

Chinese Society amid Mao's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution

The Roots and Nature of the Tragedy

❖ Commentaries by Sergey Radchenko,
Joseph Torigian, and Radoslav Yordanov
Reply by Frank Dikötter

Frank Dikötter, *The Cultural Revolution: A People's History, 1962–1976*. London: Bloomsbury, 2016. 432 pp. £22.50.

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION: Frank Dikötter's landmark three-volume history of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the era of Mao Zedong is a compendium of self-inflicted catastrophes. Tens of millions of Chinese died of starvation during the famines produced by Mao's Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s and early 1960s; vast numbers of others had already been killed during the rampantly violent consolidation of Mao's Communist regime in the early to mid-1950s; and nearly all of Chinese society was swept up in the systematic cruelty of Mao's Cultural Revolution. This forum deals with the last of these three periods, as recounted in the final volume of Dikötter's trilogy, *The Cultural Revolution; A People's History*, published on the 50th anniversary of the start of the Cultural Revolution. An earlier forum on China's Cultural Revolution appeared in the Spring 2008 issue of the journal, with five commentaries about *Mao's Last Revolution*, a sweeping political overview published by Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals as a sequel to MacFarquhar's monumental three-volume survey, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*. Dikötter's *The Cultural Revolution* covers some of the same ground but adds a great deal about the disastrous impact of the Cultural Revolution on Chinese society, drawing on a remarkable panoply of archival holdings.

When the Cultural Revolution began in 1966, the PRC was bitterly at odds with both the United States and the Soviet Union. The growing enmity between Beijing and Moscow gave rise to deadly armed clashes between Chinese and Soviet military forces along the two countries' shared border in March and August 1969. Those confrontations were one of the factors that spurred Mao to seek a rapprochement with the United States, helping to

Journal of Cold War Studies

Vol. 21, No. 2, Spring 2019, pp. 174–196, doi:10.1162/jcws_c_00880

© 2019 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

offset the Soviet military threat. The U.S.-China rapprochement became a reality after Henry Kissinger and President Richard Nixon visited the PRC in 1971 and 1972 respectively. Even as the Cultural Revolution dragged on until Mao's death (albeit with less chaotic violence than in 1966–1967), China was fundamentally reorienting its strategy in the Cold War.

We asked three experts—Sergey Radchenko, Joseph Torigian, and Radoslav Yordanov—to offer their appraisals of Dikötter's third volume. Their commentaries are published here along with a reply by Dikötter.

— Mark Kramer

Commentary by Sergey Radchenko

The much-awaited final volume of Frank Dikötter's trilogy on the history of Mao Zedong's China is not for the faint of heart. The first volume in the trilogy (*Mao's Great Famine*) was horrifying, and the second volume (*The Tragedy of Liberation*) showed that the catastrophe of the Great Leap had deeper roots than many had thought.¹ Executions, torture, starvation, cannibalism, and . . . numbers, numbers, numbers: millions of lives falling into the dark chasm of non-being in a meaningless succession of shrieks. Even before I picked up the third volume I expected to be horrified again by the sheer cruelty of Mao's regime. Sure enough, beatings, rapes, torture, and murders are all there. But the systematic monstrosity that animated the earlier years of the Maoist experiment is not. Instead, the reader beholds a chaotic stage—a war of all against all, a bizarre, partly orchestrated, partly spontaneous rebellion that left the hierarchies of power in deep paralysis, a baffling spectacle that turned the whole society upside down, leading in the long run to anything but what Mao had expected when he issued his famous call to “bombard the headquarters.”

What did Mao expect, and why did he unleash the chaos? Many a historian of the Cultural Revolution has tried to answer these questions, and so does Dikötter. There are no great surprises here. We learn that Mao wanted to “retain his position at the center” (p. 14). But why, in this case, did he not wrap up his revolution in late 1966 or early 1967, when his opponents, real and imagined, were already sidelined? Also, Mao evidently wanted to “shore up his own standing in world history” (p. x). But if so, why did he choose such

1. Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958–1962* (New York: Walker & Co., 2010); and Frank Dikötter, *The Tragedy of Liberation: A History of the Chinese Revolution, 1945–1957* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2015).

a strange way of going about it—effectively destroying his own party? The book delves into these questions only superficially, probably by design. To the extent that Dikötter tries to unwrap the sordid mysteries of Mao's court, he shows that many of the early victims of the Cultural Revolution, including Liu Shaoqi, Wang Guangmei, and Deng Xiaoping, had viciously hounded others before being hounded themselves. There were no good guys, no martyrs unjustly prosecuted: just the stench of hypocrisy and back-stabbing.

For the most part, though, Dikötter is content with leaving the realm of high politics in deliberate vagueness. He is more interested in the grassroots; this is, after all, a "People's History." We learn about the world as it looked from the window of a crowded train, bringing thousands of unwashed, hungry, but enthusiastic Red Guards to Beijing to worship Mao. We learn about the ransacking of homes, the thriving trade in Mao badges, the secret reading and hand-copying of pornographic novels. In short, we learn about ordinary people living in ordinary places during extraordinary times. The perspective is refreshing, though not unfamiliar to connoisseurs of Cultural Revolution memoirs, some of which inform Dikötter's narrative. He also relies on his tried and tested method of extracting exciting stories and troubling statistics from the local archives across China, giving readers a seldom seen bottom-up perspective.

So, what is the big story? Two very important points that appear toward the end of the book underscore the magnitude of Dikötter's contribution to the literature. The first is that even at the height of absurd ideological campaigns there existed something he calls "the second society": largely hidden from view but nonetheless evident in illicit transactions on the thriving black market, in the privacy of homes, among friends. People were living double lives: those same people who worshipped Mao in loyalty dances and memorized quotations from the Little Red Book secretly prayed to forbidden gods, listened to forbidden music, read forbidden books, and played forbidden games. "The Cultural Revolution," Dikötter argues, "ran no more than skin deep" (p. 300). This helps explain why old China proved so resilient and sprang back to life after the Cultural Revolution. It never was extinguished, not by executions, not by hunger, not by endless brainwashing.

The second point is that the Chinese people themselves buried the Maoist project by silent non-compliance. It was the people who quietly redistributed the land that had been collectivized in brutal campaigns. It was the people who innocuously subverted the revolution by trading and bartering. "Real change," Dikötter shows, "was driven from below." Deng Xiaoping succeeded only insofar as he had "neither the will nor the ability to fight the trend" (p. 321). There is certainly something to this interpretation, though often

the path of least resistance was precisely in defending the status quo. Perhaps Deng deserves greater credit for pushing aside the bureaucracy. Dikötter's own argument suggests that for every Bohemian slacker there was a committed revolutionary, and some managed to be both. But this is a part of a different story.

