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HISTORY AS HUMANITY'S CV: A CONVERSATION WITH FRANK DIKÖTTER

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This wide-ranging and often thought-provoking conversation takes us beyond Frank Dikötter's record of publication in the field of modern Chinese history to look more at the personal experience and background that has shaped his work—his fascination with language, his lack of a “mother tongue,” his permanent status as a foreigner, his accidental encounter with the China field, his views on a host of topics, ranging from the issue of agency, evidence-driven history, archival research, historical memory, the nature of the humanities and the responsibility of the historian to the key driving values of our modern world.

KEYWORDS: *Frank Dikötter, People's Trilogy, agency, archival research, narrative history*

Frank Dikötter has been Chair Professor of Humanities at the University of Hong Kong since 2006. Prior to that, he was at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, for two decades. Educated in Geneva and London, fluent in several languages, Professor Dikötter has had a distinguished career as a historian of modern China. A tireless researcher and prolific writer, he has produced more than a dozen books since 1992, when his first book, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China*, was published by Stanford University Press (a revised and expanded edition was released in 2015 by Oxford University Press). The most recent three books, the People's Trilogy—*Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958–1962*, *The Tragedy of Liberation: A History of the Chinese Revolution, 1945–1957*, and *The Cultural Revolution: A People's History, 1962–1976*—have been published in the last six years. His work has been translated into a dozen languages. In addition, Professor Dikötter has contributed numerous book chapters and articles in journals such as *American Historical Review*, *The China Quarterly*, and *History of Science*. Professor Dikötter's work has pushed the boundaries of knowledge in the field of modern Chinese history on a range of topics: race, medical science, sexual discourse, birth defects and eugenics, the prison system, drug usage, material culture and everyday life, and of course the Mao era in his recent People's Trilogy. Often groundbreaking

in their subject matter and approach, Professor Dikötter's research has won many grants and awards, including in 2011 the BBC Samuel Johnson Prize for Non-Fiction for *Mao's Great Famine*. Among Professor Dikötter's many academic appointments over the years include President of the British Association of Chinese Studies, Director of the Contemporary China Institute, SOAS, and fellow of the Royal Historical Society, Britain. He has served on a number of editorial boards, including *The China Quarterly* and *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (Taylor and Francis).

In April, 2016, I attended Professor Dikötter's lecture on his new book, *The Cultural Revolution*, at the History Department, Princeton University. Perhaps mindful of the People's Trilogy, a member of the audience asked Dikötter why his books are often about dark stories and if he would someday write happy ones. Having recently written some "dark stories" myself, I was curious about Professor Dikötter's work and what has shaped him as a historian. I contacted Professor Hanchao Lu, the editor of *Chinese Historical Review* (CHR), to see if he would be interested in an interview with Professor Dikötter for the Forum of CHR. Professor Lu supported the idea and suggested that I conduct the interview. Professor Dikötter, who graciously agreed to the project, and I met subsequently in New York and Hong Kong in the summer of 2016 to discuss the interview, which was followed by email exchanges in the fall and spring of 2017. Our conversation starts with his lecture at Princeton.

Shao: In April 2016, I attended your talk at Princeton University, on *The Cultural Revolution: A People's History, 1962–1976*, the last volume in your "People's Trilogy." A member of the audience asked why your writing had focused on dark stories and if you would write about happy stories in the future. So let us start our conversation from here, not so much about dark or cheerful stories yet but about who Frank Dikötter is as a person. We often read biographies of well-known writers on the assumption that their life experience shapes their work. But the same goes for historians. While we seek historical facts, research can be intensely personal and emotional, from the very topic we choose to the distance we go to pursue source materials. We often immerse ourselves into a subject matter for years on end, sometimes even for decades. Looking back, what were some of the early experiences that shaped who you are as a person and as a historian?

Dikötter: What motivates an individual to do the things they do? As historians we have to make very general statements about broad historical trends but I suspect that most of us would not be able to point out what it is that makes us tick. I remember walking past the TIYAC building in Taipei many years ago with a friend. It was a dormitory and I spent many months there as a student of Mandarin in the early 1980s. The building looked abandoned and I expressed my fear that it might be torn down. I explained that the village where I grew up in the south of the Netherlands had been completely erased by the Dutch State Mines in 1973. My family was the last one to move out. My friend suggested that this might be the reason why I became a historian. But probably more than anything else I was a keen reader as a young boy. There were many books about the Holocaust in my parents' library. It struck me that to be ignorant of such huge crimes that had taken place only a

few decades earlier would be a sign of unforgivable ignorance. It would smack of parochialism. Maybe that prompted me to find out more.

Shao: There might be some connection between a keen young reader on the Holocaust and the determined writer on the Mao era. But Chinese literati tradition also highly values travel. According to that tradition, a scholar should not only read many thousands of books but also travel many thousands of miles (读万卷书, 行万里路), like China's grand historian Sima Qian from the 2nd century BC who vividly described life in the early Han Dynasty from his observations on the road. Born in the Netherlands, you have studied and worked in Geneva, London, Paris, Oxford, Taipei, Beijing, and Hong Kong and traveled widely, even in your early career. Where did that interest in travel and adventure come from? What is your earliest memory of traveling? How did it contribute to your becoming the scholar you are?

Dikötter: My family moved to the United States when I was only five years old. Like many continental Europeans, they sent me and my younger brother to the local school where we had to learn American English. Back in the Netherlands two years later we had to take extra classes over lunch-time to help us catch up with Dutch. Then five years later it was Geneva in Switzerland with lessons in French. I do not really recall ever being familiar with any language, and the notion of a "mother tongue" strikes me as rather bizarre. I grew up constantly pondering the meaning of words and looking at people talk without always understanding what they were saying. So to some extent you could say that I have always been a foreigner, even without traveling. My brother never left Switzerland and rarely travels outside of Europe. I did the opposite and took myself to different places.

