

Research Assessment Exercise 2020

Impact Case Study

University: **The University of Hong Kong (HKU)**

Unit of Assessment (UoA): **UoA 34 History**

Title of case study: **Groundbreaking Research Based on Classified Historical Archives Brings about New Understanding of Mao's China**

(1) Summary of the impact

Professor Frank Dikötter's research in the official Chinese Communist Party archives has, for the first time, brought to light powerful human testimonies of the deep suffering endured by ordinary people during the Mao era (1949–1976). Compiled into the three books that form his People's Trilogy, Dikötter's research runs counter to generally accepted interpretations of this era and has contributed to a revised view of the scale of the Great Famine. Dikötter's accessible, prize-winning Trilogy has shaped popular consciousness by transforming how non-academic audiences understand this period of China's history: thousands of online ratings testify to the scope of his readership, and hundreds of reviews – both popular and critical – provide evidence of how these works have impacted readers' perceptions of this era. The Trilogy has sold close to a quarter of a million printed and digital copies, been translated into 13 languages, significantly informed a television documentary, and been featured in hundreds of public and radio talks, television appearances, and a study guide.

(2) Underpinning research

The underpinning research was carried out by Professor Frank Dikötter, who has been Chair Professor of Humanities at the University of Hong Kong since 2006. In the first book of the Trilogy, *Mao's Great Famine*, Dikötter describes the devastation caused by the Great Leap Forward and, for the first time, connects what happened in the corridors of power with the everyday experiences of ordinary people, leading him to estimate the number of dead at 45 million, 15 million more than the previously accepted figure [3.3, 3.5]. Drawing on hundreds of previously classified documents, the second volume in the Trilogy, *The Tragedy of Liberation*, examines the years immediately following the 1949 revolution, and challenges historical accounts that present this period as one of peace, liberty, and justice [3.2]. In the third book, *The Cultural Revolution*, Dikötter once again draws on these documents to undermine the picture of complete conformity that is often supposed to have characterised the last years of the Mao era [3.1, 3.4].

The People's Trilogy is based on painstaking archival research by Dikötter in dozens of party archives, most of which had never before been seen by historians, whether local or foreign. It uses hundreds of unique archival documents to piece together the stories of ordinary people in China from 1949 to 1976. For *Mao's Great Famine* alone, a total of six months was spent in the party archives of several dozen provincial, municipal and county archives in the People's Republic of China. The book also used archives from several collections in Moscow, Berlin, Geneva, London and Washington. The same can be said about *The Tragedy of Liberation*. In the case of *The Cultural Revolution*, hundreds of files from ten provincial archives were consulted, as well as over a hundred memoirs, many of them unpublished or self-published.

Overall, the People's Trilogy constitutes a research effort unmatched in both the quantity and the quality of the archival evidence about the Mao era. The archives have gradually been closed down, first after the Olympics in 2008 and then even more drastically after the latest administration took over in Beijing in 2012. The same type of research would no longer be possible, as the majority of archives consulted for the Trilogy have either closed their doors entirely to researchers (Yunnan Provincial Archives, for example), have heavily restricted access to all the files and/or have reclassified vast amounts of information. Dikötter shared many of these files with the University Services Centre at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. As evidence of their importance to future research, the files were digitised to become the core of a database edited by Song Yongyi and others (*Database of Chinese Great Leap Forward and Great Famine 1958–1962*,

edited and compiled by The Editorial Board of The Chinese Great Leap Forward and Great Famine Database, CD-ROM, Hong Kong: Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies at Harvard University; Universities Service Centre at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2013).

(3) References to the research

3.1 Dikötter, Frank. *The Cultural Revolution: A People's History, 1962-1976*. London: Bloomsbury, 2016. (432 pages)

Translations into Chinese, Korean, Brazilian Portuguese, Spanish, Polish and Dutch are in progress.

3.2 Dikötter, Frank. *The Tragedy of Liberation: A History of the Chinese Revolution, 1945–1957*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013. (400 pages)

Translations into Chinese, Korean, Brazilian Portuguese, Polish, Spanish and Dutch.

3.3 Dikötter, Frank. *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958-1962*. London: Bloomsbury, 2010. (448 pages)

Translations into Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Bahasa Indonesian, European Portuguese, Brazilian Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, German, Danish, Swedish, Finnish and Polish.

3.4 Dikötter, Frank. "The Silent Revolution: Decollectivization from Below during the Cultural Revolution." *The China Quarterly*, 2016, v. 227, p. 796–811.

3.5 Dikötter, Frank. "Coping with famine in Communist China (1949–62)." *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire*, 2015, v. 22, p. 917–928.

