I.

This year marks the fortieth anniversary of the start of China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. According to a later Chinese Communist Party official, one hundred million people were killed, driven to suicide, beaten, convicted in "unjust, false, and erroneous cases," "sent down," or otherwise affected by what Chinese now call the "ten-year catastrophe." Yet the anniversary was greeted by silence in China and abroad. At home, people are not allowed to commemorate Mao's horrors, because the current leaders sustain their regime through the same internal secrecy and arbitrary repression that made the Cultural Revolution possible. Abroad, people think that China has changed so much that its old tragedies are no longer relevant. Besides, it is not polite to remind our trading partners of events that they wish to forget.

And so Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals have performed a great service in providing a masterful history of this important--and puzzling--event. In an earlier series titled The Origins of the Cultural Revolution, (the first volume was published by Columbia University Press in 1974, the second in 1983, and the third in 1997), MacFarquhar described the history of Chinese high politics from 1956, when Mao began to doubt the revolutionary potential of the Soviet model, to the eve of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, when he began to try to root revisionism out of China. These books were based on skillful Pekingological analyses of official Chinese statements and propaganda. That evidence was supplemented in the later volumes by information from memoirs, official chronologies, and documentary collections that the Chinese started to publish after Mao's death in 1976.

The new book draws on still richer sources. The party has published thirteen volumes of Mao's post-1949 papers, a two-volume authorized biography, and a chronology of the life of Zhou Enlai, Mao's prime minister and chief enabler. Mao's secretaries, aides, servants, guards, and family members have issued memoirs that contain revealing information even though they were vetted by the propaganda department. Overseas and free of party censorship, Mao's personal physician, the late Li Zhisui, wrote a book about his years with the dictator called The Private Life of Chairman Mao (I must disclose that I wrote the preface), and Gao Wenqian, an émigré party archivist, detailed Mao's mistreatment of Zhou Enlai in a book on Zhou's late years.
And MacFarquhar's co-author, Michael Schoenhals, has haunted Chinese bookstands and flea markets to find many precious original documents—manuscript diaries, privately published memoirs, Red Guard handbills, intra-party investigation reports, handwritten confessions, personal notes of meetings and speeches, and original mimeographs of party documents. (Ethnic Chinese scholars from abroad have been detained on state secrets charges for purchasing such materials.) Both authors have conducted interviews with party historians and the Cultural Revolution's victims.

Before his academic career, MacFarquhar served as an international political reporter for the BBC and as a member of the British Parliament. His writing displays a fine sense of high politics. Schoenhals is a longtime student of Chinese language and rhetoric. Together they are exquisitely alive to the signals sent by nuances of timing, the editing of photographs, invitations to and exclusions from meetings, and small changes in formulaic utterances. They have created an unforgettable account of exceedingly traumatic events.

The narrative can be painfully vivid at the level of ordinary factory workers, students, intellectuals, and party members—the "masses," in party-speak—who were both actors in and audiences for a public drama whose logic they seldom understood. MacFarquhar and Schoenhals bring to life the self-righteous anger of the Red Guards and the worker rebels, the suffering of their victims, the daily rituals of the Mao cult, the efforts of ordinary people to make sense out of what was happening and to bend their minds to believe in it. They quote from a series of three handwritten confessions by an interrogation victim who had to keep changing her story until she could satisfy her questioners that she had participated in a particular plot, even though she knew nothing about it. (In fact, the plot never existed.) Such stories rescue us from regarding the Cultural Revolution as something past and canned. They portray real people in real time who did not know what was going to happen next. One sees chillingly how a totalitarian regime traps people. Schoolteachers or factory managers got up in the morning and went to work knowing that they were going to be tortured and maybe killed, but they had no place to hide and nowhere to go. The torturers were trapped, too. Activism was a narrowing chute that led from speaking to shouting to beating, from which there was no exit unless one was willing to take one's place among the victims. There was an alternative, though. It was suicide. Targets killed themselves not only to escape torture, but often to send a signal of protest. In return, the regime treated suicide as an admission of guilt and punished the victim's survivors.

Some parts of the narrative are less successful. The authors have to cram so much incident into some passages that the story becomes abstract and unreal: a series of mass movements that they describe in a chapter aptly titled "Confusion Nationwide," a seemingly meaningless wave of officially sponsored violence called "cleansing the class ranks," or the endless purges of officials at the party center who were not particularly close to the Cultural Revolution's main targets. Sometimes MacFarquhar and Schoenhals use extreme examples to stand in for a plethora of strange events, so that the story seems surreal rather than something that real people did. They present incomplete and rounded—indeed, probably fictional—numbers from their sources, saying, to give a few examples, that during the cleansing-the-class-ranks campaign in
a particular province, 22,900 people died and 120,000 were maimed; that in a particular place "33 different forms and 290 variants" of torture were used; and that in the final investigation of Liu Shaoqi, 400,000 people were assigned to go through four million files. These numbers do not seem real, and they have a numbing effect. I suppose such narrative strategies are unavoidable, given the nature of the sources and the complexity of the story.

