China Reconsidered

American scholars analyzing contemporary events in Communist China prior to its post-Mao "opening" to the West in 1979 had to rely largely on the official press. This did not deter some of them from hailing Mao's Cultural Revolution during the 1960s and pooh-poohing refugees' grim accounts. Indeed, the American Academy of Political Science held a 1972 meeting to consider (among other things) how the Cultural Revolution could serve as a model for the West in tackling *its* social problems. Sympathy, observed Sinologist Harry Harding in 1980, "is no substitute for tough-minded analysis." Here, Arnold Isaacs assesses the first wave of post-Mao books by journalists and scholars who have investigated China firsthand.

by Arnold R. Isaacs

The 1980s in China have seen not only profound political changes but also unprecedented access for foreign journalists, writers, and scholars. One result is a lengthening shelf of books that reflects, for the first time since the Communists came to power in 1949, sustained systematic observation instead of the travelers' brief glimpses and gleanings from official publications on which earlier China-watchers had to depend.

The new literature consists of more than just the impressions of American and other foreign writers, however. It also provides Westerners with rich insights into how recent Chinese events were seen through Chinese eyes.

This is the product, chiefly, of the political liberalization that has taken place since Mao Zedong's death in 1976. The regime under Deng Xiaoping remains totalitarian—controls are still imposed on speech and press—but Mao's successors in Beijing have allowed writers, artists, and ordinary citizens more latitude than was ever granted, or even contemplated, during the Mao era.

If there is a prevailing theme in these books of the 1980s, it is disillusionment with revolution and with Maoism. This is in sharp contrast to the previous decade, when many Western visitors wrote about China with uncritical admiration—those on the Left imagining Mao's regime to possess a revolutionary purity no longer found in the arthritic Soviet state, and later, after Richard Nixon's "opening" to China, those Americans on the Right intoxicated by the thought of a huge new partner for Washington in an anti-Soviet alliance.

The euphoric reporting of the 1970s was itself a startling shift away from

the menacing images of the late 1950s and early 1960s, in the wake of the Korean War, when China was commonly pictured by U.S. journalists and politicians alike as a rogue aggressor state in the grip of an expansionist ideology.*

China is no longer seen in the West as an international threat. But the dominant message in the books of the 1980s is overwhelmingly critical of China's internal conditions and official institutions. Almost without exception, the authors portray both a political regime under which the most intimate aspects of life are subject to heavy-handed Party control and a huge, bumbling bureaucracy shot through with petty corruption and favor-seeking. In contrast to the glowing reports of many Western visitors during the Mao era (1949–76), the new China hands describe the victims of Mao's Cultural Revolution, persistent rural poverty, and startling economic inequalities.

The Next Wave

The evidence for this revised view of China is frequently powerful. But it is important to note that it may already be partly out of date. Of the books published so far in this decade, none reflects the impact of Deng Xiaoping's economic reform program, with its emphasis on free-market incentives and openness to Western trade and technology. Deng's efforts have begun to show fruit only during the last two years or so.

*Such fluctuating American perceptions of China are not unique to the Communist era. The alternating cycle of positive and negative stereotypes dates from early in the 19th century. A 1958 study of this phenomenon is *Scratches on Our Minds: American Views of China and India* by Harold R. Isaacs, reissued by Sharpe (1980).

The bleak conditions depicted in the current crop of books are those of the early 1980s, during a kind of national convalescence, when Maoism was officially discredited but before the new leadership's policies had taken shape. If Deng's program has the stimulating effects that current news reports suggest, and if Deng's policies survive, the next wave of China authors may be more optimistic (perhaps too optimistic) and hopeful than those reviewed here.

Concentric Spheres

American journalists were among the first beneficiaries of China's more open policies, deploying to Beijing in 1979 after the normalization of Sino-American relations. Many were fluent in Chinese, some had advanced degrees in Chinese studies, and most had reported on Chinese affairs from British-ruled Hong Kong.

The assignment was rewarding but not easy. Reporters found China "secretive and many-layered, like one of those intricate series of concentric spheres that Chinese craftsmen carve from solid blocks of ivory," writes Richard Bernstein, *Time*'s man in Beijing during 1980–82.

