

## A Decade of Upheaval: The Cultural Revolution in Rural China

Dong Guoqiang and Andrew G. Walder. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021. 240 pp. \$29.95; £25.00 (pbk). ISBN 9780691213217

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In *A Decade of Upheaval*, two top experts on Mao's China continue and expand their remarkably prolific collaboration to provide a richly grounded study of the rise and fall of factional political battles during the Cultural Revolution. With a focus on a little-known rural county in Central-Eastern China, this study zeroes in on the political conflicts and state violence that spanned the entirety of Mao's last decade and finds a local case study with broad implications for the whole field of Cultural Revolution historiography. The study is based on extraordinarily solid evidentiary ground, utilizing a large array of freshly unearthed primary sources such as Red Guard materials, Party archives, diaries and memoirs.

The book makes a multi-pronged intervention to deepen the existing scholarship on the Cultural Revolution. First, Dong and Walder depart from the conventional view that portrays party-state cadres as defending the bureaucratic order. Through detailed documentation, they argue that insurgent cadres in fact played a key role in the destruction of the very political organizations in which they had deeply vested interests. This intriguing and apparently counterintuitive view has profound implications for how scholars understand the basic patterns of Cultural Revolution conflicts. Instead of focusing on the bottom-up nature of Cultural Revolution insurgent politics as conventionally emphasized, the book develops an "inside-out" view which contends that the party-state bureaucracy did not crumble under mass rebellions from below but rather imploded from within, largely as the result of insurgencies by its own agents. The book's second major argument concerns the role of Chinese military in the Cultural Revolution. Departing from the commonplace view of the PLA as a conservative force closely tied to the party-state bureaucracy, the book brings into sharp focus the important role played by the military in fomenting and exacerbating local political antagonisms.

The third thesis advanced in the book involves the issue of historical continuity and discontinuity. This is an argument unique to this book, as the other themes have been developed in various ways in the authors' earlier works, especially in Andrew Walder's *Agents of Disorder: Inside China's Cultural Revolution* (Harvard University Press, 2019). In a profoundly revisionist spirit, the authors challenge the widely accepted periodization view of the Cultural Revolution. For decades, many scholars have refused the Chinese Communist Party's official view of the Cultural Revolution as an unmitigated "ten-year turmoil." Instead, they suggest that the movement can be better understood as consisting of an initial period of uninhibited mass insurgency and institutional collapse that was followed by a qualitatively different period of rebuilding the political order, mass demobilization and political repression. Calling on scholars to rethink and revise this paradigm, Dong and Walder highlight the continued persistence of factional conflicts throughout Mao's last decade, arguing that there were in fact more lines of continuity than have been previously understood and recognized. Carefully examining the ways in which political antagonisms from the late 1960s survived and continued to thrive throughout Mao's last decade, Dong and Walder concluded that China's Cultural Revolution was indeed "a continuous, decade-long period of political turmoil," during which the country's political order and social and economic life unraveled.

While the book's attempt to highlight the previously neglected lines of continuities is highly valuable, it seems that the authors' bold conclusion that the Cultural Revolution did in fact



constitute a largely continuous “ten-year war” is overdrawn. The key issue is not that Dong and Walder appear to have gone backwards toward the Chinese Communist Party’s official formula of “ten-year chaos” – an ideological cliché that grossly simplifies and distorts an extraordinarily complex historical reality. Rather, the point here is that their thesis may not be fully supported by available historical sources. A broad array of sources concerning society, economy and politics in various localities across China will likely support a substantially different historical picture. Instead of a continuous “ten-year war,” which I believe needs to be taken in a figurative than literal sense, we find a society and an economy that were remarkably well run throughout Mao’s last years. Crumbled in 1966–1967 but reconstituted under military tutelage by 1968–1969, local Party authorities meticulously and comprehensively managed various aspects of social, economic, cultural and political life, including Party restoration and recruitment, propaganda work, rehabilitation of wrongful cases, policing and crime prevention, economic production, commodity allocation and everyday consumption, educational and cultural development, marriage and birth control, and workers’ welfare, amongst numerous others. Available local sources would lend support to an image of an extraordinarily resilient and adaptive Communist party-state which, even at the peak of political turbulence during the Cultural Revolution, struggled to perform and accomplish its various tasks of governance and management. My point here is certainly not to downplay the salience of conflict, disorder and breakdown throughout Mao’s last decade, but merely to point to a different thread of continuity that has been largely neglected in previous scholarship, namely, the continuous existence, despite highly challenging political circumstances, of order, governance and authority.

It seems that even within the locality that Dong and Walder’s work investigates, the “ten-year war” thesis only receives partial support from their own sources. The book mainly focuses on Cultural Revolution factional battles. But it provides little, if any, information on the region’s economic and social life, and there is no compelling evidence that local governance, economy and society were really “wrecked.” Factional animosities surely continued into the 1970s after the restoration of political authorities in 1968–1969 but, from the accounts provided in the book, these remnant conflicts seem to be of relatively limited scale and were restricted to the circles of former factional combatants. Mao’s last decade may indeed have been a “ten-year war” from the sharply polarized partisan perspectives of these factional antagonists as well as from the point of view of post-Mao Chinese rulers notoriously keen on political order and stability, but we need to be careful not to take such a notion at face value and uncritically elevate it into an overarching analytical category that defines the essential character of the entire historical period.

Together with Walder and Dong’s numerous other works, this book makes a highly valuable contribution to the scholarship of the Cultural Revolution in particular, and Mao’s China in general. While the meticulous details documented in the book may present a challenge to readers unfamiliar with modern Chinese political history, *A Decade of Upheaval* should undoubtedly be of significant interest to scholars in not only the China field but also the broad field of the historical and comparative study of social and political movements.

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