Review Essay

The Chinese Revolution and "Liberation": Whose Tragedy?

The Tragedy of Liberation: A History of the Chinese Revolution, 1945–57
FRANK DIKÖTTER
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Once upon a time in China, Ella Fitzgerald sang in Shanghai's jazz clubs; bright neon lights with English advertisements shone in the dark; and, even in provincial Kunming, people saw 166 shows of the Hollywood movie *I Wonder Who's Kissing Her Now*. This was before 1949, when the communist peasants' army entered the cities and turned China in the first decade of Maoist rule into "one of the worst tyrannies in the history of the twentieth century, sending to an early grave at least 5 million civilians and bringing misery to countless more" (p. xiii). This tyranny is the focus of Frank Dikötter's *The Tragedy of Liberation: A History of the Chinese Revolution 1945–57*.

In order to show the violent nature of the regime, Dikötter has masterfully chosen the famine-inducing 1948 siege of Changchun by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) as the starting point of his book, instead of the "peaceful liberation" of Beiping or Shanghai. His argument is that the new regime terrorized the Chinese people into submission, and violence became the major foundation of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Dikötter does not deny that the Communist Party of China (CCP) initially enjoyed some popularity, but he argues that it was not long before the CCP broke all its promises to peasants, workers, intellectuals, members of religious groups, foreigners and entrepreneurs. He believes that the CCP transformed China into a theatre of propaganda that fooled domestic and foreign followers with "Potemkin Villages" of fake model farms and factories. The control of inflation, the improvement of hygiene, the rapid decrease of infant mortality and the "colonization" of Xinjiang are a few of the regime's achievements that Dikötter acknowledges. However, according to him, these did not result in greater equality, justice or freedom.

This book is the second volume of his project, *People's Trilogy*, and covers the period from the Civil War between Nationalists and Communists in 1945 to the Anti-Rightist campaign in 1957. The first volume, *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958–62,* was published in 2010 and a third and final part on the Cultural Revolution will follow. To my knowledge, Dikötter, a well-known expert on Republican China, became interested in the famine in 2006. Thus, his *People's Trilogy* undertakes to rewrite the history of Maoist China as a one-man project in a relatively short period of time. In the first volume of the trilogy, *Mao's Great Famine*, Dikötter built his arguments against several critical academic reviewers mainly on his impressive

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and partly exclusive access to several provincial archives in China. His new book is based on a wider range of sources, including documents from county and provincial archives, internal reports such as *Neibu cankao*, published research and documents from the PRC, and eyewitness accounts. In *Mao's Great Famine*, he included an essay on his use of these sources. Both books contain quotations from local archival documents and speeches of Party leaders that are well chosen to serve his argument. *The Tragedy of Liberation* is clearly targeted towards the general reader, as he tends to use moralistic and emotive language uncommon in most scholarly work.

The Scale of Mass Killings

Official CCP Party historians and some Western scholars for a long time portrayed the period between 1949 and 1957 as the "golden age" of Chinese communism, wherein the Party and the people rebuilt the country in social harmony. Over the last ten years, a new generation of Western scholars has conducted field studies based on local archival material to show that the transition of the early 1950s was experienced by different people across the country in diverse ways.[1] The Chinese historian Yang Kuisong used his exclusive access to the Central Party Archive in Beijing to provide detailed accounts of the dynamics and escalation of repression in a number of campaigns, including Land Reform (1947–52), Suppression of Counterrevolutionaries (*zhenfan*) (1951–53), Three-Antis and Five-Antis (1951–52). According to the sources from the Central Party Archive quoted by Yang, 250,000 "rich peasants" and "landlords" were killed in a single year (1947) during Land Reform in northern China alone, and 712,000 people were executed during the *zhenfan* campaign nationwide.[2] So even in the PRC, it is no secret that at least one million civilians were killed before 1954. However, no single monograph in English has been written on this topic.[3]

