



Mao Zedong: A Life

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“Spence draws upon his extensive knowledge of Chinese politics and culture to create an illuminating picture of Mao. . . . Superb.” (*Chicago Tribune*)

From humble origins in the provinces, Mao Zedong rose to absolute power, unifying with an iron fist a vast country torn apart by years of weak leadership, colonialism, and war. This sharply drawn and insightful account brings to life this modern-day emperor and the tumultuous era that he did so much to shape.

Jonathan Spence captures Mao in all his paradoxical grandeur and sheds light on the radical transformation he unleashed that still reverberates in China today.

Mao Zedong: A Life Details

Date : Published August 29th 2006 by Penguin Books (first published 1999)

ISBN : 9780143037729

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Format : Paperback 188 pages

Genre : Biography, Cultural, China, History, Nonfiction, Asia

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Han says

For a small like this, I would say it is a comprehensive overview of Mao, how he started and ended, which helps me to understand why many things are like this in modern China. They all have its root.

As a Chinese born and reared in mainland China, I have a mixed feeling about Mao after reading this book.

Like many people who have commented, this book doesn't reveal anything about Mao's personality. All statements are very objective, which is good for a brief biography. However, I would like to know more about Mao's relationship with Jiang Qing and other his colleagues such as Zhou enlai and Lin Biao.

Hobbes says

This was no deep look into the trivial doings of Mao, but rather a synopsis of his life. I found it to be absolutely perfect for what it was. The details all seemed to be on the same plane: no sudden dips down into minutia, unmatched elsewhere. Likewise, no skipping over the surface to cover great gulfs of time in only a few pages. No doubt the end lacked depth but the author certainly made a good case for they why: Mao's personal journey having been mostly completed and no events were happening to him instead of emanating from him.

If someone wishes a quick summary, just under 200 pages, of a man that has defined a country for generations this is wonderful pick. It does provide insight into the man along with giving an account of the history of his time. Being someone who knew only as much as I could remember from my Asian history lessons out of mediocre text books, I did not feel lost at all. This is a well written, concise book that does exactly what it sets out to.

Hilmi Isa says

Mao, hasil tulisan *Jonathan D. Spence*, merupakan sebuah buku biografi ringkas mengenai seorang tokoh besar China pada abad ke-20, *Mao Zedong*.

Buku yang berketebalan 205 muka surat sahaja ini ditulis oleh seorang yang sememangnya pakar mengenai hal ehwal negara China. Buku ini amat sesuai sekali dibaca oleh mereka yang mungkin selama ini tidak pernah mengetahui latar belakang dan sejarah kehidupan Mao Zedong selama ini.

Walaupun ini bukan kali pertama saya membaca buku biografi mengenai Mao, namun, membaca buku ini mendedahkan beberapa fakta yang tidak saya ketahui sebelum ini.

Cian says

A concise and historically punctual overview of Mao Zedong and the development of his 'Thought' within (but beginning much outside) the global narrative of Communist insurgence, particularly where similarities

with the Soviet Union could be drawn.

Although perhaps a little vague, especially where the later years of the boy born in the obscurity of the periphery within the sprawling realms of China - a country humiliated by foreign imperial bureaucracies, and the ineffectiveness of the late-decade decadence of the late 19th century Qing dynasty - this book accurately explains the changing cultural climate of the maturing Mao in a story book fashion that presents the Chairman as both an idea and a contradiction. A man who was at once an educated peasant - and at the same time not really a peasant at all despite his rustic tendencies. His intellectualism alienating him spiritually from the humble ruralness with which he hoped to shape a New China and, and mould his personal and professional image.

Though no matter his posturings, his visions of a utopian working-class China in which the blood and toil of the peasantry subsided all things would come to undercut his baseline ideology as it was the exploitation of the peasantry again which were to propel his idealisms to a reality. A reality that was in-achievable beneath his tunnel-visioned lens of policy construction.

