

Mao and The Da Vinci Code: Conspiracy, Narrative and History

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The otherwise informed reader might be forgiven for having given up reading Dan Brown's racy *The Da Vinci Code* on page 149. Here the author explains that "Long before the establishment of Greenwich as the prime meridian, the zero longitude of the entire world had passed directly through Paris, and through the Church of Saint-Sulpice. The brass marker in Saint-Sulpice was a memorial to the world's first prime meridian, and although Greenwich had stripped Paris of the honour in 1888, the original Rose Line was still visible today."¹

This location and point of reference is of course essential to the later plot. That it is historically misleading to describe the meridian in this way is largely irrelevant to the extremely compelling narrative presented by Dan Brown. For those who care about historical research in the fiction they read, Arturo Perez-Reverte's equally as fictional *The Nautical Chart* is more soundly based, with its plot revolving around the recognition that in the 17th and 18th Centuries there was no primacy in identification of the meridian of

longitude: many European cities attempted to establish their claim to that role.²

On the surface there would seem to be little point in taking Dan Brown to task for his lack of historical understanding on this and other matters.³ *The Da Vinci Code* is on most levels avowedly a work of fiction – an adventure story that delivers a heavy dose of escapism. Its primary concern is conspiracy, which almost necessarily permits conjecture as evidence, a relationship that history usually handles more cautiously. Two conspiracies are at the heart of *The Da Vinci Code*. One is the conspiracy of The Priory, said to be a secret society protecting reason and the 'sacred feminine' of the early Christian Church. The other is the conspiracy of the mainstream Roman Catholic Church to maintain its dogma and organization, particularly through the more recent manifestation of Opus Dei, described by Brown in this book as a 'deeply

¹ Dan Brown *The Da Vinci Code* Corgi Books, Sydney, Australia, 2003.

² Arturo Perez-Reverte *The Nautical Chart* Pan Macmillan, London, 2002. Dava Sobel *Longitude* Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1996.

³ See, for example: Richard Abanes *The Truth Behind the Da Vinci Code: A Challenging Response to the Best-selling Novel* Harvest House Publishers, 2004.

devout Catholic sect' but more usually referred to within the Church as a prelatore - an organisation independent of location that includes both ordained priests and lay members.⁴

There can be little doubt that part of the popularity of *The Da Vinci Code* is indeed its concern with conspiracy. Conspiracy, like celebrity, has become a social obsession. The past few decades have seen the growth of conspiracy theories, or parapolitics, about a vast range of social, cultural and political activities. These include suspicions about the roles of governments, government agencies, multinational corporations, scientists and 'those in the know' in attempting to mislead across issues such as fluoridization, artificial sweeteners and access to this planet by extraterrestrial beings.⁵ Indeed, so great is the desire to find conspiracy that the strongest evidence for the existence of a conspiracy often becomes the total absence of evidence.⁶ Explanations of this phenomenon are often linked to the impact of industrialisation on communities, the waning of the importance of organised religions and the loss of faith, as well as a growing distrust of politicians.⁷

These tendencies are also well observed in and with respect to the People's Republic of China [PRC] since 1978 and possibly for many of the same reasons. Towards the end of that year there were a series of high level meetings in the party-state that introduced the retreat from both Mao-dominated politics and the previous introversion of the Chinese State. The introduction of a reform agenda and an opening to the rest of the world started a process that led domestically to rapid industrialisation, urbanisation, and economic growth; severely challenged belief in the political system; and made people more sceptical, both within the PRC and amongst external analysts, not least because the Chinese Communist Party [CCP] deliberately and purposively revised its own history. From the early 1980s on, academic, political and editorial commentators in the PRC have often talked about the resultant crisis of faith and confidence in the political system not least because they have been concerned to reinforce regime legitimacy.⁸ Certainly too the secretive nature of CCP politics has made it a field ripe for conspiracy theorists in the period of greater

⁴ Founded 1928. Website: <http://www.opusdei.org/>

⁵ See, for example: Jonathan Vankin and John Whalen *The 80 Greatest Conspiracies of All Time* Citadel Press, 2004; Joel Levy *Conspiracies: 50 reasons to watch your back* Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 2005.

⁶ Charles Wright 'Web of deceit' in *Australian Financial Review* 21 March 1998, p.8.

⁷ See for example: 'Conspiracy Theorem' in the *Sydney Morning Herald* 8 October 2005, p.40 reporting on research from university academics

in the UK meeting in Derby. Brown himself has stumbled into both controversy and additional claims of conspiracy with the claims from others, notably Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln that Brown's ideas come from their *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (published Dell, New York, 1983.) See <http://priority-of-sion.com/posd/baigent.html>

⁸ See, for example: David S G Goodman 'The Chinese Political Order after Mao: "Socialist Democracy" and the Exercise of state power' in *Political Studies* Vol. 33, No. 2, June 1985, p 218-235.

openness (particularly in publishing within the PRC) of the last twenty five years. Alongside some similar concerns to those to be found in the rest of the world (especially those related to spies, multinational corporations and extraterrestrials) there has been a whole range of PRC-published books exposing the inside story of CCP politics and the lives of individual celebrities.⁹

Outside the PRC too, the earlier certainties of dealing with China, the PRC and the CCP have also been challenged in a variety of ways. In particular, in the last decade or so, the search for revisionist history and conspiracy has delivered three books in China Studies that have had considerable impact on the field: Jenner's *The Tyranny of History: The Roots of China's Crisis* which argues that the project of the Chinese state has long been and remains fatally flawed; Menzies's *1421: The Year China Discovered the World* which suggests that the Chinese imperial navy circumnavigated the globe well in advance of any Europeans; and Jung Chang and Jon Halliday's *Mao: The Unknown Story* which portrays Mao as a self-obsessed dictator whose behaviour was in every respect even more extreme and excessive than either Stalin or Hitler.

In all three cases the authors identify the conspiracy of the political system at the heart of their subject of study, as well as (to some extent even more importantly by implication) the conspiracy of academics and scholars who have chosen not to reveal the truth as now revised by each of these authors.

All three books of these books have been controversial for a variety of reasons. They have been to a remarkable extent quite sensationalist in the claims that they make and in the ways in which they make them, and their marketing has reflected this. In particular, as might be expected, each has been presented as completely revising knowledge and understanding, not just of the phenomenon directly at the heart of investigation, but also of China as a whole. In each case, revisionism has also been presented as coming from outside the mainstream, particularly of academic scholarship, thereby reinforcing the apparent anti-establishment thrust of the analysis. Possibly in part response, each has been attacked by academics for its poor scholarship, which almost necessarily it would seem has added not only to each author's self-belief but also to the confidence of their (usually non-academic) supporters and their moral superiority in the case being argued. This academic criticism has of course not stopped each of these three texts becoming mainstream literary best sellers around the world, and one of them

⁹ Probably the best known exposés have been an account by Mao's erstwhile doctor, and the apparent inside story on the attempted coup by Mao's then designated successor (Lin Biao) and his flight and death in 1971. Both have been translated and published in English: Li Zhisui *The Private Life of Chairman Mao* Random House, New York, 1994; Yao Ming-le *The Conspiracy and Murder of Mao's Heir* Collins, London, 1983.

(Menzies) has already occasioned a television series.¹⁰

Apart from their obsession with revising history and their sensationalism, all three books share a number of additional common characteristics. Each has clear academic pretensions, though it is clear from the very start that they are not prepared to obey more normal academic rules of engagement. Quite apart from other functional aspects of academic writing (of which more anon) the more formal and basic architecture is often absent. Jenner has no introduction, no list of sources; Jung Chang and Halliday write with no introduction, no conclusion. Paradoxically, Menzies's *1421* (clearly the most fantasist of the three) has an introduction, list of sources, and a bibliography. They also share a common view of history as the past waiting to be discovered, which of course facilitates the imagination of conspiracy, since the emphasis focuses on 'truth' rather than a process of more open discussion and interpretation with less certainty.

The style of writing employed in all three could in no sense be said to be dispassionate, and is extremely polemic. Moreover, the author is involved personally in each story: Jenner in middle age, as admitted in his own text as an embittered once sympathetic Maoist academic;

Menzies as former British Royal Navy commander whose previous experience make him explicitly in his own assessment uniquely able to work out the hidden history of China's naval explorations; and Jung Chang as victim, though in interviews connected to the book's publication rather than in the book itself.

A consideration of these three books, and of their claims to revisionist history, provides more than simply the opportunity to detail and demonstrate poor scholarship, satisfying though that may be under the circumstances. More interestingly, it stimulates consideration of the characteristics of academic scholarship, particularly of history, and its differences to other kinds of writing more generally. These three texts raise questions about the nature of evidence and argument that are fundamental to academic endeavour. They also touch on issues about the use of narrative and the nature of conspiracy, as well as raising questions about the relationship between history as past events and history as interpretation of the past.