Against this background, Dikötter deserves credit for showing the significance of terror and mass killings during CCP campaigns to establish the new order. Mao undoubtedly used the setting of quotas for arrests or executions as a tool to propel the campaigns. For example, he defined the quota for execution during the *zhenfan* campaign as 0.5 people per thousand in the cities, one person per thousand in areas where the enemy was still active and not more than 1.5 people per thousand in regions with extraordinary problems.[4] Using a report from August 1952 by the minister for public security, Luo Ruiqing, Dikötter shows that in some provinces the death rates were even higher, for example 1.92 per thousand in Hunan and 2.56 per thousand in Guangxi (p. 100). Dikötter argues

1 For example see Brown and Pickowicz 2007.
2 Yang 2009, Vol.1, 99; 217. Recent publications in the PRC also openly discuss the killings of those accused of being landlords and spies during Land Reform. For example see Luo 2005 and Wang 2006, 126–139.
3 For journal articles, see Strauss 2006.
4 Yang 2009, Vol. 1, 191.

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that the official number of deaths (710,000 people or 1.2 per thousand) is the lowest possible estimate and that it is more likely that more than two million people were executed. Regarding Land Reform, he provides examples of villages where hundreds of "landlords" and "rich peasants" were killed. However, due to the lack of any verifiable numbers at the provincial or national level, Dikötter approximates that 1.5 to 2 million people were killed during this campaign between 1947 and 1952 (p. 83).

For a number of reasons, one being that campaigns and their targets overlapped in time and space, it is difficult to estimate the number of victims of the early campaigns. A "local bully" could have been executed in the context of Land Reform or as part of the campaigns against counterrevolutionaries or "bandits." I am not arguing that Dikökter's estimate of five million victims is impossible, but more research is needed and it remains to be seen whether the opening of the Central Party Archive will eventually provide an answer.

It is even more difficult to explain the reasons for the large scale of violence. Given its initial popular support, why did the CCP launch massive campaigns of mass killing in the early years of its rule? Dikötter's book does not provide a convincing answer. Instead, it seems to suggest "evil people did evil things." Moreover, the communist ideology or systems as such do not seem to explain the level of violence and its "Chinese characteristics." Klaus Mühlhahn argues that the projects of state building of the Kuomintang (KMT) and CCP on the mainland, including labour camp systems, were highly interlinked with war, civil war and a permanent or enduring "state of emergency."[5] In addition to these dynamics, I believe that the discussion of revolutionary violence should consider its interaction with counterrevolutionary terror and also the relations between the central and local levels. The CCP almost faced total elimination in 1927 and 1937. After coming to power, it faced an external threat: the KMT in Taiwan was waiting to "destroy the communist bandits and reconquer the mainland." Meanwhile, the US air force bombed North Korean cities and infrastructure into the ground. The Party leadership feared that this war could be expanded to Chinese territory.

It is true that Mao promoted mass killings of enemies in several campaigns, but he also launched policies to limit or stop violence, when these campaigns got out of hand. For example, at the end of 1947, Mao criticized "chaotic killings" (*luansha*) in the context of Land Reform in several directives and said: "The fewer people are killed, the better."[6] After this intervention by the Party leadership, the worst excesses were stopped but the campaign escalated again after the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950. These kinds of developments are too complicated to fit into Dikötter's story of a centrally orchestrated mass murder and are therefore ignored by him.

5 Mühlhahn 2009, 172–174.
6 Mao 1969, 1179.

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Scholars who argue that the communist regimes were as evil as German National Socialism face the problem that neither Stalin nor Mao established a killing industry consisting of death factories. In Dikötter's book, the term "Auschwitz of the mind" is used to describe Maoist "thought reform." He attempts to show that thousands of people killed themselves, because they were unable to bear the pressures of endless struggle meetings or forced self-criticism. In my view, equating suicide with killing millions by gas is a provocation that goes too far and will not help Dikötter's cause.

