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## La dernière révolution de Mao (interview)

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Questions to Michael Schoenhals on his book with Roderick MacFarquhar, *Mao's Last revolution (La dernière révolution de Mao. Histoire de la Révolution culturelle 1966-1976*, Paris, Gallimard, 2009, 808 pages).

With Barthélémy Courmont, chief-editor, *Monde chinois*

*Barthélémy Courmont – Your book is a monumental contribution to the historical studies of the Chinese Cultural revolution, between 1966 and 1976. What were the reasons behind the beginning of this period? Was this revolution unavoidable in mid 1960s China?*

Michael Schoenhals –

The events halfway through the 1960s that Roderick MacFarquhar and I refer to as the start of the Cultural Revolution had their origin in any number of complex political and social factors. To be frank, some almost certainly belong in the category of known unknowns, while others may even qualify as Rumsfeldian “unknown unknowns”! The ultimate *catalyst* was in any case to be found in Mao the person and Mao’s thinking about change and evolution. As I have written elsewhere – in *A Critical Guide to Mao*, edited by Timothy Cheek (Cambridge University Press, 2010) – the CCP Chairman viewed *chaos* as conducive to positive social change. On this particular point his thinking was close to that of today’s evolutionary scientists who, while studying not society but mother nature, show that being “on the edge of chaos... provides the greatest evolvability” in species. Mao was dismayed by what he interpreted as signs of stagnation in the socialist revolution he led. In the Cultural Revolution, he sought by way of the right amount of induced chaos to evolve China further away from an oppressive past, by way of an imperfect present, to a communist future. Was this all somehow unavoidable? No, but once Mao had decided that something radical had to be done in response to what he also called domestic “revisionism” (and managed to get the rest of the CCP leadership on board), who was there to stop him? Did Tony Blair listen to a million people protesting in the streets of London on 15 February 2003? No, he was going to have his own War of Liberation, come hell or high water. Be it here in Europe or there in China, powerful politicians with conviction are often hard of hearing...

*Barthélémy Courmont – The Cultural revolution was originally a political movement, and rapidly turned to a general civil war separated in different phases that you described in your book. Would you say that the Chinese authorities were unable to control its development and instead constantly tried to adapt to it, or was it a deliberate choice?*

Michael Schoenhals –

In terms of violence on a civil war scale, things got out of hand in the summer of 1967, and to an extent that forced Mao to assent to policy changes that surely he would have preferred *not* to make, such as involving People's Liberation Army main force units in the maintenance of just the right level of order—or chaos, if you wish. Beginning in 1968 at the latest, adapting to the unfolding of events was probably what preoccupied Mao rather more than actually “leading” the Cultural Revolution. On this point, the situation in 1966 had been very different. After 1971, the Chairman was becoming depressed, it seems, about what was happening to “his” revolution. He may still have been mentally agile, but physically he was increasingly fragile. At no point in the history of the CCP would elite level politics become as much a game of esoteric communication as it was during these his final years. Mao would at times retreat entirely into the realm of classical poetry and ancient history, have selected texts printed up in editions of maybe a dozen copies or so, and ask the other members of the Politburo standing committee read them. The unenviable task that the other leaders then faced was to divine – perhaps on the basis of an allegorical reading of the biography of a general from the Jin dynasty or a poem from the Tang – where in the present the Chairman's mind might be wandering next.

*Barthélémy Courmont – Mao Zedong stimulated the Cultural Revolution, and seems to have repeatedly used its development to serve his political ambition and punish his opponents. But did he always have the control of the events, or was he, at some point, exposed to the ravages he shaped?*

Michael Schoenhals –

In your preceding question, you referred to the “Chinese authorities.” Mao was himself, ultimately, those very “authorities,” so in a sense my answer to that question is also my answer to this one. He was never exposed to the ravages he shaped: his security detail saw to that! At times, he would become irritated by the wall of security that surrounded him, but that obviously does not make him unique or even unusual among world leaders. He had good intelligence on what was going on in China – intelligence was one apparatus that actually seems to have functioned quite well, even during the most tumultuous periods in 1966–1968. He also had power to act on the intelligence, including to successfully execute major policy reversals in response to what we now often speak of as the “facts on the ground.” In the summer of 1967, he had embarked on a misguided policy of what in Europe today goes by the name armed humanitarian intervention in support of outnumbered and outgunned leftist “rebels” in selected Chinese provinces: the outcome was an unmitigated disaster and a carnage of near civil war proportions. But when he, based on the intelligence he was receiving, decided to pull back from the brink, he was able to do so. He remained the consummate guerrilla fighter to the very end, and was able to translate guerrilla strategy from the realm of warfare to the realm of politics with ease.

*Barthélémy Courmont – Mao's obsession was to pursue a “Chinese way”, in opposition to the great powers, both the western countries and the USSR. Was the Cultural revolution a political manoeuvre justified by this objective?*

Michael Schoenhals –

Any “way” that was to stand a chance of success would have to be a “Chinese” one – history had taught Mao as much! The question that one may want to ask here is not whether the sacrifices of the Cultural Revolution were, in this sense, “justified.” A question much more to the point would be whether the immense sacrifices forced upon the Chinese people in order to produce a nuclear weapon and delivery vehicle during the harsh years *preceding* the Cultural Revolution had been justified. I don’t even think I have to answer that one: look at the way the so-called “international community” treats Iran today! Quite a few academics I talk to in China these days are in two minds about the “Chinese way” and somehow want to have their Western pie and eat it too. This is a difficult question that presumes a lot of knowledge and above all *empathy* on the part of the person asking it, as well on the part of the person answering. Why is “our” way taken as the default? Why don’t we ask ourselves what justifies or explains France’s or Sweden’s *Sonderwege* – which is surely what they amount to when viewed from beyond the Ural or Mediterranean, or from a Chinese historical perspective.