It is far from easy to find a term that appropriately describes the kind of writing represented in these books. A charitable starting point would seem to be their identification as 'popular scholarship.' There would seem to be a clear distinction to be made between on the one hand, fiction, even where that fiction uses historical events and characters (such as *The Da Vinci Code*) or is based on historical scholarship, and on the

¹⁰ 1421: *The Year China Discovered America?*: www.pbs.org/aboutpbs/news/20030110_china.html Shown on ABC TV. Sunday 6 November 2005, 13 November 2005, 20 November 2005, 7.30 pm: <http://www.abc.net.au/tv/guide/netw/200511/program/sZY7566A001D6112005T193000.htm>

other hand, scholarship itself, including popular scholarship. The dimensions of scholarship necessarily vary from field to field and discipline. Nonetheless, it would be hard to think of scholarly writing without three functional characteristics: verifiable evidence; contextualisation in a corpus of knowledge; and a (at least implicit) theory of knowledge, including an understanding of how law-like generalisations (often aka proof) are established. In history and social science, which might at best always be regarded as less precise areas of knowledge, proof is an argument not simply that a particular case can be demonstrated but also that its counter arguments would appear to be less likely.

It is possible that the term 'popular scholarship' is meant to imply an approach to knowledge that does not respect these basic characteristics of scholarship. More usually it suggests a more immediate and reader-friendly way of delivering the message(s) of scholarship that avoids some of the more idiosyncratic aspects of academic writing. Certainly, none of the three books under consideration here qualify under the more usual description of popular scholarship. All three seem to accept that 'the truth is out there somewhere,' lack any apparent theory of knowledge, and do not engage with logical as opposed to metaphysical proof. Like Lewis Carroll's Bellman they rely on repeated statement rather than argument – 'What I tell you three

times is true.'¹¹ Whatever their other defects, all are characterised by constant overstatement. Conjecture frequently replaces evidence – almost totally in the case of Menzies – and evidence is too often not verifiable. Moreover, the writings of others are in large measure ignored, even when they (remarkably) would appear to support the case being made.

All three of the books are strong on narrative. Indeed, it could be argued that a strong narrative is in all three cases a substitute for evidence and argument. Several of the critics of Menzies's *1421* have suggested that the book should be regarded as fiction rather than non-fiction in the manner of *The Da Vinci Code* or Erich von Daniken's *Chariots of the Gods*.¹² Jenner's *Tyranny of History* is clearly a different category of polemical, poor scholarship. Jung Chang and Jon Halliday's *Mao* is also highly polemical though much of the book is clearly a similar form of fiction to that employed by Menzies. If something had been the case, then these are the consequences that might have followed: except that doubt has been totally exiled.

All the same, as the reader starts to consider their response to these three books they are also likely to reflect on the essentially contested nature of evidence and knowledge. How we know what we know depends not only on records but also on interpretation of those records,

¹¹ Lewis Carroll *The Hunting of the Snark* Fit One – The Landing. Stanza 2. 1876.

¹² Geoff Wade (Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore) on H-ASIA@h-net.msu.edu 7 November 2005.

and that is often more dependent on the spirit of the times than even those who accept the necessary influence of contemporary factors may sometimes admit. Though many historians are undoubtedly positivist, history more reliably remains a continuing discussion about the interpretation of the past, including engagement with earlier scholarship. Writing of all kinds – fiction as well as academic writing – contributes to the creation of an intellectual environment. In that context *The Da Vinci Code* and other assorted conspiracies take on a new importance. As it becomes far from straightforward to maintain a distinction between fiction and scholarship then it would seem safer to argue that not only scholarship but also even historical fiction should not deliberately mislead and that in so far as either fiction or popular scholarship lay any claim to historical legitimacy then they too should evince both integrity and a grounding in the contemporary state of historical knowledge.

The China Conspiracy

Bill Jenner's *The Tyranny of History*¹³ played a formative role in the emergence of a public discourse amongst academics, opinion-formers,

policy-makers and politicians in Europe and North America during the early 1990s to the effect that the PRC's rapid and dramatic economic growth would lead to its political disintegration.¹⁴ The book was written in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Incident of 4 June 1989 when the leadership of the CCP sent armed forces to disperse students and (predominantly) young people who had been demonstrating in Beijing's main square for a couple of months. It was published in 1992 when its author was Professor of Chinese at ANU. Jenner had worked as a translator in Beijing on the eve of the Cultural Revolution and is best known as translator of Sang Ye's *Chinese Lives* – a series of interviews with ordinary Chinese in the manner of Studs Terkel's Chicago daily life stories – and a whole series of books published by Foreign Languages Press, in Beijing including *Journey to the West* and the autobiography of Puyi, last Manchu Emperor of China. These events clearly frame Jenner's attitudes and the generation of this book. The introductory 'Note to the Reader' charts his emotional move from a China-lover during the Cold War to a far harsher critic in the early 1990s, and references to this change

¹³ W J F Jenner *The Tyranny of History: The Roots of China's Crisis* Allen Lane, London, 1992. Reviews may be found in: Peter Lowe in *International Affairs* vol.69 no.1 January 1993, p.173; Ranbir Vohra in *Journal of Asian Studies* vol.52 no.2, May 1993, p.440; Roger V des Forges in *Pacific Affairs* vol.67 no.3, 1994, p.441; and John Schrecker in *The China Quarterly* no.134, June 1994, p.365.

¹⁴ For example: Maria Hsia Chang 'China's Future: Regionalism, Federalism, or Disintegration' in *Studies in Comparative Communism* Vol.XXV No.3 September 1992, p.211; Chao Chien-min 'Transition From Authoritarian Rule: Is Eastern Europe's Today Mainland China's Tomorrow?' in *Issues and Studies* 26, no. 11 1990; Gerald Segal *China Changes Shape* Adelphi Papers No.287, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1994.

in mood are repeated at other times during the book.¹⁵

The essence of Jenner's argument in *Tyranny of History* is that China is a conspiracy: an artificial construct that has been imposed over a series of local conditions and cultures. China's history provides the state and the social system with the strength that keeps it united as China but at the same time this history prevents China adapting as it needs to develop further in the future. Past success, Jenner argues, has made the formula sacrosanct. He suggests that the social system will collapse, politics implode, and the state disintegrate into entities determined by the many different local cultures.

The siege and massacre of Peking in 1989 and the whole range of policies that have followed them, policies evidently aimed at undoing many of the apparent changes of the last decade, raise more insistently than ever the dreary possibility that China is caught in a prison from which there is no obvious escape, a prison continually improved over thousands of years, a prison of history – a prison of history both as literary creation and as the accumulated consequences of the past. The essence of this prison is that there is no easy escape from pasts and the ways they are perceived, which restrict the present to a greater extent than most other cultures of the world are restricted by their pasts. (p.1)

Jenner's starting point may be the crisis of the early 1990s, where the CCP was seriously concerned for its legitimacy in the aftermath of June 1989. However, he rapidly builds this into a far deeper structural crisis. As he concludes his first chapter:

China's ills go far deeper than in the particular dictatorship that is now approaching its end. (p.17)

and he later explicitly denies:

that it only needs the Communist dictatorship to collapse for China to become a land of sweetness and light. (p.228.)

The problem though that Jenner never resolves is to explain precisely the nature of the crisis China faces, let alone how it is manifested. In Jenner's view the China conspiracy keeps the country united and its people repressed, but this has always been the case. His book details how several different institutions and traditions are sclerotic, but also emphasises that this lack of dynamism is not new but deliberate. These include the operation of the state over several thousand years, the role of bureaucracy, the hold of the family, the functions of architecture, the relationship between economic growth and the environment, the understanding of law, the importance of superstition, and the centrality of the writing system.

Through his examination of these institutions, Jenner concludes that there are:

... structural problems, with roots deep in the past, to be found in virtually every aspect of China as a cultural invention and also of China

¹⁵ See, for example, Jenner's description of reading Red Guard texts from the Cultural Revolution sympathetically during the 1960s and then later his surprise at finding them cynically devoid of 'politics' p.215/6.

as a group of actually existing human societies ...the general crisis that is the sum of all the problems is so grave that the political survival of China as a unitary state, the physical survival of those who live in the poorest and most remote parts of the countryside, the moral survival of value systems inherited from the past or adapted from abroad that might be adequate to today's and tomorrow's needs, and the intellectual survival of the written code and the traditions and thought patterns it carries are all at stake. (p.227)

His prescriptions for the future are to suggest that China needs to move away from its current emphasis on uniformity, weaken central control of politics and society, and encourage localism and local cultural identities.

