

They're rehearsing the fireworks in preparation for the opening of the Beijing Olympics which debut later this week. But behind the scenes, complaints continue about the blocking of some Internet sites, and journalists are grappling with government restrictions - which would probably suit the late Mao Tse Tung just fine. Martha Teichner looks back on the legacy of Mao.

Call the Olympics China's coming-out party: The celebration of how far it's come and how fast, the Beijing skyline proof that Mao Tse Tung's determination to make China a superpower is coming to pass.

Thirty-two years after his death, if Mao miraculously woke up tomorrow, would he even recognize the capitalist colossus China has become? Would he recognize himself in the embalmed icon, the distant founding father figure, the Chinese Communist Party has cast him as in the new China?

It seems rewriting history where Mao is concerned is nothing new. He did it himself, big time.

You may have always believed the official line that Mao was the man who transformed China, a heroic leader, even if he did some bad things.

The real Mao, we discover, did horrendous things.

"Mao was responsible for well over 70 million deaths of the Chinese in peacetime, and he was as evil as Hitler or Stalin," said Jung Chang, "and he did as much damage to mankind as Hitler and Stalin."

She and her husband, historian Jon Halliday, are the authors of "Mao, The Unknown Story" (Random House), based on ten years of research.

"In China we interviewed about 150 of Mao's inner circle, in Mao's family, relatives, friends," Chang said, "and many people talked for the first time."

Even Chang and Halliday were shocked by what they learned:

"I did not realize how much of the misery and hardship he caused was done knowingly and so ruthlessly in terms of his own personal interests," Halliday said.

You've heard of the Long March? It changed history. In order to win their war against the ruling Nationalists, the Chinese Communists needed help from the Soviets. So between 1934 and '35, 80,000 Communist soldiers and civilians walked 6,000 miles across China, so they would be in a secure position to receive arms and supplies. Mao, supposedly the hero of the Long March, slogging along with everybody else, in fact, was carried.

"He even designed his own transport, a bamboo litter," Halliday said. "He said in his later life, 'I was lying in the litter. I had nothing to do. What did I do? I read, I read a lot.'"

Mao knew his political future depended on getting to the Russians first, so on the way he schemed to outmaneuver his party rivals, even though that meant the calculated sacrifice of the lives of thousands of Red Army soldiers.

"Whoever linked up with Moscow, had the communications with Moscow, and [was] recognized by Moscow as the party leader, would be the boss," Chang said.

"So at the end of the Long March, Mao is number one?" Teichner asked.

"Yes," Chang said.

"Well, Stalin I think spotted Mao as probably the guy in the Chinese Communist Party most like himself," Halliday said. "And of course Mao also like Stalin had long range vision. I mean, Mao could think strategically. He was very, very smart."

Ultimately he outsmarted Nationalist leader and U.S. ally, Chiang Kai Shek. Defeated, the Nationalists retreated to the island of Formosa, now called Taiwan, where they remain to this day.

On October 1, 1949, Mao declared himself leader of the renamed People's Republic of China. The crowd chanted "Long live Chairman Mao," unaware of the horrific suffering his ambition would bring, beginning with a campaign which, he claimed, was to modernize China. He named it "The Great Leap Forward."

"Thirty-eight million people died of starvation and overwork," Chang said. "And Mao didn't want to stop. He said for all his projects to take off, half of China may well have to die."

Imagine: half the population. And for what? In fact, it was to pay for the technology to build an atomic bomb. China eventually exploded one in 1964.

China's people starved, because Mao was selling what food they produced to Russia and Eastern Europe. Glowing reports to the outside world about agricultural and industrial production were propaganda.

"And when he was shown the report of, you know, food shortages, of peasants starving, Mao said, 'Educate the peasant to eat less,'" Chang said. "He even said, 'Death have benefit, they can fertilize the land.'"

