

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

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If one treats the histories of individual countries as stories, China's is one of the few narratives that is certain to hold the reader in suspense. A country of extraordinary complexity and historical depth, China stimulates the imagination and engages observers in meticulous analysis. Frank Dikötter's book *China After Mao* appears as a beacon of research, offering a fascinating lens through which the intricate layers of modern Chinese history are revealed. The book offers a vital contribution to the broader discourse on the nation's past, present and future, providing insights that resonate far beyond scholarly circles.

Frank Dikötter is a professor at the University of Hong Kong and a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution. He is the author of the magisterial *People's Trilogy*, which documents the lives of ordinary people under Mao and has been translated into many languages (Dikötter, 2010, 2013, 2016). This is the fourth and final volume in Dikötter's monu-

mental series of books devoted to the modern history of China, spanning the years 1949–2012. In this book, the author picks up where his previous work left off: he begins with the death of Mao Zedong and concludes with Xi Jinping being appointed for his first term. Drawing from Chinese eyewitness accounts and newly available archival records – including hundreds of documents from provincial archives, newspaper reports and unpublished memoirs – he calls into question much of what we believe we know about China. The book casts doubt on the image of a society moving unwaveringly towards growth. Instead, we get a picture of a China rife with party intrigues, disasters, extreme wealth and everyday poverty.

The book comprises a personal and introductory preface, ten chapters and an epilogue. Dikötter begins with an intriguing autobiographical perspective of China as a young student learning Chinese in the 1980s and later as a visitor to the country. Undoubtedly, he is

a historian who closely observes events and their documentation. His approach is to start from the grass roots. Primary importance is given to local sources and observations of individuals of lesser prominence, followed by official central sources. It is worth mentioning that the book pays special attention to the secret diaries of Mao's personal secretary, Li Rui. These provide an unofficial record of official meetings, conversations with high-ranking party members, official events and discussions with prominent party figures. Dikötter uses these journals to unveil what lies behind the scenes of power.

Dikötter distances himself from the methodologies previously applied in political observations of realities concerning the USSR and China. These methods historically focused on analysing external façades, for example, by seeking meaning in the arrangement of leaders in honour tribunes during official parades. From the very first lines of Dikötter's book, we discern a fusion of his brilliant scholarly approach with the perspective of an adept journalist, elucidating the intricacies of events and their mundane contexts. The reasons for this are not arbitrary but emanate from the nature of the examined reality. In the case of China, and perhaps all non-democratic states, 'every piece of information is unreliable, partial or distorted. We do not know the true size of the economy, as no local government will report accurate numbers; and we do not know the extent of bad loans, as banks conceal these. Every diligent researcher holds the Socratic paradox in mind: I know that I don't know. Howev-

er, where China is concerned, we don't even know what we don't know' (p. ix).

One of the more intriguing features of the book is its unveiling of the dualistic image of China. This becomes apparent when describing how China confronted the consequences of the 2008 financial crisis. Although a stimulus package worth over half a billion dollars was implemented in the aftermath of the crisis, resulting in the creation of hundreds and thousands of construction projects (evidenced by a boom in skyscraper construction), it came at immense social costs. Farmers had their land confiscated, residents were dispossessed from their homes, often new ones that were subsequently demolished. The quality of the newly constructed buildings left much to be desired – their anticipated lifespan was one-third less than in the West. Many buildings succumbed to construction disasters, giving rise to the term 'tofu buildings'. The housing market became subject to speculation and price inflation, leading to a situation where some individuals incurred debts and, often, residences, commercial spaces and entire buildings remained vacant. As Dikötter writes, in the midst of all this, China resembled 'a tanker that looks impressively shipshape from a distance with the captain and his lieutenants standing proudly on the bridge while below deck sailors are desperately pumping water and plugging holes to keep the vessel afloat' (p. xvi).

The book under review reveals the operation of what is effectively a secondary economy, where elements of a free market have emerged imperfectly, locally and far from the gaze of officials in the

capital. People were unwilling to wait for the central government to lift them out of poverty. In many instances, local officials took the initiative, wresting power from the central administration. They maintained an official façade to avoid starving the population to death. This leads Dikötter to the conclusion that, 'if the economy developed, it did so despite the heavy hand of the state and abrupt policy reversals engineered at the top. Real growth took place in the countryside, far away from the glare of official scrutiny' (p. 43).

Delving into the ideological aspects of China's history, Dikötter not only examines the role dogma has played in Chinese politics but also highlights how the West's underestimation of it obstructs a nuanced understanding of the country. He points out that China employs a tactic of simulacrum, mimicking the language of Western nations when it is advantageous (p. 273). For the international audience, statements and speeches were crafted by leaders discussing political reform, 'sending experts into a frenzy of speculation that the true transition towards democracy is about to begin, as carefully hidden forces within the party machine were finally gaining the long-deferred upper hand' (p. 279). These were outward-facing statements that did not reach the domestic audience due to censorship.

Dikötter critically assesses the belief that China has abandoned ideology, or at least attempted to do so. In both official and unofficial statements and ac-

tions of the Communist Party, there is a sincere faith in the superiority of the communist system, as well as a commitment and concern for the development of ideology (p. xii). In political practice, the current leader, often criticised for a supposed retreat from Westernisation, has not reversed the trend but rather leveraged tools established by his predecessors over the past decade (p. 279). These are undoubtedly issues that merit the reader's attention.

Significant in its own right, *China After Mao* is particularly intriguing as it emerges at a time when the world is grappling with daily updates on China's resurgence. Focused on the historical period preceding the onset of Xi Jinping's new era, the book offers a unique vantage point for examining contemporary events through a fresh historical lens. Dikötter's noteworthy accomplishment lies in crafting a book meant not only for experts, but for all those who are interested. With China getting stronger, interest in reading it should grow.

References:

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