

2011

Book Review: Mao Zedong and China in the Twentieth-Century World

Jeremy Tai

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive>

 Part of the [Asian History Commons](#), [Asian Studies Commons](#), [Chinese Studies Commons](#), and the [International Relations Commons](#)

Tai, Jeremy, "Book Review: Mao Zedong and China in the Twentieth-Century World" (2011). *The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012*. 874.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive/874>

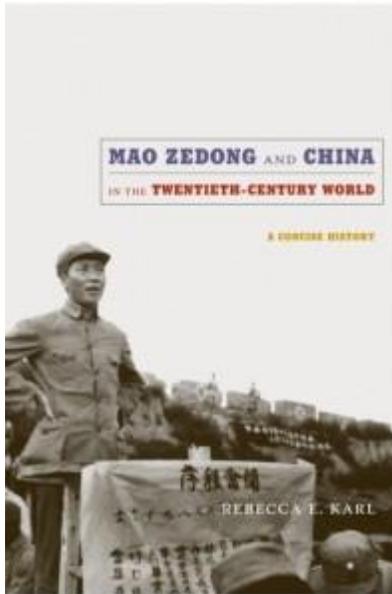
This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the China Beat Archive at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012 by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Book Review: *Mao Zedong and China in the Twentieth-Century World*

January 19, 2011 in [Books by Twentieth-Century China](#) | [Permalink](#)

Karl, Rebecca E. *Mao Zedong and China in the Twentieth-Century World: A Concise History*. Durham [NC]: Duke University Press, 2010. xii, 200 pp. \$74.95 (cloth); \$21.95 (paper).

Reviewed by Jeremy Tai



Mao Zedong may no longer be the sublime object of desire in China, but in recent decades his image has been continuously invoked and consumed in countless guises – both familiar and new – ranging from pop art portraits to the ubiquitous face of Chinese banknotes, from Cultural Revolution kitsch to the ObaMao souvenirs currently found in tourist traps around China. The reproduction of Mao in his various postmodern manifestations suggests a loss of meaning and depoliticization; at the same time, however, the deep-seated clash between sentimental and polemical cultural representations also makes clear that there is still much at stake in the question of his significance. In particular, following Li Zhisui's *The Private Life of Chairman Mao: The Memoirs of Mao's Personal Physician* (1994), biographies have become the preferred medium amongst English-language publications for depicting Mao's life and worldviews. Li set in motion a flood of research into the leader's private life and a broad shift away from the revolutionary presented in Edgar Snow's *Red Star Over China* (1938) and toward the monster portrayed in Jung Chang and Jon Halliday's controversial *Mao: The Unknown Story* (2005). Followers of the cult of personality were well-known during the Cultural Revolution for religious performances of love for their savior, but detractors have been no less willing to get intimate with Mao – though they have inverted the values of hagiography to feature spectacular tales of infidelity, cruelty, and misrule. This spotlight on the deficiencies of Mao's character seems complicit with the naturalization of private self-interest in postsocialist China.

In *Mao Zedong and China in the Twentieth-Century World* (Duke University Press, 2010), Rebecca Karl provokes both China scholars and the general public to reassess the Chairman once again. Karl's book departs from the tendencies to either depoliticize Mao or sensationalize his private life for popular consumption by recentring contemporary discussions around his public role in making revolution. She attempts "to reattach Mao to a historical moment of crisis demanding critique and action" (p. x). Even though Karl does not leave Mao's private life untouched, she explicitly distinguishes her approach from the biographical genre, characterizing it instead as a history modeled after Georg Lukács's *Lenin: A Study on the Unity of his Thought* (1924). Lukács wrote his commemoration shortly after Lenin's death and sought to set his subject's thought within a historical framework. Similarly, Karl skillfully weaves together Mao's ideas and the historical milieu that made possible their conceptualization in a

well-written, balanced and grounded narrative accessible to non-specialists and suitable for use in undergraduate courses.

The book is divided into ten chapters, most of which span about a decade each, and covers the early Mao and the late Mao with equal attention. Rather than documenting life-long expressions of an a priori essence, Karl considers Mao's formative experiences, arguing that his early views and actions "did not indicate the political theorist that he was later to become" (p. 8). Her book begins with Mao's introduction to Western learning and anti-dynastic thought amidst the Qing dynasty's humiliating defeats at the hands of Western and Japanese powers. She then traces the major turning points in the development of Mao's understanding and practice of revolution. In 1918, Mao first became acquainted with Marxism in reading groups at Beijing University sponsored by Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu, but his writings from that year do not indicate a momentous impact (p. 14). It was after exchanging letters with his former classmate Cai Hesen, who was writing from France, that Mao declared his support for Bolshevik Communism in the early 1920s. Later, his work at the Peasant Movement Training Institute in 1925 convinced him of the revolutionary potential of the peasantry. The Nationalists' white terror in Shanghai on April 1927 initiated a period of experimentation with land redistribution, the turn to guerilla warfare, and an important break with the Stalin-dominated Comintern. Mao declared the Chinese Communist Party's independence from Moscow at the Zunyi Conference in 1935. After resettling in Yan'an at the end of the Long March, Mao formulated his theories regarding protracted war, new democracy, literature and art, and the mass line.