Grant Funding

1) 'New Approaches to the Mao Era', French National Research Agency and Hong Kong Research Grants Council Joint Award, 2013–2016, HK\$1,920,500

2) 'A Social History of the Early People's Republic', Research Grants Council, Hong Kong 2011–2014, HK\$789,000

3) 'A Social History of the Great Chinese Famine', Research Grants Council, Hong Kong 2008–2010, HK\$660,000

The Trilogy was also the basis for an honorary degree from Leiden University in 2017. In 2017, Dikötter was appointed Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, one of America's most respected public policy research centres.

(4) Details of the impact

In addition to its substantial influence and impact on scholars and professional historians, Dikötter's People's Trilogy has shifted public perception and understanding of the Mao era among popular audiences across the globe, as demonstrated below. His unprecedented archival research has shed new light on the history of modern China—particularly in relation to the Great Chinese Famine, an event about which there are presently only two significant book-length histories available in English. The reach and significance of Dikötter's impact is evidenced by the widespread critical acclaim for his work, its transformative effect on individual readers, and its popular uptake through dissemination in multiple languages and formats worldwide.

Global Media Impact and Non-academic Awards

Dikötter's work has been reviewed by many of the world's leading, non-academic, international English-language media outlets, including the *New York Times*, *Observer*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Economist*, *Newsweek*, *South China Morning Post* and the *Financial Times*. Michael Sheridan of the *Sunday Times* has declared that, "the history books may have to be rewritten after this unsparing reappraisal of China's communist revolution and its legacy of destruction." Graham Hutchings called it, "a major contribution to scholarship on Modern China, that is unequalled, certainly in the English Language" in the *Literary Review*. Shivshankar Menon wrote in *India Today*, "This will [...] be required reading on the Cultural Revolution in the future for all those who wish to understand how China came to be what it is today" [5.1]. These are just three examples of the

dozens of articles, including many in languages other than English, testifying to the groundbreaking nature of the People's Trilogy and how it has shed new light on modern Chinese history.

Mao's Great Famine was awarded the 2011 Samuel Johnson BBC Non-Fiction Prize, the most prestigious non-fiction award in Britain. In 2014, *The Tragedy of Liberation* was shortlisted for the George Orwell Prize, the UK's most prestigious prize for political writing. The Prize was established in 1994 "to encourage writing in good English – while giving equal value to style and content, politics or public policy, whether political, economic, social or cultural – *of a kind aimed at or accessible to the reading public, not to specialist or academic audiences*" [italics added] [5.2]. The prizes and media coverage have contributed to the Trilogy's impressive reach with a wide transnational non-academic readership. The first volume, *Mao's Great Famine*, has sold over 100,000 copies in English alone; and combined sales for the English-language versions of *The Tragedy of Liberation* and *The Cultural Revolution* in the U.S., Australia, the U.K., and India total over 71,000 [5.3]. Volumes of the Trilogy have been translated into 13 other languages.

Making Specialist Research Accessible to Non-Academic Audiences

Thousands of popular ratings and hundreds of unsolicited reviews of Dikötter's work online are evidence of his success in popularising the history of modern China – and, by extension, the fruits of specialist, archival research – for non-academic audiences around the world. The Trilogy has garnered a total of 435 written reviews and over 4,000 ratings on Goodreads (with an average rating of 3.99 out of 5) and 296 written reviews on the U.S. version of Amazon alone, where the books have received an average rating of 4.4 out of 5. Many reviews mention the powerful emotional impact produced by the Trilogy's humanising elements, which have contributed to its effectiveness in fostering historical awareness in lay readers: "[his] description of the famine [...] make[s] the reader imagine for his or herself something of what it might have been like to be part of the tragedy, as both victim, survivor, or perpetrator" (Patrick Dessi, Amazon Reviews, 2015). Dikötter's work has further prompted readers to make meaningful connections between the events chronicled in the Trilogy and their own personal histories. For instance, a 2016 Amazon review by David Wolf reads as follows: "I have family that lived through the period, but in all that time only Dikötter has managed to bring the calamity to life in a visceral narrative that is at turns startling, enraging, numbing, and ultimately heartbreaking." Also evidenced in reviews are changes to people's understanding of geopolitical realities. Another reviewer writes, "the events discussed here taught me a lot about the sociological and economic effects which circumstances such as communism, dictatorship, and military rule had in China. I found this work to be of immense educational value, and I highly recommend reading it." (Sophie, Goodreads, 2019) [5.4].

