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Flawed Reflections: Robert Loh, Mao Zedong and the Socialist Transformation Campaign in Shanghai, 1955-1956

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Since its debut in 1962, Robert Loh's memoir *Escape from Red China* has enjoyed an extraordinary tenure of utility for scholars and historians of the People's Republic of China.¹ Its emotive and Americanized literary presentation to a global audience distinguished it almost immediately from its more measured predecessors and peer competitors.² The memoir was a detailed and highly personal insider's account of a Chinese intellectual and business executive in Shanghai from 1949-1957, and was deemed as a superior perspective on, or a direct rebuke to, contemporary travelogues from "old China hands" like Edgar Snow. In spite of its anti-communist message, Loh's book was recommended by groups engaged in rapprochement with the PRC in the early 1970s.³ In the 1980s, the book was cited along with other first-hand accounts as 'particularly useful' in the *Cambridge History of China*.⁴ While *Escape from Red China* garnered less attention as China underwent more reforms in 1990s and 2000s, Loh's narrative was again vaulted into the public eye in 2013, with its inclusion in a commercially successful survey of the early PRC.

Loh was an ideal witness for the historian Frank Dikötter in his book *The Tragedy of Liberation*.⁵ From his presence at public executions to his persecution by workers in Shanghai, Loh brought specificity and human interest to Dikötter's plot line. The historian described his rationale behind using defector memoirs:

¹ Robert Loh as told to Humphrey Evans, *Escape from Red China* (London: Michael Joseph, 1962). Page numbers in this essay refer to this British edition.

² Chow Ching-Wen, "Ten Years of Storm," *The China Quarterly*, Vol.5 (1961), 145-149; Chow Ching-wen *Ten Years of Storm: The True Story of the Communist Regime in China*, translated and edited by Lai Ming, forward by Lin Yutang (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960); Mu Fu-Sheng, *The Wilted of the Hundred Flowers: Free Thought in China Today* (London: William Heinemann, 1962).

³ For a recommendation of Loh memoir to non-specialists amid other travelogues from the 1960s, see National Committee on United States-China Relations, *An Annotated Guide to Contemporary China* (New York, 1971), p. 19, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED049987.pdf>. Loh's testimonials are taken as fully genuine in Peter J. Seybolt, ed., *Through Chinese Eyes. Vol. 1: Revolution: A Nation Stands Up and Vol. 2: Transformation: Building a New Society* (New York: Praeger, 1974).

⁴ *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 15: The People's Republic, Part 2: Revolutions within the Chinese Revolution, 1966-1982*, Roderick MacFarquhar and John K. Fairbank, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 930.

⁵ Frank Dikötter, *The Tragedy of Liberation: A History of the Chinese Revolution, 1945-1957* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013). Dikötter cites Loh's memoir no fewer than 21 times in his book, drawing on extensive excerpts of about 31 different pages.

Sympathisers of the regime have unjustly discarded many of the claims of these earlier eyewitnesses, but these can now be corroborated by archival evidence, giving them a new lease of life. Taken as a whole these sources offer us an unprecedented opportunity to probe beyond the shiny surface of propaganda and retrieve the stories of the ordinary men and women who were both the main protagonists and the main victims of the revolution.⁶

Dikötter's stated approach to the memoir thus involves a basic retrieval and reuse of Loh's published narrative, and its cross-referencing and strengthening with archival documents. In practice, these techniques are underpinned by an empathetic and wholly credulous approach to the narrative arc, which functions as a pre-emptive moral commitment against the unnamed critics who might reveal their own disdain for "the real Chinese people" by challenging the veracity of the source.

Dikötter's heavy use of Robert Loh brought the historian praise in the pages of the *Financial Times*, where Julia Lovell singled out Loh's perspective and the value it brought to public debate over the atrocities of the early PRC:

Dikötter sustains a strong human dimension to the story by skilfully weaving individual stories through the length of the book. Early on, we meet...Robert Loh, a patriotic intellectual who escapes quietly to Hong Kong while Mao's anti-rightist purge approaches its climax. In so doing, Dikötter captures the idealism that motivated many to endorse the revolution and also the way in which the party squandered this enthusiasm.⁷

Loh's memoir has therefore seen a great deal of use over the decades, and has indeed been given "a new lease on life" by Frank Dikötter.

But how reliable is it? When we use official state evidence to cross-reference the book's claims are Loh's words illuminated as more or less reliable? Does the book really help readers "to probe beyond the shiny surface of propaganda"? *Escape from Red China* has sustained virtually no criticism for its reliability as a source, apart from two early but relatively mild critiques by Stuart Schram and Theodore Chen, respectively.⁸ Now that more historical data has become available, it is possible to more thoroughly cross-check Loh's claims, and better situate his credibility. This

⁶ Frank Dikötter, *The Tragedy of Liberation: A History of the Chinese Revolution, 1945-1957* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013). pp. xv-xvi.

