
Private Practice, Public Performance: The Cultural Revelations of Dr Li

Author(s): Geremie R. Barme

Source: *The China Journal*, No. 35 (Jan., 1996), pp. 121-127

Published by: The University of Chicago Press on behalf of the College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2950280>

Accessed: 22-01-2018 04:37 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University, The University of Chicago Press are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The China Journal*

**PRIVATE PRACTICE, PUBLIC PERFORMANCE:
THE CULTURAL REVELATIONS OF DR LI**

Geremie R. Barmé

Many Chinese writers, from propagandists to dissidents, have claimed that Mao Zedong was the quintessential representative of China, the embodiment of the nation. There are also Chinese who have argued that during his rule Mao reconstructed the nation in his image, popularizing his personal traits of suspicion, deviousness, *hauteur*, manipulation and power-play through mass political movements, eventually infecting the whole country with a Mao-malady, the effects of which are still felt today. Regardless of whether he is regarded as a hero or monster, Mao both as man and leader still enthral many Chinese.

In all likelihood, Li Zhisui's treat-and-tell memoirs will only serve to augment rather than detract from the Mao mystique. With the collapse of belief in the Party and the cause it represented, patriots have tended, at least publicly, to uphold the farrago of Mao myths. A survey by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences that was published in late 1993 by *Beijing Youth News*, a slick propaganda organ of the Communist Party's Youth League, offered an unsettling view of popular perceptions of the dead leader. The majority of respondents, regardless of the suffering they might have experienced as a result of his aberrant policies, said they still admired Mao as a great man and leader. Some of the younger people questioned in one poll were even sceptical about the horrors of the past, in particular those of the Cultural Revolution period, and questioned whether Mao should be blamed for

THE CHINA JOURNAL, NO.35, JANUARY 1996

whatever had happened.¹ Surveys conducted by *China Youth Daily* in June and October 1994 found that Mao outstripped both Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping as the most popular Chinese leader in recent history.²

While the tenor of reports regarding the public standing of Mao in the official media has been basically positive, closely reflecting the official verdict on Mao, some Chinese social critics have portrayed the Mao Cult as a social aberration. In 1989, in one of the most outspoken critiques of Mao ever published in China (in the Anhui journal *Baijia*, which was subsequently banned following 4 June), the Shanghai writer Li Jie opined that the secret of Mao's political success came from understanding the Chinese plight, an understanding that he shared with the writer Lu Xun.³ Li argued that whereas Lu Xun had used his insight into the weaknesses of the Chinese character to struggle with the burden of tradition and to warn his compatriots of its dangers, Mao had manipulated his knowledge of the Chinese to further his political ambitions.

In his study of the 'Mao phenomenon', as he calls it, Li Jie quotes the last stanza of one of Mao's most famous poems, 'Snow' (1936), as revealing the Chairman's psychological condition:

This land so rich in beauty
Has made countless heroes bow in homage.
But alas! Qin Shihuang and Han Wudi
Were lacking in literary grace,
And Tang Taizong and Song Taizu
Had little poetry in their souls;
And Genghis Khan,
Proud Son of Heaven for a day,
Knew only shooting eagles, bow outstretched.
All are past and gone!
For truly great men
Look to this age alone.

The poem exudes the kind of self-assertiveness and egomania that continues to beguile those for whom Mao Zedong represents the abiding genius or eidolon of China. Yet Li Jie comments:

The tone is self-confident and heroic, certainly, but it also reveals a deep admiration and jealousy. Here was the peasant boy listing all of the major father

-
- 1 Tang Can, Zhu Rui, Li Chunling and Shen Jie, 'Dangdai renxinzhongde Mao Zedong — dui 100 ming putongrende zhuanti diaocha', *Beijing qingnianbao (Xinwen zhoukan)*, 21 December 1993.
 - 2 Chan Wai-fong, 'Mao Outstrips Deng in Popularity Poll', *South China Morning Post (Weekly)*, 28-29 January 1995.
 - 3 Li Jie, 'Lun Mao Zedong xianxiang — yige xingcunzhede pipan shouji, zhiwu', *Baijia*, no.3 (1989), pp.51-2.

figures of Chinese history, leaving the last and most glorious position, however, for himself. There is a grand boldness of vision all right, but behind the vision lurks an ugly cultural pettiness.

Li Zhisui's account of life in the inner sanctum of the Party leadership fleshes out this view, with descriptions of Mao's petulance, meanness and 'byzantine' personality.

