

Mao Zedong and China



If Mao Zedong were to catch a glimpse of present day China, he would surely turn in his grave, except for the inconvenient fact that he doesn't have one. Indeed, his embalmed body is today one of the major tourist highlights in Tiananmen Square. Not only has China embraced state led capitalist-style economic growth, but Mao himself, as kitsch and commodity, 'floods the consumer market', as Professor Rebecca Karl puts it in her excellent new biography. These days 'CCP' could just as easily stand for the Chinese Capitalist Party, rather than the Chinese Communist Party.

Paul Doolan

Rebecca E. Karl, 2010

Mao Zedong and China in the Twentieth-Century World: A concise history.
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THE HISTORICAL STUDY OF CHINESE COMMUNISM, and in particular of Maoism, has been plagued by moralistic, badly researched books that are closer to soap-operas than serious studies: books like Li Zhisui's *The Private Life of Chairman Mao* (1994) and *Mao: The Unknown Story* by Jung Chang and Jon Halliday (2005). The latter supplies hundreds of intimate details about Mao's personal life, from the state of his cotton underwear to his encounters with multiple girlfriends, but the account is based on a huge number of anonymous interviews as well as documents that cannot be traced and checked. Any piece of information that can be used to attack the cult of and personality of Mao is uncritically used, regardless of origin.

Rebecca Karl's marvelous newest book provides a healthy antidote to this gossipy approach to history and can serve as an excellent introduction to the topic for the beginning student, as well as the interested general reader. Her aim, she explains in her short introduction, is to engage the 'academic and market realm' implicitly, placing Mao and China as 'integral to the history of the twentieth century' and positioning Mao as 'central to the history of Chinese and global socialism, as well as central to the history of revolution and modernity'. Furthermore, she hopes to 'reattach Mao to a historical moment of crisis'. I took this all to simply mean that she wishes to embed Mao within the historical context of his times. But I became apprehensive when I read that she wants to understand how 'Mao dared to propose and activate a revolutionary project' and she hopes to recall Mao in order 'to remember possibility against the pressure to concede to the world as it now appears'. Karl concludes this increasingly radical sounding introduction by lamenting the dearth of utopian dreams in today's world. She then quotes Lacanian-Marxist philosopher Slavoj Zizek in what I took to be an attempt to establish her own credibility as an intellectual of the radical left. Most alarmingly she adds: 'I am optimistic, though, something of (Mao's) philosophy, passion, and

historical method can be retrieved for a rethinking of our present'. I began to imagine a new cultural-revolution beginning in the halls of New York University as Professor Karl and her gallant young students are moved to rethink their privileged present through their study of Mao's 'philosophy, passion and historical method'.

But what follows this interesting introduction is a lively, well written, and, as the title suggests, remarkably concise history of Mao and China in the 20th century. Karl succeeds in giving us a balanced portrait of Mao, warts and all. What's more, Karl succeeds remarkably well at explaining the phenomena of Mao by profiling him against the historical background and examining with subtlety the complex interplay of the individual (Mao) and the forces that made, and occasional unmade, him. We are taken through his early life, his love for his mother and his early friendships, his concern for the plight of women and his eventual repositioning of himself from liberal to convinced communist. The alliance with the GMD and the hard years of the civil war and the Sino-Japanese war are vividly described and we understand why Mao reevaluates the Marxist perspective and puts the peasant at the centre of his thinking. The achievements during the key years of the Jiangxi Soviet are summarized, when the communists successfully redistribute the land, mint their own currency, create progressive marriage laws, open schools for children and adults, male and female, and launch a series of hygiene and health campaigns. Surprisingly, the Long March gets short shrift and is summarized in a couple of paragraphs. Karl tells us that, despite later myth making, Mao saw the Long March as a major defeat.

