

# Addressing the Mao Controversy

## Red Guards and Red Herrings: Teaching *Mao: The Unknown Story*

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**Editors' note:** In our last issue (Spring, 2006), we noted that the book *Mao: the Unknown Story* by Jung Chang and Jon Halliday has fueled debate over the legacy of Mao Zedong and that, as a result, many ASIANetwork members who are concerned with modern Chinese history have been faced with questions as to whether or not—or how—to utilize this controversial resource in their teaching. We indicated our hope to promote dialogue in the pages of *ASIANetwork Exchange* about the controversy. We are thus very pleased to include this article as a response to our editorial, and we encourage further submissions from readers on this subject.

Believe the blurbs: Among much of the reading public, Jung Chang and Jon Halliday's biography of Mao has set a new standard. Thanks in part to the work of



reviewers like Nicholas Kristof—who miraculously found time to read the giant tome when he wasn't rescuing Cambodian prostitutes or traveling to Darfur—Chang and Halliday's book is selling briskly in the United States, the protests of the professoriat notwithstanding. For specialists, the book's appearance creates a crisis of sorts. However, so long as the book sparks debate in classrooms, conference halls, and beyond, victory indeed can be said to "belong to the people."

My experience with the text is linked to my role as a teacher at a liberal arts

college and as a historian curious to find new points of entry into modern China. Having used the book as the core reading for a diverse class of sixteen students

at Hiram College, in this essay I would like to make some suggestions based on that experience.

Seemingly hewn out of raw hatred, the text has been justly critiqued by leading scholars. (For a summary of these criticisms and citations to the relevant review literature, see *The China Journal*, January 2006.) *The Unknown Story* is indeed relentlessly bitter, impaired by a blind fury which manifests itself in anachronistic word choices ("Red bosses") and ridiculous claims to omniscience (Chang and

Halliday relay Mao's "greedy" deathbed thoughts are relayed with utter confidence). Moreover, *The Unknown Story* is overly-dependent upon

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sensational reminiscence literature and anonymous interviews, while potentially amazing sources listed in the clumpy endnotes must remain questionable until verified by other scholars. The book thus

represents a program of research whose impressive breadth is marred by narrow ends. As Timothy Cheek brilliantly notes in his review essay "Academic Biography

as Mass Criticism" (*The China Journal*, No. 55, Jan. 2006) the book resembles the kind of protracted and public struggle



session with which Mao attacked Wang Ming or Stalin levied against Trotsky. Like the ice pick that killed Trotsky in Mexico City, the book is intended to function as a weapon, sometimes sharp, more often bludgeoning.

In spite of these manifest flaws, the book possesses redeeming qualities which enhance its use in the classroom. Foremost, the galvanizing character of the biography makes for stimulating discussion. A number of new vignettes arising out of Soviet, East German, and Albanian archives enrich what we know about China in the Cold War, enhancing the book's value as a portrait of the global dimensions of that conflict. The comparative cast of the text—Stalin being

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a touchstone—makes Mao more accessible for students unfamiliar with Chinese history. Most of all, the book is current, controversial, and influential both inside and outside of the academy. Thus, when students open up the *New York Times* to find that their intellectually voracious Commander-in-Chief is reading *The Unknown Story* at night, they tend to realize that they are becoming members of a wider community stretching beyond the confines of the classroom.

My method of mitigating the book's excesses is rather simple: cut the worst chapters and broaden the palette of readings beyond *The Unknown Story*. This method allows instructors to work more effectively with the two parties which are likely to emerge in one's classroom: those students who are prone to believe Chang and Halliday's every word, and those who see the authors' narrow agenda at work and are prone to disillusionment or disgust with the text.

Students with less experience approaching a text critically (typically freshman) may have difficulty coming to terms with the fact that the professor has assigned a book in which he or she does not wholly believe. Using supplemental readings ensures that students inclined to swallow completely the perspective of the authors are provided with reasonable safeguards. (Whether or not these students are able to break the pernicious bonds of the five-paragraph essay format is another matter altogether.) This method also provides an outlet for more critical students who might otherwise feel unduly harnessed by exclusive reliance on the Chang and Halliday text.

