoir visited China in 1955 and declared: "The power he [Mao] exercises is no more dictatorial than, for example, Roosevelt's was. New China's Constitution renders impossible the concentration of authority in one man's hands." She wrote a lengthy book about her visit entitled *The Long March*. During the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, her consort Jean-Paul Sartre praised the "revolutionary violence" of Mao as "profoundly moral." It is true, as Chang and Halliday argue, that in terms of electoral politics, the Maoist parties China funded in Western countries from the 1950s to the 1970s only ever gained miniscule support. But among intellectuals, the story was very different.

In France, the intellectual center of Maoism from the late 1960s to 1976 was the journal *Tel Quel*. This publication was the focus of much of the theoretical activity that emerged in Paris at the time and was responsible for launching the careers of many of the luminaries of the French intellectual Left, notably the cultural analyst Roland Barthes, the post-structuralist philosophers Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, the Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, the

theorist of psychoanalysis Jacques Lacan, and the radical feminist Julia Kristeva. Themes that emerged in *Tel Quel* at the time were taken up by the influential British Marxist journal *New Left Review* and from there spread to the rest of the English-speaking world. *Tel Quel* began as a Marxist-Leninist journal but became influential in shifting the Western Left away from old Marxism, with its emphasis on the blue-collar working class as the bearer of social revolution, and towards the new Leftism of the post-1960s period, with its emphasis on feminism, anti-racism, gay liberation, and anti-colonialism.

The journal's founder, the novelist and critic Philippe Sollers, in 1967 began publishing Mao's poems accompanied by sympathetic articles. By 1971 the journal had switched to an overtly Maoist political and theoretical position. Although the editorial group flattered Mao as a serious thinker, lauding in particular his essay "On Contradiction," the only substantive point they took from him was about the autonomy of the cultural sphere. Traditional Marxism held that the culture of a society was determined by its mode of production. Taking their cue from the Chinese Cultural Revolution, *Tel Quel* argued instead that culture was a relatively autonomous realm. This opened a space for them to endorse the notion of cultural politics—the idea that literature, debates, lectures, performances, and artistic output could effect social change—a position that was bound to be popular with writers, academics, and artists who had been previously consigned by Marxism to utilitarian roles. Intellectuals were thus elevated to major players in the socialist revolution. Ideas and attitudes that survive today for which *Tel Quel* can claim more responsibility than most include the theory of postmodernism, the academic field of cultural studies, the policy of multiculturalism, the sanctification of theorists as celebrities, and an utter hostility to liberal-democratic capitalism, especially in its American form, which the journal identified as the source of all oppression.

Tel Quel's formal switch to Maoism in 1971 cost it the support of Derrida, Althusser, and a few other writers who did not want to break with the French Communist Party, which remained steadfastly loyal to the USSR. But most of the

editorial group went along with Sollers. The culmination of their enthusiasm for Mao was a visit to China by Kristeva, Barthes, and Sollers in 1974. In his history of the journal, *The Time of Theory* (1995), the English writer Patrick French writes that its Maoism pushed it sharply to the Left. The group wanted to emulate the Red Guards of the Cultural Revolution. This was rather difficult, however, since none were students. They were the teachers, lecturers, and writers who in China had been dismissed from their posts and forced into manual work. Instead of going out into the factories and fields, the *Tel Quel* writers made do with less arduous measures. They printed the slogan “Vive la pensée-maotsétoung” in each edition of the journal and decorated their offices with political graffiti copied from Chinese walls.

Maoism, writes French, gave the journal a reputation for political radicalism of a “somewhat hysterical nature.” In the context of Parisian leftism, it was hysterical only because it dared to differ from the local, Stalinist-oriented Communist Party. In reality, it represented little more than a switch from one murderous tyrant to another. *Tel Quel's* allegiance to Mao lasted until his death in 1976, when the group began a search for new revolutionary heroes to champion. There is little doubt that were another totalitarian dictator to emerge today with a Little Red Book of aphorisms as banal as those of Mao Tse-tung, the intellectual heirs of *Tel Quel* would be the first to worship at his feet.

