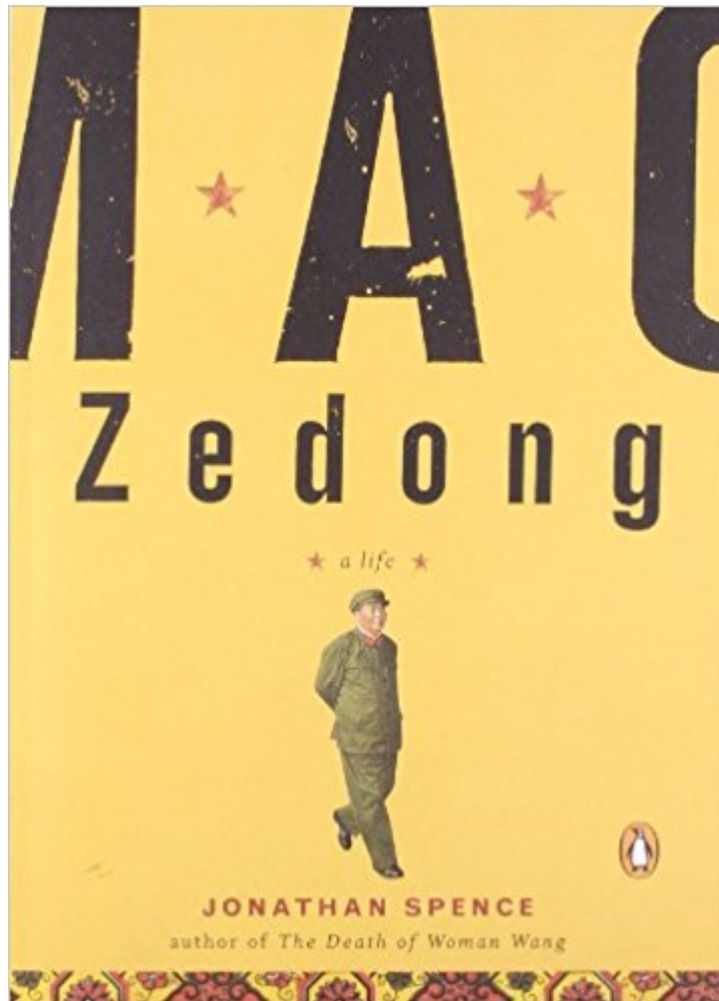




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Mao Zedong: A Life



Synopsis

“Spence draws upon his extensive knowledge of Chinese politics and culture to create an illuminating picture of Mao. . . . Superb.” (Chicago Tribune) From humble origins in the provinces, Mao Zedong rose to absolute power, unifying with an iron fist a vast country torn apart by years of weak leadership, colonialism, and war. This sharply drawn and insightful account brings to life this modern-day emperor and the tumultuous era that he did so much to shape. Jonathan Spence captures Mao in all his paradoxical grandeur and sheds light on the radical transformation he unleashed that still reverberates in China today.

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Customer Reviews

From humble beginnings in rural Hunan, Mao Zedong became the "Great Helmsman" of Communist China. By the time he died in 1976, he had profoundly changed the course of history. His increasingly erratic whims and graspings at a wild utopia destabilized his immense achievements, and he was ultimately responsible for the deaths of perhaps 60 million people. Jonathan Spence brings great erudition to the story of this flawed colossus. He is particularly enlightening on Mao's early years--it is nearly two-thirds through the book before Mao stands on the walls of the Forbidden City in October 1949 and declares the establishment of the People's Republic of China. The young revolutionary's infamous willfulness is soon apparent, yet Spence rounds out his character by, for example, quoting a poem to his beloved first wife and mentioning the profit he made from an early capitalist venture, a bookstore. Mao Zedong is excellent biography--and more. China was convulsed

for nearly a century by almost constant war and revolution, and Spence uses the life of the man at the heart of so many historic events to elucidate the whole momentous epoch. In his many writings, Spence has proved a master at making complex themes easy to understand, and this compact book provides yet another example of his skills. --John Stevenson --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

In the latest of the concise Penguin Lives series, China historian Spence (The Gate of Heavenly Peace, etc.) blends historical facts with cultural analysis, creating a work that is fluid and informative despite its brevity. Portraying an intimate Mao (1893-1976), Spence leaves much of the political commentary to other historians, focusing instead on how a boy from the farm villages of Hunan rose to rule the most populous nation in the world. Spence gives readers a Mao who is smart but not wise, unexceptional in almost all qualities except his "inflexible will" and "ruthless self-confidence." He points out that, even at a young age, Mao's perception of governing foreshadowed much of how he eventually did rule: in an essay written about Lord Shang, a Qin dynasty minister, Mao argued that Shang's rule, considered by historians to be cruel, was just ("At the beginning of anything out of the ordinary, the mass of the people always dislike it"). "I have come," writes Spence, "to think of the enigmatic arena in which Mao seemed most at home as being that of order's opposite, the world of misrule." The shortness of the form enables or requires Spence to accelerate the pace of Mao's life, thus adding drama to the sea change in Mao's character from naive idealist to cunning political infighter and center of a personality cult. The Mao who lingers on the last page is a somewhat diminished, Lear-like figure, estranged from his wife and ultimately unsure of whether his revolution had a future. When Henry Kissinger praised Mao's writings during their famous meeting, the chairman responded: "I think that, generally, people like me sound like a lot of big canons." (Oct.) Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

