They call me farsighted, but that's rubbish. After I die, I expect to be attacked for what I have done. Some things I've done may turn out to be wrong. I'm a human being, just like you, and to err is human. But I have my convictions. I will always remain faithful to the revolution, no matter what names they may call me. (Mao Zedong to his daughter Li Min in the early 1960s. Quoted in Terrill 1999: 7)

What kind of a man was Mao Zedong? What drove him? And what is the historical significance of the Mao Era (1949-76)? Author Jung Chang and historian Jon Halliday should be saluted for kicking these questions back to life with their massive 832 page *Mao: the Unknown Story* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005). Already, the reviews and debates that the book has sparked could fill a volume. It is a great opportunity to reflect on the state of the field in Mao Studies. How does Chang & Halliday's 'unknown story' fit with the 'known story', or the received wisdom, in the study of one of the most remarkable leaders of the twentieth century?

*Mao: the Unknown Story* is an ambitious attempt to extensively rewrite the history of Mao Zedong and the Chinese Revolution. Again and again Chang & Halliday challenge conventional interpretations, dig up new sources, and create entirely new storylines. In many instances the authors reject the findings of generations of academic historians working in the field of modern Chinese history. And their revisionism is by no means a lightweight challenge: the 50-page bibliography is the most comprehensive ever produced for a Mao study and includes a host of new sources in Chinese as well as other languages. The couple invested a decade of hard work in the project; they interviewed practically everyone alive who had ever met Mao, and they examined new material related to Mao in the recently opened files of the Communist International (Comintern) in Moscow. To this massive body of research Jung Chang — author of the bestseller *White Swans* (1991) which portrays three generations of Chinese women based on the story of Jung Chang’s own family history — added her considerable writing gifts, producing a
lively and hard-hitting text. *Unknown Story* has probably already outsold all other existing Mao biographies and there are many reasons why this challenge must be taken seriously.

**Revising Mao's Road to Power**

Chang & Halliday's Mao is an obnoxious character from beginning to end. He starts out not as the conventionally portrayed determined idealist but as a 'lukewarm believer' in the revolution who soon developed a taste for 'bloodthirsty thuggery' in his investigations of the peasant movement in Hunan in the mid 1920s. In relation to the South China Soviet period (1928-34), we are accustomed to accounts that at the very least acknowledge Mao's brilliant military skills. Not so in *Unknown Story*, where Mao is described as an irresponsible adventurer who more than once sacrificed thousands of Red Army soldiers and officers in operations designed solely to bolster his own power within the CCP and army. The Red Army's undeniable military triumphs during this period were the work of other army leaders (often acting in opposition to Mao's military suggestions) as well as the product of the Comintern's extremely efficient intelligence support to the Chinese Red Army. Mao's road to power was paved not by military victories but rather by the massive terror he unleashed within the party and army. This was particularly evident in the infamous Futian Incident, where thousands of Red Army soldiers rising in mutiny against Mao's leadership were massacred by 'Mao's cronies' (to use Chang & Halliday's expression) who routinely used torture to extract 'confessions' from their victims.

Onwards to the Long March (1934-35) where the difference between *Unknown Story* and the standard version is more pronounced than anywhere else. Even the most critical accounts to date have always acknowledged Mao's tactical and strategic skills in the face of the extreme challenges of the March, which destroyed more than 90 percent of Mao's Central Red Army but kept the communist leadership intact under impossible conditions. It was the astonishing achievement of the Long March more that anything else that became the lasting emblem of Mao's genius as well as the heroism of the Red Army. In *Unknown Story* we find Mao on the Long March comfortably reading on his stretcher, carried by barefoot carriers across snow-clad mountains, pretending to be too ill to walk. Once again his military decisions are invariably wrong, the situation salvaged only by his able commanders.
But the really revisionist feature of Chang & Halliday’s Long March account is their angle on Chiang Kai-shek’s contributions to the March. They claim that Chiang consciously allowed the Red Army to escape from the base areas in South China, using his superior military forces to ‘nudge’ the Red Army in the desired direction westward. In this way Chiang had a perfect pretext for moving his loyal armies into the warlord-controlled provinces of central China, thus establishing the authority of his National Government in these areas. Further, Stalin had an important hostage in Moscow in Chiang’s son Chiang Ching-kuo (later to follow in his father’s footsteps as president of Taiwan). Chiang Kai-shek hoped that by allowing the Red Army to survive, he would persuade Stalin to return his son to him. Neither argument appears persuasive or based on solid sources, and so far Chang & Halliday’s revisionist account of the Long March has found no support among the book’s many competent reviewers.

