EMERGING FROM UNDER THE SHADOW OF MAO

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHEN XIAOYA BY ZHANG WEIGUO

In July, soon after Jung Chang's Mao: The Unknown Story hit European bookstores, a new two-volume Chinese-language study of Mao Zedong was published in Hong Kong: Chinese Cowboy: A Behavioral and Psychological Analysis of the Case of Mao Zedong, by political scientist Chen Xiaoya.1 Chen examines Mao's politics and psychology from a cultural, historical and political perspective. Volume 1 explores the origins and evolution of Maoist orthodoxy, Maoist utopia, Mao's early financial backers and the relationship between Mao's personality and Chinese-style totalitarianism. In Volume 2, Chen examines the peculiar relationship between Mao and Lin Biao, Zhou Enlai and the Gang of Four.

Zhang Weiguo: Can Mao Zedong and Hitler be compared?

Chen Xiaoya: This is a difficult question, which cannot be answered in a couple of sentences. You could say that both founded totalitarian systems, but of different types, one Eastern and one Western. I don’t address this question in Chinese Cowboy. I plan to investigate it in another book entitled The Chinese Onion (Zhongguo yangcong). Here I can only give a broad outline. I think we can consider this question from six perspectives:

1) Both Mao and Hitler played leading roles in shaping the twentieth century;
2) Both dictatorships were founded on a “mob society” and class disintegration;
3) Their authority was founded on ideological fraud;
4) The systems they created provided a vast stage for giving rein to the worst instincts in human nature;
5) Their political regimes achieved extreme forms of social control and restriction of human freedom;
6) The atrocities committed by their regimes were unprecedented in brutality and scale.

I should explain that political scientists use the terms “mob” and “mob society” are used in a specific sense. By mob society they don’t mean a popular movement or a movement led by ordinary people, but rather a marginalized mob who long for a savior, are driven by destructive impulses and have lost a sense of class identity. Germany’s defeat in World War I created such a group of people. The Communist revolution also did away with class structure and turned people into cogs in the state machine. Mao Zedong wrecked this machinery and turned masses of people into such a mob.

Zhang: How did you arrive at these insights? When did you begin studying totalitarianism?

Chen: I first came into contact with the study of totalitarianism in the mid-1980s. Although at the time we had already read Hannah Arendt’s The Origins of Totalitarianism in English and were familiar with the term “totalitarianism,” we still couldn’t use it openly in the context of Chinese contemporary history or political science. To break through this taboo, scholars borrowed the concept of “totalism” proposed by Professor Tang Tsou.2 In an effort to analyze “totalism,” many young and middle-aged scholars carried out studies comparing China’s political system with those of foreign countries, and published books based on their findings. These scholars began focusing on this question in the 1980s, as China was undergoing the first reform of its political system. The point of departure was the social structure and political system, but there was a consensus among young and middle aged political theorists that the aim was to analyze the regime and its nexus of power. At that time, I was the head of the theory department and later of the news desk at China Culture Daily (Zhongguo Wenhuaobao). My work for this newspaper was a learning experience. It was then that I began to grasp the fifth point that I mentioned above, namely that both the Hitler and Maoist regimes embodied extreme forms of social control and restriction of people’s freedom.
Zhang: Is there common ground between your research and that carried out by foreign scholars on the Cultural Revolution?

Chen: There certainly is. Foreign scholarship on the Cultural Revolution developed in an environment of political freedom and freedom of speech. Chinese scholarship falls short in two respects: first, in other countries scholars are free to tell it like it is; second, they have a global perspective and can draw comparisons with Jewish recollections of Nazi atrocities and the Soviet criticism of oppression during the Stalinist period. The fourth and sixth points that I mention above are based on the work of foreign scholars: the systems created by Hitler and Mao provided a vast stage for giving rein to the worst instincts in human nature, and the atrocities committed by their regimes were unprecedented in brutality and scale.

Zhang: How did you arrive at the other points?