⁷ Julia Lovell, "The Road to Hell: A history of early Maoist China puts paid to any notion of a 'golden age,'" *Financial Times Weekend* (London), 31 August – 1 September 2013, Arts Section, p. 8.

⁸ "[Loh's] hostility to Mao's regime is extreme, and probably exaggerated, but nevertheless it sheds a bright light on the painful aspects of the Chinese bureaucracy." Stuart Schram (unsigned review), "Informations Bibliographiques," *Revue française de science politique* Vol. 14, No. 3 (Juin 1964), 630; Theodore H.E. Chen, Review of Robert Loh and Humphrey Evans, *Escape from Red China*, in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 23:1 (1963), 129-130.

process also helps us to ask questions about how real or misused the text can be as a “corrective” to PRC official evidence.

This research note unpacks one specific episode in Loh’s memoir with the aid of Chinese sources – his meeting with Mao Zedong. Table 2 also briefly draws attention to other areas where Loh’s factual accuracy can be cross-checked. Before doing so, however, a question is raised: Why was Loh’s biography so capable of capturing the interest of foreign audiences?

Born in Shanghai in the 1920s, in the late 1940s Robert Loh was in the United States studying at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and returned to his home city during the earliest months of the PRC to teach political science. He subsequently transformed his career in the summer of 1951, leaving academia to take on the role of a capitalist bureaucrat as the manager of a flour mill in Shanghai, doing so through his connections with the Rong family. He was thereafter elected to the Shanghai Federation of Industry and Commerce (*Shanghaishi gongshangye lianhehui*) after that organization’s establishment in October 1951, the National Political Conference district level in 1954 and the Shanghai National Political Conference.⁹ These positions gave him insights into the CCP United Front, enabling him to meet Chairman Mao Zedong in connection to the gathering momentum for the Socialist Transformation Campaign. He left Shanghai for Hong Kong in the summer of 1957, not long after hearing a recording of Mao’s February speech “On Contradictions Among the People.” In Hong Kong, Loh published some shorter works about ultimately defected to the US in the spring of 1960, where he was immediately taken in as a witness for the House Committee on Un-American Activities, informing the legislators that nothing was as it seemed in China. (Chunks of his testimony were later modified and brought directly into *Escape from Red China*.)

[Table 1.]

Did Robert Loh meet Mao Zedong in December 1955?

Robert Loh’s memoir describes a surprise meeting he had with Mao Zedong in December 1955. Frank Dikötter covered this meeting in *Tragedy of Liberation*, using Loh’s perspective to undergird his analysis of socialist transformation (*shehuizhuyi gaizao*) in Shanghai, and to further demonstrate both the subtle and the arbitrary aspects of CCP manipulation of top entrepreneurs.¹⁰ Dikötter was, however, not the

⁹ On establishment of the 1951 organization, see “Quanguo gongshanglian dengzu qianhou de Zhang Naiqi [Zhang Naiqi before and after the establishment of the All-China Federation Industrial and Commercial and other organizations],” *Minjian Zhongyang Wang*, 1 April 2020. On Loh’s appointments, see *Escape from Red China*, pp. 108–109.

¹⁰ Dikötter, *Tragedy of Liberation*, pp. 239–240.

first person to call attention to this meeting. *Readers Digest* illustrated it in a mass condensed version of *Escape from Red China* published in 1963 [see Figure 1].¹¹ In a significant early scholarly analysis of Socialist Transformation Campaign, Roderick MacFarquhar relied on Loh to document that “early in December [1955], Mao Tse-tung made an unpublicised visit to Shanghai, where Mayor Ch’en Yi arranged for him to meet about eighty of the city’s leading businessmen.”¹²

Loh writes:

One night in early December [1955], I received a confidential telephone call from the Secretary-General of the Federation of Industry and Commerce. I was informed that I must attend a meeting to be held at the Sino-Soviet Friendship Hall at a specified time and that both the call and the meeting were to be considered confidential.

When I arrived at the hall, I found that about eighty of Shanghai’s top businessmen had been ordered to attend. I immediately found J.P. [Rong Yiren] and Charlie [Rong Hongwen], but neither of them seemed to know what the meeting was for. Just when everyone was becoming apprehensive, the main door to the hall opened and Chen Yi, who now was the country’s Vice-Premier, appeared. He held open the door and Mao Tse-tung entered.

[...]

