If Mao Zedong were to catch a glimpse of present day China, he would surely turn in his grave, except for the inconvenient fact that he doesn’t have one. Indeed, his embalmed body is today one of the major tourist highlights in Tiananmen Square. Not only has China embraced state-led capitalist-style economic growth, but Mao himself, as kitsch and commodity, ‘floods the consumer market’, as Professor Rebecca Karl puts it in her excellent new biography. These days ‘CCP’ could just as easily stand for the Chinese Capitalist Party, rather than the Chinese Communist Party.

Karl succeeds remarkably well at explaining the phenomenon of Mao by profiling him against the historical background and examining with subtlety the complex interplay of the individual (Mao) and the forces that made, and occasional unmade, him. Karl succeeds in giving us a balanced portrait of Mao, warts and all. What’s more, Karl has made with some people who have experienced the later myth making, Mao saw bureaucratization as the enemy of revolution. Karl ominously remarks that disciplining the Communist Party. This all sounds interesting, but as an attempt to seize politics – the power of mass culture and speech for revolution’. It is at this point in 1966 that Mao, described by Karl as ‘ruthless’ coins the most radical of slogans: ‘Dare to rebel against authority’. Yet a year later he ordered the anti-revolutionary ____

Throughout the book, the main narrative is interrupted by occasional ‘Interludes’, extracts taken from interviews that Karl has made with some people who have experienced the events described. Personally I found these interludes to be arbitrary and they added little extra value. I couldn’t see the point of the interview with Saba Koho on the Cultural Revolution, particularly because the interviewee is a Japanese journalist who had spent time in Yan’an and written a best-selling account of Chinese Communism in the 1940s for an American audience. A proper copyeditor would have spotted this. Even the page numbering in the index entry on Snow has never been to China. These interludes fail to appear in the table of contents or the index.

This brings me to some weaknesses in the editing of Karl’s work. Edgar Snow is mentioned three times in the book – the first time he is simply ‘Edgar Snow’, the second time she has forgotten that we’ve already met him and he becomes ‘The American journalist Edgar Snow, who had spent a good deal of time in Yan’an’ and the third time we get the repetitive and extended (Mao’s old friend Edgar Snow, the American journalist who had spent time in Yan’an and written a best-selling account of Chinese Communism in the 1940s for an American audience). A proper copyeditor would have spotted this. Even the page numbering in the index entry on Snow is incorrect.

Lastly, the book is clearly meant to be an introduction to this crucial episode of Chinese history, yet it is lacking a single map. How is the lay reader, the target audience for this book, supposed to successfully navigate through sentences like ‘Mao moved from Xiantan to Hunan’s provincial capital, Changsha’ and ‘Mao returned (from Canton) to Changsha and thence to Shaoxing’ when the north side of the Jinggangshan Mountains in Jiangxi Province, just east of the provincial border with Hunan, stands a remote and forbidding mountain. How is the lay reader, the target audience for this book, supposed to successfully navigate through sentences like ‘Mao moved from Xiantan to Hunan’s provincial capital, Changsha’ and ‘Mao returned (from Canton) to Changsha and thence to Shaoxing’ when the north side of the Jinggangshan Mountains in Jiangxi Province, just east of the provincial border with Hunan, stands a remote and forbidding mountain. Without a map, these are just exotically sounding but ultimately meaningless words. Karl deserved better from Duke University Press.

Nevertheless, Rebecca Karl has written an admirable volume, has achieved her aims, and her book should become the standard introduction to Mao and China in the 20th century.

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