

WRITING *MAO: THE REAL STORY*

Alexander V. Pantsov

Professor of History

Capital University, Ohio, U.S.A.

In the 1980s and 1990s I did my research on the roots of Stalinism and the Soviet influence on China working in Russian, American, British, French, Chinese, and Taiwanese libraries and archives. My work at the time resulted in the publication of a few books and articles. Among them was *The Bolsheviks and the Chinese Revolution 1919-1927* which came out in London and Honolulu, Hawai'i in 2000 and in Moscow in 2001.

Shortly thereafter, I received a request from the famous Russian publisher “Molodaia Gvardia” to write a book on Mao Zedong. The biography of Mao came out in Russian in 2007. It was later translated into English by my friend Steven I. Levine and in 2012 came out in the United States with Simon & Schuster under the title *Mao: The Real Story*. It was also translated into German and came out in 2013 with Fischer Verlag under the title *Mao: Die Biographie*. In 2015, the Taiwanese publisher Linking printed a Chinese translation of my American *Mao: The Real Story*. The Korean and Italian translations are coming out.

In the meantime, in 2010 I signed a contract with Zhonghua renmin daxue chubanshe (The Publishing House of the Chinese People's University). This publisher offered translating and publishing my Russian *Mao Zedong* in Beijing albeit I did not believe it possible. However, this second Chinese translation did come out in 2015 under the title *Mao Zedong Biography*.

The Russian, American/German/Taiwanese, and Chinese editions of my Mao book have some dissimilarities but they are not crucial. All editions pursue one goal – to examine Mao Zedong objectively. Mao was a revolutionary who lived a very long life, from the beginning of the past century to its end; he became both a witness and an active participant in a myriad of events in both Chinese and world history; and he rose to the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and the PRC. His importance in modern Chinese history merits a detailed and objective assessment. My book is not a political pamphlet but rather the result of many years of painstaking scholarly research presented in a narrative style that might be interesting and absorbing to a general reader. In attempting to recreate the concrete historical situation in which Mao, and all his friends and foes operated, I purposefully tried to avoid being biased by political prejudices of the right or the left. It is the only way to understand the people who have lived before us correctly, and it is the only way to respect history. If one starts writing history from one's political point of view it will never be an objective historical record but rather a political accusation.

Am I lacking a “moral compass” if I write objectively? Not at all. History is full of blood. When we turn over its pages we feel blood on our fingers. One cannot find an ideal historical figure. Consider Julius Caesar, Peter the Great, and Napoleon. Ponder the lives of Martin Luther, Jean Calvin, and Henry VIII. Think of Oliver Cromwell, Vladimir Lenin, and Chiang Kai-shek. In an American context reflect upon men like President Andrew Jackson, who deliberately persecuted millions of Native Americans, to say nothing of the numerous eminent figures who justified the enslavement of African Americans. Were all of them just one dimensional fanatics or oppressors? Hardly. They

were all controversial figures. Even the lives of Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin, certainly extreme cases, should be researched objectively. Of course, their biographers must keep in mind that these two despots were both responsible for igniting the most devastating world war in history. Nor should Hitler's guilt for perpetrating the Holocaust ever be forgotten. Still it is obvious that only multifaceted pictures of all these people – even the most odious – can help decipher the complex historical reality. It is we, not these long-dead leaders, who require the truth.

The book is based on private files of top Chinese leaders as well as other sources from the former secret archives of the Soviet Communist Party (CPSU) and the Comintern. The Bolsheviks began organizing their archives shortly after the October Revolution of 1917. From the very beginning their main task was not only to collect documents on the history of the Bolshevik party, but also on the history of the international labor and communist movements. After the liquidation of the Communist International (Comintern) in 1943 all of its documentary collections were transferred to the Central Party Archives. In the 1950s the archives of the Communist Information Bureau (Cominform) were also deposited there. Finally, in June 1999 the former Communist Youth League Archives were merged into the collection. These archives house about two million written documents, 12,105 photographic materials, and 195 documentary films, which are organized in 669 thematic collections.

