

## Book Review

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**The Tragedy of Liberation: A History of the Chinese Revolution 1945-1957**, Edited by *Frank Dikötter*, London: Bloomsbury, 2017, Paperback, RRP, £10.99, ISBN: 9781408886359, 376pp.

**Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958-1962**, Edited by *Frank Dikötter*, London: Bloomsbury, 2017, Paperback, £10.99, ISBN: 9781408886366, 420pp.

**The Cultural Revolution: A People's History, 1962-1976**, Edited by *Frank Dikötter*, London: Bloomsbury, 2017, Paperback, RRP, £10.99, ISBN: 9781408856529, 396pp.

It will soon be seven decades, since *Mao Zedong* took power in Beijing in 1949. Since that date, China has changed dramatically particularly under the reforms of *Deng Xiaoping* in 1979, has become an economic superpower and has recently re-elected its current president, *Xi Jinping* in 2017. The PRC has experienced quite a roller-coaster of a transformation, whether economic, political or social. It has embarked on a trajectory from poverty to prosperity in what is historically a very relatively period of time. It has had, for instance, an economic growth rate of almost ten percent a year for many decades. It now has many internationally known corporations, such as *Haier*, *Lenovo*, *Huawei* (amongst others) and the best business school in Asia, CEIBS in *Shanghai*. It has had also its own 'Managerial Revolution'. The costs and benefits of this journey to prosperity clearly need explaining.

The three volumes of a 'People's Trilogy', penned by Dr *Frank Dikötter*, (1961-), which we review here and which is just now published in paperback, cover much of the period extending from the 1950s to the late 1970s. The distinguished author of the work is currently Chair Professor of Humanities at the University of Hong Kong. Before moving to there in 2006, he was Professor of the Modern History of China at SOAS, the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, earlier gaining his PhD at that institution. He has published nine books in the field and is an accomplished

word-smith. The author here employs a conventional narrative approach to the materials at hand and as such this work is relatively easy to read, at least as far as the prose-style is concerned. However, the content itself is often very disturbing. The author who seems to be a pessimist by nature, deals with the very *yin* and *yang* of modern Chinese history, emphasising much of the time the darkness rather than the light of recent Chinese experience, it must be said. The books we review, it must be noted, were not written chronologically but may be most usefully read in their historical narrative order. He gives an account of his early days in the Netherlands and his education in Switzerland and explains his standpoint vis a vis contemporary, Chinese history (see the website interview to be found specifically at <http://www.frankdikotter.com/interviews/patrick-brzeski.html>).

The first volume as we may call it, *The Tragedy of Liberation*, deals with the period of reconstruction after the devastation of the Second World War, stretching into the 1950s. The book came out as a hardback in 2013. This revolutionary period was an 'omelette' that required the 'breaking' of many 'eggs' but worse was yet to come. Much of the material covered in this account is political but there are solid economic and social issues also included, such as the nationalization of banking and industry. The second volume, 'Mao's Great Famine', first published in hardback in 2010, deals with the 'Great Leap Forward' and the consequent distress. There is an enormous amount of detail on these events in the book; it perhaps more than the non-specialist reader needs to know. It is a highly uncomfortable read, given that around 45 million people are said to have died. The third volume deals with 'The Cultural Revolution' of the 1960s and early 1970s and first came out in hardback in 2016. The upheavals of the period as described here leave very little to the imagination. The education of many was, for instance, permanently blighted. Even those who have probed deeply into these travails will find yet further illustrations of

the turmoil and disorder. But many Chinese coped by operating in the 'black-market' and exhibiting often rudimentary traditional entrepreneurial skills in a range of 'underground' economies, given the dire circumstances of the day. At the end of this vast panoramic view, the author reveals how a 'Silent Revolution' takes place in China, as the 'market' is gradually re-introduced under *Deng's* new policies of encouraging grass-roots enterprise and professional management.

The Trilogy is clearly vividly written and well-referenced, in the opinion of this reviewer, whatever the reader may think all the standpoint of the author. He has previously written that 'What strikes me with *Mao* was his ability to inflict horror on a huge scale and yet retain a genuine spell over many of his subjects. Much the same can be said of other dictators in the 20th century: millions cheered their leaders even as they were led to their deaths. The key, I think, is the extraordinary care with which these dictators cultivated their image. Nobody can rule through naked power alone. Dostoyevsky wrote that a ruler always uses both "magic and the sword" to keep power'. On this point, a later insightful interview given by the author, in the THES in May 2016 tells all (see <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/books/interview-frank-dikotter-university-of-hong-kong>).

The works have to date sold very well in hard-back and will no doubt now find a wider and student readership in paperback. They had had already a very positive reception in a number of informed journals and publications. The second volume on the Great Famine won the prestigious *Samuel Johnson Prize* in the UK and was in fact translated into Chinese by the *New Century Press* in Hong Kong in 2011. The author has also had the benefit of hindsight – having had access to many recently emerging archives. But it is, one again must emphasize, so much of the time, very sober reading indeed. No doubt, pirated copies have been published on the Mainland. But it is too early to see what the reaction of Chinese opinion has been to such writings from a Western standpoint, given that that so many of them already had direct experience of those troubled times.

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