Completely missing from Jenner's argument is any theory of social or political change. One of the strangest puzzles then becomes to understand how if the lack of opportunity for change described by Jenner generates a crisis during the 1990s then how did it come about that a similar crisis was avoided in previous centuries. Perhaps Jenner would argue that the crisis has been ever present but that there had been no direct consequences. Quite apart from the semantic vandalism involved in this definition of crisis, here is an apparent intellectual paradox crying out for Jack Goldstone's work on explaining political change in China.¹⁶ Yet

Jenner's voice clearly wants to be both isolated and nihilistic. As throughout the book Jenner makes almost no reference to other scholars or writings, Chinese or otherwise, and certainly not to Goldstone or any other explanation of change in China.¹⁷

This characteristic of Jenner's scholarship severely inhibits his argument in a number of areas where there are writings and research that would clearly be of use. In China-specific terms it would be surprising if Jenner had not at some time read Theodore de Bary's *Sources of Chinese Tradition* which is centrally concerned with China's long-term social, economic and political values that are at the heart of the former's discussion.¹⁸ Certainly Jenner's writing is informed by de Bary's interpretation of Chinese culture and its description of the influence of the past on the present. Moreover, reference back to de Bary might have provided a framework for analysing the ways in which the PRC and the CCP have built on the structures of

Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World University of California Press, 1991.

¹⁷ There is a reference to Andrew Nathan (Columbia University, Political Scientist, and well-known analyst of democracy in China) on p.180 but no source for the comments. The same is true for H.G. Creel's analysis of China's bureaucracy (p.20) Owen Lattimore on the functions of the Great Wall (p.94) Frank Leeming on patterns of cultivation (p.29) and Maruyama Masao on national war-guilt (p.230.) The index lists the French scholar Marianne Bastid but reference is to p.256 whereas the book finishes on p.255. The book has no notes or list of citations.

¹⁸ Theodore de Bary, Wing Tsit Chan, Burton Watson and Chester Tan *Sources of Chinese Tradition* 2 vols. Columbia University Press, New York, 1963.

¹⁶ Jack Goldstone 'East and West in the Seventeenth Century: Political Crises in Stuart England, Ottoman Turkey and Ming China' in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* Vol.30 p.103-142, 1988; and Jack Goldstone

the past and how those arrangements hinder the greater openness that Jenner clearly desires to see established.

More generally, Jenner's discussion of the artificiality and construction of China's national identity is undertaken without reference to any of the fairly extensive research and scholarship that has been concerned with examining nations, nationalism and national identity since the Second World War. For example: Ernest Gellner would have assisted Jenner in understanding the role of language (and literature) in the construction of nations¹⁹ – a central concern for his analysis of China's identity and its crisis – as would Einar Haugen.²⁰ Walker Connor and Eric Hobsbawm would have provided perspective on the role of the state in nation-building²¹ – another central concern for Jenner. Anthony Smith (who has become the single most important academic author on topics related to nations and nationalism during the 1990s) would have assisted with Jenner's work on the cultural construction of the nation, as would Benedict Anderson.²² Gellner and Smith would have provided a sound basis for a discussion of the

relationship between the state and its constituent parts.²³

Leaving aside Jenner's failure to engage with the world of scholarship in which he would like to situate himself, his argument still remains overdetermined in a number of ways. One is the equation of the empire(s) that existed before 1911 with China, and particularly the territory bounded by the PRC. The boundaries of the late Qing Empire were indeed very much those of the PRC, but this was not the case for earlier dynasties. More importantly imperial self-consciousness began to change dramatically about the middle of the 18th Century. Before this time there was little of the uniformity and conformity that are central to Jenner's description. Local identity was almost always more important than the relationship to the empire as a whole, not least because empire was equated with the world. There is a hesitation here in referring to the area of the PRC and the late Qing as 'China' or to the inhabitants of that territory as in any sense 'Chinese' (as does Jenner) because that level of self-consciousness did not apply until the beginning of the 20th Century, when it then generated a whole new political vocabulary.²⁴ Given his later comments about the revolutionary morality that used to infuse the CCP

¹⁹ Ernest Gellner *Nations and Nationalism* Cornell University Press, 1983.

²⁰ Einar Haugen 'Language, dialect, nation' in *American Anthropologist* Vol.68, p.922-935, 1966.

²¹ Walker Connor 'Nation-Building or Nation-Destroying?' in *World Politics* Vol.24, p.319-355, 1972.; Eric Hobsbawm *Nations and Nationalism* Cambridge University Press, 1990.

²² Anthony D Smith *National Identity* Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1991; Benedict Anderson *Imagined Communities* Verso, London, 1983.

²³ Ernest Gellner 'Scale and nation' in *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* Vol.3, p.1-17, 1973; Anthony D Smith *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* Blackwell, Oxford, 1986.

²⁴ Shih Chih-yu *Negotiating Ethnicity in China* Routledge, London, 2002; Yingjie Guo *Cultural Nationalism in Contemporary China: The Search for National Identity under Reform* Routledge, London, 2003.

(p.156) it is unlikely that Jenner really meant to suggest that the advent of modern nationalism made little difference to the operation of China's society and politics.

Jenner's argument is also overdetermined in its apparent insistence that China must disintegrate and the refusal to consider alternative explanations of the dynamics that might be at work. Jenner seems to equate a state's potential for sustained unity not simply with its people's ability to conform but also with a homogenous culture. This is a strange equation, especially in systems of continental scale, such as China. It also ignores the extent to which homogenous cultures are constructed. Moreover, many states and systems have managed to survive on the basis of bi- or multi-culturalism, even if a substantial proportion of those have been post-colonial migrant societies. Political geographers have long argued that culture is indeed important, but not in the crude way suggested by Jenner. More salient is the question of the 'state-idea'. The dominance of a particular state-idea in a given area determines the stability of that state.²⁵ In the case of the PRC a range of peoples who are culturally distinct all now privilege the idea of China, usually claiming that their local culture is the quintessential China. To be sure there are exceptions in Tibet and Xinjiang where the Chinese state-idea does not

run so strongly, but these are the exceptions that prove the rule.

The Tyranny of History is ultimately problematic not least because it has no noticeable logic of inquiry. Instead, the book becomes pretty much a list of 'some things I have discovered about China in my first fifty years' which is in large measure how the author presents the text in his prefatory note. It is doubly problematic because it was written by a full professor at a leading university, and one well-known for its China Studies.

The Exploration Conspiracy

The Honourable Neil Andrew, Speaker of the House of Representatives, the Honourable Paul Calvert, President of the Senate, the Honourable Prime Minister John Howard, distinguished members of the federal parliament of Australia, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am delighted to meet with you today, and address such a distinguished audience at the Australian parliament building.

Let me begin by expressing, on behalf of the Chinese government and people, my best wishes to you and, through you, to the courageous and hard-working Australian people.

Though located in different hemispheres and separated by high seas, the people of China and Australia enjoy a friendly exchange that dates back centuries.

²⁵ R Hartshorne 'The Functional Approach in Political Geography' in *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* Vol.40, 1950.

The Chinese people have all along cherished amicable feelings about the Australian people.

Back in the 1420s, the expeditionary fleets of China's Ming Dynasty reached Australian shores.

For centuries, the Chinese sailed across vast seas and settled down in what they called Southern Land, or today's Australia.

They brought Chinese culture to this land and lived harmoniously with the local people, contributing their proud share to Australia's economy, society and its thriving pluralistic culture.²⁶

This is how Hu Jintao, President of the PRC, started his speech in October 2003 when he addressed the Australian Parliament. There is though nothing to suggest that the Chinese navy reached the land now known as Australia during the 1420s, or indeed that Chinese continued to follow a route here for the following 360 odd years before Captain Philip and the First Fleet arrived. The only evidence for this part of Hu's speech is Gavin Menzies's *1421: The Year China Discovered the World*²⁷ which makes the case, or so it believes, that during 1421-3 China's naval vessels circumnavigated the globe, with in

particular, Admirals Zhou Man and Hong Bao (Chapters 6 and 7) visiting Australia during 1421-23. According to Menzies, Zhou Man also visited California and Admiral Zhou Wen visited the East Coast of North America from Florida to Rhode Island (Chapter 13.) It is interesting that no PRC leader has made a speech when visiting the USA where similar claims are made, despite Menzies's book being published in the USA with the alternative title of *1421: The Year China Discovered America*.

