Revisiting China's Cultural Revolution:

A Review Article

KENNETH C. WALKER

Mao's Last Revolution. By Roderick Macfarquhar and Michael Schoenhals. pp. xiii, 693. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, Belknap, 2006.

The End of the Maoist Era: Chinese Politics During the Twilight of the Cultural Revolution, 1972–1976. By Frederick C. Teiwes and Warren Sun. pp. xxi, 705. Armonk, New York and London, M. E Sharpe, 2007.

doi:10.1017/S1356186308008833

Amid much turbulence during the last century China experienced many and varied political campaigns and mass movements. Few of these have been as spontaneous as the May 4th Movement of 1919 (in protest at the terms affecting China of the Versailles Treaty) or the Tiananmen Square demonstrations in 1976 and 1989. Communist guerrillas in the areas controlled by them in the 1920s instigated campaigns against "local bullies, evil gentry and lawless landlords", while in the 1930s Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Party launched the "New Life Movement" to promote good manners and improve public order. From the 1940s onwards political campaigns both within the party and involving "mobilisation of the masses" became a common feature of life under the communists. Mao Zedong even declared that a mass movement was necessary to accomplish any major undertaking. The "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" launched by Mao in 1966 combined all the features of a political campaign with those of a mass movement. Mao's overarching motive in launching it was, of course, to prevent the onset in China of "revisionism" of the kind which he discerned in the Soviet Union. It was his final and most spectacular effort to impose his will on his fellow-countrymen.

Mao's Last Revolution is an eagerly awaited study of this campaign by two of the world's foremost experts on Chinese internal politics. It is unsurprisingly the best history of it so far. If it does not quite come up to expectations, that is because it is less comprehensive in covering certain phases of the campaign than MacFarquhar's majestic three-volume *Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, published between 1974 and 1997, was in dealing with the preceding period. The second half of the Cultural Revolution, following the demise of Lin Biao, who had been Mao's anointed successor, is covered in fascinating detail in Teiwes and Sun's *The End of the Maoist Era*, the first book in a series planned to extend to the eventual return to power of Deng Xiaoping.

One of the effects of the Cultural Revolution on quite a few of those who participated and/or suffered in it has been a wish to recount their experiences, whether in an attempt to justify their actions, to exculpate themselves and their associates, or merely to clarify what had seemed to be obscure

© The Royal Asiatic Society 2008
Printed in the United Kingdom

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1356186308008833 Published online by Cambridge University Press

events. Since the 1980s numerous memoirs of personal experiences and episodes during the Cultural Revolution have been published in Chinese, in mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. These have included some by prominent figures in the Communist Party, their associates and family-members, including one of Deng Xiaoping's daughters.[1] Also, various collections of documents and speeches from the period have been published. The authors of both books make good, judicious use of such sources, as well as interviews with some Chinese academics and others, making due allowance for the likely bias of the writers and their interlocutors. Among the sources cited by MacFarquhar and Schoenhals is *Da Dongluan de Niandai (Years of Great Upheaval)* by Wang Nianyi (王年一) published in 1988. It appears to be one of the few histories of the entire Cultural Revolution written and published in China. Curiously, Teiwes and Sun refer to a work by Wang Nianyi with the longer title *1949–1989 nian de Zhongguo: Da Dongluan de Niandai (China 1949–1989: Years of Great Upheaval)*, apparently covering the much longer period indicated, although they too give the date of publication as 1988.[2]

Covering the campaign from its beginning, MacFarquhar and Schoenhals narrate and elucidate its complex course, from the manoeuvring of leaders subject to the increasingly hard-to-predict whims of Chairman Mao to the disorderly actions of the Red Guards and worker "Rebels" and the conflicting demands placed on the Armed Forces.[3] The aim of preventing revisionism was to be achieved not only by purging his hitherto presumed successor, Liu Shaoqi, and others in the leadership who did not show themselves committed to this goal, but also by training "revolutionary successors" among the young who would emerge in "mass struggles" and needed to be "tempered in great storms of revolution".[4]