We all stiffened with surprise, and I heard a gasp from the assembled businessmen. We could hardly believe that we were really seeing the world-famous figure. Chen Yi introduced us individually to Chairman Mao. We were too nervous and confused to do more than murmur an automatic greeting.¹³

Dikötter accepts Loh’s basic timing for the meeting. So too did MacFarquhar, although the British scholar lays out a more questioning line with respect to Mao’s chronology and the pace of the campaign. Dikötter, however, goes beyond past precedents by drawing extensively on Loh’s description in the form of a light paraphrase spanning a couple of pages of text, amplifying rather than challenging or interrogating Loh’s perspective. Is this episode “corroborated by archival evidence,”

¹¹ Robert Loh with Humphrey Evans, “Escape from Red China,” in *Reader’s Digest Condensed Books*, Volume 2 in 1963. On the extensive anti-communist vetting that these shorter texts were subjected to, see Adam Sisman, *John LeCarre: The Biography* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 257. See also Allen Dulles to Charles Stevenson, praising “the whole-hearted cooperation of *Reader’s Digest* with the CIA during my directorship of the Agency”, 4 October 1961, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP74-00115R000300020058-8.pdf>. Thanks to Elizabeth Dewing with research assistance on these questions, as well as for reading through this manuscript and offering comments.

¹² Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution, Vol. 1: Contradictions Among the People, 1956-1957* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 22-23.

¹³ Robert Loh with Humphrey Evans, *Escape from Red China*, p. 135.

or is it a *Reader's Digest* Orientalist fantasy? Did Mao actually go to Shanghai in December 1955 to meet with national capitalists?

Following Frank Dikötter's formula, here we ought to be able to turn to official documents for verification. The *Jianguo Yilai Mao Zedong Wengao* (Mao's Manuscripts after the Nation's Founding, hereafter *Mao Zedong Wengao*) seem like a ready candidate. These sources have been available since the early 1990s, and Dikötter has used physical copies of these books as a visual background for his promotional interviews in which he decries the inability of "high politics" sources to tell the stories of "real people" like "entrepreneurs."¹⁴ He also occasionally cites these works, although he prefers not to.¹⁵

These published manuscripts form part of Dikötter's evidentiary prosecution of Mao. Via Dikötter's treatment, we can see Mao's enmeshment in the process of generating and accelerating the movement toward Socialist Transformation. Dikötter brings forward one document in which Mao appears to endorse grain expropriations against peasant resistance to the campaign in the countryside, portraying Mao as eager to rip as much grain as fast as possible from China's rural population. The manuscripts are used to buttress the historian's argument that Mao's behaviors in late 1955 amounted to an "attack [on] 'incorrect attitudes' toward collectivization."¹⁶ Both before and after his ostensible 1955 meeting with Loh, Dikötter frames Mao's actions and indeed the overall environment as essentially satanic: "the countryside [was] the ninth level of hell...in the countryside the High Tide unleashed a wave of terror...in the midst of terror...terror once again gripped the cities."¹⁷

Dikötter's citation of the *Mao Zedong Wengao* materials from 1955 make clear that the historian has consulted the volume that might corroborate Mao's meeting with Robert Loh. On the broadest level, these official sources do indeed make clear that Mao was turning his attention to socialist transformation in late 1955 and early 1956. In November, Mao put together 10 cryptic points for attention on a list of

¹⁴ Hong Kong Trade Development Council, "Frank Dikötter: Where are the people in the People's Republic of China?" *YouTube*, 30 May 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yCYZkTvRab8>

¹⁵ Qin Shao, 'History as Humanity's CV: A Conversation with Frank Dikötter', *The Chinese Historical Review*, 24:2 (2017), 166-182.

¹⁶ Dikötter, *Tragedy of Liberation*, 235-236. Dikötter writes: "In the margin of a report on co-operatives in Guangxi province, Mao scribbled 'Middle peasant claims of hardship are all fake.'" The historian seems unable to translate Mao into English without adding a special twist to highlight malevolence whether it is there or not; there is no "all" or "dou" in this original text, and literally the very next sentence in the same marginalia is, of course, not quoted by Dikötter, since it indicates Mao's attention to cases of edema and hunger in Guangxi. See "Zai Zhongyang jingweituan zhanshi de jifen nongcun qingkuang diaocha shang xie de wenzi," July 1955, *Jianguo Yilai Mao Zedong Wengao*, 1955.1 - 1955.12 (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 1996), Vol. 5, 209-211.

