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R. James Ferguson
Bond University, James_Ferguson@bond.edu.au

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Abstract
Extract:
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Keywords
Chinese culture, politicians

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BOOKS: A REVIEW OF NEW AND RECENT PUBLICATIONS OF NOTE

The Dangers of Dramatic Biography: A review of SALISBURY, Harrison E. *The New Emperors - Mao and Deng: A Dual Biography*, London, Harper Collins, 1993.

by R. James Ferguson

Harrison E. Salisbury is a prolific writer on the Soviet Union and China who has had the advantage of many visits to these countries over more than twenty years. He is the author of some twenty books, including *The 900 Days: The Siege of Leningrad, The Long March: The Untold Story*, and more recently *Tiananmen Diary: Thirteen Days in June*. As a correspondent of note (he was the Moscow correspondent for the *New York Times*) Salisbury managed to interview many Chinese leaders, though any direct and close access to either Mao Zedong or Deng Xiaoping was not possible.

The book is notable for its wealth of research and intimate detail, and the ease with which Salisbury navigates the complex seas of traditional Chinese culture and the labyrinthine details of Communist Party in-fighting. The writer also has a noted poetic flair and a sense of the apt title or metaphor, hence we find a chapter entitled 'The Poet of the Fragrant Hills', speaking of the period 1946-1949 before Beijing was confirmed as the capital of the new regime. Salisbury is quite willing to speculate on the motivations and character of Mao Zedong during this period: -

> Mao was a poet as well as a politician; a philosopher as well as a polemicist. His days should have been filled with military calculations, political arrangements, and prosaic details of creating a new Communist government. But this was not entirely true. His poetry gave an insight into the mind of this revolutionary with deep-set, aching eyes.[1]

Other chapters such as 'The Study of Chrysanthemum Fragrance', 'The Gate of Heavenly Peace' and 'Saturday Night Dances' indicate this is not just a political biography, but an attempt the capture the character of the two leaders, and to provide the flavour of the periods in which they lived. This does not mean that the historical, political or scholarly has been excluded from the account. On the contrary, Salisbury has indicated the kind of influences which came to bear on Mao's thinking, noting that, alongside the traditional doctrines of Marxism-Leninism, more tradition texts such as *Records of the Historian (Shi Ji)* and *The General Mirror for the Aid of Government (Cu Chi Tang Qian,* compiled in the 11th century A.D.) were closely studied[2]. Likewise, its seems that Mao was deeply immersed in Chinese history, and had comprehensive knowledge of China's philosophical and scholarly tradition, including Sun Tzu's *Art of War* and literary accounts like *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*[3]. The period of manoeuvring before and

1. SALISBURY, Harrison E. *The New Emperors - Mao and Deng: A Dual Biography*, London, Harper Collins, 1992, pp16-17.
2. Ibid., p9
3. Ibid., pp51-3

during the Cultural Revolution is also described in detail, and here Salisbury gives a convincing narrative of the complex political and sociological forces which tore China apart. At the same time, some account of revisionist attempts to view the Cultural Revolution in a different light might have been discussed, even if these views are not accepted[4]. The account of the older Mao as a senile paranoid confined to his study and his erotic books, though entertaining and dramatic, lacks any serious analysis of the way authoritarian regimes can loose touch with their origins and grass roots, and Salisbury's account suffers from a certain stereotypic quality. If Mao was able to retain at least symbolic leadership of China through this period, there must have been very real reasons why this was so, and why the apparent allegiance of party leaders such as Zhou Enlai was maintained. In fact the closing chapters on Mao are reminiscent of the rise-and-decline model commonly found in ancient genres of biography, whether the subject is Herod the Great or the Roman emperor Tiberius, and also commonly found in psychologically reductive accounts of Hitler or Stalin.

If Mao is presented as the declining giant who is corrupted by the very system he has created, Deng Xiaoping tends to wear the 'white hat' in this book, at least until Tiananmen square with its "Facts Written in Blood" (another colourful chapter title). Until then, Salisbury rightly detects a strand in Deng's thinking from which he only deviates under the pressure of extreme necessity. This is the constantly reiterated theme that 'Communism is not poverty', a doctrine crucial to anyone who had experienced or seen the major economic and food crises experienced by much of China in the 1960's[5]. It is precisely this experience which leads to the famous phrase of Deng that 'It does not matter whether the cat is black or white. So long as it catches mice it is a good cat.' It is this pragmatic formulation which allows the concept of 'Communism with Chinese Characteristics' to incorporate elements of state capitalism and an open door policy into the Chinese Communist Party's current political platform. The doctrine may seem contradictory, at least problematic, but Deng was not the first to consider such an option. It was already implicit in the thought of Sun Yatsen as early as 1919 in his *The International Development of China,* where capitalism was viewed as a means to help build socialism[6]. Salisbury reiterates the consistency with which Deng returns to these themes over the years[7].