When reflecting on the cultural implications of Li's book, it is worth quoting Li Jie at length to show that there are those among the younger generation of Mainland cultural critics (Li Jie is in his thirties) who have been able to make their own bold analysis of what Mao has meant for the China of the 1980s and 1990s. Li Jie writes:

The decade-long Cultural Revolution is often described as a period during which Chinese killed Chinese, or Communists fought Communists. It would be more precise, however, to say that it was a *mêlée* in which Mao Zedong became entangled with Mao Zedong. This is because by 1966 the Chinese could only think in Mao Zedong Thought; they had undergone a complete stupefaction of their own thought processes. Hundreds of millions of people were turned into clones of Mao himself. They all believed they belonged to Mao, regardless of whether they were rebelling against the authorities or protecting the powerholders; whether they declared themselves to be revolutionaries or were branded counter-revolutionaries. They all believed there was only one Mao and they belonged to him. Even today there are probably many people who still don't realize that in his later years Mao was schizophrenic. Mao was, on the one hand, ordering them to rebel while, at the same time, he called on them to protect the proletarian Motherland. It was nothing less than a black comedy ...

During those years anyone who had a modicum of power as a rebel leader would turn into a mini-Mao. The way they talked, their enunciation, speech patterns and even grammar were all *à la* Mao. The most convincing evidence of this was the use of Mao quotes by both sides as a weapon during every debate and bloody skirmish. They all cried 'We swear to protect Chairman Mao with our lives'. The Chinese weren't fighting with each other; two Mao Zedongs were locked in mortal combat...

Of course, Mao Zedong left other indelible impressions on the life of the Chinese. In both the villages and cities of China in the 1980s, you can detect Mao's shadow everywhere ... They [people with any power at their disposal] may have learnt nothing of Mao's 'art of struggle' but they all know the rude and arbitrary style he adopted when he was out of sorts.

Although Li Zhisui's book can be faulted in many ways — stylistically it reads like the product of collective authorship, there are many areas of doubt both factual and interpretive in the text, and there are unresolved questions concerning the doctor's actual access to the events he depicts — *The Private Life* gives the first unadulterated (though I suspect, self-censored) depiction of

the atmosphere of Zhongnanhai and of Mao's personality as revealed in everyday situations (for example, his battles over the right to go swimming where and when he pleased, his diet, guards, Party protocol, and so on).

Even Li Zhisui, for all the distance that the passage of time allowed him — and the perspective provided by life in the United States — readily admits to the power of Mao's personality and his winning ways. Indeed, there was something for everyone in the Mao persona. As Edgar Snow wrote in the early 1960s:

What makes him [Mao] formidable is that he is not just a party boss but by many millions of Chinese is quite genuinely regarded as a teacher, statesman, strategist, philosopher, poet laureate, national hero, head of the family, and greatest liberator in history. He is to them Confucius plus Lao-tzu plus Rousseau plus Marx plus Buddha ...⁴

In the 1990s, Mao remains a patriotic leader, martial hero, philosopher-king, poet, calligrapher (surrounded as he so often was with the *bric-à-brac* of the traditional literatus — cloth-bound books, writing brushes and ink stones), but he is also widely seen in a positive light as a strong and irascible figure, a wily infighter, a man who was both emperor and oracle, the ultimate Machiavellian manipulator who knew, many would argue, just how to keep the restive Chinese nation in place. Mao consciously played on the contrasting Chinese traditions relating to the sage-emperor and rebel chieftain.

Much has been made of the revelations in Dr Li's book regarding Mao Zedong's sexual appetite (although details of his actual sexual practices remain tantalizingly obscured). There has been a sensationalistic response in the Western as well as Hong Kong and Taiwan media to the details Li gives of Mao's numerous peasant wenches, 'personal secretaries' and nurses. Even though the controversy surrounding Li's book and the comments he made in a BBC documentary in early 1994 led to official outrage in Beijing, Mao has generally epitomized in China not only national political potency but also physical potency. Most of the Mao-related jokes current from the early 1980s, for example, reflected positively on the leader's prowess in bed, and they often used figures like Zhou Enlai or Hua Guofeng as foils. On one level such humour represented a transgression against the august figure of the Leader and allowed a popular invasion of the 'forbidden zone' relating to the person of Mao. On another level, they were also indicative of a gradual process that has seen Mao become more human, more approachable and, in the new Mao Cult, a familiar of the Chinese masses. Through this process, often described by Chinese critics as 'secularization', Mao has been enlisted into the ranks of the people in contrast and even in opposition to the present leaders, who are increasingly seen as being sectarian, corrupt and lacklustre.

I would venture that Li's memoirs have done little to undermine this popular impression of the Chairman. Indeed, one could speculate that popular

⁴ Edgar Snow, *The Other Side of the River* (New York: Random House, 1962), p.151.

opinion in China — at least among those who have seen Li's book — was neither particularly outraged nor surprised by the latest proof of the Chairman's talents. If anything, people may well regard Mao's voracious appetites, whether for sex, power struggles or food, as further evidence of his exceptional stature, superhuman energy and unequivocal success.

