In any case, what legitimacy can democracy have when one does not have access to information or freedom to organize?

SH: Do you think that Party and central control is really so monolithic? What about central-regional and local tensions?

GS: The infinite variations on the ground tell us that the central government is not as strong as it seems. Although the state lays down general policy guidelines, it is the local representatives of the Party who implement these guidelines. They go about their business with an eye to personal gain, depending on the power equations in the village and how much influence they wield. Centralization in China amounts to a permanent negotiation between the authorities in Peking and the local potentates of the Communist Party.

SH: At the same time, you observe that the Party appears to be losing legitimacy and ideologically no longer enjoys the faith and support of the people.

GS: In fact, despite the crackdowns on freedom of expression, there is a religious renaissance underway in China. However, the Buddhists are very weak, with limited influence, and are controlled by the Party. Taoism is also very weak. The officially-recognized Catholics are going for legitimacy, and the hope that staying within Party restrictions will allow the development of a larger Catholic church. The Protestants are very active, especially the evangelical churches. I don’t agree with the book Jesus in Beijing1 that the rise of religious practices is just shifting from one obedience set to another.

Another reason for the loss of Party legitimacy is widespread corruption, which is a key source of unrest but also of Party unity. The government publishes new regulations and publicizes some executions to show it is serious about combating corruption, but in fact the Party uses corruption to maintain unity by distributing the economic benefits of political privilege. This can be traced back to Mao. Also, if you criticize the Party, you will be attacked for undermining China’s national pride, which is only possible if the Party holds itself up as synonymous with the nation.

SH: Given this landscape, what do you think are the long-term prospects for change and political reform?

GS: I think there is a kind of economic determinism operating in China; due to the increasing power and wealth of Party members, there is very little incentive for change.

Some people argue that faced with the threat of unrest, the Party will transfer resources to quell rising protests. But that won’t happen, because the Party has the situation under control and there is no possibility that these movements will cement and coalesce into an effective force for change. Also, the fear of civil war and social chaos is stronger than hatred of the Party, which suggests that the Party has been successful at convincing people that there is no alternative.

But perhaps we are not looking at the right things in assessing future prospects for change. The future is happening where you don’t expect it. For example, looking at popular cultural phenomena, like the Super Girl contest on Hunan TV—the Chinese equivalent of American Idol, in which the winner did not in any way reflect an official version of beauty or talent. Instead you could see the globalized influences of Japanese and Korean pop culture and even U.S. pop culture. The Party criticized the result as an example of the consequences of an “unprepared democracy,” because the “wrong” candidate, i.e. not educated and not the best singer, had won.

Jiang Rong, author of The Wolf Totem,2 writes that there are two ways to be a Chinese—a wolf or a sheep, which is just a wolf converted into a sheep by Marxism or Confucianism. This is a huge metaphor for China. What does this mean? Simply that cultural change may not necessarily take place at an obvious level. There is a sea change underway on the Internet and on popular shows, but will this be translated into political argument? 2008 will be a decisive year: for the Party, the Olympic Games must be a symbol of the triumph of the Party, but for human rights organizations it also presents a window of opportunity.

NOTES

OPEN FORUM

Another View of Mao: The Unknown Story

BY LOIS WHEELER SNOW

In China Rights Forum No. 4, 2005, Roger Garside wrote a review of Jung Chang and Jon Halliday’s book Mao: The Unknown Story. I am not acquainted with Mr. Garside’s work, but I note from CRF that he served as a British diplomat in China during the Cultural Revolution and then again in 1976–1979. It does not follow that these two experiences, revealing as they probably were, would automatically make him an expert on Chinese revolutionary history, a fact borne out by his high praise of the Chang-Halliday book as demonstrating “scholarship on an heroic scale.”

A number of acknowledged China scholars have pointed out many flaws in The Unknown Story. Andrew Nathan, Chair of the Department of Political Science at Columbia University, has stated that so-called revelations in the book came “from sources that cannot be checked,” adding that “others are openly speculative or are based on circumstantial evidence, and some are untrue.” He has further stated that many claims are “based on distorted, misleading or far-fetched use of evidence.”

This contrasts with the Garside report of “diligent and resourceful researching of primary sources [that] has enabled the authors to make important revelations,” among which is the dismissal of Edgar Snow’s accounts of the Long March in Red Star Over China, many told to him directly by...
Mao Zedong. Mr. Garside contends that these were “falsehoods propagated unwittingly by Snow” and “myths about the Long March that have held the world in thrall until now.”

Notable among such “myths” is Snow’s description, as told to him by Mao, of the Dadu Bridge battle in 1935. Chang and Halliday claim that no such battle took place, though they offer no concrete evidence that it did not. Granted, the battle could have been somewhat exaggerated by Mao in the telling, but source after source affirms that a battle did indeed take place there. Otto Braun, the German who made the Long March and who was no particular admirer of Mao, reported events that he himself had witnessed at Dadu Bridge and that resemble Mao’s description as given to Snow.

I understand the fury that Jung Chang carries with her owing to the cruel treatment she and her family endured in the past, but that is no justification for misrepresenting historical facts. The book is one-dimensional and one-sided. Instead of presented a balanced and accurate view of events, it paints a totally black portrait of Mao as a born monster, Zhou Enlai as a sycophantic toady and the young men and women in Baolan and Yenan as terrorized victims trapped by a leader they despised, who relished torture and sacrificed anyone in his lust for power. Nicholas Kristof noted in The New York Times that “Mao comes across as such a villain that he never really becomes three-dimensional. As readers, we recoil from him but don’t really understand him. He is presented as such a bumbling psychopath that it’s hard to comprehend how he bested all his rivals to lead China.”

In The Observer, Jonathan Fenby wrote, “By concentrating on the man and his misdeeds, critics say, the book does not explain the context of Mao’s rise, his ability to hold power for 26 years and his international impact. ‘More needs to be taken into account than a simple personalisation of blame,’ one leading historian, Jonathan Spence of Yale, wrote in The New York Review of Books.”

Also in The New York Review of Books, Jonathan Mirsky, who has highly praised The Unknown Story, wrote, “The factor that Ms. Chang and Mr. Halliday omit—although it is plain enough in Ms. Chang’s Wild Swans—is that hundreds of millions adored the chairman and . . . would have died for him. They were in awe of him but that is not the same as fear of a monster.” An American woman who lived and worked in China in the 1940s has written, “Nor are such accounts [as Red Star Over China] invalidated by the excesses to which the revolution was later taken by Mao . . . Let’s keep facts and reports and their authors in context with [their] times.”

Despite some critical remarks on the Chang-Halliday book, Roger Garside concludes that “we owe a huge debt to the authors for enabling us to draw from this life lessons that are both timely and timeless.” He does not specify what these lessons are, and it would appear difficult to do so. His review adds to the mean, dark shadow cast by the authors on the reputation and integrity of Snow, a journalist whose reporting was based not only on personal contact with the leaders of the revolution, but also on many hours spent listening to the unknown soldiers and peasants who participated in its daily events. The achievements of those who flocked to join the Communist struggle and who believed in and helped bring about some of their expressed revolutionary goals are ignored. Garside emphasizes the authors’ caricature of Snow as a gullible mouthpiece for Mao, while ignoring the role Snow played over the years in bringing first-hand reports on China back home to the United States and keeping the door open between the two countries at a time when the United States was cut off, by its own doing, from an understanding of events involving one fourth of humanity.

The writer is the widow of Edgar Snow.