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## **Mao: The Unknown Story**

Jung Chang and Jan Halliday  
New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005, pp. 814

Mao Tse-Tung has always had a radical allure. Mao's legions of fans have included such luminaries as Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone deBeauvoir, Pierre Trudeau and numerous others. Now we have a book that forces us to radically reconsider our view.

This is not a strictly academic study. Jung Chang was born and raised in China. Her mother was a Party functionary, and she herself experienced the Cultural Revolution firsthand, including briefly as a Red Guard. However, what makes this book unique is the authors' use of hitherto hidden Soviet sources, items from the Stalinist archives, as well as insider information from a vast array of people who knew Mao personally: children and other relatives, doctors, nannies and servants, colleagues and political rivals, bodyguards, secretaries, interpreters, and sexual companions.

In essence, this book explodes a number of myths about its subject, while also giving us new insight into his character. There is no space to go into these myths here, but the main picture that emerges is of a supreme egoist with virtually no loyalty to, or feelings for, other people. Mao was committed first and foremost to the quest for power.

Even his embrace of Marxism seems to have been a means to that end. In one of his earliest writings, written when he was still a young man, Mao expresses approval for a German philosopher espousing a creed similar to that of Nietzsche's "ubermensch." Mao wrote:

I do not agree with the view that to be moral, the motive of one's actions has to be benefiting others. Morality does not have to be defined in relation to others... People like me want to... satisfy our hearts to the full, and in doing so we automatically have the most valuable moral codes. Of course there are people and objects in the world but they are only there for me.

Mao did not believe that he had responsibility for other persons. In his conception of "Great Heroes,"

[e]verything outside their nature, such as restrictions and constraints, must be swept away by the great strength in their nature.... When Great Heroes give full play to their impulses, they are magnificently powerful, stormy, and invincible.... [T]here is no way to stop them.

It is clear that Chang and Halliday want to smash Mao's iconic status. However, if even half of what they say about him is true, he was probably the worst and most deadly tyrant of the twentieth century.

To take a couple of examples: while Hitler and Stalin had specialized apparatuses to carry out their deeds of terror – arrest, imprisonment, torture, and execution – Mao

added the new wrinkle of having much of the denunciation, torture, and execution occur in public, with those present being forced to watch and participate.

In addition to medieval-style public inquisitions, Mao perfected the technique of thought control whereby all Party members and many members of the public were forced to reveal their personal and family contacts, allegedly for reasons for security, and to subject themselves to relentless and unending criticism and self-criticism, often in mass public humiliation sessions.

Even the top leadership was not immune to this. When Mao targeted one of his colleagues for punishment, he also took great pleasure in making sure that the person's family members suffered as well.

In addition to “improving” on the techniques of terror and mass persuasion developed by Hitler and Stalin, Mao was also responsible, directly, or indirectly, for more deaths than the two of them combined. The authors calculate the figure as being close to 70 million – from execution, suicides, famine, overwork, and other causes.

Mao also took cultural well-being to a new low. As the authors point out, while Stalin tolerated many works of classical literature and music, and Hitler tolerated apolitical entertainments, Mao made it his mission to virtually eliminate culture except for the Little Red Book and a few other approved works.

As with Christian Europe where the Bible, and the Church's interpretation of it, was one of the few sources of culture available, during the Cultural Revolution especially, the Gospel according to Mao was virtually the only source of culture available to ordinary people and Party members. During his reign, thousands of cultural monuments and manuscripts were destroyed: inestimable treasures of Chinese culture were lost, and the heritage of the Chinese people was irrevocably damaged.

At the end of his life, obsessed with his slipping grip on power, Mao empathized strongly with ousted leaders, and even his old rival, Chiang Kai-shek. He was filled with self-pity and, now blind, asked his attendants to read old polemics against opponents against whom he still felt so much venom. He spent a lifetime seeking and building up his power base and, within a month, his wife and closest colleagues had all been arrested. Twenty-seven years in power and countless deaths, and it all started to unravel within weeks of his death. Whatever one may think of the authors' treatment of its subject, this will remain the definitive sourcebook on Mao Tse-Tung for years to come.

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