
sumer culture and, in the process, establishes himself as a profound and original cultural critic in his own right. *Fables of Abundance* is a rare picture of an intellectual searching for fresh, new ground on which to stand as an interpreter of modern life.

THE PRIVATE LIFE OF CHAIRMAN MAO: The Memoirs of Mao's Personal Physician. By Li Zhisui. With the editorial assistance of Anne F. Thurston. Trans. by Tai Hung-chao. Random House. 682 pp. \$30
BURYING MAO: Chinese Politics in the Age of Deng Xiaoping. By Richard Baum. Princeton. 489 pp. \$35

Ever since Mao Zedong officially founded the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949, the inner workings of its political system have remained clouded in mystery. Two new books plumb that mystery and uncover, at bottom, a large irony: a country supposedly governed by ironclad ideology was buffeted this way and that by a few men's personal whims.

Li Zhisui was Mao's personal physician (his great-grandfather had also been physician to a Chinese emperor), but his story of Mao's private life belongs less to medical annals than to the *National Enquirer*. Mao's insatiable appetite for young women (he passed on venereal disease to hundreds of them), his slovenly personal habits (he neither bathed nor brushed his teeth), his drug addiction, and his extravagant "imperial" processions from city to city hardly fit his once-popular image as an ascetic, ideologically inspired patriot. Convinced that Chairman knows best, Mao trusted few and worked closely with no one. When thwarted, he would contemplate returning to the mountains to launch a new guerrilla campaign. He seems to have enjoyed few things as much as the terror and chaos caused by his Cultural Revolution (1965-68).

But can this tale, with its lurid sex and the relentless pettiness of Mao and his vicious, self-indulgent wife, Jiang Qing, be entirely believed? Anne Thurston, a noted China authority, has

shaped and written much of the book, and her contribution gives a creditable historical background to Li's anecdotes. Li's source materials, his diaries, were burned in 1966, yet he asks the reader to accept verbatim dialogues as well as minutely observed details of events he could not have personally witnessed. Nor can Li qualify as an unbiased observer when it is obvious that he allowed few standards, political or ethical, to interfere with his role as Mao's physician, confidante, and servant.

Baum, a political scientist at UCLA, readily admits that he is using limited and questionable documents, but he nevertheless manages to construct a richly textured and convincing portrait of the political transformation that ensued after Mao's death in 1976 at the age of 82. Deng Xiaoping, the master manipulator, demonstrated again the centrality of personal control in China, and during his reign the scheming of factions and rivals customarily took the place of policy debates. It was, after all, his ambivalence about market reforms and political liberalization that led to the Tiananmen Square massacre in June 1989. Deng is now 90 years old and sick, and the People's Republic stands on a precipice once more, with few institutions in place that can guarantee stability, economic reform, political change, or even the shunning of nationalistic militarism. Baum makes clear that Deng's one-man show has been better for China than was Mao's. But Deng, too, has cast the Chinese people adrift in complex and dangerous circumstances, being no more willing than Mao to trust China's fate to independent political processes he cannot dominate.

THE SOUTHERN TRADITION: The Achievement and Limitations of an American Conservatism. By Eugene D. Genovese. Harvard. 138 pp. \$22.50

If any more evidence is needed that the end of the Cold War turned the world upside down, this book should do it. It is not so much the author's argument that "southern conserva-

tive thought, shorn of its errors and irrationalities" deserves a "respectful hearing" that is topsy-turvy as the fact that the author is the nation's most eminent historian on the left.

Genovese, Distinguished Scholar-in-Residence at Emory's University Center in Atlanta, is alluding not to the free-market conservatism of Georgia's Newt Gingrich but to a traditional conservatism that has its origins in the antebellum writings of men such as John C. Calhoun. It is a conservatism that grants pride of place to community, hierarchy, and order, a conservatism that looks with horror upon today's visions of individual freedom, whether those of liberals or conservatives. It achieved its second wind with the Agrarian movement, which included writers and poets such as Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren and produced the famous manifesto, *I'll Take My Stand* (1930), and was continued by scholars such as Richard Weaver (1910-63) and M. E. Bradford (1934-93). Today, it is preserved in two intellectual magazines, *Chronicles* and *Southern Partisan*, and partially represented in the political arena by Patrick Buchanan.

This older southern conservatism is a tradition nearly as hostile to the market as it is to socialism and communism. Against the homogenizing and leveling influences of the national state and international finance capitalism, the southern conservatives have held up a vision of regional autonomy, "small property," and "Christian individualism." They are appalled by most of what modernity has wrought. "There is ground for declaring that modern man has become a moral idiot," Richard Weaver wrote in 1948. "For four centuries every man has been not only his own priest but his own professor of ethics." Genovese finds many flaws and a few things to admire in these arguments, but he is rightly drawn to the traditionalist idea of egalitarianism, which is based on moral skepticism rather than the usual utopian assumptions about the goodness of man. Most southern conservatives would agree with C.S. Lewis's judgment that "mankind is so fallen that no man can be trusted with unchecked power over his fellows."

The power of the southern conservatives' cultural critique is not matched by their political program, which suffers from internal philosophical gridlock. Those who in the past opposed segregation, for example, did little to promote integration because of their commitment to community rights, "and their particular communities . . . were implacably hostile to black demands," Genovese notes. Today, they fear international capitalism but, because of their distrust of the national government, they are reluctant to propose effective means of regulating it. Genovese believes that the southern conservatives could have "surprising strength" in national politics. Such a conservatism, traditionalist in economics and morality, may hold lessons for the Left, but it is hard to see how it has much to offer a larger public apart from an admirable but finally inchoate longing for community.

Arts & Letters

THE RUIN OF KASCH. By Roberto Calasso. Trans. by William Weaver and Stephen Sartarelli. Harvard. 385 pp. \$24.95

The Ruin of Kasch is literary but not a novel, historical but not a history, philosophical but not formal philosophy. Its author, Roberto Calasso, is a distinguished Milanese publisher and the author of *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* (1993), and here he has composed an extended meditation on the downward course of civilization and the emergence of the modern world.

Kasch makes its own genre, albeit one quintessentially European in tone and feel. (Had Calasso been around, and of different views, he might have been hired for the *Encyclopédie*.) Calasso follows, at least in this work, the mind's leaps rather than the footprints of earthbound narrative. He thus devotes only nine pages to the legendary African kingdom of Kasch, but the tale resonates forward and back through every chapter as an example of what happens as we move from apparently primitive to apparently enlightened practices. What such a