I was one of the first scholars who got access to the then still closed archives of the Soviet Communist Party and the Comintern in Moscow. I received permission in the spring of 1990, a year before the Yeltsin revolution in Russia, when Gorbachev's *glasnost* reached its zenith. At that time this depository was named the Central Party

Archives of the Institute of Marxism-Leninism of the Soviet Communist Party Central Committee. Soon I got access to all collections.

A brief survey of the contents of these archives highlights their importance as a source of information for writing biographies of China's top Communist leaders – information that I thoroughly mined for Mao Zedong biography. A core component of the archives is an extensive collection of papers related to the Chinese Communist movement. These include voluminous files of the CCP delegation to the Executive Committee of the Comintern (ECCI); the CCP Central Committee's various accounts and financial receipts; the Comintern and the Bolshevik Party's directives to China; the papers of Lenin, Stalin, Trotsky, and other Bolshevik leaders; secret reports of Chinese Communist and Chinese Nationalist representatives to the Comintern; and personal dossiers on many leading Chinese revolutionaries.

The collection of private documents relating to the Chinese Communists is of particular interest. Unlike many other archival materials it was not opened to most scholars even during the brief period of the Yeltsin ideological "thaw" in the early 1990s. This collection has always been secured in a top secret section of the archives. Even today public access to the files is highly restricted. Only a very few specialists including me, have been permitted privileged access to these materials and continue to enjoy such access on the basis of personal ties with archivists and scholars in contemporary Russia. This restricted collection comprises 3,328 personal dossiers including those of Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Zhu De, Deng Xiaoping, Wang Ming, and many other leading members of the CCP leadership.

The dossier on Mao Zedong is the most impressive. It contains fifteen volumes of unique papers including his political reports, private correspondence, Mao's medical records compiled by his Soviet physicians; secret accounts by KGB and Comintern agents; personal materials regarding Mao's wives and children; accusations against Mao written by his political enemies within the CCP leadership; and a variety of Soviet embassy and KGB secret messages related to the political situation in the PRC from the late 1950s to the early 1970s.

Research in these documents has uncovered many new facts about Mao's life that require us to revise commonly accepted views on the history of the Chinese communist movement, the history of the PRC, and particularly Mao himself. The Russian archives document the continuing dependence upon Moscow of the CCP from its founding in 1921 through the early 1950s. Careful attention to the life of Mao suggests that the history of the CCP at the time can be understood only if one takes into account its continuing dependence on Moscow for authoritative policy guidance and direction. Archival materials on major figures such as Zhang Guotao, Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi, Cai Hesen, Qu Qiubai, Deng Zhongxia, Wang Ruofei, Chen Yu, Li Lisan, Gao Gang, Yu Xiusong, and others also suggest that the CCP remained subordinate to Stalin and his lieutenants, who controlled the Comintern and held the fate of CCP leaders in their hands. This is demonstrated, for example, by reference to the countless humiliating interrogations and self-criticism that leading Chinese communists were forced to undergo because of alleged mistakes or "Trotskyist activity." There is even evidence suggesting that in 1938 Stalin was planning a major show trial of Comintern officials, including Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi, Kang Sheng, Chen Yun, Li Lisan, and some others. Had he not

backed away from this plan, many top leaders of the CCP might have become his victims. Some documents, however, suggest that he murdered most of the CCP delegates to the Seventh Comintern Congress, held in July – August 1935.

Stalin did not include Mao Zedong on his “blacklist.” Indeed, it was Stalin himself and the Comintern that assisted Mao’s rise to power in the Chinese Communist Party. As newly available Soviet and Chinese archives reveal, Mao was a faithful follower of Stalin who took pains to reassure the Boss of his loyalty and who dared to deviate from the Soviet model only after Stalin’s death. Mao consulted with Stalin on a variety of issues including even minor ones. Shortly before the promulgation of the PRC, Mao even asked Stalin whether the Chinese Communists should establish a capital of New China in Nanjing or Beijing. Stalin preferred Beijing.