Shao: Being at ease as a foreigner everywhere without a "mother tongue" is probably an advantage for someone who loves to travel and learn languages. When did you first venture out of Europe to go to Asia?

Dikötter: In 1985 I went to China for two years and stopped to spend a month in India and a month in Thailand. It struck me that to be airdropped in China without seeing anything en route from Switzerland would be rather artificial. I have been to Southeast Asia dozens of times since. I guess the key word is context. The more you travel the greater the perspective you acquire. When I was in China I was very fortunate in that the Swiss were the only ones to send students who had already completed their university degrees. In other words there was no obligation to take language classes, and I decided after a week that sitting in a classroom with a dozen other foreigners pretending to speak Mandarin to each other was not very appealing, so I started traveling throughout China. I went everywhere. I spent months on the road, often traveling in the most rudimentary way possible, mainly because I had no money, but also as a way of finding out more about daily life for ordinary people. The highlight was a sky burial in Tibet.

Shao: Perhaps in the future you will write about your travel in those days, Tibetan sky burial and all. That will be very interesting, especially because the China you saw in the mid-1980s has changed so much. But then you went back to Europe to continue your studies.

Dikötter: In 1987 I went to Britain to start a PhD. The fear, again, was parochialism: I felt that French, the language I was most familiar with, was not about to become a world language. So I became determined to learn English. Some of my friends in sinology were set on mastering Mandarin, but I was more interested in

English: that, after all, is the language I would use to communicate, not Mandarin. A billion people speak Chinese, how does it matter that one more person can speak it fluently? I will always cherish English, and I keep on learning, making notes of new terms or expressions. But the travel bug will never go away. In 2006, after twenty years in London, a city I will always love, I moved to Hong Kong. There was a time, before the Cold War, when Europeans who were interested in Asia actually lived in Asia. But so much of academia has become abstract. There are plenty of scholars of China who hardly spent any time in China. I call it armchair sinology. Hong Kong is the place where all the grand theories about 'China' come to crash.

Shao: Perhaps we can return to discussing "armchair sinology" later. But how did your own journey to the China field start? Were you interested in any particular aspects of Chinese history?

Dikötter: I could be flippant and say that I have no interest in China, I am instead interested in modern history (it would not be entirely untrue). When I went to university in Geneva I picked history and Russian. I only studied Mandarin as a minor, very much as an afterthought. I was a fan of Dostoevsky, I devoured everything he wrote. But when I graduated in 1985 I realized that scholarships to the Soviet Union were reserved for Swiss nationals. There were no such restrictions when it came to China, so off I went. At the time I was just happy to be as far away as possible from the familiarity and comfort of Switzerland. But I went to China as a historian, not as a sinologist. All my degrees are in history, not in "area studies," never mind "sinology." A language is a tool, not a methodology. I could just as easily have picked another part of the world. What mattered to me was to try to see the history of the twentieth century from a different vantage point, any vantage point outside Europe.

Later, after I started my PhD in London in 1987, I discovered the term "Eurocentrism": that is what I was trying to get away from. I remember arriving in Tianjin in 1985 determined not to read anything at all. I thought I had read all my life. I was there to unlearn, not learn. I would have done the same thing had I ended up in Japan or Senegal or India. Of course after a while I started reading again to try to make sense of everything I had seen and experienced. But the idea that one has to "like" or "be fascinated by" the geographical area one happens to be studying, in particular as a historian, still strikes me as odd, in particular if it happens to coincide with a one-party state. Surely one can be a fan of Dostoevsky without necessarily "liking" the Soviet Union? Just imagine being a Goethe scholar in the 1930s. The People's Republic of China is not the same as China, and the Chinese Communist Party of China is not the same as the People's Republic of China. I apologize if that sounds obvious. As a historian, I am fascinated by the sheer diversity of human behavior in the twentieth century, that era so appropriately called the "age of extremes."

Shao: China was certainly a different world from Switzerland and a Eurocentric approach often misses the point. Also, twentieth-century China is a rich laboratory to study a broad range of human behavior. Indeed, you have produced a large body of work on a whole diversity of topics, from the fall of the empire to the spread of communism. Your first book is about the discourse of race in modern China. Then you went on to study medical science and sexual identity, birth defects and eugenics, crime and the prison, narcotic culture and addiction, the myth of the "opium plague," and material culture in everyday life. Your most recent three books, which you called "the people's trilogy," focus on the Mao era, on the Communist

liberation of the 1950s, the great famine (1958–62) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) respectively. Your work often emphasizes the importance of studying the voiceless. Do you have a particular interest in the underdog? What are some of the common themes running through your rather diverse studies?

Dikötter: I am definitely not an underdog myself. I have had a very secure, comfortable, and happy upbringing, the kind of background some readers would call privileged (I call it middle class). I think the key that runs through my work is not just the underdog, but the broader issue of agency. My first book, on the discourse of race, looked at how and why racial theories developed by Europeans were taken on board in China at the end of the nineteenth century. The same impulse was behind my book on drugs: conventional wisdom has it that supply determines demand, hence historians have tended to study issues of policy and production. Where are the users? They make choices (and yes, not always in circumstances of their own making, a saying that sounds just a trifle tautological to me). One choice they made was not to take to the alcohol Europeans were so keen to sell. So why opium? And why did some of them shift so rapidly to heroin but not to cocaine once opium was prohibited? Why was cannabis a non-starter?

