

Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals,

Mao's Last Revolution. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England, 2006. 693 pp.
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A number of significant new studies of Mao Zedong's 'Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution' (GPCR) 1966-1976 have appeared in the last few years, changing and developing the state of the field considerably. Virtually all the established and internationally recognized Cultural Revolution scholars – such as Jonathan Unger, Andrew Walder, Frederick Teiwes and Warren Sun – have recently produced important new work. At the same time, a younger generation of scholars has also entered the stage. In China as well the GPCR attracts a lot of historical attention. The movement, though still living memory for millions, is gradually making the transition from 'contemporary affairs' to 'recent history', as memories and people fade away. In the proliferation of new studies *Mao's Last Revolution* stands out. It is the first comprehensive historical account of the GPCR, and is destined to be the standard reference work on the Cultural Revolution for many years to come.

Mao's Last Revolution, ten years in the making, is the crowning achievement of two splendid academic careers. Harvard professor Roderick MacFarquhar began his research on the GPCR in 1968, when the movement was still at a high. In the decades that followed, he wrote the three volumes of *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution* (1974, 1983, 1997), which have long since become established as the authoritative account of Chinese politics in the years 1956-1966. Expectations regarding professor MacFarquhar's 'fourth volume', the study of the GPCR period itself, obviously ran high in the academic community. They were not diminished by the news that MacFarquhar had joined forces with Swedish scholar Michael Schoenhals, also a veteran of GPCR studies. Although from a younger generation, he is highly respected for his perceptive studies of the 'mother of all movements' (to paraphrase Saddam Hussein) and not least for his grasp of GPCR primary sources (cf. his documentary study from 1996 *China's Cultural Revolution, 1966-1969: Not a Dinner Party*). *Mao's Last Revolution* satisfies all expectations. The two authors have produced a rich and very readable text that captures many of the complexities of the late Maoist era. Quite naturally, the central focus of the study is the political stage at 'Mao's court', since the movement, from beginning to end, was both Mao's invention and responsibility. Moreover, the reception of, or reaction to, the GPCR at the local level,

as well as in the minds of the Chinese people, is also examined in the book. This provides the context for politics at the Centre, although a comprehensive study of the *social history of the GCPR* remains a project for future scholarship.

Mao's Last Revolution is not an easy read. The huge number of Chinese names, and the intricacies of the many histories, might be off putting to some readers. However, even an experienced China studies scholar will be left with many thoughts after reading *Mao's Last Revolution*. The book offers no easy solutions to the many mysteries of the 1966-1976 period, and in some cases, the mystery actually appears to have deepened. In the first generation of GCPR studies, such as Hong Yung Lee's much read *The Politics of the Cultural Revolution* from 1978, but also in the sociological studies of Anita Chan, Jonathan Unger and Stanley Rosen, factional conflicts were understood to be an expression of conflicts between institutions and social forces, thus suggesting a basic rationality in the pattern of political behaviour during the GCPR. Military leaders such as Lin Biao, Mao's second-in-command, strove to maximize the influence of the military. As premier, Zhou Enlai sought to limit the damage to government institutions. Children of the party elite, as well as those from the 'red classes', struggled to maintain their comparative advantage, while marginalized youth saw opportunities for winning a place at the top. With all that is now known, the assumption of rationality has become much more difficult to uphold, and *Mao's Last Revolution* paints a disturbing picture of a political system that became seriously dysfunctional. Like a spoiled child, the omnipotent chairman kept everybody around him busy trying to guess his real intentions while struggling to fulfil his impossible demands. One after the other, all his old colleagues of the Chinese revolution, now reduced to submissive and flattering courtiers, were tossed away like unwanted toys. For example, what was the political message to the Chinese population of, say, the Lin Biao affair? After having designating Lin as his successor at the 9th CCP Congress in 1969, Mao's views of his 'closest comrade-in-arms' began to cool, leading the Lin family to its destruction in a desperate attempt to flee the country in September 1971. How to explain that the all-knowing Great Leader had – once again – allowed a 'traitor, scab and renegade' to become his closest collaborator? As if this loss of face was not enough, the propaganda machine in its vilification campaign against the Lin family quoted passages from a document allegedly written by Lin's son, Lin Liguo, which described Mao, quite appropriately, as an unpredictable and cruel dictator. Politically, Lin Biao was first criticized

for the 'ultra leftist errors' of the GCPR, and then, in 1974-1976, he was condemned as a right-winger as well as a follower of the conservative philosophical principles of China's ancient master Kong Fuzi. From the viewpoint of political spin, none of this makes much sense, and it is up to the reader of *Mao's Last Revolution* to make his or her own judgment on the entire affair. In this sense *Mao's Last Revolution* is also commendable for the things that are *not* in the book.