Then there is Yan’an, where Mao established his undisputed leadership through the bloody Rectification Campaign of 1942-44. Here the basic storyline begins to converge with the standard version, but Chang & Halliday still have some surprises in store. They devote an entire chapter to proving—unconvincingly in the opinion of this reviewer—that Mao repeatedly tried to assassinate his old nemesis Wang Ming in the struggle for power within the party. The conflicts between Mao and Peng Dehuai come as less of a surprise. In the Civil War period (1946-49) we find Stalin as the real operator behind the Chinese communists, providing them with invaluable support and intelligence. There is an air of 1950s Cold War rhetoric in these chapters that describe Chiang Kai-shek as a well-meaning leader whose army leadership had been completely penetrated by communist agents.

The history of the Mao Era of the People’s Republic of China is framed within what Chang & Halliday call ‘Mao’s Superpower Dream’. Mao fantasized about world domination and directed all available resources to this enterprise. The Great Leap Forward as well as all the other economic campaigns were related to this superpower dream. Again, reviewers are sceptical about this claim, but in the treatment of the various stages and events during the Mao Era there is growing convergence with the standard version; we are no longer shocked to learn about terror and decadence, tyranny and grandiose mistakes. Still, the account in Unknown Story is the most disgusting and bloodstained yet. The writing couple’s approach to Chinese politics during this period is a lot simpler than most of the accounts that grapple with ‘factions’,
'interests' or 'political lines': it was always about power! Mao remained power-hungry all his life and that is what drove him to eliminate most of his old comrades one way or another. This disillusioned view of politics was widespread in China after the Mao Era, and one sees why, but it is not intellectually satisfying and misses important aspects of Chinese politics from 1949 to 1976. The many works of Frederick Teiwes—to mention only one of several eminent scholars in this field—remain a far more rewarding guide to Maoist politics.

Unknown Story differs in important respects from the Western standard version as well as from the official Chinese line, and the further back in time it delves, the greater the difference. The official Chinese Communist Party verdict on Mao as it was expressed in the 1981 Party History Resolution basically says that Mao was a 'great leader' until around 1956. Thereafter he forgot about party discipline and started persecuting people blindly while throwing the country into the chaos of one ill-advised campaign after another, with the Great Leap Forward (1958-60) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) as the towering mistakes. Indeed, the great leader's memory remains tarnished by these 'tragedies'. What has been called the standard version above, i.e. contemporary Western mainstream studies of the Mao Era, is not vastly different from the official Chinese Party line today; no wonder, since Chinese and Western party historians have developed extensive ties over the last two decades.

Some differences have diminished visibly, such as the case of the Lin Biao incident of 1971, when Mao's designated successor was killed in a plane crash in Mongolia, apparently trying to escape to the Soviet Union. Much suspicion has surrounded the official Chinese explanation of the story, but recent works by Qiu Jin (a daughter of Lin Biao's air force chief Wu Faxian) as well as Frederick Teiwes have shown conclusively that the official version is not a cover-up for some sinister plot (Jin 1999, Teiwes 1996). Several Western scholars—David Apter and Tony Saich (1994) among them—have examined the dark side of Yan'an. Moreover, further back in historical time the Futian Incident, which had remained a mystery for decades, began to become unveiled thanks particularly to the efforts of Stephen Averill (1995). But most Western observers would still agree that before 1949 Mao Zedong was a formidable revolutionary leader rather than the bumbling maniac portrayed by Chang & Halliday. And even after 1949, many are of the opinion that he remained a fairly 'moderate' and reasonable leader by Stalinist standards up until the mid 1950s. Unknown Story has not made the existing edifice of scholarly work
on Mao come tumbling down like a house of cards; there are too many problems with the sources, methodology and analytical approach of the book for that. However, *Unknown Story* will provide food for thought for a long time to come.

