

Debating the Cultural Revolution in China

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Yu Hau

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In Western imaginations, the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–76) – in which one of the world’s oldest, most elaborate cultures began destroying itself, in which a successful, disciplined political organisation tore its own heart out, and in which colleagues and classmates turned murderously on each other – stands among the landmarks of the recent Chinese past. In the late 1980s, when Chinese history and culture remained esoteric to all but specialists, it was accounts of the Cultural Revolution – told in English through the personal narratives of those who endured it – that drew general audiences in their millions to read about the country. The success of Jung Chang’s *Wild Swans* in particular turned the Cultural Revolution memoir into a

genre sensation, beloved of publishers and readers alike. By the late 1990s, *Wild Swans* had been joined by a clutch of cygnets – *To the Edge of the Sky*, *The Vermilion Gate* – mostly family sagas, mostly written by women, many of them focusing on the traumas of the Cultural Revolution. (At the close of that decade, it was even rumoured that literary agents had defined ‘Chinese pain’ as a product, because a profit could be made from it.)

In China, the Cultural Revolution – the ‘ten years of madness’ – is also regarded as one of the seminal tragedies of the country’s 20th century. For obvious political reasons, however, there are limits to how the event can be commemorated. The Cultural Revolution, after all, was a civil war (with disastrous consequences for China’s political, economic and cultural development) unleashed by China’s pre-eminent leader, Mao Zedong; a civil war that was made possible by Chinese communism’s culture of violence and one that Mao’s fated successor, Deng Xiaoping – a high-ranking leader in 1966 – signally failed to prevent. [\[d1\]](#) [3] It is hardly surprising that the regime does not want to encourage free-form, open-ended debate about its causes and consequences. In the interests of drawing a veil over such contention, the Party passed its own, final judgment on the Cultural Revolution and on Mao’s role in the early 1980s, declaring that the Great Helmsman had been 70 per cent right, and 30 per cent wrong, and that no further discussion was required. Nonetheless, memory of the Cultural Revolution has inevitably resonated through Chinese cultural life – not least because so many writers were affected. Literary commemorations of the Cultural Revolution have long outnumbered those of the famine that followed the Great Leap Forward (1958–62). This is perhaps because, although the latter was in absolute terms far more destructive of Chinese life (claiming some 40 million deaths, to the Cultural Revolution’s estimated 1.5 million), those worst affected were (predominantly illiterate) farmers, while the Cultural Revolution particularly targeted intellectuals. And although substantial restrictions still exist on coverage of the Cultural Revolution in China’s public history industry (especially in the mass media), there is greater, if still incomplete, freedom for fictional explorations of these events.

Over the past 20 years, China’s most critically acclaimed novelists – writers such as Mo Yan, Yu Hua and Su Tong, born between the 1950s and early 1960s – have turned the historical novel into the pre-eminent genre in serious contemporary fiction. For the most part, they have concentrated on recounting the 20th century, and particularly the landmark traumas of the Communist decades through which they themselves lived: Land Reform, the Great Leap Forward and, of course, the Cultural Revolution. In *Brothers*, one of the bestselling Chinese novels of the early 21st century, Yu Hua created a two-volume blockbuster covering China’s last four decades: a portrait of the country’s transformation from Maoist political thuggery to money worship. The first volume is taken up by a startlingly brutal account of the Cultural Revolution.

The novel is set in Liu Town, an east-coast backwater near Shanghai, and tells the lives of two victims of Mao’s China – Baldy Li and his stepbrother Song Gang. Approaching their teens during the Cultural Revolution, the boys witness Song Gang’s father, Song Fanping, tortured then battered to death (ostensibly for being the son of a landlord, in reality for a linguistic slip interpreted as slandering Mao) only 14 months after his marriage to Baldy Li’s mother, Li Lan; within another few years, she dies of kidney failure and sorrow. In *Brothers*, the Cultural Revolution starts out as burlesque anarchy – a chance for children to skip school and enjoy heaping humiliation on ‘class enemies’: ‘[The boys] only knew that now Liu Town had become as festive and rowdy as if every day were a holiday’. Soon enough, however, the ubiquitous mob violence – daily lynchings leave the town literally smeared with blood – turns against the boys and their family. The killing of the boys’ father – described in horrifying detail across four pages – is the centrepiece act of mindless cruelty. Six local Red Guards beat him steadily to death, shredding his flesh, ripping an ear off, finally bayoneting him with a splintered wooden bat: ‘As the spikes were yanked out blood gushed from his body as though it were a perforated wine skin’. Even after he has died, reinforcements arrive to take over the beating, trampling and pummelling, while the first group of killers breakfast ‘with savage delight’ on ‘soy milk, buns and fritters’. Even in death, Song Fanping has to endure the humiliation of having his kneecaps smashed so that he can be fitted into the only cheap coffin available.