Dikötter's research significantly influenced the writings of American author Karen Kao, informing her debut novel, *The Dancing Girl and the Turtle* (Linen Press 2017), which she describes as "the first of four interlocking novels to be set in Shanghai from 1929 to 1954," as well as her short stories, essays and a weekly blog called Shanghai Noir. According to Kao, "*The Tragedy of Liberation* is one of the few English language sources on the period. Better yet, it is a lively account written in a style accessible to a layperson like myself." Dikötter's Trilogy and its eyewitness accounts of survivors informed Kao's construction of her novel's historical setting: "Without *The Tragedy of Liberation*, I would not have been able to ground my fiction so deeply into fact nor illuminate my essays on modern-day China with insights from the past." She plans to, "make similar gratifying use of [Dikötter's book] in [her] third novel," in which "the action will move between Shanghai and the eponymous labour camps" [5.5]. Kao's use of Dikötter's work in her novels acts as a multiplier of the original impact by extending its reach to further audiences. *The Dancing Girl and the Turtle* has been favourably reviewed, notably in *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*, where it was described as, "a well-researched and engrossing outset for the next volume of the *Shanghai Quartet*" [5.6].

The Trilogy's sustained popularity and mass appeal is reflected in invitations to speak at public lectures at leading universities (Oxford, Harvard, Columbia, and Yale), and several literary festivals around the world. Dikötter spoke at the world's biggest literary festival, the Edinburgh

International Book Festival, in 2016, where he was introduced to an audience of 160 as having “fundamentally changed the way historians understand China”. Other appearances include the 2016 Singapore Writers Festival, the 2016 Hong Kong International Literary Festival, the 2014 Auckland Writers Festival, and the 2014 Hong Kong Book Fair. The Trilogy has been discussed on radio and television, including appearances by Dikötter on ABC Radio, multiple BBC Radio programmes, a 2016 interview with Andrew Marr on BBC Radio 4, BBC World News, and Deutsche Welle Television. Many of Dikötter’s talks are available online. His interview for the Institute of New Economic Thinking published in June 2016 has garnered over 17,000 views [5.7].

Transnational Dissemination in Multiple Translations and Formats

The reach of Dikötter’s research-based impact has been expanded through multiple translations and formats. The books belonging to the Trilogy are available in print, as Kindle e-books and audiobooks, and have been translated into Chinese, Korean, Brazilian and European Portuguese, Polish, Japanese, Bahasa Indonesian, Spanish, Dutch, German, Danish, Swedish, and Finnish. *Mao’s Great Famine* was made available in a subsidised edition for high schools in Germany. It has stimulated the production of new works, including Karen Kao’s historical novels discussed above, as well as a study guide and an award-winning French television documentary.

Mao’s Great Famine formed the subject of an English-language learning resource, *A Macat Analysis of Frank Dikötter’s Mao’s Great Famine: The History of China’s Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958-62* (2016) by John Wagner Givens (also available in print, e-book, and audiobook versions). The Macat Library publishes, “unique academic explorations of seminal works in the humanities and social sciences – books and papers that have had a significant and widely recognised impact.” The Chief Learning Officer of Macat International stated that *Mao’s Great Famine* was selected as a result of a consultation exercise in which six university historians in the UK and US were asked to submit a list of the 100 titles – academic books or papers – they felt had made the greatest impact on the way in which their discipline was conceived of or taught [5.8].

Directed by Patrick Cabouat and co-written with Philippe Grangereau, *La Grande Famine de Mao* (2011) is an hour-long, award-winning French television documentary, which features both Dikötter and the research he undertook for *Mao’s Great Famine*. It was screened nine times on French television between 2013 and 2016, including on the free-to-air public television channel France 5, and on Belgium’s public-service broadcaster RTBF in 2015. It is still widely available to view online, where it has been viewed thousands of times. One posting of the documentary on YouTube by International School History in January 2015 has over 16,000 views and another posted in October 2015 has over 230,000 views [5.9].

(5) Sources to corroborate the impact

5.1 Article by Graham Hutchings in the *Literary Review*, May 2016. Articles by Michael Sheridan in the *Sunday Times*, May 1, 2016, September 1, 2013 and September 5, 2010. Article by Shivshankar Menon in *India Today*, June 27, 2016.

5.2 *The Tragedy of Liberation*, one of six shortlisted books for the Orwell Foundation’s Orwell Prize: <https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-prizes/about/about-the-prizes/>

5.3 Evidence of sales figures from Bloomsbury.

5.4 Amazon reviews for *Mao’s Great Famine* from David Wolf (7 July 2016) and Patrick Dessi (29 November 2015). Goodreads review for *The Cultural Revolution* from Sophie (16 August 2019).

5.5 Statement from Karen Kao, author of *The Shanghai Quartet*.

5.6 *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal* review: <https://chajournal.blog/2019/07/14/dancing-girl/>

5.7 Interview for the Institute of New Economic Thinking published on June 22, 2016

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N9iVDCzGyiE>

5.8 Statement from the Chief Learning Officer of Macat International.

5.9 Link to YouTube posting <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FcvAz9t3kDw&feature=youtu.be>