¹⁷ Dikötter, *Tragedy of Liberation*, pp. 237-239.

entrepreneurs managing more than 500 workers.¹⁸ He provided more detailed guidance, inserting a paragraph into a Central Committee draft document in order to highlight the need to “unite with core elements” among the capitalists in order to pressure the less willing candidates for transformation.¹⁹ Such documents and pressures from Mao undoubtedly made their way down to impact the life of Robert Loh. Yet in no reading of these sources do we actually find Mao in Shanghai in December 1955 – indeed, in the published materials, that month is nearly exclusively taken up with his preface to *Socialist Upsurge in the Chinese Countryside*. The last entry in his published manuscripts for 1955 sees Mao cajoling his comrades to meet him in Hangzhou in early January for meetings with provincial officials to focus on rural collectivization, marking a southward orientation of his thought, if not his actual body.²⁰ Mao’s published manuscripts do not therefore corroborate a meeting between Mao and Robert Loh in 1955, or even a Mao trip to Shanghai at the end of that year.

Fortunately we can turn to a more recent body data published in Beijing, the six-volume *Mao Zedong Nianpu* (Chronology of Mao Zedong, hereafter *Nianpu*) which cover the period from 1949-1976. These works were published in 2013 as part of the Party’s commemoration of the 120th anniversary of Mao’s birth.²¹ While these volumes at times devolve into extracts from previously published material and are relatively scant for the Cultural Revolution decade, they are highly useful in locating Mao’s whereabouts on an essentially daily basis in the 1950s, and do contain passages from hitherto unpublished conversations or annotations.

What these sources make perfectly clear is that Loh – and therefore Dikötter -- has got the dates wrong for Loh’s meeting with Mao. The *Nianpu* indicates explicitly what had been only implied in prior sources: that the Chairman spent most of December 1955 in Beijing, and was focused on rural collectivization. The chronology describes how, from 22-25 December 1955, Mao took a swing through Zhengzhou,

¹⁸ “Guanyu zibenzhuji gongshangye shehui zhuyi gaizao wenti de tigang” [Outline regarding the problem of socialist transformation of capitalist industrialists], *Jianguo Yilai Mao Zedong Wengao, 1955.1 – 1955.12* (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 1996), Vol. 5, 465. Mao’s ten points were written on Li Weihai’s 24 November 1955 summation for the State Council; Li was serving at that time as head of United Front Work.

¹⁹ ‘Dui Zhongyang guanyu jinyibu zhankai dui zibenzhuji gongshangye de gaizao gongzuo de zhishi zao’an de xiugai’, *Jianguo Yilai Mao Zedong Wengao, 1955.1 – 1955.12* (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 1996), Vol. 5, p. 466.

²⁰ “Guanyu Yuandan shelun he zhunbei zhaokai bufen shengweishuji huiyi deng wenti de xin [Letter regarding New Year’s Day editorial and preparing for a portion of provincial Party secretaries to meet, and other issues,” *Jianguo Yilai Mao Zedong Wengao, 1955.1 – 1955.12* (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 1996), Vol. 5, p. 576. The letter was addressed to Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi, Chen Yun, and Peng Dezhen. The editorial focused on the Five-Year Plan, having been edited by Chen Boda. Mao was eager to see Chen Yun in person prior to these meetings taking place for 5 January, inquiring about his health problems.

²¹ Maura Cunningham is thanked for helping the author to locate these six volumes in a bookstore in Shanghai shortly after their publication.

Wuhan, Changsha, and Nanchang. On the morning of 25 December Mao went to Hangzhou, where he stayed for more than a week, meeting on New Years' Eve with Chen Yi, to whom, among other things, he complained about the low global stature of Xinhua reporters.²² Mao's main targets or interlocutors that December were not capitalists or intellectuals, but instead were provincial party secretaries, whom he was sounding out and cajoling with respect to the acceleration of rural agricultural policy. Loh's memoir was at least correct in the sense that Mao was spending time with Chen Yi in the broader Yangtze delta region in December 1955. But it is now clear that Loh was wrong about the date of his meeting with Mao, and this error has now passed unchallenged into scholarship by MacFarquhar and Dikötter.

Did Robert Loh therefore simply fabricate his meeting with China's helmsman? It seems impossible that he would, unless his elaborate description of Mao at the event was purely based upon film and newsreels:

The Communist Chairman is tall for a Chinese; he is a heavy, soft-looking man who appears younger than his pictures usually suggest he is very slow. He walks with his toes pointed out; he takes short steps and swings his arms more than seems necessary for his ponderous gait. His face is animated. He smiles often, and his expression is usually friendly and mild. He gives the impression of being a kindly, simple, honest peasant. A cigarette is almost always held between his pudgy fingers, and his teeth are stained black from chain-smoking.²³

Mao was not simply a smoker or a garrulous conversation leader; he was a planner, if a mercurial one, and documents show he had been planning for a meeting with the Shanghai capitalists for several months.²⁴ On 27 November 1955, he pinpointed 10 January 1956 as a significant date for the Central Committee to send out some personnel to debate the Socialist Transformation of industry.²⁵ Ultimately the meeting did indeed take place, in Shanghai, on 10 January 1956. The event also served as Mao's personal emergence from a full week of intensive agricultural policy discussions with provincial level officials in Hangzhou, and his reengagement with

²² *Nianpu* Vol. 2, pp. 477-500 for the time in Beijing, pp. 501-502 for the tour.