Bordering on the maniac, and the paranoid, his efforts and ultimate vision was increasingly mired by his imposed isolation - where he at once sought to set himself apart from the rest of the party as a rural egalitarian and crusader of the people, but was at heart a faltering intellectual who could never himself implement the new reality with which his administration and ultimate control was effectively a symbol, a burning crux for revolution. A revolution he himself withheld the rights to envision - as distant and isolated a figure as he became as from the young pragmatist concerned with civil and social liberty as a youth.

The book is a good if brief analysis of the Chairman's state of mind and maraud of personal and contextual influences. His isolation itself, though extensively explained with regards to his 'second circle years' is not wholly brought into discussion when maybe it most specifically should be, where Mao's very mentality as leader of the party would develop as it did primarily within the spacing of the Yan'an cylindrical aura of influence during the latter war years.

Whilst concurrently Mao's stashed time as Chairman (when most all consolidations of ideological power were made) is brushed over somewhat in favour of his totemed and far-reaching strategic influence upon the youth with regards to the Cultural Revolution, the formation of a new crimson Red Guard yielding the most effective gains in terms of historiography - where a basic, but good introduction to Mao is considered.

Worth the read - but only as a supplement to something denser or perhaps more specific in its scope and subsequent analysis.

Derek Ide says

Worth reading, especially for the early/formative years of Mao's life. Spence traces his intellectual and political trajectory well, that is right up until Mao assumes power. After that Spence's writing becomes sloppy, heavy-handed, and often opaque. It's not entirely clear why Mao did anything he did, other than the tacit suggestion that Mao was simply a power-hungry megalomaniac. Good primer, worth pursuing other writers (especially more sympathetic accounts) alongside it.

Jasmine says

This is a good quick read for someone who interested in the way Mao created a public personality and clung to failing policies despite some evidence of his own doubt and criticism from others. His journey from a child born in a peasant village who was quick to follow the winds of radical movements and read subversive

newspapers as a youth to an isolated older man that imposed radical policies rooted in lofty aphorisms and who was paranoid of dissent from intellectuals and students much like himself when he was a youth. I wish this book had gone more into depth about how his conflict with Chiang Kai-shek or the Chinese civil war. I wondered while reading the book if Mao's experience with the several deaths of his children in their infancy and detachment from then influenced his apathy towards the suffering of the people for the sake of revolution.

On another note there was some amusing trivia such as his quote to Peng Dehuai "if your not going to shit then get off the pot!"

What my father had told me about his life began to come together such as in in hundred blossoming flowers speech in 1957 which is when my father recalled Mao encouraging dissent with the dissenters promptly being punished for speaking out against Mao. My father's cousin committed suicide after speaking out in this period. My father called it "luring the snake out of the hole".

David Redman says

For those looking for a short introduction into the life of Chairman Mao Zedong, this is a perfect book. Although it is true that others have gone more in depth, for a person who is just reading for a simple understanding of his life it gives the information that helps you understand the revolution leading to the current state of The People's Republic of China, changing from their empire to their Nationalist Government to the communist government today. Spence describes his life from his beginnings to today.

Hock Tjoa says

A brief and not at all sensational account of Chairman Mao. Meaning, it does not address any of the sensational aspects of Mao's personality (such as Mao's physician did) or dwell on the disasters of the Cultural Revolution or of the Great Leap Forward or get into the whys and wherefores of Mao's (manipulative) relationship with Lin Biao, Liu Shao Qi or Zhou Enlai. Instead, it is a "straight up" account of Mao's life and succeeds I think in communicating the essentials of these without getting into any detail about those other, polemical issues. I think it well worth reading in addition to -- any part of a very broad spectrum of books.

Syed Fathi says

This small book which tries to tell a story about one huge world leader, really helps readers in a sense that you can understand a huge subject with fewer pages. Of course, it needs simplification, and also selection, in order to achieve this goal. A layman about the subject, I find the book helpful in my journey as readers. As I get to understand the subject in a less painful way (you need to sip through a few thick tomes to understand it as a whole).

