

Jeremy Brown, original pre-publication draft

Rana Mitter
CHINA'S WAR WITH JAPAN, 1937-1945
The struggle for survival
458 pp. Allen Lane.
978 1 846 14010 5

Frank Dikötter
THE TRAGEDY OF LIBERATION
A history of the Chinese revolution, 1945-1957
376 pp. Bloomsbury.
978 1 4088 3757 3

The first time I taught an introductory class about twentieth-century China as a PhD student, I asked what I thought was a clever essay question for the students' final exam: 'If you had lived in China during the 1930s and 1940s, would you have supported the Communists or the Nationalists?' One American student rejected the question, writing that he could not imagine setting foot in China because it was such an impoverished and violent hellhole, especially during the years of China's war against Japan (1937-1945), the Civil War between the Communists and Nationalists (1945-1949), and the Mao Zedong era (1949-1976).

I thought I had failed as a professor. My goal had been to teach students to have empathy for the tragedies Chinese people suffered during the Second World War and the Communist revolution, but also to recognize how much progress China had made. I had hoped to inspire students to want to learn more about China and to travel and work there, but my lectures' emphasis on blood and gore had turned off one student for good. I resolved to tone down the violence in my future classes and to balance the narrative with stories that would make students want to take a plane to China.

Little did I know that at my new job in Canada, approximately 80 percent of the students in my modern Chinese history lectures would have recently arrived in Vancouver on planes *from* China. These international students do not need me to tell them how far China has come since the turbulence of the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. Their very presence in Canada (where at my university they pay tuition at 3.5 times the rate set for Canadian residents) is evidence of China's changes. Chinese students who choose to learn about their own country's history in Canada know that their teachers and textbooks back home have mythologized the Communist Party's achievements and covered up the dark chapters in the Party's past. They want exposure to an unvarnished, critical history, so that they can make up their own minds about how to interpret China's war against Japan, the Communist revolution, the Great Leap famine of 1958-1962, the Cultural Revolution, and the Tiananmen Massacre of 1989.

These days, instead of asking students on the final exam whether they would have sided with the Communists or Nationalists, I ask a slightly different question on the very first day of class: 'Imagine that China held an open presidential election after Japan surrendered in August 1945. For whom would you have voted?' The results have remained consistent over the past five years: too close to call. Around 40 percent of the 150 students vote for Chiang Kai-shek, approximately 40 percent vote for Mao Zedong, while the rest reject both Chiang and Mao, thinking optimistically that things

might have turned out better if Deng Xiaoping had become China's top leader in 1945 (decades earlier than his eventual ascent in 1978), or hoping that Sun Yat-sen, who founded the Republic of China in 1912, could have somehow returned from the grave to avert civil war (Sun died in 1925).

Although Chiang Kai-shek has become a popular and sympathetic figure on the mainland after decades of vilification by Communist authorities, Mao remains the politically correct choice, as the recent state-orchestrated celebrations of the 120th anniversary of his birth have shown. It is therefore striking that so many students raise their hands to support Chiang over Mao. But four out of ten students still choose Mao, showing a reluctance to wholly reject the Chairman and his legacy.

This diversity of opinions is heartening to me. It would likely garner opposite responses, however, from the authors of two recent books: an approving nod of understanding from Rana Mitter, whose *China's War with Japan, 1937-1945: The Struggle for Survival* shows admirable empathy for the difficult, almost impossible choices faced by Chinese people from all walks of life, including Chiang and Mao themselves, during the eight-year war against Japan. Frank Dikötter, on the other hand, would probably shake his head in disappointment that so many young Chinese people still see as Mao a viable leader. His wholesale condemnation of Mao's rule in *The Tragedy of Liberation: A History of the Chinese Revolution, 1945-1957* make him a kindred spirit of the student who pledged that he would never set foot in such a 'hellhole'.

China's War with Japan aims to present a comprehensive narrative of the war from the perspective of the three main political forces in China: Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists, Mao Zedong's Communists, and Wang Jingwei's collaborationist regime. Mitter achieves his three-pronged goal, but Chiang's voice dominates the book, which focuses heavily on the Nationalists' retreat from Nanjing to Wuhan to Chongqing, and also on Chiang's frustrated efforts to become more than a junior partner of the Allies after 1941. In contrast, Mao and Wang Jingwei pop up only occasionally in the narrative. They come across as colourless figures compared to Chiang. While Mitter draws on Chiang Kai-shek's diary to great effect, showing the Generalissimo's emotional responses to Japanese atrocities and how 'dizzy' and 'exhausted' Chiang felt about the great Henan famine of 1942-43, he can only rely on public speeches by Mao and others' descriptions of Wang Jingwei. If it is true, as Mitter writes, that Wang Jingwei and other collaborators spent most of the war 'sitting around, doing nothing', the author was smart to give them short shrift.

China's War with Japan is a readable and thoughtful account of how China's leaders grappled with painful dilemmas about domestic and international alliances and rivalries, public assistance for war and famine refugees, and whether to advance or retreat on the battlefield. Readers hoping for a military history, however, may be disappointed. Mitter either omits descriptions of battles or replaces them with vague claims that Nationalist soldiers fought 'fiercely', 'heroically', or 'valiantly' against the Japanese. These adverbs do not describe the actions of any other group, as if Communist or collaborationist soldiers, or even the British in Burma or the Japanese themselves, were somehow less valiant than the Nationalists.