It could also be argued that Mao, the ultimate father-mother official, enjoyed such a broad appeal because, to an extent, he was a love object. This is something that was revealed not only in the endless pæans of praise written for Mao during the Cultural Revolution, but also in the recent (1992-93) mass revival of Mao songs released in disco versions on tape, CDs and in karaoke videos. The mass popularity of the 1995 film 'Under the Burning Sun', based on a 1991 Wang Shuo story about the coming-of-age of a group of adolescents in a PLA compound in the early 1970s, also attests to this. In an interview given in late 1995, the movie's director noted that Mao was the first person whom members of his generation had learned to love.⁵

In the popular imagination Mao, however, has remained above all a martial hero and patriot possessed of the genius of Zhuge Liang, the strategist *par excellence*, and the 'temper of a great knight-errant' (*daxia qidu*). When discussing Mao's disastrous Great Leap Forward policies and the Cultural Revolution, Li Zhisui condemns the Chairman's uncaring cruelty. But these very elements of Mao's lunatic idealism, roughishness, callousness and recklessness make him an attractive martial hero for a population succoured on traditional tales of chivalry, violence and mindless acts of courage.

Mao's seeming popularity among the young in China today is something that may appear confounding. But it is Mao as the *soi-disant* irreverent rebel and supporter of the young — something that Li Zhisui limns in great detail in his memoirs — that from the late 1980s began to have an increasing appeal to many young people.⁶ Zhang Chengzhi, now a prominent novelist and public critic of the commercialization of Mainland culture, had been the first to coin the term 'Red Guard' in 1966 when he was a student at Qinghua Middle School. Writing for a Japanese monthly at the time of the Mao centenary, Zhang remarked on the continuing cachet of the Chairman:

I don't care if people deride me for being the last Red Guard, I just never want to forget the principle Mao pursued in dealing with Red Guards and students. In 1966, before the student movement became violent, he issued a warning to high-level cadres in the Party. Quoting from memory it went something like this: 'No one who crushes a student movement will come to a good end. The northern warlords repressed the students and look what happened to them. So did the reactionaries of

⁵ See the director Jiang Wen's comments in Sandrine Chenivresse, 'For Us, Mao was a First Love', *China Perspectives* (Hong Kong), no.1 (September/October 1995), pp.72-3.

⁶ See Geremie R. Barmé, *Shades of Mao: The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1996).

the KMT and you know it was useless. I advise you all: don't crush the student movement. No good will come of it. Heed my words'.

I don't know what people think today when they re-read this passage. It still moves me deeply. He may have been a hopeless politician, but he took students seriously and respected their demands as a matter of principle.

Mao spent his student days in his homeland of Hunan, an area that has a strong and ancient spiritual tradition. Those student years left a lasting impression on him and turned him into an eternal student. Youthful impulsiveness is a privilege students enjoy and it is something that became a basic political principle for Mao.⁷

Li Zhisui's book will not alter the fact that Mao is, to many people, EveryMao: he is the peasant lad made good; warrior-literatus as well as the philosopher-king. Interestingly, the 1993 survey by researchers at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, published in *Beijing Youth News* on the eve of the Mao centenary, revealed an abiding admiration for Mao even among his victims. (Whether this is the view that would be expressed if there was press freedom and an end of one-party rule in China is a matter for speculation.)

Long ago Mao's persona achieved the status of national myth, and in his posthumous rebirth his history as presented in the Chinese media fits in neatly with what Bruce Chatwin called 'the Hero Cycle'. Mao weathered numerous setbacks, trials and tribulations, including the agonies of the failure of his own policies, and in death he has come out victorious. As Chatwin wrote in his Australian saga *Songlines*:

Every mythology has its version of the 'Hero on his Road to Trials', in which a young man ... receives a 'call'. He travels to a distant country where some giant or monster threatens to destroy the population. In a superhuman battle, he overcomes the Power of Darkness, proves his manhood, and receives his reward: a wife, treasure, land, fame.

These he enjoys into late middle age when, once again, the clouds darken. Again, restlessness stirs him. Again he leaves: either like Beowulf to die in combat or, as the blind Tiresias prophesies for Odysseus, to set off for some mysterious destination, and vanish ...

Each section of the myth — like a link in a behavioural chain — will correspond to one of the classic Ages of Man. Each Age opens with some fresh barrier to be scaled or ordeal to be endured. The status of the Hero will rise in proportion as to how much of this assault course he completes — or is seen to complete.⁸

⁷ Zhang Chengzhi (Chō Shō-shi), 'Mō shūseki gurafiti', *Sekai*, no.1 (1994).

⁸ Bruce Chatwin, *Songlines* (London: Cape, 1987).

I would venture that *The Private Life of Chairman Mao* provides further evidence that the history of Chairman Mao, whether as man or myth, conforms to much of this 'assault course'.

Beijing
November 1995



The Company we keep...

To succeed in regional business, you need the facts – without the fiction. These past 12 months, we've again offered the views and perspectives of some of Asia's most influential business and government leaders. Information crucial to regional business strategies.

Asia Today pioneered serious reporting of Asian business in Australia – 13 years on, we're widely read and respected throughout the region. Profit from our knowledge – put **Asia Today** at the top of your essential reading list for 1996.

**asia
today**®

Australia's Regional Business Magazine