



Rebecca E. Karl. *Mao Zedong and China in the Twentieth-Century World: A Concise History.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2010. 208 S. \$74.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-4780-4; \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-4795-8.

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R. E. Karl: Mao Zedong and China in the Twentieth-Century World

Political intervention rather than conventional biography, Rebecca Karl's *Mao Zedong and China in the Twentieth-Century World* invites us to rediscover the relevance of Mao's politics and thought for today's world. The author is an intellectual and cultural historian, whose previous work has focused on anti-colonial and feminist thought in the nineteenth and twentieth century. The book is addressed to non-specialists; it is succinct and readable, and with five pages of footnotes and two of bibliography, the scholarly apparatus is kept to a minimum. Karl's aim is to place Mao back in the context of Chinese and global history, in ways that enable contemporary readers to understand how and why Mao came to propose and activate a revolutionary project calling every convention so as to remake the world (p. x). Against the tendency in recent works to demonize and dehistoricize Mao, Karl aims to place Mao in the global and Chinese context of the twentieth century. She also insists on the continued relevance of Mao for the history of global socialism, and implicitly at least on his relevance for the twenty-first century world.

The first five chapters – each of them very short – describe Mao's childhood and youth, his political awakening, and his rise to preeminence in the Chinese Communist Party, culminating in the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949. Four longer chapters cover his years as China's supreme leader. Structure and periodization follow the standard narrative of PRC history, taking the Great Leap Forward, the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, the suppression of the Red Guard move-

ment, and Mao's death in 1976 as turning points. A tenth and final chapter covers the repudiation of everything Mao stood for by the post-Mao leadership and China's transformation in the thirty-five years since Mao's death. The chapters are models of concision: whether Karl deals with the complexities of warlord politics or Mao's fraught relationship with Stalin and Khrushchev, the writing is consistently clear and succinct. The focus is on Mao, with a small supporting cast. Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi, Peng Dehuai, Lin Biao and a handful of other leaders are characterized but not fleshed out – nor could they be, in such a short work. Mao's wives make short appearances, illustrating the constraints imposed by the CCP on female revolutionaries, but we are spared long discussion of his private life.

It is a sign of how much Mao's star has fallen since the demise of global socialism that Karl's account reads as iconoclastic, whereas much of it would have passed for mainstream scholarship twenty years ago. For Karl, as for an older generation of sinologists, the essence of Mao's politics was his belief in the revolutionary potential of the masses and his insistence that all revolutionary practice served the aim of transforming the everyday life of the masses. Her Mao is a visionary who opposed elite politics, dogmatism, and bureaucratic rule and who, for all his selfishness and recklessness, remained attuned to the needs and moods of the Chinese people. This portrait differs sharply not only from the Chang-Halliday account of Mao the Monster, but also from the tenor of much recent scholarship. Revisionist CCP historians have de-

constructed Mao, pointing out how little Mao's positions differed from those of his rivals; how closely the young Mao, like his rivals, followed the directives of Stalin and the Comintern; and how Mao's ideological consistency is very much a post hoc construction, created through a process of centering that made Mao's wavering line appear straight and turned the positions of his rivals into deviations from his correct path. Recent scholarship has also demonstrated how much Maoism was a collective creation and how little of substance separated Mao from his colleagues, even at times when Mao lashed out against revisionists and traitors in the ranks. Karl acknowledges this scholarship, but as she admits in the preface (p. x), she is less concerned whether Mao individually wrote or thought all the things attributed to him and more concerned with Mao as a figure in Chinese and global history: a maker of revolution. Fortunately, she does not completely detach Mao the figure from the thinker of possibility whose work reminds us that things do not have to be the way they are from Mao the historical actor. One can quibble with details: her estimate of fifteen to twenty million famine victims in 1959-61 is on the low side (most specialists estimate eighteen to thirty-two million), and the language she uses to describe the horrible violence of the Cultural Revolution is so mild as to come close to a whitewash. But in a short book covering a long time period, choices are necessary, and on the whole, Karl gives a fair account of the human costs, as well as the achievements, of Mao's rule.

The central question to ask of a book that is so obviously political is not whether the author gets this or that fact right but whether her basic assessment of Mao is convincing. For Karl, the essence of Maoism is mass politics: Mao's aim throughout his career was to create the conditions, through political struggle, in which the masses could transform their lives. The underlying assumptions

here are that the conditions in which China's masses lived were so bad that they needed to be radically transformed; that the main obstacle for positive change was political oppression (by patriarchs, landlords, capitalists, imperialists and, after 1949, by Party bureaucrats); that the masses did not articulate their aims independently of Mao and the CCP; and that Mao, more or less consistently, stood on the side of the oppressed and not on that of the oppressors. All of these assumptions are questionable. While we can be reasonably certain that most farmers (who formed the vast majority of the Chinese people) welcomed land reform and, willingly or grudgingly, accepted the formation of cooperatives, we know from dozens of case studies that they universally resented the larger collectives established after 1956. We also know that the continuation of class struggle after all obvious oppressors had been shot, imprisoned, or cowed did not incite popular enthusiasm; most people simply wanted to get on with their lives and resented the politicization of everyday life. Karl's case is strongest for China's women—the group that was most obviously oppressed before 1949 and benefited most from the continuation of the social revolution after 1949. However, even here results are rather mixed, since the Maoist emphasis on class struggle made it impossible to come to terms with repressive gender relations in the family. The main problem, in this reviewer's view, is that Karl does not see how much Mao the politician—in contrast to Mao the essayist—was a statist centralizer, whose central project was not the liberation of the masses but the transformation of China into an advanced industrial and military power, and how much Maoism *in practice* translated into increased grain extraction, longer work hours, less calories consumed, and less personal autonomy for large parts of the population—especially for the rural people who paid the bill for Mao's grandiose dreams.

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