However, it is in the closing chapters, written under the impact, indeed the 'shock' of the events in Tiananmen Square in May and June 1989, that the author reveals much of his own expectations and hopes for China. Salisbury felt that the more flexible Deng of 1978 would have continued negotiating with the students, but that by 1989 he had become 'the rigid elder' who 'blundered into a declaration of martial law'[8]. Salisbury implies, but

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4. For some recent views, see Chan, Anita "Dispelling Misconceptions about the Red Guard Movement", *The Journal of Contemporary China, 1 no. 1*, Fall 1992, pp61-85 and Moody, Peter R. Jr. "The Reappraisal of the Cultural Revolution", *The Journal of Contemporary China, 4*, Fall 1993, pp58-74.

5. Salisbury loc. cit., p209

6. Sun Yatsen has received a rather positive treatment in the last 15 years in the PRC. See GODLEY, Michael R. "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics: Sun Yatsen and the International Development of China" in Ungar, Jonathan (ed.) *Using the Past to Serve the Present: Historiography and Politics in Contemporary China*, Armomk New York, East Gate, 1993, p239, p243, p248, p258.

7. Salisbury loc. cit.,p391

8. Ibid., p447

is unable to fully prove, that Deng directly ordered the army to use disproportion force against the students: -

> Why the Public Security troops did not employ water cannon and rubber bullets instead of machine guns was never explained. The inference was that someone in command wanted to "shed a little blood," as Deng Xiaoping was known to have said. He had a choice. If he had not wanted blood, the army and armed police would have followed orders.[9]

Salisbury's account of this period contains many vivid scenes which help fill out the confused details when several armoured columns drove into the centre of Beijing. One reported incident seems to indicate that 'chaos' was experienced well away from Tiananmen Square itself. Salisbury records: -

> Savage combat occurred at Muxudi. A heavily armored detachment was moving down Fuxingmen Street, firing ahead at the intersections. It became stalled at the corner of Sanlihe Lu, just outside the big government apartment complex. The tank commander did not know he was at the doorstep of some of China's most distinguished citizens. He directed random fire into the buildings, and there were half a dozen victims, including the son of a diplomat and a retired Foreign Ministry official. A fierce battle ensued as angered citizens hurled Molotov cocktails. Many became so enraged they wanted to lynch the PLA men. A quick-witted civilian saved many lives. "Let the men take off their uniforms," he shouted. "Then they won't be soldiers anymore." The soldiers shed their uniforms and stood around in their underwear. Kindhearted Beijingers took pity on them and led many to their quarters, where they gave the frightened men tea and sympathy. Then they set fire to the armored vehicles with Molotov cocktails.[10]

There has been considerable debate about the true nature of the events of 1989, and whether they should be regarded as a riot, an incident, or a massacre. From the account provided in Salisbury[11] they were a battle, though the government had much greater access to the tools of violence. More importantly, the battle was an ideological one which tested the legitimacy of the Deng regime before the world press. Here the timing of the protests with the arrival of the reformist Gorbachev on May 15 helped focus further media attention on the student activities and the hunger strike, a nexus which was not lost on Deng, though Salisbury argues that he failed to really understand the impact of the TV pictures broadcast overseas[12].

Salisbury feels that the real loser in these events was Deng and his progressive policies, since Deng was forced to ally himself to a conservative group of elderly Party members who are unable to face the realities of the 1990's, let alone the demands of the 21st century. The last two pages of the book portray a China deeply frightened by the capabilities of the U.S. as revealed in the 'Nintendo War in the Gulf', disappointed in the failed Moscow coup against Gorbachev, and cautious about the dangers of cultural

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9. Ibid., p444
10. Ibid., p452
11. Ibid., pp452ff
12. Ibid., p444, pp457-58

pollution[13]. This pessimism is revealed in the second last paragraph of the *The New Emperors*: -

> The watchwords of Deng's terminal administration became caution, stability, don't rock the boat, don't disturb the urban masses, and at all costs don't destabilize the peasants. Talking of the future in 1991, Yang Shangkun sounded like a man trying to tiptoe into the twenty-first century without wandering into a mine field. There was not a single new idea in the first five-year plan of the nineties, not an upbeat prediction for the year 2000. The brave visions of the early Deng revolution had faded into gray. China, Yang insisted, was still "on course." If true, the course had taken a detour into a Sargasso Sea.[14]