²³ Robert Loh and Humphrey Evans, *Escape from Red China*, p. 135

²⁴ In October 1955, he had instructed Peng Zhen and Deng Xiaoping to aid him in arranging meetings with about 300 "transformed capitalists" in Beijing, the meetings in which Rong Yiren had taken prominent part. See "Guanyu zhajiji zibenzhuyi gongshangye shehuizhuyi gaizao wentie zuotanhui de piyu," 28 October 1955, *Mao Zedong Wengao*, p. 427.

²⁵ Mao Zedong, 'Zai Zhongyang guanyu zhuanda taolun zibenzhuyi gongshangye gaizao wenti de jueyi zaoan deng wenjian de zhishi gaoshang jiaxie de hua' (Prose inserted on the draft of the CCP Central Committee order regarding the debate on the draft decision and other materials regarding the transformation of capitalists and industry), *Jianguo Yilai Mao Zedong Wengao, 1955.1 - 1955.12* (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 1996), Vol. 5, p. 459.

the question of “Socialist Transformation of Industry” in 1956.²⁶ This meeting in Shanghai was the one described by Robert Loh.

Here is the entry of Mao’s *Nianpu* for 10 January 1956:

In the early morning, [Chairman Mao] took a train from Hangzhou to Shanghai, and Chen Yi travelled with him. At 3 p.m., he was accompanied by Chen Yi and went to the Jiangnan Shipyard [江南造船厂] ...Continuing on, he inspected the Shenxin Number 9 Factory, understanding the production and lives of the workers after public-private consolidation, and the situation of the relations between the workers and the capitalists (*laozi guanxi*).

As Figure 2 shows, at Shuxin Number 9 Factory, Mao was accompanied by Rong Yiren, a central character of Loh’s memoir.

[Figure 2.]

The entry in the *Nianpu* continues:

At 8 p.m., [Chairman Mao] participated in a dialogue [*zuotan*] and dinner at the Sino-Soviet Friendship Exhibition Hall with over 70 people from all circles of Shanghai city as well as high level Party cadre. Chen Yi introduced Mao Zedong to the mathematician Su Buqing [苏步青], to whom Mao said: ‘We welcome mathematics, socialism needs mathematics.’ At dinner, Mao sat at a table with Huang Tanpei, Shu Xincheng, Zhou Yucheng, Rong Yiren, and others.

Here, allowing for confusion over the basic fact of the date of the meeting, we have our first explicit divergence with Loh’s recollection: the memoirist states the meeting had consisted of Mao, Chen Yi, and “eighty of Shanghai’s top businessmen.”²⁷ To be sure, Loh’s recollection of the headcount tallies with the official sources. But the Chinese records indicate that the meeting was in fact geared toward a broader societal interface for Mao, encompassing intellectuals as well as businesspeople. As a former professor himself, it seems odd that Loh would have been ignorant of Mao’s primary conversation partners at what Loh called an “elaborate tea.”

One professorial participant was Su Buqing (1902-2003), a mathematician. Mao greeted him at the event by shaking his hand and saying “We welcome mathematics,

²⁶ *Nianpu* p. 506. From 5-9th January, Mao moved to the Hangzhou Dahua Fandian to extend his debate on agriculture with a group of provincial party sectaries.

²⁷ Robert Loh and Humphrey Evans, *Escape from Red China*, p. 135.

socialism needs mathematics.” Su later recalled the event, doing so in hagiographical tones:

“Hearing Mao thus praise (*chongshi*) mathematics, valuing mathematics workers, in my heart I was very excited...Being near to Chairman Mao and listening respectfully to his guidance, his every action and word was deeply impressed upon me, and he was completely cordial. On that day, with Chairman Mao and everyone all together, such lively conversing and laughing, with not even the least constraint, had a huge educational impact upon me...”²⁸

Another intellectual present at the meeting was Zhou Gucheng (周谷城), a pioneering scholar of world history. Zhou would later go swimming with Mao at Zhongnanhai, and with whom he talked about poetry until about the Cultural Revolution.²⁹ Robert Loh was in elite company.

Prior to arriving to meet Robert Loh, Mao was at the Shenxin Number 9 factory, hosted by none other than Loh’s close personal friend Rong Yiren. So it is clear at this point that Loh either became very confused with the details of his recollection of this event, or is fabricating the details. His friend could not have been ignorant of Mao’s arrival at the banquet hall, and was almost certainly not standing around waiting for Mao to arrive, because Rong was accompanying Mao to his visit to the Shenxin factory. Dikötter goes as far as to flag up Rong’s time with Mao at the factory, conveniently avoiding Loh’s assertion that Rong was completely ignorant of Mao’s presence in Shanghai. Here Dikötter is correct, going with the PRC’s official record of an event rather than his ostensibly more “authentic” defector memoir.

