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Mao's Last Revolution

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First time as tragedy, second time as kitsch. During the 1990s, China took on board Deng Xiaoping's message that 'to get rich is glorious'. Yet some of the country's elite, jaded by the endless supply of luxury goods now available in Beijing and Shanghai, favour restaurants with a new spin: the peasant cuisine of the Cultural Revolution. In the midst of the city's neon lights, these eateries would recreate the simple rice, meat and vegetable dishes that were experienced by the urban youth 'sent down' to the countryside at Mao's orders; the food a homage to a time imagined by many as a simpler, more honest era when China had a strong, common purpose. Only the prices brought the diners back to the present day: despite the simple fare, this was cuisine affordable exclusively by the most well-heeled.

The idea of recalling an era of honesty and simplicity was itself dishonest, a rosy recreation of a time when China was turned upside down. Yet this tendency was not merely an attempt to rehabilitate an era of destruction. The 'Mao craze' of the 1990s, which saw other reworkings of the Cultural Revolution era including a disco remix version of songs such as 'The sun is deepest red, Chairman Mao is dearest of all' and the classic 'The East is Red', was instead an attempt to disarm what is still a dangerous but under-examined era in recent Chinese history. By rendering it as nostalgia, there was the possibility of somehow making the period's poisonous memories harmless. Similar attempts could be seen in former East Germany in the 1990s,

where a Berlin restaurant dressed its waiters in the military police uniforms of the old regime for the amusement of sophisticated (presumably West Berliner) diners.

This type of nostalgia, whether from the Chinese themselves or from westerners still fond of the Maoist 1960s, will receive little support from MacFarquhar and Schoenhals's monumental *Mao's Last Revolution*. Devastating in its detail and analysis, this volume is the essential survey history of the Cultural Revolution. That description, however, may make the book sound necessary but dull, which would be profoundly misleading. The nearly 500 pages take the reader through a maze of intrigue, ideology and unending violence, but they are leavened throughout by a black, coruscating wit. Lu Xun, generally considered China's greatest 20th-century author, was noted for his dark, despairing humour about his countrymen's failings. Although *Mao's Last Revolution* is meticulously researched history, not fiction, the wry voices of its authors make it a worthy successor to the writings of Lu Xun, Gogol, or any other author who sees irony in the darker side of human nature.

The Cultural Revolution has some claim to be the strangest political movement anywhere in the post-war world. Nothing like it was ever seen in any other socialist society. Before 1966, as the authors point out, 'China was by and large a standard Communist state, if more effective than most' (p. 1). But in the summer of that year, the leader of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Chairman Mao Zedong, declared war on his own party and government. 17 years after the foundation of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Mao was concerned on a variety of fronts. His own personal status was precarious. After the disastrous Great Leap Forward of 1958-62, in which millions of Chinese farmers had starved to death as the result of his utopian agricultural policies, Mao had been forced to step back from his paramount role within the leadership. In addition, he was concerned that the revolutionary ardour that had fuelled his revolution was fading. In the 1960s, for the first time in over a century, a generation of Chinese was coming of age that did not have to worry about foreign aggression, or of the country being torn apart by civil war. Aside from the major disaster of the Great Leap, the economy was doing well. The Party, Mao felt, had become bureaucratised, complacent and stale, keener on office than revolution. As obsessed with continuous revolution as he had been as a young man, Mao decided that it was the CCP itself that must be destroyed so as to renew itself and that the country's youth would be the instrument of that renewal. In spring and summer 1966, Mao persuaded his colleagues to launch the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, a movement that would eventually destroy many of the comrades who had helped Mao to bring it about. The most obvious manifestation of the new order, causing consternation in the outside world, was the authorisation of China's young to declare themselves to be 'Red Guards' who were charged with correcting the 'mistakes' of their elders. The Guards promptly attacked teachers, doctors, party officials and anyone else who thought that their authority lay in their age or expertise, rather than in a fanatical devotion to the thought of Chairman Mao. Before the Cultural Revolution was officially ended in 1976, China would be transformed. Some 12 million Red Guards made their way to Beijing, determined to get a glimpse of Mao in Tiananmen Square; a similar number of urban youth were 'sent down' to the countryside to 'learn from the peasants' (even though the peasants were not particularly delighted to see them). Some 2.2 billion Chairman Mao badges would be forged as part of the cult of personality that raised Mao Zedong Thought almost to a theology. During 1967, the most violent year of the Red Guard period, national industrial output dropped by 14.9 per cent, although the damage was mostly concentrated in the cities and affected agriculture far less. Most lastingly, China's schools and colleges were effectively shut down for years, producing a generation of Chinese, now in their 50s and 60s, who gained little education and found themselves profoundly ill-equipped for the high-technology, globalising turn that China has taken since the 1980s.

