

Review of China After Mao : The Rise of a Superpower by Frank Dikötter

Pundits Keep Predicting China's Imminent Collapse — and Keep Getting It Wrong

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Frank Dikötter is the best-selling popular historian of China today. In his latest work on the post-Mao years, Dikötter joins a long line of those predicting the speedy demise of the Chinese system, letting ideology get in the way of analysis.

Review of *China After Mao: The Rise of a Superpower* by Frank Dikötter (Bloomsbury, 2022)

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Frank Dikötter is the best-selling English-language popular historian of China, known in particular for his “People’s History of China” trilogy: *Mao’s Great Famine* (2010), *The Tragedy of Liberation* (2013), and *The Cultural Revolution* (2016). The three books are detailed, deeply ideological histories of particular periods under Mao after the 1949 revolution, in which Dikötter set out to argue that the rule of the Communist Party of China (CPC) has been an utter disaster for China.

His earlier work, *The Age of Openness: China Before Mao* (2008), applied the same argument to China’s pre-communist history, depicting the country as having been a freer and more prosperous society before 1949. At 140 pages, it is much shorter than his other works — perhaps reflecting the paucity of evidence that even the most committed of Cold Warriors can offer in support of that particular case.

With [China After Mao: The Rise of a Superpower](#), Dikötter has attempted something much more ambitious: an overview of China’s rise to become a major world power since 1976 (although the book oddly stops at 2012, on which I will say more about later). While Dikötter’s publisher has not marketed *China After Mao* as the fourth volume of the series, it is very much a follow-on work, both stylistically and politically. I will give a brief account of those books before looking at the present volume.

The Great Leap Forward

Mao’s Great Famine, the first of the trilogy, covers the Great Leap Forward (GLF) of 1958–1962. It is

much the best of the series. The GLF began as Mao's attempt to square a circle: he sought to increase the rate of accumulation by imposing impossible growth targets on agriculture and replacing scarce or nonexistent material resources with sheer hard labor. The result was a widespread collapse in output and one of the worst famines in modern Chinese history.

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Western scholars have studied the GLF much less than the Cultural Revolution, even though the death toll was much greater. In part, this is because the impact of the GLF was almost entirely confined to the Chinese countryside and so was far less visible. But it is also because China's post-Mao leadership, while anxious to distance themselves from the Cultural Revolution, wanted to keep the reality of the GLF hidden as far as possible.

The first general history of the famine, Jasper Becker's [*Hungry Ghosts*](#), only appeared in 1997, though there had been academic studies, notably Judith Banister's [*China's Changing Population*](#). Banister used official figures to suggest that the campaign had led to some thirty million excess deaths over four years.

Dikötter's detailed work in Chinese archives added much detail to these previous works, in particular confirming that the scale of forcible grain procurement and exports during the famine proved that this was an entirely man-made disaster. While [*Tombstone*](#), a book published by Chinese journalist Yang Jisheng after years of clandestine research, is now the definitive study of the GLF, *Mao's Great Famine* remains the best general account of the period.

1949

The same cannot be said for *The Tragedy of Liberation*. The subtitle presents the book as *A History of the Chinese Revolution 1945-1957*, but it doesn't live up to that billing. Dikötter goes into great detail about the violence of Maoist land reform, the successive campaigns against opposition both real and imaginary, and the prison system — as well as including eighteen pages of attacks on Westerners then living in China.

However, while the author acknowledges that there was economic recovery after decades of war and occupation, and real improvements in health care, he gives no explanation of how this happened or the contribution that land reform made to such outcomes. There is no mention at all of the Family Law of 1950, which transformed the lives of Chinese women, nor of the expansion of rural education.

By starting the book in 1945, Dikötter gives readers the impression that the CPC appeared out of nowhere. He offers no account of how the party grew during the war against Japan. Nor does he convey the poverty and desperation of China in the 1930s and '40s. Indeed, *The Tragedy of Liberation* paints a rather implausible picture of rural China as a basically egalitarian society before the Japanese occupation, asserting at one point that "the most basic social distinction — as in any other village in the world — was between locals and outsiders."