From the 1950s to the 1980s, there was a great debate among economists about the best policies to end the poverty and backwardness in much of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. By this time, enough information had emerged from the USSR to show that its regime's claims and statistics about industrial success and agricultural output in the 1930s and 1940s were either largely exaggerated or outright bogus. State control of the economy, collectivization, and five-year plans should have been consigned to the dustbin of economic history. Yet at the very time this was becoming apparent to those with eyes to see, left-wing economists were lining up to offer precisely the same advice to the Third World. Many used Mao's Cultural Revolution as confirmation of their case.

In Britain, the group of Keynesian economists at Cambridge University led by Joan Robinson used its considerable influence with Social Democrat politicians around the world to argue this line. The policy these economists recommended for Britain itself was a mixed capitalist/state-owned-enterprise model, but for the Third World they came out as true believers of state-controlled socialism. In her 1969 book *The Cultural Revolution in China*, Robinson urged Mao's policies of the 1960s as the solution to the underdeveloped world's poverty. She said that the Soviet example showed a socialist revolution could transform a backward country into a great industrial and military power. But Mao had demonstrated that transforming the economic base was not enough to create genuine socialism. So, she argued, the revolution had also to be carried into the superstructure, that is, the culture of the society. Robinson admitted that China had not published any official statistics since 1960, so Mao's experiment could not be confirmed by any systematic account of GNP or economic growth rates. Nonetheless, she was certain that the new democratic relationships forged between experts and workers during the Cultural Revolution had been successful, offering

solid benefits to all except the former privileged few, in improvements in the standard of consumption, social services, and economic security, which have transformed China from one of the most miserable countries in the so-called developing world into one (perhaps the only one) where development is really going on.

Robinson especially praised the Chinese system of public self-criticism and confession of errors. Instead of recognizing that these public displays were often the prelude to a death warrant, Robinson commended them: "the Chinese are taught to analyze mistakes in order to avoid them in the future; they do not mind even foreigners knowing that mistakes have been made." Throughout the late 1960s, when she made personal appearances at conferences in India and other underdeveloped countries, this Cambridge don, whom many Keynesians thought deserved a Nobel Prize, took the stage with a copy of Mao's *Little Red Book* clutched firmly in her hand.

In the United States, other Keynesian economists took a similar line. In his 1973 book, *A China Passage*, written after a Potemkin-style tour of the country, John Kenneth Galbraith gushed: “There can now be no serious doubt that China is devising a highly effective economic system.” Despite the complete absence of any credible statistics, Galbraith endorsed estimates by other economists who traveled with him that Chinese industrial and agricultural output was growing at 10 or 11 percent per annum: “This does not seem to me implausible.”

Throughout his career, Galbraith had made a point of avoiding the jargon and ideological crudities of orthodox Marxist economists. He also distanced himself from the theories of Third World underdevelopment and monopoly capital advanced by Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy in the American Marxist journal *Monthly Review*, a publication which in the 1960s became overtly Maoist. But, like Joan Robinson, when it came to recommending policies to lift the people of China out of poverty, Galbraith advocated precisely the same political program.

The United Nations proved equally incompetent. An economist at the U.N.’s Food and Agriculture Organization, Sartaj Aziz, wrote a 1978 book, *Rural Development: Learning from China*, defending the system of communes Mao had established during the Great Leap Forward. Introducing it, the British economist and environmentalist Barbara Ward, author of *Only One Earth*, was effusive:

The Chinese have found solutions to virtually all the major problems found by the first stages of modernization. The Chinese achievement was contrived by ignoring the accepted beliefs of Western development experts and the most sober tenets of orthodox Marxism.

Jasper Becker observes in *Hungry Ghosts* that figures like Robinson, Galbraith, Aziz, and Ward used their weighty reputations with governments to endorse policies that had disastrous results for the underdeveloped countries they advised. They perpetuated their poverty and persuaded their younger generations that the route to modernization lay in the Maoist brand of socialist revolution. “Ignorant of the millions who had been sacrificed on the altar of Mao’s vanity,” Becker writes, “academics and pundits now held up China as a

development model, and Mao's policies began to cast a terrible and destructive shadow on the rest of the Third World."

