

Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik

Mao, the monk and the umbrella: Reflections on a Mao biography in the context of politics and culture

Keynote lecture for the international symposium of the International Association of Auto/Biography, Vienna, October 31, 2013

To deal with the biography of Mao Zedong is to deal with a myriad of paradoxes. It is to deal with all sorts of misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and misperceptions. Last but not least, it is to deal with narratives and counter-narratives, with images and counter images, most of them based on sources beyond the control of readers and writers.

The first paradox is related to the fact that the first biography of Mao Zedong was published by a US journalist named Edgar Snow who was introduced to Mao via the underground CCP party organization in China and who at the time was not widely known as a leftist. Snow's account of Mao's life was based on hours of interviewing Mao Zedong who lived at the time in a remote place called Bao'an and who had only just started to become the eminent leader of the Communist Party of China. The first biography of Mao Zedong is thus an autobiography written down by a journalist who wrote the text according to a translation which again was revised by several stakeholders including the CCP Central Committee and the Communist Party of the USA. The full text of the interview was first published in a journal, later in Edgar Snow's famous best seller "Red Star over China"¹, a book which is widely regarded as the book which has shaped the perception of Mao Zedong and the Communist movement in China ever since. The interview was translated into Chinese and has long been the only source of information on Mao's youth and early adulthood for the Chinese language public. This biography is told in Chinese, written in English and translated back into Chinese.² It is the first among an ever growing number of biographies written by non-Chinese authors and published by non-Chinese publishers. For an officially sanctioned biography of Mao Zedong written in Chinese the public in the PRC would have to wait until 2004. No wonder that Chinese language reviews of the official Mao biography applaud to this publication as the first Mao biography which departs from a "Western understanding" or "Western image" of Mao Zedong³.

Edgar Snow went back to China on several occasions. In 1970, two years before he and six years before Mao died, he met Mao again, this time as some assume not without interference of the CIA. It was at a time when Nixon and Kissinger were making plans to

¹ Edgar Snow: Red Star over China. Revised and enlarged edition. New York 1973.

² N.N.: Republication of Mao Zedong's Autobiography. In: China Daily, December 7, 2001, see: <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/2001/12/07/23275.htm>, last seen October 29, 2013.

³ 毛泽东传 http://www.wenming.cn/qmyd_pd/mrys_qmyd/hz_mrys/201203/t20120313_553060.shtml
孙铁玮: 毛泽东传》透过西方思想折射历史, see: <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/paper2836/12286/1105723.html>, last seen October 28, 2013

approach China. Mao was as we are told glad to see Snow again and invited him to stand right next to him during the October 1 national parade. Then he talked to him and answered a question regarding his position in the CCP by using a well known Chinese proverb. He said: "I am a monk under an umbrella". He stopped before articulating the second part of the proverb leaving it for the interpreters to communicate what he wanted to say to Snow. Some authors write that the interpreters while known for their formidable English were not well educated enough to know the proverb and therefore refrained from adding the second part which a foreigner cannot be expected to know. Therefore they only translated the first part into English with the result that Snow was quite confused as to what Mao actually wanted to say. Others refer to the fact that this interview was taking place during the Cultural Revolution. No one including friends whom Snow asked to help him to understand Mao dared to translate something the Chairman had not said or to interpret the proverb for Snow. He never learned what the second part of the proverb was. It said: No law, no heaven and implies that the monk under the umbrella is totally autonomous in his decision making as neither heaven nor law can have an influence on him. Snow who did not know the second part of the proverb and who did not receive any help to understand the first part ended up writing in his report of the meeting that Mao described himself as "a lonely monk under a leaky umbrella".⁴ Poor Mao, nobody around to understand him, to support him and to give him shelter, all by himself, isolated from the Party and with no support. This is the image Snow conveyed to his Western readership. The lonely dictator who was the opposite of Stalin and Hitler, not the populist arousing mass support, but the lonely philosopher who understood too much to be understood by the Party and those around him who should be able to understand him. When Nixon and Kissinger met Mao, they referred to him as the philosopher.⁵ When leftists from Europe and the US envisaged Mao as different from the mediocre leaders of Eastern Europe and the bureaucrats from Moscow they had the image of Mao under the leaky umbrella in front of their eyes. However, Mao who had tried to impose an image that he had created of himself for the world, had conveyed a totally different message: Some translate it saying: the monk under the umbrella allows for the awful to be lawful and for treason to be the reason.⁶ Others simply stress that Mao wanted to be perceived as a dictator at the zenith of his power in total control of his world. This is

⁴ 论“和尚打伞”VS“人算不如天算”/淳于雁, see: <http://201205070626.htm#.Um7a7nge47l>, last seen October 28, 2013; Olivier Assayas: The Hall of Uselessness: Collected Essays. See: <http://www.nybooks.com/books/imprints/classics/the-hall-of-uselessness-collected-essays/>, last seen October 28, 2013.