The first two-thirds of the book describes the years between 1965 and 1969, which might be called the Cultural revolution proper. This is the period of party "work teams" sent to "rectify" college campuses, Red Guards "smashing the four olds" (old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits of the exploiting classes), worker "rebels" "seizing power" in factories, Mao's mobilization of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to suppress factional fighting, his "sending down" of the Red Guards to labor with the peasants, his purge of second-in-command and head of state Liu Shaoqi and other leaders, the paralysis of the party apparatus and government bureaucracies, the establishment of army-dominated "revolutionary committees" to take over the running of the country, and society-wide persecutions against imaginary enemies. This period ended with the Ninth Party Congress of April 1969, at which the Cultural Revolution was declared victorious and the leader of the military, Lin Biao, was designated as Mao's "best student, comrade-in-arms, and chosen successor." The master arc of this part of the story is a coup by Mao against the party: he calls up the masses to purge the leadership, then uses the army to demobilize the masses and puts his most loyal follower in the number two position.

The second part of the book uses half as much space to cover twice as much time, from the party congress in 1969 to Mao's death in September 1976, which is considered the official end-date of the Cultural Revolution. These pages devote less attention to events in society and more to events at Mao's court. Here the story becomes even more bizarre. Mao purges Lin Biao, rehabilitates and then re-purges Deng Xiaoping, denies Zhou Enlai treatment for a fatal cancer, empowers his wife Jiang Qing and three radical colleagues to launch a series of oblique political campaigns against other leaders, and designates an ill-qualified new successor, Hua Guofeng, whose rule was to last only a couple of years past Mao's death. The main story line of this part of the book reverses that of the first part. Mao undoes the involvement of the military in politics, gets rid of his newly designated successor, unravels his purges of some party leaders to reinstate civilian rule, and pushes his personality cult and ideology over the edge of self-parody into destruction. This was, as the authors put it, "an ending [of the Cultural Revolution] so painfully drawn out, so tortuously slow, that it would last more than twice as long as the event it supposedly brought to a close."

II.

Why did Mao do it? This has always been the master puzzle of the Cultural Revolution. MacFarquhar and Schoenhals do not formulate an overall answer, but two lines of interpretation emerge from their narrative. Neither of their arguments fully makes sense, and taken together they even leave the authors themselves dissatisfied.
MacFarquhar and Schoenhals suggest, for a start, that Mao was motivated by revolutionary ideals. Thus, after asking, "Why did China's supreme leader decide to tear down what he had done so much to create?," they answer by describing Mao's theory of revisionism. This theory had its source in Mao's disappointment with the Soviet experiment, which he believed had created a privileged bureaucratic class that abandoned revolutionary ideals. To prevent the same thing happening in China, he set out to "smash the old culture," "weed out capitalist roaders in the Party," and create a "new socialist man." Elsewhere the authors say that "the Cultural Revolution had always been about the rearing of revolutionary successors," and that Mao sought to "temper" his successors in the "surging waves" of the mass movement because he believed that human nature could be remolded through struggle. The masses, he believed, "had to liberate themselves."

The irony of this theory has been clear ever since Li Zhisui, in his memoir of his life as Mao's personal physician, exposed the self-indulgent way Mao lived: his multiple villas, private trains, and serial mistresses; his personal cruelty to everyone around him; and his lack of interest in the suffering of the masses. Mao was given to apparently jocular but genuinely chilling remarks such as that China would do fine even if two-thirds of its population died in a nuclear war, and that the universe would survive even if the Earth were destroyed. MacFarquhar and Schoenhals do not cite these dicta, but they report him as saying: "This man Hitler was even more ferocious. The more ferocious the better, don't you think?" And this: "Beijing is too civilized! I would say there is not a great deal of disorder ... and that the number of hooligans is very small. Now is not the time to interfere." At one happy private occasion, Mao offered this toast: "To the unfolding of nationwide all-round civil war!"

