

Dikötter, Frank: *The Cultural Revolution. A People's History 1962–1976*. London: Bloomsbury 2016. ISBN: 978-1-4088-5649-9; XXVII, 396 S.

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This book is the final volume of a trilogy on the history of the People's Republic of China under the rule of Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong. Having previously covered the early years of socialist construction and the devastating Great Leap Forward, author Frank Dikötter provides an account of the Cultural Revolution, including its prehistory. He neatly summarizes the different periods of the movement using color metaphors: With „red“ he marks the first three years as a period of mass mobilization, followed by a „black“ period of military dominance. Finally, the „grey“ years describe the increasing divergence between top-level party rhetoric and social developments after the death of Lin Biao in 1971. While these distinctions have been advocated by others before, it is important that popular works subscribe to the disaggregation of the „ten years of chaos“ narrative stressed by the Communist Party. As always with Dikötter, the book is an entertaining read and much emphasis is placed on crafting a storyline that renders individuals, places and events recognizable to a larger audience. Occasionally, overly simplistic depictions („[Mao] and his comrades-in-arms were united again, determined to suppress the people“, p. 8) could have been avoided.

The book is subtitled „A People's History“, though no reference is made to previous usages of the concept or analytical approaches such as „Alltagsgeschichte.“ Dikötter points out that the book is not about the party elite, but about people from „all walks of life“ (p. XVI), especially marginalized groups such as the „black classes“ of alleged political enemies. If taken seriously, this approach is a very important corrective to Mao-centered analyses of recent history. In this volume, the „people“ come to fulfill a double role: By including snippets from published memoirs as well as primary sources from local archives, they add color to the narrative by showcasing

the effects of party policies at the local or individual level. On the other hand, and this is the book's key argument, the people (especially the peasants) are described as ultimately responsible for the turning away from the Cultural Revolution and the beginning of market reforms. Dikötter here effectively popularizes research conducted by Lynn White, Kate Zhou and others, and furthermore traces the emergence of alternative spaces of societal organization in the early 1970s.

While the author of this review is supportive of approaches aimed at decentering party history and the Cultural Revolution in particular, several issues hamper the explanatory power of this volume, at least for a scholarly audience. Four of these will be briefly outlined below:

First, the book offers many local examples but they usually amount to a few paragraphs at most. As a consequence, there is no space to analyze or explain the relevance of these snapshots within their particular environments. While this might work for the oft-quoted memoirs of Ken Ling, Nien Cheng or Jung Chang, it is insufficient for the newly introduced archival evidence. Many interesting facets are touched upon, including how objects confiscated by Red Guards were later dealt with, the national economic situation in 1970, the impact of the Cultural Revolution on education, or the effects of barefoot doctors on rural health care. Yet the examples mostly serve to illustrate preconceived claims, as there is no engagement with alternative interpretations nor a critical evaluation of the sources relied upon. All too often „the people“ assume a mere ornamental function to either document the cruelty of the movement and its leading proponents, or to reveal the ingenuity of the masses in overcoming the shackles of Maoism and the planned economy.

Second, causes and effects are seldom placed in clear correlation. Were peasants or local cadres the driving force of departing from the planned economy and what does this tell us about the role of the state? Were central leaders indeed powerless to curb such trends, if they had wanted to? Did the impact of the Cultural Revolution really run only „skin-deep“ with regard to societal values?

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All of these are highly important questions and Dikötter presents clear-cut observations. The lack of comprehensive analysis, however, often leads to more questions than answers.

Third, while Dikötter cites two major incentives for Mao Zedong's unfolding of the Cultural Revolution in the introduction, including ideology („grand vision of the socialist world“) and power („old man settling scores“), the role of ideology is largely neglected. This is problematic, because it avoids an engagement with the finer points why Mao launched the movement. Did he only perceive the need to destroy remnants of old thinking, or was he rather in search of an alternative mode of political representation since he believed that the Communist Party itself had morphed into a new bureaucratic class? While Mao exploited the uncertainty arising from his ambiguous statements, it is imperative to address them in order to gauge the extent of destruction he was willing to wage on the party-state, as well as the public appeal of his vision among „ordinary“ people. The high point of Mao's radicalism, visible in his attempt to „arm the Left“ in the summer of 1967, in this book basically boils down to the ambitions of Jiang Qing and Lin Biao with an acquiescent Mao watching from the sidelines (p. 152). Given that the sources for this reinterpretation are a newspaper editorial, a well-known memoir and an out-of-context citation of the standard account of the period on the preceding Wuhan affair (p. 340. n. 9), the narrative reinvigorates stereotypical depictions of the evil Jiang Qing and Lin Biao cliques rather than providing novel analysis or a history from below.

Fourth, the book would have profited from a clearer distinction between analytical concepts and party language, as well as from extended source criticism. Despite his highly critical stance, Dikötter reproduces concepts like „liberation“ (as metaphor for the communist victory in 1949, p. 119) and phrases like „counter-revolutionary incidents“ or „reactionary elements“ (p. 31) without further qualification. The archival documents, from which these terms emanate in the first place, are rarely problematized as a source, despite the fact that the described findings were often prompted and framed by recent party poli-

cies and categories. Occasionally, the book also repeats urban legends, such as Mao's alleged outcry: „Give me back my aeroplanes“ (p. 100), when witnessing the waste of aluminum for buttons produced in the name of his cult in 1969. So far no source has been found that would trace this statement to Mao Zedong. Already in April 1968 a student by the name of Jiang Mingliang from Northwestern Polytechnical University in Xi'an critically employed this sentence, quoted as a popular saying, in a letter to Mao and the CCP Center to express annoyance with the Chairman's omnipresent cult.<sup>1</sup>

To summarize, this is a well-readable account of the Cultural Revolution for a broad audience that offers new perspectives, which are definitely worthwhile pondering, although probably not all of the proposed answers will hold up. Yet the volume hopefully triggers a number of detailed case studies that will probe long-held assumptions about this crucial period of transformation.

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<sup>1</sup> See „Jiang Mingliang deng shang Zhonggong zhongyang, Mao Zedong shu,“ April 1968, in: Song Yongyi (ed.), Chinese Cultural Revolution Database, third edition (online version), Hong Kong 2013.