**Methodological Problems**

But is it history? The authors no doubt want the book to be accepted as a piece of scholarly work and have responded angrily to criticism regarding particular sources, interpretations etc., from professional academic historians. Nevertheless it is striking that when Jung Chang arrived in Denmark on her autumn promotion tour for the book, it was cast as a literary event. She spoke at a book fair and was interviewed for Danish TV by the station's expert on literature, rather as one would expect a successful Chinese female author to be interviewed, everybody completely ignoring the question of the book's historical accuracy. During these talks and interviews Jung Chang took every opportunity to repeat her mantra, which also appears in the opening sentence of *Unknown Story,* that Mao was responsible for the death of over 70 million human beings. At a literary event one does not start asking an author where such a figure comes from or how it tallies with the fact that both population size and life expectancy almost doubled during the Mao Era after a century of slow population growth and hyper-mortality. A decade from now Jung Chang will probably have achieved more than anyone else in shaping the historical image of Mao Zedong, and the 70 million dead will be universal knowledge, regardless of what professional historians say. One must respect and admire Jung Chang for her single-minded effectiveness in the great demolition project.

The problem of sources has been mentioned already. It would take a lifetime to check the huge body of footnotes, but a few cases have come to light already. Methodological problems are the main concern in prominent China historian Andrew Nathan's review of *Untold Story* (*London Review of Books*, 17 November 2005). As he points out, 'many of their discoveries come from sources that cannot be checked, others are openly speculative or are based on circumstantial evidence, and some are untrue...' Professor Nathan provides more than a dozen examples, all of them very damaging errors in the world of academic historical research. In a much-quoted review in the *New York Review of Books* (3 November 2005) Professor Jonathan Spence—the contemporary *doyen*
of modern Chinese history if ever there were one—adds to the list, among other things pointing out that long sections of dialogue in the treatment of the Cultural Revolution period are based on a Chinese volume of alleged telephone conversation transcripts which gives no sources at all and appears rather to be a kind of docu-fiction on the Gang of Four. Probably the most striking misreading of the sources is a quotation from a Great Leap Forward speech, where Mao allegedly said that 'half the population may have to die' for the Leap to succeed; the phrase even serves as a chapter headline. In fact Mao was warning what he considered to be ultra-leftist provincial leaders that they were going too far in the Great Leap, and that if they continued on this track 'half the population may have to die'. That is exactly the opposite meaning of Chang & Halliday's interpretation, and one cannot help wondering if the authors were aware of the true meaning of the speech but chose to cut one phrase out of its context and 'spin' it.

In a review for the *Chicago Tribune Review* on 6 November 2005, Jeffrey Wasserstrom focused on the blurred line between fiction and biography in *Unknown Story*. He compares the book to a recent novel about the historical figure who inspired the Dracula legend and finds a number of shared features. In Chang & Halliday's book an omniscient narrator sometimes appears out of nowhere to explain what *really* goes on with remarks such as 'inside the Chairman was livid with rage while keeping a cool countenance', and the like. Whenever circumstances forced Mao to say something sensible or even moderate, he apparently was furious inside, starting to plot revenge right away. But how does Jung Chang (who as the novelist of the two authors presumably penned this) really know? She doesn't! And this literary technique reveals a basic problem of the book. There are plenty of contradictions and uncertainties in Mao's life and work, but Chang & Halliday are never in doubt. If a source can help paint a black picture of Mao, then it is a good source; if it is open-ended it can be twisted in that direction anyway; and if it contradicts Chang and Halliday's arguments it might as well be ignored. One does not need a PhD in history to notice the extreme bias in the use of sources. Furthermore the predictability of *Unknown Story*'s approach to the various events in Mao's life make the reading progressive less interesting, regardless of Jung Chang's writing skills. This is not a historical biography in the conventional sense, and read that way it is rather problematic because of the eclectic use of sources and the one-sided interpretations. Neither is it a work of fiction: read in this way it is too long and too monochrome, in fact a bit boring. It is
something in between—'biographiction' perhaps—and if we accept for a while the transcending of genre borders it is a very interesting book nevertheless.

