

Justice after Mao: The Politics of Historical Truth in the People's Republic of China

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Yifan Shi

East China Normal University, Shanghai, China
Email: ecnushiyifan@gmail.com

In this volume, historians Daniel Leese and Amanda Shuman explore the applicability of the concept of “transitional justice” within the context of the Chinese “reversal of verdicts” from the late 1970s to mid-1980s. The editors highlight that between 1976 and 1987, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) embarked on a substantial yet often underexamined endeavour to rectify prior injustices (p. 2). What sets the CCP’s approach apart is that scholarship on transitional justice primarily focuses on legal processes during democratization, leaving little room for exploration of “how authoritarian states cope with the legacy of mass injustices committed in their own name” (p. 3). Both editors have noticed that, as exemplified by the trial of the “Gang of Four,” judicial proceedings became heavily politicized, because “the party leadership’s perception of law ... remained subordinate to politics and served as a flexible instrument to achieve present objectives” (p. 5). Nonetheless, they contend that despite the constraints imposed by the CCP, this “politics of historical justice” made significant strides in addressing fundamental questions of how to grapple with the enduring ramifications of past injustices (p. 14).

Interestingly, some findings in this volume cast doubt on the extent of the CCP-led reversal of verdicts, prompting a re-evaluation of the transitional justice framework. In the first part, Zhaojin Zeng’s chapter reveals how ordinary merchants had to adapt to the rapidly evolving political landscape during both the Mao and Deng eras in order to assert their property rights. While in the early 1950s, employing “revolutionary-style tactics” such as revealing one’s political background was rather effective, these tactics lost relevance by the 1980s. Notably, this shift was less about adherence to “actual law” and more rooted in the enduring belief in the government’s role in China’s economic affairs (pp. 41–42). Similarly, Puck Engman’s analysis of property restitution during house raids in Shanghai unveils that post-Mao restitution efforts, stemming from the Cultural Revolution, did not result from the recognition of private ownership but from evolving standards, notably the broadening definition of the “people” (p. 72). Qin Shao’s interviews with Shanghai residents highlight that the purpose of the post-Mao rehabilitation “was to support the CCP’s own legitimacy, not exactly to serve justice to the people” (p. 94).

In the second part, Guoqing Song and Long Yang delve into micro-level case studies that illuminate the intricate mechanics of the rehabilitation process. Song contends that while rehabilitation did restore the public reputation of victims, it remained fundamentally “an act of discretionary benevolence of paternalistic rulers” (p. 107) as the CCP did not formally recognize the victims’ right to make their own requests. Yang’s research on the re-examination of corruption cases during the Socialist Education Movement underscores the CCP’s formidable influence in deciding the reinstatement of Party membership for rural cadres. These micro-level case studies shed light on the power dynamics and complexities inherent in the rehabilitation process.

The chapters in the final two parts cover a diverse array of topics, all centred around the competition among various agencies to shape narratives of the past. One example is the local initiatives surrounding the compilation and publication of books about Tao Zhu’s role during the radical land reform in Guangdong. This illustrates “both the way local narratives on party history could emerge



in the post-Mao period and the limited ability of such narratives to challenge those of the Center” (p. 149). Another aspect is the CCP’s deliberate efforts to erase all traces of the “Gang of Four” within the publishing sector, reflecting the enduring nature of the party-state’s control over public information. Additionally, the book explores the enduring memories of both those who perpetrated and those who endured atrocities during the Mao era, illuminating the prolonged controversies that persist to this day. The state’s current reluctance to engage in public discourse about its past errors further underscores the lasting impact of these contentious issues.

This volume exemplifies the remarkable quality of historical research on post-Mao China, with contributors drawing from a diverse array of primary sources. These sources include official records, grassroots materials, oral interviews and rare documents from the Maoist Legacy Project database. The official “history of the Reform and Opening-up,” promoted by the CCP as one of the “four histories,” aims to emphasize the Party’s success in achieving economic growth and social stability without adopting a “Western-style” democratic political system. This volume, however, counters this positive narrative by providing detailed accounts, particularly those of ordinary individuals, offering a more nuanced perspective.

My main critique of this volume centres on its overreliance on the “transitional justice” framework. As Leese states, the applicability of “transitional justice” to the Chinese case is contingent on the “the definition of the concept” (p. 286). This semantic approach can be unsatisfactory as it may limit deeper theoretical exploration. In this regard, “transitional justice” might not be the most suitable framework for discussing the post-Mao reversal of verdicts due to fundamental differences between the two. Conclusions, such as the assessment that the rehabilitation process in the early 1980s was constrained and characterized by paternalism, may appear less striking, particularly when considering the wealth of new primary sources consulted by the contributors in this volume. Instead of drawing comparisons between post-Mao China and transitional regimes, a more viable approach might involve a comparative study of China in the 1980s and the “normalization” period in Eastern Europe. Such an approach could lead to fresh inquiries, like understanding how the CCP convinced the people that things were returning to “normal.” Nonetheless, this book is an essential addition to the library of anyone with an interest in post-Mao China and the judicial processes in authoritarian states.

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The Central Politics School and Local Governance in Nationalist China: Toward a Statecraft Beyond Science

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Anatol E. Klass

University of California, Berkeley, CA, USA
Email: anatol.klass@berkeley.edu

Historians of modern China have long debated the successes and, more often, the failures of Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist government during its brief period in power on the Chinese mainland. The debate often hinges on the question of why the Kuomintang (KMT) failed to maintain political control over China in the run-up to the Civil War, with some scholars highlighting the “seeds of