In my experience, the best companion reading to *The Unknown Story* is Jonathan Spence's compact biography *Mao*, published by Penguin. Spence situates Mao within a rapidly changing Chinese society, showing the young man as a curious and often adrift lone spirit of his times. Spence's *Mao* is pithy and quickly paced, qualities which allow instructors to assign chapters from both Spence and *The Unknown Story* simultaneously without undue guilt. Pairing Spence with *The Unknown Story* creates the opportunity for short response papers in which students analyze the differences between the two texts in terms of narrative emphasis, sources employed, and conclusions drawn. Additionally, both texts contain excellent maps of China as frontpiece,

either of which can serve as the basis of map quizzes throughout the course.

In looking at young Mao, students should select for themselves a short document from Stuart Schram's magnificent collection of Mao's earliest writings *Mao: The Road to Power*. For the 1930s, I recommend skipping much of Chang and Halliday's sledgehammer treatment of that decade (with chapters entitled "Fight Rivals and Chiang—Not Japan" and "Red Mole Starts China-Japan War," perhaps the reasons are obvious). I would maintain, however, that it is essential to assign a short monograph or series of articles on the broader societal

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impacts of the war with Japan. For this purpose, I recommend Diana Lary and Stephen MacKinnon's collection *The Scars of War: The Impact of Warfare on Modern China* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2001). It may be also useful to assign a healthy excerpt from Mao's Yenan period writings, such as *On Guerrilla Warfare*, to hedge against the notion that Mao was only concerned with womanizing or poisoning rivals during this period. The Mao online archive is useful in this regard (<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao>).

For the civil war period from 1945-1949, I ask students to find and analyze documents from the Marshall Mission—depicted in *The Unknown Story* as the turning point in Mao's fortunes—or an online collection of scholarly essays from the Marshall Foundation (<http://www.marshallfoundation.org/china->

[mediation-mission.html](http://www.marshallfoundation.org/china-mediation-mission.html)). Chang and Halliday's writing is swift here, and convinces the reader that only the intervention of George Marshall saved Mao and the CCP from extinction or permanent exile. Harbin becomes the modern equivalent of Tora Bora and the counterfactual "what ifs" flow freely. At this moment, *The Unknown Story* is pedagogically valuable because it strips from the communist revolution the aura of inevitability. This is, therefore, an ideal juncture to discuss China's great alternative to Mao, Chiang Kai-shek. Since Chiang is treated with kid gloves throughout this otherwise bruising text, one might have to rely on one or two documentary films to expose to students the many problems facing the Nationalists in the late 1940s. As any casual observer of modern Iraq can attest, stunning military victories have little bearing on the success of the government that follows them. Had Chiang Kai-shek been able to triumph on the battlefield, was his reign (or Chinese democracy) thereby assured?

Since the book's treatment of the 1950s is extensive, students might be asked to find alternate explanations for the Taiwan Straits crises, track down additional documents ([www.cwihp.org](http://www.cwihp.org)), or learn more about China's bilateral relationships with nominal allies such as North Korea. For students intrigued by the progress of the revolution within China during this period, they might profitably investigate the relevant chapters from Jung Chang's, *Wild Swans*, which describes in a more balanced fashion why individuals were largely supportive of the Communist Party through most of the 1950s. Finally, why not go along with the authors' (self) criticism of the Left of the 1960s by juxtaposing the book's depictions of mainland misery in 1960 with Edgar Snow's glowing tome of the same year, *The Other Side of the River?* Along the same lines, I recommend utilizing the *Peking /Beijing Review* as a fascinating means of allowing students to track for themselves the twists and turns of Party policy in the 1960s and beyond.

Citations for additional reading selections, sample assignments, my analysis of Chang and Halliday's use and misuse of sources, and a handful of student essays on *Mao: The Unknown Story* are available to viewers outside of China at: <http://maocrit.blogspot.com/> ●