**Part of a Larger Trend**

Chang & Halliday's portrait of Mao appears to be part of a larger trend. In the last two to three years a number of new biographies on Hitler, Stalin, and Mao have been published, whereas there does not seem to be a similar surge in the study of revolutions and social movements. Maybe it is simply easier as well as more exciting to study exceptional individuals rather than the context and social structures that produced them. In *Unknown Story* the contours of the Chinese Revolution are so vague as to be almost invisible. But the communist-led revolution was only the last chapter in a century-old history of violent revolutionary upheavals. 'Class struggle', although later to become Maoist shorthand for thought control and purges, was real and rife well before the communists ever appeared on the stage. What the Chinese communists achieved was to learn to 'ride the tiger' of revolutionary upheavals and gradually to find the driver's seat. Mao did not invent the Chinese Revolution; indeed, he was a product of this revolution as much as its leader during a particular stage. It is remarkable how harmonious and peaceful the Chinese society of the 1920s to 1940s appears in the pages of *Unknown Story* as compared to the description in *Wild Swans*, and this revision is the price of ignoring context in order to pin as much blame on Mao as possible. But time is on Chang & Halliday's side, because as a revolution—any revolution—gets older, the 'revolutionary violence' glorified in the early days tends to look more and more like simple violence and crime. Was it really necessary to kill so-called 'landlords' by the millions in the land reform movement of the early 1950s?

Mao was rather uninterested in Marxist ideology; this is one of the basic premises of *Unknown Story*. To many Mao experts it is really the opposite that is the case. In one of the first reviews of the book (*Guardian*, 23 July 2005) the respected China specialist John Gittings wrote that 'The real tragedy for China, I would argue instead, is that far from being uninterested in ideology, Mao in his later years became obsessed with it.' I strongly agree with Gittings. If Mao really did not care much about Marxist ideology, why did he devote so much effort to the study of Marxist political economy in the late 1950s when he was trying to understand
the problems of the Great Leap Forward? In fact it may be argued that it was precisely Mao's renewed interest in theoretical Marxism in his later years that unleashed a host of problems for China. Realizing how far China in the 1960s and 1970s still was from the communism of Marx and Lenin, Mao's revolutionary impatience gained new momentum. Of course there is no definite proof as to the true significance of ideology in Mao's mind, but the important point of Chang & Halliday's approach is that it exposes the 'banality of evil' (to borrow Hannah Arendt's phrase) in Mao's actions. Deprived of the legitimacy of revolutionary ideology, the myth of genius shattered, many of the late Chairman's activities are de-masked as simply evil. This Manichean portrait of the man shares a lot with US president George W. Bush's understanding of the rationale and motives of the United States' enemies: 'Because they are evil!' It is forceful rhetoric no doubt, but lacking in analytical depth.

Chang & Halliday's focus on Mao as the source of all evil begets the counterfactual question: what would China have been like if Mao had died on the Long March? To be a little more specific: what if the Communist Revolution had prevailed nevertheless, under the leadership of, say, Zhang Guotao or Stalin's trusted man Wang Ming? Would it have been smooth sailing all the way? The experience of the socialist era everywhere in the world suggests otherwise. The Revolution would still be a revolution bound to age, and Stalinism would still be Stalinism; statues and pictures of the Great Leader would still be all over the place. China probably would have been spared the Cultural Revolution, but maybe not the Great Leap Forward which was after all one of the important origins of the Cultural Revolution. There would have been other wars and disasters. Mao's brushstrokes on the Chinese canvas were sweeping and ruthless, but the fundamental tragedy of the history of the Chinese Revolution is the fact that Soviet Stalinism and the Chinese emperor cult were practically predestined to fuse after the party took power, producing an exceptionally autocratic type of leadership. It might have gone better, and it might even have gone worse for China with a different leader; one dreads to think of a North Korea-type China! None of these speculations is meant to exonerate Mao from his evident crimes and mistakes, but they may help frame the matter into a larger historical perspective.
A Huge Industry

Mao biography is a huge industry. Stuart Schram has devoted a lifetime of excellent research to the study of Mao, and his Mao biography of 1963 has been revised and republished in a number of editions, increasingly critical of Mao's politics. There are many other significant works, but the present downturn in Mao's fortunes started in 1994 with a book on *The Private Life of Chairman Mao* by his former physician Li Zhishui (New York: Random House). Only then did we begin to gain insight into the unsavoury details of Mao's sex life, his behind-the-scenes machinations and his predilections.