Chen: I arrived at the first and second points from reading history: first that Mao and Hitler played leading roles in shaping the twentieth century, and second, that both dictatorships were founded on “mob” mentality and class disintegration. The third point—that Mao’s authority was founded on ideological fraud—is something I learned from bitter personal experience. As I and others of my generation emerged from the shadow of Mao Zedong, we began to discover this fraud. It was a soul-stirring time. I will eventually recount these experiences in my memoirs.

Zhang: What issues do you address in Chinese Cowboy?

Chen: In this book I focus on China’s onion-like structure and the distinguishing features of Maoism: while Mao’s bodyguards were destroying the Party and government system (including the public-security organs, procuratorial organs and people’s courts), countless acts of savagery were committed by the underprivileged against the privileged, the led against their leaders, young people against older people with qualifications and experience, students against teachers, poor people against rich people, and the unscrupulous against the virtuous. The Maoist slogan “to rebel is justified” gave ordinary people permission from the highest authority to overturn heaven and earth. The ideology that enabled this evil to spread unchecked was rooted in China’s deep-seated populist tradition. The meticulously organized, programmed and planned persecution of the Jews by the Nazis was altogether different. Nazi ideology, which was centered on racism and ethnocentrism, was a response to Germany’s defeat in World War I.

Zhang: What are the distinguishing features of Maoism in concrete terms?

Chen: Some people have argued that Mao, like Hitler, was guilty of genocide, his target being the intellectuals. In Chinese Cowboy I write that I don’t oppose accusing Mao Zedong of regarding intellectuals as his enemies, and of destroying and massacring a great many of them. But “exterminating” intellectuals as a group cannot have been his goal (even a secret goal), because he took delight in “remolding” intellectuals. Mao employed brainwashing and the threat of violence to strip them of their human dignity and ideals, to turn them into walking corpses incapable of thinking and speaking for themselves, and to convert them into “useful” cogs in the great machinery of totalitarianism. In this respect, Mao went further than Hitler. The treatment of intellectuals is the defining feature of Chinese totalitarianism.

Anyone with even a cursory acquaintance of the history of Nazi Germany and personal experience of the Maoist period knows that in Nazi concentration camps there was no “political study.” Ideological or spiritual problems were handled by pastors and priests. But in China “studying” was a very important part of life in our study classes and cadre schools, among urban youth sent down to the countryside, and even in ordinary units, such as production teams, workshops, administrative offices, neighborhood committees and school classes. What a fine word: “studying”! The term encompassed endless ideological self-criticism, criticism and struggle. The goal of “studying” was to understand Mao Zedong thought and to be of one mind with the Party. And for almost everybody the result of studying was to progress from failing to understand to “understanding” all too well. A great many people can testify to this from bitter personal experience.
Zhang: How would you compare veneration of Mao Zedong with worshiping at the Yasukuni Shrine, which honors Japanese war criminals? (Some people have compared Mao’s Mausoleum on Tiananmen Square with the Yasukuni Shrine).

Chen: After NATO planes bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999, I wrote an article entitled, “Martyrs, Temples and Humanitarianism,” on the subject of popular agitation to commemorate Chinese “martyrs.” One of the arguments I made was that the Yasukuni Shrine is also a memorial to martyrs who laid down their life for their country, and that not all of them were war criminals. Shrines and memorials serve the same social function as Chinese temples: it is simply to cherish the memory and achievements of ancestors (or martyrs or ancient sages), to foster patriotism, to transmit national traditions from one generation to the next, and to comfort the widows and orphans of those who gave their lives for their country. If you identify with and belong to a particular society, you worship in a particular temple. That’s just the way things are.