⁵ Richard Nixon and Mao Zedong "Memorandum of Conversation," February 21, 1972, 2:50-3:55pm, see: [http://china.usc.edu/\(S\(xu1qhuju3muygh3h5avn1h45\)A\(EH30Aj2SzQEkAAAAMWMzN2M2NDYtMzg4NC00MTZILTk0NDAOtK0N2I3ZTY3NzJi2uzvHU0EIEf2e71oueCqz-nu0_81\)\)](http://china.usc.edu/(S(xu1qhuju3muygh3h5avn1h45)A(EH30Aj2SzQEkAAAAMWMzN2M2NDYtMzg4NC00MTZILTk0NDAOtK0N2I3ZTY3NzJi2uzvHU0EIEf2e71oueCqz-nu0_81))), last seen October 28, 2013.

⁶ See: <http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Talk:%E5%92%8C%E5%B0%9A%E6%89%93%E4%BC%9E%E5%BC%8C%E6%97%A0%E6%B3%95%E6%97%A0%E5%A4%A9>.

paradox No. 2. The western public for which Mao wanted to create an image of himself creates its own image of him.

Paradox 3 relates to the fact that biographies on Mao are written without relying on unselected primary sources. The two most important English language biographies which were published lately boast of having exclusive access to formerly unknown sources. In both cases these sources are from outside China, and in both cases, the sources are primarily from Russian archives. The Chinese archives are still inaccessible, and therefore even the only authoritative biography of Mao Zedong from China, although published by the Central Archives of the CCP, cannot claim to be true to the sources as nobody has the right and possibility to check how the authors selected the sources. Jung Chang and Jon Halliday claim to write “Mao – the unknown story”⁷, but, as Andrew Nathan puts it: “There are problems, however: 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.”⁸ What is even more disturbing is the fact that Jung Chang’s story is a counter narrative by intention directed against all those stories which describe the benign, thoughtful, refined and intellectual Mao. Her book certainly adds to our knowledge about China and Mao, however, the criterion for selecting her sources is too obvious to be convincing. Her aim is to deconstruct Mao, and all too obvious is the fact that by deconstructing Mao she is deconstructing her own hero. Jung Chang was a Red Guard at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. She disconnects herself from this stage in her life by disconnecting herself from the enormous influence Mao had on her life. That is why her book is read by so many people and politicians all around the world who proudly claim to have put it on their bedside tables. No matter whether more leftist or rightist; hardly anybody who was politically interested during the 1970s could escape Mao’s charisma. All of us who know better today read Jung Chang to get rid of Mao’s shadow.

Yet another counter narrative is Alexander V. Pantsov’s account under the title of “Mao: The real story”⁹ the Russian version of which was first published in 2007. It was translated and edited for an English reading public with the support of Steven I. Levine. The book boasts to present “the real story” rather than the “unknown story”¹⁰ and argues on more than 700 pages that the worldwide understanding of Maoism as a form of socialism with Chinese characteristics is untrue. Instead, the CCP and its leader Mao Zedong were supported and funded by the Soviet Union and were loyal to Stalin until his death. Only after Stalin had died

⁷ Jung Chang and Jon Halliday: *Mao – the unknown story*. New York 2005.

⁸ Andrew Nathan: *Jade and Plastic*. In: *London Review of Books*, Vol. 27, No.22, pp.10-13; see: <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v27/n22/andrew-nathan/jade-and-plastic>, last seen October 28, 2013.

⁹ Alexander V. Pantsov with Steven I. Levine: *Mao – the real story*. New York 2012. For another review see: Roderick McFarquhar: *Who was Mao Zedong?* In: *The New York Review of Books*, October 25, 2012.