Experiences of Ordinary People

The publisher claims that Dikötter interweaves experiences of ordinary people with the brutal politics of Mao Zedong's court. However, it is very difficult to know how ordinary people experienced the first years of communist rule. Peasants and workers did not publish many memoirs and rarely kept diaries. One could try to read the official documents "against the grain," but the Party established rules on how to describe actions and opinions of people according to the Maoist worldview. To add oral history interviews is useful, but many eye-witnesses are already dead or very old. Furthermore, ordinary people also learnt from Maoist campaigns how to narrate their life stories; it is therefore difficult to reconstruct "authentic voices" of "real" China today.[7] Dikötter chooses a fairly simple solution to this epistemological problem: many of the voices of "ordinary people" in his book are quotes from anti-communist exiles in Western countries during the high tide of the Cold War. For example, Robert Loh, quoted through his memoir *Escape from Red China* (1962), is Dikötter's most widely cited witness. Although it is likely that these types of books reflected the view of elites or the well-educated, upper-middle class as in the case of Loh, it is very uncommon for scholars to rely on this type of literature. If one uses these sources as testimonies in an academic context, a critical reading is surely needed. In China, memoirs regarding the early years of the PRC have become more diverse and critical than in the past. Dikötter could have included these testimonies in his account to avoid dependency on narratives of the Cold War.

In all social revolutions, there are winners and losers; where some lose power and privilege, others gain. Dikötter focuses on the dark side of "liberation" and on groups such as capitalists, landlords, intellectual elites, foreigners and Buddhists or Christians that were suppressed and humiliated. A student from an elite university could hardly be called an "ordinary Chinese" in a society where the majority had no access to basic formal education before 1949. To be sure, voices of peasants and workers are rare in the book or are chosen very selectively. How did millions of peasants feel when they received land, houses and farming equipment and when the documentation of their debts were burned? How did poor peasants who became village leaders experience "liberation"?

7 Hershatter 2011, 235.

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What did people who saw a doctor or a classroom for the first time in their life think? What were women thinking when the New Marriage Law (1950) ended legal concubinage and forced marriage at very young age, and both urban and rural dwellers could increasingly decide by themselves whom to marry?[8] Were workers of state units unhappy that the government guaranteed lifelong job tenure, social security, health care, cheap housing, pensions and retirement at the ages of 60 (men) and 50 (women)? Dikötter refers to this system as "bound labor" on the "road to serfdom" and chooses instead to focus on the spread of diseases, bad housing conditions and workplace accidents. I wonder if workers perceived these problems as a form of "serfdom" or as expected difficulties in a period of transition.

I am not claiming that the lower strata of society, the 90 per cent with "good class backgrounds," were all satisfied. Many workers doubted the promise of "liberation" because capitalists were still in charge in the factories and the CCP promoted cooperation between labour and capital as a part of the "new democracy." For example, Robert Cliver shows in his archival study of the private silk industry in the Yangzi Delta that, until 1952, the "feudal management system" remained in place: male foremen would use bamboo sticks, public humiliation and sexual harassment to discipline young female workers. Cliver notes that "democratic reform," enforced in 1952, disappointed women because they thought the supervisors were punished too lightly and some of them were able to keep their jobs.[9]

Many women were also disappointed when the CCP backtracked on promises to allow them to divorce violent husbands. By the mid-1950s, the CCP had compromised with urban and rural patriarchy and made divorce more difficult. Voices of ordinary people such as these indicate not that the Chinese revolution was a tragedy, but that it did not go far enough. For instance, I interviewed a PLA soldier from a poor peasant background who continues to be outraged that some urban intellectuals, who did not contribute anything to the revolution, were awarded high positions in the government.

Dikötter emphasizes the numbers of people who were stigmatized as members of a "bad class" or enemies of the state. For example, he estimates that ten million "landlords" had their land expropriated (p. 83) and that many of China's three million Catholics and one million Protestants had to give up their religious practices due to state repression. Conversely, one could ask about the numbers of people who might have gained something from the revolution. Consider that the urban population stood at 57.6 million in 1949 and increased to 99.4 million in 1957.[10] While unwanted sections of urban society were sent to the countryside, many of the new arrivals from the villages became part of the permanent workforce in state-owned enterprises and improved their standard of living. In general,

8 Regarding the impact of the marriage law see Diamant 2000.
9 Cliver n.d.
10 Lu 2004, Vol. 1, 633.

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people recruited into the permanent workforce during this time would "own" their job until the late 1980s and could help relatives to get access to the "iron rice bowl." During the Great Leap Famine, state workers in heavy industry in economically strategic cities were among the best protected groups in the country. Furthermore, the Party offered new career opportunities for people with limited formal education. The number of CCP state officials (*guoganbu*) increased from 720,000 in 1949 to 7.9 million in 1958. In 1955, 170,000 Party branches in the countryside had four million members who were the backbone of the new regime.[11]

