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A MACAT ANALYSIS

FRANK DIKÖTTER'S

# MAO'S GREAT FAMINE

THE HISTORY OF CHINA'S MOST  
DEVASTATING CATASTROPHE, 1958-62





An Analysis of

**Frank Dikötter's**

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**Mao's Great Famine**

John Wagner Givens



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**PROBLEM-SOLVING** – producing strong solutions

**REASONING** – creating strong arguments

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## **CRITICAL THINKING AND MAO'S GREAT FAMINE**

**Primary critical thinking skill: REASONING**

**Secondary critical thinking skill: PROBLEM-SOLVING**

The power of Frank Dikötter's ground-breaking work on the disaster that followed China's attempted 'Great Leap Forward' lies not in the detail of his evidence (though that shows that Mao's fumbled attempt at rapid industrialization probably cost 45 million Chinese lives). It stems from the exceptional reasoning skills that allowed Dikötter to turn years of researching in obscure Chinese archives into a compelling narrative of disaster, and above all to link two subjects that had been treated as distinct by most of his predecessors: the extent of the crisis in the countryside, and the actions (hence the responsibility) of the senior Chinese leadership.

In Dikötter's view, ultimate responsibility for the catastrophe lies at the door of Mao Zedong himself; the Chairman conceived and ordered the policies that led to the famine, and he did nothing to reverse them or limit the damage that was being wrought when evidence for their disastrous impact reached him. Dikötter's ability to persuade his readers of the fundamental truth of these arguments – despite his admission that his access to sources was necessarily limited and incomplete – together with the clear structure of his presentation combine to produce a work that has had enormous influence on perceptions of Mao and of the Great Leap Forward itself.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THE ORIGINAL WORK**

Historian **Frank Dikötter** was born in 1961 in Kerensheide in the Netherlands and took his first degree in history and Russian at the University of Geneva in Switzerland. From there, he won a scholarship to study in China and explored the country as it emerged from the Maoist era. Dikötter earned his doctorate from the School of Oriental and African Studies in London in 1990, and became professor of the modern history of China there. He has been chair of humanities at the University of Hong Kong since 2006. His 2010 work *Mao's Great Famine* is based on information unearthed in official Communist archives that are usually closed to researchers.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THE ANALYSIS**

**Dr John Wagner Givens** holds a DPhil in politics from the University of Oxford. He is currently an Asian Studies Center Associate and adjunct professor at the University of Pittsburgh, having previously held positions as a post-Doctoral Research Associate at the Center for Asian Democracy at the University of Louisville, as Associate Lecturer at the University of the West of England, and as a Visiting Scholar at Nankai University in Tianjin.

Dr Wagner's research interests span a range of topics including law, foreign policy, and political economy, but he specializes in ostensibly liberal institutions in nondemocratic regimes. He is currently working on a book manuscript on lawyers that sue the Chinese state.

## **ABOUT MACAT**

### **GREAT WORKS FOR CRITICAL THINKING**

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**Director for Education and Skills, Organisation for Economic  
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**former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cambridge**

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**Rt Hon Charles Clarke, former UK Secretary of State for Education**

‘The Macat analyses provide immediate access to the critical conversation surrounding the books that have shaped their respective discipline, which will make them an invaluable resource to all of those, students and teachers, working in the field.’

**Professor William Tronzo, University of California at San Diego**





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# WAYS IN TO THE TEXT

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## KEY POINTS

- Born in 1961, Frank Dikötter is a Dutch historian who specializes in Chinese history at the University of Hong Kong.
- He examines in extraordinary detail the famine caused by the Great Leap Forward\* of 1958 to 1961—the Chinese Communist Party’s\* campaign to jumpstart Chinese industry—showing it to be perhaps the greatest man-made catastrophe in human history.
- *Mao’s Great Famine* is the result of four years of research in archives across China and is an unflinching account of how this episode in Chinese history was far worse than previously thought.

### **Who Was Frank Dikötter?**

Frank Dikötter, the author of *Mao’s Great Famine: The History of China’s Most Devastating Catastrophe* (2010), is a well-known scholar of Chinese history who has written ten books and speaks six languages. His early work tended to focus on difficult topics such as drugs, crime, sex, race, and marginalized populations in China. He is best known as a critic of the Chinese Communist Party, the party ruling the nation since 1949, writing a trilogy of histories that cast an unflattering light on the party’s early years. The best known of these is *Mao’s Great Famine*.