Bernstein distilled his China experience in *From the Center of the Earth*, the most stylish of the books turned out by that first group of reporters.

Reporting on the city of Chongqing, for example, where "the houses lean, pitch, and roll in all directions as if bobbing on the surface of the sea," Bernstein manages to evoke the flavor of China's urban life:

Chungking's [Chongqing's] sound is not at all the sound of a city in the West that comes from the hum of machines and

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Opening to the West: American products were advertised in Hang-zhou during the 1979 world badminton finals; the goods were available only to tourists.

engines and the whoosh of tires on pavement. It is an entirely human sound, created only by the friction of feet and by voices, the vague, unfocused sound that fills a stadium or amphitheater as the crowd waits for some spectacle to begin. It is the sound of idleness, the sound of waiting. It is the muffled cacophony of overpopulation, of masses of people who throng the city's streets and alleys, its bright spots and its dark crevices, but who, besides escaping the airless heat of their tiny homes, really have nothing to do.

Reaching similarly stark conclusions, though very different in style, is *China: Alive in the Bitter Sea* by Fox Butterfield, who opened the *New York Times*'s Beijing bureau in 1979. Butterfield's strength lies in his solid documentation of the wide range of failures, notably in the Chinese economy, that Mao bequeathed to his successors. Under Mao, millions of Chinese had died of hunger; millions more barely survived.

In one rural province, Butterfield discovered, rural incomes were less equally distributed than in capitalist Taiwan, Egypt, or South Africa. In another poor region, he learned that more than three decades after "liberation," peasants still had to go out on the roads to beg for food during the lean season before the harvest, just as they had done for centuries during the feudal past. They were given written permission to beg by the local Party authorities, Butterfield discovered, so they would not be arrested.*

Sharing the outlook of their colleagues were Jay and Linda Mathews, who reported for the *Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times*, respectively, and co-authored *One Billion*. The Mathews' experiences as parents in China provided some lighter moments—as when their guide on one trip commented favorably on the good

*Rural poverty and oppression are the subjects of two controversial studies, *Broken Earth* (1983) and *Journey to the Forbidden China* (1985) by Steven W. Mosher, an academic whose work is often journalistic in character. See "The Mosher Affair" by Peter Van Ness, *WQ*, New Year's 1984.

behavior of some other American children in the party. "Our kids aren't like that," Jay Mathews confessed. "They're noisy and loud, sometimes a little rude." "Maybe," said their guide, "they want to grow up to be foreign correspondents."

Two of the most useful books by non-American journalists were written by David Bonavia, a reporter for the London *Times* and the Hong Kong weekly *Far Eastern Economic Review*. Bonavia's experience in China dates back to the early 1970s, and he also served in Moscow.

Bonavia's *The Chinese*, published in 1980, provides a snapshot of China just as its leaders were embarking on the long, hesitant journey away from Maoism. That journey is also the theme of *Verdict in Peking*, his account of the trial of Mao's widow, Jiang Qing, and the other members of the ultra-Maoist Gang of Four.

The trial in Beijing was "a kind of apology to the people of China," he writes, "and an explanation to the rest of the world, for the country's extraordinary behavior" during the harsh final decade of Mao's rule.

A Growing Web

Post-Mao China has been scrutinized by scholars, of course, as well as by journalists. A good roundup is *China's Foreign Relations in the 1980s*, edited by the Brookings Institution's Harry Harding. With six fellow authors, Harding traveled to China, Japan, India, Singapore, and Italy for meetings with nearly 100 Asian and European specialists on China.

Out of those discussions came essays on the historical, political, economic, and strategic context of present-day Chinese foreign policy. In the final essay, Harding concludes that although China's future foreign policy may fluctuate, nothing is likely to "cause any fundamental unraveling of the growing web of commercial, diplomatic, educational, and cultural activities that binds China to the rest of the world."

Some of the same ground is covered in *The China Factor*, written under the auspices of the American Assembly (an affiliate of Columbia University) and the Council on Foreign Relations. The contributors include Richard H. Solomon, the editor, and Michel Oksenberg, Robert A. Scalapino, Lucian W. Pye, and William G. Hyland. Destroying the new ties between Washington and Beijing, Solomon writes, "would reimpose on both China and the United States great costs which could not serve the interests of either country."