In 1981, the 'Gang of Four' (the top leaders who promoted the Cultural Revolution on Mao's behalf), were put on trial. One of the Gang, Mao's widow Jiang Qing, declared defiantly that she could have done nothing without the permission of the Chairman himself, and that she was merely 'Mao's little dog'. Nonetheless, the show trial ended as the post-Mao leadership had wished, finding the Gang guilty of having manipulated Mao in his last days for their own ends. Conveniently, the turmoil which had overturned a nation of hundreds of millions had been the fault of just four people. Yet although this interpretation seems ludicrous to outside observers, western conventional wisdom on the Cultural Revolution has also tended to divide its most

famous players into misleading separate categories of perpetrators and victims. In this interpretation, Liu Shaoqi, the president of the PRC, was the primary target. Although he was Mao's designated successor, he soon found himself the victim of the intrigues of Mao and his new ultra-revolutionary supporters. Purged and expelled from the party, Liu was put under house arrest and died of medical neglect in 1969. Also purged, but able to recover, was Deng Xiaoping, accused of being 'Capitalist-Roader No 2' (the sort of telegraphic accusation in which the Cultural Revolution delighted, meaning 'second most powerful person taking the road of capitalism', the first most powerful being Liu Shaoqi). Liu and Deng, then, were the most prominent victims. In retrospect, heroes of the Cultural Revolution are harder to identify, but even today, the role of Zhou Enlai, the savvy prime minister, is regarded as one of moderation, particularly within China, where he is regarded as responsible for actions such as saving the Forbidden City and its treasures from the hordes of marauding Red Guards.

MacFarquhar and Schoenhals destroy all these assumptions. Liu and Deng were indeed victims, but they were far from being innocent ones. In March 1966, before the Cultural Revolution had officially begun, four major leaders including Peng Zhen, the mayor of Beijing, were condemned at a Politburo meeting over which Liu presided. An earlier accusation against the leadership stalwart, and veteran of the Long March, General Luo Ruiqing, led him to attempt suicide. Liu Shaoqi noted coldly to the Politburo that 'He suffered a few injuries, but didn't die ... if you're going to commit suicide, you have to have some technique.' Deng Xiaoping added: 'He jumped like a female athlete diver ... resembling an ice lolly' (p. 27). The latter comment seems particularly chilling from a man whose son, Deng Pufang, would later be thrown out of a window during a 'struggle session' and be paralysed for life. The meeting itself set the tone of black farce which would run as an undercurrent throughout the Cultural Revolution. In a document which, as the authors say, was 'one of the most bizarre statements ever submitted to a meeting of the Politburo', defence minister Lin Biao responded to anonymous letters from the wife of one of the accused leaders by certifying that 'when she and I met, [my wife] Ye Qun was a pure virgin, and she has remained faithful ever since' (p. 35). Zhou Enlai, meanwhile, was present at all the meetings where, one by one, over the years, top leaders were picked off by Mao. The few, less famous, leadership figures who made a more concerted attempt to oppose the Cultural Revolution were swiftly destroyed.

MacFarquhar and Schoenhals note that throughout the Cultural Revolution there was little need for Mao expressly to make his wishes known, and that his fellow-leaders would vie with each other to carry out his aims even beyond what he himself had stated. They term this tendency 'working toward the Chairman' - a term borrowed from Ian Kershaw's idea of 'working towards the Führer', by which the Nazi leaders all tried to divine what Hitler wanted without it being explicitly stated. And rightly, the author's point out that the advantage of his colleagues 'working toward the Chairman' was that it enabled Mao to step back from the consequences of his actions, stating disingenuously about the violence which the Cultural Revolution had unleashed: 'it's a mistake when good people beat up on good people, though it may clear up some misunderstandings, as they might not otherwise have got to know each other in the first place' (p. 162-3).

