

Mao's Ordinary People

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This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the Cultural Revolution's launch. In China, substantive public discussion of the subject remains taboo. The official line of the Communist Party (CCP), circulated in 1981 in the form of a resolution on party history, pronounced the entire decade from 1966 to 1976 a cataclysmic leftist error initiated by Mao Zedong that resulted in "the most severe setback and the heaviest losses suffered by the party, the state, and the people since the founding of the People's Republic."

Despite the party's unequivocal condemnation of the movement, backed up by a highly efficient censorial regime, Chinese authorities have been on high alert since the beginning of this year. In March, the party tabloid *Global Times* warned its readership that "small cliques" might exploit the anniversary to circulate "chaotic misunderstandings" of the Cultural Revolution. Loyal party members were instructed to remain vigilant, and not to depart or deviate in any way from the official determination on the matter, lest either popular discussion or scholarly reflection on this critical watershed in twentieth-century Chinese politics challenge the party's final word.

Fortunately, however, scholars based outside of the People's Republic in recent years have availed themselves of a wide variety of materials to provide us with new understandings and fresh perspectives on the period. Relying in part on documents salvaged from antique book markets and paper-recycling outlets in and around Beijing, Harvard's Roderick MacFarquhar (the dean of Cultural Revolution historians) and Swedish scholar Michael Schoenhals in 2006 published a masterful analysis of the convulsive elite politics that literally turned the Chinese party-state inside out beginning in 1966. Their book, *Mao's Last Revolution*, explained

in breathtaking detail how the leader celebrated as China's Great Helmsman launched a war against the party he had labored so assiduously to build, a mere 17 years after the founding of the People's Republic.

Stanford sociologist Andrew G. Walder painstakingly mined thousands of Red Guard publications—newspapers and reports produced by student groups that mobilized in response to Mao's call to challenge the party—to write *Fractured Rebellion: The Beijing Red Guard Movement* (published in 2009). He demonstrates that the key schisms between student

groups were not the direct result of preexisting socioeconomic class backgrounds, as many scholars previously argued, but instead were frequently a function of the relationship between the students and the work teams sent by central party leaders to manage them. The University of Toronto's Wu Yiching made use of Red Guard and rebel publications along with archival and other documents for his 2014 book *The Cultural Revolution at the Margins*, in which he depicted the myriad political and ideological dynamics that radicalized Mao's Cultural Revolution from below.

The Cultural Revolution: A People's History, 1962–1976, is the last volume in a controversial but engrossing trilogy on China during the Mao era by Frank Dikötter, a Dutch historian now based at the University of Hong Kong. His new book builds on and at the same time departs from these other authors' recent contributions. In the first two volumes of his trilogy, *Mao's Great Famine* and *The Tragedy of Liberation*, Dikötter recounts in often lurid detail the horrors that befell those who did not enjoy the favor of the authorities and agents of the newly installed Chinese Communist party-state. *Mao's Great Famine*, the most detailed account available in English to date of the famine caused by the agricultural communization and rapid development program known as the Great Leap Forward (1958–61), drew on an impressive

**The Cultural Revolution:
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range of archival materials to which others have been denied access, but drew criticism for its polemical and sensationalistic style.

Dikötter's second volume, which covers the 1945–57 period, incorporated an even wider range of source materials to shed new light on the CCP regime's reliance on violence and terror during a period long portrayed by many China scholars abroad as the "golden age" of Chinese Communism. *The Tragedy of Liberation* upends this view by documenting both the scale and frequency of mass killings that took place in the years immediately following the revolution. Frequent public executions and a series of mass campaigns emerged as key weapons in the CCP's arsenal, and were deployed with cold-blooded precision to build a brutal and uncompromising machinery of government that periodically preyed on its own citizens, even as the party hailed them as the true "masters" of the new state apparatus.