A couple of years earlier I had published a book on the history of prisons in modern China. Prisoners are a good example of people we tend to think of as the ultimate underdog: they are locked up and the key is thrown away. But every prison director knows that there is no such thing as a “disciplinary project” (Foucault) or a “civilizing project” (Elias).¹ Prisons are not run by guards, they are run by the prisoners, in a frail state of perpetually negotiated equilibrium with guards. And the greatest threat to vulnerable prisoners were of course other prisoners, as powerful social hierarchies were replicated inside the penitentiary.

The interest I developed in a whole range of human reactions in the world of incarceration was replicated in my book on material culture. I was not interested in production, and in fact not even in what some historians refer to as “consumption,” which is a rather problematic term in the first place, if only because it stands in negative opposition to “production.” I was interested in what a whole diversity of users, many of them very ordinary people, actually did with a range of modern objects, from glass and cement to rubber galoshes and enamel washbasins. One of the conclusions was that people in the countryside during the republican era were far less inhibited about taking on board new objects and using them to suit their own purposes than their counterparts in Europe. So delighted by electricity were many customers in China that “the foot-candle intensity is greater in an average small Chinese retail store than it is in many a store of equivalent importance in a small American city,” according to an American investigator writing in 1918,² when in Britain fear of electricity was such that some people refused to allow potentials of more than 50 volts in apprehension of the unpredictable power of the current. A far cry, in

¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage, 1995); Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, rev. ed. (London: Blackwell, 2000).

² R.A. Lundquist, *Electrical Goods in China, Japan, and Vladivostok* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1918): 10–11 quoted in Frank Dikötter, *Exotic Commodities: Modern Objects and Everyday Life in China* (New York: Columbia University Press); also published as *Things Modern: Material Culture and Everyday Life in China* (London: Hurst, 2007): 135.

short, from the conventional view that people in China were somehow “hostile towards alien things.”

People have names, they have stories. We cannot tell all of them, but can we at least try to approach them in a humane way? And can we do so modestly, in the full knowledge that no one approach will be fully satisfactory? I cannot account for what makes me tick, and yet I have to read about how the “disciplinary project,” or the “civilizing project,” or the “rise of capitalism” explains all human history. There is a place for interpretation, and there is a place for methodology, but much of what parades as theory is more akin to dogma: an all-encompassing worldview in which an answer can be offered for everything without too much effort. There will always be a tension between evidence-driven research, of which I am a proponent, and theory-driven research. The problem is not so much that most research is inevitably a bit of both, but that sometimes it tends to be neither. Lack of evidence is covered up with theoretical posturing. According to one statistic, 82 per cent of articles published in the humanities are not cited even once. Probably a good thing too. The humanities is not a science, and we should stop pretending it is.

Shao: I hope we will come back to the nature of historical research shortly. In the meantime, do you see the broad issue of agency differently when you study one-party states in which state control can be especially tight and brutal?

Dikötter: Agency is of particular importance to me when it comes to one-party states. It is those regimes—under Stalin, under Hitler, under Kim Il Sung, under Mao—that reduced people to mere digits on a balance sheet, a resource to be exploited for the greater good. So I am not about to replicate that approach. Not for me the grand theories that see human beings as nothing more than a statistic. Li Rui, one of Mao’s secretaries who was denounced after the Lushan Plenum in the summer of 1959, put it rather eloquently in a review of *Mao’s Great Famine*: in the last sentence he says that the reason for the disaster was that “people were not treated as human beings” (bu ba ren dang ren).³

Shao: But people often reject such treatment. They might be pushed down, but they also push back, in diverse and complicated ways, often out of a sheer instinct for survival, as you have pointed out.

Dikötter: Historians have tended to overlook the extent to which one-party states failed to impose their grand designs, despite the vision of social order projected at home and abroad. The Soviet Union was chaotic, Nazi Germany was disorganized, China under Mao was often on the brink of anarchy. These regimes encountered a degree of covert opposition and subversion that is unheard of in any country with an elected government. When it comes to the Great Leap Forward in particular, the portrait that emerges from archives and interviews is one of a society in disintegration, leaving people to resort to whatever means available to survive. The tragedy is that collectivization forced everyone, at some point or another, to make grim moral compromises. Routine degradations thus went hand in hand with mass destruction. It was not so much what some readers might see as morally appealing “acts of resistance,” or “weapons of the weak” pitting villagers against the state, but what Primo Levi called a gray zone,⁴ one in which those who managed to survive are rarely

³ Li Rui, “Du Feng Ke Mao Zedong de dajihuang,” *Zhengming*, no. 1 (2012): 79–81.

⁴ Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, reprint (New York: Vintage, 1989).

heroes. Of course many people refused to make moral compromises. I remember one man who explained with a straight face that his father refused to steal and died of starvation as a consequence. There are countless cases of suicide in the archives, some of them by women who could not decide which child to feed and which one to starve.

Shao: Moral ambiguity and the blurring of different forces are often overlooked as they complicate the need for a clear and compelling explanation. But that is what makes us human and makes human behavior so fascinating. Another rather complicated issue is memory. You have often commented on the suppression of memory in China and the lack of monuments dedicated to the death and destruction of the Mao era. If in the future China were to become a free society confident enough to confront its past and to memorialize the Cultural Revolution, what would the purpose of such a memorial be? To condemn and protest the violence and madness of the Mao era? To remember the dead? To reconcile the victims with their oppressors? To meditate on the past?