¹⁰ See: John Pomfret: „Mao: The Real Story“ Alexander V. Pantsov and Steven I. Levine. In: *The Washington Post*, October 18, 2012, see: http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-10-18/entertainment/35499817_1_mao-zedong-edgar-snow-communist-party, last seen October 28, 2013. With regard to this book’s relationship to Jung Chang’s publication he states: “Pantsov and Levine barely mention Chang and Halliday’s book, but much of their focus seems aimed at refuting the screed-like tone of that work, even though many of the scholarly conclusions are the same.”

and Chruschtschow had come to power did Mao dare to claim a leading position for China among the worldwide communist movement, and only then did he dare to openly distance himself and China from the Soviet model. They quote from a myriad of sources from Soviet archives, and they include arguments from Chinese language as well as English language publications. However, the book does not analyze the one phase of CCP history in which Maoism was born and the CCP developed the logic of Maoism being a combination of Marxism-Leninism and experiences gained from the particularity of the Chinese Revolution. As long as they cannot explain why according to their sources the CCP depended on Soviet money and advice, while at the same time stressing the particularity of the Chinese Revolution their argument is not convincing and their choice of sources unclear. Their story is the deconstruction of the belief long held both by politicians from the right as well as from the left all over the world, and this is the story of China being different from the Soviet Union and therefore less evil. This belief made China enormously attractive for young people during the 1970's¹¹ and it helped China to re-enter the world with the help of politicians like Nixon and Kissinger who hoped that with China re-entering the world the world could be changed. Pantsov and Levine unmask this understanding of Mao by trying to show that he was a die heart Stalinist and only distanced himself from the Soviet Union because he believed that Chruschtschow and his successors were not Stalinist enough. With this assessment both leftists in search of a humanist socialism as well as political realists like Nixon and Kissinger were trapped by an image of Chinese particularity Mao and the CCP had created in order to better position China in the world.

The official biography written by party historiographers from the Central Archives of the CCP under the leadership of Jin Chongji¹² certainly is as much a counter narrative to Pantsov's main argument as it is to Jung Chang's biography. The biography is mostly descriptive and therefore refrains from arguing directly. Instead it uses a method of writing history which is very common both in post-49 as well as in pre-49 China. It is the method of hiding the argument in the way the author presents sources and data (遇论于史) which makes the book look more unbiased than any of those written outside China. This might be regarded as the next on our list of paradoxes. However, a closer look at the three volumes shows that there are at least two arguments embedded in the book. It is the argument that Mao used all of his intelligence, energy and knowledge in favor of the Chinese people even if some of his good intentions lead to unintended results. This hidden argument is, of course, directed against biographies of the Jung Chang kind. The second argument which the official biography propels is the argument that Mao Zedong Thought is a combination of what is called "the general truth of Marxism-Leninism" and the "practical experience" gained during the course of the Chinese Revolution and the construction of socialism in China. This argument is obviously directed against biographies written on the basis of the Pantsov argument. However, this relationship of narrative and counter-narrative can only be

¹¹ For an analysis of the situation in West Germany during the 1970's see: Gunnar Hlnck: Wir waren wie Maschinen. Die bundesdeutsche Linke der siebziger Jahre. Berlin 2012.

¹² 金冲及（主编）：毛泽东传。Vol.1-3, Beijing 2004.

depicted if comparing the three versions. So let's compare f.e. the way the Korean War is described in the three biographies in order to identify their respective argumentative strategies.

Jung Chang and Jon Halliday give their chapter on the Korean War the title: "Why Mao and Stalin started the Korean War" (Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, p.356) They describe Mao as an enthusiastic supporter of Kim Il-sung's idea to invade the South of Korea long before the war started, and they argue that Stalin's reluctance to support Kim's plans was overcome by Mao's enthusiastic response. Basically, they argue that Stalin, Mao and Kim were eager to fight in Korea albeit because of different reasons. On October 2, Mao finally sent a cable in which he conveyed his commitment to "sending Chinese army to Korea" (Jung Chang p.363). They argue that Mao "gambled that America would not expand the war to China" (Jung Chang, p.362) and therefore did not see any risk in getting involved into the Korean War. The implicit argument, of course, is that Mao "needed a functioning China as a base for his wider ambitions" (Jung Chang, p.362) and therefore did not take the "poverty-stricken, exhausted China" and the dangers of China being "thrown into war with the U.S.A." (Jung Chang, p.362) into consideration. This was for him a chance to make his personal ambitions come true, and he did not hesitate to send hundreds of thousands of Chinese into death for the sake of his personal ambitions.