These are the words of a man who has been deeply disappointed in the political crack-down initiated by the Chinese government, and who had expected a more liberal and patient approach from Deng. Here Salisbury may have been affected by the notion that economic reform must also lead to parallel political reform, a linkage generally rejected by both the PRC and Vietnam. In fact, since 1989, in spite of temporary trade restrictions, and much debate on human rights in international diplomacy, China's economic reform and large-scale foreign investment have continued unabated. Indeed, as of early 1994 the problem was an overheated and unsustainable growth rate which needs to be slowed. *The New Emperors*, then, suffers from the haze of Western expectations, hopes and fears. China-predicting, in the sense of looking for features which seem to indicate a trend towards liberalization favoured by the West, can readily be the downfall of China-watching. Here, though, we simply need to notice the theme repeated consistently in Deng's speeches - the current Chinese leadership, though using capitalism, still embraces socialist goals and explicitly rejects the kind of western democracy found in American or British systems of representation[15]. Deng, on December 30 1986, annoyed at student demands for more democracy, spoke to a small circle of the leadership, stating: -

> When we speak of democracy, we can adopt neither bourgeois democracy nor the tripartite division of governmental power. I have repeatedly criticized the rulers in the U.S.A., telling them that in reality they had three governments.[16]

China may evolve forms of consensus, openness and democracy within its political culture, but it is unlikely to quickly adopt a free wheeling multi-party system operating within adversarial forms of political debate[17]. Both a suitable political culture and a range of supporting educational and legal institutions would need to develop before this would be possible, let alone likely.

For all these limitations, *The New Emperors* remains a powerful and persuasive account of China's history throughout much of the twentieth century. It provides a looking glass

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13. Ibid.. pp460-1

14. Ibid., p461

15. See for example the collections of speeches made by Deng Xiaoping during 1983-1984, under the title of *Fundamental Issues in Present-Day China*, Beijing, Foreign Languages Press, 1987 p35, pp38-39, pp54-57, p80.

16. In FRANZ, Ili *Deng Xiaoping*, trans. by Tom Artin, Boston, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988, p302.

17. See NATHAN, Andrew J. "Chinese Democracy: The Lessons of Failure", *Journal of Contemporary China, No 4*, Fall 1993, p5, pp10-11.

into the complexity of policies and alliances within the Communist Party of China, and gives an eye-witness account of the tragedies of 1989. It is a book of academic importance, but is also accessible to the general reader. Its limitations of perspective are partly based on the commitment and sympathy of the author to his subject, and also to the difficulty in interpreting recent events whose effects had not yet become fully apparent.

Further Reading: A range of other books on Mao and Deng, though earlier in publication, are still worth reading. For example, BONAVIA, David *Deng*, Hong Kong, Longman Group (Far East) Ltd, 1989 and also FRANZ, Ili *Deng Xiaoping*, trans. by Tom Artin, Boston, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988 provide a somewhat different perspectives on Deng, and focus much more on his economic and social policies. Important older studies of Mao include SCHRAM, Stuart *Mao Tse-tung: Political Leaders of the Twentieth Century*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1967 and FITZGERALD, C.P. *Mao Tse-Tung and China*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1977.

A range of views on the events in Tiananmen Square will be found in a series of articles published after 1989. A few of these include BRUGGER, Bill "Do We Need to Reassess the Chinese Regime After the Events of mid 1989?", *Asian Studies Review, 14 no 1*, 1990, pp36-41; DIRLIK, Arif & PRAZNIAK, Roxann "Socialism is Dead, so Why Must We Talk about it? Reflections on the 1989 Insurrection in China, its Bloody Suppression, the End of Socialism and the End of History", *Asian Studies Review, 14 no 1*, 1990, pp3-25; DUTTON, Michael "The Massacre and the Method", *Asian Studies Review, 14 no 1*, 1990, pp30-36; MACKERRAS, Colin, BUCKNALL, Kevin & TROOD, Russel *The Beijing Tragedy: Implications for China and Australia*, (Australia-Asia Papers No 51), Brisbane, Centre for the Study of Australia-Asia Relations, Griffith University, 1989; MACKERRAS, Colin "Tiananmen, One Year After: Western Images and the "Rewriting of History", *Asian Studies Review, 14 no 1*, 1990, pp45-52; Perry, Elizabeth J & Wasserstrom, Jeffrey N. (eds.) *Popular Protest and Political Culture in Modern China: Learning from 1989*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1992.