As much as Western conservatives might enjoy learning how badly the reputations of their political and ideological adversaries suffer from what we now know about the Maoist regime, they can take little comfort from this terrible story. Two characters who do not emerge well from Chang and Halliday's book are Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger. The main reason Nixon went personally to China was to bolster his chances at the 1972 election. Kissinger's aim was to take strategic advantage of the Sino-Soviet split. In the deals traded between China and the U.S., it was all one-way traffic, with the United States making concession after concession and getting almost nothing in return. Nixon agreed to pull out American troops from Vietnam, thereby abandoning the South Vietnamese regime. Kissinger promised to pull out "most, if not all" American troops from Korea before the end of Nixon's next term. He failed to extract any guarantee the Chinese would not support another Communist invasion of South Korea. They sold out America's old ally Taiwan, by getting Peking into the United Nations, with a seat and veto on the Security Council. Looking at the U.N. vote, Mao declared: "Britain, France, Holland, Belgium, Canada, Italy—they have all become Red Guards." In their personal meetings, Mao was haughty towards Nixon and cut him short. Afterwards, he instructed his diplomats to continue to treat the U.S. as Public Enemy No. 1 and to denounce it fiercely in public. Despite Nixon's overtures, Mao was intent on maintaining his claim to be the global anti-American leader.

In the 1950s, to convince the USSR to give him nuclear weapons, Mao had twice stage-managed confrontations with Taiwan in order to invoke the prospect of America attacking China with atom bombs. In 1972–73, he used the same tactic in reverse. He used the specter of war with the USSR to try to persuade the U.S. to give him nuclear weapons. Kissinger went along with this, at least orally. He told the Chinese that he had set up a secret task force to study the best way to provide them with nuclear artillery shells, battlefield nuclear weapons, and

tactical aircraft loaded with nuclear bombs. Kissinger also asked the French to break existing embargoes and sell aircraft to China. He secretly encouraged Britain and France to sell Mao strictly prohibited nuclear reactor technology. Kissinger reassured Mao's envoy: "We will take a formal position in opposition, but only that. Don't be confused by what we do publicly."

It is clear, however, that Kissinger over-estimated Chinese military and industrial strength and failed to understand what a wreck of a country Mao's continued purges had created. Kissinger did not realize the ally he was trying to cultivate still had only a small and primitive industrial base and very little military power. China's aircraft industry was so decrepit that its products were practically useless. In April 1972 Chou En-lai warned the Albanians not to try to fly their Chinese-made MIG-19s since they were likely to explode in mid-air. Chou told other heads of state not to request Chinese helicopters, as they were unsafe. Kissinger's tactic of driving a wedge between China and the USSR did work, but not quite in the way he intended. The Soviets were alarmed by Nixon's overtures and construed them as an overt and direct threat. In June 1973, Brezhnev warned Nixon and Kissinger that if further military arrangements were made between the U.S. and China, "this would have the most serious consequences and would lead the Soviets to take drastic measures." One ostensible purpose of Nixon's visit to China had been to reduce the chance of war with the USSR. If anything, that prospect only increased.

Chang and Halliday finish their biography with a gloomy reminder. In the face of today's renewed bout of Western enthusiasm for China and its purported miracle economy, they use their epilogue to emphasize just how little has changed politically. Today, Mao's portrait and his corpse still dominate Tiananmen Square in the heart of the Chinese capital. The current Communist regime declares itself to be Mao's heir and fiercely perpetuates his myth.

But let me conclude on a more positive note. In the past, books about China have played a major role in altering its politics. Edgar Snow's *Red Star over China* was important in winning domestic support for the Chinese Communist Party.

Chang and Halliday's book will be impossible to ignore. It will no doubt be banned in China, but will still circulate secretly and be more sought after for that. The tens of thousands of Chinese students now studying at Western universities will see it in the bookstores. The story its authors tell is so awful it will both shock the Chinese people and confirm many of the private anecdotes and rumors passed down within families. Rather than being the man who made the ancient Middle Kingdom stand up again, Mao was the one who brought it to its knees. This is a powerful story which Mao's heirs will have great difficulty denying or suppressing. Just as Snow's book helped install the regime, Chang and Halliday's could help bring it down. If any single book in our own time has the capacity to change the course of history, this is it.

Notes

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I. *Mao: The Unknown Story*, by Jung Chang and Jon Halliday; Knopf, 832 pages, \$35. [Go back to the text.](#)

Keith Windschuttle's latest book is *The White Australia Policy* (Macleay Press).

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