

MEDIA RESOURCES

Filmmaker Interview

Lee Feigon on *The Passion of the Mao*

The editors of *ASIANetwork Exchange* recently conducted the following interview with Lee Feigon, whose new film, *The Passion of the Mao*, premiered March 11 and 12 at the Cinequest Film Festival in San Jose, California. As we wrote on p. 1, we are publishing the interview primarily in the interest of encouraging discussion of the newly re-kindled controversy over the life and works of Mao Zedong. As Bay Area film critic Fernando Croce has noted,

The film's main contrast lies between established notions about Mao brought from history books and little-known facts regarding his background, aims, and achievements.... Best of all, filmmaker Lee Feigon uses an irreverent tone to bring the many sides of history together, blending interviews, stock footage, and hilarious animated interludes ...into an informative and highly enjoyable essay.

The interview, we feel, serves an important secondary function as well. Many of our members are interested in film as an element of contemporary education about Asia, and this article not only provides information about a new film in the field, but also some fascinating insights into the production of the movie itself.

*Dr. Feigon received his Ph.D. in modern Chinese history from the University of Wisconsin at Madison. For over twenty years, he was a Professor and Chair of the East Asian Department at Colby College. Now he is 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, 2002), he has 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). He has also written for *The Wall Street Journal*, *Barron's*, *Nation*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Atlantic*, and the *Boston Globe*. He has also appeared on MacNeil Lehrer, CNN, Hardball CNBC, and the NBC Nightly News.*

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 many 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 University of Michigan 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

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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 Chang/Halliday 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.



How did you solicit and carry out interviews? And with whom?

The interviews were the best part of making the movie. I had already written a book on Mao, so I knew whom I wanted to interview. But I hadn't met any of the people I referenced in my book. It was exciting to call them up and actually arrange to talk with them. In the interviews with Wang Zheng, Bai Di (a Drew University professor), and Han Dongping (a Warren Wilson College professor), I found my eyes sometimes welling up with tears at what they were saying. It was moving to listen to the sacrifices they made to help women and peasants advance.

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

I felt I could 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. And so I use animation and humor to show some of the wilder, more ambiguous aspects of Mao's life, such as his sexual high jinks. 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?

How did you find documentary footage?

Back in 1980, I had the first research Fulbright given for China since the late 1940s. When I got to Beijing, I had to negotiate my way into every library and archive. I often found material in unusual places. This experience gave me the wherewithal to contact far-flung archives not only in the U.S. and China, but also in Hungary, Albania, England, and other unlikely areas.

My best source turned out to be Russia. They had old footage maintained in mint condition. I found a Texas company assisting the Russian archives. They helped me understand that the people duplicating this archival footage were poorly paid freelancers.

This meant taking chances. Not just in Russia but also in China and in India, I wired thousands of dollars into the accounts of people I had never met. Friends and relatives thought I was insane. In the end, the worst experience was with someone in the U.S. The second worst was with a person in China, a country I thought I knew well and where I had friends who attested to the integrity of the people with whom I was dealing.

Also, as I have already discussed, I wanted to use animation instead of regular footage to show certain aspects of Mao's life. I got quotes of hundreds of thousands of dollars for the work. That was beyond my means, so I decided to get on the internet and outsource it. In India, I found two talented artists charging a fraction of the price of American animators.

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 thirtyfold 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.

How did you go about publicizing the film and getting it ready to market?

I went to film festivals and film markets and talked to any distributor, publicist, or agent who would listen to me. I came up with a provocative title, which I knew would get a lot of attention. It got a little more than I had bargained for when it got picked up by some vicious hate groups and put on a white supremacist website. But far and away the best source of publicity has been my fellow Asian scholars. As soon as I started telling them about the movie, the word got out lickety-split.

Do you have any advice for others who might want to get into film production?

Watch out for the sharks and look beyond the usual sources. When people hear that a movie is being made, they see dollar signs. I was shocked at the prices Americans and Europeans wanted to

charge for sound, for footage, for everything.

Make sure you either have good camera skills or that you bring along a good camera-person. I bought a decent camera and did most of the filming myself. This gave me maximum flexibility and meant I didn't have to hire fancy crews. But the learning curve was greater than I had expected.

Keep control of the process. I was the producer, writer, and director. I had my hands in everything. It was a lot to do, and I'm not sure other people would want to take on that much. But I found that as soon as things got out of my hands, they started going in directions I didn't always like. When I finally got some professional editors in to help me, they carted away my footage to their own studios. Often they would put in things that didn't belong there or that I hadn't intended. To this day, I'm not sure I caught everything they changed.

Learn to be flexible. For instance there is a section in the movie that discusses Mao's activism on woman's issues in 1919. The problem was that I didn't really have anything to represent this. My editor stuck in a picture of woman activists some 25 years later. At first I was livid. He finally convinced me that since we were trying to represent the idea, and didn't have pictures of the actual historical event, it would do. Making movies is different from writing books.

How do you envision this film being utilized in the classroom or in other teaching situations?

I'm hoping this movie will get at least a limited theatrical release before it gets to the classrooms. Ultimately the film can be used in both basic modern Chinese history classes and in more specialized classes on Mao.

I haven't yet made the round of educational distributors. With the major distributors I have so far contacted, the film has been viewed first by a junior person in the organization. Many have called me back to say they loved it and were recommending it to their boss. Each time, they mentioned how much they had learned from it. Unfortunately, this didactic message hasn't carried much water with the bosses so far, but I think it says something about how well it may ultimately work in the classroom.

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Spring 2007: Asia in World History: 1450-1770

This is the third in a series of planned special sections that will eventually include all eras encompassed in the National World History Standards. Authors of manuscripts for this special section are encouraged to focus on transnational flows of people, products, ideas and practices. The deadline for initial receipt of manuscripts for this special section is mid-December 2006.

Fall 2007: Natural Disasters in Asia: Geography and Environment

In this special section, it is hoped that articles will be published where authors address how the people of Southeast and other parts of Asia have responded to natural disasters such as earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis, and threats of epidemics and pandemics. We intend this section to be particularly useful for geography teachers. The deadline for initial receipt of manuscripts for this special section is the first week of May 2007.

Winter 2007: Teaching about Asian Governments and Legal Systems

There are many mistaken Western stereotypes about the function of law in Asian politics and societies. This special section should better enable instructors to inform students about the role of legal systems in various Asian cultural and political contexts. The deadline for initial receipt of manuscripts for this special section is early September 2007.

Spring 2008: Marriage and Family in Asia

The institutions of marriage and family are common to all societies. Prospective authors writing for this special section should develop manuscripts that will enable teachers and students to both better understand marriage and family practices in Asia, and more intelligently reflect on the role of these institutions in their own societies. The deadline for initial receipt of manuscripts for this special section is early December 2007.

We look forward to years of collaboration between ASIANetwork and EAA. If you have any questions whatsoever about EAA please don't hesitate to contact me.