Dikötter has clearly read the Robert Loh biography very carefully, as well as canvassed the available data on Rong Yiren. The problem here is that the process of doing this calls into question basic aspects of Robert Loh’s account, and his depiction of himself as an insider. This is because in his memoir, Loh boasts about Rong’s fakery, asserting that he, Robert Loh, was acting as Rong’s ghost-writer for speeches and even penned two articles which Rong had to write for *People’s Daily*. Loh also boasts about ghost-writing confessional speeches and letters for the female members of the Rong family.³⁰ [See Table 2.] Yet, in his account of his own meeting with Mao, Loh’s memoir demonstrates no awareness of his close friend’s earlier meeting with

²⁸ Hu Xinmin, “Su Buqing: Mao zhuxi sui likaile women, dan Mao Zedong sixiang jiang jixu zhidao wo qianjin [苏步青：毛主席虽离开了我们，但毛泽东思想将继续指引我前进]” 乌有之乡 (*Wuyuozhixiang* / Utopia), 16 June 2021. <http://www.wywxwk.com/Article/zatan/2021/06/436022.html>

²⁹ Liu Nanyan [刘南燕], “周谷城与毛泽东的交往, Zhou Gucheng yu Mao Zedong de Jiaozhu,” *Guangming Ribao*, 22 November 1999, <https://www.gmw.cn/01gmrb/1999-11/22/GB/GM%5E18248%5E7%5EGM7-2210.HTM>

³⁰ Robert Loh and Humphrey Evans, *Escape from Red China*, p. 140.

Mao. The idea that Rong would have delivered a speech to Chairman Mao at a meeting of the Politburo in October 1955, and that Loh – allegedly Rong’s speechwriter -- would not have mentioned it in his memoir, is laughable, yet this is what the reader is required to believe. Had Dikötter been interested in believing Robert Loh as a critical witness, he might have mentioned this highly damaging – to Mao, of course – detail.

The *Nianpu* makes clear that Mao had put some groundwork in place in late 1955 for the Socialist Transformation Campaign. As one indicator, Mao, along with much of the CCP Politburo, had met with Rong Yiren in Beijing on 27 October 1955. Dikötter duly draws the reader’s attention to Rong Yiren’s involvement in the leadup to the transformation. He describes Rong’s involvement in the 27 October meeting, doing so via a reading of an official Party biography which conveyed Rong Yiren’s remarks about government takeover of textile mills.³¹ The historian then mixes in a poignant detail from *Escape from Red China*, describing Rong’s emotional pain at pulling out photographs of purged patrons and politically damaged friends like Pan Hannian in Shanghai as the trajectory of the CCP movement became clear.

Mao left Shanghai for Nanjing the next day, then on to Tianjin on 12 January, where he met 190 people “of all circles and inner-party high cadre”, as in Shanghai.³² Four days after meeting Robert Loh, Chairman Mao was swimming in Zhongnanhai with Sichuan Party Secretary Li Jingquan and back on more familiar terrain -- grain issues -- where we leave him to loll and linger.

Conclusion

Using official documents and taking the meeting with Mao as a case study for Robert Loh’s credibility, we can summarize a few facts. Loh’s book gets the following assertions right:

- a. Rong Yiren was involved in the Socialist Transformation Campaign
- b. A meeting took place between Mao and some non-Party members in Shanghai in late 1955/early 1956
- c. About 80 people took part in the meeting
- d. Mao Zedong led the meeting and hosted a dinner

But he gets the following things wrong:

³¹ Dikötter, p. 239, citing Pang Xianzhi and Jin Chongji *Mao Zedong Zhuan, 1949-1976* (Beijing: Wenxian Chubanshe, 2003), pp. 448-449. The *Nianpu* (p. 457) gives further detail about 27 October 1955: Mao had a prefatory meeting with Peng Zhen in the morning to discuss the approach to the capitalists, and then met with Rong Yiren and others that evening, along with Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai, Chen Yun, Peng Zhen and Deng Xiaoping.

³² *Nianpu*, p. 490.