Class and Land Reform

Official Party history continues to present Land Reform as the core tenet of Chinese peasants' "liberation." Dikötter makes an argument that is currently quite popular among some Chinese and Western scholars regarding Land Reform: the concepts of class and exploitation would have been alien to a rural Chinese society that was based on kinship. He states: "Nowhere in this profusion of social diversity could anybody called a 'landlord' (*dizhu*) be found" (p. 70). Moreover, surveys by American experts of Chinese agriculture in the 1930s (such as John L. Buck) have shown that land distribution was not highly unequal, nor was exploitation by high rents a central reason for China's rural backwardness, as the CCP had claimed (p. 71).

First of all, the inequality of land ownership before 1949 is hard to assess due to the lack of any surveys at the national level. Joseph Esherick, who did a critical reassessment of the land surveys and statistics of the Republican era, came to the conclusion that it would be ludicrous to view China as a nation of smallholders. In the 1930s, landlords did own a great deal of land.[12] Furthermore, Buck and many other US experts were not particularly interested in the issue of class. They mainly promoted technical solutions to solve China's rural problems by improving farm management, credit systems and infrastructure.[13] While it is true that China lacked big landlords with huge estates such as in South America or East Germany, exploitation was still primarily based on high rents. National estimates in the 1930s suggested that 42 per cent of farmland was rented and that the rents ranged from 50 to 70 per cent of the main harvest.[14]

While communist activists on the ground sometimes labelled people as "landlords" without any economic criteria, the Party leadership tried to provide clear definitions. For example, in August of 1950 the government passed a decision that defined a "landlord" (*dizhu*) as a person who did not participate in manual labour and whose income was based on the exploitation of wage labour and

11 Gransow 1983, 314–15; Yu 2006, 739.
12 Esherick 1981, 407.
13 For a critical review of Buck's work see Stross 1986, 161–188.
14 Zarrow 2005, 99.

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tenants through high rents.[15] In contrast to a "landlord," a "rich peasant" (*funong*) owned land and good farming tools, but also rented out some land. His or her income was also mainly based on exploitation, but he or she participated in manual labour. A "middle peasant" (*zhongnong*) owned some land, but in general did not exploit other wage labourers nor receive rents. A "poor peasant" (*pinnong*) owned little or no land and relied on selling his or her own labour power. In practice, it was sometimes difficult to label classes based on these criteria, because in the more developed areas in the south, such as Jiangnan, many villagers received the majority of their income from activities outside agriculture.[16] However, some scholars argue that after a while people with "good class backgrounds" learned to adopt the new language of class in order to improve their "social capital" and used it in negotiation with the state.[17] In the end, the labels became their reality.

Dikötter quotes farmers who asked the *People's Daily* in 1950: "Why doesn't Chairman Mao just print some banknotes, buy the land from the landlords and then give us our share?" (p. 74). Dikötter believes that this would be a good question. He notes that if any land reform was necessary, it could have been done without one drop of blood, like in Taiwan, Japan or South Korea. Instead, Land Reform on mainland China was not only about distribution of wealth, but a very violent establishment of a new social and political order. However, Dikötter's negative comparison with Taiwan (1949–53), South Korea (1945–50) and Japan (1947) might not be appropriate. Taiwan's population stood at 7.7 million people in 1949 and mainland China at over 540 million. Forty-three per cent of arable land was initially distributed by the CCP. Even if the new government wanted to buy off the land by printing money, the scale of inflation is hard to imagine. The leadership of CCP believed that hyper-inflation had been one reason for the downfall of the KMT and sought to keep inflation rates low. We could also ask a different question: why was the KMT able to successfully implement their style of land reform on Taiwan after they failed to implement it on the mainland in 1930s? One important reason might be that on the mainland the KMT had to compromise with rural elites in and outside the party to fight warlords and communists, while on Taiwan – as outsiders – they were not beholden to local landlords.

Last but not least, the land reforms after 1945 that US advisors in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan designed were responses to the communist success on mainland China. I am not justifying the mass killings used by the CCP, which in some regions took place even after the land was divided. However, it is hard to imagine that there was any non-violent way to turn rural society on mainland China upside down.