Confessions

A more personal report comes from historian Vera Schwarcz, who in 1979–80 was a member of the first officially sponsored exchange group of American scholars in China. Schwarcz's research topic was the May Fourth Movement—China's great student-led protest in 1919 that heralded the next three decades of revolutionary upheaval. But during her 16 months in China she found herself immersed in the ferment of contemporary Chinese political life.

Her encounters with intellectuals emerging from years of persecution are recorded in diary form in *Long Road Home: A China Journal*. One scientist told her of the made-up "confessions" he and others were required to write during the 1950s, to prove their devotion to Mao's new order. "We tried to hear and to reproduce the unified voice the Party deemed acceptable," he told Schwarcz ruefully. "Thus, we forgot our own."

Other visiting scholars have looked critically at some of China's revolutionary myths. Two examples are Margery Wolf's *Revolution Postponed:*

Women in Contemporary China and Richard Madsen's *Morality and Power in a Chinese Village*.

Wolf's interviews with nearly 300 women in various Chinese provinces led her to conclude that despite the revolutionary promises of 1949, China remains a profoundly patriarchal society in which "a woman's life is still determined by her relationship to a man, be he father or husband, not by her own efforts or failures."

Madsen, studying a Guangdong province farming community, found that the twists and turns of official orthodoxy over the last 35 years weakened traditional Confucian beliefs but failed to generate any new ideas in their place. Today's prevailing rural values, Madsen observes, seem to encompass nothing more than selfish pragmatism.

The most telling accounts of China's recent experience come from the Chinese survivors.

"I love Chairman Mao" were almost the first words Liang Heng learned to speak. But after Mao's erratic policies destroyed his family—Liang's mother was purged in the 1957 anti-rightist campaign, and his father, a journalist, was persecuted in the Cultural Revolution—Liang suffered years of inner turmoil matching the chaos that Mao brought down on China. In *Son of the Revolution*, written with his American wife, Judith Shapiro, Liang has produced an extraordinary memoir.

Spirit of Protest

He was successively a roving Red Guard, a member of a semidelinquent street gang of homeless youths, a peasant, a factory worker, and finally (after Mao's death permitted Liang and millions of others to overcome the stigma of "rightist" family backgrounds) a literature student at the Hunan Teachers Institute. There he met Shapiro, who had come to teach English; after they fell in love, it took no less than the permission of Deng Xiaoping himself for the couple to marry and leave for the United States.

Liang's disillusionment (by the time Mao died, he writes, "the very word 'Revolution' had become tedious and meaningless") was shared by millions of Chinese who came of age during Mao's final decade. The voices of some are in *Mao's Harvest*, a striking collection of stories, poems, and essays published in 1979–81.

The book's editors, Helen F. Siu and Zelda Stern, culled their selections not from the openly dissident Democracy Movement publications but from officially sponsored literary magazines that sprang up in considerable numbers during the cultural thaw of those years. (Almost none of these magazines survive today.) A spirit of protest animates most of these pieces, but the authors demand not so much a change in the system as the right to self-expression. One essayist observes:

> If you say we are here for revolution, the idea is too abstract and farfetched. I don't want to write for the purpose of making a contribution to the people or for Deng's Four Modernizations but for myself, for my own personal needs. I am not content to let society treat me as if I were nothing.

The same attitude flavors *Chrysanthemums*, a collection of stories by Feng Jicai, one of China's best known writers and painters. During the topsy-turvy Cultural Revolution, Feng burned many of his own manuscripts (sometimes as soon as he had finished writing them, according to his translator, Susan Wilf Chen) in order to avoid persecution by Maoist zealots. Nearly all the stories Chen chose for this collection recall the lunatic passions and "stifling, fear-ridden atmosphere" of that time. The episodes often sound unbelievable, but as one of Feng's

characters remarks, "If my story seems to smack of caricature, that is because life itself was freakish in those days."