Quite naturally, the book painfully documents many of the worst episodes of the GCPR, as well as some of the most bizarre events. It raises questions as to how it was possible for ordinary Chinese to live in such a society. *Mao's Last Revolution* offers only a few glimpses of 'daily life in the Cultural Revolution' and cannot convey to its reader the immense *boredom* of the times that probably tortured the Chinese city population just as much as the occasional outbursts of frenzied 'struggle'. For most of the time, even the young went to bed early, because there was nothing else to do. The shops sold the same few products year after year. Most people had an assigned job for life, and most lived in walled compounds with restricted access from the outside. Playing cards became the favourite pastime. For most of the time, for most of the people, nothing at all happened. There is probably no easy way to introduce to the Western reader this duality of the GCPR as a lived experience, with its interplay of boredom and frenzy.

The first half of *Mao's Last Revolution*, covering the years 1966-1968, is particularly interesting. This was the time of the Red Guards, the various kinds of 'rebels', and the factional battles. This period is sometimes referred to as the 'Cultural Revolution proper', the years when chaos reigned. In 1968 the army was called in to restore order. The 9th Chinese Communist Party (CCP) congress in 1969 was a further milestone on the road to normalization. However, after the Lin Biao affair, Mao once again began to talk about the GCPR in the present tense, and twice in his last few years he again strove to promote Cultural Revolution values in big political campaigns with his wife Jiang Qing and her associates, the later 'Gang of Four', as the main agents. Only after the death of Mao and the arrest of the 'Gang' in 1976, was the GCPR truly over. Despite many things remaining the same between the years 1966 and 1976, there is one very substantial difference between the first two years of the GCPR (i.e. from the summer of 1966 to the summer of 1968) and the remaining eight years of this period. In the first period, when the ruling communist party itself was paralyzed by Red Guard attacks, many young people experienced a kind of freedom and empowerment

that they had never tried before. This is not to deny the significance of manipulation of the Red Guards from above, but at least in some places, there emerged a measure of autonomous organization at the grass roots level. In contrast, after 1968, GCPR slogans were mostly aired in strictly controlled top-down campaigns, while many of the young activists of the Red Guard/Rebel period were actually rounded up and punished.

GCPR scholarship veterans Anita Chan and Jonathan Unger argue, and with some justification, that in putting the two periods, the 'grass-roots autonomy' and the 'top-down' periods, together under the same heading, one risks losing sight of the uniqueness of the early GCPR period. The second half of *Mao's Last Revolution* also seems to contain less new material and offers fewer challenges to the 'conventional wisdom' of contemporary GCPR scholarship. Moreover, it has also to some extent since been eclipsed by the latest volume by Frederick C. Teiwes and Warren Sun, *The End of the Maoist Era: Chinese Politics During the Twilight of the Cultural Revolution, 1972-1976* (2007), although that book focuses exclusively on elite politics.

My own critique of *Mao's Last Revolution* relates to another issue: the book does not adequately prepare young readers for unconventional GCPR scholarship such as Mobo Gao's *Gao Village* (1999) and Han Dongping's *The Unknown Cultural Revolution* (2000). Both were children at the time of the GCPR, and to them the Cultural Revolution meant, first of all, access to education. The GCPR period was in fact the crucial period in making schooling universal at the village level. Later, these two authors completed PhD programs at Western universities, enabling them to introduce to the world how the great political movements of the Mao era, above all the GCPR, were experienced at the village level. For older readers, the surprise may be less profound. Many things in Gao's and Han's accounts - quite different from each other by the way - remind us of a once familiar world from the pro-China literature of the 1960s and 1970s, that is, a world of politically awakened and empowered villagers, enthusiastic youngsters, proud barefoot doctors, and so forth. This image has since crumbled under the weight of a mountain of revelations concerning GCPR crimes. While there is no justification for those crimes, it should not be ignored, that at least in some villages, the GCPR was actually a rather dynamic period with progress in many fields, culturally as well as economically. For example, in many places the GCPR meant the creation, for the first time ever, of a social sphere for the young, with some sports and other cultural activities that allowed the youngsters to get together and perhaps fall in love, upsetting the

traditional pattern of arranged marriage. The new basketball ground – often next to the new primary school or the new village clinic – might be the meeting ground for this emerging youth culture. Some youths who were sent out to the country from the big cities were able to connect meaningfully with the villagers and introduce (a Maoist version of) modern life to them. In some places, the GCPR was instrumental in the development of collective agriculture. None of this is a denial of the vast destruction, the absurdity, and the agony of the GCPR. So many of Mao's actions in those fateful last ten years of his life were both criminal and absurd, but this does not mean that his diagnosis of China's condition was a mere illusion. Bureaucratic systems, elitism, suppression of women, formalism, and many other such elements of the cultural tradition were – and still are – real, and they provide parts of the wider context that explains why the Chairman's GCPR policies were able at least initially to unleash such an enthusiastic response from millions of Chinese.

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