To be sure, Mao was not like East Germany’s Walter Ulbricht, Bulgaria’s Todor Zhivkov, or other dependent leaders of Central and East European communist parties, but there can no longer be any doubt that he was loyal to Stalin, whom he looked to for guidance as well as support. It was only after Stalin’s death in March 1953 that Mao began to distance himself from the Soviet leadership. He came to view Khrushchev as an untrustworthy buffoon and deliberately treated him with contempt. I show that personal enmity between Mao and Khrushchev was one of the main reasons for the Sino-Soviet rift.

By the late 1960s this rift had escalated to a degree that has often been underestimated. Drawing upon the former Soviet secret archives I demonstrate that in the late 1960s Sino-Soviet relations became so tense that the Soviet leadership had even

begun to consider armed intervention in the affairs of the PRC, such as undertaking an atomic attack against the PRC's industrial centers or blowing up Chinese atomic sites.

For the Mao book I also used documentary sources from other collections that became accessible due to the efforts, above all, of Chinese historians as well as their Russian, American, and West European colleagues. These include the texts of speeches, articles, letters and telegrams of Mao Zedong and of other Chinese leaders, stenographic reports of sessions of the higher organs of the Chinese Communist Party, the People's Republic of China, and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, documents of the American government and the governments of other countries, as well as protocols of conversations between Mao and world leaders at the highest level. No less important are the numerous reminiscences of persons who knew Mao both at home and at work.

My research helped me present Mao as a man of many contradictions. Like most people he had his positive and negative sides, strengths and weaknesses. The Great Helmsman was neither a saint nor a demon, but rather a complicated and multifaceted figure who indeed tried his best to bring about prosperity and gain international respect for his country. Yet he made numerous errors, having trapped himself in a cul-de-sac of a political and ideological utopia, and basking in his cult of personality while surrounding himself with sycophantic courtiers. Without a doubt he was one of the greatest utopians of the twentieth century, but unlike Lenin and Stalin, he was not only a political adventurer but also a national revolutionary. Not only did he promote radical economic and social reforms, but he also brought about a national revolution in former semi-colonial China. Unlike Lenin and Stalin, who destroyed a great and powerful Russia that prior to the October Revolution had been one of the leading world powers, Mao

transformed China from a semi-colony into an independent and powerful state. He was not only a revolutionary who transformed social relations, but also a national hero who brought to fruition the mighty anti-imperialist revolution begun by Sun Yat-sen, compelling the entire world to respect the Chinese people. He united mainland China after a long period of disintegration, power struggle, and civil wars. It was during Mao's rule that China was finally able to become one of the main geopolitical centers of the world, politically equidistant from both superpowers, and, therefore, attracting increased attention from world public opinion. Thus it was Mao who renewed the world's respect for China and the Chinese people, who had long been despised by the developed Western world and Japan.

Of course, during Mao's rule the Chinese people remained poor, and the Chinese economy backward, but it was precisely during this time that Chinese began to take pride in their country's present as well as its past. This is why the Chinese people will never forget the "Great Helmsman."

Yet Mao's domestic policies produced national tragedies. He brought to the Chinese not only national liberation, but social servitude. It was he and the Chinese Communist Party he directed that, through deceit and violence, imposed totalitarian socialism upon the long-suffering people of China, driving them into the abyss of bloody social experiments. The lives of hundreds of millions of people were thereby maimed, and several tens of millions perished as a result of hunger and repression. Entire generations grew up isolated from world culture. Mao's crimes against humanity are no less terrible than the evil deeds of Stalin and other twentieth-century dictators. The scale of his crimes was even greater. Still, Mao is distinguished from the ideologists and

practitioners of Russian Bolshevism even in his totalitarianism. His personality was much more complex, variegated, and multifaceted. No less suspicious or perfidious than Stalin, still he was not as merciless. Almost throughout his entire career, even during the Cultural Revolution, in intraparty struggle he followed the principle of “cure the illness to save the patient,” compelling his real or imagined opponents to confess their “guilt” but not sentencing them to death. This is precisely why the “moderate” faction, despite the repeated purge of its members, was ultimately able to stand its ground and come to power after the Chairman’s death. Mao did not cure the “illness” of Deng Xiaoping and his supporters, but neither did he eliminate them physically. He did not even order the death of Liu Shaoqi. The chairman of the PRC was hounded to his death by enraged Red Guards. Moreover, Mao did not take revenge on his former enemies. He neither killed Bo Gu, nor Zhou Enlai, nor Ren Bishi, nor Zhang Guotao, nor even Wang Ming. He tried to find a common language with all of them after forcing them to engage in self-criticism. In other words, he forced them to “lose face” but also kept them in power.