Gavin Menzies was born in China and served as a Royal Navy submarine commanding officer until 1970. In retirement he revisited China and during the second half of the 1970s through an examination of maps and navigation charts (as he tells it) he:

stumbled upon an incredible discovery ... which, though it did not lead to buried treasure, suggested that the history of the world as it has been known and handed down for centuries would have to be radically reversed. (p.3)

The eventual discovery was that four fleets of the (Chinese) Ming Dynasty Admiral Zheng He with about twenty-five to thirty ships and about 7,000 people circumnavigated the globe during 1421-3, travelled to and mapped the Americas, Australia, New Zealand, Antarctica, many Pacific islands, Greenland and the Arctic. Amongst other results this feat required that they were able to navigate and Menzies claims that the Chinese fleet had developed a system to determine longitude well in

²⁶ 'Constantly Increasing Common Ground' Address to a Joint Sitting of the Australian Parliament by the President of China, Hu Jintao, 24 October 2003: <http://parlinfoweb.aph.gov.au/piweb/Repository/Chamber/Hansardr/Linked/2966-4.PDF>

²⁷ Gavin Menzies *1421: The Year China Discovered the World* Random House, Sydney, 2002.

advance of its European genesis. (Appendix 4) They established settlements in several of the locations they visited including Australia, New Zealand, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Rhode Island and California. They also, according to Menzies had a profound influence on world social history, bringing rice to California (p.206) corn to the Philippines (p.127) and chickens to South America (p.124) (as well as somewhat surprisingly for New Zealanders, the mylodon – a giant sloth previously thought to have been extinct several centuries before – from Patagonia to that country, even though there is no subsequent record of its development there) (p.173).

It has long been known in both Chinese and other records that between 1405 and 1433 Zheng He organised seven voyages that explored the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf sailing as far as the East Coast of Africa.²⁸ The voyages stopped when changes in the Imperial Court led to changed policy and greater introversion. The travelling fleets were brought home and both ship and imperial records destroyed. Menzies's claim is that it was on the sixth series of voyages during 1421-3 that the globe was circumnavigated. Although there is no record of this

²⁸ An excellent most recent account in English is: Louise Levathes *When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405-1433* Oxford University Press, New York, 1994. Zheng He's voyages of course had their official historian Ma Huan, who produced the most authoritative account of their activities, even when not witnessing events at first hand. It was first published in 1451. In English this has been published as *Overall Survey of the Ocean Shores* Cambridge University Press, 1970.

having occurred either in general or in detail, Menzies emphasises that the 1477 destruction of official records is proof of the Imperial system's conspiracy of silence:

The legacy of [Ming Emperor] Zhu Di, Zheng He and their great treasure fleets would be all but obliterated. What oceans they had sailed, what lands they had seen, what discoveries they had made, what colonies they had created were no longer of interest to the Chinese hierarchy. The ships that had made those voyages were left to rot and were never replaced. The logs and records were destroyed and the memory of them expunged so completely over the succeeding decades that they might never have existed. (p.56)

Generally true, but not in detail. In the first place, by no means all Chinese records of Zheng He's voyages, including official records, were destroyed. One of the sources that Menzies cites (in another context) is an examination of carved stone tablets dedicated by Zheng He (in 1431) to Tianfei (a Daoist Goddess) in thanks and reporting on the first six voyages and preparing for the seventh.²⁹ Zheng He provides a summary of where the voyages went and what they achieved, preserving for posterity his view of the activities. The sixth voyage did indeed set out (for the Indian Ocean) but it is likely that had it then developed into a journey of discovery that circumnavigated the globe there

²⁹ J J L Duyvendak 'The True Dates of the Chinese Maritime Expeditions in the Early Fifteenth Century' in *T'oung Pao* XXXIV, 1939, p. 344-5.

would have been mention of this rather than, as Zheng He is reported as having confirmed in stone:

In the nineteenth year of Yongle (1421) commanding the fleet we conducted ambassadors from Hulumosi (Ormuz) and the other countries who had been in attendance at the capital for a long time back to their countries. The kings of all the countries prepared even more tribute than previously.

Louise Levathes in her study of the voyages makes it clear that had Zheng He or his fleets visited other countries he would have recorded them here even while being circumspect because of the political problems at the Imperial Court.³⁰ All the same, Menzies is almost totally dismissive of past scholarship, seeing in it another conspiracy to hide the truth. As he writes with specific reference to the discovery of the Americas:

... academics are not aware of the evidence; perhaps they have chosen to ignore it, presumably because it contradicts the accepted wisdom on which not a few careers have been based. Academics with rather more open minds will look again. (p.232)

This combative stance has of course undoubtedly helped provide publicity and sell the book. Certainly it has generated fierce criticism and opposition. There are several well-documented reviews of *1421* that take the case presented by Menzies to pieces both strategically and in

detail.³¹ While the book has been well received in many places, for those working in Chinese history of the era, maritime scholars, seafarers with an interest, and academics in related fields there is an almost complete disbelief that anyone (let alone the publishers) can have been taken in by a work usually described in terms of fiction masquerading as history.³² The best that has been said about the book is that it has a provocative thesis, worth exploring but unfortunately unproven. It has led several scholars to complain to the Library of Congress when Menzies was scheduled to speak there; and Geoff Wade (National University of Singapore) has both complained to Fair Trade Authorities in the UK, USA, Canada and Australia arguing that the book should not be presented by the publishers as 'History,' and lobbied libraries to have the work reclassified into fiction.³³ Menzies's response is not that of a typical historian. As he is reported to have told *People Magazine* in February

³¹ Major reviews include: Tim Barrett in *The Independent* 16 November 2002; P J Rivers "1421" Voyages: Fact and Fantasy Malaysia, 2004; Bill Hartz *Gavin's FantasyLand*: <http://www.hallofmaat.com/1421.html>; Robert Finlay 'How Not to (Re)Write World History: Gavin Menzies and the Chinese Discovery of America' in *Journal of World History* Vol. 15 No.2 June 2004: <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jwh/15.2/finlay.html>; and in Chinese - National Cheng-kung University, Newsletters: http://www.sname.ncku.edu.tw/ncku_chinese/teacher/personal/cjh/cheng-ho/ There is also a website - *1421: The Year China DID NOT Discover America. A Tabulation of the evidence against Gavin Menzies* at <http://www.kenspy.com/Menzies/>

³² For example: <http://www.maritimeasia.ws/topic/1421bunkum.html>

³³ 22 October 2005: hasia@h-net.msu.edu

³⁰ Louise Levathes *When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405-1433* Oxford University Press, New York, 1994, p.170.

2003 when the opposition to and criticism of his book was mentioned: '[t]here's not one chance in a hundred million that I'm wrong!'³⁴

1421 starts by setting the scene for both the author's voyage of discovery and that of Zheng He's fleets during 1421-3. It then details the voyages purported to have been undertaken in turn by each of Zheng He's subordinates: Hong Bao to Antarctica and Australia; Zhou Man to Australia and the Americas, via Southeast Asia; Zhou Wen to the Caribbean, North America and the North Pole; and Yang Qing in the Indian Ocean. The book also contains detailed appendices detailing supposed evidence and key information.

In addition to a lack of active engagement with earlier scholarship on Zheng He except where it supports his argument, and the absence of any consideration of counter-arguments, a third key problem with *1421* is the use, or more accurately the abuse of evidence. Examples abound. Menzies's starting point for thinking that Zheng He's fleets could have gone round the world, instead of just the Indian Ocean is a good example of his art. Mention has already been made of the carved stone tablets to Tianfei in 1431. One of these records that the fleets had in total visited thirty different countries.

³⁴ Quoted in Robert Finlay 'How Not to (Re)Write World History: Gavin Menzies and the Chinese Discovery of America' in *Journal of World History* Vol. 15 No.2 June 2004: <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jwh/15.2/finlay.html>

Unfortunately the 1930s article read by Menzies that discusses this tablet reports on a transcription error which renders 30 as 3000.³⁵ Although the author of the 1930s article explains the copying error in a footnote,³⁶ Menzies prefers to see a larger truth in the observation that Zheng He's fleets had not visited 3000 countries as the greater number would imply travel considerably further afield. (p.82.) Given that Zheng He's fleets made seven voyages of discovery the uninformed but otherwise alert reader might well enquire how the sixth voyage came to be singled out for identification as the circumnavigation journey. This appears to be because on this occasion Zheng He, and later his keeper of records, Ma Huan, both returned to China early (if separately) and not with the other ships, thus creating the appearance for Menzies of 'missing years' in the chronicle of their activities. (p.86.)

Menzies's claims essentially rest on three different sorts of argument. First, there are arguments about maps. Menzies claims that Chinese exploration resulted in maps later provided to European circumnavigators and explorers without which they would have failed to reach the Americas and Australia.

