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Book Reviews

The Cultural Revolution on Trial: Mao and the Gang of Four. By Alexander C. Cook. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 292 pp. $99.99, £64.99 (cloth), $34.99, £19.99 (paper), $28.00 (ebook).

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Alexander Cook has written an innovative study of the trial of the Gang of Four (and the associates of Lin Biao) and its meanings in Chinese society in the early 1980s. He compiles all available material about the trial, locating the trial as an example of transitional justice, found in (some) societies that have moved from authoritarian to democratic systems of governance. The more innovative aspect of the study, however, is his comparisons of the trial and its messages with three prominent, contemporaneous literary works: Liu Binyan's 劉賓雁 *People or Monsters?* (*Ren yao zhijian* 人妖之間), Dai Houying's 戴厚英 *Stones on the Wall* (*Ren ah, ren!* 人啊, 人!) and Yang Jiang's 杨绛 *Six Records of a Cadre School* (*Gan xiao liu ji* 干校六记), which, in different ways, are in dialogue with and challenge the authorized messages associated with the trial. Thus, this work combines elements of history and literary criticism and analysis to bring out a fuller sense of the tensions and deeper cultural resonances as the Chinese Communist Party attempted to put the Maoist past aside, if not fully behind it. The result is an intriguing and stimulating work, but one which may oversell its argument and which has a number of minor, but annoying, errors, particularly with regard to its illustrations.

Cook doesn't deny that a transitional justice framework is compatible with the more common interpretations of the Gang of Four trial as a show trial or political trial, but his framing of the trial as a form of transitional justice brings additional insights: such practices "mark the transition to a new era, punishment of wrongdoers, reconciliation and social stability, democracy and the rule of law, and hopes for creating the good society" (23). While this surely fits the Gang of Four trial, what is remarkable, but not remarked on by the author, is that this is the same regime in power, and one that performed comparable (though not nearly as spectacular) forms of transitional justice in 1949–50, in the "trials" against landlords, Kuomintang officials, and collaborators with the Japanese. It may be turning over a new leaf (supposedly), but it is rare when the same regime has two instances of transitional justice.

He argues that "the main significance of the trial is that it represented law as the key to justice" (25). As such, it was part of the claims the post-Mao party-state made to legitimacy, replacing Maoist charisma and the immanent transcendence of socialist/communist revolution. Cook sees the trial of the Gang as the symbolic acme of the post-Mao leadership's attempt to create socialist rule of law in China, which he sees as a fundamental element of bureaucratic rationalization. "Legal reform meant rationalization; rationalization meant modernization; and modernization meant a better, more prosperous future

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for socialist China" (27–28). This also meant that law served fundamentally instrumental purposes. The trial of the Gang, both as symbolic of the rule of law, and as a process marking a new phase of Communist Party leadership, could go only so far. The core tenets of one-party dictatorship could not be challenged, nor could, in a foundational way, the Cultural Revolution and its driving force, Mao Zedong.

Yet, as they have done repeatedly throughout history (though Cook doesn't really discuss this), Chinese intellectuals and literary figures used literary works to challenge the official orthodoxy. Cook identifies Liu Binyan, Dai Houying, and Yang Jiang as doing exactly this. They did not oppose reform, but "the malady facing Chinese socialism was not merely irrationality [as exemplified by the Cultural Revolution], but inhumanity. In this way, popular literature pointed indirectly to the inadequacy of instrumental rationality alone, detached from humanistic values, to a guarantee of a more just society" (28). He thus brings these three writers and their well-known works of the early 1980s into dialogue with the processes and lessons of the trial.

I found the chapters on the three writers and the themes Cook sees in their works, monsters for Liu Binyan, emotions for Dai Houying, and vanity (the vanity of grand plans) for Yang Jiang, as the most engaging in the book. All three writers and their works share a local focus and highly personalistic point of view, inspired by real events and fictionalized autobiographical details, if not pure memoirs. They convey to the reader the consequences of the grand plan of building socialism and carrying out a Cultural Revolution on real people rather than dwelling in the realm of ideas and the march of history. And all three, in various ways, suggest that the damages done in the Maoist period persist to the present and will continue into the future. Human fallibility will doom every grand plan and that fallibility can only be met with human compassion and a desire to find truth.