The author's version of Mao's early life does nothing to explain history's deadliest dictator. Skepticism is rewarded when we refer to his notes. Spence lists as his source, Edgar Snow. Snow took Mao's word for word dictation, covered it with his name, and allowed the great teacher to edit the final draft. Details such as working on the family farm at age six and his treatment of his dying mother, are contradicted by more reliable voices. Author Spence sees Mao changing his "trajectory" in 1937 toward the Mao we now know. But by 1937 Mao Zedong had already decimated his militia

with a monstrous purge and he abandoned a number of his wives and children when they became inconvenient. Spence describes hard times for Mao's band "It was only through the spirit of democracy- sharing hardships.. " that they survived. During that period, Mao recorded how the Reds "requested local support. "The Red Army . . . makes every effort to protect the merchants-. . . (However), because of the current shortage of food supplies, we are writing you now to request that you kindly collect on our behalf 5000 dollars, 7000 pairs of sandals, 7000 pairs of socks and 300 bolts of white cloth. It is urgent that these be delivered before eight o'clock this evening|. If you ignore our requests, (it will be proof of your collaboration with reactionaries)|In that case we will be obliged to burn down all the reactionary shops in (the town)|Do not say we have not forewarned you!" Mao noted, "You can only expropriate once in a given locality, afterwards there would be nothing to take." Spence also describes the ordeal of the "Long March" but misses the flavor. One Red unit set out 6000 strong, within six months they sustained 998 casualties and 208 defections to the enemy, but also 4004 desertions. In order to replace massive desertions, males as young as fourteen were conscripted along the way and failure to meet recruiting goals led to death. Similar to Mao's previous "requests" from inhabitants along his route, all in their path who lived above subsistence level were defined as landlords and therefore subject to complete confiscation of all possessions. Any reluctance to cooperate resulted in "burning their houses, and digging up and destroying family tombs| Their families will be punished by death." This book catalogues a number Mao Zedong's crimes but takes a curiously moderate view of the monster who killed more than Hitler and Stalin combined. Recommended further reading: Abandoning an Ally- (U.S./China- World War II, Red conquest, Korean War (The new chronicle, based on previously suppressed Government documents and writings of Mao Zedong) Fitzgerald, James- The Long March- (A Red Army Brat interviews witnesses along the route) Sun Shuyun. Mao: The Unknown Story- (A comprehensive view of Mao Zedong)- Chang & Holliday China's Special Area- (by Stalin's man in Mao's HQ)- Petr Vladimirov- Allied Pub. Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung- Vols. 1-5, Mao Tse-tung Abandoning an Ally: The Real Story Behind 70 Million Killed in China and America's "Forgotten War"

I now need to set off and read something other than the footnoted references to the major episodes

of The Great Leap Forward and The Cultural Revolution. but good coverage of his childhood.

Mao was a man of ideals, incredible bravery and perseverance, and magnetism. He united China and raised the status of women magnificently. He was a visionary until he reached power, then for a quarter of a century he had no idea what to do with it, and nearly destroyed all his work. Spence shows all this in an interesting and convincing way. I definitely learned a lot about both sides of this controversial man. (then read China's Economy by Kroeber which shows how Deng saved the day after Mao.)

Jonathan Spence's biography of Mao was my first experience with the new Penguin Lives series, and I was unsure what to expect. Certainly, one cannot expect too much from a biography of one of the major political figures of the 20th century that offers only 178 pages of text and 10 pages of endnotes. But I was game to try it, since I knew very little about Mao and gathered I would learn a lot in a relatively short time from this biography. Spence certainly succeeds in compressing most of the major events of Mao's life into this thin volume, and concisely reviews much of Mao's political thought and how it evolved. He also does a good job of mining source materials, particularly some of Mao's more obscure writing and poetry. But my major frustration in reading this book was a feeling that I never learned much about Mao as an individual human being, except that he came from obscure bourgeois peasant roots, that he was "married" at least four times and had at least ten children with whom he had rather distant relationships, and that as the years passed, he became more and more of a megalomaniac. I would also fault the book for giving minimal attention to the history of the times and to Mao's principal comrades in arms. (For example, Zhou Enlai does not appear until the final quarter of the book and gets minimal mention at that. The Long March gets only 2-3 pages.) Also somewhat curious is that the book lacks an index. All of that said, however, this is a remarkably informative book given its length. I should emphasize that the text on each page measures lightly under 6 x 4 inches, too--so not only is it a short book, but also a small book. I put the book down eager to learn more about Mao, which I suppose does commend it to other readers who know as little as I did before I read it.

Good historical country of his life. Quite factual and provides context to Mao's rise and actions. As a historical book delivers its main message across.

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