

ON THE BOOKSHELF

"The Cultural Revolution: A People's History, 1962-1976"

By Frank Dikotter

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There's a lot of talk today about how America is "more divided than it has ever been", which betrays a level of ignorance of history that is appalling. Rather than discuss the American Civil War, or the War of 1812 era, allow me to nominate the most horrific example of internal strife in a modern nation. It was a deliberate action of the national leader who was not elected but ascended to power, created a cult of the personality, and with deliberate malice set out to completely demolish all sense of normalcy in that nation. It was partly political but also inspired by the same dark forces that inspired Hitler and Stalin, and their protégés in Cambodia and North Korea.

Not merely once or twice but numerous attempts were made by Mao tse Tung to utterly destroy the fabric of Chinese society. This was to create his own bizarre and paranoid version of a "worker's paradise" but a more accurate description would be "worker's inferno".

For example, to control the college students and other young people who might oppose him, Mao would control their destinies by controlling where they lived. If they gave him trouble, he banished them from the cities, where all amenities of life were found. From 1962 to 1978, some 18 to 20 million students were banished from the cities and forced to live in abject poverty in the countryside. Their education was wasted and many committed suicide rather than do without Mao's support. In 1949 the regime has started emptying the cities of entire categories of people described as threat to social order and a drain on public resources. The countryside became the great dumping grounds for all "undesirable elements", including millions of refugees and disbanded soldiers. The only way to survive was to sneak back into the cities and work as cheap labor, relegated to dirty and dangerous jobs.

Mao also pitted one group of loyal young followers against another, constantly changing the rules and standards to generate chaos. "Like the Great Leap Forward, the campaign to Learn from Dazhai was a gigantic exercise in deception. Dazhai itself was a sham, its model villagers the reluctant actors in a play written by the Chairman."

The number of his own subjects he deliberately and callously destroyed is legion, running to tens of millions over the time he held power in Red China. His hubris is astounding: generate a huge problem and then blame his political rivals for all the trouble, piously declaiming any responsibility for it. In that way, the people of China were conned into believing that Mao really cared about them. He only cared about himself. Though Mao died in 1976, his bullies continue to run a one-party state, totalitarian and deceptive.

Be sure to look for the entire award-winning trilogy from Frank Dikotter now in paperback from Bloomsbury. He is chair prof. at U of Hong Kong.