Dikötter: There is a short documentary by Hu Jie about villagers who erect a memorial arch to remember those who died during the Great Leap Forward. Within days the police erased the structure. For good measure, they also arrested some of the villager leaders. But even if China were to become an open and free society comparable to Taiwan, there might still be constraints on how people can deal with the past. Remember that after Franco's death in 1975, a so-called "pact of silence" was agreed upon, meaning that there was nothing comparable to a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Fear of the residual power of the Francoists was one reason for the silence, another the complicity of many ordinary people in decades of repression. Yet despite the fear of reopening old wounds, historians were free to reconstruct the crimes committed under Franco in meticulous detail. I guess that what concerns me most as a historian is the ongoing effort to destroy the memory of those who fell victim to the one-party state. As Elie Wiesel put it, "the executioner always kills twice, the second time through silence." As the case of Spain shows, even in a democratic society there may be implicit and unspoken constraints, but ultimately my concern as a historian is to document the past, not prescribe how people should deal with it. A vibrant and diverse civil society, over the long term, will always produce a whole range of complex responses to the past. Historians should facilitate these debates, not prescribe them.

Shao: Documenting the past for the future is also a challenge, given the vast destruction of life, family, community, material culture, historical sites, social fabric, and human spirit all over China. For instance, today, the former residency of Fu Lei, the renowned Chinese translator and art critic who introduced Balzac and many other great Western writers to China, still stands on Jiangsu Road in Shanghai. But few people who pass in front of that house realize that in the fall of 1966, Fu Lei and his wife, after having been subjected to vicious attacks by Red Guards for days on end, hanged themselves there. They left their savings, a miserly 53.5 yuan, in an envelope to cover the burial costs. And there were millions of other unnatural deaths under Mao, as you have documented. In fact, the entire country could be turned into a museum dedicated to the political oppression and persecutions of the Mao era. Perhaps someday there will be a Chinese version of stolpersteins, those brass bricks laid on the streets of German cities bearing the names of Holocaust victims.

Dikötter: Indeed, when you exit the underground in Berlin on Hausvogteiplatz to go to the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, you can see the name and address of a victim of the Nazi era carved on every step. In fact, it is difficult to wander around any city in Germany for more than about ten minutes without coming across some sort of reminder of the past. A vibrant civil society will always produce more than just one monument. There are hundreds of ways of remembering, marking, and respecting the past.

Shao: Let us return for a moment to the nature of historical research and the use of theory. You have stated that your recent work can be described as narrative history. Narrative history is often considered to be long on description and short on analysis. Is description not a form of explanation and analysis, if the description is guided by “pregnant principle,” as Lawrence Stone pointed out?⁵ In fact, is there any meaningful historical narrative that is not directed by certain principles? How does narrative history serve your purpose? What are your thoughts on the apparent divide among different modes of history writing and the supposed value and hierarchy the historical profession attaches to them—empirical, analytical, theoretical, popular, scholarly, narrative, scientific, and so forth?

Dikötter: I am mainly evidence-driven, not theory-driven. A theory-driven approach is best suited to historians who have limited evidence, which may very well be the case for the distant past or very specific historical situations where evidence has been destroyed. An abundance of evidence will, by definition, resist simple, one-dimensional explanations. It lends itself better to narrative history. One reason is that narrative history can illustrate the huge diversity of human behavior, instead of trying to narrow it down to a hierarchy of “variables” and “determinants.” It tries to see the past from as many different angles as possible. Another reason is that analysis and interpretation in narrative history is implied, rather than stated explicitly. It runs quietly underneath the text. The facts can often speak for themselves, they do not always need a loud voice pontificating about their meaning. Nothing could be more misconceived than the lazy distinction between narrative history and analytical history. Narrative *is* analysis, but one stripped of the pretensions of social science.

Most of all history is not a science. It is a craft and an art. Narrative history aims for clarity and elegance in expression. A lot of history writing is marred by jargon, as pseudo-scientific terms are often used without much thought.

Shao: What are some of the pseudo-scientific terms in the China field?

Dikötter: The term “masses” appears regularly in writings about post-1949 China. Or “peasants.” But there are no peasants in China. It is a term specific to feudalism. As the regime itself proclaims, China is no longer feudal. There are villagers and farmers, and not all of them till the land. There are no “intellectuals” either. The term comes from the regime’s effort to assign a class label (*chengfen*) to everyone after 1949. It is a straightjacket. There are teachers, accountants, artists, journalists, a whole variety of people who do not work with their hands. Of course we need to tell the stories of big intellectual figures like Fu Lei, but a line or two on a village teacher, a word picture of an ordinary clerk can also reveal a great deal about the regime.

⁵ Lawrence Stone, “The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History,” *Past & Present*, no. 85 (Nov. 1979): 4.

Shao: Does narrative history assume a different relationship with the reader as compared to analytical history?

Dikötter: It does. Narrative history is the most basic, fundamental technique historians have to help the reader develop a feel for the past. It stresses empathy, or the ability to understand and share the feelings of others, and hence better to understand the choices people who lived in the past had to make in the midst of extraordinarily complicated circumstances. Narrative history sees people as individuals with complex personalities, not abstract social categories like “peasants” or “intellectuals.” Narrative history also excels at recreating context in all its complexity, from the corridors of power in Beijing down to a small village in the hinterland. Narrative history emphasizes the role of chance and contingency, subtly undermining deterministic, reductionist approaches that rely on grand theory.