Dikötter's contention that life for most Chinese people was worse in the early 1950s than it had been before 1949 is contradicted by virtually every other account of the period.

In similar vein, there is very little information about the corruption and cruelty of the Guomindang regime, which was one of the main drivers of support for the CPC. By comparison with the first half of China's twentieth century, the early 1950s was a relatively peaceful and prosperous era.

Development in this period was increasingly top-down, seeking to maximize accumulation from the peasantry and prioritizing heavy industry over consumption. But Dikötter's contention that life for most Chinese people was worse in the early 1950s than it had been before 1949 is contradicted by virtually every other account of the period.

The Cultural Revolution

The Cultural Revolution is perhaps the most studied period of Chinese history — Dikötter cites a select bibliography from 1999 that ran to over two hundred pages. Yet very few of those works are popular histories, and the third book in the trilogy fills that gap.

Its author gets a lot of the dynamics right, showing how quickly the student revolt finished and the way in which Mao soon turned to the army to restore order. He also documents the many splits inside the army and party leaderships that prolonged the chaos.

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The history of the period offers plenty of material for Dikötter's method of piling horror upon horror, though his analytical grasp is less certain. For example, a number of the sources that he quotes contradict his assertion that armed battles between different groups of Red Guards were all "engineered from above," quite apart from the simple fact that no one was quite sure who was "above" in the chaos of the time. It's surprising that the author completely omits any mention of the Cultural Revolution in Tibet, where some of the worst attacks on traditional culture took place, as well as one of the most widespread armed revolts against CPC rule.

The section dealing with the aftermath, from 1971 to 1976, is less successful. This is one of the least-studied and most convoluted periods of modern Chinese history, but the account here adds little to what is already known. The section on the [April 1976 riots](#), which presaged the end of the Cultural Revolution five months before Mao's death, is surprisingly short, and doesn't even mention the many protests in cities outside Beijing. Overall, however, the book does give a sense of Maoism having run its course and suggests why the post-Mao regime would embark on a fundamentally different path.

After Mao

One theme running through the trilogy is the extreme poverty of much of China under Mao and the ways in which major policy decisions exacerbated this condition. The experience of the “Reform Era” since 1978 has of course been very different, with the Chinese economy going from stagnation to become the second-largest in the world. China has changed out of all recognition over the last forty-five years, and any good history of the period should describe and explain how and why this has happened.

Unfortunately, *China After Mao* accomplishes neither task properly. Dikötter’s basic argument is summed up in the title of the book’s first chapter, “From One Dictator to Another (1976–1979).” In spite of all the things that have changed, he argues, the dictatorship of the CPC is essentially the same as it was under Mao. Since the party leadership has not in Dikötter’s view properly embraced capitalism — by which he means private ownership — the economy is necessarily headed for the rocks.

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The book is strongest on what used to be called “Pekingology” — the dissection of policy and personal differences inside China’s ruling class — and on the many things that have gone wrong with China’s economic model: the debt mountain, uncontrolled competition between different local governments, repeated bouts of inflation, and massive environmental degradation. What’s missing, however, is any attempt to explain how the economy has repeatedly recovered from or managed these crises and continued to grow, or even an acknowledgement of the fact that many stresses and strains are in fact the result of growth.

Moreover, the search for every scrap of evidence of failure does at times lead Dikötter into error. For instance, he includes the following claim: “In 1976, according to the World Bank, the country’s gross domestic product, when calculated per capita, ranked 123rd in the world. By 2001 . . . it had dropped to 130th.” Yet just eighteen lines later, he notes that China had “achieved Deng Xiaoping’s goal of quadrupling the economy by the turn of the century.” It is hard to see how both statements can be right, and Dikötter makes no attempt to explain the contradiction.

On closer inspection, the [World Bank data](#) is flawed. There were more countries listed in 2001 than for 1976, partly because of the creation of new states during the intervening years and partly because many established states had been missing from the 1976 data. Without going into too much technical detail, it’s worth noting that the World Bank has no fewer than six different ways of measuring GDP per capita. Dikötter doesn’t explain which one he’s using here.