In all of this, Mao was an authentically Chinese leader and ideologist who was able to combine the principles of foreign Bolshevism not only with the practice of the Chinese revolution, but also with Chinese tradition. A talented Chinese politician, an historian, a poet and philosopher, an all-powerful dictator and energetic organizer, a skillful diplomat and utopian socialist, the head of the most populous state, resting on his laurels, but at the same time an indefatigable revolutionary who sincerely attempted to refashion the way of life and consciousness of millions of people, a hero of national revolution and a bloody social reformer – this is how Mao goes down in history. The scale of his life was too grand to be reduced to a single meaning. And that is why he

reposes in an imperial mausoleum in the center of China, in the square adorned with his gigantic portrait. He will be there for a long time, perhaps forever. In essence, the phenomenon of Mao reflects the entire trajectory of twentieth-century China in all its complexity and contradictions, the trajectory of a great but socially and economically backward Eastern country that made a gigantic break from the past to the present over the course of eight decades. The achievements of Mao Zedong are indisputable. So are his errors and crimes.

I also tried to write a lively and interesting human story that devotes a lot of attention to Mao's character and his personal and family life as well as to his political and military leadership. It is filled with stories that present Mao as son, husband, father, friend, and lover, as well as strategist, theorist, statesman, and political infighter. From many angles I show Mao as a man of complex moods, subject to bouts of deep depression as well as flights of manic exaltation, a man of great force of will and ambition who achieved virtually unlimited power during his leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and of the People's Republic of China. My goal was to draw a living portrait that engage even readers who know little about Mao and China. I also tried to describe the kaleidoscopic array of people Mao encountered and the places in China where he lived, studied, worked, and relaxed, from his native village of Shaoshanchong to the Forbidden City in Beijing, where he lived as a virtual emperor. My book, which tells the history of modern China through the life of its most important leader, tries to convey the feel, smell, and texture of China.

I also tried to present a vivid and objective portrait of the aging Mao from the late 1950s to his death in September 1976, a period marked by Mao's audacious attempts to

remold Chinese society along the lines of a uniquely Maoist socialism during the Great Leap Forward (1958–61) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), efforts that caused tragedy on a vast scale. All these events are examined with the aim of identifying the overarching objectives and personal rivalries among top leaders whom Mao skillfully manipulated to advance his aims. In contrast to conventional views, I show that the Cultural Revolution was not merely Mao's final struggle for power, but rather a serious if tragically flawed effort to achieve his utopian vision of creating a new, ideal citizen in a new, ideal society. By the mid-1960s Mao had come to believe that the socialist reconstruction of sociopolitical relations was insufficient. Even after the construction of socialism people would remain inert and egotistical. Each person would harbor a greedy ego dreaming of returning to capitalism. Thus, if things were just allowed to slide, even the Communist Party itself could degenerate. That is why he arrived at the conviction that it would be impossible to build communism without first destroying the old, traditional values of Chinese culture. However, he obviously underestimated human nature. That misjudgment caused the failure not only of the Cultural Revolution, but also of the entire Maoist project. The system of barracks communism, a stark and regimented society that Mao envisioned died with Mao himself.

Thus my task as an historian was neither to blame nor to praise Mao. It is far too late to settle any scores with him. He is dead and he must be talking to Karl Marx now. The task I set for myself, rather, was to portray in all essential details one of the most powerful and influential political leaders of the twentieth century. It is my hope that this book will help readers achieve a deeper and more accurate understanding of Mao, of the times and country that produced him, and of the China he created.