Pantsov and Levine call their chapter "The Korean adventure" (Pantsov and Levine, p.374). For them, Mao took the decision in order to "remove the label of 'suspected Titoist' from him" (Pantsov and Levine, p.374). "Mao's entry into the Korean War appears at least in part to have been a conscious demonstration of the PRC's leaders' devotion to the Kremlin Boss". (Pantsov and Levine, p.374) Stalin wanted to drag the West into this war, and he needed Mao to assist him while using Kim's ambitions to find the right location for this adventure. For Pantsov and Levine, "Stalin intended to use the Korean War to weaken the United States by involving it in a conflict not only with North Korea, *but also with China*" (Pantsov and Levine, p. 376): For them Stalin is the only winner of the war (Pantsov and Levine, p.379), and China was unable to reject Stalin's plans as they wanted to be integrated into the international Communist movement and respected by Stalin. Because they were in this position they had to accept rude behavior both from Stalin and Kim Il-Sung's sides and were not in control of the situation. The CCP leadership was aware of the high risk and hesitated to take the decision of sending troops to Korea. In this context they quote from a telegram which Mao sent to Moscow on October 2, 1950 only a few days before the Chinese Volunteer Army entered Korea. In this telegram Mao argues in favor of waiting how the situation develops despite the fact that the North Korean Army was running into severe difficulties. The cable argues that the risk is too high to have the Soviet Union dragged into the war and that there is no confidence on the Chinese side "in the success of military operations against American troops" (Pantsov and Levine, p.381). This implies the idea that Mao was very much aware of the implied risks and that he did not want to provoke a US reaction which would change China into a battlefield.

While Pantsov and Levine ascribe the “Korean adventure” very much to Stalin and the Soviet Union and stress the importance of internal debate among the ruling elite in China, Jin Chongji looks at the months before, during and after the Korean War very much from a Chinese perspective. According to his account it was impossible to come to a unanimous vote on the question of whether or not to enter the war. He quotes at length from Mao’s original draft of the telegram which Pantsov and Levine present. The draft shows Mao’s inclination to enter the war; the telegram that was finally sent to Moscow shows doubts which were more the doubts of the majority of his politbureau than of himself. In 1970 Mao revealed during a conversation with Kim Il-Sung how difficult it was to take the decision. Jin Chongji quotes him saying: “Although we already had five armies at the Yalu River, our politbureau could not come to a decision. We talked things over and over again, looking from one side and the other. Finally it was decided.”¹³ The reason why the decision was taken is given by Jin by referring to the responsibility and friendship the Chinese leadership felt towards Kim Il-Sung and North Korea. In addition, the fear of a US attack on China was strong and the confidence in the SU supporting the North Korean and Chinese effort by their air force was solid. China had to protect its allies, no matter how costly this would turn out to be.

For Rung Chang the decision to enter the war was yet another sign of Mao sacrificing the Chinese people for the sake of his own ambitions; for Pantsov and Levine Mao and China were the victims of Stalin’s ambitions; and for Jin Chongji as the official historiographer of Mao Zedong the decision cannot be explained in terms of power politics, it was a decision based on moral considerations which proved to Mao’s moral superiority combined with an acute sense of threat from the side of the US. Three explanations are based on three different sets of sources all of which are only known and available to the respective authors. Does this mean that we understand Mao better now that we can read these biographies? But then again: Mao described himself as the monk for whom the lawful is awful and reason is treason. Does this self-explanation not go well with Rung Chang describing on 631 pages how Mao was nothing but a monster in dire need of power to do his own thing and to realize his full potential no matter what consequences would arise for other people. The rivalry between the SU and China or between Stalin and Mao Pantsov and Levine focus on is certainly a factor which played a role in the decision making process on the Korean War. It is a factor which Rung Chang does not discuss because it does not fit into her picture of Mao as someone who knew no limits standing above everybody else. How could he compete with Stalin? Pantsov and Levine do not need to distance themselves from Mao. Their problem is Stalin and not Mao. Jin Chongji has, indeed, a very Chinese way of looking at Mao. He sticks to the CCP Central Committee’s decision on “Some Questions Regarding the History of the Party since 1949”¹⁴ taken in July 1981. In this decision the Party assessed Mao as Mao had assessed Stalin: 70% successful, 30% deficient. This gives him the possibility all historiographers in Chinese history had at their hands: to distribute praise and blame on the

¹³ Jin Chongji 2004, Vol. 2, p.204.

¹⁴ 关于建国以来党的若干历史问题的决议。人民日报 July 1, 1981.

emperor once he had died. The act of censuring the emperor was one of the core tasks a traditional Chinese historiographer would have to fulfill even if he were punished for his assessment. But this historiography was based on Confucian ethics, and it was embedded in a Sino-centric worldview. Both of these preconditions for distributing praise and blame are supposedly incompatible with a modern, socialist, if not Maoist China. But, and this is paradox No. 4 on our list, they are still there. And they can be found between the lines, hidden in the text, of all three volumes Jin Chongji wrote with the official approval of the Party.