I find Mao life story, struggle, family life, as interesting, strange, and often paradoxical in many cases. Born in 1893 at Hunan, he moved from being a librarian to the chairman of communist China. In the early life, Spence collected the habit of Mao, particularly his love for reading. Early in Changsha, Mao read rigorously

in a library founded by late Qing's reformist. He had a great interest in world geography and history. One of this early teacher was Yang Changji (Mao married to his daughter later in his life), which reiterate the importance of exercise. Mao absorbs this idea and would regularly go hiking with his friend and swim in the Xiang River.

Mao also active in organizing student association to go on strike against Zhang Jingyao, famously known as General Zhang, a military governor in Hunan. Mao also loves poetry, one of his beautiful poem written to his wife, Yang Kaihui in 1923:

*I'm begging you to sever these tangled ties of emotion.
I myself would like to be a rootless wanderer.
And have nothing more to do with lovers' whispers.*

John Pistelli says

I like the old Penguin Lives series of brief biographies; they were published between 1999 and 2002 and then abruptly discontinued. I used to read or peruse them back then—I remember reading the one on Woolf in full and maybe Austen too, as well as looking through the Joyce and Melville. So I decided to revisit the series with this volume on Chairman Mao by the distinguished historian Jonathan Spence. It has convinced me that the brief biography format works better for writers than for politicians, since the lives of the latter are so crowded with incident and action and personality.

Moreover, this book is rather oddly structured, leaving for its last third the narrative of Mao's actual rule over China and providing less detail about that period than about Mao's earlier life. This creates a certain "balance," but it neglects the obvious fact that readers, especially those coming to Mao for the first time, will probably be most interested in his leadership. Spence, who rarely editorializes, seems to need this narrative structure to make his argument, though: he casts Mao's life as a tragedy in which the thoughtful, humane, gifted, idealistic young man from the rural provinces rises to world prominence and is then undone by his own hubris. People who know more than I do about modern China will have to decide if this is plausible.

Spence also emphasizes Mao's intellectual ambitions and inadequacies, a motif that climaxes in the Cultural Revolution. In this ghastly episode (though one that will no doubt find more and more defenders today), Mao revenged himself on party leaders for the failures of his own highly ideological plans to modernize China in the Great Leap Forward. Calling on the populace—especially the young—to revolt against their teachers, parents, and other authorities, to "attack the headquarters," in Mao's words, he consolidated his own authority since his ideology was the guide to the revolution. Spence attributes to Mao a resentment for intellectuals with roots in his rural background and in his own failure to become a genuine scholar or thinker himself:

Mao had also grown more hostile to intellectuals as the years went by—perhaps because he knew he would never really be one, not even at the level of his own secretaries, whom he would commission to go to the libraries to track down classical sources for him and help with historical references. Mao knew, too, that scholars of the old school like Deng Tuo, the man he had summarily ousted from the *People's Daily*, had their own erudite circles of friends with whom the [sic] pursued leisurely hours of classical connoisseurship, which was scarcely different from the lives they might have enjoyed under the old society. They wrote elegant and amusing essays, which were printed in various literary newspapers, that used allegory and analogy to tease the kind of "commandism" that had been so present in the Great Leap, and indeed in the Communist leadership as a whole. It was surely of such men that Mao was thinking when he wrote: "All wisdom comes from the masses. I've always said that intellectuals

are the most lacking in intellect. The intellectuals cock their tails in the air, and they think, 'If I don't rank number one in all the world, then I'm at least number two.'"

Here Spence's insistence on going into detail about Mao's early studies, his attraction to the classics, his love of poetry, pays off. One is even tempted, if one has known a lot of literary intellectuals, to laugh ruefully along with Mao's insult. (And I am even tempted to suggest an analogy along these lines between Mao and Nixon, both of whom built policy around their and their constituencies' resentments, justified and unjustified, against academic and cultural elites.) The Mao who made the Cultural Revolution, though, was living in comfort and luxury beyond even most scholars, traveling around the country in his specially outfitted train and dallying with his mistresses.

