China’s Cultural Revolution

In the heatofthe sun

HowMao’s call for“disorderunderheaven” tore China asunder

The Cultural Revolution: A People’s

History 1962-1976. By Frank Dikötter.

Bloomsbury; 382 pages; $32 and £25

The Cowshed. By Ji Xianlin. Introduction

by Zha Jianying. New York Review of

Books; 188 pages; $24.95 and £14.99

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IFTY years ago the Great Proletarian

Cultural Revolution, as it was officially

known, plunged China into Maoist mad-

ness. It left well over 1m people dead and

wrecked the livesofmanymillionsof oth-

ers. It was Mao Zedong, then 72, who

launched the “red terror”, asyoungpartici-

pants proudly called it, partly to purge the

partyofofficialswho were sceptical about

his radical policies. He feared that such

waverers might expose him to the kind of

posthumous condemnation that was

heaped upon Josef Stalin after the Soviet

leader’s death. Another of Mao’s motives

wasa Utopian one. He appeared to believe

that people power, no matterhow bloody,

could turn China into a socialistparadise.

The Communist Party does not like to

dwell on whathappened. In 1981itissued a

formal pronouncement on the late chair-

man’srule. Itcalled him a “great” and “out-

standing” leader, butsaid the Cultural Rev-

olution, from 1966 until his death in 1976,

had been a “catastrophe”, initiated and led

by him. That, the party hoped, would be

the end of the discussion. It did not want

Chinese people to examine evidence that

the Cultural Revolution wasnotjustan ab-

erration of Mao’s—the act of a man sadly

misguided by his fanatical wife, Jiang

Qing, and other members of the “Gang of

Four”—butan eventthathad hisimprint all

over it, and one that revealed a profound

flawin Communistrule itself.

A new history of the period by Frank

Dikötter of the University of Hong Kong

describes the Cultural Revolution as “an

old man settlingpersonal scoresatthe end

ofhislife”.But, ashe notes, there were oth-

er forces at work, too: Mao’s colleagues

settlingscores oftheirown; citizens taking

aim at anyone they disliked; and the sup-

port given by different military leaders to

various factions, resulting in widespread

armed clashes.

The bookisthe final volume in a trilogy

about the horrors ofMao’s rule. The other

two (“Mao’s Great Famine” and “The Trag-

edy ofLiberation”) made illuminating use

of numerous local archives in China to

which MrDikötterhad gained unusual ac-

cess. These archives appear not to have

shed asmuch lighton the Cultural Revolu-

tion astheydid on these earlierevents. The

book’s strength is more in the telling: the

interweaving of insight from local docu-

ments with detail from a wide range of

published memoirsand histories.

One work that Mr Dikötter omits from

his lengthy bibliography is “The Cow-

shed”, the story ofwhat happened during

the period to an eminentscholaratPeking

University, Ji Xianlin. It was published in

1998 in China, a rare exception to the party-

imposed reign ofsilence. An English trans-

lation has now been released for the first

time. With dozens ofother academics, Mr

Ji was kept under the thumb ofa clique of

Red Guards who had been his students

and colleagues. For nine months he was

shunted into a shanty—nicknamed the

cowshed—on the university campus. He

was forced to do hard labour, moving and

stacking coal, and was given so little food

he wasalwayson the brinkofcollapse.

In his own introduction, Mr Ji, who

died in 2009, says he felt compelled to

write about his experiences because so

many of the perpetrators of the Cultural

Revolution were now pretending to be

“upstandingcitizens”. Some, he writes, are

“waitingforthe right opportunity to make

agrab forpoweragain”.

For all his praise ofMao, it is very hard

to imagine China’s president, Xi Jinping,

launching another Cultural Revolution.

China atthattime wasdirtpoorand all but

cut offfrom the rest ofthe world; Mao did

not worry about the global impact, or the

economicone, ofthe “greatdisorderunder

heaven” he boasted of having created. Mr

Xi appears to fear chaos more than any-

thing else. And few Chinese people, lead-

ers included, would be willing to sacrifice

the enormous wealth the country has

created since Mao’sdeath.

As Mr Dikötter describes, even during

the Cultural Revolution there were signs

thatcommitmentto itwassometimesonly

skin deep. As general literacy declined, he

notes, “opportunities to read forbidden

literature paradoxically increased”. Red

Guards quietly pocketed the sensitive

works they confiscated; a “thriving black

market” in such material sprang up. An

illicit, hand-copied, book, “The Heart of a

Maiden”, describinga student’s sexual en-

counters, “may well have been one of the

most studied texts after the Chairman’s

‘Little Red Book’,” MrDiköttersays.

But it is the pain, not the stolen plea-

sures, that persists in public memory. In a

foreword to the English edition of “The

Cowshed”, Zha Jianying, a China-born

journalist who went on to live partly in

America, says that during the 70th anni-

versary of the Holocaust last year, her

thoughts often turned to China. A friend

whose family was battered by the Red

Guards told her: “We are the Jews in this

country.” The analogy between the Holo-

caust and the Cultural Revolution is a bit

stretched, Ms Zha says. Still, she encour-

ages readers to imagine the impossible:

that the Jews of Germany still had to live

with Hitler’s portrait hanging in the main

square of Berlin, and their tormentors

wenton unpunished. That, she says, is con-

temporary China. At least to some, mostly

nowelderly, Chinese, itis.