In the interests of achieving a faithful likeness of these extreme times, Yu Hua makes use of a style that is crude in almost every respect: in its freakish protagonists and plot twists; in its fondness for repetitions and

expletives (or, ideally, repeated expletives – one paragraph alone is graced by eighteen conjugations of ‘f**k’); in its fountains of body fluids (snot, blood and saliva). Modern China, its author has reasoned, ‘is so sick that a writer can’t pretend to be a doctor. Instead, the best one can do is admit that one is ill and try to describe the symptoms’. And the coarseness of the novel’s literary language seems technically well-matched with the grotesquerie of the violence being described: archival and anecdotal evidence tells us that Yu Hua’s descriptions of hyperbolic sadism are historically accurate.

The highly negative portrayals of the Cultural Revolution in Yu Hua’s *Brothers* are indeed a sign of the writer’s political bravery (and proof of the greater creative freedom that Chinese novelists enjoy, relative to peers working in film, television or newspapers). In refusing to allow these events to go quietly forgotten, and in commemorating them in such scurrilous, brutish style, Yu Hua flagrantly contradicts the exhortation by the Chinese Writers’ Association (the government’s official literary union) that writers should ‘make positive contributions’ to sounding an ‘elevated main note in literary creation’. And yet *Brothers* also illuminates the interpretative limits faced by Chinese authors describing the Cultural Revolution. The book ultimately pulls its punches when it comes to seeking the origins of these events. The horrific violence of the Cultural Revolution is portrayed as an irrational explosion of mass thuggery, without any attempt to search for deeper causes (in, say, Communism’s institutionalisation of violence at all levels of government and in its caste-like system of class designations). As a result, the book is often rich in superficial shock value – in its explicit descriptions of violence and sex – but weak in its grasp of the political roots of Maoist cataclysms. Moreover, there is scant introspective attention paid to perhaps the most interesting psychological legacy of the Cultural Revolution: the way in which the great majority of victims and persecutors have had to co-exist quietly with each other since the regime turned its back on class struggle after Mao and his revolution came to an end in 1976. Yu Hua’s sensationalist style seems almost deliberately designed to forestall deeper thought about the causes and outcomes of these events. By militating against careful reflection on the Cultural Revolution, Yu Hua unwittingly furthers the regime’s project to stifle widespread debate about its sources.

The narrative style of Roderick MacFarquhar’s and Michael Schoenhals’ *Mao’s Last Revolution* could hardly form a greater contrast with the tone of hysterical violence that dominates *Brothers*. The former – the most authoritative, comprehensive single-volume account of the Cultural Revolution in English – does not in any sense shy away from the physical horror of these events, mind; it is littered with appalling spectacle. We read of an early victim of Mao’s purge hurling himself off a building; his suicide attempt failed but left him crippled, after which his opponents hauled him to mass criticism meetings inside a cabbage basket. Red Guards beat class enemies to death without understanding their alleged counter-revolutionary crimes. Cities up and down the country were – as Yu Hua describes in microcosm – spattered with blood: some 15,000 were killed or wounded in Wuhan alone. MacFarquhar and Schoenhals describe how factions of students murdered each other with sugar sickles intended for Cuba; funeral processions in which Red Guards held aloft the severed body parts of the fallen; how some victims were not only killed but also eaten; how one man with a bad class background bled to death in front of his family after having his ear cut off.