And Spence's clear, factual, and even decorous prose can have a quality of euphemism about what actually went on in the Cultural Revolution, leading readers to believe that it might be an example of some regrettable but necessary excess in the birth of a modern nation rather than a top-down pogrom against civilization itself by a despot preaching self-criticism even as he was immured in the appurtenances of authority. Spence does mention torture as the Revolution's method, and he holds up some Red Guard rhetoric for implied mockery, but the *New York Times* review of the biography, written by a penitent journalist taken in at the time by Maoist propaganda, gives a more vivid sense of the actual atrocities involved than the biography itself does:

For a year or more, I wrote uncritically, even enthusiastically, about dreadful things -- nuclear scientists shoveling out pigpens who insisted they had been ignorant until "educated" by the peasants; classical musicians with fingers smashed by the Red Guards who described their past work as "poisonous weeds"; acupuncture as the sole "anesthetic" for deep-brain surgery in operations that, as we learned years later, few patients survived. Only when the rationalizations became too great to bear did I revert to my instincts.

To understand is not to excuse. One can see, reading this book, how a man of Mao's intelligence and sensibility could nevertheless proceed by degrees into tyranny by the extremity of the circumstances in which he had to maneuver: decades of war and deprivation. And it is useless, also obnoxious, to airily insist on liberalism as bromide and panacea to historical actors born far away and long ago. I don't fault Spence for avoiding such rhetoric in 1999, when it was so fashionable. All the same, the lessons for us in Mao's life, especially its final third, should not be avoided: theory must subject itself to observable reality; what looks like popular activity is often manipulated by elites; populist rhetoric is usually promoted by elites themselves for their own purposes; the arts and sciences may be open to all in terms of opportunity, but considered in themselves they are inegalitarian insofar as not everyone is talented enough—perhaps only a few are—to attain great achievements within them. Spence makes the pattern of Mao's policies clear: he destroyed wealth, whether economic or cultural, in the guise of distributing it equally.

Of course, it is more difficult to evaluate Mao than, say, Hitler: many of his goals seem laudable—the elimination of poverty, the reform of unjust hierarchies, the resistance to imperialism. All the more reason, then, to be clear about the lies and cruelty and stupidity into which such goals may be corrupted.

Jimmy says

I actually used an old audio tape while driving. Shows you the kind of stuff I listen to.

A fair, even-handed biography. Very thorough. What a catastrophic failure Maoism was. How does it happen? Part of it is losing touch with reality. Part of it is a fear of being overthrown. Part of it is believing so much in a philosophy that all discussion goes out the door. He was willing to destroy all of the historical buildings in Beijing and would rather have had all smokestacks. So he nixed a plan to have the greatest park

system in the world for workers.

At least "20 million people died" in the Great Leap Forward or Cultural Revolution. Enough said.

Yves Gounin says

La biographie eut longtemps mauvaise presse dans la science historique. Elle y voyait un exercice racoleur – qui rencontrait d'ailleurs souvent le succès dans le grand public – plus soucieux de multiplier les anecdotes croustillantes que d'étudier la « longue durée ». Avec le renouveau de l'histoire politique, la biographie a fait son retour dans les années 80. Il s'agissait d'ailleurs moins souvent de présenter un personnage individuel dans sa singularité que de traiter l'histoire collective à travers le prisme de l'histoire singulière. La biographie que J.N. Jeanneney consacre à François de Wendel a pour thème central les relations entre milieux d'affaires et vie politique sous la IIIème République ; quand S. Berstein étudie Edouard Henriot, c'est une incarnation de l'Idée républicaine qu'il poursuit.

S'attaquer aux « monstres » de l'histoire est plus difficile ; car leur singularité fut si écrasante, leur longévité si grande qu'on ne peut réduire leur personnalité à une seule thématique. Du coup, la singularité du « héros » biographique repasse au premier plan. C'est le risque assumé par Jean Lacouture dans ses essais monumentaux sur De Gaulle ou Mitterrand. Des questions passionnantes surgissent : comment un homme que rien souvent ne distingue initialement de ses contemporains va-t-il se retrouver dans la position de marquer l'histoire de sa trace ? Est-ce le fruit du hasard, des circonstances (De Gaulle aurait-il été De Gaulle sans la Seconde guerre mondiale ?) ou l'aboutissement logique d'un apprentissage tout entier tourné vers la conquête du pouvoir ? Autre question qu'appelle l'étude biographique des « tyrans » les plus sinistres que compta le XXème siècle : comment ces leaders charismatiques, souvent animés du désir sincère de faire le bien, de restaurer la grandeur de leur Nation, en vinrent-ils à causer la mort de millions de victimes ?

