2-23-2009

In Case You Missed It: Passion of the Mao

Jeremiah Jenne

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive

Part of the Asian History Commons, Asian Studies Commons, Chinese Studies Commons, and the International Relations Commons

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive/413

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the China Beat Archive at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012 by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.
By Jeremiah Jenne
Passion of the Mao is the quirky documentary produced by Lee Feigon based on his book Mao: A Reinterpretation. There’s some things to like about the film. I appreciated the irreverence, and there were a number of chuckle-worthy jokes and sly references as well as several precipitous descents into banal toilet and body humor. (Some of which, for awhile, are also pretty chuckle-worthy.) Mao’s writings are referenced throughout the film, though Mr. Feigon’s choice to have them read using a voiceover that recalled the worst of the Fu Manchu films from early Hollywood is odd. Mr. Feigon also gives prominence to Mao’s fondness for scatological references and bawdy language. It’s funny and raunchy and, for the most part, unnecessary. Mao was the kind of guy who liked young girls, disliked bathing, and enjoyed the occasional fart joke. Okay, I got it. Next.

In terms of history, the first half of the film is quite good. The occasional surrealist cartoon or madcap aside doesn’t distract from a pretty solid narrative that hits the high points of Mao’s early career, a narrative which is interwoven nicely with the larger story of the Communist Revolution. But like that revolution, the movie starts to veer off course after we get to 1949. Mr. Feigon does well to reminds us that the early years of the 1950s were ones of economic growth and relative peace (though not so much if you were declared a landlord or a rightist). His treatment of elite politics in this era centers on a portrayal of Peng Dehuai as a “Judas” figure whose long-standing grudge against Mao led to an ill-fated showdown at Lushan. It’s an intriguing re-telling of the Mao-Peng dynamic, but to cast Peng as having sold out Mao for 30 pieces of Soviet silver in this CCP passion play comes off a bit disingenuous given that there is little (if any) mention of the downfall of Lin Biao.

And it is this decision to minimize events from the latter part of the 1960s and 1970s that is perhaps the film’s greatest flaw. For all the antics, animation, and toilet humor, Mr. Feigon has a serious point to make: Perhaps we’ve misunderstood the Cultural Revolution all along, that it wasn’t that bad, and that any evidence to the contrary is the result of the wrong people ending up in power following Mao’s death. Mr. Feigon dismisses Red Guard violence as an early setback in the movement, and chooses instead to focus on statistics which suggest increased educational access, economic growth, and industrial output during the 1966-1976 period. He doesn’t say where the numbers come from and if he’s using CCP figures from that era then obviously we must maintain a certain healthy skepticism.

The hypothesis that the political interests of Deng Xiaoping and his allies in the post-GPCR period have shaped the discussion and discourse about the Cultural Revolution is an intriguing one, and it is a not-so-subtle subtext of the movie that Mr. Feigon views the current government and the legacy of Deng Xiaoping with great disdain. In this way, he reminds me of protesters in China today who hold up pictures of The Chairman as a whip against the current government, one which is seen as more a product of Deng Xiaoping’s reformist policies than of Mao’s revolutionary vision.
In the end, while I enjoyed the beginning of Mr. Feigon’s movie, the casual glossing of the Cultural Revolution was disturbing to me. I have met and talked to too many people who still cannot shake terrible memories of that period. I know families still riven by animosity over events which occurred forty years earlier. I’m willing to accept that the collective and official memory of the Cultural Revolution and Mao was influenced by the political needs of Deng Xiaoping, but in this movie Mr. Feigon himself commits the error of “Leaning too far to one side” and is a bit too blasé about an event which caused great pain and suffering for many people. In the end, it will take more than fart jokes and film parodies to save Mao’s legacy.