ADDENDUM

RESPONSE TO PROFESSOR FREDERICK C. TEIWES

Since Professor Frederick C. Teiwes attached his forthcoming review of my *Deng Xiaoping: A Revolutionary Life* to his paper submitted to our conference, I feel obliged to attach here my response to his review that is also coming out in *Journal of Cold War Studies*.

First of all, I want to thank Professor Frederick C. Teiwes for the thought provoking review. I am impressed with his meticulous and critical analysis of the text.

Since I made all the research and writing, all the errors he uncovered are mine not of my collaborator Steven Levine. Dr. Levine's role was that of translating my Russian book in its entirety into English and cutting the manuscript to comply with publisher's requirements.

I will definitely correct the mistakes in the next edition of the book that is coming out in late 2016 in Taiwan. At the same time, I want to make a few comments.

1. Professor Teiwes says, "Despite the authors' claim, there was no disobedience on Deng's part shortly before Mao's death."

Actually, in November 1975 Deng did display disobedience. On November 20, he openly declined Mao's order to head a Central Committee task force charged with drafting a resolution pronouncing the Cultural Revolution an overall success. Mao wanted the ratio of successes to failures set at 70:30, but Deng bluntly asserted that as an exile, he could not say anything good about the Cultural Revolution. Beforehand he had accidentally angered Mao with his "cats" or something else but it was caused by his

misunderstanding of the great leader, not disobedience. Now it was the first time when he refused to follow a direct order of the Great Helmsman.

2. Professor Teiwes believes that I have “a tendency to use unreliable sources as definitive, notably the account of Mao’s doctor, Li Zhisui, and *The Tiananmen Papers*. Moreover, an important and extensively cited source was ignored when it did not fit the narrative: i.e., the account of Deng’s daughter Maomao on his meeting with the ‘vile’ Kang Sheng upon returning to Beijing in 1973 where she was present. Having portrayed Kang as a leftist enemy of Deng and close supporter of Jiang Qing, the authors find no place for Maomao’s report of this meeting that not only revived a pre-Cultural Revolution family friendship, but more significantly her description of Kang fiercely denouncing Jiang as a traitor.”

I would not be so conclusive. *The Tiananmen Papers* were published by two highly respected American scholars, Perry Link and Andrew J. Nathan whose professionalism is beyond question. Why shouldn’t I trust their judgment especially as both of them, Nathan and Link after the publication became *personae non gratae* in China? By the same token, why shouldn’t I use Dr. Li’s memoirs if we know that he was found dead in his son’s house in Carol Stream after his interview with U.S. television in January 1995 about his intention to publish one more book? We could also regard Alexander Litvinenko’s accounts on Putin quite dubious had he not been poisoned.

No one memoir is totally accurate but we still critically use them if they are the only source of information and if we cannot find their flaws. Why should I trust Maomao more than I trust Li Zhisui? Why should I find a place in my narrative for Maomao’s report of the 1973 Deng’s meeting with Kang Sheng if Maomao (or those who wrote her

“memoirs”) actually does not add anything new to our understanding of the Deng/Kang relations. At the end of the paragraph Professor Teiwes quotes she asserts that Kang “was . . . two-faced” and “[a]t death’s door, he used his last breath to puff up flames of discord?” This statement does not counter my narrative at all.

Actually, a few years ago in the Russian edition of my *Mao Zedong* book I did mention that Kang lost trust in Jiang Qing: “His [Mao’s] attacks against her [Jiang Qing] were so short-tempered that Kang Sheng took fright and shortly before his death he severed all ties with Jiang and her confederates.” However, I deleted this phrase from the American edition and I did not elaborate on it in my *Deng Xiaoping* book for the reasons explained.

3. Professor Teiwes criticizes me for misinterpretation of Hua Guofeng as a “weak man”. However, Mao himself asserted that Hua Guofeng was not a strong leader and it was the reason why he chose him: “They say he has a low profile. That’s why I’m choosing the man with the low profile.”

