

Mao. A Life

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It is one of the unfortunate realities of the twentieth century that the list of defining world political leaders is shared between those whose actions resulted directly in the greatest number of deaths and those who led the defence when their actions impinged on the rest of the world. The stature of the former, and their place in history, was achieved because they created (or were inspired by) an ideological vision and engineered the authoritarian power to impose the logic (or one particular logic) of that vision on their populations, ostensibly for their benefit but ultimately at the cost of millions of their lives

It is probable that any list of those defining leaders drawn up with the benefit of hindsight at the end of the twentieth century would see very few changes in the top echelon from one drawn up fifty years ago. Mao Zedong would indisputably be one of them. For Philip Short, Mao's life was 'played out on an altogether vaster canvas' than that of the other world leaders. As 'unquestioned leader of almost a quarter of mankind' he 'wielded powers equalled only by the most awesome of Chinese emperors' and did so 'in an era when China's history was so compressed that changes which, in the West, had taken centuries to accomplish, occurred in a single generation.' It was Mao who guided China through the leaps from 'semi-colony to Great Power', from 'millennial autarky to socialist state', and from 'despoiled victim of imperialist plunder to Permanent Member of the UN Security Council, complete with H-bombs, surveillance satellites and ICBMS'. To this might be added the notion that Mao, by charting a particular revolutionary course through the socialist transition, offered an alternative (and for many developing countries a more attractive, desirable and achievable alternative) future not just to Western capitalism but to the Soviet industrialisation model.

Yet, with the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that the Maoist vision was fundamentally unsound (both conceptually and in the mix of policies through which it was promoted), that it was achieved through a massive denial of basic civil liberties and a propensity to impose widespread physical and mental coercion, and that there were deep (and deepening) flaws in Mao's own character and personal life.

The two writers who have done the most to introduce Mao to the wider world and then to extend our understanding of Mao are Edgar Snow and Stuart Schram. Snow was the first person to place Mao's life before a world audience - but did so, in retrospect, in excessively (and naively) rose-tinted terms. Schram by contrast produced a more complete, rounded and critical biographical study but wrote at the point where the Chairman was still only on the verge of launching the disastrous Cultural Revolution. The time is ripe for an authoritative biography that is able to assess Mao's life as a whole in a broader historical context, and to do so in the light of the enormous volume of recent secondary literature and the array of inside information that has seeped out since Mao's death. Short's background of reporting in China and his understanding of the Soviet dimension to the story enables him to draw on and draw together the contrasting journalistic and academic traditions and provide the necessary rigour and accessibility.

In contemplating a survey of Mao's life a plethora of issues and ideas spring to mind. How did Mao's childhood condition his complex character? How did he manoeuvre his way through the complexities of the Chinese politico-military situation, and the intrigue and internecine strife of the Communist Party itself. How did Mao's particular ideological slant contribute to the socialist transition in the 1950s and then to the disasters of the GLF and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution? Where did the vision come from; where were the seeds of those destructive and inhuman campaigns sown; how were they nurtured; and how and why did the idealism ironically turn on itself and make the achievement of the goals less - rather than more - likely? How, in the final analysis do we balance Mao's achievements against their costs? The list could go on. So, what kind of approach does Short take? Does the book seek to provide important new information on Mao's experiences and achievements? Does it set out to offer a significant reinterpretation of Mao's life and work? Does it extend our understanding of Mao's life and his place in history, and does it provide the definitive account for the next generation?

The approach is essentially chronological and the first two thirds of the book take us up to 1949 and into the Korean War. Short deals with Mao's Confucian childhood and proceeds through the national and Hunanese political and military developments in the 1920s, weaving in the growing complexity of inter and intra-party politics and politico-military rivalries. He lays out the evolution of Mao's ideological and moral perspective and his military baptism; leads us through the emergence and triumph of Mao's contentious military strategy in the 30s; looks in illuminating detail at the loss of innocence in the factional bloodbath of the Futian incident; and covers the construction of dominance over the Party and the emergence of the cult of the personality in the 40s. For the post-Liberation period Short intertwines China's relationship with the West (and with the USA in particular) with the internal dramas of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution and then the battle that Mao fought to secure the longer term future of his revolutionary vision.

It is a careful, erudite work which lays out the facts of Mao's childhood and the conflicts inherent within early C20 China and then charts a way through Mao's complex involvement in the unfolding of those conflicts and the bitter, and often unforgiving, machinations of the Party itself. The ability to draw on Schram's enormously valuable definitive editing and translating of Mao's writings, Saich's work on the history of the Communist Party, official and unofficial publications form within China itself (particularly the Nanliu collection), as well as his own personal contacts enables Short provide us with a more complete and detailed knowledge of Mao's life.

However, Short's pre-occupation lies with political manoeuvring and military tactics. It is overwhelmingly an account of what Mao did and what he experienced. Its focus is Mao's relationship with the Chinese revolution. But where is Mao's own life? Where is Mao the person? Where is the analysis of Mao's personal, intimate relationship with his wives and his children, or with his colleagues in revolution? These aspects are touched on but they are not developed and Short does not really show how and when they impinged on the

public sphere. Maybe Mao was incapable of forming close relationships? Maybe one of his colleagues (but who!) should have taken him aside and whispered "Listen Mao, chill out, get a life"?

Nor is there much space for Mao's emerging economic ideas or responsibilities - not even his intimate involvement in land reform, or his important writings on economic and financial problems in the early 1940s. In short we are presented with "a life" - a political/military life, a life on China's revolutionary stage.

