



**Frank Dikötter, Mao's Great Famine, *The History of China's most devastating catastrophe, 1958-62***

Londres, Berlin, New York, Bloomsbury, 2010.

**Lucien Bianco**

Translator: N. Jayaram

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# Frank Dikötter, Mao's Great Famine, *The History of China's most devastating catastrophe, 1958-62*

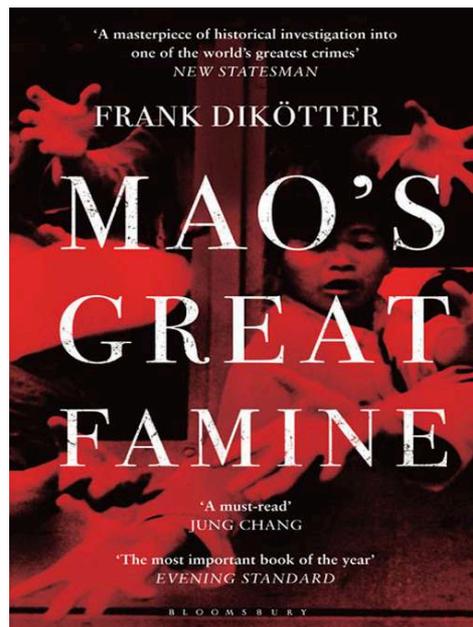
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- 1 Frank Dikötter's work, appearing half a century after the most murderous year (1960), will henceforth be the leading account on the "Great Famine." Like Jasper Becker's book,<sup>1</sup> Dikötter's focuses on describing and conveying to the reader the stark effects of the famine at the local level, whereas a series of other good accounts have concentrated on analysing the decisions and political conflicts at the top of the Communist hierarchy.<sup>2</sup> Unlike Becker, Dikötter is careful with his sources: it is the work of a researcher and not just moving and well-meaning journalistic reportage.
- 2 With non-experts in mind, the first two (of six) parts retrace major events of the Great Leap Forward disaster and famine, rightly stressing the crucial role of the Lushan Conference: "Had the leadership reversed course in the summer of 1959 at Lushan [as they had intended to before the Peng Dehuai affair], the number of victims claimed by famine would have been counted in the millions. Instead, as the country plunged into catastrophe, tens of millions of lives would be extinguished through exhaustion, illness, torture and hunger" (p. 103).



Ironically entitled “Dizzy with Success” – in reference to a famous article of 2 March 1930 in which Stalin called for the inevitable halt to collectivisation and dekulakisation, blaming it on local communist cadres’ excesses – Chapter 11 describes in detail the pre-Lushan period, when Mao had been so disturbed as to declare, “I now support conservatism [and thus prudence]. I stand on the side of right deviation. I am against egalitarianism and left adventurism...” However, he took the latter path six months later. Chapter 16, which concludes the chronological section, contains the newest elements: it eloquently shows how then-president Liu Shaoqi finally took cognisance of the extent of the disaster in the spring of 1961, thanks to an investigation he undertook of his native village in Hunan and the surrounding area. Unlike Mao, Liu resolved not to be misled by local authorities’ versions, and ended up learning from villagers that there had, in fact, been no drought in the region the previous year: the disaster was manmade (*renhuo*), not a natural calamity. That was the position he took subsequently: “The centre is the principal culprit, we leaders are all responsible” (p. 121). It was a sacrilege for which Mao would not pardon him: this chapter anticipates the epilogue, in which the author recalls the famous 7,000 Cadres Conference (January 1962) and the stormy encounter six months later in which Liu told a furious Mao, “History will judge you and me” (p. 337). Convinced that he had found China’s Khrushchev, and fearing that Liu would denounce him later in a “secret speech,” Mao did all he could to prevent such a terrible eventuality: the book ends on this sinister foreboding of the Cultural Revolution.