Outwardly, the remains housed in the Mao Zedong Mausoleum, the war criminals honored in the Yasukuni Shrine, and the sculpture in the Lincoln Memorial are all of a kind. But Buddhism has its Buddhist temples, Daoism has its Daoist temples and other traditions have their own memorial temples. What they contain is appropriate to their own traditions. But in one respect the two cannot be compared. The Mao Mausoleum occupies a far less important position in Chinese society than the Yasukuni Shrine does in Japan—never mind their locations. In Japan, paying homage at the Yasukuni Shrine has become a tradition. Choosing to pay homage or not to pay homage at the shrine is a highly emblematic act. Here in China, visiting the Mao Zedong Mausoleum is a completely individual matter (and it bears noting that unlike the Japanese, we visit rather than pay homage). As I see it, ordinary Chinese tourists who have traveled a long distance to visit Beijing go to the mausoleum because they seek fun and excitement, and because they like the hurly-burly and seeing unusual things they don’t get to see back home.

Zhang: How do you think people would react if Mao’s body were removed from the memorial hall?

Chen: I’d say that if Japanese war criminals were removed from the Yasukuni Shrine there would be a big outcry in Japan, but if Mao were moved it would be no big deal at all in China. Even if a crowd of onlookers gathered, things would not get out of hand, because Chinese people have become “desensitized” to Mao in the 30-odd years since the end of the Cultural Revolution. The publication of A Factual Record of the Lushan Conference by Li Rui and Sacrifice to Utopia by Su Xiaokang opened the ears of the deaf and the eyes of the blind. By 1989, nobody batted an eyelid when people threw eggs at Mao’s portrait on the front gate of Tiananmen Square. Even the police remained indifferent. Why? I’ve already mentioned the issue of desensitization. The first to be desensitized were the upper echelons of the Party. Mao’s many public and secret political enemies certainly didn’t idolize him. For example, in Chinese Cowboy I point out that Lin Biao showed no respect for Mao. When Mao boasted of the Long March, Lin Biao just said one word: “Dickhead!” Lin Biao was the first Party leader who didn’t make a self-criticism. People think it was Zhao Ziyang, when in fact Lin Biao was the first, and he was confronting Mao. Zhou Enlai, Chen Yun, Liu Shaoqi all occupied very important positions in the Party.

Zhang: Since the top echelons of the Party were the first to have second thoughts, why didn’t they do something about it?

Chen: The reason that people in the top echelons didn’t take action was not that they didn’t know Mao; they were as aware as people are today. This is how ideas are disseminated: first, intellectuals put them forward, then cultural and literary circles turn them into a variety of works of literature and art, and finally ordinary people adopt them as their own. The government is slower to act than ordinary people. In today’s China, there is an endless stream of works of literature and art dealing with Mao. As soon as one is censored, another appears. Recently, primetime Chinese state television aired a series called “Rivers and Mountains,” which tells the story of a corrupt political leader who goes from bad to worse, and who sounds, behaves and makes the same mistakes as Mao. In the end he was also living in splendid isolation. What’s more, every scene has a portrait of Mao in the background. Nobody can fail to grasp the implication. The government took no action because it didn’t know what would happen if it did. Officials are afraid of situations that get out of control. In other words, although they are desensitized, they have still not broken out of Mao’s spell. They are still afraid of the people. In fact, fearing the masses and idolizing mass movements are both legacies of the Maoist period that continue to haunt many different groups of people.

Zhang: Do you think that there would be no trouble if Mao’s portrait were removed from Tiananmen gate?

Chen: It would be just like taking down any public symbol or a totem pole in a tribal settlement. For some people, its sudden disappearance will be hard to get used to. The key question is, what will replace it? If the site is put under repair for a year and the portrait is gone when it’s opened to the public again, people will get used to it. But if you get rid of the nose, you also have to get rid of the eyes. Putting slogans about “world peace” and “national unity” in its place would fit the trend of the times. Disposing of Mao’s remains will take considerable political finesse. My mother has been paralyzed for 13 years and is very heavy. To turn her over, I have to first turn one of her legs and then turn her on her side. I then push her backside and shoulder over and prop up her head. I think that to dispose of Mao’s remains they will have to proceed just as carefully.