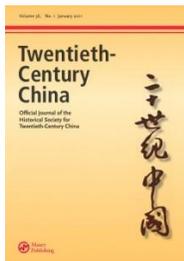
Drawing from a rich collection of Mao's writings, Karl takes his contributions to socialist theory and practice seriously. In her account, revolution is not merely a tool serving Mao's bent for power, but rather a genuine response to material conditions. Moreover, Karl reevaluates the distinctiveness of Mao Zedong Thought. First, she believes Maoism to be more than the sinification of Marxism as suggested by other scholars. Instead of a one-way movement that reinforces the notion that Marxism is always already Western, she suggests a synthesis and says, "It is more appropriate to see Mao Zedong Thought as the product of Mao's simultaneous interpretation of Chinese history and China's present through Marxist categories and the interpretation of Marxist categories through the specific historic situation of China" (p. 53). Second, Maoism always assumes revolution to be a lived experience of everyday life, rather than an abstract body of knowledge imposed by distant elites. For Karl, the concept of voluntarism – construed in opposition to economic determinism – is imprecise. More than sheer will, Mao's concept of politics is inextricably tied to quotidian existence and the struggle to transform the structures of social life (p. 58).

Karl treats Mao's emergence as the leading figure of the Communist Party in a judicious manner, without skimping on discussions of purges, rectification campaigns, dogmatism, and the cult of Mao. Certainly, Mao may have become a statesman but he did not take the seizure of state power to be the ultimate goal of revolutionary mass mobilization. Karl highlights the persistent contradiction between bureaucracy and mass politics, foreshadowed in Yan'an and later shaping the dynamics of the Maoist era (p. 60, 84, 93). The unevenness in the social relations of production engendered under socialism strained relations between Mao and the rest of the Party leadership, with the former eventually advocating struggle against the latter (p. 96). Karl believes the Cultural Revolution should be read not as Mao's desire to take state power for himself but "an attempt to seize politics – the power of mass culture and speech for revolution" (p. 117). Rather than a top-down orchestration by Mao, the Cultural Revolution was also a mobilization of people dismayed with the direction of the country and the Party six years into the post-Great Leap Forward restoration (p. 118). According to Karl, although interpretations have been divergent, what is universally agreed about the Cultural Revolution is its failure to deliver on its promise. The mass politics of workers and rebel students was ultimately betrayed by the People's Liberation Army (p. 119, 133-134). Following a nuanced presentation of the Maoist era, the book concludes with the about-faces witnessed after Mao's death during the reform era. In what Karl considers "the most un-Maoist of all developments in post-Mao China," politics has become monopolized by the state while economics and social development are now monopolized by market-defined success (p. 181).

At first glance, another book on Mao could seem to return us to the history of great men, but Karl is attentive to the unequal status afforded women in the Party and the continued burden of household reproductive labor despite the rhetoric concerning women's liberation. Her feminist analysis points to

not only the rendering of women comrades like Mao's first wife Yang Kaihui into menial and maternal roles, but also the criticisms Ding Ling leveled in Yan'an and during the Great Leap Forward, both of which led to the writer's forced reeducation (p. 66-67, 105). As for model dramas, women were featured as title characters, but it was always an enlightened male Party leader that guided these women to revolutionary consciousness and action (p. 148). Throughout the book, Karl's critical perspective is aided by interludes, composed of interviews with Wang Yuanhua, once an underground Communist cultural activist in Shanghai during the wartime 1940s, discussing his discomfort with Mao's "Yan'an Talks on Art and Literature" and the anti-Hu Feng campaign in 1955; independent writer Sabu Kohso on how he came to be aware of Mao and the Cultural Revolution as a student radical in Japan; and the Chinese scholar Wang Hui on post-Mao politics.

Overall, *Mao Zedong and China in the Twentieth Century World* shares a common thread with Karl's earlier *Staging the World: Chinese Nationalism at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (2002), that is, the reconceptualization of the world in which China is participating. These two texts demonstrate historical identifications with the emergent nationalist and anti-colonial movements in the non-Euro-American-Japanese world after the Sino-Japanese War of 1895, the struggle against the global situation of fascism and imperialism during the War of Resistance (p. 57), and the third world represented by the unaligned nations of the Bandung conference in 1955 (p. 89). In 1971, the People's Republic of China was voted into the United Nations. For Karl, this event marked "the long rise of the PRC from revolutionary internationalist icon to bulwark of the established global order" (p. 151). Against the established global order and the "harmonious society" (*hexie shehui*) of the Hu Jintao regime, Karl's book reminds us that revolutionaries in the recent past staked out dreams of alternative worlds to the present. Recent cultural representations have increasingly cast Mao's life-long project as an aberration, thereby facilitating "disutopia" – what Slavoj Žižek described as "not just the temporary absence of Utopia, but the political celebration of the end of social dreams" (p. xi). Rather than returning to Mao or even redeeming him, Karl uses the late leader to challenge her readers to think beyond our complacency with the order and normalcy of global capitalism.



Jeremy Tai is a graduate student in modern Chinese history at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

© 2011 by Twentieth-Century China Editorial Board. All rights reserved.