Another key point of narrative history is that it takes readers seriously. Indeed, what is the point of writing at all if nobody is going to read us? It is the responsibility of the historian to ask questions about the past and to convey whatever insights may have been gained to readers in a meaningful way. Readers are not stupid. My mum reads, my wife reads, they do not need to be patronized.

Shao: Who are some of the influential narrative historians you enjoy reading?

Dikötter: Of course there has always been a very rich vein of narrative history, in particular in Britain. In our field there is the wonderful Jonathan Spence! But since the early 1990s, a new genre has appeared, as a whole range of historians have started integrating rich archival findings with finely textured narratives, making sure their accounts actually reach a larger audience. I have in mind historians of the Soviet Union such as Robert Service, Catherine Merridale, and Orlando Figes, but others too, say Richard Evans on Nazi Germany or Simon Schama on the Netherlands. Still, there are academics who wish to distinguish between “popular” and “scholarly” history, but it certainly does not apply to this particular genre of narrative history. One could hypothesize that historians who describe the work of others as “popular” tend to produce work that few people read.

Shao: What do you consider as quality history work?

Dikötter: Quality history writing has three components: the quality of the evidence, the quality of the interpretation and the quality of the writing. There is also the quality of the fit between these three components. All of it requires hard work.

Shao: In your research, do you start with a question or an assumption? Could you please share the process in which you engage your research, from identifying a topic to developing an interpretation?

Dikötter: I am all in favor of full immersion into the sources, whether they are oral, printed, or archival in nature. In general the primary sources, not secondary material, suggest new topics. Take racial theories in the late nineteenth century. It would be difficult to read anything by Liang Qichao without stumbling across his almost obsessive concern with classifying humanity into different “races,” although the secondary sources barely mentioned this when I was still a bumbling PhD student. Or famine. Is it really possible to spend more than a day in an archive in the PRC reading on 1959–60 and somehow miss one of the greatest human catastrophes of the twentieth century? Of course we have assumptions. That is why contact with primary sources is so important, as they offer a corrective to our pre-conceptions. We should not look for evidence, but for counter-evidence. I would

never have thought of writing my chapter on “the silent revolution” in *The Cultural Revolution* had it not been suggested to me by access to the archives. In document after document, it appeared to me that in the wake of Lin Biao’s death in 1971, ordinary villagers quietly started to undermine the planned economy, wrenching away from the state some very basic freedoms, including the freedom to trade and plant crops as they saw fit. It seems to me that sometimes students spend too much time thinking about the perfect research topic sitting in front of a computer. It would be better for them to identify a body of primary sources they enjoy working with and then see what fruitful questions might be suggested by the available evidence. Imagine a hunter-gatherer dreaming up the perfect duck à l’orange only to find out that the waterfowl has migrated and oranges are nowhere to be found. Better hunt first and then come up with a recipe.

Shao: Your work is known for its archival research. You and your team have visited dozens of local archives in China to gather primary source material for the People’s Trilogy. Could you please discuss the archival work you have done? Where do graduate students new to the scene start in exploring the archives? What are some of the challenges? The digital age and the tireless efforts by some of our colleagues have produced some excellent databases on PRC history. But what are the conditions for research on the ground, at the county or provincial level in China? What are some of your insights about archival research?

Dikötter: The term “archives” can sound a little stark and intimidating, but doing research is not difficult. If it were so hard, then how would I have been able to gather the evidence for my trilogy, even with the help of Zhou Xun for the first volume? In every reading room where I have spent time there are local historians and students quietly working away. All you need is a letter of introduction stating your name, affiliation, and research topic. You also need a bit of luck. There are several dozen provincial archives and hundreds of county archives. If the requirements of your research tie you to a particular place and it happens to be a difficult one, then you are unlucky. I think it is always advisable to seek a good fit between the evidence and the questions we ask. In other words, as I said above, make sure you find a good body of evidence first and then see what kind of fruitful questions you can ask rather than the other way around. You also need to be persistent. Not every archive will be equally welcoming. There is no need to become discouraged. There are always plenty of alternatives.

I think that possibly the single most damaging factor that has prevented more quality research taking place in archives across the border from Hong Kong are rumors. Armchair sinologists who tell you that the archives are closed, or that most of the files are still classified, or that you need to go through endless paperwork, or that there is nothing really valuable there, or that foreigners are not welcome, or that locals are not welcome, or that publishing critical scholarship will ruin your career, or that digital databases contain all we need. So I have only one piece of advice: do not listen to them. If we compare what historians of the Soviet Union have done with Russian archives to what historians of the People’s Republic have done with Chinese archives, my heart sinks.

Shao: Today, the public, especially the English reading public, has learned much more about the Mao era than before, in part thanks to you and other researchers’ archival work on that era. One might expect that the publication of books such as *Mao’s Great Famine*, which documents in meticulous detail the Chairman’s

role in the Great Leap Forward and the mass starvation on the ground, would direct more attention to Mao's crime against the Chinese people. But some China scholars have also questioned certain aspects of your recent work. You have had a number of exchanges with them, both online and in the printed media.⁶ Meaningful scholarly debate is necessary to the health of the profession. The debate on certain aspects of your work is interesting. Let us first talk about the number of deaths in the famine. The official number is 20 million; Yang Jisheng, the author of *Tombstone*, came up with 35 million;⁷ and your research points to 45 million. Clearly, there is a range. Some scholars, such as Roderick MacFarquhar, simply acknowledge this range and cite all of these different numbers.⁸ Is it possible to treat the number of deaths in the Great Leap Forward as an open-ended question, as the opening of more Chinese archives and research in the future may yield new information?

