

## **Excerpt of an Interview with Asia Network**

### **What made you decide to take on this project?**

I've had two secret passions all my life. My book on Mao came out a couple of years ago, so that secret's been out of the closet for a while. But my filmmaking desires have only been known to a few close friends. When I was in graduate school, I took a summer off to take filmmaking classes. I loved them, but filmmaking didn't seem like a serious occupation. So I went back to grad school and wrote my dissertation. Two years ago, when I bought a new home computer for my daughter, I noticed it came with software that enables users to edit home movies. Why, I thought, couldn't I use similar software to make a documentary on Chairman Mao's life? So the movie is not only about Mao's aspirations, but also about mine. As Mao put it, "Dare to Struggle, Dare to Win."

### **But why Mao now?**

In the 1960s, Americans disillusioned with U.S. policies in the Cold War and in Vietnam accepted these inflated Chinese views of Mao. After Mao died, some of his mistakes became better known and a reaction naturally occurred. Mao's reputation took a 180-degree turn.

Mao's successors tried to magnify their own achievements—and draw attention away from their failings—by debasing the leader they once called "the

sun in the sky.” It became trendy even, avant-garde, (as Wang Zheng, a Michigan University Professor whom I interview in my movie points out), for people in China to claim that they had been victimized during the Cultural Revolution. For some, like the novelist Ba Jin who did this publicly at a time when it was dangerous to say such things in China, making these statements was a courageous act. But in the West, where there’s not only no danger from such statements but a receptiveness to talk of the evilness of a communist system, many have jumped on this bandwagon.

Today it is commonplace to compare Mao to Stalin, Hitler, or other notorious villains. The recent Chang/Holiday book is an example of the extreme form of this demystification process. Just as the pendulum initially swung too far in the one direction, it has now swung too far in reverse. The time is ripe to look at Mao and especially at the Cultural Revolution in a more even-handed manner.

The people I interviewed for my film acknowledge that horrible atrocities took place during the Cultural Revolution. But during the Cultural Revolution my interviewees didn’t engage in violence and neither did their friends. Then and now they thought that the people who did engage in violence were wrong.

As some of my interviewees note, while the power people attacked one another, ordinary people engaged in productive, creative enterprises, or sometimes just had fun. The shut down of much of the old Stalinist-derived political, social, and education system for periods of time enabled people like my interviewees to engage in new kinds of personal growth and to work to benefit

society. That innocent people were caught up in the violence, and many of the innocent people who were victimized were intellectuals is undeniable, but it does not take away from the fact that economic, political and educational growth was also occurring during this period.

Unfortunately, many of those who are now bemoaning the violence of the Cultural Revolution, and sometimes even bemoaning the violence in which they themselves engaged, were people who didn't have to do it or at least could have helped prevent it in the first place. These violent people are in effect getting away with murder by claiming that Mao or his lackeys made them do it, while the good deeds of those who weren't violent are being ignored.

**But how is *The Passion of the Mao* different from the book you wrote on Mao?**

I felt I could get portray Mao more comprehensively with a movie than with the printed word. One of the biggest long-term problems of Mao's rule was his deification. In my book, I tried to portray Mao seriously. I think the best way to attack Mao's deification is to use humor.

With *The Passion of the Mao*, I have made a movie that reflects in style as well as content the impact of Mao Zedong's life. The movie is irreverent, serious, playful, obscene, tragic—all at the same time. I believe there is a huge gap between Mao the passionate political leader and Mao the man—a man with

outsized peculiarities and peccadilloes in sex, hygiene, and just about everything else.

I have developed what I believe to be an original documentary style. Just as Mao and Jiang Qing in the Cultural Revolution tried to combine the old with the new, turning the familiar genre of Peking Opera into a new revolutionary form, so I try to blend old documentaries into my new documentary to convey both in style and in content Maoist ideas. At times the real Mao is difficult to distinguish from the fictional Mao. So I use animation and humor to show some of the wilder, more ambiguous aspects of Mao's life, such as his sexual hijinks. What better subject for such a mix of genres than the life of a man viewed by millions as a savior and by others as a tyrant?

**This brings us to the question of what you hope to show with the movie.**

The movie is a biography of Mao from birth to death, but here are a few of the things I highlight:

- Mao was a successful businessman and educator before he became a communist.
- The Long March was in many ways a disaster.
- Mao did more than anyone in Chinese history to enhance the position of women.
- Under Mao the literacy rate increased from 15 to 80 percent.
- It was Mao who in the late 1950s insisted on departing from the centralized, Soviet model of development and began to decentralize the economy.

- Chinese industrial output increased thirty-fold from 1949 to 1976. Even during the Cultural Revolution, the country had almost no inflation and an industrial growth rate of between 8 and 10 percent, respectable by any standards.
- Legitimate questions remain about the human costs of the economic expansion achieved under Mao, as well as disputes over exact numbers. But the assertion that the Chinese economy stagnated under Mao and did not begin to grow until his successors imported Western economic methods is sheer malarkey.
- Western writers have usually credited Mao's successors with ending China's period of isolation, but in 1971, when the Nixon administration reversed America's China policy, Mao was in charge and was eagerly receptive.

My goal is to put Mao in perspective as a canny revolutionary who shaped China's history.

### **What is your background?**

I received my Ph.D. in modern Chinese history from the University of Wisconsin at Madison. For over twenty years, I was a Professor and Chair of the East Asian Department at Colby College. Now I'm a Research Associate at the University of Chicago.

In addition to the book on which the movie is based, Mao: A Reinterpretation (Ivan R. Dee Press, 2002), I have also written Demystifying Tibet: Unlocking the Secrets of the Land of the Snows (Ivan R. Dee Press, 1996), China Rising: The Meaning of Tiananmen (Ivan R. Dee Press, 1990), and the

biography: Chen Duxiu: Founder of the Chinese Communist Party (Princeton University Press, 1983).

I have written for The Wall Street Journal, Barron's, Nation, the Chicago Tribune, the Atlantic, and the Boston Globe. I have also appeared on MacNeil Lehrer, CNN, Hardball CNBC, and the NBC Nightly News.