Dikötter is right to see the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989 as a hinge point in China’s modern history, and the chapter on 1989–1991 is arguably the best one of the book. Yet even here, the author’s excessive reliance on British Foreign Office reports means that his account of events outside Beijing isn’t as sharp as it could be.

A Changed Society

The huge economic changes since the 1970s have been accompanied by equally profound social and political transformations. It is in dealing with this subject that the book is weakest.

Not only has everyday life in China changed out of all recognition, but the post-Mao era has also seen far more strikes, protests, and other forms of dissent, with varying levels of repression and tolerance from the authorities in response. Dikötter highlights the worst instances of repression, yet for a self-described “people’s historian,” his account of popular resistance is curiously patchy.

Take his description of strikes and peasant protests during the 1990s:

In most cases protesters dispersed quietly after their point had been made, resilient yet resigned, fully aware that they stood no chance against the implacable machinery of the state.

This misses the fact that two very distinct protest waves — peasants revolting against excessive taxes on the one hand, workers who had been sacked from state-owned enterprises and were demanding redundancy payments on the other — both won their key demands. In both cases, the central state changed the law to head off further protests.

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Over the period covered in *China After Mao*, the state has felt compelled by the combined pressures of action from below and demographic change to grant in practice much more extensive rights than existed under Mao. Although there is no legal right to strike, most strikes take place without police intervention, and many end in victory — something that China’s central ruling class are well aware of.

In her book [China: Fragile Superpower](#), former US official Susan Shirk recounts a meeting with China’s then premier Zhu Rongji in 2002: “Without referring to any notes, he continued, ‘Between January 1 and March 28, 2002, there were 265 protests of groups of more than 50 workers.’” The numbers of those taking part in labor protest may have declined since then. However, as the China Labour Bulletin’s [Strike Map](#) shows, the phenomenon hasn’t gone away.

The point about the loosening of state control applies all the more to everyday life in China. In part this is because the extension of the market into all aspects of social life demanded a relaxation, but it is also because people have repeatedly pushed at the edges of what is allowed and grown accustomed to a standard of living that was unthinkable forty years ago.

To give just one example: Dikötter notes at one point that in 1980, a standard Chinese television set would have cost the average factory worker between five and eight months’ wages. However, he does not go on to say that almost every household now has a television.

The Bubble That Never Pops

The book ends in 2012, with only a brief epilogue covering the decade since. This is ironic, since the tightening of the CPC's economic and social control under Xi Jinping has meant that China today more closely resembles the unchanging dictatorship of Dikötter's account.

The author explains the cut-off point by reference to his sources: the book relies heavily on the unpublished diaries of a senior member of China's ruling class, which end in 2012 (we are not told how he came into possession of these diaries). This means that the book doesn't even mention the Belt and Road Initiative, a quite astonishing omission for a work that is supposed to give an overview of China's changing relations with the world.

There has long been an audience for books predicting the imminent demise of the CPC. In the current political climate, *China After Mao* is likely to do as well as its many predecessors. However, as Thomas Orlik noted in his contrarian work [*China: The Bubble That Never Pops*](#):

Collapse theories have been many and varied. So far, they have one thing in common: they have all been wrong.

A full explanation of this lies beyond the scope of this review. However, one key part of the answer is that the CPC's tight control of the economy is a feature, not a bug — a point that writers who equate capitalism with private ownership cannot grasp.

Of course, the CPC cannot outrun the basic contradictions of capitalism forever, but that's true of all ruling classes, and the CPC leaders are far from being the most incompetent of them. Readers who know something of modern China will find far more to disagree with in Dikötter's book than I have noted here, and anyone looking for a good account of how China has changed since Mao will need to keep looking.

Charlie Hore

P.S.

- "Pundits Keep Predicting China's Imminent Collapse — and Keep Getting It Wrong". Jacobin. 06.15.2023:

<https://jacobin.com/2023/06/china-after-mao-collapse-capitalism-history-book-review>

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