Dikötter: First of all, no exact number is possible. The nature of the evidence is so disparate that to produce a specific number would be indulging in what is called "specious precision." It makes no sense to say 20 million or 35 million. I do not say 45 million, I say at least 45 million. It could be 50 million. Second, my estimate is the only one based on extensive archival research. All the others are based on published statistics. There are two exceptions to this statement, namely the towering work of Yu Xiguang, who has carried out research in close to a hundred county archives over a period of twenty years and puts the death toll at 55 million.⁹ And of course there is Chen Yizi, who toured the archives with a team of researchers on the orders of Zhao Ziyang before 1989 and also came up with a figure of 50–55 million.¹⁰ I think the next step will be evidence from the Central Archives, which have remained closed so far. Who knows what is in there?

Shao: On the other hand, as all the researches have pointed out that the famine caused massive death, do the different estimates affect our appreciation of the scope and depth of the suffering Mao's policy inflicted on the people? For instance, if Hitler killed five instead of six million Jews, would it make his crime any less haunting? What are your thoughts on the meaning of such statistics?

Dikötter: Every death counts. We have lengthy criminal trials for individual cases of murder, how could one death not count? If victim 5,000,001 is my uncle it matters all the more to me. But the point you make is of course a valid one: these are crimes against humanity on a huge scale, whether we talk about 20, 30, or 40 million. But to me the key point in the book was not only that quite a few of the victims did not die of hunger, as some 2–3 million were beaten or tortured to death, but that food

⁶ See, for instance, the exchange between Anthony Garnaut and Frank Dikötter: Anthony Garnaut, "Hard Facts and Half-truths: The New Archival History of China's Great Famine," *China Information*, 27, no. 2, (2013): 223–46, and Frank Dikötter, "Response to 'Hard Facts and Half-truths: the New Archival History of China's Great Famine'," *China Information*, 27, no. 3 (2013): 371–78.

⁷ Yang Jisheng, *Tombstone: The Great Famine of China, 1958–1962*. trans. Stacy Mosher and Guo Jian (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012).

⁸ Roderick MacFarquhar, "Who Was Mao Zedong?" *The New York Review of Books*, October 25, 2012.

⁹ Yu Xiguang, *Dayuejin ku rizi: Shangshuji* (The Great Leap Forward and the Years of Bitterness: A Collection of Memorials) (Hong Kong: Shidai chaoliu chubanshe, 2005): 8; Jasper Becker, *Hungry Ghosts: Mao's Secret Famine* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996): 271–72.

¹⁰ Becker, *Hungry ghosts*, 271–72.

was used as a weapon by local party cadres against people who were too old, too young, too sick, too weak to contribute to the regime through their labor. People did not starve to death, they *were* starved to death, and that seems to me to be a crucial distinction.

Shao: That is indeed an important distinction, that the lack of food was not the only reason of death. On the issue of death during the famine, there have also been some questions about your interpretation of certain sources. On December 1, 2015, a request on the H-PRC listserv for the original Chinese text of Mao's remarks at the March 1959 Shanghai meeting that *Mao's Great Famine* quoted generated 22 postings in a month-long discussion under the title of "Looking for Great Leap 'Smoking Gun' Document." It was fascinating to read the entire exchange. One person, who could not find in the Hebei Provincial Archives Mao's remark, "When there is not enough to eat, people starve to death. It is better to let half of the people die so that the other half can eat their fill." ("大家吃不饱, 大家死, 不如死一半, 给一半人吃饱") that you cited,¹¹ questioned if the footnote in your book was fake. Another person who went to the Gansu Provincial Archives, with your book in his backpack, followed your endnotes and found one document after another exactly where you indicated they would be. The discussion also highlights the challenge in using and interpreting Chinese archives and their context.¹² Overall, the discussion demonstrates a genuine interest in Chinese archival research.

Dikötter: What amazes me is that there have been a number of detailed discussions about this single one document since the book was published in 2010. I have made the original available on more than one occasion. I deposited a copy at the USC at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Song Yongyi has included it in his database on the Great Leap Forward and Zhou Xun has translated the document in its entirety, all of this before 2015. So what kind of researcher fails to find the document and puts a request on H-PRC in the year 2015? Not a very good one I guess. It took four years after this controversy started for somebody to actually go to Gansu and pull out the document, as I did back in 2007. The most outlandish claims have been made about it, including that (1) it is a fake; (2) I tampered with the document; (3) the document has been tampered with by the archivists because I am a foreigner; and (4) the document is a fake written in 1959 by someone trying to discredit Mao. My greatest critic failed to distinguish this file from another and was unable to do something as simple as note the document's pagination. I guess it only confirms what I said above: theories thrive where evidence is lacking. How about checking the document in the first place?

Now, what does the document actually say? Nothing exceptional. It is a list of interjections by Mao, and at one point he says "When there is not enough to eat, people starve to death. It is better to let half of the people die so that the other half can eat their fill." A number of commentators claim that this was nothing but a metaphor. Mao was really talking about reducing the number of factories in the country, they allege. My answer is as follows. First, what a strange metaphor to

¹¹ Minutes of Mao's interjections at the Shanghai conference, March 1959, Gansu Provincial Archives, 91-18-494, 48, quoted in Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958-1962* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2010): 88.

¹² H-PRC, December 2015, <https://networks.h-net.org/node/3544/discussions/99266/looking-great-leap-smoking-gun-document#reply-100586>.

use in the middle of a famine during a conference specifically convened to discuss the famine. Second, Mao used a similar expression in Moscow in 1957, when he opined that with a nuclear war half the planet would die but then the socialist camp would reproduce quickly and dominate the world. Third, at the same conference Mao makes available 16,000 extra lorries to increase grain procurements from the countryside. He orders up to a third of the crop to be confiscated. He tells his subordinates to get to the grain before the villagers can. And fourth, it is not a metaphor, it is a description of what happened: the grain was taken from the countryside where people starved to death so that people in the cities could eat their fill.

