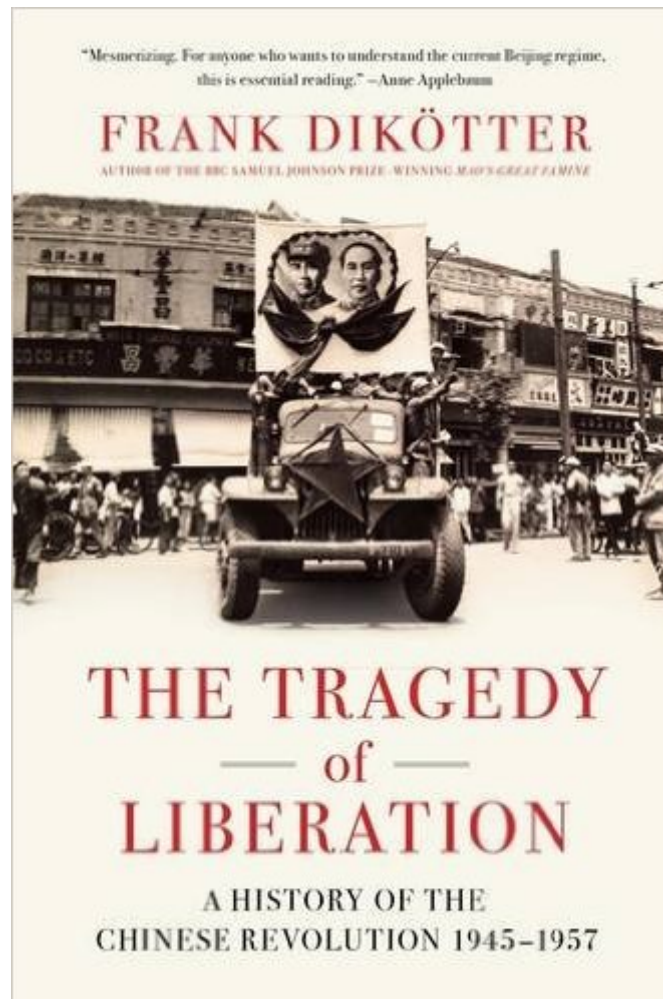


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# The Tragedy Of Liberation: A History Of The Chinese Revolution 1945-1957





immigrants coming from China into Hong Kong, something in the order of 100,000 a month. This latest book by Frank Dikotter, Professor of History at Hong Kong University answered all those questions I had in my mind when I was a kid. From primary source, Dikotter documented how the Communists confiscated land and property from all and sundry - thus my mum said, they will take everything from you except for the food which you have already eaten. They burnt books and heavily controlled the flow of information, controlled what your thoughts should be. Hence my mum said, study hard, retain knowledge, they can't take that away from you. Quotas were given by Mao at every campaign, the Rectification Campaign, the High Tide, in the aftermath of the "Let a Hundred Flower Bloom" campaign for the number of people to be executed.

Halfway through the book, I envisaged giving it 4 out of 5 stars in my planned review on .com. After reading Part IV (the last two chapters), I have taken one star away. For, taken altogether, the narrative seems imbalanced, even at times biased, to me. Let me explain. Parts I & III represent a prosecutor's brief. They contain a detailed description of the Communist state's crimes against the liberties and the property of its people. The writ is long, well substantiated, well structured, and well written. Readers should take in these Parts attentively, for they open up little known vistas. There is a tendency in contemporary history of China to focus on Mao's crimes perpetrated during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, glossing over those of the first period. This is an error: there is continuity in Mao's policies & from Yan'an to his dying days. At heart, Mao was the Great Destructor. Any (admiring) intimation that he practiced "creative destruction" is nonsense. Even though the author's historical method is not explained in detail, the underlying logic is readily understandable. Sub-national archives in China have become available to scholars. The author has mined them extensively in order to "retrieve the story of ordinary men and women who were both the main protagonists and the main victims of the revolution." (Pg. xiv) The subjective experiences are gripping (if often repetitive) tales of hunger, cold, disease, torture, children being sold & and many many deaths. Stories are telling, riveting; but how representative are they of what happened overall? We do not know. The huge diversity of China and the poor quality of records at the time make inferences problematic. Certainly many of the events presented in the book were common.

In this second volume of his planned trilogy on the early history of the People's Republic of China, Professor Frank Dikotter of Hong Kong University plainly calls the "liberation" of China in 1949 a "tragedy." This highly readable account relies on evidence drawn largely from first-hand accounts

and from documents found in Chinese local archives. They challenge the triumphant narrative taught in China's schools and shown on television. This volume's topics include executions; suicides; the selling of children; "voluntary" donations of funds and enterprises to the state; political campaigns that moved individuals to denounce friends and relatives; book burning; prisons and labor camps; agricultural policies that reduced harvests and caused local starvation; ignorance of economics; imitation of Soviet policies; gigantic engineering projects that ground up forced labor; political infighting at the top that caused deaths and ruined lives below; envy, jealousy, and the settling of old scores; and the transformation of "bustling metropolises" into "drab zones of conformity." He outlines the roles of Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and many other Party leaders in the cruelties. So damning are the facts that Professor Dikotter had no need to rely on charged adjectives and adverbs to darken the narrative of man-made calamities. Professor Dikotter's sharp economic analysis relies less on China's unreliable statistics and more on confidential government and Party reports. I particularly admired his terse descriptions of nutrition and smaller grain rations (pp. 212-213), grain spoilage (pp. 220-223), and the stages of collectivization by which China's farmers were made "bonded laborers at the beck and call of the state" (pp. 207-225, 234-237).

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