It was China's president, Liu Shao-Chi, who finally stood up to Mao and rallied top Communist Party officials to put an end to the famine. But Liu and the others soon paid: The infamous Cultural Revolution was Mao's revenge.

Beginning in 1966, "It brought trauma, misery, torture, death, to hundreds of millions of people," Chang said.

We've heard the name "Cultural Revolution," but who even knew what it was? Mao didn't just purge the party of anybody who could vaguely be called "elite"; he literally stripped China of all culture. His Red Guards - violent vigilante student groups - pillaged homes, burned books and tortured party officials.

Jung Chang's family suffered, too. It is their story she tells in her hugely successful first book, "Wild Swans."

"My father was one of the few who stood up to Mao and opposed the Cultural Revolution," she told Teichner. "And as a result he was arrested, tortured, driven insane, and he was exiled to a camp and died very young."

Her parents (seen at left) had been conscientious Communists, but even her mother was imprisoned and denounced.

"She went through over a hundred of those denunciation meetings," Chang said, "and she was made to kneel on broken glass, and she was paraded in the streets where children spat at her and threw stones at her."

A child herself, Jung Chang was sent to a work camp, and never saw her grandmother again. She died in 1969.

While literally millions of families like Jung Chang's were enduring the agonies of the Cultural Revolution, Mao had himself photographed swimming. He wanted his enemies to know he was well and in charge. Mao loved to swim, but how's this for weird: He never bathed or brushed his teeth.

"Instead he would have his servants, his mistresses wiping him every day with a hot towel," Chang said. "He didn't like to wash his hair either, and he liked this slightly itchy feeling."

Mao was a serious womanizer, and he was famous for doing government business from his bed.

His rare public appearances were all about the cult of personality. The party faithful would wave the little red book, the collection of Mao quotations everyone in China was ordered to carry - and never to question.

"You know, we were told that socialist China was paradise on Earth," Chang said, "but if this is paradise, what then is hell?

"I blamed people around Mao, I blamed Madame Mao, but I could never contemplate Mao."

Madame Mao Jiang Xing (Mao's fourth wife) was his attack dog. She was one of the so-called Gang of Four, enforcers who ultimately took the heat. Within a month of Mao's death the Gang of Four were arrested and tried. Madame Mao committed suicide in prison.

Mao died in September 1976, after 27 years in power. The world struggled to process his impact.

Given China's secrecy, China watchers had little to go on.

What did it mean that in 1972 and again in 1976, President Nixon went to Mao, not the other way around?

The Cultural Revolution ended with Mao's death, and in 1978 Jung Chang was allowed to go to Britain to study. She's lived there ever since.

She keeps with her one of the shoes her grandmother wore (on bound feet), the arm band Jung herself wore as a Red Guard, some Mao badges - a little history of 20th century China in objects.

"Mao left a tattered China," Chang said.

Teichner asked, "How do you explain the economic miracle that's transformed China?"

"The economic miracles happened because Mao died, and people had had enough of living under Mao's kind of rule," she said. "I mean, they wanted a good life."

Jung Chang is equally dismissive of claims that Mao liberated Chinese women.

"They became more equal in, you know, basically slave labor."

"If there's one criticism that has come to light in the book, is that there's such an unrelenting sort of attack on Mao," Teichner said.

"Well, one way to answer that would be to say 'No,'" Halliday said. "Should one be even-handed about Hitler, for example? I mean, Mao did what he did."

Mao has been conveniently repackaged. A generation of Chinese born after his death know only the revisionist version.

"Young people don't know that's the myth," Halliday said. "I mean, they think he is still the great hero."

"So the truth of Mao really isn't out in the open in China, even now, 30 years after his death?" Teichner asked.

"No, not at all," Chang said.

And may never be. "Mao, The Unknown Story" has been published in Chinese, but the book is banned in China.

Last week, Amnesty International released a report claiming that human rights violations in China have actually increased since Beijing was awarded the Olympics.

Repression may, in the end, be what remains of Mao's legacy.

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