But most of all, even if we go along with the claim that this was nothing but a metaphor, how would it change my book? If I deleted that one sentence, what difference would it make? There is still plenty of evidence to show that the leadership including Mao knew what was happening and decided nonetheless to increase food procurements, all of this in March 1959, several months before the confrontation at Lushan. And finally, so much sinological energy spent on one sentence, it leaves one slightly bemused.

Shao: What is your take-away from the debate? How do we build a professional, constructive academic environment in which scholars feel safe to share their work, to listen to each other, and to make mistakes?

Dikötter: Debate and disagreement is vital in any civil society, as Hannah Arendt pointed out a long time ago. But where do we still have debates? The ability to debate a point is still cherished in Oxford and Cambridge and Leiden. Here is what a debate is: A says X and B says Y. A more scholarly format is A says X and adds a footnote to substantiate the claim. B checks the footnote and says Y. But what happens increasingly in universities is that A says X and B says “A is anti-China!” or “A is not a political scientist!” or “A has funding from the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation!” or “A has falsified the evidence even though I myself have not bothered to check it!” In the United States it seems to boil down to two exclamations: “A is left-wing!” or “A is right-wing!”

The truth is that scholars all too often tend to herd in small groups of like-minded people. Quite a few seem not to see much value in debate. Some denounce, ostracize, or disinvite those who have different opinions. In our own field, to take but one example, Richard Walker, the author of a meticulously researched book on the first five years of communism in China, whose findings have been very much vindicated by recent archival evidence, was hounded out of the field in the late 1950s by Harvard University Professor John K. Fairbank and others.¹³ And today, of course, there is the criticism (and endless hate mail) from the PRC. There is a long-standing political tradition since 1949 of hurling invectives at your enemies rather than debating them. If your enemies are politically wrong they must be annihilated, verbally or otherwise.

Shao: Recently, Paul Krugman wrote about a “deep diffidence about pointing out uncomfortable truths” in our society. In 2000 when he became a columnist for the New York Times, he was discouraged from using the word “lie” about some of George W. Bush’s policy claims, because “lie” was too “blunt” a word for a

¹³ Richard L. Walker, *China Under Communism: The First Five Years* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955); Richard L. Walker, “China Studies in McCarthy’s Shadow: A Personal Memoir,” *The National Interest*, no. 53 (Fall 1998): 94–101.

presidential candidate.¹⁴ Perhaps the “dark stories” you have written can make some people feel uncomfortable. Do you think there is some aversion to uncomfortable truths?

Dikötter: Of course my work makes some readers feel uncomfortable. How many people, including some China experts, have identified the CCP with their own political cause? Call me naive, but it took me several years to realize that some of the scholars who study the Cultural Revolution actually think that they are studying *the* revolution. Before I published *Mao's Great Famine* I used to ask my students why the only two book-length studies of the Great Leap Forward had been written by journalists, namely *Hungry Ghosts*, a pioneering book written in 1996 by Jasper Becker, and more than a decade later the two-volume *Tombstone*, published in 2008 by the Chinese journalist Yang Jisheng. Where were the China experts? Richard Walker wrote about the famine at the time, but he was no longer part of the field. No wonder some of the China experts got annoyed.

Shao: Of course, you are not the only one to point out the crimes Mao committed. Roderick MacFarquhar states that Mao “led his 600 million countrymen into the valleys of death,” that were the Great Leap Famine and the Cultural Revolution.¹⁵ Elsewhere, scholars hold that Mao was “ultimately an evil destroyer,” and his “crime against humanity are no less terrible than the evil deeds of Stalin and other twentieth-century dictators. The scale of his crimes was even greater.”¹⁶ But Mao’s influence is still very much alive not only in China today, in its state ideology and policy, in the academic field, and in both elite and popular culture, but also beyond China. For the most part he is not treated as someone who committed crimes against humanity. Why is burying Mao so much more of a challenge than burying Hitler? Or perhaps Stalin’s case is more compatible?

Dikötter: Roderick MacFarquhar is a first-rate scholar, a gifted writer, and a true gentleman. He pointed out, many years ago, that the Russians could drag Stalin out of his mausoleum because they still had Lenin. Mao is both the Lenin and the Stalin of China. The regime he established is still in place, unlike the Third Reich or the Khmer Rouge. I had a long debate a few months ago with a journalist from the French newspaper *Le Nouvel Observateur*, as they tried to establish which dictator of the twentieth century was the greatest criminal. I stuck with Hitler, and placed him one rank above Mao, but I had to agree that my choice could be seen to be euro-centric. But Mao towers above Stalin, there can be no doubt about that. On the other hand, what really concerns me is the extent to which people all along the hierarchy of power were complicit in the many crimes committed by the CCP. There was Mao’s inner circle, including Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping, and Zhou Enlai, not to mention Lin Biao. All of them had their hands soaked in blood. Mao would never have been able to prevail if he had not received support from his underlings at key moments, for instance at the Lushan Plenum in 1959. And then there were the willing executioners, all those who stepped into the shoes of the millions of cadres purged for

¹⁴ Paul Krugman, “Donald Trump’s ‘Big Liar’ Technique,” *New York Times*, September 9, 2016, accessed September 9, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/09/opinion/donald-trumps-big-liar-technique.html?_r=0.