Clearly, Mao was a hypocrite in his personal life and a terrorist-from-above in his politics. But none of this proves that he did not believe what he said about "continuous revolution." If Mao was serious about his vision, however, why did he make such a hash of it? Even his closest colleagues found his demands vague, contradictory, and changing. First he endorsed the takeover of power in Shanghai by the workers, then he changed his mind and lodged what MacFarquhar and Schoenhals call a series of "absurd quibbles" as a way of ordering a reversal. First he ordered local military units to "support the left," then he ordered officers to undertake self-criticism for doing so. First he encouraged the leftist acolytes Wang Li, Guan Feng, and Qi Benyu to promote "dragging out a small handful in the military," then he ordered their arrest for being too radical. Over and over MacFarquhar and Schoenhals show that no one understood what Mao wanted. "After the session, the minister of education ... said to his colleagues, 'Now I am very confused.'"

"Amazingly, it would seem as if the identity of the person or persons 'like Khrushchev' to whom the Chairman was alluding escaped even members of Mao's inner circle." "The participants [in the central work conference] had no idea what accorded with or violated Mao's grand design." "Misperceptions of Mao's attitude, induced by his contradictory behavior, quite probably helped to precipitate the February Countercurrent."

Still less could young students, workers, and cadres imbibe any reliable message from Mao's cryptic words and contradictory actions. Those who committed
themselves most strongly to the "ism" attached to Mao's name--people such as the
philosophy professor Nie Yuanzi, the Red Guard leader Kuai Dafu, and the
ideologist Chen Boda--ended up in the countryside learning from the peasants, or in
prison. The eventual result after Mao's death was a society more cynically
materialistic than perhaps any other on earth.

MacFarquhar and Schoenhals's second line of interpretation is that Mao launched
the Cultural Revolution as a form of power struggle, to bring down his rivals
within the party. They quote him as saying, "Of all the important things, the
possession of power is the most important." After discussing Mao's concern with
revisionism, they segue into his antipathy for Liu Shaoqi, the number-two in the
leadership, who, unlike the pliant Zhou Enlai, "had no intention of abandoning his
critical faculties" when responding to Mao's directives. In this view of the Cultural
Revolution, Mao saw plots all around him. When his senior colleagues took over
policy-making after the failure of the Great Leap Forward, he decided to take power
back. He targeted officials in the cultural sphere first because they were less
important, and used that stratagem to draw out their more powerful patrons. As he
changed the party line, more and more cadres flunked the loyalty test, enabling him to
widens the purge.

Only Zhou Enlai managed to tack and turn to stay consistently close to the helmsman,
so Mao spared Zhou and used him to run the country. (Such was Zhou's agility that
he suddenly upgraded the protocol status of a purged leader's funeral when Mao
jumped out of bed in his pajamas to attend it, ordered an airplane in which other
officials were traveling to circle so he could get his own plane on the ground first and
be there to welcome them, and reversed the flow of the annual National Day parade
so it would go toward instead of away from the symbolically revolutionary direction
of east. And such was his sangfroid that he opined, "If someone is already dead, then
you should not go too far in your attempts to determine [who was responsible].")
Mao held Deng Xiaoping in reserve in a factory job to back up Zhou, according to
MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, because Mao unaccountably viewed Deng as less
dangerous than other senior cadres. Even so, Mao constantly had doubts about
everyone: Zhou and Deng, his ghostwriter Chen Boda, his wife Jiang Qing, and his
final mistress Zhang Yufeng. To the end of his life he never found a leadership team,
a wife, a lover, or a child whom he could trust.

But the theory of the Cultural Revolution as a power struggle also does not
adequately explain Mao's actions. Why not just sack Liu Shaoqi, as Mao had done
with so many rivals in so many previous party "line struggles"--arrange to have him
voted out of office, accuse him of some political crime, or call a meeting and arrest
him when he showed up, in the efficient manner in which Mao's successors dealt
with his wife and her colleagues, the so-called Gang of Four, after his death? Instead
Mao entrapped Liu in an irresoluble policy conundrum so as to humiliate him;
laboriously disempowered him through a costly, tumultuous mass movement; picked
away at his network of supporters; and finally dispatched him to a long, lonely, cold,
and miserable death. The purge dragged on for nearly two years and required the
mobilization of tens of millions of people, causing grievous damage to the economy,
the party, and, in the long run, to Mao's own reputation. Liu's death took another two
years.
Or consider the case of Lin Biao. As MacFarquhar and Schoenhals point out, "Had the Cultural Revolution been simply a power struggle, Mao could have ended it in early 1967," after the fall of Liu Shaoqi. Why purge the ultra-loyal Lin, who had no ideas of his own and wanted nothing more than to preserve unanimity with Mao at all times? (Lin's position was that "we must firmly implement the Chairman's instructions, whether we understand them or not." ) MacFarquhar and Schoenhals observe that Mao's "motivations are still obscure." And if Lin had to go, why not just fire him, or have him arrested and charged with some false crime? Why entrap him in an obscure debate over China's need or lack of need for a head of state, and engage in a year-long, semi-public campaign to undermine his power in the military and his reputation, to the point where Lin decided to flee the country and died in a plane crash--a messy procedure that again cost the country by delaying its economic recovery and cost Mao himself heavily in the minds of the public? In short, as MacFarquhar and Schoenhals quote one cadre as saying, "If what the chairman resents is that there are too many cadres, why not simply tell those eligible for retirement to retire? Why go about it in this way?"