It seems unlikely that the Cultural Revolution was truly marked by 'good people' beating up other 'good people'. Perhaps the most eye-opening aspect of the book is its detailed accounting of the sheer violence unleashed by the movement. Again, in the west, we tend to have a generalised picture of the Red Guard period, when China's youth were given permission to turn on authority figures and subject them to 'struggle sessions' in which they stood in painful poses such as the stretched-out 'airplane position', while teenagers howled at them that they were 'cow demons' or 'snake spirits'. Yet even this confrontational image fails to do justice to the sheer scale of violence unleashed; Mao himself later described China in 1967 as being in the grip of 'all-round civil war' (p. 199). In December 1966, some 120,000 Red Guards from two rival factions battled for four hours in Kangping Road in Shanghai (p. 163). Regular Chinese army (PLA) troops and an improvised army linked to the city's Revolutionary Committee clashed in the southern city of Nanning in spring 1968, bombing the river front and leaving some 50,000 people homeless (p. 245). China even played host to the world's first test of that very contemporary fear, a radioactive 'dirty bomb', which was somehow cobbled together in 1967 by the 'revolutionary masses' experimenting with equipment found in a geological institute in the north eastern city of Changchun (p. 220). Even in the midst of destruction, comic-opera

elements intervened. In January 1967, Red Guards tried to capture the commander of the Nanjing Military Region, a senior officer who was also a 'onetime Buddhist who had studied martial arts in the legendary Shaolin Monastery as a teenager.' Panicked phone calls reached the defence ministry, reporting that the commander 'was drinking heavily and threatened to open fire if anyone tried to seize him' (p. 176). It was incidents such as this which eventually forced Mao to authorise the army to clamp down on the Red Guards in 1969. Yet, in another counterintuitive interpretation, MacFarquhar and Schoenhals show that the supposedly peaceful later period of the Cultural Revolution, from 1969 to the arrest of the Gang of Four in 1976, actually resulted in more deaths than the earlier, more flamboyant years. This later period saw Deng Xiaoping challenged. Temporarily released from exile by Mao in 1975, Deng was faced with a rebellion in Shadian, a small Muslim village in Yunnan province, where the villagers were in a standoff with tax collectors. Deng authorised the use of the army to end the confrontation. 21 days later, the village was razed, and more than 1,600 villagers, including 300 children and elderly, had been killed while trying to flee. 14 years later, protesters in Tiananmen Square would also feel the ruthlessness behind Deng's avuncular, pragmatic image.

One of the areas that the authors touch upon briefly is the comparison between Mao's techniques of leadership and those of Hitler and Stalin. The authors get in a sideways comparison to Hitler through a Soviet reference when they say that 'Unlike Stalin, [Mao] did not feel the need for ... a final solution' (p. 184). Later, the mysterious Central Case Examination Group, charged with meting out violent revenge on Mao's enemies, is described as 'the Cultural Revolution equivalent of Lenin's Cheka and Hitler's Gestapo' (p. 282). However, these tantalising hints at the authors' assessment of Mao will, one hopes, pave the way for a fuller comparative analysis in a future volume. Even these fleeting references will cause controversy among China specialists, as there are many scholars who still reject any comparison between the regimes of Mao and Hitler, even when it is clearly not the content, but the technique of leadership that is being compared. The differences between Hitler's and Mao's regimes are manifold. At its core, Nazism explicitly rejected ideas of Enlightenment rationality, whereas the rhetoric of the Cultural Revolution portrayed it as the ultimate leap into a particular type of scientific, rational modernity. Most importantly, Nazism was inherently genocidal, and Maoism, for all the deaths it caused, was not (although it did inspire the genocidal Khmer Rouge in Cambodia). Nonetheless, the connections between the two regimes are too numerous to ignore: the use of the cult of personality; the obsession with the renewal of society and the destruction of bourgeois liberalism; and the essentially modern techniques of mass mobilisation, parades, and the occupation by the state of much of the private sphere.

Comparing the Cultural Revolution with violent mass mobilisations elsewhere in the 20th century would also force more detailed answers to the question of *why* China erupted in such violence in 1966. Would this have happened in other societies if their structures of government had been similarly challenged? The revolt of youth against their elders was a global phenomenon in the 1960s, and the 73-year-old Mao himself became a symbol of rebellion to young radicals in Paris and Berkeley. The baby boom phenomenon that had fuelled the youth rebellion of the west - a generation coming of age with a strong sense of personal entitlement, no personal memory of the horrors of wartime, and deep concern that there would not be enough college places or jobs for them - were also relevant to China. Yet the violence and fervour of the Cultural Revolution truly was different from demonstrations at the LSE or riots in Sproul Plaza, and many of the reasons were internal to China. Violence was endemic throughout 20th-century China: warlord battles in the 1920s, total war with Japan in the 1930s and 1940s, and, as recent studies show, immensely violent terror campaigns in the 1950s that accompanied land reform and mobilisation for the Korean War. It is misleading to assume that violent coercion in Mao's China should be considered in stark contrast to enthusiastic co-operation with the regime. Co-operation and violence ran hand in hand, fuelled in part by an undercurrent of Social Darwinism that had emerged as early as the 19th century, laying a highly un-Confucian stress on the transformative and positive power of destruction.