15 "Zhengwuyuan guanyu huafen nongcun jieji chengfen de yueding" (Decision by the Government Affairs Office on the Division of Class Categories) in Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi, ed. 1992. Vol. 1, 382–407.
16 Strauss 2007, 28–31.
17 Zhang 2004, 40–41.

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Grain Politics and Hunger

Dikötter argues that with the collectivization of agriculture (1953–56) farmers became "bonded laborers" of the state. He claims that their level of nutrition would have been lower than before 1949, and argues: "The government also determined the quantity of grain that each person should eat. This was set at roughly 13 to 16 kilos per head each month – a little more than half the required amount of unhusked grain to provide 1,700 to 1,900 calories per day. It was a starvation diet imposed equally on all villagers" (p. 217). Remarkably, Dikötter provides no source for this claim. It seems that millions went hungry, but death by starvation did not occur on a massive scale.

Even the official statistics that were published in the 1980s regarding the years 1953 and 1957 show that in several provinces peasants lived on grain rations with an average calorie intake of under 1,900 or even 1,500 per day.[18] Today, most international organizations recommend a minimum intake about 2,000 calories for people who perform light manual labour. According to my knowledge, the government never defined an amount of grain that peasants were entitled to eat. Documents from 1954, 1955 and 1959 state that an average of around one *jin* (500 grams) of processed grain per day would be sufficient (around 15 kilo per month). This is only about 1,750 calories provided by wheat flour and 1,830 calories by milled rice.[19] According to my interpretation, one *jin* was recommend by leaders such as Chen Yun in 1955 as a reasonable minimum level of rural consumption.[20] While most Chinese peasants lived on a comparatively low calorie intake per day, it seems not to be the case that everyone in the countryside subsisted on a "starvation diet" in the mid-1950s. Agricultural output and consumption was highly unequal in the country.[21] Furthermore, before 1958, peasants were entitled to plots for private use (*ziliudi*) and could grow vegetables for their own consumption to complement the grain ration.

It is undeniable that the industrialization of Maoist China was based on the exploitation of peasants using the state grain monopoly for purchase and sale (*tonggou tongxiao*) as a tool. Urban populations were entitled to grain with rationing cards, while the rural population had to rely on their production output. The government could feed the increasing urban population with cheap grain, and, for the first time in Chinese history, the state was able to take control of the rural "surplus" to finance industrialization and imports of modern technology with grain exports. However, the government pushed rural consumption to a low level and even caused deaths of millions of peasants during the Great Leap Forward. Only after 1962 did the government accept that the peasants needed enough food to live.

18 Walker 1984, 100–101.
19 I used the conversion rates for East Asian food from Piazza 1983, 7.
20 Wemheuer 2014, 97–98.
21 Walker 1984, 99–102.

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One need not go to the archives to learn that food shortages took place in 1953, 1955 and 1957. The government explained several times that the grain problem was far from being solved and that grain shortages in parts of China were the result of frequent natural disasters. In October 1953, Mao Zedong declared in an internal speech that about ten per cent of the peasants were "lack of grain households" (*queliangh*u), meaning they lacked grain for subsistence, and that 20 to 40 million would suffer from a natural disaster every two years. Published statistics show that over 38 million people in 1953 and over 24 million in 1954 were affected by spring shortage (*chunhuang*).[22] The introduction of the state monopoly for purchase and sale of grain in 1953 and the high procurement quotas led to massive conflicts between peasants and state. In March 1955, the government reacted to the dissatisfaction created by the purchase policies. It admitted that relations with peasants were tense (*jinzhang*) and that high purchase quotas had damaged their interests in production. Hence, the alliance between workers and peasants and the socialist project was in danger.[23] As a result, the so-called Three-Fix policy (*sanding*) was established to ensure that the level of yield, purchase and sale would be fixed for the next three years, allowing peasants to increase production without a rise in procurement quotas. Furthermore, families labeled as "lack of grain households" were allowed to "borrow" additional grain from the collective. However, Dikötter does not mention the "Three-Fix"-policy or the self-criticism of the CCP. As noted, he frequently writes about the radicalization of campaigns, but not about the following readjustment by the government. Admittedly, these readjustments did not always last for long; the Three-Fix policy did not last three years and is another example of a broken promise.

