A New Book on Mao: A Quick Q & A with Author Rebecca Karl

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A New Book on Mao: A Quick Q & A with Author Rebecca Karl

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Rebecca Karl, who teaches at New York University and is known in Chinese studies circles as the author of important studies of nationalism during the final years of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) and the development of Marxist thought between the 1920s and the present, has a new book coming out soon. Titled Mao Zedong and China in the Twentieth-Century World: A Concise History, it’s being published (simultaneously in paperback and hardback editions) by Duke University Press. The publisher promises that it will provide readers with a “lively and concise historical account of Mao Zedong’s life and thought,” and it comes with advance praise from Stanford literary specialist Ban Wang and historian Delia Davin, whose many publications also include a short book about the Chinese Communist Party leader. Struck by the challenges Professor Karl has taken on, both of moving from writing for specialists to writing for general readers (that’s clearly the main target audience to her new book) and trying to cover such a big topic in a small number of pages (the book has just over 200 of them), I asked her to share her thoughts on these challenges and other subjects with followers of this blog:

JW: What inspired you to write this book—and to write it in a way that would engage non-specialists as well as be of interest to scholars in Chinese studies?

RK: First, thanks for giving me this opportunity to introduce my new book. Over the years, in my teaching and non-academic life, I have encountered many people – students, family, concerned citizens of various political persuasions – who are baffled and confused about China’s past and its current trajectory. I decided I wanted to write a book for all of those people: the ones who are genuinely interested but perhaps not very knowledgeable about China.

In writing the book, then, it became clear that I needed to explore and explain certain ideological, historical, and political aspects of what made Mao possible in China in the twentieth century, and what Mao himself made possible (or impossible) in the course of his rise to power and rule in China through the tumultuous years of the pre- and post-war periods. To do that properly, I needed to explore the relationship of socialist theory to capitalist global realities; the relationship of Maoism as it emerged to the situation of China; and the relationship between China and the world that was a condition for China’s existence in the world in the twentieth century. No book that I knew of did all of these things to my satisfaction; so I decided to do them by writing this new book.

JW: What was the hardest period to cover in a concise and accessible fashion—and what, if there was one, turned out to be a surprisingly easy period to deal with in this kind of summary manner?

RK: Personally, the worst chapter for me to write was the first. I have no ideological or other political position on Mao’s childhood. He was a kid, he grew up in certain circumstances: these are important for setting a scene and a tone, but I refuse to reduce – as many scholars before me have – his later political persuasions to a father- or mother-complex, or to some other childhood trauma, real or imagined. This made the chapter difficult to approach. However, it is short and I got over it.

In the meat of the book, I found the Cultural Revolution chapters most difficult in terms of topic, but easiest to write. It is the multiple dismissals and distortions to which the Cultural Revolution has been subjected that really motivated the book as a political and historical project. Because of that, I wrote them in a white heat of passion and never looked back. The substantive chapter that was worst to conceptualize and write was the Great Leap Forward one. For this, I needed to maintain a decent line of analytical rigor, even while being very clear about the hideous results of the period. Since the whole book is designed to counter the idea that Mao was just a crazy megalomaniacal tyrant, I needed to deal with the issues raised by the theorization of the socialist economy – which were, after all, the root of the Great Leap period – without dissolving the human tragedies into abstractions. This was a real challenge. I hope I did it justice!

JW: Liang Qichao, an intellectual who was a major influence on Mao, figured centrally in your impressive first book, Staging the World: Chinese Nationalism at the Turn of the
Twentieth Century. Are there other connections you see between that project and this one, despite the stylistic contrast between a work largely aimed at academics and one written with a broader readership in mind?

RK: The real unity between the books is my abiding and ongoing concern to connect what happens and happened in China in the 19th-21st centuries to a global context, which both informed China’s passage and to which China’s rise and challenge has been central, in my view. Liang Qichao, to my mind, was the first to discover what “the world” was and meant in the late-19th and early-20th century. Mao forced himself into a position to do something about that “world.” Thus, while the subject matter and the approaches are rather different in both books, the thematic unity between them is quite strong. Succinctly stated: China cannot be understood without the world, the world cannot be understood without China. I take this proposition in a very literal way. I think people today see this in some intuitive sense – China, after all, economically dominates these days; but how to really understand what it means historically is my focus in the previous work and in the Mao book, as well.