Dikötter's distinctive narrative style deftly interweaves descriptions of high-level political wrangling with accounts of the trials and tribulations suffered by "ordinary people" far from the inner sanctum of Mao's court. The author's aims across all three volumes are to demonstrate the profound and deepening disconnect between the CCP's leaders, particularly Mao himself, and the common people whose fate they shaped over several decades, and to map the unintended and often disastrous consequences that arose from the party-state's attempt to build a new China.

MENACING MASSES

Dikötter's focus on the "ordinary people" of the Mao era is brought to the fore in his latest volume, as its subtitle indicates. But who are the ordinary people of Dikötter's Cultural Revolution? Whereas non-elites appear in his first two volumes chiefly as the hapless victims, dupes, or stooges of the party, in this book the masses initially take on a more menacingly activist role during what Dikötter calls the "Red Years" of 1966–68.

Dikötter's account draws in part on earlier works by MacFarquhar and Schoenhals to reconstruct the elite political context but also updates their view, depicting the Mao of the mid-1960s as a resentful aging revolutionary sidelined by his political rivals. Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping, and others who would soon be accused of being

"Khrushchev-type revisionists" focused on stabilizing the Chinese economy in the wake of the disastrous Great Leap Forward. They succeeded in part by reversing many of the left-leaning policies and radical initiatives that bore a distinctive Maoist stamp. Although Mao grudgingly assented to these reversals, he viewed them as evidence that the party elite had turned its back on the revolution. He struck back in June 1966 by issuing a call to forces outside the party to mobilize in order to attack his political enemies.

Radical university and high school students around Beijing were the first to respond, taking up Mao's charge to "bombard the headquarters." They held heated debates about university and national politics, penned angry letters to authorities, and put up large posters denouncing university administrators. The top party brass reacted by dispatching "work teams" of government officials to investigate and manage the students' complaints. As Walder has documented, these measures backfired by deepening existing rifts among students and

drawing government functionaries into the fray. Entrenched party cadres fought back, sometimes cracking down on student groups, and sometimes forming their own Red Guard organizations for protection. Students initially

excluded later formed rebel Red Guard groups. Much of the capital, and soon China's other major cities, plummeted into convulsive cycles of violence whose reverberations echoed across the country.

With state and party offices paralyzed, industrial production stymied, and transport and communication lines snarled, Mao again called on "ordinary people" to seize power and expel those party-state leaders who were allegedly following the capitalist road. The next group to respond was the working class, initially in Shanghai and then in other Chinese cities. Unsurprisingly, however, the mobilized workers split into factions, as had the students before them, producing ever-widening circles of violence. In some locales the military attempted to step in to quell the disorder, but Mao instructed them not to put down the rebel forces.

In recounting the infamous mass uprisings in Changsha in 1967 and Wuhan in 1967–68, Dikötter builds on some of Wu's work in *The Cultural Revolution at the Margins* as well as many previously unused archival sources to document the

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numerous instances of mob rule, public torture, and executions that took place as these huge mass uprisings unfolded. Throughout the “Red Years,” factions of “ordinary people” inflicted horrendous violence on each other until the People’s Liberation Army finally consolidated control through the newly formed Revolutionary Committees, which were government organs composed of army officers, reliably left-leaning cadres, and representatives of rebel mass organizations.

Dikötter records how the Cultural Revolution spread to the rural hinterlands when the Red Guards were disbanded and the students were sent “up to the mountains and down to the countryside” to learn from the peasants. He calls this period lasting from 1968 to 1971 the “Black Years.” Drawing on numerous memoirs by former sent-down youth and original interviews, he describes the harsh working conditions they endured, including exposure to the elements and infectious diseases. Thousands of female students who found themselves at the mercy of

predatory village leaders were molested or raped in the countryside.

Cadres accused of revisionism and other political crimes were dispatched to rural “May Seventh Cadre Schools” to be reeducated through labor in similarly harsh conditions. Meanwhile, ordinary urban residents and rural villagers alike suffered through the bloodiest and most brutal period of the Cultural Revolution, as the Revolutionary Committees moved to consolidate their power by settling scores in the vicious “cleansing of the class ranks” campaign.