¹⁵ MacFarquhar, “Who Was Mao Zedong?”

¹⁶ Alexander V. Pantsov with Steven I. Levine, *Mao, the Real Story* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2012): 5, 575.

being ‘rightist’ after the Lushan Plenum and who were willing to carry out orders regardless of any sense of right and wrong. And as in Spain, there is the extraordinarily complex issue of complicity on the part of many ordinary people, whether they merely closed an eye or secretly denounced a family member of neighbor. But the one who started it all was Mao. He is the one who must bear ultimate responsibility.

Shao: It is often stated that we have to learn from history to prevent it from repeating itself. It is a noble calling for historians and a reassuring idea for the public. But in reality, does history writing have such an impact? What are your thoughts on the meaning of history writing?

Dikötter: Like you, I am a little skeptical about the idea that we can prevent history from repeating itself by learning from it. History actually never repeats itself, that is why it is so difficult to spot. But that does not mean that we cannot learn a great deal from it. We should all endeavor to understand how we got to be here. History is humanity’s CV. Better read it carefully if you want to know what it is you are dealing with.

Shao: With humanity’s CV in mind, how do you train the next generation of historians? What do you teach at HKU?

Dikötter: I teach a seminar on dissertation writing for postgraduate students in history. I remember having to take seminars in methodology and theory as a PhD student, but nobody ever taught us how to write, although ultimately that is what we do as historians. I am passionate about clear and meaningful writing combined with relevant, innovative research. I also teach undergraduate courses and adopt a hands-on approach. History is much more than writing endless essays about other historians. Every one of my students, regardless of their level, is asked to carry out a small research project, whether interviewing a relative, working through a batch of documents or using government archives.

Shao: You have given numerous invited lectures and keynote addresses on your work, from academic conferences, think-tanks and literary festivals to professional societies. Do you find people in different professions or from different parts of the world—Paris, Dresden, Oslo, Phnom Penh, Myanmar, Shanghai, Auckland, to name a few—respond to your work differently? What are some of the most memorable experiences in your interaction with the audience?

Dikötter: There are, at heart, two kinds of audiences, regardless of geographical location, namely academics and readers. The best questions invariably come from readers, if only because they actually read. And they tend to have a sense of perspective, which means that they ask far more probing questions than scholars, who are often more concerned with the boundaries of their own field. One of the hardest questions I ever had came from a sixteen-year-old student when I gave a talk at a high school in Hong Kong. She asked me how I coped with reading about so much horror in the archives for so many years on end. It left me lost for words, but it forced me to think. At literary festivals you get to meet people from all walks of life, not just academics, and they bring all sorts of fresh questions and perspectives to the table. There is such a great interest in non-fiction out there, it is a true privilege to get to meet so many readers. Academics can sometimes forget why they write and who they write for.

Shao: If the body of your work represents your intellectual autobiography, or at least part of it, then what is that intellectual trajectory? What is the essence of that autobiography?

Dikötter: I would probably say that the key is a reflection around the two values which have produced the modern world and which were clearly announced in 1789: freedom and equality. Surely just about every salient aspect of the past two hundred years has revolved around how these two values have played out, from the use of racial theories to deny the equality of whole groups of people, the portrayal of women as biologically inferior versions of men, the attempt to police the bloodstream of entire populations by prohibiting specific psychotropic substances, the rise of the prison, the imposition of murderous regimes who promised a utopia of plenty for all or, more positively, the effects of global trade in a whole range of goods and the gradual acquisition of basic freedoms in parts of the world: humanity has come a long way, but it remains a pretty mixed bag, as we struggle with how to reconcile these two competing values.

Shao: Where will that journey take you next? What are some of the projects you are working on?

Dikötter: I am working on the cult of personality seen through the lives of eight dictators, namely Mussolini, Hitler, Stalin, Kim Il Sung, Mao, Duvalier, Ceausescu, and Mengistu. My hope is that my book can be read as a historical handbook on how to build up a successful cult of personality: future dictators can read it, as well as all those interested in exposing them.

Shao: That sounds like a timely project, given recent political developments in the world. Thank you very much for this thought-provoking exchange. We have discussed a number of weighty issues. Let us conclude the conversation on a lighter note. You studied classical guitar for many years at the conservatory in Geneva, Switzerland. Who are your favorite composers? Do you still play guitar? Any other hidden talents?

Dikötter: I have no true talent, I just plod along! And I tend to focus on one thing only, so the guitar has fallen by the wayside. I had many favorite composers, from Bach to Villa-Lobos. I have always regretted not being able to play Maurice Ohana's magical *Si le jour paraît*. But the only true hero and model I have ever had was not in classical music, but in rock, namely Jimi Hendrix.

Selected Publications by Frank Dikötter

The Cultural Revolution: A People's History, 1962–1976 (2016).

The Tragedy of Liberation: A History of the Chinese Revolution, 1945–1957 (2013).

Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958–1962 (2010).

The Age of Openness: China before Mao (2008).

Exotic Commodities: Modern Objects and Everyday Life in China (2007).

Cultures of Confinement: The History of the Prison in Asia, Africa and Latin America (co-edited with Ian Brown, 2007).

Narcotic Culture: A History of Drugs in China (co-authored with Lars Laamann and Zhou Xun, 2004).

Crime, Punishment and the Prison in Modern China (2002).

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The Construction of Racial Identities in China and Japan: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives (edited, 1997).

Sex, Culture and Modernity in China: Medical Science and the Construction of Sexual Identities in the Early Republican Period (1995).

The Discourse of Race in Modern China (1992 and 2005).

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