*Barthélémy Courmont – How would you describe Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing, and her influence during this period?*

Michael Schoenhals –

Obviously I did not know her personally, but I do know some of her former members of staff, and they give a much more nuanced account of her than we find in the media. Her influence was considerable, over art and culture, possibly over gender politics—if and when one was on the agenda—and over part of the inner circle around Mao.

*Barthélémy Courmont – Zhou Enlai’s role seemed to be more ambiguous. How would you describe Mao’s Prime Minister’s implication through the Cultural Revolution?*

Michael Schoenhals –

Ah yes, the premier... Involved personally in every single important decision that was taken, be it in the civilian sector or the military one. Responsibility? Second only to Mao’s—for better or for worse—and far, far greater than Lin Biao’s or that of the “Gang of Four”! This is not news, and any student of the inner workings of the CCP worth his salt will know that it could not have been otherwise. Just look at how decisions were taken and the routines involved! I do not wish to say that Zhou or anyone else beside Mao for that matter fully understood what the Party Chairman wanted to do in the Cultural Revolution, but Zhou and the rest of what at the time was referred to as “the Proletarian Headquarters” all supported it and made it possible. Zhou was, if you wish, Mao’s ultimate enabler!

*Barthélémy Courmont – The end of the Cultural revolution was an extraordinary ideological battle opposing Mao and Zhou’s vision of China’s future, which ended with the rehabilitation of Deng Xiaoping. Can Deng’s rise and the reforms he implemented be considered a post-mortem victory for Zhou Enlai and a total defeat of Maoism?*

Michael Schoenhals –

Your question is not really a question, but an interpretation of certain events that took place in China in the middle of the 1970s. I prefer a different interpretation of a different selection of events from that decade that, to me, makes more “sense.” I have written in detail about this in “The Global War on Terrorism as Meta-Narrative: An Alternative Reading of Recent Chinese History” (*Sungkyun Journal of East Asian Studies* 8:2), and the point I made was that Mao’s passing marked both an end and a transition. Briefly, his successors stressed the importance of staying the course – some speaking in terms of acting in accordance with “principles laid down” or “past principles,” others merely insisting that one had to go with “whatever” Mao had decided or instructed. Then, in the spring of 1977 Deng Xiaoping, set the process in motion that slowly, almost imperceptibly, would come to mark the end of Mao’s conception of socialism as predicated on a constant, never-ending, all-consuming war or struggle against revisionism, a faith-based conception that for well over a decade in the collective subconscious of millions of Chinese communists had held the answer to the questions “Who are we?” and “What are we doing?” Zhou Enlai plays almost no part in all of this.

*Barthélémy Courmont – One of the human consequences of the Cultural revolution is what you referred as a « lost generation », millions of young people who left schools to work in the countryside. How did it affect the social reconstruction of this country? Are traces of this period still visible?*

Michael Schoenhals –

The years that the generational cohort that currently governs much of China spent in the countryside after 1968 gave them unique insights into “how the other half lives.” Hopefully this enforced temporary hardship proved to be a formative experience that today just might underwrite some of policies meant to lessen the gap between the richer and poorer parts of China. If not, then traces of the period will soon no longer be visible.

*Barthélémy Courmont – You concluded your book by suggesting that the Cultural Revolution was a terrible period, but somehow precipitated the reforms needed in China. Would you say that Mao’s last revolution was a necessary step toward the modernization of this country, the last manifestation of Chinese conservatism?*

Michael Schoenhals –

What is conservatism? What is Chinese conservatism and its Maoist manifestations? These questions were once easy to answer, back when “conservative” was bad and modernization good. When the Cultural Revolution had only just ceased to be part of the here and now, I recall taking a certain pride in being “modern” myself – but what is there to be proud of these days? Drone warfare? Nuclear power? Facebook? As a European intellectual, I would seem to need another major upgrade (Michael Schoenhals version 58.1) before I can again deal with this question coherently. The short answer for now is I no longer know the ideological implications of an answer in the affirmative. I long ago passed the point at which still further “modernization” makes any sense to me or fills any genuinely felt need.

*Barthélémy Courmont – How do the generations born after the Cultural revolution in China evaluate this period?*

Michael Schoenhals –

To be honest, I don't think they know or care too much about it. They are busy doing their own thing, and enjoying their own cultural revolution. But, the great proletarian one played out by Mao and their parents and grandparents is becoming an increasingly popular subject in the history departments of some of China's finest universities, including Fudan University in Shanghai (where I spent the academic year 1975–76). When I was back there in November 2010 and gave a talk on recent trends in international research on the history of the Cultural Revolution, the hall was packed with students and I ended up spending the better part of two hours just answering questions. What seemed to interest the young people the most were alternative and genuinely “other” ways of telling the history of what had transpired in China in the 1960s and 1970s, not merely playing variations on the all too familiar themes regurgitated in the popular press.