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Autocratic Ghosts and Chinese Hunger

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BRYAN CAPLAN

Continuing revelations about Joseph Stalin's reign have led many historians to rank him the greatest mass murderer of our century and possibly of all time. But a growing body of evidence indicates that they are probably mistaken: Mao Zedong, the dictator of Communist China for nearly thirty years, appears to have outdone his Russian counterpart after only a dozen years in power. Two recent books by scholars of Chinese Communism further cement the case that Stalin did not retain the number-one rank for long. One of these works, Jasper Becker's *Hungry Ghosts: Mao's Secret Famine* (New York: Free Press, 1996) focuses on Mao's single greatest atrocity, the Great Leap Forward. The other work, Zhengyuan Fu's *Autocratic Tradition and Chinese Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993) puts Communist China into a three-thousand-year historical perspective, arguing that Chinese Communism married Marxism-Leninism to the native-grown Chinese despotic tradition. Both books are excellent contributions to herculean task of writing the history of modern China.

Becker's *Hungry Ghosts*

Becker's work will come as a surprise to many in the West. Largely as a result of the line taken by the post-Mao government of China itself, the world has come to view the Cultural Revolution as the height of Mao's brutality and tyranny. But terrible as the Cultural Revolution was, it did not approach the horrific proportions of the Great

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Leap Forward. A wide variety of sources confirms a death toll of 30 million or more. The earliest estimates along these lines emerged only after China made its official data available to the West. As Becker explains, “In the mid-1980’s, American demographers were able to examine population statistics which had been released when China launched her open-door policy in 1979. Their conclusion was startling: at least 30 million people had starved to death, far more than anyone, including the most militant critics of the Chinese Communist Party, had ever imagined” (p. xi). Becker’s investigations turn up a broad range of estimates, most of them in the range from 30 million to as many as 60 million unnatural deaths during 1958 through 1961.

How did this gigantic loss of life all come to pass? In standard Leninist fashion, Mao began his rule with a brief but strategically vital “new economic policy” period. He gave the bulk of the Chinese peasantry a few years to enjoy the end of the civil war. But while average Chinese were rebuilding their lives, Mao was busily destroying the latent threat that all *nonaverage* Chinese presented to his authority. With the Suppress Counterrevolutionaries Movement, Mao turned his guns on (and filled his slave labor camps with) Nationalists, landlords, and religious leaders. Similarly, the Land Reform Movement scapegoated better-off peasants, seizing their lands, sending them to labor camps, and executing them. Once these natural leaders of village resistance to the central government were out of the picture, Mao was ready for phase two: forced collectivization.

Stalin’s methods provided the model, but internal Party opposition slowed down the pace for the first few years. By 1956 the job was largely complete: 400 million peasants were pressured into pooling animals, tools, and seed, and accepting the direction of Party authorities. Internal passports were introduced, travel severely restricted, and strict grain quotas set. The results were typical: grain yields fell 40 percent in 1956, livestock was slaughtered to avoid expropriation, and local famines began to appear.

By 1957, Mao appeared willing to compromise with his “go-slow” opponents in the Party. Seemingly in sync with Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization campaign, Mao gave his famous “let a Hundred Flowers bloom” speech, encouraging criticism. But this was only a ruse; after five weeks of relaxed censorship, Deng Xiaoping was appointed to head the Anti-Rightist campaign to purge the self-identified critics. The targets, Becker observes, “were not just intellectuals but also large numbers of high- and low-ranking officials who had complained about Mao’s agricultural policies” (p. 54). By 1958 Mao held a crushing grip on a terrified Party packed with his most dogmatic followers.

Mao’s position was now secure enough that he could impose the Great Leap Forward. Its practical thrust was to copy Stalin’s industrialization program, but there was much more to it. Partly, Mao wanted to engineer a rapid leap into pure communism, eliminating the vestiges of individualism that Stalin had tolerated. Oppressive collectives had to become fully totalitarian communes. “In April, the first ‘people’s commune’ was established in Chayashan in Henan province, one of China’s poorer

regions. There, for the first time, private plots were entirely abolished and communal kitchens introduced for its 40,000 members” (p. 83). The dictator also wanted China’s farmers to switch to a bizarre array of pseudoscientific agricultural techniques derived largely from the Stalinist quack biologist Lysenko. Last, Mao required villages to start producing steel and other industrial products, demanding a quota most could meet only by melting down their existing stock of pots and pans.