As I turned the last page, I found myself wondering whether the *big* big question was left hanging. That question is: what, really, was the Cultural Revolution? Yes, Mao, yes power struggle, yes, mob violence, yes, brutality and misery, but there was something else. This was the only time in the PRC's tumultuous history (with the exception of the brief and tragic episode of 1989) when the ruling Communist Party's legitimacy was under serious threat. The fact that it was Mao who stoked the fire does not diminish the fact that the fire was fed by pent-up grievances and frustrations at the grass-roots. The Cultural Revolution undermined the existing hierarchies of power. To borrow Dikötter's final sentence, it "queried the monopoly of the one-party state." When students assembled in Tiananmen Square in the spring of 1989, calling for democracy, the Chinese leaders feared a repetition of the Cultural Revolution. They had seen it all before. They ordered tanks to crush the unarmed protesters before the whole country was in flames. The headquarters, so relentlessly bombarded at Mao's behest 23 years earlier, stayed intact this time.

The events of 1966 were of course very different from those of 1989. But perhaps there is still a connection between the two, one that points in the direction of the complex interactions between Chinese society and Chinese elites. These interactions hold lessons for the present not just in China but in much of the world.

Commentary by Joseph Torigian

Frank Dikötter's *The Cultural Revolution: A People's History 1962–1976*, provides an accessible, eloquent, and brutal laundry list of the physical and emotional devastation suffered by ordinary Chinese during the Cultural Revolution. A powerful distillation of different types of material, the book is a searing and timely indictment of a period that in China remains politically sensitive and exceptionally difficult to research. Some may criticize the book for its relentlessly negative appraisal of a deeply complicated set of events and its lack of theory, but these problems are far from fatal. Dikötter's treatment of elite politics is sometimes questionable, but the book overall is a powerful chronicle of suffering.

Like the first two books in Dikötter's trilogy—the first dealing with the catastrophe of the Great Leap Forward and the second going back to the violence of the 1945–1957 period—*A People's History* draws not only on secondary material but on an extremely impressive collection of untapped archival collections to strengthen previous conclusions and introduce important new dimensions to the study of the Cultural Revolution.² In addition, Dikötter skillfully incorporates material from self-published autobiographies and interviews.

Dikötter uses this material most effectively to describe the experiences of ordinary people, who he believes “are often missing (p. xvii)” in the secondary literature. Space does not allow a full list of the fascinating new information he has uncovered in the archives, but some tidbits are especially juicy: an explosion of speculation and private entrepreneurship, including opium dens in Zunyi in the wake of the Great Leap Forward (p. 19); the discovery during the Socialist Education Movement of foreign magazines, anti-Communist publications, pro-American slogans, Confucian classics, religious revivals, bride purchasing, and students praising the Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito and the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev (pp. 30–32); the destruction of elements of Shanghai's cultural heritage, including thousands of books from the Jesuit Zikawei Library, the city's oldest temple, and all tombstones of foreigners (pp. 84–85); bizarre attacks on flower gardens and cats (p. 86); the shocking economic effects of the mass production of the Little Red Book and Mao badges (pp. 98–100); rampant crime and mob justice (pp. 147–148); new details on the hunger, diseases, persecution, and sexual abuse suffered by “sent-down youth” in the villages (pp. 197–200); the defeatist or “anti-CCP” attitudes of some individuals during the military confrontations with the USSR in 1969 (p. 211); the mass expansion of markets outside the state plan in the countryside as a result of the chaos wrought by the Cultural Revolution (pp. 224–225); and the shameful persistence of starvation and abject poverty in the countryside (pp. 263–264).

Dikötter also debunks two alleged triumphs of the Cultural Revolution: hygiene and education. He refers to new research by Fan Ka Wai showing that traveling Red Guards contributed to a meningitis outbreak that killed 160,000, as well as other secondary material that, in Dikötter's words, shows that the “barefoot doctors” project was a sham (pp. 267–269).³ His own

2. Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine*; and Dikötter, *The Tragedy of Liberation*.

3. Fan Ka Wai, “Epidemic Cerebrospinal Meningitis during the Cultural Revolution,” *Extreme-Orient, Extreme Occident*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (September 2014), pp. 197–232.

research revealed that in one city “so many doctors were arrested that the main hospital was almost forced to close down” (p. 238). With regard to education, Dikötter draws on a State Council document from the Shanghai Municipal Archive that indicates “by 1978, as a result of the Cultural Revolution, the rate of illiteracy or semi-literacy reached 30–40 per cent among children and adolescents in China. In parts of the country it was more than 50 per cent” (p. 288).

Dikötter’s book does a terrific job of meeting what Joseph Esherick, Paul Pickowicz, and Andrew Walder have deemed the “most obvious need” for historians studying the Cultural Revolution—“to address more directly the human cost of the period.” *A People’s History* easily makes the case that for many people the Cultural Revolution was a nightmare. Although much material in China remains inaccessible, what Dikötter was able to collect through an admirable application of imagination and elbow grease, despite his status as a foreigner, suggests the possibility in the future of finding even greater horror. In fact, the content of the book strongly suggests that greater openness of the archives will not happen anytime soon, even if, legally, Cultural Revolution documents should be already available.

According to the Archives Law of the People’s Republic of China, “Archives kept by State Archives repositories shall in general be open to the public 30 years after the date of their creation,” but archives “involving the security or vital interests of the State” can be withheld longer, even indefinitely.⁴ The importance of this exception is particularly obvious when considered together with the Communist Party’s increasingly strident identification of “revisionist” history as a threat to the regime itself. Chinese President Xi Jinping has referred to “de-Stalinization” as a central reason for the USSR’s collapse, citing a nineteenth-century poet who argued that “In extinguishing the kingdom of men, the first step is to remove its history.”⁵ To be fair, Peking University professor Liang Zhu’s definition of “historical nihilism” as “rejecting the [Communist] revolution; claiming that the revolution led by the Chinese Communist Party resulted only in destruction; denying the historical inevitability in China’s choice of the socialist road; calling it the wrong path; and [arguing that] the history of the Party and New China is a

4. See Charles Kraus, “Researching the History of the People’s Republic of China,” CWIHP Working Paper No. 79 (Washington, DC: Cold War International History Project/Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, April 2016).

5. Simon Denyer, “How Xi Jinping’s Presidency Was Shaped by Traumas of Mao and Gorbachev,” *The Guardian*, 6 March 2015, p. 9; and Josh Chin, “In China, Xi Jinping’s Crackdown Extends to Dissenting Versions of History,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 1 August 2016, pp. A1, A10.

continuous series of mistakes” could just as easily be applied to Dikötter’s own wok on this trilogy.⁶

These developments mean the “depoliticization” of Maoist history in the years before Xi came to power, which some scholars believe helped create conditions for path-breaking archival work, now shows signs of reversing.⁷ Unsurprisingly, “the chatter on H-PRC, across the Twittersphere, and at academic conferences paints a grim picture of doing archival research in China.”⁸ As Roderick MacFarquhar has remarked, for whatever reason, Beijing has decided not to contextualize history by making a “look how far we’ve come” argument or by drawing a curtain between the Mao era and the reforms under Deng Xiaoping. Until such a fundamental change occurs, Beijing’s flexibility on archives will probably remain limited. In the meantime, scholarship that refuses to give up, like Dikötter’s new book, is extremely important.