The violence running through MacFarquhar and Schoenhals's narrative brings to mind one particular feature of the Cultural Revolution: its assumptions based in a particular type of aggressive masculinity. The language of the era is obsessed with transformation through force: a young woman Red Guard, Song Binbin,

was told by Mao that her personal name, meaning 'suave' was not aggressive enough, and that she should change it to 'Yaowu', or 'be martial'. Propaganda posters showed women wearing camouflage outfits and wielding rifles; they did not show men feeding babies. Fiction of the era is obsessed with a romantic view of technology, with paeans to the glorious future shaped by motorised piledrivers, massive electricity generating stations, and the ultimate symbol of technological virility, the atom bomb. While China's neighbours across the Sea of Japan regarded nuclear weapons as the dark side of modernity, remembering the experience of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Lin Biao declared that the highest compliment that could be paid to Mao Zedong Thought was that it was 'a spiritual atom bomb of infinite power'. The reverse side of this romantic virility was a deep prurience, with a rhetoric of 'liberation' masking the reality that personal relationships were now decided by the party's dictates, just as Confucian orthodoxies had forced men and women into loveless unions a century earlier.

MacFarquhar and Schoenhals end with the hope that, as the Party searches for ways to deal with its various crises, it may 'decide that political pluralism is an opportune way to diffuse responsibility and deflect criticism ... Then, the Chinese may be ready publicly to confront the horrors of what they did to one another during the Cultural Revolution and render a final verdict on the responsibility of the Chairman who unleashed them' (p. 462). The authors' hope that China may choose a pluralist, more liberal path for its politics, is laudable. Yet even if it does, comparable examples of democratisation show that there is no guarantee that the reckoning will come. West Germany, South Africa and Taiwan all found ways to deal with the legacies of Nazism, apartheid, and the destruction of the island's elite by Chiang Kai-shek's government in 1947. Yet Spain democratised by agreeing to avoid judgements on its Civil War past, and even now, no final verdict on Franco has been reached. The events in 2006 in Budapest surrounding the 50th anniversary of the 1956 uprising have showed that it is possible for that incident to be reclaimed not only by liberal democrats, but also by apologists for Soviet rule and fascism. In China, opening up discussion about the Cultural Revolution will not only allow more victims to put their stories forward, but also for perpetrators to try and justify their actions. Particularly at a time when the liberal internationalism of the 1990s is fading, a democratic Chinese government may decide that this is simply too dangerous a sentiment to let loose and turn its attention to the future rather than the past.

For the moment, although there is growing interest in the Cultural Revolution in China itself, with memoirs, films and even university courses tackling aspects of the era, huge areas of discussion (such as the true role of Zhou Enlai) are still closed for discussion. This means that MacFarquhar and Schoenhals's work, studded by astounding access to documents handed over in secret, or ferreted out through diligent trawls through flea markets in Beijing, is likely to remain the standard account of the Cultural Revolution for a generation or more, at least until voices within China can tell their own story freely. As such, the book serves as an immensely important record for the Chinese who can gain access to a copy (one assumes a Hong Kong translation will be swiftly smuggled into China), as well as for western readers who will find it meticulous, balanced and fair.

The Cambridge economist Joan Robinson was just one member of the British left who was enthralled by the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in China. 'Now another generation of teenagers and students have been plunged into the revolution and become committed to it', she wrote in 1969. 'Running their organizations without the aid of grown-ups, and later on Long Marches, they learned more about politics and about their own country in a few months than they ever could have learned out of books.' The last word on the reality of the Cultural Revolution, however, should perhaps go to Chen Yun, one of the greyer bureaucrats in the leadership, and a central planner through and through. 'At this point', he observed to an audience of bankers in 1973, 'a considerable distance still separates us from that era that Lenin described as one when some public toilets will be made out of gold' (p. 373). China today is getting rich in way that could not have been dreamed of in the era of Mao. But its new wealth is distributed with great unevenness. Perhaps the greatest crime of the Cultural Revolution is that it took worthy instincts - the desire to break down unnecessary hierarchy and reduce economic inequality - and turned them into a quest for personal aggrandisement, violent revenge and cultural destruction. As a result, the only gold plumbing likely to be seen in contemporary China is in the bathrooms attached to the expensive restaurants serving up a sanitised

nostalgia for an idealistic, communal Cultural Revolution that never was.

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