³⁵ In Chinese the characters for 'ten' and 'a thousand' are very similar, differentiated only by a small stroke. Menzies does not read or write Chinese.

³⁶ J J L Duyvendak 'The True Dates of the Chinese Maritime Expeditions in the Early Fifteenth Century' in *T'oung Pao* XXXIV, 1939, p.344-5, Footnote 2. A translation of the entire inscription can be found at the University of Minnesota, Department of History website: www.hist.umn.edu/hist1012/primarysource/source.htm It says 'thirty countries.'

Secondly, he lists copious examples of apparent contact between China and the rest of the world well in advance of previously known periods of contact. Thirdly he repeatedly emphasizes that he himself has specialist knowledge of tides, currents and climates because of his sea-faring experience.

The key figure for Menzies in the transfer of knowledge about the New World from China to Europe was a Venetian adventurer, Niccolo da Conti. According to Menzies da Conti met the Chinese fleet in India on its outbound journey and sailed along. There is though no direct evidence at all to support this assertion. Nonetheless, Menzies claims that only da Conti could have brought the charts and maps to Europe and that these had to have been 'obtained during his voyages aboard the Chinese fleet.' (p.93.) These then fed into a series of well-known maps and similar information produced in Europe, including the Vinland Map of Northeast America and Greenland, regarded as a 20th Century fraud since 1974 but accepted by Menzies as genuine, possibly because it becomes a necessary part of his thesis. (p.305) Strangely, Menzies does not consider the possibility that the maps and related information that assisted European exploration could have been from the Arab navigators who had travelled extensively for some six centuries before the Zheng He voyages.

Menzies's examples of material exchange and social interactions between China and various parts of

the New World are equally as contentious and apparently without foundation. Robert Finlay points out quite clearly that Menzies most often employs a circular argument here. The ships are loaded with those items and products in the narrative before they leave China that are discovered by Menzies in situ in the New World. However, there is no evidence provided in the book that these items were actually loaded on the Chinese ships in the first place, and no consideration that similar items might have been found or developed independently in more than one location, let alone a search for evidence of any casual connection where that is claimed by Menzies.³⁷ All the examples of Chinese observations platforms, settlements, wrecks and other apparent manifestations of exploration cited in the text are either unverifiable or deliberate distortions of the available evidence. A good example is the Newport (Rhode Island) Tower, identified by Menzies as a Chinese structure, part observation tower, part marker for the Chinese settlement left behind and part lighthouse. (p.286) As Hartz points out, there are just a few problems with this argument, not the least of which is that the structure is most likely from the 17th Century.³⁸ Moreover, one of the sources cited by Menzies, The New England Antiquities Research

³⁷ Robert Finlay 'How Not to (Re)Write World History: Gavin Menzies and the Chinese Discovery of America' in *Journal of World History* Vol. 15 No.2 June 2004: <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jwh/15.2/finlay.html>

³⁸ Bill Hartz *Gavin's FantasyLand*: <http://www.hallofmaat.com/1421.html>

Association [NEARA] has disassociated themselves from his findings:

In his exuberant tale of Oriental luxury and Zheng He's mission of discovery, trade, and tribute, Menzies cites all of the authors just mentioned. Yet he seems not to have read their work ... The evidence that Menzies presents for pre-Columbian American contact, however enticing it may appear, is loaded with extraneous detail and presented with scant relevant documentation. Stoneworks, inscriptions, and architectural features are described without drawings or photos to help the reader evaluate the similarities or permit scholars to analyze the meanings. Maps are not shown in sufficient detail to enable the reader to have confidence in the veracity of the interpretations. In his discussions of discoveries around the North Atlantic rim, Menzies' assertions and fuzzy adaptations of the work of Bill Penhallow and Sue Carlson - to convert the Newport Tower into a Chinese structure - are completely unconvincing and at odds with the research findings of these and other NEARA members ...³⁹

Menzies bases his conclusion on observations about a 'lighthouse' at Zaiton (Quanzhou) in Fujian. (p.288) Unfortunately, while the tower in question is located on the coast it was not a lighthouse but a Buddhist pagoda.⁴⁰

Menzies's third type of argument rests on his own personal specialist

knowledge as a mariner. For example:

if I was able to state with confidence the course a Chinese fleet had taken, it was because...my own knowledge of the winds, currents, and sea conditions they faced told me the route as surely as if there had been a written record of it. (p.83)

This and subsequent statements represent an extravagant claim that does not seem borne out by the evidence of the text. Some examples may suffice. Menzies says that the fleet set sail on 5 March 1421. (p.59) This is unlikely. Winds are light and variable at that time in the South China Seas. Voyages more usually started on the Northeast Monsoon in November or December.⁴¹ As Robert Findlay points out, the Imperial order was issued in March but the fleet sailed at the end of the year.⁴² Similarly, Menzies says that the fleet sailed across the Indian Ocean to East Africa at the end of the North-east Monsoon around the middle of 1421. (p.88) This is extremely unlikely. At the time stipulated the fleet would have had to stay in Calicut (West India) because from May to August there is a South-west Monsoon along that coast that closes it to sailing vessels, and reverses the flow of the ocean's surface current.

The first edition of *1421* also includes an interesting claim about

³⁹ Nautical analysis from P J Rivers "1421" *Voyages: Fact and Fantasy* Malaysia, 2004.

⁴⁰ Robert Finlay 'How Not to (Re)Write World History: Gavin Menzies and the Chinese Discovery of America' in *Journal of World History* Vol. 15 No.2 June 2004; <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jwh/15.2/finlay.html>

³⁹ www.neara.org/MiscReports/1421.htm

⁴⁰ Bill Hartz *Gavin's FantasyLand*: <http://www.hallofmaat.com/1421.html>

sailing conditions that has been later omitted from later revised editions.

The miniature Ice Age that started in 1450 ... was partly caused by a shift in the earth's axis. By analyzing the sailing directions and the star guide given in the *Wu Pei Chi* of 1422 I was able to calculate that the equator at that date was at 3 degrees 40 minutes North. As a result, a corresponding shift of 3 degrees 40 minutes northwards in the maximum and minimum limits of pack and drift ice would have occurred in both the northern and southern hemispheres. (p.306)

As a result of these conditions, Menzies claims it was possible for the Chinese fleet to both sail to the North Pole and circumnavigate Greenland.

In critically reading this account of Zheng He's 1421-3 voyages of exploration and circumnavigation it is hard to avoid the conclusion that *1421* has all the ingredients of a rattling good contemporary conspiracy, quite apart from that of the Imperial Court or sceptical academics. In 2002 the book was launched at the Royal Geographic Society in London, but not despite appearances to the contrary by or through the Royal Geographic Society. The relationship was one of room hire. Similar publicity has been sought in similar ways subsequently at Stanford University and the Library of Congress. Menzies is (also) a qualified barrister but became so mired in litigation during the 1990s that the British legal system designated him as a 'vexatious litigant' essentially

stopping him from issuing further writs against anyone (including opponents to the narrative of *1421*) at least in that country.⁴³ Despite the attempt to establish the work's academic legitimacy (inherent in holding meetings at the Royal Geographic Society, Stanford University, and the Library of Congress, as well as in the architecture of *1421*) Menzies clearly sees the need to go outside the corrupted academy for the truth. A *1421* website has been established not simply to publicize the book (and its associated products) but (so it is claimed) to collect and exchange further evidence.⁴⁴

The idea that Chinese vessels undertook an early circumnavigation of the globe and that the Chinese discovered, and to some extent settled in the New World is an exciting story. It is almost inevitable that the message of *1421* would play to a sympathetic audience in the PRC, and despite Menzies's disputes with academics in that country, the Chinese party-state has continued to maintain its favourable commentary.⁴⁵ Moreover, *1421* has already started to lead to imitators and variations on the theme. Paul Chiasson, a Canadian architect, is scheduled to publish (during 2006) *The Island of Seven Cities: The Discovery of a Lost Chinese Settlement* (Random House, Toronto)

⁴³ http://www.hmccourts-service.gov.uk/info/about/vexatious_litigant/
<http://bbs.omnitalk.org/alumni/messages/28843.html>

⁴⁴ <http://www.1421.tv/index.asp>

⁴⁵ For example: 'Chinese scholars value hypotheses by foreign peers on earlier discovery of America' in *The People's Daily* 15 July 2005.

about a colony established by the Chinese during the 15th Century in Nova Scotia.⁴⁶ At the start of the 20th Century when communications of all kinds were considerably more limited a well-respected and well connected British scholar living in Beijing – Edmund Backhouse – who spoke (read and wrote) Chinese was able to commit major fraud in adding to Chinese history.⁴⁷ At the start of the 21st Century with a more interconnected world, a far greater number of Chinese historians, and publishers' more thorough review of submitted manuscripts it is surprising that a literary fraud (albeit of a different kind) should be able to be perpetrated.⁴⁸

The Mao Conspiracy

Take a charismatic and best-selling author who is Chinese but who now lives in England and writes in English; add a husband who has

Russian and a research record; and have them write a biography of one of the major figures of the 20th Century. It is an undoubted formula for literary success, and so it has proved. Jung Chang and Jon Halliday's biography of Mao Zedong (Mao Tse-tung) was one of the literary sensations of 2005 throughout the English-speaking world.⁴⁹ Jung Chang is the author of *Wild Swans*, a family history of China in the 20th Century that is justifiably credited with introducing many people to that country.⁵⁰ In *Mao: The Unknown Story* the object of study is considerably less immediate. Mao Zedong (1893-1976) was the leader of the CCP from 1942 and the effective ruler of the PRC after 1949 until his death.