Four is a bad number in Chinese cosmology, when you pronounce it, it sounds like the word for death. So allow me to add yet another paradox to our list. This paradox is the fact that Mao did not make any efforts to have his biography written before he died even when the personality cult reached its zenith during the Cultural Revolution and when he admitted to Edgar Snow that the masses needed the cult of the personality more than anything else. Kim Il-Sung created a master narrative of the Kim family which merges fact and fiction, history and myth. Students of all ages have to study the history of the family Kim and have to take the story told about their Great Leaders for granted. Why did Mao not do this? Bruce Cumings who writes the most fascinating analysis of North Korea and Kim Il-Sung explains most of what the three Kim generations do by referring to the strong influence of Neo-Confucianism on Korean culture. Why should Neo-Confucianism which is obviously of Chinese origin not have influenced Mao Zedong and convinced him that the masses needed a master narrative of their beloved leader?

Mao speaks of himself as the monk under the umbrella without law and heaven. With this self-description he positions himself as a ruler who does not conform to traditional values and beliefs. He does not think of his power to be given to him in the form of the mandate of heaven. His power comes from the people and stays with him as long as he reaches the hearts of the people. However, in the same vein as the party views itself as the omniscient avant-garde Mao regards himself as a visionary above the people and above the Party. In this sense he allows himself to have a selective approach to tradition and history. He uses tradition when it seems helpful and necessary; and he rejects tradition when it seems plausible and practical. Because he sees himself as the monk under the umbrella without law and heaven he has the right to be selective. As a result of his selective approach to everything, Mao is unpredictable, difficult to explain, impossible to fit into one narrative: a paradox personality which defies any attempt at writing a one dimensional biography. Had Mao allowed for an official biography to be published in China before his death he would have lost his freedom and power to be as selective, arbitrary and unpredictable as he was. As he was extremely interested in everything related to the tradition of Chinese civilization, he knew that no ruler before him had ever had a biography written before his death. Whether or not this was yet another reason for refraining from having the masses read his story is unknown. We can only guess that much of what people experienced as his charisma was due to the fact that he was the monk under the umbrella who had no relationship to

heaven what so ever as the umbrella covered heaven and made it impossible for Mao to speculate about the heavenly mandate and will.

The biographies I introduced above have one feature in common. They write Mao's biography as the history of China from the early 20th century up until Mao's death. None of them write a biography of Mao as an individual trying to penetrate into his psyche and thought, his problems and solutions, his knowledge system and mind map. The life of Mao is what party historiographers defined already in the 1940s: It is the combination of Marxism-Leninism with the practice of the Chinese Revolution¹⁵. Mao's personal doctor Li Zhisui tried to escape from this prison by writing his book on *The Private Life of Chairman Mao*¹⁶ and Andrew Nathan calls it "The most revealing book ever published on Mao, perhaps on any dictator in history"¹⁷. But the book while telling us much more than any biography on Mao's personal life cannot explain what Mao thought and how Mao thought. It hits again only one of the many faces of Mao Zedong.

So do we still need more biographies of Mao, and, if yes, is it possible to write a biography which is more convincing and insightful than what we already have at hand? Roderick MacFarquhar writes in his review of Pantsov's and Levine's biography that we need more biographies as long as we find new sources which add to our understanding of and knowledge about Mao.¹⁸ But we know from what I mentioned above that all the new sources we find are selected by authors who so far have no 他 escaped the trap of writing the whole life of Mao Zedong into one consistent story. No matter how many years they spend going through archives, interviewing eye witnesses and travelling to important locations, when it comes to writing the biography of Mao Zedong only so much is conveyed to the reader as fits into the argument of the author. This way of writing a biography helps the reader to come to a certain understanding of the biographed person; but it always reduces the person the biography is about to a one dimensional one purpose personality.

We need multi-dimensional biographies. And these biographies should not only be based on new sources. Rather than trying the impossible in writing the "true story of Mao", multi-dimensional biographies should concentrate on the multitude of existing images and imaginations of Mao, including those which Mao created for us and had others create as well as those which do not comply with his views. Chances are high that we dig out much more about Mao from doing this kind of archeological work than from opening yet another exclusive archive which is closed to everybody but the one author. There is still a lot to be done.

¹⁵ Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik: Parteigeschichtsschreibung in der V China: Typen – Themen und Methoden. Wiesbaden 1984.

¹⁶ Li Zhisui: *The Private Life of Chairman Mao*. New York 1994.

¹⁷ See cover of Li Zhisui's book.

¹⁸ Roderick MacFarquhar (Fn.8).