

Review - Dragon in Ambush: The Art of War in the Poems of Mao Zedong

Written by Francis Grice

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FRANCIS GRICE, JUL 28 2014

Dragon in Ambush: The Art of War in the Poems of Mao Zedong

Translated by: Jeremy Ingalls

Edited by: Allen Wittenborn

Rowman and Littlefield, 2013

Mao Zedong was one of the most prolific writers on political theory and military strategy in the twentieth century. The largest and most comprehensive catalogues of his prose, the *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung* and the *Collected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, cover his adult life: from his days as a student, through his career as an insurgent, and on to his final role as founder and leader of the People's Republic of China. Accompanying this prose, Mao wrote considerable quantities of poetry. Many of his poems have been analyzed before, but primarily for their literary style rather than for their military and political meanings.

According to one scholar, this represents a significant omission. In *Dragon in Ambush: The Art of War in the Poems of Mao Zedong*, Allen Wittenborn has compiled and edited a series of translations and commentaries on twenty of Mao's earliest poems by the distinguished scholar, Jeremy Ingalls, who passed away in 2000. These are accompanied by a series of propositions by Ingalls about Mao's poems, including that:

- Mao imbued his poems with complex political and military ideas.
- These notions combine to provide a driving political and military theme: the ruthless pursuit of psychological domination to achieve supremacy over all rivals.
- This theme can only be appreciated by studying all of the poems sequentially.
- Marxist-Leninism acted as a political convenience rather than a doctrinal centrepiece in Mao's poetry.
- Mao believed that the full meaning of his poems could only be comprehended by a select cohort of readers: those who possessed a sophisticated understanding of Chinese history, language, and culture.
- This was because he intended "that his poems become a manual of master strategy for subsequent adepts" (p15).

By suggesting that Mao's poems possessed sophisticated military and political elements, Ingalls acknowledges that she is challenging the past statements of "Mao-supervised publicists and translators" that Mao's poems were mostly trivial in content and lacked a central design (p4). She justifies her disagreement by indicating that the richness of the style and content contained within Mao's verses demonstrate, by themselves, a desire to articulate these messages.

The work provides a convenient repository of twenty of Mao's poems from 1925-1936, with Mandarin characters and pinyin transliterations placed alongside the author's translations. This layout allows for readers to access a captivating tranche of Mao's poetry, and to follow with alacrity the links between the Mandarin and the English translations provided. Ingalls provides extensive explanations about the rationale behind Mao's words and links these with major military and political events of the period, defining moments and myths in Chinese history, and important traditions and symbolism in Chinese literature. The result is a lucid translation of some of Mao's earliest poems, supported by detailed explanations about the military and political meanings that Ingalls believes are present.

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Many of Ingalls' assertions contrast with those made by previous translators. She attests, for example, that the 1934 poem 'Huichang' refers to Mao looking forward to the impending Long March, which involved a six thousand mile retreat of the Red Army from the Jiangxi Soviet in the south to Yan'an in the north (pp204-220). This contrasts with traditional interpretations of the poem, which suggest that Mao was writing about the previous arrival of the Red Army into Huichang, Jiangxi.[1] Ingalls' arguments are detailed and intriguing, but at times appear convoluted and potentially subjective. It is difficult to reliably ascertain whether the conventional interpretations or Ingalls' new explanations are correct, with the latter striking the reviewer as not fully convincing. The best approach for interested readers may be to peruse both sides and make their own decisions.

Ingalls' authority could have benefitted from the articulation and use of a stronger interpretative methodology. There is such a framework provided at the outset of the book, but this really amounts to little more than an elongated statement that the poems "convey their import through multilayered allusions, combining references to contemporary events with clues referring to passages from older Chinese literature." This is supported by a declaration that Mao's poetry can only be understood by those who possess "the resources to penetrate the entanglement of Mao's allusions to Chinese classical texts and his dazzlements of wordplay" (p3). Ingalls places herself amongst the select few who can demystify these messages, and then leverages this position to dismiss the work of prior interpreters, arguing that they lacked the necessary knowledge to appreciate Mao's cryptic meanings.