Mitter's arguments about how war shaped Chinese politics and society are more convincing. One powerful chapter, 'States of Terror', compares the parallel intelligence and secret police regimes that quashed dissent and tortured alleged spies—a trend shared by Chiang Kai-shek's 'Free China', Mao Zedong's base area of Yanan, and Wang Jingwei's collaborationist capital in Nanjing. Wartime pressures

led to widespread paranoia and fear, pushed aside voices calling for pluralism and tolerance, and normalized violence against a dehumanized enemy.

This insight helps to explain how the Communist Party governed after it came to power in 1949. The Communist Party succeeded in the 1930s and 1940s because of its ability to mobilize for total war. As Mitter writes, ‘The war experience was crucial to the formation of the modernized Communist state, underpinned by terror in service of the revolution’. In *The Tragedy of Liberation*, Frank Dikötter agrees that terror was the foundation of Mao’s regime. Dikötter begins by describing the 150-day Communist blockade and siege of the city of Changchun in 1948, during which tens of thousands of civilians died. This atrocity sets the tone for the rest of the book, which is an encyclopaedic account of inhumane acts, from dogs being swung, choked, and skinned (‘still steaming from the body heat’) by Communist policemen to more than one hundred lepers being locked in a hospital and burned alive by a Communist militia in Yunnan province in 1951.

Dikötter is right to argue that the 1950s were not an idyllic ‘honeymoon’ period that preceded the tragic Great Leap famine and the Cultural Revolution. But my reaction to his descriptions of strangled dogs and burning lepers was akin to the mixture of confusion and revulsion I felt when visiting the Museum of the Mummies in Guanajuato, Mexico. Just as any tourist in Guanajuato must visit the mummies, any scholar of China’s 1950s must read Dikötter’s book. Few other works on the Mao period contain such a quantity and range of archival materials: the book draws from nine provincial and three municipal archives.

While there are few better places to view well-preserved mummies than Guanajuato, ogling the bodies there constitutes an act of inhumanity against the people who were exhumed. We know nothing about their lives. We do not know their occupations, their personalities, their hobbies, or even their names. Everything about them has been lost, except for the morbid fact of their exhumation, which turned them into desiccated corpses in a chintzy tourist trap. Similarly, the mostly nameless victims catalogued in Dikötter’s book have been reduced to caricatures defined only by the worst moments of their lives (and in the cases of many people executed as ‘landlords’ and ‘counterrevolutionaries’, their deaths).

While Dikötter’s archival documents provide lists of victims devoid of personalities or backstories, readers do become acquainted with a handful of individuals in *The Tragedy of Liberation*: people who managed to flee China and wrote memoirs in English about their suffering. These mostly forgotten books, like Shanghai businessman Robert Loh’s *Escape from Red China*, are worth revisiting, but in Dikötter’s hands reviving fifty-year-old books is more an attempt to score ideological points against a Cold War enemy than a new advance in our understanding of Mao’s China. Richard J. Walker’s *China Under Communism: The First Five Years*, published in 1955, lacks the colourful archival data that enlivens Dikötter’s work, but the books’ messages are remarkably similar. Walker: ‘Under Mao’s government fear has crept into every soul’. Dikötter: ‘Every bit of human dignity was stripped away as victims tried to survive by killing their former selves’.

Richard Walker deserves credit for accurately emphasizing the role terror played in the establishment and consolidation of Mao’s China. Because Walker was working with extremely limited sources in the early 1950s, his hyperbolic statements about ‘every soul’ can be excused. Dikötter has no such excuse. He repeatedly claims that terrible things were happening ‘everywhere’ in China, but since he is only citing documents from twelve local archives (fewer than half of China’s provincial archives

and a tiny fraction of its municipal ones), his attempt to stretch his claims about victimization to every corner of China lacks credibility.

I have been to some of the same archives as Dikötter and have uncovered evidence of similar atrocities. I understand the feeling of elation upon discovering a golden nugget after having spent days slogging through dry reports about model factory workers. Who would want to waste precious space in a book by including data from a report celebrating the electrification of a village workshop, at the potential cost of excluding stories about dogs being strangled by Communists? It is understandable that Dikötter is so eager to share the atrocities committed against dogs, lepers, and many other people and animals in China during the Mao years. Bringing such brutality to light is a valuable contribution. But portraying only the most terrible stories from the archive as the norm for everyone, while dismissing other boring documents as mere propaganda, gives a distorted picture of everyday life in 1950s China, where modernization and repression were never mutually exclusive.

As Mitter shows, the Chinese Communists' use of terror was forged under wartime conditions and had lasting effects. But contrary to Dikötter's claims, the changes wrought by the Communist takeover were not the same for everyone everywhere in China. For some people, the New Marriage Law of 1950 (totally ignored by Dikötter) had at least as significant an impact on everyday life as did land reform or the Campaign to Suppress Counterrevolutionaries, unleashing a wave of divorces and remarriages in rural areas and reshaping family dynamics.

Someday my former student who wrote that he never wanted to set foot in China might come across Frank Dikötter's *The Tragedy of Liberation*. If he deigns to read it, the book will confirm his view of China as a hellhole. Thankfully, many others approach Chinese history with more open minds. Even on the first day of class, they hold their noses when asked to choose between Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong, but most still make a choice. Readers who want to understand the difficult, unavoidable choices faced by Chinese politicians, workers, farmers, and soldiers during the middle of the twentieth-century will find much of value in Rana Mitter's *China's War with Japan*; those who want to confirm their preconceived notions can seek comfort from Dikötter's mummies.