William Hinton, the author of *Shenfan*, is American, not Chinese, but to the extent that he draws on extensive oral history interviews, his book also represents, at least in part, Chinese experiences as seen through Chinese eyes.

This book continues Hinton's chronicle of a village in north central China called Long Bow, where Hinton lived as an early admirer of the Communist revolution during the first four years of Communist rule (1949–53). When Hinton's focus is on subjects outside Long Bow, his work is little more than propaganda. But when he turns to village personalities and events, his account brims with the earthy details of how rural Chinese live, farm, and conduct their affairs.

Hinton was on hand when local party cadres in 1971 carried out a grim "rectification campaign," seeking to uncover errors or counter-revolutionary plots among village officials. All told, he provides perhaps the most detailed account available of how Mao-style politics actually worked at the grass-roots level.

China's leaders, past and present, do not lend themselves to easy analysis. But biographers persist.

Perhaps the best effort is Dick Wilson's *Zhou Enlai*, a portrait of Mao's urbane Number Two, who died in 1976. Zhou, Wilson shows, truly earned his reputation as China's "indispensable man." As Prime Minister for 26 years, he was simultaneously the country's chief administrator, diplomat, conciliator of intraparty disputes, and—not least important—mender of Mao's broken crockery. Wilson, a British author of numerous books on China, does not really solve the many riddles of Zhou's character or of his long, enigmatic partnership with Mao, but he does a workmanlike job of presenting the available facts of Zhou's life.

Some parts of this study need to be

Mao Zedong

Deng Xiaoping

read with caution, however, especially Wilson's anecdotes drawn from Chinese publications appearing after Zhou's and Mao's deaths. At that time, Beijing propagandists were deliberately brightening Zhou's image, partly to discredit further his enemies, the deposed Gang of Four, and partly as a means of subtly diminishing Mao's own godlike image.

Deng Xiaoping by the Taiwan-based scholar Ching Hua Lee is said by its publishers to be the first full-scale biography of China's present leader.

Although written in plodding style and burdened by details that may exhaust the nonspecialist, this useful study traces Deng's life and his 60 years in the Chinese Communist movement. The story covers the years of the Long March, the wars against the Japanese and Chiang Kai Shek's Nationalist regime, the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, and the succession of purges and factional struggles that Deng weathered before coming to power after Mao's death.

A Different Story

Deng, who will be the last Chinese leader to have served with the revolution's founding fathers, is shown to have displayed the same qualities as a young man that he is known for today: intelligence, pragmatism, competence, and a bristling stubbornness in the defense of his own ideas.

In sharp contrast is *The Messiah and the Mandarins*, a breezy biography of Mao by the British journalist Dennis Bloodworth. While no original scholarship is attempted or achieved here, the general reader will find it a coherent profile of the Great Helmsman.

Bloodworth's success lies in showing the grandiosity of Mao's revolutionary passion: He dreamt of transforming not just China's political and economic system but the people themselves, whom he imagined could be freed of greed and selfishness and reborn as a new generation of noble postrevolutionary heroes and heroines. Bloodworth writes:

He was forever pushing them upwards, only to see them roll back again, but the significance of this did not appear to trouble him—that the terrible futility of the ordeal of Sisyphus lay not in the stone, but in the law of gravity; and that the terrible futility of his own ordeal might lie in the nature of man.

A different story is that of Ding Ling, a literary rebel who became the Chinese Communist movement's best known woman writer. Yi-tsi Mei Feuerwerker has written *Ding Ling's Fiction* as an extended critical essay rather than as straight biography; it is, in essence, a bitter commentary on the artist's fate in 20th-century revolutionary politics.

Ding Ling, born in 1904, began writing fiction during the 1920s, at first mainly about young women trying to liberate themselves in a male-dominated society. (The ideas expressed in her stories were so new that she used the English words "modern girl" because no equivalent phrase had yet been coined in Chinese.) Ding joined Mao's guerrillas in the 1930s, and from then on, Feuerwerker shows, was constantly torn between her artistic vision and the demands of Maoist orthodoxy.

Contradictions

Purged from the Party as a "rightist" in 1957, she spent the next 22 years in prison or banished to remote provinces, while her books were banned and her name erased from official literary histories. Though she was reinstated during the post-Mao cultural thaw, her life still embodies the terrible contradiction between China's "liberation" and the victimization of

so many of its people.