To some extent, MacFarquhar and Schoenhals could have made these puzzles less puzzling by more clearly explaining the structure of power in the Mao era. Nobody understands it better than they do. Among many nuggets of new discovery in their book, they explain how Mao got information about events on the ground, how Red Guard rallies were planned, how the Cultural Revolution Small Group displaced the Politburo as a decision-making body, how the Red Guard linkups around the country triggered a meningitis epidemic, how the Central Case Examination Group managed the investigations of top officials, how delegates were chosen to attend the Ninth Party Congress, and in what form Mao received letters from the masses. All these details are useful for anyone trying to understand the political milieu in which Mao and his enemies operated.

But some larger points about the power structure would have helped readers to make more sense of Mao's goals and strategies. Mao had been forced to cede most of the levers of power in the Chinese party-state after the failure of the Great Leap Forward. As of 1965, he did not control career promotions in the party, the government, or the economic units. He did not control the propaganda apparatus, which was the chief means of communication between the central authorities and the population and local officials, because internal means of communication in the bureaucracy were so ineffective. (Even high-ranking local officials had to guess which way the wind was blowing by analyzing what was said in the party-controlled mass media.) Nor did Mao control the making or implementing of policy in economics, education, or other key areas—with the significant exception of foreign policy.

By all appearances, Mao in 1965 was a safely stowed figurehead who could be brought out on occasion as a symbol by other leaders advancing their own agendas. But he was not satisfied with that role, and he retained two instruments for clawing his way back to supremacy. The first was the cult of personality. His colleagues had wavered over whether to allow it to exist, but over time they built it up as a tool for mobilizing the backward peasant society that they were trying to modernize. If Mao found a way to get access to the propaganda media, he could use his cult to go over
the heads of the other leaders to appeal directly to the masses. Once he broke out of
the communication blockade, no one could contradict his interpretation of his own
ideology. Then he could use the masses as a source of power, a technique that the
Chinese Communist Party had wielded against the Japanese and Chiang Kai-shek's
Kuomintang, but which had not been used before in internal party power struggles.

Mao's second resource was power over key elements of the military. Neither Mao nor
anyone else firmly controlled the military nationwide, owing to unclear lines of
command and inefficient communications. But as MacFarquhar and Schoenhals point
out, Mao had ultimate authority over the armed forces as chairman of the Party
Military Affairs Commission. Early in the Cultural Revolution he took special care to
strengthen both the Beijing Garrison Command and the palace guard that surrounded
all the leaders at home and at work in Zhongnanhai, and to consolidate his direct
control over these units.

The story of how Mao did this is complicated. MacFarquhar and Schoenhals provide
all the details, but they do not do enough to explain what the details mean. Mao did
not rely on the loyalty of any one chain of command. He developed multiple formal
and informal lines of control over the armed forces nationwide and locally, so that the
threads came together only in his hands. As a result, when Mao closed the political
trap on Liu Shaoqi, Liu was as paralyzed as any middle school teacher in the face of
the Red Guards, because he was physically surrounded by Mao's men. When some
of the most senior leaders of the party and the army got together to attack the conduct
of the Cultural Revolution in the so-called February Countercurrent of 1967, Mao
was able to order them into a series of self-criticism meetings with no hope of uniting
their extensive party and army networks against him. Even the head of the army, Lin
Biao, had no way to defend himself when Mao decided to go after him, and ended up
fleeing the country in an unsuccessful attempt to save his life.

This understanding of the power structure goes some way to show how the two
theories of ideological vision and power struggle fit together to explain some
aspects of Mao's behavior. If he had to clear the established party leaders out of the
way to make the revolution continue, then he needed to use the masses to topple them,
and he wanted to do it in the messiest way possible in order to temper the
revolutionary successors in the storms of struggle. After this he needed the army to
demobilize the masses, and then he had to decapitate the army to push it back to the
barracks so he could return selected old cadres who had undergone tempering to their
jobs on probation. In this strategy, Mao moved from impaired power to absolute
power, using the process to put the party and the people through an exercise designed
to change their views of the world.