At the core of the Great Leap Forward was Mao’s notion that the very idea of scientific and economic constraints was somehow bourgeois propaganda. The Chinese Communist Party put forward a new scientific doctrine: The people guided by revolutionary leadership can accomplish anything. Experienced farmers were told at gunpoint that their outmoded methods of growing food were to be replaced with the scientific methods of Marxism; but in fact, the peasants’ genuine—albeit crude—scientific knowledge was jettisoned in favor of nonsense. “Mao wanted to modernize China but could not grasp the basis of modern thought, the scientific method: that the way in which the natural universe behaves can be proved or disproved by objective tests, independent of ideology or individual will” (p. 308).

The official position of the current government of China since the early 1980s has been that “the famine was 30 percent due to natural disaster and 70 percent due to mismanagement” (Fu, p. 303). In itself this declaration is an enormous confession, but Becker shows that the entire disaster was unnatural, due not to excusable “mismanagement” but to malevolent indifference to human life. The national scale of the famine largely rules out natural explanations; the climate of China was too varied for famine to hit everywhere at once. In the past, starvation on such a scale had always been man-made. But this time the cause was neither civil war nor barbarian invasions but a one-sided war of the government of China against the Chinese people. Forced collectivization greatly reduced food production. Subsequent communalization dealt a further blow to food supplies, yet initially increased food *consumption*, as the communal kitchens, celebrating newfound “prosperity,” provided generous helpings free of charge until the gravity of the shortage became obvious. All the while, enormous pressure was placed on local Party members to upwardly falsify production figures. These faked numbers were then used by those in the higher echelons to estimate villages’ quotas. When the quotas could not be filled, desperate peasants were searched and tortured, forced to hand over hidden grain. As in the Ukrainian famine under Stalin, the most prosperous areas often had the highest quotas and suffered the worst; and as the famine raged, China, like Russia in the 1930s, exported grain.

Becker provides both general figures and regional case studies of Henan, Anhui, Tibet, and other provinces. The details of a helpless people’s frantic search for food and their final resort to cannibalism are sickening. In Henan, Becker recounts,

Deaths were kept secret as long as possible. What food there was was distributed by the collective kitchen and generally one family member would

be sent to collect the rations on behalf of the whole household. As long as the death of a family member was kept secret, the rest of the household could benefit from an extra ration. So the corpse would be kept in the hut. In Guangshan county, one woman with three children was caught after she had hidden the corpse of one of them behind the door and then finally, in desperation, had begun to eat it. (p. 119)

The account of the famine is the heart of Becker's book, but he covers other neglected topics from the Great Leap period. He describes the growth of Mao's system of slave labor camps to an estimated peak population of 10 million. Becker singles out Mao's leading accomplices, most of whom will be less than familiar to Western readers: men such as Hua Guofeng, Zhao Ziyang, Hu Yaobang, and Kang Sheng. And he explains how the famine ended in 1961, with a desperate intra-Party struggle against Mao led by Liu Shaoqi. (Liu and the others who opposed Mao in 1961 were primary targets in the Cultural Revolution that soon followed.)

Last, Becker recounts the scandalous indifference and credulity of Western intellectuals and China experts during the Great Leap Forward. Although much of the American press accurately reported the muffled reports of starvation, the world press largely discounted the possibility. Numerous foreign visitors—from Field Marshall Montgomery to Edgar Snow, François Mitterand, and Gunnar Myrdal—relayed the official Maoist line. For the most part, those mistakes were often culpable. In Becker's words,

It is perhaps unfair to criticize such books in the light of later knowledge, but many of these judgements were based on little evidence. After the Great Leap Forward, China published few statistics and those figures that were made available merely consisted of percentages, none of which could be verified, let alone measured, against independent research. China was an intensely secretive, tightly controlled society, as even her admirers conceded. Too many scholars readily accepted propaganda as fact, and even though more details of the famine emerged in the 1980s, there has still been a deep reluctance to reconsider the question. (p. 301)

Fu's Autocratic Tradition and Chinese Politics

Becker's *Hungry Ghosts* is an intensive study of the most horrific episode in the history of Communist China. Zhengyuan Fu's *Autocratic Tradition and Chinese Politics* supplies context by way of an extensive interpretation of modern China's entire history. His central thesis: "Both in the imperial period and the PRC era the Chinese social order has been characterized by a state-society relationship in which society is almost totally subordinated to the state" (pp. 5–6). China's superlatively autocratic political

tradition is the ultimate cause of tyrannical atrocities such as the Great Leap Forward: “The near total superordination of state over society is the necessary, and often the sufficient, condition for such incidents. In China, it was the untrammelled exercise of centralized political power that brought about socioeconomic disaster” (p. 305).