The publication of *Mao: The Unknown Story* was greeted by a series of extremely favourable reviews which made comments along the lines of (in the title words of one) 'This book will shake the world.'⁵¹ All have confirmed its importance in reassessing Mao's place in China's history, even when noting that the book is more than a little polemical.⁵²

⁴⁶ <http://www.collectionscanada.ca/newbooks/g4-900-e.html> Advance publicity for this book states: 'While tantalizing mentions can be found in early navigators' journals and maps. *The Island of Seven Cities* reveals for the first time the existence of a large Chinese colony that thrived on Canadian shores well before the European Age of Discovery. Chiasson addresses how the colony was abandoned and forgotten, in the New World and in China, except in the storytelling and culture of the Mi'kmaq, whose written language, clothing, technical knowledge, religious beliefs and legends, he argues, expose deep cultural roots in China. *The Island of Seven Cities* unveils the first tangible proof that the Chinese were in the New World before Columbus.'

⁴⁷ Hugh Trevor-Roper *Hermit of Peking: The Hidden Life of Sir Edmund Backhouse* Macmillan, London, 1979.

⁴⁸ Backhouse forged books and documents purporting to tell the inside story of the Qing Court.

⁴⁹ Jung Chang and Jon Halliday *Mao: The Unknown Story* Jonathan Cape, London, 2005.

⁵⁰ First published in 1991 this book is an international best-seller. On 21 November 2005 it was ranked 545th in sales on amazon.com and 1010th on amazon.co.uk

⁵¹ Lisa Allardice 26 May 2005 *The Guardian*.

⁵² Including: Jonathan D Spence 'Portrait of a Monster' in *The New York Review of Books* Vol.52 No.17 3 November 2005; Nicholas Kristoff 'The Real Mao' in *New York Times Book Review* 23 October 2005; Keith Windschuttle 'Mao and the Maoists' in *The New Criterion* October 2005; Arthur Waldron 'Mao Lives' in *Commentary* October 2005; Howard W. French 'Putting a knife into the heart of the

Even the reservations contained in the later, more considered reviews have for the most part hesitated to be too openly critical.⁵³

Certainly it would seem that a high standard of scholarship has been set for the book. According to the publishers, *Mao: The Unknown Story* is a:

groundbreaking biography ... the most authoritative life of Mao ever written ... full of startling revelations ... exploding the myth of the Long March, and showing a completely unknown Mao: he was not driven by idealism or ideology ... he schemed, poisoned and blackmailed to get his way ... Mao's character and the enormity of his behaviour towards his wives, mistresses and children are unveiled for the first time ... This is an entirely fresh look at Mao in both content and approach. It will astonish historians and the general reader alike.⁵⁴

Chairman's legend' in *San Francisco Chronicle* 23 October 2005; Paul Monk 'So Vile A Thing as Mao' in *Australian Financial Review* 26 August 2005; Brahma Chellaney 'Neo-emperor of evil genius' in *The Japan Times* 4 September 2005; and Perry Link 'Mad, bad Mao' in *Times Literary Supplement* 20 July 2005.

⁵³ Possibly the fullest and most critical to date (late November 2005) has been Andrew Nathan 'Jade and Plastic' in *The London Review of Books* 17 November 2005. Interestingly in the context of the history/fiction discussion undertaken here, Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom 'Mao as Monster' in *The Chicago Tribune* 6 November 2005 compares the Mao volume to a recently published fictional account of Vlad the Impaler and finds the latter to have more integrity. Also see: Delia Davin 'Dark Tales Of Mao The Merciless' in *Times Higher Education Supplement* 12 August 2005.

<http://www.randomhouse.co.uk/catalog/book.htm?command=Search&db=main.txt&eqisbndata=0224071262>

Jung Chang herself (in publicity interviews, though not in the book) goes even further in her claims to have revised history, citing the failure of others to see the truth. Here is another author claiming (like Menzies, and even to some extent Jenner) privileged access and the ability to reveal knowledge of which others are not only ignorant, but have also been complicit in ensuring remains unrevealed:

All the historical events like the Long March, the war with Japan, how Mao came to power, the Great Leap, the Cultural Revolution - our story is completely different. Nobody has explained Mao like us.

Bits of the information were around ... but they were like pieces of a jigsaw that didn't make any sense. Nobody has put them together into this coherent picture of Mao. People looked but they didn't see.⁵⁵

Much is made of their access to sources, in China as well as elsewhere. An interview with *The Guardian* reports:

The Chinese government warned surviving members of Mao's inner circle to watch what they said to Chang and Halliday, but the threats backfired. "People were dying to say things. They realised that if the government was that bothered, their story was going to be heard. I always gave them a copy of *Wild Swans* so they knew this was the kind of person I am, the kind of book I would write. They knew it wouldn't be the party line."⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Lisa Allardice 26 May 2005 *The Guardian*.

⁵⁶ Lisa Allardice 26 May 2005 *The Guardian*.

Jung Chang read the Chinese sources, Jon Halliday the apparently previously unrevealed material in Russian archives. And why could these two authors succeed where others feared to tread? The answer is a high level of personal involvement and motivation that led to the need to enquire how the Mao-conspiracy had come about. As Jung Chang revealed in an interview in Hong Kong:

Mao dominated my earlier life. I saw him bringing disaster to my family. Both my mother ... my father and my grandmother died in the Cultural Revolution, and I saw him turning the lives of a quarter of the world's population upside down. And yet I felt the world knew astonishingly little about him, and I certainly didn't know much. I didn't know what drove him, what went on in his head, how did he become the supreme leader of the Communist Party and then China, and what was he up to after he took power. I wanted to find out a bit more.⁵⁷

The flavour of the Mao portrayal is rapidly established by the authors. The book starts:

Mao Tse-tung, who for decades held absolute power over the lives of one-quarter of the world's population, was responsible for well over 70 million deaths in peacetime, more than any other twentieth-century leader. (p.3)

The reader is left in no doubt that this will be no Han Suyin-style saccharine, Cultural Revolution Era hagiography.⁵⁸ This impression is

⁵⁷ Lorraine Hahn *TalkAsia* interview with Jung Chang, 23 July 2005.

⁵⁸ Han Suyin *The morning deluge: Mao Tse-tung and the Chinese revolution, 1893-1954* Little

then reinforced in short order by details of Mao's notes in the winter of 1917-18 taken from his reading of Paulsen's analysis of ethics, and the authors' comments:

In these notes, Mao expressed the central elements in his own character, which stayed consistent for the remaining six decades of his life and defined his rule.

Mao's attitude to morality consisted of one core, the self, 'I', above everything else: 'I do not agree with the view that to be moral, the motive of one's actions has to be benefiting others. Morality does not have to be defined in relation to others ... People like me want to ... satisfy our hearts to the full, and in doing so we automatically have the most valuable moral codes. Of course there are people and objects in the world, but they are all there only for me.

... 'Some say one has a responsibility for history. I don't believe it. I am only concerned about developing myself ... I have my desire and act on it. I am responsible to no one.'

Mao did not believe in anything unless he could benefit from it personally. (p.13) ...

Absolute selfishness and irresponsibility lay at the heart of Mao's outlook.

Brown, Boston, 1972; Han Suyin *Wind in the tower: Mao Tse-tung and the Chinese revolution, 1949-1975* Little Brown, Boston, 1976. Han Suyin was in many ways the Jung Chang of her generation, writing her autobiography of wartime China *Destination Chungking* (Harper Collins, 1973) and Korean War era Hong Kong *A Many Splendoured Thing* (Little Brown, 1952) for publication in the USA.

These attributes he held to be reserved for 'Great Heroes' – a group to which he appointed himself.

..