But MacFarquhar and Schoenhals are constantly at pains to explain not only what happened, but also how it could have happened. There is a devastatingly effective coolness to their writing, as they explain the course of the Cultural Revolution: not only Mao’s central culpability, but also the complicity of his chief lieutenants (none of whom tried to prevent Mao from launching his political witch-hunt, most of whom were purged in the course of the Cultural Revolution). Jung Chang’s and Jon Halliday’s recent, best-selling biography, *Mao: The Unknown Story*, turned the Cultural Revolution into melodrama: the villains (Mao, his wife Jiang Qing and his Defence Minister, Lin Biao) lined up on one side; their good-hearted victims (Liu Shaoqi and his wife, Deng Xiaoping) on the other. MacFarquhar and Schoenhals paint a picture in which blame was far more troublingly widespread. Both Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping were deeply implicated in the culture of political violence that made the extremism of the Cultural Revolution possible; both mocked early victims of the movement before it turned on them.

Technically, the book is a tour-de-force, a heteroglossic survey of Cultural Revolutionaries at every level of Chinese society, that makes use of both conventional archival material and sources from below: interviews,

memoirs, pamphlets, posters, diaries and denunciations, and other flea-market finds. (Michael Schoenhals has been acclaimed elsewhere as the ‘doyen of Chinese garbology’ – presumably for his skill in excavating historical gems from piles of apparently waste paper that have found their way to such markets.) Even traditional archival sources on the Cultural Revolution, it should be remembered, are far from straightforward to access in China today. Much evidence from these years is routinely shut off to foreign researchers without special connections and permits. In MacFarquhar’s and Schoenhals’ narrative, the voices of external observers inject welcome tonal variety into the turgid political formulae of official PRC communiqués. Although in the eye of the storm, British diplomats stationed in China during the Cultural Revolution still kept their upper lips almost miraculously stiff. One Foreign Office functionary evacuated from Beijing laconically observed that as he, his wife and young family fell under attack at the airport from Red Guards, his ‘tie was pulled into so tight a knot that it had later to be forced open with a tea spoon.’ Imprisoned within the British embassy in Beijing on the evening on which it would be sacked, its inhabitants almost burnt to death and its women sexually molested, the ambassador reported back to London that the staff ‘dined together ... off a dinner of tinned sausages and peas, claret and biscuits and cheese, prepared by the ladies. After dinner I went to the first-floor ... to play bridge, while those of the staff who were not at work watched Peter Sellers in a film entitled not inappropriately, ‘The Wrong Arm of the Law’!

MacFarquhar’s and Schoenhals’ dispassionate, clear-headed account is therefore more profoundly unsettling than the surface sensationalism generated by a novel like *Brothers*. We gain a powerful sense of a tragedy unfolding: of a fundamental failure by Mao and his subordinates to predict the consequences of their actions; of the hypocrisy of a revolutionary elite who – themselves enveloped in privilege and learning – wished to deny these things to their countrymen. We are left with greatly enhanced understanding of a disaster – still insufficiently explained and discussed in China today – driven by an over-concentration of power and by a lack of institutional accountability, both issues that remain political hazards in the contemporary People’s Republic.

Other reviews:

Guardian

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/apr/18/brothers-yu-hua-review> [4]

Independent

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/brothers-by-yu-hua-1705907.html> [5]

New York Times

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/08/books/review/Row-t.html> [6]

Quarterly Conversation

<http://quarterlyconversation.com/brothers-by-yu-hua-review> [7]

Words Without Borders

<http://wordswithoutborders.org/book-review/yu-huas-brothers> [8]

Mostly Fiction

<http://bookreview.mostlyfiction.com/2010/brothers-by-yu-hua/> [9]

Los Angeles Times

<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-ca-yu-hua1-2009feb01,0,3136534.story> [10]

New York Times

<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/06/arts/06iht-idbriefs7C.3055900.html> [11]

Powell's

http://www.powells.com/review/2006_11_30 [12]

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[3] http://ihrconference.wordpress.com/category/book-reviews/#_msocom_1

[4] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/apr/18/brothers-yu-hua-review>

[5] <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/brothers-by-yu-hua-1705907.html>

- [6] <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/08/books/review/Row-t.html>
- [7] <http://quarterlyconversation.com/brothers-by-yu-hua-review>
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