Fu begins with the Chinese imperial period. As one would expect, he surveys the political and economic history of the major Chinese dynasties. But he also investigates the origins and development of Chinese political ideology, especially the relatively obscure thought of the so-called Legalists. Although Confucianism was often the official ideology, Fu argues that the practical influence of Legalism was far greater. “The central idea of this school of political philosophy,” Fu explains,

is the supremacy of authority and centralization of power in the person of the ruler. Legalists were noted for their unabashed insistence on the total subordination of the people to the ruler. Whereas other schools of thought gave verbal concessions to the interest of the people and justified the authority of the sovereign as ensuring the welfare of the people, the Legalists explicitly treated the people as a means for the glorification of the ruler. (pp. 38–39)

Throughout the imperial millennia, Chinese rulers put Legalist principles into action. Five characteristics in particular stand out (p. 2):

1. State imposition of an official ideology.
2. Concentration of power in the hands of a few persons, often an individual, without institutional constraints on the exercise of that power.
3. Wide-ranging scope of state power over all aspects of social life, including the economy.
4. Law as a tool of governance wielded by the ruler, who acts above legal constraints.
5. State domination over all social organization, with private individuals as subjects and possessions of the state.

Fu puts ideology at the center of his history. After some creative beginnings during the Hundred Contending Schools period (551–233 B.C.), Chinese thought was legally frozen into an official orthodoxy. In 136 B.C., Emperor Han Wudi adopted Confucianism as the state ideology, banned other schools of thought, and set up an imperial university to ensure that bureaucrats learned the approved doctrine. Legalism, however, remained a kind of covert ideology for the elite: “Obviously, if everyone is familiar with Machiavelli’s work, then the prince has very few tricks left to rule over the people. What was lacking in Legalism was provided by Confucian rhetoric, which was never meant by the emperors to be strictly implemented except as cosmetics” (p.

49). This official ideology and proscription of competing schools of thought carried over to later dynasties.

More practical factors enabled the Legalist ideology to bear fruit: China's rulers normally lacked both the decentralized feudal political system and independent religious authorities that European rulers had to cope with. The emperors kept careful control over their bureaucrats with civil service exams, the "avoidance principle" (which prohibited holding office in one's native area), enforced job rotation, and mandatory retirement. Those who occupied the highest echelons of government often lived in mortal terror of their emperor. To take one example, of sixty-four leading early Ming ministers, twenty-eight were executed, one committed suicide, and two were stripped of title. The remaining thirty-three died natural deaths, but similar percentages of their heirs were put to death.

It is equally important to note that statist economic policies were prominent in China from the earliest periods. Government monopolies of manufacturing, especially of salt, iron, and alcohol, were common—not just to raise revenue but to prevent the growth of rival power sources. In some periods, the government monopolized foreign trade and tea. Building on the Ming dynasty's holdings of mines, the Qing dynasty banned private mining. As Fu puts it, "'State socialism' has a long history in China" (p. 93).

After this panoramic survey of the Chinese political tradition, Fu turns to the history of modern China under the Chinese Communist Party. As a prologue, he describes what might be called the interregnum between the downfall of the Qing dynasty in 1911 and the establishment of the Communist dynasty in 1949. Fu is careful to note the typically neglected Communist influence on the Chinese Nationalists, Sun Yat-sen, and Chiang Kai-shek, but focuses instead on civil society during the interregnum. Privately owned newspapers and magazines, voluntary associations, universities, and private enterprise all flourished as never before. Although Chiang's regime was traditionally authoritarian, it never restored the oppression of the imperial era: "Despite, or probably because of, the official corruption and ineptitude of the Nationalist government, the state was not able to control or suppress free expression during the period from 1912 to 1949. Never before in the history of China were such viable private media serving as a forum for popular expression" (p. 164).