Some of the most tantalizing details Dikötter’s book reveals are about the regime’s failures to penetrate urban and, especially, rural society, as well as signs of dissatisfaction with the regime that at least sometimes sparked outright resistance. In this regard, Dikötter’s book has strong similarities with another major new contribution, *Maoism at the Grassroots*, by Jeremy Brown and Matthew D. Johnson.⁹ Both books further substantiate earlier work by social scientists who, in the words of Brown and Johnson, concluded “state control was not always total or centralized but at times appeared limited and tenuous.”¹⁰ The impressive sources in books like *A People’s History* and *Maoism at the Grassroots* suggest it may be possible to draw new, albeit tentative, conclusions about the nature of the Chinese regime instead of simply complicating the narrative. Unfortunately, as Elizabeth Perry has argued, it is unclear whether historians will choose to ask such big questions.¹¹

Although *A People’s History* and *Maoism at the Grassroots* are both part of a trend that not only describes the everyday experience of ordinary people but

6. Miles Yu, “Inside China: Liang Zhu Warns of U.S. ‘Historical Nihilism’ Plot,” *The Washington Times*, 30 July 2015, p. 3. Dikötter argues the case for a potential alternative path in Frank Dikötter, *The Age of Openness: China before Mao* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

7. Julia Strauss, “Introduction: In Search of PRC History,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 188 (December 2006), pp. 855–869.

8. Kraus, “Researching the History of the People’s Republic of China.”

9. Jeremy Brown and Matthew D. Johnson, eds., *Maoism at the Grassroots: Everyday Life in China’s Era of High Socialism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

10. Jeremy Brown and Matthew D. Johnson, “Introduction,” in Brown and Johnson, eds., *Maoism at the Grassroots*, p. 1.

11. Elizabeth J. Perry, “The Promise of PRC History,” *Journal of Modern Chinese History*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (January 2016), pp. 113–117.

also emphasizes their stubbornness and agency, Dikötter's book stands out for its almost uniformly bleak message. Its title and content suggest an intellectual debt to Howard Zinn's controversial polemic about U.S. history.¹² After reading Dikötter's trilogy, some may wonder how such an apparently unambiguous disaster could leave such a legacy of ambiguous feelings among many Chinese. This is a legitimate point but is perhaps mitigated by three factors. First, Dikötter's latest book is not marked by especially aggressive language. The tone, as the writer Ian Johnson notes in his own review of the book, differs from that of the first two volumes of Dikötter's trilogy, and the use of this more measured language enhances the book's power.¹³ Second, unlike many books (including Zinn's) that attempt to tarnish historical figures or events, Dikötter does not simply offer the most tendentious interpretations of weak secondary source material. Instead, his book is scrupulously footnoted and researched (except with regard to some matters related to high-level politics, as discussed below). Third, as a horrifying chronology of undeniable abuses, Dikötter's book can and should play a central role in challenging nostalgic or propagandistic accounts of an extraordinarily grim period in China's history. Especially after recent incidents like the moves against China's only museum dedicated to the Cultural Revolution, the crackdown on the liberal history journal *Yanhuang Chunqiu*, and even a Maoist-style concert held at the Great Hall of the People by the teenage group 56 Flowers, it is a good time to remember that the Cultural Revolution truly was a disaster caused by Mao—a conclusion, one should not forget, that was also reached by Deng Xiaoping and enshrined in an official decision on history in 1981.¹⁴

Although Dikötter's primary concern is with the experiences of the "people," some may criticize the book for lacking a new big argument. Like Roderrick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals in their *Mao's Last Revolution*, Dikötter concludes that Mao's thinking about class struggle and his desire to purge other members of the elite were key causes of the Cultural Revolution. Drawing on existing secondary literature, but at the same time making highly

12. Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2015).

13. Ian Johnson, "China: The Virtues of the Awful Convulsion," *The New York Review of Books*, 27 October 2016, pp. 33-35.

14. Didi Kirsten Tatlow, "Fate Catches Up to a Cultural Revolution Museum in China," *The New York Times*, 2 October 2016, p. A9; Kiki Zhao, "Liberal Chinese Journal's Purged Editors Declare Publication Dissolved," *The New York Times*, 19 July 2016, p. A5; Joyce Huang, "China's '56 Flowers' Singers Reopen Cultural Revolution's Wounds," *VOA*, 12 May 2016, online at <http://www.voanews.com/a/china-56-flowers-singers-reopen-cultural-revolution-wounds/3328577.html>; and Ezra F Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 357-358, 365-370.

significant further contributions with new details from the archives, Dikötter shows how social tensions created by previous CCP policies helped set the stage for the Cultural Revolution, as well as how the extreme radicalism of post 1949 Chinese political history contributed to pressure from below for major change even before Mao's death.¹⁵ Readers in search of a rigorous social scientific explanation for the Cultural Revolution might seek out Andrew Walder's recent book.¹⁶ However, writing such a book was not Dikötter's intention; he instead wanted the book to be accessible to general readers, and the Walder and Dikötter books complement each other well because of their respective strengths. Dikötter's book is the business end of a failed revolution.

Although Dikötter accurately identifies many of the dynamics shaping elite politics during the Cultural Revolution, in some cases he apparently has not quite kept up with the latest findings. Or at least he does not adequately convey that some of his conclusions are not supported by other important scholars. In a popular book no one would expect a conclusive resolution of historiographical debates on each and every important question, and perhaps Dikötter has read some of the new literature and decided he does not support the conclusions. As I see it, however, his positions on some issues need to be further refined.

Dikötter concludes that "Mao felt personally threatened by deStalinization" (p. x) and that "In 1956, some of the Chairman's closest allies had used Khrushchev's secret speech to delete all references to Mao Zedong Thought from the constitution and criticize the cult of personality. Mao was seething, yet had little choice but to acquiesce" (p. xii). However, the respected Chinese historian Lin Yunhui has argued that the decision to exclude Mao Zedong Thought in the party charter (not the constitution, as Dikötter writes) at the 8th Party Congress was unrelated to the influence of Khrushchev's secret speech and denies that Mao's political position was weakening. Even before Iosif Stalin's death, Mao had already suggested no longer using the phrase "Mao Zedong Thought." The party understood the removal of the phrase from the party charter in 1956 as a sign of respect for previous great Marxist

15. Lynn T White, *Policies of Chaos: The Organizational Causes of Violence in China's Cultural Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989); Lynn T. White, *Unstately Power: Local Causes of China's Intellectual, Legal and Governmental Reforms* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998); Kate Xiao Zhou, *How the Farmers Changed China: Power of the People* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996); Ralph Thaxton, *Catastrophe and Contention in Rural China: Mao's Great Leap Forward Famine and the Origins of Righteous Resistance in Da Fo Village* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); and Daniel Roy Kelliher, *Peasant Power in China: The Era of Rural Reform, 1979–1989* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

16. Andrew Walder, *China under Mao: A Revolution Derailed* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

scholars. Moreover, Mao's cult was not criticized—Deng Xiaoping explicitly stated at the 8th Party Congress that the CCP never had a problem with a cult of personality.¹⁷ Dikötter also dates Khrushchev's announcement of peaceful coexistence to two years after Khrushchev's secret speech at the 20th Soviet Party Congress (p. x). However, this idea was stressed with great fanfare at the same congress (although it also had appeared even prior to Khrushchev's coming to power in statements by Georgii Malenkov).