No one can understand China's current (peaceful) revolution under Deng without looking at the past. Among recent histories, one of the most rewarding is *The Gate of Heavenly Peace* by Jonathan D. Spence, a British-born Yale scholar.

Spence gracefully illuminates the upheavals of the last 100 years by focusing not on China's generals and political leaders but on its thinkers and writers—men and women who not only shared the passions and dangers of their time but also described them with artistry and understanding.

Three people give continuity to Spence's narrative. The first is Kang Youwei, a leader in the doomed effort to reform the decaying Qing dynasty at the end of the 19th century. "When objects get old, they break. When institutions get old, they are corrupted," Kang wrote in 1895—the same thought that inspired Mao's Cultural Revolution seven decades later.

Spence's second subject is the writer and literary modernizer Lu Xun, who led Chinese literature away from its fossilized classical traditions and became the mentor and model for an entire generation of writers who came of age after World War I. And the third is Ding Ling, whose life and work, as Yi-tsi Mei Feuerwerker's study shows, encompassed the long travail of China's revolution.

No Pluralism

Through these lives, interwoven with glimpses of many others, Spence gives the reader a vivid sense of how China's turbulent revolution *felt* to some of its most sensitive and sharp-eyed participants. Of all of them, it was Lu Xun who most unforgettably expressed the human cost of the struggle. "Revolution is a bitter thing," he once declared, "mixed with filth and blood, not so lovely or perfect as the poets think."

In *Chinese Democracy*, Columbia's Andrew J. Nathan places the brief 1978–79 Democracy Movement and its aftermath in the context of earlier reform movements—including Kang Youwei's—and of Chinese political tradition.

Nathan shows that, during the last 100 years, the impulse toward pluralism and individual freedom surfaced whenever political conditions permitted reformers to voice their ideas. But so far, Nathan concludes, China's "obsession with political order and national strength has made it impossible for most other Chinese, even non-Marxists, to share [such] reformers' vision of change."

Old Passions

Other chronicles adopt a more narrow focus, examining specific events of the 20th century. *The Long March* by *New York Times* alumnus Harrison E. Salisbury, no China hand, chronicles the legendary 6,000-mile retreat of Mao's guerrillas from a wilderness area of Jiangxi province in southern China to Shaanxi in the far north, whence Mao would return to conquer all of China 14 years later.

The Long March was one episode in a saga extending well back into the last century. This drama is traced by Robert Scalapino in his new history, *Modern China and Its Revolutionary Progress: 1850–1920*, covering the 70-year span from the great convulsion of the Taiping Rebellion to the eve of the founding of the Communist Party.

Another historian, Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, examines a fateful moment in U.S.-Chinese relations—Washington's refusal to recognize the newly victorious Communist regime in 1949, preceding nearly a quarter century of conflict and total estrangement—in *Patterns in the Dust*. And a different look at the past is offered by my father,

Harold R. Isaacs, in *Re-encounters in China*.

As a young journalist in Shanghai during the early 1930s, Isaacs knew many writers and revolutionaries of that period, including Ding Ling and Son Qing-ling, widow of Sun Yat-sen (later the ceremonial vice-chairman of the Peoples Republic).

In 1980, Isaacs was finally allowed to revisit the scenes of his radical youth. His memoir of that journey shows both author and his old acquaintances as if on film in double-exposure—amid the passions of the 1930s, and amid the terrible ambiguities of the revolution's legacy nearly half a century later.

If one theme emerges from all these books, it is that through all the turbulence of recent Chinese history the big issues have remained remarkably constant. "Science and Democracy," Beijing's dissidents wrote on Democracy Wall in 1979. The same words, exactly, were the slogan of the students' May Fourth Movement 60 years earlier. China's long struggle has been with domestic tyranny, economic backwardness, human degradation, and the threat of foreign encroachment. That struggle is not over.

CHINA BOOKLIST

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EDITOR'S NOTE: *For earlier works on China, see* WQ*'s Background Books essay on Mao's China (Autumn 1980).*