Of course, the fundamental question to ask of the book is whether Chinese readers of these very widely read works read them the same way Cook did. Did they see them in dialogue with the Gang trial? Did they draw out the same implications from the writings that Cook did? Clearly, they were widely read. Critics hinted at some of the lessons. All received public acclaim (to varying degrees). But did readers juxtapose them against the trial? These works were also roughly contemporaneous to theoretical discussions about alienation under socialism and socialist humanism, so it seems fair to say that the broader points about these works was shared by some significant fraction of thoughtful readers. But did it make a difference? The discussions on alienation and socialist humanism were shut down. Liu was expelled from the party and went into exile.

It is here that Cook might have provided a longer historical focus, whether, for example, on Liu Binyan and Wang Meng writing in the Hundred Flowers about similar issues, or in Republican or Imperial times. The Chinese state, of whatever stripe, has not been all that kind to critical humanist intellectuals trying to illuminate the ways the state falls short of humanist principles. He does briefly in the introduction talk about the persistent dilemma of how to pursue wealth and power without sacrificing core cultural values, and the dualism of Confucianism and Legalism, but more could be done here.

On might challenge Cook's claim that the trial was the most memorable cultural event of the post-Mao transition. Democracy Wall and the rehabilitation of the first Tian'anmen Incident would surely at least rival the trial (3). Zhou Enlai did not call Deng Xiaoping back to office in 1974 (19); it was Mao in 1973. The correct party rank of the Gang from

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highest to lowest is Wang Hongwen, Zhang Chunqiao, Jiang Qing, and Yao Wenyan (not as indicated in the caption on p. 42), and the chief prosecutor, Huang Huoqing, is listed incorrectly as one of the chief associates of Lin Biao in a caption on p. 55; the man in the photograph is Huang Yongsheng.

Despite these issues, this is a stimulating work. While historians and literary scholars have long known that literature is a fundamental way to understand some of the dynamics of Chinese society, it is a lesson that too few social scientists pay attention to. One hopes reading this book will help to change that.

Imperial Bandits: Outlaws and Rebels in the China–Vietnam Borderlands. By Bradley Camp Davis. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2017. xiii, 267 pp. (Illustrations) US$30.00 (paper).

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This book is an excellent study of the powerful armed groups inhabiting southern China and northern Vietnam during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Unlike the newly fashionable studies of Zomia that, often inaccurately I believe, characterize pre-twentieth-century Eurasian borderlands regions as places where communities primarily avoided lowlands states, Davis provides a nuanced, erudite investigation into the strong connections between upland bandit networks and the major imperial states in the region: Nguyễn Vietnam, Qing China, and, later, the French protectorate. In a concise summary of this work, Davis writes, “This book tells the story of bandits, their official allies, and the communities that endured the culture of violence in the China–Vietnam borderlands” (17).

Bandits, of course, have long enjoyed scholarly attention, and, following the strands of scholarship that have revealed the important links between bandits and state power, Davis compellingly argues that bandits were recruited by the imperial states seeking to extend power into the China–Vietnam borderlands. In this way, each imperial state, including the French protectorate of Vietnam, bears responsibility for supporting and prolonging a culture of political violence that terrorized the diverse communities of the uplands. From this important perspective, French rule was not an imposition of rationality and civilization any more than was the Qing intervention, which began in the eighteenth century. In this way, Davis traces continuities in borderlands politics across the disruptive decades of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. State collaboration with bandit powerbrokers, he argues, provided an important continuity, even as French colonial officials imposed new ruling structures and new concepts of sovereign territoriality onto the region. This vital insight, I believe, provides much potential for all who are interested in the larger regional history of the Sino-Southeast Asian borderlands.

The first chapter introduces us to the Black Flags, one of the most important political and military organizations in the region. The founder was Liu Yongfu, a Hakka from Guangdong who had joined the Kingdom of Yanling, a Guangxi rebel organization that was a contemporary of Hong Xiuquan’s God Worshipping Society (Taiping

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