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Book Review

Mao Zedong he wen hua da ge ming : Zheng zhi xin li yu wen hua ji yin de xin chan shi. Song Yongyi. Lian jing chu ban shi ye gu fen you xian gong si, 2021. 520 pages. ISBN: 9789570859973

毛澤東和文化大革命：政治心理與文化基因的新闡釋. 宋永毅. 聯經出版事業股份有限公司, 2021

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The Proletarian Cultural Revolution has been popularly referred to as the “crazy era” in Chinese history, yet few studies have sought to examine the pathological mindsets of the key political leaders of the Cultural Revolution and how their mental and psychological conditions underwrote the genesis and developments of the Cultural Revolution. Likewise, the existing literature about the Cultural Revolution does not sufficiently address the extent to which it was guided by the very traditions it sought to destroy. Although the Cultural Revolution has been closely associated with the eradication of the so-called “Four Olds,” namely, old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits, much research remains to be undertaken on the actual connections between those traditional ideas and cultural roots and how they directly contributed to and impacted the Cultural Revolution itself.

Yongyi Song’s new monograph, *Mao Zedong he wen hua da ge ming : Zheng zhi xin li yu wen hua ji yin de xin chan shi* (*Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution*), addresses both of these gaps in Cultural Revolution studies. A prominent and prolific Cultural Revolution bibliographer and scholar, Song provides new perspectives on the genesis and developments of the Cultural Revolution through two lenses: He examines how the psychological profiles of Mao Zedong and key members of his inner circle helped to shape the events of that tumultuous period, and he explores the connections between the traditional ideas and cultural roots that the Cultural Revolution sought to overturn with the politically immediate calculations and concerns of top leaders during the Cultural Revolution.

Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution has nine chapters. The first six chapters examine the psychological profiles and/or culture-based behaviors of the paramount leader Mao Zedong, his wife, and one-time cultural czar Jiang Qing, his handpicked successor Lin Biao, his ideology czar Zhang Chunqiao, as well as head of the State Council Zhou Enlai and the deposed erstwhile head of state Liu Shaoqi. The last three chapters of the book are devoted to the discussion of political couples, collective killings, and heterodox thoughts during the Cultural Revolution—three subjects in which the author is an authority through his decades of work with archival sources on the Cultural Revolution.

Through detailed and deliberate analyses of these individuals and the historical events they led, Song has identified several specific personality traits that Mao exhibited during the Cultural Revolution—paranoia, irrationality, perversion, obsession, and impulsiveness—and demonstrated how these traits impacted his decisions and, thereby, the course of history. Song also highlights how three of Mao’s inner circle members, namely, his wife Jiang Qing,

his handpicked successor Lin Biao, and his chief intelligence czar Kang Sheng, were all diagnosed before the Cultural Revolution by medical professionals with mental illnesses and elucidates how their diagnosed conditions underwrote the developments of the Cultural Revolution. His analyses make a compelling case that the mental conditions of these key players of the Cultural Revolution are essential and indispensable for understanding the Cultural Revolution's many seemingly irrational and indecipherable phenomena.

Song also uses Mao's highly complex and involved relationship with Lin Biao to explore the connections between the Cultural Revolution political maneuvering and its precedents in Chinese history. He argues that, in the final analysis, Mao's relationship with his handpicked successor Lin Biao is in essence a variation of the succession politics of the imperial system, in which a sufficiently powerful ruler would seek to handpick his successor, but not without a nod to some institutional norms. He makes the case that Mao even surpassed his predecessors in succession politics by precluding or disregarding any institutional norms that would constrain him. For instance, Mao's practice on succession politics was even more despotic than his predecessors—Mao demanded not only to choose his successor but even his successor's successor.

Studies on the roles of the personality traits and idiosyncratic behaviors of various political leaders abound in history. One can think of how German military officers' fear of waking up Hitler during his sleep critically delayed the deployment of the German strategic reserves during the Battle of Normandy or how the fear that Joseph Stalin's inner circle had of him prevented him from receiving timely medical intervention after his stroke and led to his death. The same question can be asked about the Cultural Revolution: Would there have been a Cultural Revolution at all if it were not for Mao's neuroses leading him to believe that Liu would treat his legacy in the same way that Khrushchev had dealt with Stalin's?

Despite its evident importance, studies of Mao, the Cultural Revolution, and its leaders based on their mental and psychological conditions or its connections with traditional ideas and culture are largely absent in the current literature. By weaving politics with psychology and cultural studies, Song's book has presented more avenues of historical inquiry and has introduced the study of the history of emotions into the discourse on the Cultural Revolution. This book will hopefully lead to more publications on the Cultural Revolution from these fresh angles.

Studies of the personal aspects of political leaders can sometimes lapse into speculations and sensationalism. Song's book has successfully risen above them because of his unparalleled access to and intimate knowledge of primary sources in question, thanks to his role as the chief editor of the monumental Cultural Revolution Database as well as the acclaimed database series on the history of contemporary Chinese political movements. This book is very well-documented, with an extensive list of references and excellent footnotes. Additionally, Song was also twice jailed as a political prisoner in China—once in the early 1970s during the Cultural Revolution for organizing an "illicit book club" and then again in the late 1990s for his research activities on the Cultural Revolution. His prison experience has deepened his understanding of the subject matter of his book.

At a time when research on the Cultural Revolution is at a low ebb, the importance of studying the Cultural Revolution has paradoxically become all the more important. With the

political pendulum in China dramatically swinging back towards autocracy and the resurrection of policies and practices that reminds one of those practiced during the Cultural Revolution, the publication of this book will shed light on not only the Cultural Revolution half-a-century ago but also on contemporary Chinese politics and society, where, among other things, the historical specter of succession politics is once again raising its head and catching the attention of China watchers around the world.

Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution is appropriate for both academic and public libraries. It will be a good addition to collections in several academic areas and disciplines, including history, psychology, cultural studies, as well as the study of the history of emotions as a methodology.