

WAS MAO REALLY A MONSTER?: The Academic Response to Chang and Halliday's *Mao: The Unknown Story*. Edited by Gregor Benton and Lin Chun. London and New York: Routledge, 2010. viii, 199 pp. US\$42.95, paper. ISBN 978-0-415-49330-7.

The academic response to popular histories is much like a master chef going to McDonald's with a favourite young niece or nephew: disgusted by the crass marketing of salt, grease, and high fructose corn syrup but not wanting to come off as a snob (and, to be sure, the french fries are tasty). When academics fume against Gavin Menzies, *1421: The Year China Discovered the World* (Bantam, 2002), Iris Chang, *The Rape of Nanking The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* (Basic Books, 1997), or, the subject here, *Mao: The Unknown Story*, they feel the same futile avuncular exasperation: How can I explain this to a civilian? To be sure, Ming armadas did make prodigious explorations, the Japanese Army did in fact commit war crimes, and Mao was indeed a megalomaniac under whose rule tens of millions died from political causes. But if Mao's story is not "unknown" (any more than the Rape of Nanking was "forgotten"), was he the monster Chang and Halliday portray?

Fourteen academic reviews are reprinted here, with references given in the footnotes to reviews in newspapers and general interest weeklies. The editors' introduction sets out the book's history and initial positive reception, and then notes that most professional commentary has been "disapproving" (11). They challenge the assertion in the book's opening sentence that Mao was "responsible for well over 70 million deaths in peacetime," saying that the number's origin is vague and substantiation shaky (9).

Part 1 comprises reviews in general readership publications: Delia Davin's "Dark Tales of Mao the Merciless" (*Times Higher Education Supplement*), Andrew Nathan's "Jade and Plastic" (*London Review of Books*), and Jonathan Spence's "Portrait of a Monster" (*New York Review of Books*). Nathan concedes that obstructions to research in China make documentation difficult but that, in the end, many of *Mao's* "unknown stories" are suspect, some come from "sources that cannot be checked," others are "openly speculative or are based on circumstantial evidence," and some are "untrue." Chang and Halliday are "magpies": every "bright piece of evidence goes in, no matter where it comes from or how reliable it is." "Jade and plastic" are arranged in a mosaic to "portray a possible but not a plausible Mao" (28).

Part 2 brings on the heavy hitters from a special review section of *China Journal* (January 2006). Gregor Benton, Steve Tsang, Timothy Cheek, Lowell Dittmer and Geremie Barmé dissect specific charges brought and mostly find them wanting. Cheek implies (54) that Chang and Halliday are rebels who bombard the headquarters of Western scholarship to dispel the Maoist ox ghosts and snake demons which dominate public discourse and American diplomacy.

Part 3 includes other academic specialists. Alfred Chan (from this journal) elegantly critiques the book's argument and evidence. David Goodman's full length article "Mao and *The Da Vinci Code*: Conspiracy, Narrative and History" (*Pacific Review*) is a highlight. Goodman explains that *Mao*, like Dan Brown's thriller, is popular history, a genre which does not follow the "normal academic rules of engagement." Neither book has an introduction or conclusion to discuss point of view, theory or methodology. Both simply assume that history is "the past waiting to be discovered rather than murky ambiguities to be interpreted, synthesized, or debated" (88). In both works, narrative replaces argument and excludes disagreement or alternative explanations; conjecture replaces evidence; and isolated references ("jade and plastic"?) replace sustained dialogue with the scholarly field.

Chinese reviews appear in part 4. Chen Yung-fa is cautious and meticulous, while Mobo Gao more polemically calls *Mao* an "intellectual scandal" (119), and Jin Xiaoding presents a low key "critique" (135).

In part 5, Bill Wilmott (published online) lucidly expatiates on earlier criticisms, but Arthur Waldron's "Mao Lives" (*Commentary*) presents the sole minority view: Chang and Halliday's factual evidence is "overwhelmingly accurate and well supported." Like Goodman but to a different end, Waldron sees their voice as novelistic and moral rather than that of the "bloodless scholar" (167-168). Accordingly, Waldron first extols their thesis at length and only then explores their disconnection from scholarly discourse and emphasis on the "great man" rather than the history which produced him.

Another review which might well have been included is Perry Link, "An Abnormal Mind" (*Times Literary Supplement* August 14, 2005). Link conjectures that Chang and Halliday "may have feared that to acknowledge anything beneficial would weaken their case against Mao or would play into the hands of those who argue that, despite all, the emergence of New China made it worthwhile to pay the price of Mao." Chang and Halliday "feed the assumption, which is deeply embedded in Chinese political culture, that if only the good people can gain the upper hand, everything will be fine." Link thus explains why, for them, Mao had to be a monster.