Dikötter's contention that the 20th Soviet Party Congress had an *immediate* impact on Mao's thinking toward Moscow is also problematic. Dikötter's position, which is shared by Lorenz Lüthi, has been challenged in recent years by scholars such as Austin Jersild, Shen Zhihua, and Xia Yafeng, who maintain that the 20th Party Congress had no immediate effect on Sino-Soviet relations.¹⁸ At the time, Mao did not yet oppose peaceful coexistence, and the evidence "seems to indicate that he was not worried that de-Stalinization might have serious consequences for Chinese society. He even consented and appreciated this."¹⁹ Despite this reservation on timing, most scholars, including me, do believe that Khrushchev's speech and de-Stalinization did *eventually* have an important impact on Mao, but only when he looked back on it years later.

Dikötter subscribes to the view that Mao's position was weakened by the Great Leap Forward and concludes that "Mao was hardly paranoid in believing that many of his colleagues wanted him to step down" (p. xii). However, the "weak Mao" thesis has been debunked by many important scholars.²⁰ Almost no evidence suggests that Mao's ultimate authority was ever in question. Lin Yunhui writes that "no matter whether Mao Zedong's opinion was correct, other leaders with different opinions could only do a self-criticism. Defending the personal authority of Mao Zedong meant defending the 'big picture,' it meant defending the interests of the 'party.'"²¹ Qian Xiangli agrees

17. Lin Yunhui, *Guoshi zhaji: shijian pian* [Notes on national history: On incidents] (Shanghai: Dongfang chubanshe, 2010), pp. 164–168.

18. Lorenz M. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); Austin Jersild, *The Sino-Soviet Alliance: An International History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), p. 112; and Zhihua Shen and Yafeng Xia, *Mao and the Sino-Soviet Partnership, 1945–1959: A New History* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015), pp. 133–166.

19. Shen and Xia, *Mao and the Sino-Soviet Partnership*, p. 146.

20. Frederick C. Teiwes, *Politics and Purges in China: Rectification and the Decline of Party Norms, 1950–1965* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1979), pp. 345, 385.

21. Lin Yunhui, *Guoshi zhaji*, p. 320.

As Mao Zedong's authority grew by the day, and the authority given to him by the system became stronger and stronger, in most situations, people primarily respected the opinion of Mao Zedong and believed the opinion of Mao Zedong has natural correctness. But when there really were different opinions, they would never be expressed openly. Therefore, in the party's history "opposition power" never existed.²²

As an example of potential outright opposition to Mao, Dikötter writes that at the 7,000 cadres meeting "Peng Zhen, it was alleged, intended to confront the Chairman" (p. 11). Dikötter subsequently refers to "Peng Zhen's attempt to discredit the Chairman" (p. 14). In fact, Peng was a particularly loyal follower of Mao, and the content of Peng's speech at the meeting was almost certainly suggested to him by the chairman himself.²³

Any work on the Cultural Revolution must come to grips with the difficulty of correctly assessing the role of Lin Biao, the defense minister who had seemed to be Mao's heir-apparent. Many important parts of this story remain unclear and open for debate. For example, a masterful recent evaluation of all the available evidence on Lin's departure and death shows it is still almost impossible to guess with any certainty what happened that fateful night.²⁴ Dikötter adopts the traditional view of Lin as power hungry, writing that "the marshal . . . exploited the turmoil to expand his own power base, placing his followers in key positions throughout the army" (p. xv).

Unfortunately, this characterization does not fit with, or even acknowledge, the massive outpouring of new material on Lin that has appeared over the last few years.²⁵ Nor does it mention other interpretations of Lin, which are generally supported by the newly available evidence. Scholars such as Wang Nianyi, He Shu, and Chen Zhao label Lin Biao a member of the "Watch and See Faction" (观潮派) or "Avoid Getting Involved Faction"

22. Qian Xiangli, *Lishi de bianju: Cong wanjiu weiji dao fanxiu fangxiu, 1962–1965* [Sudden Turn of Events in History: From Solving the Crisis to Opposing and Preventing Revisionism, 1962–1965] (Hong Kong: Xianggang zhongwen daxue dangdai Zhongguo wenhua yanjiu zhongxin, 2008), pp. 57–58, 66, 111–112.

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 87–94.

24. Han Gang, "Jiu yi san' shijian kaoyi-yi 'Lin Doudou koushu' wei zhongxin" [Evaluation of the '13 September' Incident—Centered around "Lin Doudou's Oral Testimony"], in Yu Ruxin, ed., "Jiu yi san" huiwang: Lin Biao shijian shishi yu bianxi [Looking Back on 13 September: Historical Facts and Analyses of the Lin Biao Incident] (Hong Kong: New Century Press, 2013), pp. 237–254.

25. Li De and Shu Yun, eds., *Lin Biao riji* [Diary of Lin Biao] (Carle Place, NY: Mirror Books, 2009); Lin Biao, *Lin Biao wenji* [Writings of Lin Biao] (Hong Kong: CNHK Publications Limited, 2011); Wu Faxian, *Wu Faxian huiyilu* [Memoir of Wu Faxian] (Hong Kong: Xianggang beixing chubanshe, 2006); Li Zuopeng, *Li Zuopeng huiyilu* [Memoir of Li Zuopeng] (Hong Kong: Beixing chubanshe, 2011); and Qiu Huizuo, *Qiu Huizuo huiyilu* [Memoir of Qiu Huizuo] (Hong Kong: Xin shiji chubanshe, 2011).

(逍遙派).²⁶ Frederick Teiwes and Warren Sun portray Lin as a reluctant man who was dragged into elite politics against his will.²⁷ Even if not everyone is convinced of this revisionist viewpoint, it at least bears mentioning.²⁸

The latest evidence necessitates reevaluations of specific events related to Lin. Dikötter writes that “Mao, on the advice of Lin Biao, removed Luo Ruiqing as chief of staff of the army” (p. xx) and that “Mao was easily swayed, relying on Lin Biao far more than on Luo Ruiqing” (pp. 44, 45). However, we now know the situation was more complicated. For example, the extremely important memoirs of Qiu Huizuo, one of Lin’s top deputies in the People’s Liberation Army during the Cultural Revolution, claim that the stubborn and bossy Luo was widely disliked by many of the marshals (including Ye Jianying, but especially Nie Rongzhen) and that Mao was troubled by Luo’s relationship with Marshal He Long, Liu Shaoqi, and Deng Xiaoping. Lin, who deeply respected Luo’s abilities, merely tried to fulfill Mao’s wishes after realizing what the Chairman wanted.²⁹ We still do not have decisive proof that this was the case, but at the very least a variety of new evidence casts serious doubt on the notion that Luo was blameless, that Lin was entirely at fault, and that Mao was passive.³⁰

Dikötter also claims that a rivalry between Lin and Luo began in 1959 after the Lushan plenum, when they became defense minister and chief of staff, respectively (p. 44). But according to Qiu, it was Lin who nominated Luo, who came from the same military faction, or “mountaintop,” to the position.³¹ Even after Mao warned Lin about Luo’s prickly character, Lin stood by his decision.