The machinations of Mao, with the help of a few confidants, in launching the criticism of senior figures in "big-character posters" at Beijing University are well covered, as is the emergence of the Red Guards in a middle school attached to Qinghua University (also in Beijing). As someone who remembers observing the beginnings of the campaign from his desk in the British Foreign Office, this reviewer would have liked to see a little more on its early public manifestations. For example the startling *People's Daily* editorial of 31 May 1966, which called for the sweeping away of "monsters and demons"[5], is not mentioned. Full weight is given to the importance of the "Sixteen Points", as the Decision on the Cultural Revolution adopted by a Party plenum in August 1966 was popularly known, except that there is no mention of the provision that elections should be held to form Cultural Revolution Congresses at local levels, which is an intriguing sign of apparent democratic aspirations

[1] *Deng Xiaoping and the Cultural Revolution* by Deng Rong was published in English by Foreign Languages Press, (Beijing, 2002). The Chinese version is: *Wode fuqin Deng Xiaoping "Wenge" suiyue*, by Mao Mao [Deng Rong's nickname], Beijing, Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe (Central Documents Publishing House), 2000.

[2] Another history of the campaign written by Chinese is *Zhongguo "Wenge" shi nian shi (History of the Ten years of China's 'Cultural Revolution')* by Yan Jiaqi and Gao Gao, published by Tianjin People's Publishing House and the Hong Kong *Ta Kung Po* press in 1986. In their history of the Cultural Revolution, *Ten Years of Turbulence* (published by Kegan Paul International in 1993), Barbara Barnouin and Yu Changgen also cited Wang Nianyi's *Da Dongluan de Niandai*. The book cited by Teiwes and Sun may be one in a series of several books covering the longer period to 1989 (or a different version expanded to cover the longer period, in which case the 1988 publication date given would appear to be wrong). The introduction to *The Chinese Cultural Revolution as History*, edited by Joseph W. Eshrick, Paul G. Pickowicz and Andrew G. Walder (Stanford, 2006) describes the wealth of documentation now available on the Cultural Revolution and recent research.

[3] Some of the contributors to *The Chinese Cultural Revolution as History* provide vivid descriptions of local manifestations of the campaign, including the activities of Red Guards and Rebels and the impact on individuals. By contrast with most accounts of the period, some other writers, e.g. Mobo Gao in his *The Battle for China's Past: Mao and the Cultural Revolution* (Ann Arbor, Michigan, and London, 2008), recall the benefits to the rural population (at least in some areas) of welfare and other policies practised in the Cultural Revolution.

[4] Phrases from the Chinese Communist Party's "Ninth Comment" in 1964 (the 9th in a series of comments outlining differences with the Soviet leadership): see MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, (pp. 12–13).

[5] 横扫一切牛鬼蛇神 (hengsao yiqie niugui sheshen), literally "sweep away all bull monsters and snake spirits".

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1356186308008833 Published online by Cambridge University Press

held at that stage. There was a brief attempt to realise such aspirations with the proclamation of the "Shanghai Commune" in early 1967, but Mao soon decided to suppress this novel creation of the "revolutionary masses" and to replace it with a "Revolutionary Committee" which would include military representatives to "support" and, if necessary, exercise control over the masses. Any aspirations for elected bodies of this kind were extinguished as the campaign lurched on in ways that the remaining leaders struggled to control, eventually doing so by the imposition of order throughout the country by Revolutionary Committees including representatives of the masses, "revolutionary cadres" and, most importantly, military officers. As the authors explain, this was a difficult long drawn-out process, which was not accomplished until large numbers of casualties had been suffered in fighting between rival Rebel and Red Guard groups and between them and military units. The formation of new provincial Party Committees to replace those which had collapsed under the onslaught of Red Guards and "Revolutionary Rebels" took even longer, and they invariably turned out to be dominated by the military.