- a. The month and year of the meeting
- b. The emphasis of the meeting and the guests involved
- c. Rong Yiren's knowledge of and type of participation in the meeting
- d. The timing of the release of the "Socialist Transformation Campaign" in the meeting's aftermath

There are over two dozen passages in Frank Dikötter's *The Tragedy of Liberation* which draw exclusively on Loh as an authoritative witnesses. Are all of them as questionably accurate as this case study of the Socialist Transformation campaign, and Loh's face-to-face with Mao Zedong? *The Tragedy of Liberation* is not in need of adding to existing challenges of the book's accuracy.³³ Some of us continue to teach it, if only to use the referencing practices as a "how to write commercially successful but questionably accurate Chinese history."

The present essay confines itself to a narrow dive into a single instance of factual irregularity: Robert Loh's meeting with Mao Zedong. Behind this episode is a more labyrinthine task which begs for attention, namely that of documenting Loh's employment by the US government and untangling any American government involvement in the production of *Escape from Red China*.³⁴ The activist role of Loh's ostensible co-author, Humphrey Evans, also needs a great deal more probing. At the time he collaborated with Loh, Evans was a former employee of the US Information Service who, according to recently declassified documents, was working as a contractor for the CIA.³⁵ Ample material exists which could underpin an interpretation of Robert Loh's *Escape from Red China* as an example of US Cold War propaganda, or more broadly reframe Loh's career in the 1960s as an example of American state instrumentalization of Chinese defectors.³⁶

This is not to say that Loh's narrative should be ignored, or to double down and assert that its more fictionalized aspects fully undermine the book's compelling

³³ Jeremy Brown, 'Steaming Dogs,' *Times Literary Supplement* (July 2014), 24; Felix Wernheuer, 'The Chinese Revolution and "Liberation": Whose Tragedy?' *The China Quarterly* No. 219 (September 2014), pp. 849-860; Adam Cathcart, "Quantifying Civilian Casualties in the Northeast during the Chinese Civil War," *Sino-NK*, 17 March 2021, <https://sinonk.com/2021/03/17/quantifying-civilian-casualties-in-the-northeast-during-the-chinese-civil-war/>

³⁴ "Now an employee of the Department of Defense, he [Robert Loh] is often lent to the State Department to help greet escapees from communism on their arrival in the United States." Howard H.S. Chao, *Story Without End: A Chinese Diplomat Escapes* (Hong Kong: Phoenix Press, 1965), 75.

³⁵ William B. Bader (Church Committee Staffer) and William G. Miller to Walter Elder (Review Staff, CIA), "Request for Documents," 31 December 1975, U.S. National Archives, JFK Assassination Records - 2018 Additional Documents Release, Record no. 157-10005-10325 <https://www.archives.gov/files/research/jfk/releases/157-10005-10325.pdf>

³⁶ For another commentary which tells us more about US intelligence imperatives than life in the PRC, see Adam Cathcart, "Liang Sicheng as CIA Defection Target in Mexico City: New Evidence from the JFK Files," *Sources and Methods*, History & Public Policy Program / Cold War International History Project, Wilson Center, Washington D.C., 28 June 2023, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/liang-sicheng-cia-defection-target-mexico-city-new-evidence-jfk-files>

portrayal of inner struggles and discomfort with, and fear of, the Chinese Communist Party. There is a massive contemporary valence to the question of entrepreneurs and Party influence, as Desmond Shum’s memoir makes clear, or any given day in the *Financial Times*. Scholars more drawn to human rights than capital flight might even wish to outflank Dikötter by finding factual points on which to better corroborate and anchor Loh’s account of the terror of the Counterrevolutionary Suppression Campaign -- the blood dripping from Christ-like fingers of fresh corpses on trucks leaving university campuses is, no doubt, a compelling image.³⁷ Analysis of the crushing pressure of the Three-Anti, Five-Anti Movement might also be deepened, likewise the slow but no less exacting coercion the CCP enacted upon the family members of entrepreneurs in Shanghai.³⁸ This is to say that the process of better documenting Loh’s career should be as omnivorous as possible, not limited to merely pedantic fact-checking or gnashing of teeth about footnote accuracy fully ten years after the publication of a book which draws heavily from Loh’s memoir. Loh’s career in Shanghai is surely abundantly documented in city archives, if only “Lu Tseng-yu” could be located via the many organizations and United Front activities in which he participated.

