
WILD SWANS IS A DEAD DUCK

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Wild Swans is something of a mega best seller at the moment. If I see someone reading a book on the train it very likely has a pale green cover. It is the story of three generations - the author Jung Chang, and her mother and grandmother. The book takes us up to 1978 when the author left China for the West.

Her grandmother was the concubine of a high official in the war lord period in the 1920s. Her mother was involved in the resistance to the Japanese occupation and then joined the communists during the civil war against Chiang Kai Shek. After 1949, her parents became high officials in the new government. Her father reached the position of governor of Sechuan, a province of about 100 million people. The author herself grew up in 'Mao's China' and was an 'educated youth' during the Cultural Revolution.

The book is essentially about Chinese politics in that the lives of the protagonists are swept up by the events unfolding around them and the author has an anti-Mao, anti-communist message to impart. It is the politics that prompts this review.

Most of the attack on the Chinese revolution deals with the Cultural Revolution of the late 1960s. Memoirs of people who suffered during that period has become something of a genre in recent times. This book is the most commercially successful of these.

The next main focus of attack is the Great Leap Forward of the late 1950s. This review will look firstly at the author's treatment of that period and then move on to the Cultural Revolution.

The Great Leap Forward

The author trots out the standard denunciation of the Great Leap Forward (GLF) as an act of folly that lead to economic anarchy and waste. We are told about the exaggerated reporting of production figures, the ill

considered earth works, the waste and the tyranny of local officials keen to report over-achievement of targets.

I am not in a position to assess how successful or otherwise the GLF was in pushing forward industrialisation. Nevertheless, most treatments of this period can be faulted on two counts.

Firstly, immediate economic outcomes should not be the sole criteria for assessing the success of the GLF in pushing forward industrialisation. What it did was make millions of peasants familiar with industrial activity - a vital prerequisite for future economic development. It was also in line with a strategy that Mao called 'walking on two legs', whereby you rely on both modern industry and small scale labour intensive local industry. This policy makes perfect economic sense in a backward country.

Secondly, the underlying strategy of the GLF was one of linking production with a political revolution that mobilises mass involvement and initiative, and struggles to develop ways of superseding bourgeois relations in production. Such a process of mobilisation is not a dinner party and like everything else in this world entails risks. If you stuff it up you learn from the experience and determine to do a better job in future. You don't throw up your hands and say - my god the landlords and capitalists were right after all. Of course it is always safer to just follow the course already mapped out by existing society. But if you are going to do that why bother having a revolution?

When it comes to the establishment of the communes which emerged at the same time as the GLF, the author dwells on some of the temporary ultra-left aberrations such as free food and pay unrelated to work performed. Given her political preferences this is natural. However, one could just as well dwell on the mammoth achievement of collectivising ownership in agriculture. This was a necessary task for any socialist revolution in a backward country and it laid the basis for significant economic development in subsequent years.

Famine

The author blames the GLF and the establishment of communes for the crop failures and famines that occurred from 1958 to 1960. Errors

included the failure to stockpile grain, irrational hype about abundance and misconceived earthworks. Mao said that the food shortages were 30 percent due to human error and 70 percent to natural disasters. According to Jung, Lui shao-shi claimed the percentages were the other way round. In a 25 page chapter on the famine Jung dismisses the importance of natural disasters with the following remarks:

Another cause mentioned was 'unprecedented natural calamities.' China is a vast country, and bad weather causes food shortages somewhere every year. No one but the highest leaders had access to nationwide information about the weather. In fact, given the immobility of the population, few knew what happened in the next region, or even over the next mountain. Many thought then, and still think today, that the famine was caused by natural disasters. I have no full picture, but of all the people I have talked to from different parts of China, few knew of natural calamities in their region. They only have stories to tell about deaths from starvation. (p. 311)

The Chinese press at the time claimed that there had been natural calamities of an order unknown for a century. Surely this cannot be dismissed in such an offhand way. After a quick library search I came across the following account of the natural disasters by a professor of geography at the University of Hong Kong. I do not intend to adjudicate on the matter but simply present this very different account of the importance of natural disasters. Others, perhaps, can research it further.

From reports appearing in the Chinese Press the food crisis, which developed in 1960 and has since caused so much world comment, appears as the cumulative result of three bad agricultural years. In 1958 400 million mow of the total cultivated area of 1 600 million mow were affected by extremely adverse weather, floods or insect pests, and conditions reached disastrous proportions on as much as a quarter of this area. The next year was described as the worst of the decade for the farmer and the total area affected rose to 600 million mow. Nevertheless, increases in agricultural production were reported in both years, and the commune system received the credit for these achievements. In 1960, however, the total area affected by 'natural calamities' rose to an unprecedented 900 million mow, of which 300-400 million mow suffered heavily. There is some evidence - though no direct official statement has been made - that the production of food grains reached only the level of 1957 (that is, about 185 million tons as against the 1959 production of 270 million tons) and that the cotton crop was particularly small also. The worst of the 'natural calamities' of 1960 was undoubtedly drought, which prevailed over widespread areas of north China. The provinces of Hopeh, Honan, Shantung and Shansi, all important wheat producers, were affected over areas totalling 60 per cent of their cultivated land. In some parts dry spells lasting more than a year were reported. In