La très classique biographie que le sinologue Jonathan Spence consacre à Mao Zedong ne répond malheureusement pas à ces questions. S'appuyant sur une solide documentation, sans prétendre faire de révélation fracassante, l'auteur raconte la vie du grand dirigeant chinois sans se perdre à narrer celle de la Chine. Seul le tiers du livre traite de l'exercice du pouvoir, après 1949. On appréciera les développements consacrés à la formation intellectuelle de Mao, à sa (tumultueuse) vie familiale. On regrettera en revanche de rester à distance du Mao du Grand Bond en Avant et de la Révolution culturelle.

On peine aussi à trouver chez Mao cette « rupture » qui divise souvent la biographie des « grands hommes ». Né en 1893 dans une famille de paysans riches du Hunan, il tarde à s'affirmer à la tête du mouvement marxiste. Il n'occupe qu'un strapontin à la fondation du PCC en juillet 1921 et subit la Longue Marche plus qu'il ne l'initie. Son succès vient de son rejet très rapide de la ligne soviétique d'union avec le Guomindang et de révolution urbaine et ouvrière ; il lui préfère la scission d'avec Chiang Kai Chek, l'engagement militaire contre les Japonais et la révolution paysanne. Sa stratégie réussit et on voit Mao mûrir dans les grottes de Yan'an en 1936 : « De plus en plus rigide, l'homme cherche à plier son entourage à ses caprices et à ses croyances. La vie austère qu'il a menée par nécessité puis par choix, il s'en vante à présent et prétend même forcer tout le monde à l'imiter. Oubliée, la fascination qu'il éprouvait dans sa jeunesse pour les aspects les plus subtils de la civilisation chinoise » (pp.126/7). C'est peut-être à Yan'an que se situe le « tournant ».

Quelles furent les raisons pour lesquelles celui qui fut « le Lénine de la révolution chinoise avant d'essayer maladroitement à en devenir le Staline » (Lucien Bianco) causa la mort de près de 20 millions de Chinois pendant le Grand Bond en Avant et traumatisa toute une génération dix ans plus tard dans la Révolution culturelle ? Ce qui frappe dans la biographie du Grand Timonier, c'est depuis son plus jeune âge combien il

se prend au sérieux et manque désespérément d'humour. Sans doute cette critique naît-elle dans une époque qui survalorise peut-être l'humour. Mais à lire un Mao si fanatiquement confiant dans l'avenir du communisme, on se prend à croire qu'un peu d'ironie aurait peut-être évité à la Chine bien des malheurs.

Kevin says

A nice introduction to the full life of Mao, a name that's hard not to recognize but one I knew very little about. If you've got an inkling of curiosity about the foundation of the communist party in China and want to learn some about Mao's life, this is a good sampler. It's a brief little book and should give you an idea for whether you want to pursue the more in-depth tomes out there.

Rafaël Garcia-Suarez says

The first half of the book could be titled "things happen to Mao", and the second one "finding excuses to Mao". It gives a concise overview of Mao's trajectory, including his formative years, away from the power and from Beijing; I missed a bigger picture of China's history and the other leadership figures of both the Guomindang and the Communist Party.

Stephanie says

History is not really my favorite subject but finally I finished read this one. The brief biography of Mao Ze Dong tells the overview of his life and what happening in the China at that period. The book provides detail about Mao's earlier life. Mao had struggle so often against the autocratic nature of his father, hated and despised the shackles of bourgeois marriage and had found joy in a free-love relationship, detest schools and would rather go to the libraries to seek classical and historian reference, and always sought freedom of spirit and the chance to grow. The book also leading to the long years Mao took of war, which emerged strengthened and more numerous, with powerfully effective techniques of mass mobilization in the rural settings and genuine skill at the manipulation of belief through well-conceptualized propaganda.