For a considerable time government departments, as well as those of the party, were so badly disrupted as to be unable to function properly, and much depended on the role of the Prime Minister, Zhou Enlai, one of the few senior colleagues whom Mao still valued – or at least the need of whose assistance he recognised. The authors also draw importance to the *ad hoc* leadership group, which they term the "Central Caucus", said to have been set up by Mao after the August 1966 Party Plenum and to have comprised at first the members of the Party's Politburo Standing Committee other than himself and Lin Biao, later being expanded by the addition of some members of the Central Cultural Revolution Group who were not Politburo members. This body apparently took on the role which would normally have been exercised by the Politburo Standing Committee. "Caucus" may be an apt, even if hardly an exact, translation of the Chinese term *zhongyang pengtou huiyi* (中央碰头会议, literally "central putting-heads-together meeting/s") which suggests a series of meetings convened to sort out problems and perhaps was so initially, although the series of such meetings may in the course of time have acquired a more established form. By late 1967 another organisation had appeared, which was called the "Administrative Office" and included leading military figures. More research may be needed to establish whether this new body (not mentioned in MacFarquhar and Schoenhals' account) took over the role of the "Central Caucus" during the phase when increasing importance was attached to the armed forces' role in maintaining order and the influence of the Cultural Revolution Group and the role of the Red Guards declined.[6]

The events which led to the attempted defection of Mao's chosen successor, Lin Biao, during which Lin and his wife and son were killed when their aircraft crashed, are still not fully explained. It seems clear that Mao had lost confidence in Lin and, as MacFarquhar and Schoenhals suggest, he may have been scheming to set a trap for him, but the essential reasons for the rift between them remain unclear despite various explanations leaked soon after the event or suggested in later memoirs. Whatever the explanation, the affair was patently a severe blow to Mao and his left-wing supporters.

Even before that, relations between the leftwingers and Zhou Enlai seem to have worsened, especially on the question of education, for which Zhou favoured the restoration of sensible policies, while the leftists wanted to persist with radical reforms. On 19 July 1971 the *People's Daily* published an article which attacked Confucius's ideas on education, referring to his admiration of the past and "following of Zhou" (i.e. emulation of practice in the earlier Zhou dynasty) (*hào gǔ, cóng Zhōu* – 好古, 从周).[7]

[6]It is unclear whether this was the same body as the Administrative Group of the Military Commission mentioned in Barnouin and Yu's *Ten Years of Turbulence* (pp. 210, 212), but references in Red Guard publications to the "Administrative Office" or "Administrative Group" suggest that it had wider responsibilities than purely military ones.

[7]This may have referred not just to Zhou Enlai but also (or alternatively) to Zhou Peiyuan (周培源) and Zhou Rongxin (周荣鑫), two senior figures concerned with education, both of whom were close to Zhou Enlai: see

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1356186308008833 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Following the demise of Lin Biao, the leftwingers went on to defend their position and that of Mao through the publication of an extraordinary series of historical monographs and newspaper articles which both defended the First Qin Emperor (with whom Mao had in the past been compared) and acclaimed rebels who had risen against his unworthy successor, while attacking admirers of Confucius and the ancient duke of Zhou (*Zhōu Gōng* – 周公).[8] MacFarquhar and Schoenhals note that Zhou Enlai had from the 1950s sometimes been referred to as *Zhōu Gōng* – evidently as an affectionate or respectful nickname. There are further details that might be added to the analysis of the beginnings of this phase. Neither book refers to the article of 19 July 1971 mentioned above, nor to the monographs published in May 1972, nor to an important article by the celebrated Professor Yang Rongguo of Zhongshan University in the December 1972 issue of *Red Flag* which, besides praising the First Qin Emperor, repeated an old accusation (long disputed by orthodox historians) that Confucius had ordered the execution of a forward-looking official called Shaozheng Mǎo (少正卯) and had promoted "restoration of the rites".[9] Around the same time Mao sided with the leftwingers in pronouncing Lin as a right deviationist, not an "ultra-leftist" as had been stated by Zhou Enlai. As the authors note, certain press articles about Confucius from early 1973 onwards drew a link between Confucius and Lin Biao, based on the presence of calligraphy and other material indicating admiration of Confucian ideas found among the contents of Lin's residence after his death. In the following year this criticism was expanded into the wider *pi Lin pi Kong* (criticise Lin, criticise Confucius) campaign. Thus it seems that the evidence of Lin's pro-Confucian sentiments was used in an attempt to divert the original thrust of campaign away from Zhou.