Shantung, for example, there was no water in eight of the twelve principal rivers for part of the year. The province had to receive continuous help: foodstuffs, medicines and clothing were supplied from Chekiang, Kiangsu, Fukien, Kiangsi and Anhwei provinces as well as from Shanghai, and units of the army were sent from Fukien to help with relief work. Central Honan experienced a 300-day drought which started during the winter wheat sowing in 1959. A report from Honan in late June 1960 described the drought situation as serious and stated that some areas had not been sown with summer crops. The volume of flow of the Hwang Ho through the province at this time was only two-thirds that of the previous year. In Shensi a drought of 100 days' duration in the autumn of 1959 was followed almost immediately by a similar dry spell extending well into 1960.

Typhoon damage during 1960 was unusually severe in the northeast and in the coastal provinces of Kwantung, Fukien, Kiangsu and Shantung. Between 1 and 5 August the heaviest rain in living memory fell in south Manchuria during the passage of a typhoon and flooding occurred on such a wide scale that even industrial production was interrupted. Fushun received 203 mm (8 in) of rain in six hours on 4 August. The waters of the Hun and Tungchow rivers burst the dykes flooding the great West opencast coal-mine and many smaller pits. The Penki mines and some factories there were also flooded, while at Anshan the steelworks had to suspend operations. The damage to farmland can best be judged from the interruption of railway services. The Shenyang-Dairen line was cut in no less than forty places by flooding and that from Shenyang to Changchun in twenty-two places. In the south, Kwantung, the country's second largest rice producer, which in 1959 had experienced the worst floods of a century along the East River, was struck in May and June by typhoons in the Swatow area and in October by two that passed across the south of the province within a week. As a result of the May typhoon 1.82 million mow of crops were inundated on the Swatow plain. The damage from that of June extended north into Fukien; in the Swatow area alone 60 000 homes were reported damaged. The destruction caused by the autumn typhoons can be gauged from the fact that they flattened 70 per cent of Hainan Island's late rice crop. Serious floods occurred along several rivers during the year. To take one example, along the Han river, the Yangtze's largest tributary, the biggest water crest for twenty-five years was experienced early in September and a million people had to be mobilized from the farms to strengthen the dykes and fight the floods. In addition, an important consequence of the drought and floods was the rapid increase in insect pests over large areas. Shantung, Honan, Kiangsu, Anhwei and Liaoning were all reported to have been badly affected. (Dwyer, pp. 262-4)

The Cultural Revolution

Like most commentators Jung considers the Cultural Revolution an unnecessary and unnatural aberration. To her mind its was due to various flaws in Mao's character, such as a desire to impose uncritical acceptance of his views, an eccentric and unreal utopian vision and a love of social conflict for its own sake.

For Mao and other revolutionaries, the Cultural Revolution was a necessary struggle against part of the political leadership that wanted to take the capitalist road. The danger had already been heralded by developments in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe where the revolution had been turned on its head.

Mao concluded that under socialism there is a new bourgeoisie inside the ruling communist party and hence there is an ongoing class struggle. After his death the reality of this bourgeoisie was confirmed by the rise to power of people like Deng Xiaoping. Socialism is now a phoney facade and the revolution has been reversed. The communes have been disbanded, private industry introduced on a large scale and workers reduced to wage slaves.

The aim of the Cultural Revolution was in general terms described as the three stage process of Struggle-Criticism-Transformation.

The struggle against and overthrow of those persons in authority taking the capitalist road; criticism and rejection of the reactionary bourgeois authorities and the ideology of the bourgeoisie and all other exploiting classes; and the transformation of the education, literature, and art and all other parts of the social superstructure that do not correspond to the socialist economic base..
(Document from April 1967 quoted in Chen p 265)

In industry this transformation included:

- the replacing of one person management with revolutionary committees;
- the establishment of three-in-one-combinations of cadres, technicians and workers to solve problems in production and R&D. This among other measures aimed to break down the narrow division of labour;
- getting away from the profit motive and relying on the enthusiasm and initiative of workers; and

- elimination of irrational bureaucratic rules.

Mao characterised the process thus:

'Struggle-criticism-transformation in a factory, on the whole, goes through the following stages: establishing a three-in-one revolutionary committee; carrying out mass criticism and repudiation; purifying the class ranks; consolidating the Party organization; and simplifying the administrative structure, changing irrational rules and regulations and sending office worker to the workshops.' (Mao, quoted in Report to the Ninth Congress, pp. 42-3.)