Dikötter also suggests that Luo and Lin differed on military doctrine:

Lin Biao’s answer was to advocate the primacy of man over weapon. Luo was disdainful. Ideology was paramount for Lin, who distributed the Little Red Book

26. Wang Nianyi, He Shu, and Chen Zhao, “Lin Biao shi ‘Wenhua Dageming’ zhong teshu de guan-chao pai, xiaoyao pai” [Lin Biao was a special member of the wait and see faction, the avoid getting involved faction], in Ding Kaiwen, ed., *Chongshen Lin Biao zui’an (shang)* [Retrial of Lin Biao’s criminal case], 2 vols. (Carle Place, NY: Mirror Books, 2004), Vol. 2, pp. 13–46.

27. Warren Sun and Frederick C. Teiwes, *The Tragedy of Lin Biao: Riding the Tiger during the Cultural Revolution, 1966–1971* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996).

28. For example, see the lecture by the late historian Gao Hua, who died while writing a book about Lin: *Gao Hua Jiaoshou “Di er jiang: zai tan Lin Biao shijian”* [Professor Gao Hua’s “Second talk: Another examination of the Lin Biao incident”], 2006, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8rsqTEDy_Q4; and Zhou Jingqing, *Jiedu Lin Biao* [Interpreting Lin Biao] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2013).

29. Qiu Huizuo, *Qui Huizuo huiyilu*, pp. 367–387.

30. Yu Ruxin, ed., *Luo Ruiqing an* [The case of Luo Ruiqing] (Hong Kong: New Century Press, 2014).

31. Qiu Huizuo, *Qui Huizuo huiyilu*, pp. 237–238.

to the army in 1964 and promoted the slogan “Politics in Command.” Luo was appalled. (p. 44)

This view is hard to reconcile with recent work by Ding Kaiwen and Sima Qingyang, who use a wide variety of sources to show that Lin, a practical man with real warfighting experience, never adopted such a radically binary position and that his thinking on military doctrine, including on political work, was not fundamentally different from Luo’s.³² Dikötter’s assertion that Lin opposed better relations with the United States is also based on flimsy evidence (p. 245).³³

Dikötter’s account of He Long’s removal from the leadership is somewhat problematic:

What also sent ripples through the military ranks was the treatment of He Long, a flamboyant, legendary marshal whose signature in the early guerrilla days had been a butcher’s knife. He was senior to Lin Biao, and enjoyed widespread support in the army. In December dozens of Red Guards tried to track him down, although Zhou Enlai managed to shelter him in his personal residence. (p. 130)

Dikötter is absolutely correct to note He’s popularity in the military, and He did take over running the daily affairs of the Central Military Commission in March 1962 because of Lin’s illness.³⁴ However, to say He was “senior” to Lin is not accurate. Lin was still minister of defense, and he ranked third out of the ten marshals—He Long was only fifth. Dikötter’s description of Zhou as He’s savior is also misleading. He Long showed up at Zhou’s home uninvited, Zhou ultimately forced him to be taken into custody, and Zhou played a major role in the investigation report on He’s crimes.³⁵

Dikötter’s description of military factions is also somewhat inaccurate. He writes that “Mao instead propped up the Fourth Front Army, led by Marshal Xu Xiangqian, and the Second Field Army, which had served under Deng Xi-aoping” (p. 173). However, most of the Fourth Front Army became the 129th

32. Ding Kaiwen and Sima Qingyang, *Zhaoxun zhenshi de Lin Biao* [In search of the real Lin Biao] (Taipei: Shiying chubanshe, 2011), pp. 156–222.

33. This conclusion is “essentially based on a single after-the-fact assertion by Mao.” See Frederick C. Teiwes, “The Study of Elite Political Conflict in the PRC: Politics inside the ‘Black Box,’” in *Handbook of the Politics of China* (Northampton, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2015), p. 22.

34. “Dangdai Zhongguo renwu zhuanji” congshu bianjibu, *He Long zhuan* [Biography of He Long] (Beijing: Dangdai Zhongguo chubanshe: Xinhua shudian jingxiao, 1993), p. 586.

35. Gao Wenqian, *Wannian Zhou Enlai* [Zhou Enlai’s later years] (Carle Place, NY: Mirror Books), pp.186–192.

Division (in 1937), which then became the Second Field Army (in 1949). Therefore, these veterans mostly belonged to the same “mountaintop.”³⁶

Dikötter also makes questionable judgments about the relationship between Zhou Enlai and Mao’s wife, writing that “Jiang Qing took the lead in trying to expose the premier” (when the 16 May Circular of 1966 appeared a year later on 17 May 1967; p. 233). Although Dikötter does note Zhou’s praise for Jiang at one point (p. 172), he does not quite recognize the extent to which recent evidence suggests the two had an extremely ambiguous relationship. Zhou played an absolutely critical role in building up Jiang’s authority, and Jiang warned others not to attack Zhou.³⁷ According to the new memoirs of Qi Benyu, a member of the Central Cultural Revolution Small Group, Zhou and Jiang agreed more than 80 percent of the time. Because among the top leadership only Zhou strongly supported Jiang, it would not have made sense for her to attack him.³⁸ Zhou treated Jiang so courteously that he once even stopped a Politburo meeting to address her complaint that her toilet seat was too cold.³⁹ Evidence indicates that Jiang aggressively criticized Zhou in the early 1970s, but questions remain about the intent of those criticisms and how much she believed she was doing what Mao wanted.

Finally, new scholarship challenges Dikötter’s assertions that “Deng Xiaoping returned to power in the summer of 1977, much to Hua Guofeng’s disappointment” (p. 316) and that “[Hua’s] reluctance to repudiate the Cultural Revolution was out of tune with a widespread desire for change” (p. 317). Thanks to path-breaking work by scholars like Han Gang, we now know that Hua in fact did not try to prevent Deng from returning to work.⁴⁰ On key

36. Zhenxia Huang and William W. Whitson, *The Chinese High Command: A History of Communist Military Politics, 1927–71* (New York: Praeger, 1973).

37. Sima Qingyang, “Shilun Wenge chuqi Zhou Enlai yu Jiang Qing yiji Zhongyang Wenge Xiaozu de guanxi” [Discussion on the relations between Zhou Enlai and Jiang Qing and the Central Cultural Revolution Small Group at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution], *Huaxia Wenzhai Zengkan*, No. 625 (23 January 2008), p. 7.

38. Qi Benyu, *Qi Benyu huiyilu* [Memoir of Qi Benyu], Vol. 2 (Hong Kong: Zhongguo Wenge lishi chubanshe, 2016), pp. 674–676.

39. Huang Zheng, *Junren yongsheng: Yuan Jiefangjun zong canmouzhang Huang Yongsheng jiangjun qianzhuang* [Military man Yongsheng: Former PLA chief of staff General Huang Yongsheng prequel] (Hong Kong: Xin shiji chuban ji chuanmei youxian gongsi, 2010), pp. 539–540.

