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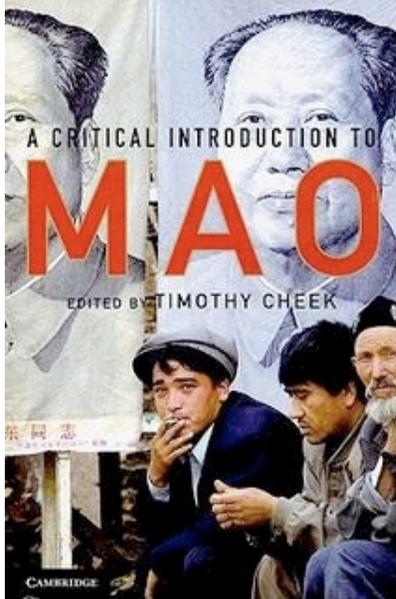
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Cheek, Timothy, ed. *A Critical Introduction to Mao*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. xxi, 369 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), \$27.99 (paper).

By Brian J. DeMare

At the outset of the final chapter of *A Critical Introduction to Mao*, Jiang Yihua, a senior Chinese scholar, suggests that it will still be many years before historians will be able to draw any definitive conclusions concerning Mao Zedong, revolutionary China's most imposing figure. This inability to give a final and authoritative interpretation of Mao, Jiang suggests, is due to difficulties of archival access as well as the fact that Mao is still being recreated and reshaped by his ever loyal followers and his equally dedicated detractors. Jiang's skeptical approach to the problem of knowing Mao, a problem rarely mentioned by his biographers, is both telling for the challenges of studying Mao, and for why editor Timothy Cheek's excellent collection of essays should be considered essential reading for students of Chinese history.

For this collection, Cheek has gathered a diverse set of scholars to tackle the problem of understanding Mao and his legacy. This has long been a vexing issue for historians. In any given modern China survey course, students might be introduced to Mao as an insightful intellectual, writing in defense of feminist empowerment as he laments the suicide of Miss Zhao. The image of Mao during later lectures, particularly during the PRC era when Mao ruled in an increasingly tyrannical style, is never so positive. Cheek and his authors confront this problem by embracing the multiplicity of Mao, both in the complexity of his longtime role as historical actor in revolutionary China and in the contested legacy he has left behind. The Mao that emerges in these pages resists easy categorization, a sharp contrast to biographies that push to demonize Mao as a monster or praise him as a perfect revolutionary. But it is this nuanced view of Mao that the non-specialist audience needs to see, and as such Cheek's collection serves as a necessary counterweight to recent narratives of Mao's life. Its sophisticated approach to the problem of knowing and interpreting Mao as a historical figure, moreover, makes it an excellent choice for undergraduate seminars.

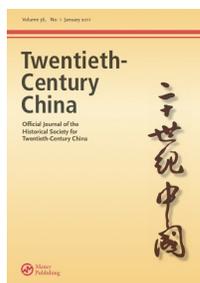
The text is divided into two parts, the first covering Mao's life, the second his legacy. Timothy Cheek and Joseph Esherick's chapters covering Mao's life and the historical context from which he emerged are followed by Brantly Womack's overview of the first half of Mao's life, with special attention to Mao's rural turn and the resulting creation of what would eventually be canonized as Mao Zedong Thought. Hans J. Van De Ven then explores Mao's rise to paramount

party leader and his concurrent push to eliminate “cosmopolitan” or international Marxism in favor of a Chinese and highly nationalistic Marxism; one of Van De Ven’s key insights is to examine the Yan’an Rectification Campaign as an attempt to suppress cosmopolitan Marxism. Using digestion, one of Mao’s favorite topics, as a metaphor, Michael Schoenhals then examines the final two decades of Mao’s life with an eye on explaining how Mao’s desire for rapid change encouraged him to purge the CCP and create all-out chaos in China.

Subsequent chapters on the historical Mao focus on key themes in his life. Frederick C. Teiwes takes up the problem of Mao’s willing followers, focusing on the top level leaders who served Mao out of a mixture of fear and loyalty. Similarly, Hung-yok Ip looks at the troubled relationship between Mao and China’s intellectuals, emphasizing that Mao’s “anti-elitist elitism” was in fact common among China’s educated elite. Delia Davin follows with another chapter on Mao’s ties with key groups, here women, tracing the disappearance of his feminist ideals as he adopted Marxism as his guiding ideology. In the final chapter on the historical Mao, Daniel Leese sifts through the massive iconography built up around Mao, a process that started as early as the 1930 and steadily gained steam up through the Cultural Revolution. As Leese makes clear, Mao was well aware of the power of his image and even today he remains a powerfully divisive symbol.

The second part of the text moves to an analysis of Mao’s legacy, starting with Geremie Barmé’s investigation of the oft cited Mao-as-emperor metaphor. Barmé admits that the imperial metaphor is an easy fit, especially given Mao’s increased autocratic behavior in his final years, but ultimately finds this metaphor limiting. Xiao Yanzhong introduces readers to recent Chinese scholarship on Mao, and perhaps unsurprisingly finds that in the PRC there also exists a multiplicity of Maos, with emerging “schools” variously promoting critical, idealized, or increasingly historically grounded views of Mao. Maoism in the “third world” is the focus of Alexander Cook’s chapter; he argues that Maoist thought has been effective as a military strategy, but not as a ruling ideology. Charles Hayford highlights how Mao has been understood in the West, tracing the Chairman’s trajectory from menace to partner. The final chapter of the text provides a forum for two senior Mao specialists, Jiang Yihua and Roderick Macfarquhar, to offer their unique perspectives on Mao. Jiang praises Mao for liberating the Chinese people while admitting that Mao failed to create a utopia for them. Macfarquhar, meanwhile, suggests that Mao’s legacy would have been better served if he had exited the historical stage after establishing the PRC.

In sum, the chapters in Cheek’s collection contribute to an understanding of Mao Zedong that is as messy and complex as it is compelling. The text, moreover, encourages readers to engage the problem of knowing the historical Mao, while reminding the reader of the equal importance of Mao’s ahistorical legacy. Sadly, this text will most likely never be sold in airport bookstores alongside popular biographies of Mao, but Cheek’s collection will hopefully spark lively discussion in seminar classrooms.



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