- 3 Dikötter’s main contribution lies not so much in detailing the goings-on at the top, the broad outlines of which are known, but rather in describing and analysing local situations, enriched by raiding the contents of a dozen provincial archives that only recently became accessible. A series of succinct but dense chapters (the book has 37) vividly depict – dare one say – survival strategies, repressive violence, the fate of the most vulnerable (children, women, the aged), the various ways in which people died, and the places where most deaths occurred: Xinyang (Henan),<sup>3</sup> Tongwei (Gansu), Guizhou, Anhui, Shandong, and Sichuan, not forgetting the *laogai* and *laojiao* victims. By way of conclusion, the last chapter offers a new tally of the number of deaths. Combining local data from various provinces, especially Sichuan, and the rigorous argumentation of Cao Shuji, who concluded in 2005 that 32.5 million premature deaths occurred,<sup>4</sup> Dikötter considers it necessary to add a dozen millions to that figure: a minimum of 45 million deaths, by the author’s calculations (p. 333). Of these, at least 2.5 million were beaten, tortured to death, or summarily killed, he adds.
- 4 Be it local cadres’ powers over people’s life and death, dead rats being fished out of cesspools to be eaten (p. 284), cannibalism (p. 320-23), or hogs trampling on smaller piglets and devouring them (p. 142), the horror that figures on almost every page is presented in a sober and factual manner. Sobriety also informs the description of victims’ comportment: the “masses” are not idealised. They try to survive by all means, even at the cost of others (p. xv, 214 and Chapter 26). One should not be too hasty in characterising as “resistance,” much less revolt, the slightest sign of these desperate measures, even though some collective actions might well merit such a description.
- 5 Meanwhile, there is something lacking in this fine book: a demographic and economic perspective of the catastrophe. The latter is too lightly attempted, the former not at all. Instead, the perspective offered at the outset deliberately leans towards Tiananmenology, stressing with some smugness – for a change – the Mao-Stalin and

then Mao-Khrushchev rivalry. To be clear: there's no question of letting Mao off lightly – he was the prime culprit behind the disaster – or of underplaying (how could one?) his pride, arrogance, blunders, and criminal stubbornness. But instead of once again narrating well-known episodes such as Mao's humiliation of Khrushchev by the Zhongnanhai swimming pool (p. 44) or the shelling of the offshore islands Quemoy and Matsu without notifying Moscow (p. 45), would it not have been more useful to set out briefly that demographic transition had hardly progressed on the eve of the Great Leap Forward? Fertility remained high, and mortality was decreasing at a rate all the more vigorous as generalised prevention (essentially vaccination) and other measures adopted in the previous eight years had reversed, or in certain cases eradicated, most infectious and parasitic diseases. In less than a decade (1949-57), infant mortality had fallen by two-thirds – according to official figures, which were no doubt given to exaggerating achievements. At any rate, infants' survival was better assured in China on the eve of the famine than ever before. Many children who starved to death between 1958 and 1962 would not have been alive in 1958 had infant mortality stayed at the pre-1949 level. (Those who survived would eventually add to worries over the problem of retirees, which is not exclusively linked to the one-child policy). Staying with the pre-Great Leap Forward situation, an extremely high natural growth rate characteristic of the first phase of demographic transition (between 20 and 25 per thousand annually from 1955 to 1957) compounded another problem: feeding a rapidly growing population. Agriculture was facing great difficulty in catering to clamouring mouths. It had been on the verge of disaster many times in the 1950s, *before the aberrations of the Great Leap Forward*.

## NOTES

1. *Hungry Ghosts: Mao's Secret Famine*, London, John Murray, 1996.
2. For instance, David Bachman, *Bureaucracy, Economy, and Leadership in China: The Institutional Origins of the Great Leap Forward*, Cambridge University Press, 1991; Alfred L. Chan, *Mao's Crusade: Politics and Policy Implementation in China's Great Leap Forward*, Oxford University Press, 2001; Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution, vol. 2: The Great Leap Forward, 1958-1960*, Columbia University Press, 1983; Frederick C. Teiwes and Warren Sun, *China's Road to Disaster: Mao, Central Politicians, and Provincial Leaders in the Unfolding of the Great Leap Forward, 1955-1959*, M.E. Sharpe, 1999. Jean-Luc Domenach, *Aux origines du Grand Bond en avant, Le cas d'une province chinoise (Origins of the Great Leap Forward: The case of a Chinese province) 1956-1958* (Éditions de l'EHESS et Presses de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1982) links social malaise and political conflict to the provincial echelons (Henan, one of the worst hit provinces), but his book ends just at the start of the famine.
3. On what is conservatively (or euphemistically) called the "Xinyang incident" (more than a million people starved to death in this region alone between October 1959 and April 1960), see Qiao Peihua, *Xinyang shijian* (Xinyang Incident – or affair, event or even catastrophe), Hong Kong, Kaifang chubanshe, 2009. Qiao had previously undertaken a very good study of a sect active during the Republic in Henan, Hebei, and Shanxi: *Tianmenhui yanjiu* (Studies on the Heavenly Gate Society), Kaifeng, Henan jiaoyu chubanshe, 1993.

4. Cao Shuji, *Da jihuang: 1950-1961 nian de Zhongguo renkou* (The Great Famine: China's population 1959-1961), Hong Kong, Shidai guoji chuban youxian gongsi, 2005.

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## AUTHORS

**LUCIEN BIANCO**

Director of studies emeritus, EHESS, Paris.