The other central element in his character which Mao spelt out now was the joy he took in upheaval and destruction. (p.14)

In short, this is to be a demonography – there is to be not an ounce of good behaviour, not a scintilla of high purpose, to be found in Mao. Chang and Halliday's Mao has a sense of manifest destiny, a great capacity for destructiveness alongside personal as well as political nastiness, and is both opportunistic and excessively selfish. These themes are then played out throughout the book, organised by episodes of evil rather than strictly through a more conventional chronological biography. In each of the six broad periods assigned to Mao's life there are separate chapters dealing with specific events that overlap in time. For example, the period from 1937-1945 (the era of the War of Resistance to Japan) is dealt with by nine chapters across two major sections of the book. The structure and flavour of this exercise is readily demonstrated through chapter titles and descriptions:

PART THREE – *Building His Power Base*

18. New Image, New Life and New Wife (1937-38; age 43-44)
19. Red Mole Triggers China-Japan War (1937-38; age 43-44)

20. Fight Rivals and Chiang – Not Japan (1937-40; age 43-46)
21. Most Desired Scenario: Stalin Carves up China with Japan (1939-40; age 45-46)
22. Death Trap for His Own Men (1940-41; age 46-47)
23. Building a Power Base through Terror (1941-45; age 47-51)
24. Uncowed Opponent Poisoned (1941-45; age 47-51)
25. Supreme Party Leader at Last (1942-45; age 48-51)

PART FOUR – *To Conquer China*

26. 'Revolutionary Opium War' (1937-45; age 43-51)

It is an unusual method of narration, and from the perspective of highlighting instances of Mao's apparent perfidy and moral turpitude works well. In the process it is possible to read apparently new stories and interpretations in almost every chapter, some of which are quite sensational. To take just three of the most surprising (from a series of) examples: Mao apparently amassed a considerable personal fortune during the Jiangxi Soviet of the early 1930s, a period somewhat better known previously for the establishment of the first CCP (extremely localised) state (p.117.) The famous battle to cross the Dadu River (in Southwest China) during the Long March (in 1935) previously credited with enabling the revolution

to continue because it ensured the CCP escaped from its Nationalist Party pursuers, is now said to have been 'a complete invention.' (p.159) During the Cultural Revolution (1966-69) Mao clashed with Liu Shaoqi (Liu Shao-chi) a CCP leader and President of the PRC before his fall from grace. A report to the CCP Central Committee recommended the death sentence for Liu, who had been imprisoned, starved and humiliated in a variety of ways, to the extent that his health had deteriorated substantially. According to Chang and Halliday this was rejected by Mao on the grounds that he (Mao) preferred a 'slow, lingering death' for Liu. (p.556.)

On the other hand, the book's claims to scholarship and integrity are at the very least questionable. There are essentially three kinds of problems: the novelty of its approach to the subject is overstated; there are problems in its use of evidence; and it has, at best, a very confused theory of knowledge.

The claim that this is in some sense Mao's 'unknown story' is certainly debateable. There is certainly much new detail revealed in the text, and as already noted many new stories and interpretations of specific events. The publication of information, particularly personal memoirs, in the PRC during the last twenty years as the CCP has rediscovered its own history has ensured that compared to the era of Jung Chang's adult life in China considerably more is now known about internal CCP politics generally, as well as about Mao himself. At the

same time, the idea of a destructive, self-centred, nasty Mao is not at all new. Both Mao's doctor (Li Zhisui) and Philip Short have produced portraits of Mao as monster in the last decade.⁵⁹ Perhaps more remarkably, Lucian Pye produced a very early revisionist biography of Mao along these lines in 1976, highlighting Mao's psychological profile as a first born son who later felt rejected by his parents, especially his mother, once other children were born, and who reacted adversely to relationships of all kinds in consequence.⁶⁰ In this context, Pye's study is remarkable because despite their extensive research Chang and Halliday appear not to have read it, or at least *Mao: The Man in the Leader* is not listed in the forty-four pages of bibliography. (p.745-789.) Nor for that matter are recent biographies by Delia Davin and Shaun Breslin,⁶¹ as well as that by Short, and there are some similarly remarkable omissions from the literature written in the PRC.⁶²

It is easy to claim to be both novel and authoritative if other books and writings are discounted.

⁵⁹ Philip Short *Mao: A Life* John Murray, London, 2003; Li Zhisui *The Private Life of Chairman Mao* Random House, New York, 1994.

⁶⁰ Lucian W Pye *Mao Tse-tung: The man in the leader* Basic Books, New York, 1976.

⁶¹ Delia Davin *Mao* Sutton Publishing, 1997; Shaun Breslin *Mao* Longman, 1998.

⁶² Jing Fuzi (Gu Hua) *Mao Zedong he tade nirenmen* [Mao Zedong and his women] Lianjing chubanshe, Taipei, 1990; Shan Shaojie *Mao Zedong zhizheng chunqiu (1949-1976)* [Mao in Power (1949-1976)] Mingjing chubanshe, Hong Kong, 2000. Both support the interpretation of Mao presented in *Mao: The Unknown Story*.

Scholarship more usually proceeds by engaging with other accounts, often quite explicitly. *Mao: The Unknown Story* does not, even where other biographies and accounts of Mao's life and work are listed in the bibliography. At the same time, if the demonising of Mao presented here is justified then it may be possible to argue that the intensity of his nastiness was not properly understood before this book. The proof of that equation though depends on the validity of the evidence, and quite clearly much of that is extremely problematic.

The more controversial any topic the more the evidence will be expected to be both verifiable and reliable. In *Mao: The Unknown Story* the evidence is too often neither. Andrew Nathan (Columbia University) who has written about internal CCP politics during the 1980s and 1990s comments:⁶³

... 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.⁶⁴

The problem of verifiability and reliability is well demonstrated by reference to the three examples cited earlier of the book's sensational findings. As already noted, it is claimed that Mao amassed a personal fortune during the Jiangxi Soviet.

Nathan's concern on this point is worth quoting in full:

Chang and Halliday cite four sources to support their statement that Mao amassed 'a private fortune' during the Jiangxi Soviet period of the early 1930s. One is an anonymous interview which cannot be checked. The second source is a book in Chinese by a writer called Shu Long, which says that Mao ordered his brother, Zemin, who was president of the Communists' state bank, to disperse money from a 'secret treasury' to the various Communist military units when a gathering enemy offensive threatened the money's security. The third is *The Long March* by Harrison Salisbury (1985), which says similarly that Zemin took part in hiding the Red Army's money and treasure in a mountain cave for two years until it was removed shortly before the Long March and divided among the Communist armies that were about to set off on the March. The fourth source is a file in the Harrison Salisbury papers at Columbia University. However, the citation is garbled, so the file Chang and Halliday used cannot be located in Columbia's Rare Book and Manuscript Library (nor can the correct citation be reconstructed from the information given).⁶⁵

The Chang and Halliday claimed fiction of a battle at the crossing of the Dadu River is even more straightforwardly contested. In the book Chang and Halliday cite an interview with an unknown 'sprightly 93-old when we met her in 1997' standing at the spot who is reported

⁶³ Andrew Nathan (ed) *The Tiananmen Papers* Public Affairs Press, New York, 2001; Andrew Nathan and Bruce Gilley *China's New Rulers* New York Review of Books, 2002.

⁶⁴ Andrew Nathan 'Jade and Plastic' in *The London Review of Books* 17 November 2005.

⁶⁵ Andrew Nathan 'Jade and Plastic' in *The London Review of Books* 17 November 2005.

as denying that there was any battle. (p.159) More recent (2005) visitors to the location report not simply that they could not find the unknown source but also that no one there was able to assist in identifying who she might have been. Moreover, they did manage to find Li Guixiu, an eye-witness and survivor of the incident (15 years old at the time):

The KMT warned us that the Reds would eat the young people and bury the old ... Many fled up the mountainside. But when we saw them, they told us not to be afraid, they only opposed bad people. I remember they were wearing straw shoes, with cloth wound around their shins. The fighting started in the evening. There were many killed on the Red Army side. The KMT set fire to the bridge-house on the other side, to try to melt the chains, and one of the chains was cut. After it was taken, the Red Army took seven days and seven nights to cross. Later, I was told that someone we had seen was Mao Zedong.⁶⁶

Mao's apparent decision to let Liu Shaoqi die a lingering death is also tendentious. The sources are apparently an interview with Liu Shaoqi's wife in November 1995, and an apparent interview with an (unnamed) member of Lin Biao's family in October 1995.