It is also a book that sets out the facts and allows them to speak for themselves. Interpretation is not placed centre stage; it is the unfolding of Mao's life in China's revolution that matters. Short presents us with a full version of the political, military and diplomatic facts of Mao's life and thus allows those who know their Chinese history to confirm or modify their views and those who are less familiar to draw up their own provisional interpretations. And on the whole it is set out fully and accurately. There are lapses (the unqualified acceptance of the "No dogs and Chinese" sign for example), and no doubt the real China-buffs will quibble with the detail. But the broad-brush strokes are sound.

So, where does Short take us? What are the major conclusions about Mao's life and his contributions on the Chinese and world stages? Here the book is a little disappointing. Short provides us with an epilogue rather than a conclusion. After a brief survey of the short-term political consequences of Mao's death the focus is widened to encompass China's own difficulty in assessing Mao. Here, Short offers a rather brief attempt to balance the achievements and costs of Mao's life and ultimately takes cover behind the point that it is still too early to place Mao in his full historical context (which, in Chinese terms, requires centuries of perspective rather than decades).

On the positive side, Short sees Mao's talents - 'visionary, statesman, political and military strategist of genius, philosopher and poet' - combining with a 'subtle, dogged mind, awe-inspiring charisma and fiendish cleverness' to produce remarkable achievements for China. Short endorses the first of the two achievements which Mao himself identified as significant (the victory over Chiang Kai-shek) but seeks to qualify the second (the Cultural Revolution) on the grounds that whilst Mao might have succeeded in smashing the old order he failed to put a viable alternative in its place. Mao certainly did not recognise, as the 'Asian Tigers' have done, that the old Confucian virtues could be harnessed in a way that made them not merely relevant to economic transformation but integral and indispensable. Moreover, the overdose of ideological fervour that Mao repeatedly injected into Chinese society actually served to immunise it and, ironically, made the desired vision of a revolutionary society more difficult (if not impossible) to achieve. Yet, whilst China has been able to abandon the Maoist ideology with ease, the myth of its founder has proved more durable.

Within this, in pursuing his path along the revolutionary road Short highlights Mao's belief in the supremacy of socialism over capitalism; his belief in the need to balance right and left while maintaining a general course that was left of centre; and his (declining) faith in the masses because the masses would not be satisfied with a system of only nominal socialism which concealed de facto capitalism. Mao was right to worry that China would travel swiftly down the capitalist road after his death, but wrong in supposing that Deng was not a 'capitalist roadster', and even more mistaken in believing that the masses would rebel and overthrow rightism because of their dissatisfaction with a primacy of prosperity over ideology.

Short also recognises that the costs also need to be woven into the analysis. These costs revolve around Mao's duplicity (as Lin Biao's son put it, 'today he uses sweet words and honeyed talk to those whom he entices; tomorrow he puts them to death for fabricated crimes') and his willingness to use the lessons of China's own dynastic history to justify and exalt the killing of opponents (or those who simply disagreed with his own political aims) as an unavoidable and necessary expedient.

However, whilst Short acknowledges that Mao's rule 'brought about the deaths of more of his own people than any other leader in history', he goes on to separate Mao qualitatively from the two other tyrants who were his contemporaries. For Short, the 'overwhelming majority of those whom Mao's policies killed were the unintended casualties of famine', and that puts Mao in a different category from Hitler and Stalin. Just as

there is a distinction between murder, manslaughter and death caused by negligence there are gradations of political responsibility for deaths deriving from of the intent that lay behind them. Moreover, whilst Stalin 'cared what his subjects did and Hitler who they were, Mao cared about what they thought about' (an interesting and under-developed idea, though surely 'cared' is an unfortunate term to choose). And not only were landlords eliminated as a class in China rather than the Jews as a people in Germany, but Mao never lost his conviction that thought reform could lead to redemption and incorporation into the masses

But can the consequences of Mao's actions be lessened in this way - any more than those of Stalin where again it could be argued that the majority of his victims were the product of the unintended famine that followed collectivisation in the early 30s? Mao's culpability for the famine deaths might be limited if Short was able to show that he knew nothing of the facts before it was too late. But not only could the problem have been tackled and minimised if Mao had acted when the problems were publicly aired at the Lushan Plenum in July 1959, but there is evidence that Mao had seen and heard the reality when he had visited Shaoshan and talked to the very peasants whose wisdom Mao exalted weeks before the Plenum. But more than this, the reason that Mao had not been kept fully informed was the extreme climate of fear and exaggeration that he himself had deliberately initiated and cultivated. Surely it was the flaws in Mao's character and in the nature of his relationship with the senior members of the Party that led him to see a conspiracy in Peng Dehuai's courageous stand and then, by reinforcing the policies of the Great Leap, to intensify the tragedy? The famine might have been unintended but that does not absolve Mao of responsibility. The context in which the famine arose was Mao's creation, the outcome was not inevitable and it was avoidable. It was Mao's reaction when the true situation was intimated that compounded the severity of the famine and led directly to the massive loss of life. The responsibility was Mao's, if not quite Mao's alone.

Nonetheless the book is still a welcome and significant addition to the literature on the Chinese revolution over the twentieth century. It succeeds in synthesising and extending to our knowledge of Mao and of Mao's central, often determining, role in that revolution. It is unfortunate that there is no bibliography and the referencing system, although exhaustive, is irritatingly difficult to use. However, the book is both is accessible for the general reader interested in China and sufficiently rigorous for it to find a place on academic reading lists. Any reservations about the lack of concern for Mao's private life, about the limited treatment of the economic issues and the interpretation of the costs of Mao's life do not undermine that achievement. And if it stops short of being the definitive biography it is the most up to date and comprehensive survey of Mao's political and military life on the market.

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