In education a number of policies were introduced in an effort to ensure that intellectuals became servants of the workers and peasants rather than intellectual aristocrats seeking a privileged way of life. All students joined the workforce after finishing high school. Only after 2 years out in the real world would they be eligible to apply for university entrance. A major factor in selection was the views of one's workmates. After completion of their courses graduates were then expected to go back to where they came from rather than hanging around in the more comfortable big cities. There was also a policy of combining learning with doing. In bourgeois society the division of labour causes a breach between the two. One of the tasks of communism is to bring them together. There was also a policy of eliminating competitive examinations and getting the better students to help the slower ones.

During the Cultural Revolution there was a struggle to promote cultural works that served the revolution rather than revisionism and capitalist restoration. This included theatrical works that had been suppressed by the conservatives who previously controlled the cultural field. There was also a mass movement to involve workers and peasants in activities such as writing poetry and short stories.

Capitalist roaders

The author tries to discredit the attack on capitalist roaders. The likes of Lui Shao Shi are made out to be passive victims rather than fascists and saboteurs. The rough time experienced by radicals hardly cracks a mention. In particular, there is no reference to the revolution in Shanghai, during which the capitalist roaders put up a stubborn struggle to retain power and repressed the rebels.

as leftwing in form but right wing in essence. Like the right they broadened the attack, alienated the middle ground that needed to be united with and won over, and engaged in factional activities to preserve their position. As a result the process of struggle-criticism-transformation was blocked. Such transformation required real changes in the way things were done, and this was something these phonies could not deliver. Furthermore, to be workable it was necessary to win over and rehabilitate most of the old cadres, and that is something that threatened their power.

Wild Swans is sprinkled with cases where the author confuses the ultra-leftist and Maoist lines, or at least fails to make the distinction. Here are the more prominent examples.

A big area where the lines are confused is on the relationship between revolution and production.

In a number of places the author refers to production being disrupted or brought to a standstill by radicals (see pages 522, 565 and 618). This is a straight parroting of the present Chinese government.

There were three positions on the relationship. The right attacked any revolutionary activity as sabotaging production. The ultra-left denounced any concern for production as a 'using work to suppress revolution'. The left accepted some disruption because of the imperatives of revolution but basically saw the revolution boosting production by focusing mass movements on unleashing the enthusiasm and creative energies of workers and on struggling against revisionists attempts to stifle this.

It is significant that one of the main slogans of the Ninth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 1969 was 'Grasp revolution, promote production'. This counters both the ultra-left and the right.

Jung also claims that Chiang Ching, and fellow radical Kang Sheng, stirred up factional fighting and ordered the army to arm the red guards (p. 471). That is untrue. The army was ordered not to back any particular faction but to support left policies and the creation of grand alliances of mass organisations. They were then to assist in the establishment of revolutionary committees based on the three-in-one combination of rebels, old cadres and the army.

It certainly needs to be said that the Maoists were greatly constrained in their ability to deal with ultra-leftism. It was not just a case of a handful of disrupters. Ultra-left errors were rife in the movement comprised as it was of inexperienced activists. Hence the struggle against the ultra left had to be put off because at that stage it would have been used as a dampener on mass action and a pretext for the right to put the lid back on and suppress the genuine left by accusing them of being ultra leftists. It was a rather complicated business.

A good book to read on how the ultra-left operated is *Inside the Cultural Revolution* by Jack Chen. He was a victim of these types in the Foreign Language Institute. Another book on this subject worth looking at is *The Rise and Fall of Lin Biao*.

Two people whose behaviour fitted the ultra-left mould were the Tings. These were the husband and wife team who persecuted the author's parents. The author tells us that they were proteges of Chen Boda (Chen Po ta) and fell from power when he fell. Her father was released from the May 7 school at the same time.

While it is dangerous to assess Jung's parents without some other sources of information about them, I will hazard the guess that they were the middle ground who needed to be won over to the revolution rather than died in the wool reactionaries. They were certainly not revolutionary. The author provides enough information about them to indicate that they could not tell the difference between communism and their left elbow. Like a lot of officials, they had joined the Communist Party because it seemed the only party that could get China out of its semi-feudal and semi-colonial mess. They were not motivated by any great understanding of the communist political agenda and they were quite happy to plod along with the conservative policies that dominated before the Cultural Revolution. To use a couple of Maoist catchphrases, the approach to them would have been one of 'curing the disease to save the patient' and 'helping more people by educating them and narrowing the target of attack'.

No denunciation of the Cultural Revolution is complete without a slanderous onslaught against Comrade Chiang Ching. Jung does not fail us in this respect. However, her contribution offers nothing new, being just a rehash of tripe sprouted by the present regime in China. (See pages 447-8.) The basic message is that Chiang Ching was motivated by petty

jealousies rather than politics. On the contrary, she was engaged in a highly political struggle in the cultural field. Prior to the Cultural Revolution this field was the preserve of conservatives (even if they called themselves communists) just as it became that once again after Mao's death.

By way of conclusion

It would be good to be able to say that *Wild Swans* at least has value as a focus for debate on the Cultural Revolution. Regrettably we cannot, because such a debate would require a revolutionary voice out there in the public arena. At the moment that voice is effectively absent.

References

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