This combined vision-and-power-struggle story line was pretty much Mao's own
account of what he was doing, and it is pretty much the account that settles out of
MacFarquhar and Schoenhals's narrative. Yet this theory gives Mao more credit for
having coherent goals and strategies than MacFarquhar and Schoenhals themselves
think he deserves. Describing Mao as opaque, deceptive, and contradictory, they
point out frequently throughout the book that there is no way to know why he did
many of the things that he did. His "behavior remains a puzzle"; "It is not clear what
or whom Mao had in mind"; "Mao's [behavior was] contradictory."
So little of what Mao said and did makes cool political sense that one is tempted to fall back on a third theory: that he was insane. MacFarquhar and Schoenhals also employ this explanation some of the time, describing Mao as perhaps paranoid, and as fantasizing during the Cultural Revolution in the way that he did during the Great Leap Forward. (MacFarquhar co-edited The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao, published in 1989, which contain extensive transcripts of some of Mao's nuttiest ravings from the Leap period.) And Mao is not the only crazy person in this story. Lin Biao was "a small, thin, weak man, his face as white as paper," who "normally led a mole-like existence in his home." Jiang Qing's "paranoia left her constantly on guard." The ghostwriter Chen Boda and the internal intelligence chief Kang Sheng were also pretty strange. And eventually the regime as a whole acted deranged--as seen, for example, in Central Document Number 3 of 1970, issued after the entire nation had been beaten into submission, which ordered officials "resolutely [to] execute those counterrevolutionary elements who are swollen with arrogance after having committed countless heinous crimes and against whom popular indignation is so great that nothing save execution will serve to calm it."

Certainly Mao was extraordinarily cruel. But neither MacFarquhar and Schoenhals nor any other scholar has yet presented a plausible diagnosis that would help us to understand how Mao's pathology directed his actions. Confronting such riddles, one misses a certainty, a fullness of reconstruction, that simply cannot be had when it comes to Mao and his court, because so much remains off-limits even in the recent document collections, biographies, and memoirs. Li Zhisui, who was perhaps the only person really close to Mao who was able to write uncensored, was too limited in his access to the leader--and, indeed, too frightened of him--to provide an answer to the inner mysteries of this supremely mysterious man. Jung Chang and Jon Halliday solved this problem in their best-seller Mao: The Unknown Story with their own imaginations--by making up motives and states of mind that they ascribed to Mao and other actors without authority from their sources. MacFarquhar and Schoenhals have respected the limits of their data, and have more scrupulously left Mao an enigma.

As soon as Mao was gone, his project was abandoned. China set course toward wherever one thinks it is heading: capitalism, market socialism, export-led mercantilism--certainly toward a society obsessed with selfish wealth. Deng Xiaoping set to work to make another Cultural Revolution impossible. He created a retirement system for party elders to leave power before they died without retaining the right to intervene in politics (as Deng himself ironically had to do in 1989 against his own wishes), strengthened the role of formal institutions in making decisions and choosing leaders, and established the deliberative technocratic promotion system that produced the current set of organization-man leaders. Deng delivered a formal verdict on Mao in 1981, in a party resolution that evaluated Mao as 70 percent good and 30 percent bad. Interestingly, MacFarquhar and Schoenhals have discovered that this ratio was originally proposed in 1975 by Mao himself in one of his displays of false modesty, making it a safe formula for the canny Deng to adopt.

Still, readers of MacFarquhar and Schoenhals's doleful history should not comfort themselves with the thought that Mao's failure taught the Chinese once and for all that
human nature cannot be changed, or that all people want freedom, or that capitalism and democracy are the tide of history. In this sense, I do not agree with the authors that the Cultural Revolution was "the last stand of Chinese conservatism," by which they mean the last attempt to define a distinctive Chinese form of modernity that uses Western technology to realize a Chinese essence. Hard as it is to believe after reading this masterful and sickening book, large parts of Mao's vision still live. The dominant voices among independent intellectuals in China today belong not to liberal democrats and human rights activists, but to so-called neo-conservatives and neo-leftists who believe that even though Mao's revolution failed (through a combination of his mistakes and Western cultural and economic subversion), the search for a distinctive Chinese model should continue. Some of these ideas even animate the current leadership's push for a so-called "harmonious society," which aims to use state control to repress social conflict and ease inequality. The Cultural Revolution was Mao's last revolution, but it may not have been China's.

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