Table 1: Selected Cast of characters in *Escape from Red China*

Character	Real name	Role in the book	Real person	Comments
Robert Loh	Lu Tseng-yu [characters unknown]	Protagonist	Yes	He also went by ‘Luo Robi’ / 駱若壁 in the translation of his book published in Hong Kong in 1964.
Chen Jen-ping, or J.P.	Rong Yiren [荣毅仁]	A top industrialist in Shanghai, mentor and friend to Loh.	Yes	China’s “leading national capitalist” plays a huge role in the book, seemingly involved in every aspect of Loh’s life. Loh states that he was Rong’s “ghost-writer” for <i>People’s Daily</i> and wrote speeches for him.
Charlie Chan	Rong Hongren [荣鸿仁]	Younger brother of J.P. He introduces Loh to	Yes	Loh depicts him as both a lush and a doubtful

³⁷ See also Greta Palmer, *God’s Underground in Asia* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1953). The sheer amount of blood and organs ripped out in this book makes it a prose peer, or a twin of sorts, to Dikötter’s visceral writing style, although its victims tend to be Catholics and its primary informants are repatriated and psychologically wounded missionaries. Nevertheless Palmer (p. 261) states that “the methods of public trial in 1950 and 1951 were more orderly than they had been in the terror two years earlier.” For a more vivid and comprehensive personal account from a defector of Counterrevolutionary Suppression rallies of late April 1951, see Chow, *Ten Years of Storm*, 106-115.

³⁸ Yang Kuisong, “The Evolution of the Chinese Communist Party’s Policy on the Bourgeoisie (1949-1952),” *Journal of Modern Chinese History*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2007), 13-30.

		<p>prostitutes in Milwaukee and Chicago, joins the CCP in 1950's Shanghai and participates in youth mobilization activities with Robert Loh.</p>		<p>communist; his use of what Loh calls "the unfortunate name of Charlie Chan" is likely an editorial choice by Humphrey Evans.</p>
Li Li	<p>Possibly loosely modelled after Zhou Xuan [周璇], a troubled actress and singer in Hong Kong and Shanghai who died in 1957, or, less likely, the actress and singer Li Lili [黎莉莉]</p>	<p>Works as a dancer in Shanghai's red light economy, is Loh's main love interest in the book, kills herself in 1957.</p>	<p>Probably an amalgamated character</p>	<p>Loh's co-author Humphrey Evans uses "Mi-Mi" as a love interest as a corresponding plot device in <i>The Thought Revolution</i> in a different Chinese defector memoir published in 1967.</p>

Table 2.

Events or documents described in *Escape from Red China* that can be cross-checked

Event	Description	Loh Chapter	Chinese sources available	Other sources	Assessment of Loh's accuracy	Dikötter use of material?
Yang Jianqing, the wife of Rong Yiren, writes a letter or makes a speech in Beijing.	Loh explains how he wrote a letter on behalf of Rong's brother's wife, describing her trip, in advance of her trip to Beijing for a conference. The point of the anecdote in the book is to show the irony: nothing in communism is genuine or real, and communism also inverts traditional gender hierarchies in a perverse way.	Ch. 9 [end]	<i>Renmin Ribao</i> [People's Daily], 9 April 1956	N/A	Robert Loh's account is correct in that the wife of a Rong family capitalist published an article. However, Loh either misremembers or lies about half a dozen basic details, including the letter's emphasis on Rong Yiren when he isn't mentioned.	No
1952 Conversation w/ British visitor	Loh describes how a British visitor had cornered him at a reception and asked him if he weren't lying about being a loyal communist	Ch. 7 [middle]	N/A	A <i>Spectator</i> article by the British visitor from 1963 verifies the episode. See Desmond Donnelly, "A Hundred Dead Flowers," <i>The Spectator</i> , 31 May 1963, p. 712.	Loh's story is verified by an external source.	No
1955.12 meeting with Mao in Shanghai	Loh describes his only meeting with Mao Zedong, who had invited an unsuspecting Loh along with J.P. (Rong Yiren) and 80 businessmen to discuss socialist transformation.	Ch. 7 [end]	<i>Mao Zedong Nianpu</i> [Chronology of Mao Zedong], Vol. 2, entries for 25, 27 Oct. 1955 & 10 Jan. 1956	Multiple Chinese articles describe Mao's tabletalk w/ intellectuals at event & Mao's visit to a textile mill earlier that day with Rong Yiren.	Loh gets the big idea right – Mao was indeed reaching out to capitalists in late 1955 – but the meeting was on 10 January 1956 in Shanghai, with intellectuals and businessmen.	Yes – pp. 238-240 in <i>Tragedy of Liberation</i> . The result is the inserting of (incorrect) facts into the narrative of Mao's timeline.
1957.01.09 Zhou Enlai at Moscow University	Loh describes his participation at an event with Zhou Enlai in Moscow		PRC Foreign Ministry website	Moscow newspaper online; Madame Sun website	Difficult to tell; few photographs or much description of the event is available.	No

[Figure 1.]



1956年1月10日毛泽东在陈毅（右二）陪同下视察上海公私合营中新九厂时和荣毅仁（右四）交谈。

Figure 2. Mao Zedong listens to Rong Yiren explain the workings of the Shenxin No. 9 Textile Mill in Shanghai, 10 January 1956.

Figure 2. Reader's Digest condensed version of *Escape from Red China*, spring 1963.