40. Han Gang, “‘Liangge fanshi’ de youlai jiqi zhongjie” [Origins of the ‘two whatever’s and their end], *Zhonggong Dangshi Yanjiu* [Research on CCP history], No. 11 (2009), pp. 34–40; Han Gang, “Quanli de zhuanqi: Guanyu shiyi jie san zhong quanhui” [A shift in power: About the Third Plenum of the 11th Party Congress], *Lingdao zhe* [Leaders], No. 1 (2009), pp. 11–17; Han Gang, “Guanyu Hua Guofeng de ruogan shishi” [Some historical facts regarding Hua Guofeng], *Yanhuang Chunqiu* [Chinese Annals], No. 2 (2011), pp. 111–124; and Han Gang, “Guanyu Hua Guofeng de ruogan shishi (xu)” [Some historical facts regarding Hua Guofeng (part 2)], *Yanhuang Chunqiu* [Chinese Annals], No. 9 (2011), pp. 33–42.

policy issues, including the crucial issue of economic reforms, no real differences separated Deng from Hua.⁴¹ Even at the elite level it was understood that major change was necessary after years of wasted time—a factor that Dikötter’s own book helps explain.

These problems do not fundamentally conflict with most of Dikötter’s main arguments about the origins of the Cultural Revolution, nor do they affect the importance of the book’s main focus on ordinary people. Making changes in a future version will help avoid distractions from the book’s most important contribution—a necessary reminder of the devastating human and moral costs of Mao’s extremism.

Commentary by Radoslav Yordanov

The last installment of Frank Dikötter’s “The People’s Trilogy” might seem on the surface to be a mere chronicling of Chairman Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolution, very little of which had to do with “culture.” However, by delving deeper into the darkest pages of China’s recent history, Dikötter offers far more than a simple fact-checking of Mao and his cronies’ atrocities aimed at their own people in the pursuit of political gains disguised as sociopolitical engineering *en toto*. It is a story of survival, detailing in most graphic terms the pains through which ordinary Chinese endured the whimsical and increasingly sadistic ways of their power-hungry leaders—all the way from the Zhongnanhai down to the village. Dikötter does not shy from including detailed descriptions of the horrific conditions great masses of the population were subjected to during the decade-long chaotic attempt at colossal social transformation. This bold approach, which might not be to everyone’s liking, is what sets the book apart, helping us learn about the depravity of this dark period not only through our minds but through our hearts.

The book does not delve deep into the origins of the Cultural Revolution. For Dikötter, Mao was the revolution (p. xii), and this is a good enough starting point for him to begin undoing the fabric of mistrust and paranoia

41. Cheng Zhongyuan, “Guanyu Hua Guofeng de pingjia wenti” [Regarding the issue of evaluating Hua Guofeng], *Jinyang Xuekan* [Jinyang journal], No. 5 (2009), pp. 21–30; Frederick C. Teiwes and Warren Sun, “China’s New Economic Policy under Hua Guofeng: Party Consensus and Party Myths,” *The China Journal*, No. 66 (July 2011), pp. 1–23; Frederick C. Teiwes and Warren Sun, *Paradoxes of Post-Mao Rural Reform: Initial Steps toward a New Chinese Countryside, 1976–1981* (New York: Routledge, 2016); and Frederick C. Teiwes and Warren Sun, “China’s Economic Reorientation after the Third Plenum: Conflict Surrounding ‘Chen Yun’s’ Readjustment Program, 1979–80,” *The China Journal*, No. 70 (July 2013), pp.163–187.

that spread throughout the country, engaging huge swaths of the population in wars that were not of their making. Dikötter emphasizes how Mao would “deliberately” turn “society upside down” and stoke “the violence of millions to retain his position at the centre” (p. 14). This contention is not particularly novel, but the book provides a rich if not always sufficiently nuanced account. Mao comes across as a wildly complex person, combining notable skills with appalling faults. Dikötter navigates through the mind of a man in whom a sense of “historical destiny” met “an extraordinary capacity for malice” (p. xi). By blending visions emanating from the harsh reality of crowded squares in “revolutionary” China with horrific scenes of purging the implied “other” and with train cars filled with the stench of urine, Dikötter convincingly depicts Mao’s extreme resolve to focus on “settling personal scores” (p. xi) at the end of his life, no matter what.

On the other end, as party functionaries scrambled for their physical and political survival, Mao’s thought and actions were met by silent yet stiff resistance, which slowly but surely proved that the collective self-preservation instinct ultimately prevailed, offsetting the malevolent ideas of a tyrant increasingly out of touch with reality. The result, Dikötter argues, was that “[t]he Cultural Revolution in effect destroyed the remnants of Marxism Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought” (p. 321).

The book is not about Mao per se and instead focuses mostly on the people who resorted to traditional means of ultimately circumventing the cruelty of their leader. Dikötter repeatedly redirects the narrative from glimpses of Mao’s peculiar traits (he swims, sends mangoes, loves sex) to scenes of visceral horror, depicting people in the darkest corners of the human condition. Therefore, even if one finds the extreme contrasts a bit too strong and free of subtlety, they serve their purpose well. The Communist regime’s self-destructive bent for creating enemies within itself and its people seems especially strange when contrasted with the lives of those who did their best to endure the harsh measures imposed on them from above and from below. Enormous masses of people were forcibly moved around to rally support for alien causes. The result was both predictable and horrifying—meningitis, torture, maiming, starvation, prolapsed uteri, “oedema, emaciation, . . . amenorrhoea” (p. 264), bloodthirsty mosquitoes—death and suffering came in many forms around that time. Dikötter captures the utter madness of the frenzied convulsions and social engineering by citing a curious example in which “a mathematician trained in Cambridge and a physicist with a doctoral dissertation from Moscow University attempted to slaughter a pig. They botched the affair, the animal breaking free, spurting blood everywhere” (p. 204). Although this anecdote in any other context might simply generate sympathy

for the animal, Dikötter uses it to highlight the disastrous waste and mismanagement of human resources.

However, if all is black on the surface, Dikötter's account, contrary to its shade-free outlines, points to age-old social constructs that are very difficult to alter even by the most ruthless of leaders. The chaos of the Cultural Revolution's constellation of various leaders and the juxtaposition between the center and the periphery provided "villagers with an opportunity to reclaim some of the freedoms they had lost under communism" (p. 224). This recurring theme is the silver lining in Dikötter's deliberately harrowing narrative. For example, in the face of external violence, the concept of familial ties proved far more resilient than the leadership's own self-preservation instincts. Even though the book often seems horrific and chilling, its deep meaning comes through at the end for those with strong enough stomachs to wade through the ugly bits of the story. No bottles of ink, forcefully shoved down one's throat (p. 80), or formaldehyde-dunked mangoes (p. 179) could permanently destroy certain cultural norms and values.

The book may dazzle readers and sometimes confuse them because of the many layers on which it operates, but it will be stimulating for students of China and will also appeal to a wider audience. To make the book more readable and perhaps in line with the "less is more" motto, Dikötter decided at times to provide minimal references. Scholarly readers will want a fuller idea about the origin of the many curious and sensational details used in the narrative. Additionally, on many occasions Dikötter emphasizes the difficulty he had in obtaining reliable data, a concern that applies not only to the quantitative but also to the factual aspects of the story. However, this issue is not unique to China's contemporary history; it is a common feature of other recent events elsewhere, where hugely polarizing and grim circumstances have entangled the fates of great numbers of people. At the same time, some might have wished for a bit more toned-down and sober depiction of the realities discussed here. Although the stark language and horrific imagery serve specific purposes, the subtlety of Dikötter's account is best sought and found between the lines.

