

Weak spots in the Chinese miracle



BOOK REVIEW

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The Dutch historian of contemporary China, Frank Dikotter, is best known for his trilogy — *The Tragedy of Liberation* (1945-57), *Mao's Great Famine* (1958-62) and *The Cultural Revolution* (1962-78). These are all fine works, drawing upon Chinese archives wherever these are accessible and exploring the complex interplay of power and ideology in determining the tumultuous trajectory of modern China. Dr Dikotter's latest offering, *China After Mao*, picks up the China story from 1978 onwards, covering the period of "Reform and Opening Up". It traces the shift in Chinese strategic posture from "lying low and biding one's time" which was Deng Xiaoping's dic-

tum, to the current "striving for achievement", associated with President Xi Jinping. The present volume is also well-researched, with the author scouring provincial and local government archives and more importantly, the extensive private diaries and correspondence of a high functionary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Li Rui (d.1919), whose daughter, Li Nanyang, has gifted these to the Hoover Archives at Stanford University.

Dr Dikotter uses archival material and Li Rui's extraordinarily rich musings to project a picture of a thoroughly dysfunctional, almost dystopian China, whose spectacular prosperity is a fragile house of cards, waiting to collapse into a heap, with some unexpected gust acting as a trigger. The pervasive corruption in the system, which acts both as a corrosive factor and, paradoxically, as an antidote to the regime's misguided policies, is a running theme throughout the book. One comes away with the impression that the Chinese economy is nothing more than a gigantic Ponzi scheme that is just waiting to unravel.

The reality is more complex and the Chinese economy has proved to be far more resilient and adaptable than Dr Dikotter gives it credit for. No Ponzi scheme could have lasted for over four decades and the prosperity of the Chinese people, the excellence of Chinese infrastructure and its advances in science and technology are real and substantive. That these very successes have spawned a host of structural challenges is undeniable, and if unaddressed, may well lead to a "dead-end" as the author argues. To prevent that, the author suggests, requires the CCP "giving up its monopoly of political power and its control over the means of production." It is more likely that the CCP will adjust and innovate as it has done over its entire history. It will not concede even a modicum of its political power.

Dr Dikotter marshals an impressive volume of documentary evidence to demonstrate that no contemporary Chinese leader has had any doubts about upholding the supremacy of the Leninist one-party state. The reform and opening up did not involve the pri-

vatization of state assets, though their corporatisation was accepted with the state continuing to be the largest stakeholder. Even in segments where private enterprise was permitted, the CPC continued to exercise guidance and scrutiny through its party cells and through regulatory controls. It was never in doubt that the public sector would always dominate the economy and both public and private sectors would be answerable ultimately to the CPC.

Dr Dikotter also demonstrates that the expectations of Western countries, led by the US, that the greater integration of the Chinese economy into the global economy and the dense engagement between Chinese intellectuals, scientists and scholars with their Western counterparts would inevitably take China towards some form of liberal democracy, were always delusional. The CPC leadership was clear that China must always be on guard against "spiritual pollution" emanating from the West and, in particular, foil

attempts to subvert the Chinese socialist dispensation through a "jasmine" revolution as during the Arab Spring and the "orange" revolution as in Ukraine later. Democracy and liberal values were always poison to the CPC.

Regime survival is the single most compelling objective of the CPC. It overrides every other consideration. This should have been apparent after the barbaric suppression of pro-democracy demonstrations at the Tiananmen Square in June 1989, but a mix of post-Cold War hubris and the sheer greed of Western business and industry prevented any rethink of

the terms of engagement between China and the West.

China After Mao puts the spotlight on the many vulnerabilities and deep contradictions that bedevil any one-party Leninist state. The local Chinese archives reflect how ingrained and pervasive these contradictions are. It is also evident that their persistence is leading to structural issues which

could lead to an unravelling of an increasingly debt-fuelled economy. We see signs of this in the current property crisis, the shrinking of space for private enterprise and the reassertion of ideology and party control over all walks of life. At the same time, the party has mastered cutting edge technologies to create the world's first truly pervasive surveillance state. As the author points out, the country hosts a "sprawling security apparatus and the world's most sophisticated surveillance system, one that their predecessors would have thought the stuff of dreams."

This latest book by one of the most serious scholars of China is somewhat of a disappointment when compared with his trilogy. There is a surfeit of negative narratives drawn from the archives but no serious effort is made to explain how, despite all its shortcomings, the Chinese system has delivered one of the most successful economic outcomes in recent history. An acknowledgement of its strengths along with its vulnerabilities would have presented a nuanced and analytically more useful sequel to Dr Dikotter's outstanding trilogy.

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