The Legacy of "Liberation"

Rewriting the history of Maoist China in the early 1950s, we should raise the question of whether or not the later road to famine and the Cultural Revolution was predetermined. If so, can we find the reasons in the political system itself, in ideology, in the dynamics of peasant-state relations or elsewhere? Dikötter's description of campaigns to burn books, outlaw jazz music and destroy churches in the early years could be read as forerunners of the Destroy the Four Olds campaign (*po si jiu*) during the Cultural Revolution in 1966. It is tempting to see hunger in the countryside in 1954 as the first sign of later mass starvation leading to the death of millions. One could also view many policies before 1953 as the foundation of "reform and opening" that took place after 1978. Dikötter argues that the CCP broke the promise to give peasants land,

22 Mao 1999, 296–297; Guojia tongjiju, minzhengju 1996, 276.

23 "Zhonggong zhongyang, guowuyuan guanyu xunsu buzhi liangshi gouxiao gongzuo, anding nongmin shengchan qingxu de jinji zhishi" (CCPCC and State Affairs council emergency directive on settling peasant production concerns and the sale and purchase of grain" in Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi, ed. 1992. Vol. 6, 76–82.

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because just a few years after Land Reform, agriculture was collectivized. Many peasants tried to resist this transformation, but in the long run, the order established by Land Reform proved more sustainable than all other radical socialist experiments in communist China. With the abolition of the People's Communes in the early 1980s, land-user rights were transferred to peasant families and the relatively equal distribution of farmland without landlords is a long-lasting legacy of the Chinese revolution. The order of "new democracy" promised a combination of open market and state planning, state and private enterprises, household-based farm economy, more autonomy for ethnic minorities and a united front of the Party with the intellectuals. Promises were broken, but Deng Xiaoping and the reformers built on the legacy of the early years.

Readers might wonder how the periods before and after 1958 are connected with each other, when starting *Mao's Great Famine* after the *The Tragedy of Liberation*. Dikötter deals with the Hundred Flowers campaign in which Mao encouraged intellectuals to criticize the shortcomings and bureaucratism of Party cadres, and then briefly with the Anti-Rightists campaign that followed in the second half of 1957. In the last chapter of the new book, he explains that during the crisis of 1956–57, millions of peasants retreated from the agricultural collectives, students protests broke out and labour strikes hit Shanghai. Dikötter does not, however, account for the fact that during the Hundred Flowers campaign people who had experienced the purges only some years before dared to speak up. Moreover, the outbreak of protests and social movements seems not to confirm the view that, at least in 1956–57, everyone was terrified inside one of the "worst tyrannies in the history of the twentieth century." Furthermore, many Chinese scholars see the persecution of 550,000 intellectuals during the Anti-Rightist campaign as a major turning point. As a result, many people were afraid to discuss political issues openly with colleagues or even family members, and relations between intellectuals and the CCP were destroyed for two decades. Dikötter mentions some executions, but the usual form of punishment of "rightists" was deportation to the countryside or labour camps. He writes: "But intellectuals were still relatively safe from the physical violence that would erupt during the Cultural Revolution in 1966" (p. 293). It seems that Dikötter wants to emphasize the importance of early campaigns and challenge the argument that 1957 was the central turning point. For him, the PRC was a tyranny from the beginning on.

Dikötter is retelling an old story about the early years of the Cold War based on new sources. While many journalists celebrate *A Tragedy of Liberation* in their reviews, most Western historians, political scientists and sociologists offer a much more complicated version of early PRC history that includes diverse experiences and local variations. Finding credible alternative narratives is a huge task that warrants future research by modern China scholars. Unfortunately, Dikötter's condemning of the Chinese revolution in his *People's Trilogy* requires an academic response that consists of more than a few novel local case studies. If a teacher wishes to have heated debates in a class on Chinese history, he or she should

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assign Dikötter's provocative book for reading. As a more balanced and calm academic account of campaigns and terror after "liberation," I recommend Yang Kuisong's *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo jianguoshi yanjiu* (*Research on the Foundation of the PRC State*) for everyone who is able to read Chinese.[24]

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24 One chapter has been translated: see Yang 2008.