Reply by Frank Dikötter

I am thankful to all the commentators for having taken time to read *The Cultural Revolution: A People's History* and then write thoughtful and carefully considered responses to the book. I am also very grateful for the opportunity to clarify some aspects of my work.

First, what was the Cultural Revolution, and how do we explain it? These are questions that have preoccupied several generations of sinologists, and, as Sergey Radchenko rightly underlines, I am not one to come up with new answers. Why would I? There is nothing mysterious about it. As Simon Leys (Pierre Ryckmans) pointed out decades ago, it was a series of sordid purges. It was also, as I explain, a grandiose vision, an attempt to create a worthy follow-up to the revolution led by Vladimir Lenin in 1917 and thereby cement Mao Zedong's place in history. Lenin had eliminated capitalist property with the Great October Socialist Revolution. Mao would now eliminate capitalist culture with the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, making sure that China, and by implication those who would follow the Chairman in the socialist camp, would not slide back onto the road toward "capitalism."

Indirectly, the book queries the usefulness of looking at the Cultural Revolution as one uniform phenomenon. To put it slightly differently, there was no Cultural Revolution in the same sense that there was a Great Leap Forward. The book divides into three parts the decade that many observers (but not all of us) refer to as the Cultural Revolution. "The Red Years" refers to 1966–1968, when, in a nutshell, Mao unleashed ordinary people against his own party. The second part, "The Black Years," discusses the army's transformation of the country into a garrison state. The last part of the book, "The Grey Years," explains what happened after both the party and the army had been ruthlessly purged. Those upheavals gave ordinary people, often with the help of local cadres, an opportunity to undermine the planned economy in what I refer to as a "silent revolution." I cannot think of two historical episodes, the Red Years and the Black Years, that are more different in nature. In fact even the Great Leap Forward is closer to the Black Years than to the height of the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1968. This implies that no unitary explanation can encompass the entire decade, other than in rather general terms (e.g., "divide and rule") that might be applied to many other periods.

Most of all, the book, like the two other volumes in the trilogy, is a tale of unintended consequences, a story of how the best laid plans go awry. I am sure Mao had a grand plan in mind, but like most despots he often had to improvise when nothing turned out quite the way he anticipated. The Red Years did not unfold according to plan, even though Mao spent four years preparing the groundwork (I call these "The Early Years," and they cover 1962 to 1966). He incited students to rebel against their teachers in the summer of 1966 and then called on the Red Guards to "Bombard the Headquarters." Instead, they became embroiled in factional strife. In the autumn of 1967, with the revolution on the verge of stalling, Mao had to turn toward ordinary people, giving them license to attack party members. But the "revolutionary masses" quickly

became divided, too, forcing Mao to ask the army to help them in the early months of 1967. As different military leaders supported different factions, all of them equally certain that they represented the true voice of the Chairman, the country slid into civil war. Why, Radchenko asks, did Mao not wrap up the revolution in the early months of 1967, when most of his real or imagined enemies had been sidelined? The likely answer is that every action has unintended consequences, producing new enemies. The enemies of yesterday may have been knocked out, but new threats have to be disabled—for instance, the “old marshals” who confronted the Cultural Revolution Group in February 1967 and could have undone the entire Cultural Revolution if they had prevailed. Such a process becomes an endless game of political survival, but a game in which Mao had the advantage because he could continually rewrite the rules. As Yordanov argues, the leaders sank into self-destructive wars as new enemies were endlessly created within their own ranks. If we follow how one action engenders unintended consequences that then have to be addressed anew, the entire decade becomes far less baffling and chaotic than it might appear to be at first glance. I hope my book conveys at least some of that inner logic to some readers.

The biggest unintended consequence of the Cultural Revolution was the undermining of the planned economy, mainly after 1971 (the Grey Years), by millions upon millions of villagers, often with the connivance of local party cadres. I state, rather bluntly, that the people rather than Deng Xiaoping were ultimately the architects of economic reform, insofar as they were the ones who forced the party to abandon the collectivized economy by taking back the land, distributing collective assets, opening black markets, and operating underground factories, all of it before Mao died in 1976. I may, of course, be wrong, but when Joseph Torigian writes that some readers might feel that the book lacks a big argument, I do wonder how much bigger it would have to be in order to be noticed.

The “silent revolution” also means that the book is not intended to be “almost uniformly bleak.” This is noted by Yordanov, who calls the recurrent theme of the silent revolution the “silver lining” in the book. For me, the massive failure of the Cultural Revolution to stamp out “old culture” and to eliminate “capitalist practices” in the countryside was uplifting.

All the reviewers are careful to point out that the book is a narrative history focused on ordinary people of all walks of life. Still, Torigian takes several pages to point at what he sees as errors in judgment that need to be addressed in the next edition. Although I am deeply grateful for suggestions for improvement, I am not sure I agree with everything he writes. The essence of his criticism pertains to what we could call “relationships between X and Y”

(Zhou Enlai and Jiang Qing, Lin Biao and Luo Ruiqing). What puzzles me is what appears to be an attempt to characterize these relationships in one way or another, and, by extension, to impute to me an attempt to characterize them in one way or another. Torigian takes me to task for claiming, for instance, that Jiang Qing pushed to undermine Zhou Enlai. Instead, “new evidence” (a memoir by Qi Benyu, a Cultural Revolution Group extremist and unrepentant Maoist who insisted until his death a few years ago that the Chairman never had any extramarital affairs) shows that they supported each other (“80 per cent of the time,” we are told, although it is unclear how this figure was arrived at). Yet another “new memoir,” this one by Huang Zheng, also published more than forty years after the events took place, even notes that Zhou was concerned about the temperature of the toilet seat Jiang Qing had to use. But how can we possibly characterize “relationships” between two party leaders in a dog-eat-dog world (or should I say tiger-eat-tiger world?) marked by constant lying, plotting, back-stabbing, duplicity, and reversals of fortune in which relationships were made, undone, and remade? As I wrote, Jiang Qing tried to undermine Zhou as best she could in the early months of 1967. She sent a damning dossier about the premier to Mao. Her closest ally in the summer of 1967 was Lin Biao, not Zhou Enlai. They went too far with the burning of the British mission in Beijing, and less than a week later Mao leaned toward Zhou, who was back in favor. Jiang Qing was in retreat and the Cultural Revolution Group in a state of virtual eclipse until the next political twist in March 1968, when she took a leading role in a military purge that placed one of Lin Biao’s most loyal followers in command of the capital’s garrison. Zhou Enlai immediately heaped praise on her, enthusing that “We should all learn from her” at a meeting of the top brass in the Great Hall of the People, as I point out in the book. No wonder Zhou would express concern even over the temperature of the toilet seat used by Jiang Qing; it is a detail that underscores his extreme deference—usually a sign of fear rather than “mutual support.”