All this progress was cut short by Mao's victory. An official ideology was re-imposed—one that Fu finds eerily like the imperial admixture of Confucianism and Legalism:

Marxism and Confucianism share the same elitist bias and advocate the rule of man instead of the rule of law. For Confucianism, the rule of man is realized by the Sage sovereign leading a group of scholar officials. For official Marxism, the new social order is directed by the party leader and his corps of the "most advanced and progressive elements of the proletariat." Both Marxism and Confucianism denigrated the role of law and neglected insti-

tutional constraints on political power. Marxism and Confucianism shared the same belief of malleability of the human mind. The traditional imperial effort of the emperor and his state to “rectify” people’s minds, especially since the Ming dynasty, was revived in a new form. (p. 172)

Although Fu limits his account of the imperial era to a survey of China’s pre-twentieth-century history, the second part of his book is detailed. But the discussion of the imperial era makes it much easier for the Western student to understand the subtexts of modern Chinese history. For example, political criticism was always directed at ministers rather than the infallible emperors. Politics in Mao’s China was no different:

The Chinese propaganda apparatus created the myth of a benevolent modern emperor in the person of Mao. Aside from natural disasters, if anything went wrong, it must have been the fault of corrupt cadre-officials who were exploiting the trust of the caring emperor, or sabotage by class enemies. The prevalent reaction of people when learning of some unpleasant aspect of life was “If only Chairman Mao knew, this would never have happened.” (pp. 192–93)

Reading this passage, one appreciates how difficult—and how important—it will be for China to identify Mao’s reign as one of unmitigated horror and despotism.

Later chapters analyze the political structure and legal system of modern China, then turn to an in-depth study of Chinese Communist political movements from the Yanan Rectification to the Cultural Revolution. Fu’s commentary on the Great Leap Forward and the associated famine covered by Becker is especially interesting:

During the imperial era, it was expected that when such massive famine devastated the country, the emperor would show some sign of remorse and issue a self-accusing decree pro forma. Mao Zedong, however, never made any serious self-criticism. Compared with Chinese imperial tradition, Mao was even less likely to admit his own shortcomings than the emperors, and Politburo members had less courage to stand up for their opinions than imperial ministers. (pp. 305–6)

Fu concludes with a chapter on post-Mao politics. In spite of the June 4 Tiananmen Square massacre, Fu acknowledges that China has entered a “posttotalitarian” phase that might ultimately bring the freedom that China has barely tasted. He plainly hopes that Western democratic ideals will continue to spread in China. The main ideological danger seems to be that Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought will be saved with a nationalist blood infusion.

In the twentieth century the theme of Chinese nationalism, with its statist orientation, often came in conflict with the pursuit of democracy. Proponents of modern Chinese authoritarianism used nationalism as a chief argument for

reviving a strong autocratic state. This was not only true of the authoritarian faction among the Nationalists but even truer of the Chinese Communists. Nationalism, or patriotism or love of the state, made it easier for the Chinese people, especially the intellectuals, to accept a revitalized version of traditional autocracy. The fragile and young enterprise of liberty and democracy in China was often sacrificed in the name of nationalism. (p. 168)

Put somewhat differently, reformers in China and elsewhere have too often fought for the “freedom” of a nation (that is, of a government) to have exclusive control over “its” citizens. Such is a freedom that, as Fu documents, no emperor was unwilling to champion—for obvious reasons. This notion of freedom is Orwellian in any language. The freedom worth having is individual freedom to do with one’s own person and one’s own property what one wishes without interference from the state.

Conclusion

As Robert Conquest’s *Harvest of Sorrow* told the world of Stalin’s greatest atrocity, Becker has drawn our attention to Mao’s most damnable act. Stalin’s Great Terror and Mao’s Cultural Revolution were to some extent intra-Party affairs, and many executed for imaginary crimes against the state were in fact guilty of capital crimes against non-Party members. But Stalin’s and Mao’s collectivization-related famines were ideologically driven mass murders of much larger numbers of innocent people; they were unprovoked wars waged by Communist Parties against nations of unarmed civilians. They are the policies for which communism should be remembered, as Nazism is remembered for the Holocaust.

Fu’s work similarly suggests a comparison to Richard Pipes’s *Russia under the Old Regime*, which investigated the political and social system of czarist Russia. Like many earlier students of Russia, such as the Marquis de Custine, Pipes found Russia to be a deeply despotic society that offered fertile ground for would-be substitute dictators. Fu arrives at an even starker picture of China’s autocratic heritage. Both Pipes and Fu conclude that political culture matters. A clear implication is that it is not enough for former communist countries to return to their older national traditions, because those traditions are part of the problem. A new appreciation for the individual and for individual rights are the ideological imports the postcommunist world needs. After all, to quote Fu’s concluding sentence, “History has shown that it is not men’s social being that determines their consciousness but, on the contrary, their consciousness that ultimately determines their social being” (p. 356).