One further difficulty with the work comes from its contention that Mao intended his poems to be understood only by the literary elite in China. This conflicts with Mao's known dedication towards making writing – including his own prose – accessible for the lower classes, as well as his hostility towards literary snobbism. We know, for example, that in 1942 Mao formally condemned "veiled and roundabout expressions, which are hard for the people to understand." [2] Similarly, in 1952, Mao's government introduced simple characters to make writing more accessible for the lower classes. Ingalls neither fully clarifies why Mao would choose to embrace scholarly elitism exclusively in his poetry nor convincingly explains why Mao would want his successor to be drawn from the scholarly few, whom he generally loathed.

Another challenge is that the author seems to have approached Mao's poems with a pre-existing belief that an overarching theme is present. This is alluded to early in the book, when Ingalls asserts that "Once what can be called his verse algebra is understood, [Mao's] master plan and the coherence of his procedures towards actualizing it become directly traceable" (p15). From this and other comments, it seems that Ingalls seeks to identify and chart certain messages across the poems which support this master theme. This creates the risk that the author is either imagining or pulling meanings selectively from the poems for this purpose, rather than allowing the content to speak for itself.

The author has also drawn upon a number of contestable facts about Mao. For example, Ingalls comments that "Chinese or non-Chinese, we can appropriately recognize that Mao is a master in the art of war" (p13). In fact, scholars are increasingly challenging the notion that Mao was either a military or political genius, with newly exposed evidence suggesting that his strategies were often short-sighted, benefitted from events beyond his control, or were developed and implemented by his rivals only to be attributed to Mao after the fact. The Long March, for example, has traditionally been associated with Mao. However, recent investigations have shown that the decision to undertake the journey was made by Otto Braun and several of Mao's political rivals, at a time when Mao had been sidelined within the Communist Party.[3] Ingalls' dependence on these tenuous beliefs cannot entirely be faulted, as many of the newer findings only became available after she passed away in 2000. Nevertheless, it is worth highlighting that some of the assumptions underpinning the book are dated and of questionable accuracy.

It is worth considering here the value of the work specifically for the field of international relations. The author's thesis that Mao's poems contain his true philosophies on strategy may be of interest to scholars of insurgency and counterinsurgency, Cold War analysts, and students interested by the rise of China within the international system. If the messages that Ingalls identifies do really represent the strategies which underpinned Mao's journey to power, then their study could help to illuminate how and why Mao undertook certain actions throughout his life. Ingalls' own claim, however, that Mao's hidden messages can only be decrypted by specialists in Chinese history, language, and culture automatically limits the significance of the book for understanding Mao's influence upon most other political

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actors across the world: If the meanings of Mao's poems are indecipherable to the majority of readers, then their impact upon other heads of state, insurgent strategists, and further interested parties must have been insignificant.

Overall, although there are several problems with the book, it retains much of value. Ingalls provides a seminal translation of twenty of Mao's poems, which will be of interest to many scholars across multiple fields. Her assertion that Mao intended to deliver a series of military and political messages for potential successors, which combine to endorse a strategy of ruthless psychological domination, represents a thought-provoking proposition, albeit one which may have been formed using subjective interpretations and a teleological approach. The work has considerable merit, but readers would benefit most by approaching it with a critical eye and questioning approach, which weighs and critiques the arguments contained inside.

Notes

[1] See also, for example, Barnstone, Willis. *The Poems of Mao Zedong: Translations, Introduction, and Notes by Willis Barnstone*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1972, pp55-56 and 136.

[2] Mao Zedong. "Talks at the Yen'an Forum on Literature and Art, May 1942." In *The Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung, Volume III*, pp69-98. Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1965, p92.

[3] Durschmeid, Erik. *Beware the Dragon: 1,000 Years of Bloodshed*. London: Andre Deutsch, 2008, p189; Sun Shuyun, *The Long March*. London: Harper Perennial, 2007, chapter 2.

About the author:

Francis Grice is an Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Studies at McDaniel College in Maryland, where he has worked since 2014. Prior to this posting, he worked as a Teaching Fellow at King's College London. He has a PhD in Defence Studies from King's College London (2014). His thesis critically examined the originality and transnational influence of the teachings of Mao Zedong on insurgent warfare.