As the authors of both books note, in 1972 Mao selected the youngish leftwinger Wang Hongwen for grooming as a possible successor. Wang was raised to the third position in the hierarchy (after Mao and Zhou Enlai) at the Communist Party's Tenth Congress held in August 1973. But meanwhile Mao decided on the rehabilitation of Deng Xiaoping, who had earlier been reviled as "the number two person in authority taking the capitalist road" (after Liu Shaoqi). While his preference was doubtless for Wang Hongwen as someone he hoped to be capable of carrying the anti-revisionist cause forward, Mao evidently recognised the need for Deng as a capable administrator to take over from the ailing Zhou Enlai. It might be observed that the simultaneous elevation of the rehabilitated Deng and the young Wang was consistent with Mao's avowed views on the inevitability of factions and progress through struggle.

Barnouin and Yu, *op cit*, (p. 253), and MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, (p. 392). There were other indications of differences over education, including the production of a film *Juelie* (决裂 – *Breaking with Old Ideas*, completed in 1975) about a conflict between two teachers, with the leading roles of a progressive young teacher and his older colleague played by actors with a remarkable resemblance to Wang Hongwen and Zhou Enlai respectively. The film was shown in a London season of Chinese films in September 1976. After the fall of the "Gang of Four" (Jiang Qing and her associates) it was screened again in China to be criticised as an example of their machinations.

[8]To make the analogy all the clearer – or possibly to indicate that they were produced with Mao's approval, the pseudonym Hong Shidi (洪 世 涤), a homophone for "Red First Emperor", was used for the writer of the monographs on the First Qin Emperor and on the rebels Chen Sheng and Wu Guang, both published as slim paperbacks in May 1972. "Emperor" in Chinese is "Huangdi", often abbreviated as "Huang", but the allusion of "di" used in the pseudonym would be clear to a Chinese reader. On Mao's view of the First Qin Emperor see *The First Emperor of China: the Politics of Historiography* by Li Yu-ning (International Arts and Science Press, 1975) cited in *The First Emperor of China* by Frances Wood (London, 2007) and Barnouin and Yu, *op cit*, (p. 255).

[9]MacFarquhar and Schoenhals note a later article by Yang Rongguo (published in the *People's Daily* on 7 July 1973) which was more intensively publicised in the Chinese media. In this later article Yang criticised Confucius for favouring the restoration of "slave-owning society" in opposition to the then emerging feudal society. Teiwes and Sun note a similar article by Yang, but not that of December 1972. In a *People's Daily* article of 13 August 1973 Yang linked Confucius with "swindlers like Liu Shaoqi" – code used to refer to Lin Biao before open press criticism of him was permitted. In further comments noted by MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, Yang openly spoke of Lin Biao's admiration of Confucius. For information on earlier debates by historians on Confucius, see Wing-tsit Chan, *Chinese Philosophy, 1949–63: an Annotated Bibliography* (Honolulu, 1967).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1356186308008833 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Mao's disenchantment with Lin Biao may have reflected his anxiety over the effects of the dominant role which the military élite had assumed in all fields and over the corresponding decline in the influence of leftwingers such as his wife Jiang Qing and the journalist Zhang Chunqiao. MacFarquhar and Schoenhals lean towards this explanation, as do Jung Chang and Jon Halliday in their biography published in 2005, *Mao, the Unknown Story*. According to the latter, Mao was angered by a fierce attack by Lin on Zhang Chunqiao and by Lin's refusal to comply with his demand to make a self-criticism.

These events came after Mao had brought about a heightening of tension in relations with the Soviet Union by instigating larger-scale clashes on the border and at the time of China's rapprochement with the United States after a long period during which official contacts between the two countries had been confined to the ambassadorial talks held in Warsaw. Even those had come close to petering out during early part of the Cultural Revolution. MacFarquhar and Schoenhals note that in early 1970 the Chinese responded positively to an American offer to send a senior emissary to Beijing. By the end of that year, as hinted at in widely reported remarks he made to the visiting journalist, Edgar Snow, Mao had decided to make a positive response to overtures made secretly at President Nixon's behest. Dr Henry Kissinger, then National Security Advisor to the President, made his first visit to Beijing in July 1971, leading to Nixon's own visit in February 1972. As the authors note, Mao told Nixon that "reactionaries. . .[who] got on an aeroplane and fled abroad" – i.e. Lin Biao – had opposed the contacts with the United States. Although, as they say, Mao may have been unaware of this until after Lin's death, it is not hard to imagine that Lin and some other military leaders may have been disquieted by Mao's stoking up of tension with the Soviet Union and then shocked by his willingness to meet the US President.[10]