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Response to Felix Wemheuer's Review

Felix Wemheuer has written a rather confusing review, and I am not sure how to respond. The review is not helped by the many misspellings and errors of pinyin in the version I have been asked to respond to [these have since been removed by the journal's copy-editor]. But the main issue is elsewhere. On the one hand Wemheuer sees things in the book that are simply not there, yet on the other hand he misses, deliberately or otherwise, some of its key proposals.

Take the first sentence. Ella Fitzgerald was indeed a star of the jazz age, but she never went to China. In Kunming, people did not see "166 shows of the Hollywood movie, *I Wonder Who's Kissing Her Now*," they saw, as my book points out, 166 different movies in 1935 (*I Wonder Who's Kissing Her Now*, the movie with June Haver, came out in 1947).

These may seem like trivial errors, but it gets a lot worse. In a long paragraph, Wemheuer queries my wisdom in comparing communist regimes with the politics of industrial killing in Nazi Germany. This, too, he gets wrong. First, he tells us that I use the term "Auschwitz of the mind" when in fact it is an expression which is clearly ascribed to Harry Wu, a man who spent some 20 years in labour camps under Mao. Then he states that "equating suicide with killing millions by gas is a provocation that goes too far and will not help Dikötter's cause." But Harry Wu never committed suicide. And when and where do I make that equation, in a book that does not mention anything even vaguely related to Nazi Germany, except for Harry Wu's description of how he felt about thought reform? The allegation casts doubt on Wemheuer's ability to review the book in a factual manner.

The reviewer wonders "why did the CCP launch massive campaigns of mass killing in the early years of its rule?" He thinks, among others, that I should have mentioned the "counterrevolutionary terror" with which the regime was faced. It is a strange suggestion, since page after page in my chapter on the terror give examples of uprisings by people of all walks of life against the Communist

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Party in 1949 and 1950 (although, to be fair to the reviewer, I do not qualify the actions of ordinary people as "counterrevolutionary terror"). In Hubei, assaults against granaries by villagers were described by the provincial Party branch as "ceaseless." In east China, some 40 rebellions rocked the countryside in the first three months of 1950 alone. In parts of Guangxi one out of three men took to the mountains to fight the communist regime.

Wemheuer also characterizes this chapter as a "story of a centrally orchestrated mass murder (sic)," when the gist of the chapter is about the many ways in which local cadres used the campaign to pursue their own agendas, often without the knowledge of their superiors. The executions, for instance, were supposed to be public and carried out in mass rallies, but Party members in many parts of the country secretly liquidated their own enemies. In Maogong, only ten victims of the campaign were sentenced and shot in public; a further 170 were covertly assassinated. Even ordinary people sometimes used the campaign for their own purposes. Here is what I write: "In an increasingly fractured society, the terror was also driven from below by people seeking retribution, settling old grudges or righting personal wrongs in the name of revolution" (p. 89). Wemheuer sees Maoist China in black and white where *The Tragedy of Liberation* is painted in shades of grey.

Mao, we are then told, "launched policies to limit or stop violence." Of course he did. Throughout his career Mao would unleash his underlings only to rein them in once he thought that they had gone far enough. And like any good dictator, Mao posed as the voice of moderation. As I write: "He lashed out at 'rightists' who fell behind their target but reined in the zeal of 'leftists'."

About "land reform." There are many paragraphs about this topic in Wemheuer's review, most of them speculation based on secondary sources, but it would be useful if he could capture, in a sentence or two, what I, as well as a number of historians from the People's Republic, actually say: "land reform" was not about the distribution of land, it was about making sure that most villagers participated, willingly or unwillingly, in "struggle meetings" during which carefully selected targets labelled as "landlords," "traitors" or "tyrants" were taken to task and sometimes physically liquidated. Only then, when most people had blood on their hands, could a return of the old order be ruled out.

About people in the countryside. Wemheuer tells us that "He [Dikötter] claims that their level of nutrition would have been lower than before 1949" after the introduction of a state monopoly over the grain in 1953. I make no such claim. It is Deng Zihui, the top leader who oversaw work in the countryside from Beijing, who claims in July 1954 that on average, throughout the country, from north to south, a villager had a third less food at his disposal when compared to the years before liberation. The monopoly over the grain was premised on the notion of a "surplus," as villagers were compelled to sell any grain above a minimal threshold of subsistence to the state. That threshold varied from place to place and was set at roughly 13 to 16 kilos per head each month, the equivalent of a starvation diet.

