

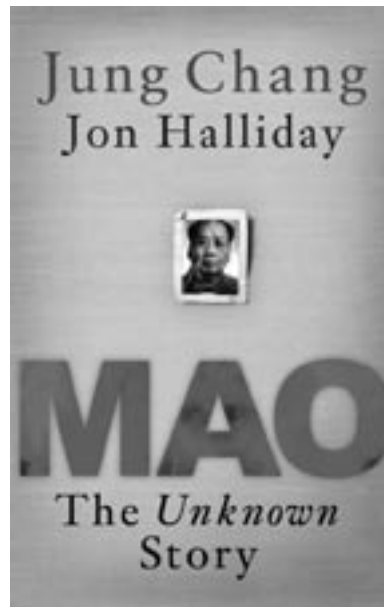
The strange allure of cruel dictatorships

Andrew McIntyre reviews
Mao: The Unknown Story
 By Jung Chang and
 Jon Halliday.
 (Jonathan Cape,
 2005, 814 pages)

To much fanfare and international recognition, Jung Chang, author of the all-time best selling non-fiction work *Wild Swans*, and her British husband Jon Halliday have co-authored a definitive history of Mao Tse-tung. The book has already been flagged as the best political history published this century. This is not mere historical revisionism; it indeed could claim to be the definitive corrective of just exactly how monstrous a tyrant Mao was. Relentless in its depiction of the biggest mass murderer of the twentieth century—more than 70 million deaths in peacetime—it focuses very much on Mao the man.

Although just over 800 pages and with copious notes and documentation, this book is for the general public. It reads as a compelling narrative and is told in the accessible style of *Wild Swans*. One of the strengths of the book is that there is no facile moralizing. The authors simply describe a man according to the lights of the people who knew him, or who met him. This has not stopped the inevitable apologists claiming that it is a calculated demolition job. After all, Chang's own family were victims, so this must be her 'revenge'. In response, Chang is at pains to point out that the book overwhelmingly rests on documented facts and primary sources. She explained in one Melbourne interview that 'the book is not a polemic. It is a straightforward story with facts. Readers can draw their own conclusions'.

Between them, the authors trav-



elled through China and interviewed over 150 family relatives of Mao, his friends, colleagues, personal staff and members of the top echelon of the Party. These people had never before talked about Mao on the record. Although the authors give the reader little alternative explanation or a wider historical context for Mao's actions, it is hard to resist the picture put before us.

The compelling conclusion is simply worse than most of us could imagine: Mao was totally cynical and unscrupulous. He survived precisely because he was more ruthless than anyone else he encountered, including Stalin. Mao, from these direct accounts, had a seamless life of cruelty waged against friend, foe and family alike. To make the assessment worse, it turns out that there was not even a vestige of ideological belief—Marxist or communist—nor idealism of any sort.

The most chilling assessment of Mao was given in detail by the man himself. In 1918, at the age of 24, Mao wrote in his diary:

People like me only have a duty to

ourselves; we have no duty to other people ... Of course there are people and objects in the world, but they are all there only for me ... Some say one has a responsibility for history. I don't believe it. I am only concerned about developing myself ...

On death and killing others:

Human beings are endowed with the sense of curiosity, why should we treat death differently. Don't we want to experience strange things? I think this is the most wonderful thing...

Right from his earliest years, the story traces Mao's psychopathology and his cruelty to others. It starts with him as a child with his immediate family, then moves to his professional colleagues and allies as they were systematically betrayed for Mao's personal hunger for power, money and domination. He was totally pragmatic. Very early in his long life, he had found an easy way to obtain money and do no real work.

Mao's treachery is illustrated during the course of the Long March, where he made his troops march for months through fruitless detours—thus sacrificing thousands of scarce fighting men—to serve no other purpose than to advance his bid for leadership. In another episode near Banyou in 1935, Mao connived, lied and menaced to force Kuo-tao, then military supremo of the main communist force at the time, to take his troops through marshes where there was neither food nor villages. Mao even urged him 'to bring all the wounded and sick who can manage to walk' in a deliberate desire to inflict maximum suffering. Mao's aim was simply to stall him and consolidate his own position.

In the Great Leap Forward, many of the disasters and hare-brained ideas could have been avoided altogether if



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it were not for Mao. He simply did not listen to expert advice. Rules and commonsense were cast aside when steel mills were required to double production. As Chang writes, 'Mao set the tone for discrediting rationality by saying the "bourgeois professor's knowledge should be treated as dogs' fart, worth nothing, deserving only disdain, scorn, contempt"...' As a result, so many of the efforts, at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives and the suffering of millions, came to nothing. Backyard furnaces produced steel that was unusable. Canals and irrigation schemes, often dug with bare hands, were abandoned as useless because of a lack of planning and analysis. The famous drive to eliminate sparrows caused ecological disaster; pleas from scientists were ignored. Over four years from 1958, about 100 million peasants were coerced into such projects, moving a quantity of earth and masonry equivalent to excavating 950 Suez Canals, mostly using their own hammers, picks and shovels, and providing their own food and shelter. Mao knew precisely and proudly just how many deaths went with each billion cubic metres of soil. When senior officials in the Gansu

province appealed against 'destroying human lives' in these projects, Mao had them condemned and punished as a 'Rightist anti-Party clique'.

The great purges that typified Mao's rule are described in brutal detail. His distinctive form of terror was to get people to use it against each other. He perfected this method in Yenan, where everyone was coerced into the exercise of criticism and self-criticism by confessing and implicating each other in terrible 'wrongs'. This method, with associated horrendous torture and slow and terrifying death, was extended from Mao's closest colleagues to the whole of China.

Mao's megalomania, his mind-boggling use of resources for his own comfort—massive and expensive houses built throughout China that he barely used, entire factories set up to ensure him of his own supply of a particular rice, or elaborate printing works constructed to print exclusive editions of just five copies for himself—are truly stupefying.

One surprising anecdote for this reviewer was the extent to which Mao succeeded in manipulating Richard Nixon through the famous 'ping pong' diplomacy and subsequent first trip to

Beijing, and just how shoddy was the humiliating treatment Nixon endured in private meetings with him in front of Kissinger. The book also shows just how much this meeting and the subsequent seduction of the United States played in projecting a benign image of Mao so much at odds with what we now know.

What is left today of this legacy? Three decades after his death, Mao Tse-tung is still officially endorsed by the present Chinese government, with his bland face hanging in Tiananmen Square and adorning every banknote. Although it is certainly true that China has changed from the bad old days, the recent defection of a Chinese diplomat in Australia is a contemporary reminder of the nature of the Chinese Communist Party and the way it deals with minorities such as the Falun Gong. Moreover, the recent demand for independent Chinese bloggers to register with the government—together with Microsoft's recent admission that its Chinese blog site would block titles such as 'freedom' and 'democracy' in the country's efforts to control the Internet—are signs that there is still a long way to go.

One wonders if a book like this will dent the popularity of Andy Warhol's Mao silk-screen prints that passed the \$100,000 mark at the New York auction houses some years ago. However, when some critics can claim that the book is 'part of an ideological offensive by capitalism to destroy not just the legacy of Maoism but also the idea of the planned economy and socialism', there is certainly resilience and chutzpah amongst the believing classes in the West.

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