Professor Teiwes then says that I do not affirm Hua as “the decisive actor” in the arrest of the Gang of Four. No, I do not. Hua did play a great role in the arrest and I do not keep it secret but I do not exaggerate it either. It was Ye Jianying and Wang Dongxing who played the decisive roles. The initiative came from Ye Jianying, and it was Wang’s Unit 8341 that arrested the gang.

Professor Teiwes also says that Hua was not a “whateverist”. However, it is well known that at the end of October 1976 Hua told officials of the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee that “everything that Chairman Mao said and [even] everything to which he merely nodded in assent, we will not subject to criticism.” Did his words

shape the “Two Whatevers” line? Yes, they did. Did he oppose Deng’s return to power? Yes, he did. Can we trust Ruan Ming’s account of the 1978 conferences of the Party leadership? Why not?

At the same time, did Hua play a big role in the initiation of economic reforms in 1978-79? Yes, of course. Did I forget about it as Professor Teiwes asserts? Not at all. I wrote that **by the time** Deng began talking about modernization, “serious changes had also occurred in Hua Guofeng’s worldview . . . **Following Hua** other party leaders recognized the need for reform.” I emphasized the significance of his trips to Romania, Yugoslavia, and Iran and wrote: “All the Politburo members, including Deng, began talking then about accelerated modernization.” I also acknowledged that it was Hua who on November 6, 1978 convened a meeting of the Politburo which decided to shift the center of gravity of all party work to modernization as of January 1979.

4. Of course, I can agree with Professor Teiwes that a chapter on the Tiananmen suppression and a piece on the Deng 1992 southern tour could be longer. However, my task was to cover the entire life of Deng in a book of no more than 600 pages. That’s why I had to be frugal.

5. Professor Teiwes mentions that I “made an apparently deliberate decision to not engage with recent scholarship [and “deep research”] at variance with the book’s narrative.” In addition, he also found some specific episodes not enough nuanced and even “fundamentally distorted”.

I do not think that in a scholarly polemic a word “distorted” is appropriate, but I leave the charge aside. I would be most grateful to Professor Teiwes if he made himself clearer. What “deep research” did I ignore? What part of history did I “fundamentally

distort” and how? Why will my reader “come away . . . with an often distorted understanding of the circumstances in which he [Deng] operated?” Professor Teiwes only pointed to one episode “encompassing several (!?) years, as in treating Mao’s entire Hundred Flowers policy in 1956-57 as a plot from start to finish to lure ‘poisonous snakes’ from their hole.” Why should we treat this policy differently if we have materials that prove this assumption? (See Deng’s explanations of the campaign’s objectives in *CWHIP Bulletin*, no. 10 (2001): 165 and revelations of Ekaterina Furtseva, then the secretary for ideology of the Central Committee of the CPSU quoted in the memoirs of Stalin’s former interpreter Valentin Berezhkov.)

So far I can only acknowledge that I “deliberately” failed to “engage” with one recent book that is the book by Professor Teiwes himself on *The End of the Maoist Era* written in collaboration with Dr. Warren Sun. Ironically, I did it for the same reasons that Professor Teiwes criticized my book, namely for uncritical acceptance of some unreliable sources as definitive and for misinterpretation of some of them.

Maomao’s account of the Deng/Kang meeting is one example. It is really strange that Professor Teiwes and Dr. Sun assert: “The incident was seemingly indicative of the extraordinary trust Kang placed in his old comrade, and the depth of his hatred of Jiang and Zhang [Chunqiao]” (p. 74 of their book). This conclusion is misleading, as Deng had never been Kang’s “old comrade”. There is nothing in Maomao’s book about “a pre-Cultural Revolution family friendship” between Deng and Kang. Moreover, Kang was known for his treacherous nature. The head of provocateurs could not be an honest man. Why couldn’t we merely assume that he tried to provoke Deng, possibly on Mao’s request? In addition, *The End of the Maoist Era* also contains so many references to

anonymous “Chinese historians” that with all due respect I was really reluctant to use it as extensively as I used other books by Professor Teiwes.

Finally, I want again to extend my deep appreciation to Professor Teiwes as well as the editorial board of *Journal of Cold War Studies* for this very useful discussion.

Sincerely,

Alexander V. Pantsov