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Wemheuer alleges that I do not give a reference to this claim, but footnote 15 clearly refers to the pioneering work of Jean Oi on *State and Peasant in Contemporary China*. Wemheuer goes on to state that "One need not go to the archives to learn that food shortages took place in 1953, 1955 and 1957. The government explained several times that the grain problem was far from being solved and that grain shortages in parts of China were the result of frequent natural disasters." Wemheuer relies throughout his review on official pronouncements and published statistics: he clearly feels that these can be trusted without further verification. But the most severe "food shortages" took place in 1954, not in 1953 or 1955, as is demonstrated on the basis of archival evidence. The archives also show that the "grain shortages" were not the result of "natural disasters" but the direct result of the grain monopoly. As *The Tragedy of Liberation* points out in the chapter entitled "The road to serfdom," huge swathes of the countryside were pushed into starvation, forcing people to sell their children or eat mud as a direct result of the grain monopoly. Wemheuer asserts that "death by starvation did not occur on a massive scale," so I can only imagine that the devastation of the early and mid-1950s do not warrant the qualification of "massive," reserved for the catastrophe of Mao's Great Famine, when tens of millions starved to death. I certainly agree that nothing matched Mao's Great Famine, but that is precisely why I would not erect that catastrophe as some sort of standard by which all other famines can be dismissed as merely incidental. There is another point on which I concur, namely when Wemheuer writes that "Only after 1962 did the government accept that the peasants needed enough food to live." Indeed. To phrase it slightly differently by introducing a double negative, before 1962 the government did not accept that people in the countryside needed enough food not to starve to death.

I do not give enough space to the voices of workers and "peasants," as Wemheuer puts it (I prefer the less derogatory and antiquated term of villagers). But since more than half of the book is dedicated to the countryside, I suspect Wemheuer means something else, namely that there is not enough about what he calls the "winners" of the revolution. Not that they don't appear in my book: as the preface indicates, "much of the regime was founded on far more than mere violence and intimidation" (p. xi). There are large sections on faithful followers: "even as every promise was broken, the party kept on gaining followers… They displayed astonishing faith and almost fanatical conviction, sometimes even after they themselves had ended up being devoured by the party machinery" (p. xii). But Wemheuer has something else in mind: he wishes to nominate not so much individuals, but entire social categories as "winners." It is a rather desperate search, one that ends up by stating that "During the Great Leap Famine, state workers in heavy industry in economically strategic cities were among the best protected groups in the country." In other words, as tens of millions were dying, some of the key workers managed to survive. Did that make them "winners"? Most of them came from the countryside, where their families were being decimated. Wemheuer then proceeds to calculate the number

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of core Party members at four million in 1955, as if these were all "winners." But how many of these got into trouble in the following couple of years? In the wake of the anti-rightist campaign of 1957 alone, one in 15 senior leaders in Yunnan were purged, as I show in *Mao's Great Famine*.

Wemheuer is so keen to argue that the 1950s were not really years of tyranny during which everything that stood in between the state and the individual was dismantled that he appears to misinterpret the outpouring of popular discontent in 1956–57. People were repeatedly encouraged by the Party to speak out and voice their grievances. "Let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools contend," Mao proclaimed. People were given regular assurances that nobody would be held to account for speaking their mind. Yet when they did, what they said so upset Mao that half a million of them were labelled as "rightists." Wemheuer sees what happened in 1956 and 1957 as proof that people were not terrified, rather than as terrifying proof that people were at the mercy of the Party.

I do agree with Wemheuer's conclusion: "Dikötter's condemning of the Chinese revolution in his People's Trilogy requires an academic response that consists of more than a few novel local case studies." Yet so far, even in more than 5,000 words, Wemheuer has not been able to live up to the standards he sets himself. There is not a single "novel local case study" here, as he relies instead on secondary sources and hackneyed official pronouncements. More to the point, his response is so riddled with factual mistakes and misrepresentations that it can hardly be considered "academic."

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