I would propose that Mao’s remains be turned over to his family members. They have the right to decide what to do, and they are not going to go against the popular will, because they also live among the people. In my upcoming book, China’s Big Man: The Facts Surrounding Mao Zedong, I write that Mao owes his
family a great deal. Humanitarian considerations would dictate that Mao’s family be allowed to dispose of his remains. Yang Kaishui, He Zizhen and Jiang Qing each deserve a share.5

Zhang: How do you think ordinary people will relate to Mao once the problem of what to do with these symbolic objects is solved?

Chen: Ridding ourselves of Mao’s influence is mainly a matter of politics and ideology. Ordinary people made of Mao whatever suited them quite some time ago: a god of wealth, a guardian angel, an amulet of success. We won’t be able to change these things no matter what books we write. Let him be a minor deity. China’s emperors killed a great many Daoist priests, but they never managed to exterminate them all. Han Yu was a fierce opponent of Buddhism, but did he succeed in snuffing it out?6 During the May Fourth Movement of 1919 and the Cultural Revolution, countless Confucian temples and ancestral shrines were smashed, but were they all destroyed? Not really. What we have now is pluralism rather than “follow the leader.” Why do we need to go from studying Mao to destroying everything to do with Mao? Russians are more forgiving and don’t go around smashing everything that came before. That’s the spirit of a mature people.

Zhang: Do you see a conflict between your work and that of overseas scholars?

Chen: There’s no conflict. Recently, Jin Zhong7 sent me his interview with Jung Chang,8 which contained a sentence that moved me deeply. She said, “I do this because I can.” She considers it her duty, an intellectual’s duty. She has advantages that enable her to illuminate certain blind spots most of us would not otherwise see. As a Chinese scholar with a limited field of vision, I am very grateful that scholars abroad are doing the work they are doing. All of us scholars believe in democracy. We don’t intend to impose our own recipe on people, but like a physician fulfilling his professional duty, we tell them what kind of poison they are afflicted with and what medicine they need to get better. But no doctor encourages a patient to treat medicine the same as food. Even a responsible physician knows that poisons can have their uses and that sometimes you have to fight poison with poison.

Zhang: Some hold the view that Mao is the main obstacle to China’s transformation into a constitutional democracy, and that criticizing Mao is the only way for China to progress. What is your view?

Chen: I spoke earlier about breaking free of Mao’s spell. Being afraid of popular movements and idolizing popular movements both run counter to the spirit of constitutional government. Constitutional government has a legitimate place for popular movements, but also imposes certain restrictions on them. Popular movements can also be a force for social progress and sound politics. As for criticizing Mao, it all depends on how it’s done. Using Maoist methods to criticize

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Poems by Yang Chunguang

Yang Chunguang, born in 1956, was one of China’s most important underground avant garde poets. He was imprisoned for 18 months for his role in the 1989 democracy movement, and later operated a literary Web site that was shut down by the Chinese authorities many times. In recent years Yang was subjected to constant surveillance, harassment and threats by the authorities. He suffered a stroke in September 2004 and died on September 19, 2005.

Secret Agent

My eyes are fastened to your belly
Making you vomit
Whenever you vomit for one minute
The entire world reverses its rotation for one circuit
The five senses emerge from the ocean
I find another of my species in the forest

This game starts with me slapping myself in the face
I serve as armor
Back then animals and man advanced together
Animals sent agents in among the humans
Eventually the breakdown of the ozone layer
Made many large animals extinct
Only then did smiling human faces appear on the silver screen

The nation is the greatest secret agent of humanity
Every race is an intelligence group
Only if there is no collective ideology
Can mankind grow fatter
Mankind will give up bee-keeping
Mankind is in danger of becoming a queen bee

Mankind is being killed off by its own secret agents one by one!

The Age of Mammoths

On the great ocean
In our country, in our moment
We can all climb on deck;
This is the face of autumn—

This season even more fiery than summer,
A face like glass.