Delia Davin, one of Chang and Halliday's discounted alternative authors on the life of Mao, accurately highlights the problems involved in using much of this kind of evidence. She notes that Chang and Halliday:

... ignore substantial contrary evidence ... Their bibliography is impressive - but what is lacking is any attempt to evaluate sources and their relative reliability. We are not made aware that different witnesses and participants have their own axes to grind and are rarely reminded that much of the history of the CCP is contested.⁶⁷

Especially when dealing with the necessarily hidden politics of the CCP, where rumour and innuendo abound, sources have to be evaluated and comments put in context. It would be foolhardy in the extreme to always assume that single items of apparent evidence could be taken at face value. Yet that is largely the modus operandi of Chang and Halliday.

These problems in the use of evidence are related to the book's weak understanding of scholarship and its confusing theory of knowledge. There is no introduction; no discussion of biography or history, or the processes of social and political change and the role of the individual in those processes. Scholarship is not mechanistic and methodology need not be explicit (particularly if a book is being written to be popular.) Nonetheless, in a controversial book of this kind one could reasonably expect an appendix on methodology and the evaluation of sources. In particular, it is crucial to understand how the authors are so certain they have avoided the ecological fallacy on so

⁶⁶ Hamish McDonald 'A swan's little book of ire' in *Sydney Morning Herald* 8 October 2005.

⁶⁷ Delia Davin 'Dark Tales Of Mao The Merciless' in *Times Higher Education Supplement* 12 August 2005.

many occasions. Fred Teiwes is probably universally regarded as the most accomplished historian of the CCP outside the PRC. In his various writings on the inner workings of the CCP, much of which has been centrally concerned with Mao, he has gone to considerable pains to explain the complex processes that attend the evaluation of dubious or potentially unreliable sources. Asking what else is known that may confirm, deny or confront any available information or source is central to scholarship.⁶⁸

The theory of knowledge that seems embedded in *Mao: The Unknown Story* is less than convincing. In the first place, from interviews associated with publicity for the book it is clear that Chang and Halliday believe that it is possible to gather all the facts about Mao dispassionately and that this constitutes scholarship and the writing of history. Or at least they explicitly argue that this is what they have done.⁶⁹ The construction of history is usually regarded as a more controlled process, necessarily involving selection and judgement. In contrast *Mao: The Unknown Story* is then presented more as an exercise in data-mining. It is as if the reader has been given an assurance that nothing has been left out. Fatally though explanation (as opposed to description) is absent. There is a

major paradox at the heart of this book. Mao was power-crazed, venal, incompetent, disastrous for China and the CCP, and instilled so much fear and hatred in those he came into contact with throughout his life. Yet nonetheless he was able to exercise absolute power and authority. At the very least there needs to be some explanation provided of the political behaviour of those in the leadership around Mao that takes account of their autonomy as human beings.

In the second place, *Mao: The Unknown Story* is not consistent in its identification of Mao the subject of the biography. Sometimes Mao and his actions are differentiated from those of the CCP, and sometimes they are equated. Thus, when Mao was on the outer of CCP politics during the early 1930s (p.115) or apparently opposed by Liu Shaoqi in 1962 (p.509) or Deng Xiaoping in and after 1974 (p.634) (even more unlikely given Deng's close relationship to Mao from 1933 that ensured that any later reinterpretation of Mao's role in China's history would be severely limited after his death) Mao is identified as an independent actor. On the other hand, when the CCP is engaged in nefarious activities, most notoriously the production and sale of opium in Yan'an, the Communist capital during the War of Resistance to Japan (p.283) then there is no daylight to be seen between Mao's actions and those of the CCP. Mao may have been responsible for the policy on opium production and trade but at the very least in a detailed (and authoritative) biography one might

⁶⁸ See, for example, the discussion in Frederick C Teiwes *Politics at Mao's Court* M E Sharpe, Armonk, New York, 1990, p.7-14.

⁶⁹ Lisa Allardice 26 May 2005 *The Guardian*; Lorraine Hahn *TalkAsia* interview with Jung Chang, 23 July 2005; National Public Radio (USA) *Talk of the Nation* 20 October 2005; The Brian Lehrer Show WNYC 19 October 2005.

expect analysis of whether this was by commission or omission. It might even add to an understanding of his exercise of leadership.

Mao: The Unknown Story is a vast compendium of information about its subject. Its authors have made much in interviews and publicity material associated with the book about the quantity, as well as the quality of their sources. In addition to secondary sources there are documents, archive material, published memoirs and several hundreds of interviews with people, often well-known in other contexts, who had met Mao. The book is full of detail, interpretation and conjecture. Some of it is almost certainly accurate, some of dubious authenticity, and some just plain false. (For example: the CCP was not founded in 1920, and Nelson Rockefeller was not Nixon's Vice President in 1972, however many times Chang and Halliday may choose to say otherwise.⁷⁰) Ultimately though the book is a self-defeating exercise. The authors, again in interviews, have said that they set out to write an accessible account (explicitly like *Wild Swans*) of Mao.⁷¹ This volume is so focussed on Mao as monster that it is not readily understandable other than by those with expert knowledge of the

historics involved. For those without, it requires reading alongside a history of the CCP or of China in the 20th Century.

Martyrs to Day-time TV Chat Shows

Strip away the pretension, the pomposity and the poor scholarship and it is clear that all three of these books have sacrificed intellectual reputation on the altar of instant celebrity. All three authors emphasise (if in different ways) the time and effort they have expended in research and production. Jenner talks about his intellectual development throughout his career as bringing him to the point of writing *The Tyranny of History*. Menzies mentions working on his research into Zheng He's voyages from the late 1970s to publication in 2002. In interviews about *Mao: The Unknown Story* Jung Chang mentions often that she had the idea for a biography while completing *Wild Swans* sometime in the early 1990s.

Nonetheless, it is clear that publication of all three was too rushed. Leave aside the infelicities that might have been avoided by more careful reading by publishing houses, authors' friends or colleagues. In each case there were three good books waiting to be written but by rushing into print the opportunity was lost. Contrary to his prediction of impending disaster, Jenner's basic idea about the disjuncture between China as a political idea and China as a series of separate cultures and societies has

⁷⁰ p.19. As Nathan patiently explains in his review, the CCP was founded in 1921, though a couple of Communist groups had been established the previous year. Andrew Nathan 'Jade and Plastic' in *The London Review of Books* 17 November 2005. Spiro Agnew was Nixon's Vice President when the talks described on p.604 took place.

⁷¹ Lisa Allardice 26 May 2005 *The Guardian*.

been a useful approach for interpreting the dynamics of its social and political interactions.⁷² Menzies could have written an entertaining novel of imaginative fiction, and alternative history about Zheng He of the 'What If ...?' kind. Chang and Halliday could have produced a view of Mao based on their extensive interviews of the famous and the powerful.

Each of these three books was produced with inadequate consideration so that they cannot continue to be taken as seriously as their subject matter demands. This is doubly unfortunate since in dealing with China there is clearly a quite explicit control of history being exercised by the CCP, with which historians need to engage if they are to understand the dynamics of China's social, cultural and political development. The search for the apparently more immediate and sensational conspiracies while entertaining runs the risk of obscuring that understanding.

⁷² See, for example: David S G Goodman (ed) *China's Provinces in Reform: Class, Community and Political Culture* Routledge, London, 1997; Feng Chongyi and Hans Hendrichke (ed) *The Political Economy of China's Provinces: Competitive and Comparative Advantage* Routledge, London, 1999; John Fitzgerald (ed) *Rethinking China's Provinces* Routledge, London, 2001; Barbara Krug (ed) *China's Rational Entrepreneurs* RoutledgeCurzon, London, 2004; David S G Goodman (ed) *China's Campaign to 'Open Up the West': National, Provincial-Level and Local Perspective* Cambridge University Press, 2004; Jing Wang (ed) *Locating China* RoutledgeCurzon, London, 2005; and Tim Oakes and Louisa Schein (ed) *Translocal China* RoutledgeCurzon, London, 2005.

If publishers can call this scholarship, as they do, then academics can request similar rules apply to historical fiction, or at least request that fiction be published in a historically responsible manner. To return to *The Da Vinci Code*, its presentation is more than a little ambiguous as to where it stands in the relationship between fact and fiction. There is a note at the front of book in which the author states

In this work of fiction, the characters, places and events are either the product of the author's imagination or they are used entirely fictitiously.

At the same time, the paperback edition appears with reprints of reviews claiming (for example) that it transmits 'several doctorates' worth of fascinating history and learned speculation,⁷³ and incorporates 'massive amounts of historical and academic information'.⁷⁴ The text of the story also starts with the existence of its two main conspiracies presented as 'Fact.' It is small comfort that the 'facts' in *The Da Vinci Code* are about as reliable as those to be found in *1421* or *Mao: The Unknown Story*.

⁷³ *Chicago Tribune*

⁷⁴ *The Mystery Reader*