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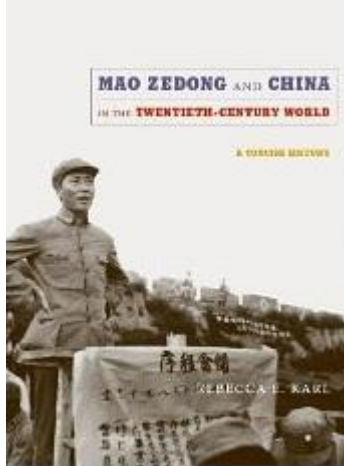
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## “Mao in Transition to Becoming Mao”: Rebecca Karl on Her Forthcoming Book

July 23, 2010 in [Books](#) by [jwasserstrom](#) | [1 comment](#)



By Jeffrey Wasserstrom

*Some time back, I did a [Q-and-A with Rebecca Karl](#) about her forthcoming trade book on Mao. Now that its publication date is drawing near, I decided to do a short follow-up and she was good enough to oblige once again by answering a few questions:*

**JW:** I see from [Amazon.com](#) that the cover for your book is up there and that some sample pages are also available for browsing. When exactly will the book be available?

**RK:** Duke University Press is sending me advance copies at the end of July; that means the book should be available for purchase by mid-August, at the latest.

**JW:** Is there anything you can tell us about how the cover fits in with or reflects the arguments in the book or differs from the kinds of representations of Mao on other recent books?

**RK:** I asked the designer specifically not to have a red cover, and not to have a picture of Mao that everyone associates with the apogee of his rule (the Mao kitsch version). Those are features of most covers for books on Mao. I wanted a picture of Mao in transition to becoming Mao. That is because one major argument of the book is that Mao, rather than just being born Mao, became who and what he was in **history** — in interaction with his local and global environment and with the challenges he and his comrades faced. To convey this historical process, I originally bought in the Shanghai Cultural Revolution museum a woodcut print of a contemplative Mao from 1938, holding a calligraphy brush and gazing out a window towards some mountains. It depicts a peaceful and calm Mao, although to my eye, it also conveyed a sense of Mao’s contemplation in tension with the mountains beyond. I submitted that to the Press as my desired cover art. It turns out that I have absolutely no sense of graphic design: the image was awful for a book cover. It felt dead and lifeless. Heather Hensley, my cover designer, tried her level and gifted best with it, but there was nothing she could do to make it work. Instead, she found a picture of a youngish-looking Mao running a meeting in Yan’an (the 1930s Communist base area) during the War of Resistance against Japan (what in the US is called the Pacific War portion of WWII). This is a moment when Mao and China are transformed, so it is perfect to depict the active argument of the book. The subdued but powerful color scheme was Heather’s idea, and I like it immensely: it contrasts with and yet gives life to Mao’s gesticulations; it also evokes the sense of an old photograph (which it is!).

**JW:** And if you don’t mind a slightly off-the-wall question, any thoughts to share with our readers on the recent flurry of attention to the relevance of Mao’s thought for being a successful manager or entrepreneur a la [this recent China Daily story](#)?

**RK:** As I write in the preface to the book, when I first began to teach a course on Mao at NYU in 2005, I found my classes filled with undergraduate business majors, who wanted to learn about “guerrilla marketing”, which they’d been taught derived from Mao’s theories of guerilla warfare. I assured them they would learn nothing about marketing from me, although they’d learn a lot about Chinese history and Mao Zedong. The attempt to “apply” Mao to managerial tasks and capitalist marketing are hilarious to me — he was as anti-managerial and anti-capitalist as it comes! — but it is surely a symptom of our times. So the question is not off-the-wall, but rather precisely a-propos!

**Tags:** [Mao](#), [Rebecca Karl](#)