In a later article (in the *New York Review of Books* of 28 June 2007) MacFarquhar notes that in late 1973 Mao ordered the Party Politburo to criticise Zhou for "rightist capitulationism" in his dealings with the United States: this probably indicates that Mao remained sensitive to misgivings in the party over his own dealings with Nixon and Kissinger and sought to use Zhou to deflect possible criticism of himself in this regard. Teiwes and Sun provide more detail on this episode and consider the possibility that Mao may have been annoyed by Zhou's acceptance of a formula envisaging the possibility that the question of Taiwan might be settled peacefully, whereas Mao had opined that a military outcome was likely. That Mao for all his efforts remained anxious about China's future adherence to the revolutionary path was suggested later when publicity was given to a comment by him on the "capitulationist" character of the hero of the sixteenth-century novel *The Water Margin*. The authors of both books draw on accounts by Deng Xiaoping's daughter and other insiders to illuminate the increasing tensions behind the scenes between Deng and the leftwingers and their competing attempts to influence Mao which lay behind this further extraordinary spate of criticism.

As MacFarquhar and Schoenhals conclude, the irony of Mao's Cultural Revolution is that, far from fulfilling its aim of purifying the Communist Party and committing the people of China to revolutionary endeavour, because of the disasters which the movement inflicted on China a reversal of Mao's policies was made certain. Indeed the consequences included: the arrest soon after Mao's death of leading leftwingers including not only the "Gang of Four" of Jiang Qing, Wang Hongwen, Zhang

[10]On the background to the 1969 clashes on the border with the Soviet Union and indications of Mao's role see "The Sino-Soviet Border Conflicts of 1969: New Evidence Three Decades Later" by Thomas Robinson in *Chinese Warfighting*, edited by M. A. Ryan, D. M. Finkelstein and M. A. McDevitt, Armonk, (New York and London, 2007). MacFarquhar and Schoenhals refer to evidence cited in *Wannian Zhou Enlai* (Zhou Enlai's Later Years, published in 2003) by Gao Wenqian, a former researcher-writer in the Documentation Research Office of the Communist Party, that Mao learned of Lin's doubts about the opening to America only after Lin's death. However, the same author in his English-language *Zhou Enlai – The last perfect Revolutionary* (Public Affairs, New York, 2007), adapted from *Wannian Zhou Enlai*, says that by early 1971 Mao was spreading rumours that Lin opposed a rapprochement with the United States.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1356186308008833 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Chunqiao and Yao Wenyuan, but also Mao's nephew, Mao Yuanxin; the gradual easing out of Hua Guofeng, the compromise successor chosen shortly before Mao's death; the return to power of Deng Xiaoping; the official repudiation of Mao's record since the late 1950s; and the launching of wide-ranging economic reform policies by Deng which not only reversed many of the practices introduced in the Cultural Revolution but also involved the abolition of the rural People's Communes introduced at the beginning of the Great Leap Forward in 1958.[11] The story of the Cultural Revolution, like that of the Great Leap Forward and the famine it caused, is an object lesson in the damage which can occur in an authoritarian system headed by a supremely powerful leader and a few cronies impervious to criticism. It still seems remarkable that in the Cultural Revolution so many of the cronies who had previously witnessed the terrible effects of Mao's misjudgments went along with him again – even though the authors of *The End of the Maoist Era*, in a well-argued and persuasive concluding chapter, explain the several factors, foremost of which were Mao's prestige based not only on his pre-1949 leadership but also on the power of his intellect and his erudition, which combined to influence them to do so.

[11] As Mobo Gao (*op cit*) has noted, the abandonment of the communes has entailed the curtailment of welfare arrangements beneficial to the peasants (while changes in policies for industry have had adverse consequences for urban and migrant workers).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1356186308008833 Published online by Cambridge University Press