In her chapter on the Yan'an period, from the mid 1930s to the late 1940s, Karl brings us an analysis of the actions taken and successes achieved at improving the lives of the peasants, as well as developments in Mao's thought, such as the concept of 'protracted war' and 'the mass line'. But she correctly points out that some of the contradictions that would later cause so much violence in the People's Republic of China had already emerged at this point, in particular the contradiction between bureaucracy and mass politics. Karl ominously remarks that 'Mao saw bureaucratization as the enemy of revolution'. The good years of the early 1950s are examined, in which 'momentous social revolution' is completed in the countryside

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China's Great Helmsman, Chairman Mao Zedong, gazing eternally to the left. Photo by Xiaming.

while the economy grows at a rate of 16% per annum and industrial workplaces provide 'subsidized housing, cradle to grave medical care, permanent jobs, educational facilities from pre-school through high school'.

Karl's section on the Anti-Rightist Campaign and the Great Leap Forward are excellent for she highlights Mao's huge mistakes but explains these (while not excusing them) as the result of choices made within certain historical parameters. This is surely the task of the historian when dealing with biography; not to apportion blame, but to seek to understand. Similarly, Mao's complex role during the Cultural Revolution is not excused, but is explained. Her argument that this period of euphoric chaos and violence was not simply Mao's attempt to regain power, but was in effect an attack on the party rooted in his increasing hatred of everything that smacked of 'bureaucratism' and 'economism' is convincing. In Karl's words: 'It is said, the Cultural Revolution was launched by Mao to seize state power (...) it is more appropriate to understand the movement not merely as a bid for state power, but as an attempt to seize politics – the power of mass culture and speech for revolution'. It is at this point in 1966 that Mao, described by Karl as 'ruthless' coins the most radical of slogans: 'Dare to rebel against authority'. Yet a year later he ordered the army to crush the young revolutionaries and restore normalcy. As Karl puts it: 'The about-face was total'.

Karl includes a section on the post-Mao period, which she describes as 'the marketization of everything', including the commoditization of Mao. She concludes her analysis of depoliticized contemporary China with the Beijing Olympics, which she describes as the 'reduction of Mao's dream of socialist modernization to a crass fulfillment of nationalist pride'. She concludes: 'Only in repudiating Maoism and everything Mao stood for is it possible for current Communist Party leaders to retain Mao as their fig leaf of legitimacy'.

Although Karl mentions Mao's theory and historical method and obviously considers him to be a thinker of some stature, I am disappointed that I am none the wiser regarding what 'Mao Zedong Thought' actually is. We learn from Karl that it has been described as the *sinification* of Marxism, that is was his 'theory of politics', that it was his simultaneous interpretation of Chinese history and China's present through Marxist categories, and that it became 'the standard for disciplining the Communist Party'. This all sounds interesting, but I would have liked more substance regarding the content of Mao Zedong Thought itself.

Throughout the book, the main narrative is interrupted by occasional 'Interludes', extracts taken from interviews that Karl has made with some people who have experienced the events described. Personally I found these interludes to be arbitrary and they added little extra value. I couldn't see the point of the interview with Sabu Kohso on the Cultural Revolution, particularly because the interviewee is a Japanese born, New York based writer who, as far as I could make out, has never been to China. These interludes fail to appear in the table of contents or the index.

This brings me to some weaknesses in the editing of Karl's work. Edgar Snow is mentioned three times in the book – the first time he is simply 'Edgar Snow', the second time she has forgotten that we've already met him and he becomes 'The American journalist Edgar Snow, who had spent a good deal of time in Yan'an' and the third time we get the repetitive and extended '(Mao's) old friend Edgar Snow, the American journalist who had spent time in Yan'an and written a best-selling account of Chinese Communism in the 1940s for an American audience'. A proper copyeditor would have spotted this. Even the page numbering in the index entry on Snow is incorrect.

Lastly, the book is clearly meant to be an introduction to this crucial episode of Chinese history, yet it lacks a single map. How is the lay reader, the target audience for this book, supposed to successfully navigate through sentences like 'Mao moved from Xiantan to Hunan's provincial capital, Changsha' and 'Mao returned (from Canton) to Changsha and thence to Shaoshan' and 'On the north side of the Jinggangshan Mountains in Jiangxi Province, just east of the provincial border with Hunan, stands a remote and forbidding promontory known as Huangyangjie'. Without a map, these are just exotic sounding but ultimately meaningless words. Karl deserved better from Duke University Press.

Nevertheless, Rebecca Karl has written an admirable volume, has achieved her aims, and her book should become the standard introduction to Mao and China in the 20th century.

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