



## MODERN CHINA

## A People's History of Mao's Revolution

Frank Dikötter asks how and why Maoism came to be buried at the end of the most drawn-out of all mass campaigns: the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

WHEN MAO ZEDONG died, he was not buried, but displayed in a glass sarcophagus. Next, people across the country, from party leaders to villagers, 'buried Maoism'. With this, Frank Dikötter ends the introduction and opens the third volume of his trilogy on the People's Republic of China, which takes the reader from the Seven Thousand Cadres Conference in 1962 to the death of the 'Great Teacher, Great Leader, Great Supreme Commander, and Great Helmsman' Mao in September 1976. This final volume asks how and why Maoism came to be buried at the end of the most drawn-out of all mass campaigns: the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. And it finds its main protagonists in the people, at large and individually.

With elite politics and conflicts as the starting point, this 'people's history' of the Cultural Revolution traces how such politics and conflicts affected individuals, how people were mo-

bilised and how they responded across a selection of China's many and diverse provinces. Familiar narratives structure the book. From the formation of the Red Guards to the Campaign to Smash the Four Olds, the Shanghai Commune, the Mao Cult, the involvement of the People's

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Liberation Army, the sent-down youth, the affair surrounding Lin Biao and his death and the rise and fall of Mao's wife Jiang Qing and her closest allies. Examples from archival and party-internal documents, interviews and a series of English language

memoirs of Cultural Revolution survivors and participants then show what these famous moments on the Cultural Revolution's political timeline meant to 'ordinary people'.

Many of these ordinary people remain anonymous. Their histories and fates are often conveyed through statistics rather than personal trajectories, local contexts and particular backgrounds. They are offset by quite a few published English language memoirs of selected individuals, including Jung Chang, the author of *Wild Swans*. These are colourful, though less ordinary. In the end, the book compels readers to reassess the early 1970s not as a phase of uniformity but as one in which human agency at the grassroots laid the foundations for the economic and social changes commonly associated with Deng Xiaoping and his post-1978 reforms. For beyond sartorial uniformity there were no seas of blue or green ants. People reorganised local economic networks, black markets thrived, some land was privately cultivated, religious activity flourished and plenty of people were listening to foreign radio and reading banned books.

For years after the end of the Mao Era, the country's flea markets were treasure troves of discarded archival documents, handwritten diaries, personal letters and other memorabilia that told a rich history of this extraordinary decade. Together with the knowledge of contemporaries, they made possible a wealth of new studies that vastly extended and complicated what we thought we knew. Dikötter's accessible people's history succeeds in linking national and elite histories with personal experiences and human drama. Still buried under the weight of the Cultural Revolution's political timeline lie more personal histories, ready to be told in future years.

*Jennifer Altehenger*

*The Cultural Revolution: A People's History* by Frank Dikötter  
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