CAPITALIST SPROUTS

It is only in the section covering the “Grey Years” of 1971–76 that the “ordinary people” finally begin to emerge as the real heroes of Dikötter’s sweeping historical narrative, which homes in on the unintended consequences that emerged with the utter defeat of the Maoist left. The failed defection and death of Mao’s erstwhile successor Lin Biao sent shock waves through the entire country

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in 1971, signaling to many “the beginning of the end.” Drawing heavily on published memoirs and personal interviews, Dikötter argues that Lin’s suspicious death (in a plane crash while he was allegedly fleeing to the Soviet Union) awakened people across China to the extent of the damage done to the party and the state.

With the attention of central and provincial leaders diverted by the ensuing internecine power struggle, Dikötter asserts, the millions of rural villagers who had been forced by the Communist leadership to trudge the road to serfdom liberated themselves in a “silent revolution,” in some cases with the support of local cadres who had lost both interest and faith in politics. Drawing on rare archival sources that other historians have not used, he details how millions mired in poverty across the countryside quietly subdivided collective assets and farmland, and secretly opened underground factories. Black markets sprang up, feeding demands that had gone unmet for decades, even as members of the so-called Gang of Four, a highly influential alliance of leftist radicals that included Mao’s wife, fulminated about the “sprouts of capitalism” germinating across the Chinese countryside.

The once-powerful party proved unable to prevent this mass defection, and in the end succumbed to precisely the denouement that the Maoists had struggled so bitterly to prevent. Well before the Chairman’s death in September 1976, Dikötter claims, the individual choices of his millions upon millions of former loyal followers succeeded in burying Maoism.

Oddly enough, Dikötter’s “people’s history” thus arrives at a conclusion not dissimilar to that of Wu Yiching, but does so by very different means. Wu, like Dikötter, draws our attention to the social grassroots during the late Mao era, seeing them as not only the site, but also an engine, of social and political change. Rather than portray “ordinary people” as the hapless victims of a dictatorial regime, Wu describes them as the agents of revolutionary political action. He shows how ordinary Chinese citizens, during the “ten years of chaos,” reappropriated the language and concepts of class imposed on them by the party-state in order to criticize the perpetuation of bureaucratic

privilege and domination, thereby radicalizing the Cultural Revolution from below.

For both authors the Cultural Revolution proves to be the birthplace of unintended outcomes: the ideological exhaustion of Maoism at the movement’s end served to reconsolidate power in the hands of the bureaucratic elite. In that sense, for Wu, the efforts of the “revolutionary masses” did little more than temporarily interrupt the consolidation of elite power. For Dikötter, by contrast, China’s “ordinary people” emerge heroically from the trauma of the Cultural Revolution in the mold of the prototypical *homo economicus* whose relentless entrepreneurialism reasserted itself once the crippling fetters of Maoism were loosened.

Although both works offer nuanced understandings of the roots of the so-called Chinese economic miracle, Wu’s more sinister and subversive tale challenges the legitimacy of a contemporary leadership determined to erase any footprints that might betray the trail it took to power. Dikötter’s narrative history does not openly contradict the broader outlines of the party’s 1981 historical resolution, but embellishes it with rich and revealing detail. His impressively documented “silent revolution” likewise lends support to Deng Xiaoping’s official account of the “bottom-up” push toward market reform initiated by the impoverished villagers of Xiaogang village in Anhui province. According to Dikötter, similar dynamics appear to have been at play in rural areas across the country.

It is, of course, one of the profound ironies of Chinese history that Mao’s final struggle against “revisionism” ended in what Wu calls a “capitalist restoration.” But it was the Great Helmsman himself who observed to a visiting Albanian delegation in 1967 that since revisionism would likely prevail, and the Cultural Revolution would almost surely end in defeat, his followers should use the probability of that defeat to awaken us all. Today, CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping’s insistence on preserving Mao’s checkered legacy can be read as a contemporary echo of this historical ambiguity: the party clings to its socialist revolutionary credentials, even as it hones its engagement with global capitalism. ■