Then in 1999 no less than three important new Mao biographies appeared. Ross Terrill's *Mao: a Biography* (Stanford: Stanford University Press) was not altogether new, however, being a revised edition of his much-read 1980 Mao biography. It is written with much journalistic flair and a lot of reconstructed dialogue, no less fiction than *Unknown Story*, and it abounds with sweeping generalizations about the Chinese and their revolution. The other two books are more indispensable. Jonathan Spence, an acknowledged master biographer, published a relatively small volume simply entitled *Mao* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999). It devotes relatively more space to the early years, trying to get a grip on Mao as a person, and it is beautifully written. The towering work of 1999, however, is Philip Short's *Mao: a Life* (New York: Henry Holt). It is as voluminous as *Unknown Story*, and like Chang & Halliday, Short is merciless in his revelations about Mao, but the book is much more balanced and analytically subtle with a fine understanding of the political context.

In the year 2002 a very different kind of Mao biography appeared in Lee Feigon's *Mao: a Reinterpretation* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee). The book bravely defends Mao's honour despite accepting all the revelations of the previous years. Feigon particularly wants to salvage the Cultural Revolution from history's Great Hall of Shame, claiming that Mao's anti-bureaucratic campaigns helped pave the way for the economic success of contemporary China. The book is based on extensive reading of Mao's works but adds nothing new to the historical narrative itself. Finally, in 2004 British historian Michael Lynch published a fairly short biography *Mao* (London & New York: Routledge). It focuses mainly on Mao's politics in a sensible narrative that relies much on Short and the other recent biographers, once again adding little new to the story. With *Unknown Story* published in 2005 it would appear that the barrel has been
scraped mighty clean, and we should not expect any new significant revelations regarding Mao. But Unknown Story has not fundamentally changed the state of the field, and in the opinion of this reviewer, Short's book remains the best comprehensive account, and for a short and readable biography, I would still recommend Spence.

The Revolution Eats Its Own Children

Today every schoolchild knows that even if a revolution attains victory, it invariably degenerates in the long run—and sometimes not so long. The revolution eats its own children and it terrorizes the population at large. Revolutions can never succeed. But Mao and his generation of communist leaders did not know that, and it is the historian's job to reconstruct their worldview and understand it, even if one disagrees vehemently with it. To Mao and his colleagues revolution was the holy grail that justified any sacrifice. It is true that Mao's judgement and mental faculties generally declined after the late 1950s—which is not unnatural for a man past his sixtieth birthday—and that paranoia and ego inflation added to the problem. But the root cause of many of the things that went wrong under Mao was precisely the revolution itself. Mao's Marxism after 1949 was one in which the Chinese Revolution proceeded to make giant strides forwards toward communism while at the same time supporting or even leading the anti-imperialist struggles worldwide. Mao did not have the several decades that the present CCP leadership have now granted themselves to oversee the modernization of the Chinese economy.

In the context of the world of the 1950s and 1960s, Mao's vision was flawed but not as absurd as it appears today in hindsight. Then the stage changed, and it should be remembered that in the crucial years 1969-71 Mao realized that his big game was essentially lost and acted accordingly; he reined in the Cultural Revolution, although he regretted having to do so, and invited US President Nixon to China. This is no power-grabbing maniac in action. But revolution remained his central concern throughout, and China's real tragedy was that revolution essentially was a dead end. The world did not develop the way Mao had envisioned, and the Chinese people's enthusiasm for revolution also could not live up to the Chairman's expectations. Mao had no way of knowing that the warming of international relations in the 1970s heralded a new age of global capitalist expansion. He could not understand why market forces were not so easily replaced by 'self reliance', quotas
and coupons. He would be genuinely shocked if he could see China and
the world today: capitalism has turned out to be much more revolu-
tionary than the revolution itself, and socialism has flopped everywhere. It
was Mao's revolutionary zeal more than anything else that produced
the great disasters of his last two decades.

Chang & Halliday probably could not have done what they have done
without help from high-up people in the CCP. They have had seemingly
unlimited access to individuals and sources that foreigners are normally
not allowed to have contact with. There is nothing wrong in this if it has
contributed to digging out valuable new information, but nevertheless
the reader deserves an account of how these individuals and sources
were found and how interviews were organized. Is it conceivable that
Chang & Halliday's work is in fact an early indication that the CCP, or
at least somebody within the CCP, is gearing up for a fundamentally
negative reappraisal of Mao Zedong? It will be interesting to see what
happens next time Jung Chang applies for a visa to go to China!

Søren Clausen is Associate Professor at the Department of History and Area
Studies, Aarhus University.

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