Translated by Stacy Mosher

Mao will not only fail to produce constitutional government but will actually work against it. Besides, propagandists and scholars have quite distinct bailiwicks. Historical scholarship pursues its own goals, and I feel that we shouldn’t burden it with a political role. Scholarship has paid in blood for this lesson for over half a century. It’s a lesson we should take to heart. Some young journalists fail to understand this distinction, which is why I’m sometimes afraid to take their phone calls.

Zhang: Some critics say that the current rulers want to restore Mao. How much of a comeback do you think Mao can make? When and how will the Chinese people finally get out from under Mao’s shadow?

Chen: If these critics are talking about censoring freedom of thought and speech, they’re clearly stating fact, but if they’re talking about economic and social policy, they’re off base. In the chapter on Maoism in Chinese Cowboy I write about what happens in a one-party dictatorship: if the emphasis is on liberalism, crony capitalism inevitably results; if the emphasis is on social justice, you’re bound to see the rich killed to help the poor, and the “haves” robbed for the sake of the “have-nots.” You’re damned if you do and damned if you don’t.

Once the system is reformed, these two policy directions can be represented by a liberal party and a social democratic party. With checks and balances, no great disaster will befall society. Under the current system, with its great social injustice and lack of checks and balances, Maoism could actually stage a comeback. The simplest way to really get out from under Mao’s shadow is to get back to life and normalcy. Someone who has no property or family, who doesn’t have to worry about fuel and food and who lacks any incentive to be productive in his work cannot really empathize with ordinary people. He will always want to face a “blank sheet of paper” and fantasize about imposing his own utopia on history and the people.

Translated by Paul Frank


NOTES
3. In 1988, Su Xiaokang published Wenbubing ji (Sacrifice to Utopia) about the 1959 Lushan Plenum, during which Mao purged Peng Dehuai and reaffirmed his commitment to the Great Leap Forward, a man-made famine that would cost some 40 million lives. Li Rui published Lushan huyi shilu (A Factual Record of the Lushan Conference) in 1989.
4. The title of the TV series “Rivers and Mountains” (Rui dujuan) is an allusion to Mao’s poem “Snow” (1936), which closes with these verses: “Rivers and mountains are beautiful, and made heroes bow and compete to catch the girl—lovely earth. / Yet the emperors Shi Huang and Wu Ti were barely able to write. / The first emperors of the Tang and Sung dynasties were crude. / Genghis Khan, man of his epoch / and favored by heaven / knew only how to hunt the great eagle. / They are all gone. / Only today are we men of feeling.” See Willis Barnstone and Ko Ching-po, The Poems of Mao Tse-Tung (New York: Harper & Row) 1972, pp. 73-74.
5. Yang Kai Hui was Mao’s wife from 1920 to 1927; she was executed by the KMT in 1930. He Zizhen was Mao’s wife from May 1928 to 1939; she died in 1984. Jiang Qing was Mao’s third wife and founder of the Gang of Four. She died in 1991.
6. Han Yu (768–824), the first proponent of which is now called Neo-Confucianism, attacked Taoism and Buddhism at a time when they were at the height of their influence. He was banished for castigating the emperor for paying respect to the supposed finger bone of the Buddha.
7. Editor of the Hong Kong-based monthly Open Magazine.
8. Jung Chang is the British-based co-author of Mao: The Unknown Story (London: Knopf, 2005), a biography of Mao resulting from ten years of research in China and Russia by Chang and her husband, historian Jon Halliday.
9. On April 15, 1958, Mao famously wrote: “Apart from their other characteristics, the outstanding thing about China’s 600 million people is that they are ‘poor and blank’ . . . On a blank sheet of paper free from any mark, the freshest and most beautiful characters can be written, the freshest and most beautiful pictures can be painted.” Mao Zedong, “Introducing a Co-operative,” Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung. (China Books & Periodicals Inc.)