Perhaps I am wrong, but I sense that Torigian sees Zhou Enlai as a more passive figure than I do. The same is true for Lin Biao. Torigian invokes the work of Chinese political scientists who portray Lin Biao as a “reluctant” participant, whereas I, according to Torigian, portray Zhou as “power hungry.” But I do no such thing. To say that Zhou played an active role is not the same as saying that he was “power hungry”; that is simply a stereotype. I, like many others, am quite sure that Lin Biao sat at home passively awaiting his fate on the last day of his life in September 1971. But that tells us nothing about the Lin Biao of 1962 or 1966 or 1968. People in one-party states are great actors, and their leaders greater actors still. They are chameleons, and the most

successful ones know how to present themselves differently in accordance with the requirements of each situation. Already during the Great Leap Forward Lin Biao confided to his diary that the entire experiment was “based on fantasy and a total mess.” He knew that the best way to maintain power was to shower Mao with flattery: “He worships himself, he has blind faith in himself, adores himself, he will take credit for every achievement but blame others for his failures.” In January 1962, as some 7,000 cadres assembled in Beijing to take stock after the disaster of the Great Leap Forward, Lin Biao stepped forward to shower praise on Mao. Lin Biao had spent several years promoting the study of Mao Zedong Thought, first in the army, then beyond. He was hardly “reluctant” when he deliberately played up the Wuhan incident in July 1967, turning it into a “military coup,” which, he alleged in an alarmist letter to Mao, put the life of the Chairman in danger (Mao saw through it and realized his hand was being forced). In the meantime, Lin Biao placed his followers in key positions in Wuhan once the city was purged of its leadership. He did not do so “reluctantly,” nor did he contemplate the scene from the sidelines. He did so not because he was “power hungry” but because, like others, he hoped to survive the Cultural Revolution by playing his hand as best he could.

As to Luo Ruiqing and Lin Biao, I do not write that “Luo was blameless, Lin was entirely at fault, and Mao was passive.” I am sure that the relationship between all three men was highly complex, which comes as a surprise to no one. I, too, have read Qin Huizuo’s memoirs, invoked on three occasions in Torigian’s review, but to suggest that a book whose author aims to portray himself as a bulwark against the political machinations of an evil Madam Mao, published ten years posthumously, constitutes “the latest evidence” may be a questionable judgment. More to the point is Torigian’s observation that there simply is “no decisive proof” for his own approach, as there rarely is when it comes to the realm of Mao-era high politics and archives cannot be consulted. I do note that when Torigian points at “new evidence” to show that Lin Biao was not “power-hungry,” his footnote refers exclusively to the work of Lin Biao himself and memoirs of three of Lin Biao’s four most trusted allies, popularly referred to as Lin Biao’s “four guardian warriors.” Of course they would be keen to exculpate their boss. They were his guardian warriors.

The idea that Mao was not particularly perturbed by de-Stalinization in 1956, or even in favor of toning down the cult of personality, or, alternatively, that key leaders such as Deng Xiaoping and Liu Shaoqi did not really have much of a role to play in deleting Mao Zedong Thought from the party constitution is neither logical nor factual. I have read and enjoyed retired party historian Lin Yunhui’s main book (I called it “magisterial” in *Mao’s Great Famine*), but to deny that Mao’s political position was weakening in 1956 makes no

sense. No need to take my word for it, either: Wu Guoguang, for example, stresses in his *China's Party Congress: Power, Legitimacy, and Institutional Manipulation* that “it is difficult to see how Mao would not have been unhappy with criticism of the cult,” all the more so because Mao was determined to defend Iosif Stalin’s own cult immediately after Nikita Khrushchev delivered his secret speech. As Wu points out, historians have repeatedly demonstrated that the Eight Party Congress in 1956 put Mao in a “disadvantageous position.” Khrushchev’s speech had huge repercussions, if only by helping to precipitate the revolts in Poland and Hungary a few months later. To suggest that none of this had an “immediate impact” on Mao’s thinking does not add up.

Apparently, Mao was never weak, if we are to believe Torigian. But to assert that Mao “was not at his weakest” in January 1962 is, yet again, neither plausible nor in tune with the balance of evidence. For starters, I never use the term “weak.” I merely state that “Mao’s star was at its lowest in January 1962 during the Seven Thousand Cadres Conference.” Is that really such an objectionable statement, after tens of millions of people were beaten, worked, and starved to death as a result of Mao’s grandiose vision? Roderick MacFarquhar, in his third volume on *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, puts it in a nutshell: “Now, if ever, was the moment for [Mao’s Politburo Standing Committee] colleagues to attempt to ensure that Mao could never again perpetrate a similar disaster.” I provide concrete examples to show that there were covert and sometimes open misgivings and criticisms of Mao’s leading role in creating the disaster of the Great Leap Forward. Common sense also indicates that the 7,000 cadres who convened in Beijing in January 1962 would have read at least some, probably many more, of the documents I read in the archives when writing *Mao’s Great Famine*. Party archives, to state the obvious, come from somewhere; namely, party leaders, many of whom were well aware of the enormity of the disaster and the role Mao had played in it.

Peng Zhen was “particularly loyal,” we are told. Really? When, as mayor of Beijing, he delayed by several weeks the publication of several of Mao’s speeches on the Hundred Flowers in the *People’s Daily* in 1956? Or when, in front of the 7,000 cadres in January 1962, he figuratively pointed a finger at Mao, demanding that he take responsibility for having announced the transition to Communism within three to five years? If this was a “particularly loyal” statement to make, why was Peng Zhen attacked so fiercely by Mao’s trusty ally Chen Boda the following day? Allegations (or “rumors,” as I say) circulated that Peng Zhen had examined the evidence around the Great Leap Forward just before the 7,000 Cadres Conference convened. Much remains obscure about the so-called Changguanlou meeting, so how exactly can we discard the importance of “rumors,” especially in a one-party state? More to

the point, if Peng Zhen was “particularly loyal,” then why the convoluted maneuvers to have him attacked through his underling Wu Han’s own underling Deng Tuo, and then have him arrested in May 1966? I wonder whether Torigian is not being pulled into the politics of exculpation by the very nature of the sources he quotes, as some party historians in the People’s Republic and key participants in the Cultural Revolution scramble to absolve those around Mao (with the exception of scapegoats like Jiang Qing and the Gang of Four) by portraying them as loyal, disciplined party members who might, at best, have participated only reluctantly in the Cultural Revolution. But as Radchenko notes: “There were no good guys, no martyrs unjustly prosecuted: just the stench of hypocrisy and backstabbing.”

I confess that I did, on first reading Torigian’s commentary, feel a pang of guilt at having been so ignorant as to have mistaken the “party charter” for a “party constitution.” But after dutifully checking the secondary literature, including the masterful work of MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals (surely the leading expert on political language), who say “party constitution,” I would conclude that both terms are commonly used to designate the same instrument. Most accounts lean toward “party constitution.”

If anything, these musings show how exhausted debates about high politics have become. There will always be a new memoir, or a new tidbit, or a new elaboration on the Internet of a previously stated interpretation about this or that episode. But, as a historian, I find it more fruitful to look at the nature of the evidence that is accessible and then see what kind of questions can be asked. As archives have opened and allowed us to collect detailed evidence about a range of issues concerning the everyday lives of the vast majority of the population, then surely that is the way forward—until the day the doors of the Communist Party’s central archives in Beijing swing open.