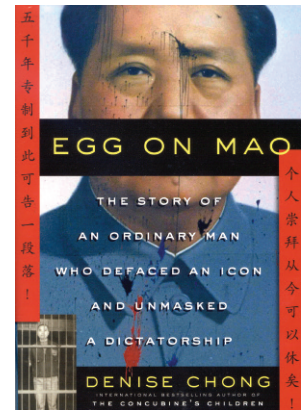


## When the masks of dictatorship fell

Denise Chong. *Egg on Mao: The Story of an Ordinary Man Who Defaced an Icon and Unmasked a Dictatorship*. Toronto: Random House Canada, 2009.

Review by Desmond Morton



This is the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the collapse of Communism across most of the world. In Beijing, a lone student defied a People's Liberation Army tank that was about to roll over him. Elsewhere, three young men from Mao Zedong's home province of Hunan sprayed his iconic portrait with eggs filled with sticky black paint.

Rebellious students seized the vandals and handed them over to the police. How dare mere workers interfere with a revolution by China's intellectual elite? While the Berlin Wall collapsed, as did the Warsaw Pact collection of dictatorships, China's Maoist revolution survived and seemingly has transformed the country into the world's other superpower.

Superpower or not, modern China is a place we all need to understand. Denise Chong is a superb guide. Deploying the same patient, wide-visioned humanity she brought to *The Concubine's Children*, a history of her own family, and *The Girl in the Picture*, a life of the little naked girl fleeing a napalm attack in a photograph that became an icon of the Vietnam War, Chong leads us to the life of a seemingly ordinary Chinese worker whose role in history depended on his having an arm strong enough to lob an

egg high across Tiananmen Square, and a lifetime bitter enough to make him risk that life to show his anger at a regime that, he believed, had systematically destroyed his happiness.

Lu Ducheng's adoring mother died young. His father was Driver Lu, whose role as a hero of labour made him a timid supplicant of all in authority and a brutal bully of his son. Lu replaced his first wife with an almost stereotypical wicked stepmother.

Ducheng's happiness was fatally linked to the lovely and loving Wang Qiuping. Even in revolutionary China, a pretty daughter was marriage bait for any man rich enough to satis-

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fy Qiuping's avaricious mother. As a penniless nobody, Ducheng had no claim to the Widow Wang's daughter beyond winning her love. Beijing's one-child policy compelled Ducheng and Qiuping to reach a cumulative age of 50 before they had children; each was 19. Their inevitable child led to brutal penalties for those who helped them and, because health care in a

market-oriented China cost far more than the couple could afford, the child soon died. Even when Ducheng's assault on Mao's portrait cost him a 17-year prison sentence, Qiuping remained a faithful, devoted and sacrificial wife. His selfless insistence that she abandon him and pursue her own life broke both her heart and the marriage.

Chinese prisoners of the 1989 resistance may have fared a little better than their predecessors because Beijing authorities realized that the rest of the world was watching. Ducheng's associates, an artist and an intellectual, received harsher sentences than he did since Beijing officials assumed that a mere auto mechanic could never

dream up such a daring act of symbolic sabotage. However, all three survived long prison sentences followed by voluntary, if reluctant, exile. Lu Ducheng now lives in Calgary, where Chong interviewed him for this book.

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