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BOOK REVIEW
Andrew Walder, *Agents of Disorder: Inside China's Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019)

Dong Guoqiang and Andrew Walder, *A Decade of Upheaval: The Cultural Revolution in Rural China*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021)

Mark Lush, University of Toronto

For years, historians of Mao's China have sifted through the chaotic episodes of the Cultural Revolution, with its seemingly infinite regional variations, sudden reversals of fortune, and violent convulsions, in an attempt to understand a movement that, at times, appeared to confound even the Chairman himself. There are perhaps few scholars who have contributed more to our understanding of this tumultuous period than Andrew Walder and his longtime collaborator Dong Guoqiang, whose numerous works have boldly revised prevailing interpretations of the Cultural Revolution, even when this has meant dismantling paradigms that Walder had himself helped to establish.[1]

In *Agents of Disorder*, Walder examines the first three years of the movement, from 1966-1969, to reveal the crucial role played by party-state officials and military personnel in collapsing state power and expanding the movement beyond China's major cities. Taking China's highly centralized Leninist party-state and its agents as his primary points of analysis, the author invites the reader to consider that the state was not just the target of popular insurgencies but also, and more importantly, a primary source of conflict and rebellion. In Dong and Walder's collaborative work, *A Decade of Upheaval*, the authors study the Cultural Revolution in Feng County (a remote, rural county in eastern China) to find that military intervention in local disputes, far from restoring order to the region, only served to deepen and perpetuate factional warfare. *Agents of Disorder* begins by asking why the party-state collapsed so rapidly in early 1967. Walder contends that the cellular structure of the state apparatus, which normally allowed the state to surveil, penetrate, and mobilize the population toward approved political objectives, accelerated the collapse of state authority under the vastly changed political circumstances of the Cultural Revolution. Contrary to popular perceptions, the author argues that it was rebel cadres who played a greater role in overthrowing the party-state from within than the more conspicuous Red Guard insurgents who launched their attack from below. Encouraged by positive signals emanating from Beijing, cadre rebels jumped at the opportunity to "control their own fate" (104), condemning their superiors in response to the disintegration of state authority in the upper echelons of the bureaucracy. Thus, Walder concludes that the collapse of civilian political authority was "more an 'inside-out' than a 'bottom-up' process" (101). Turning to the emergence of widespread factionalism and the violence that ensued following the overthrow of local governments across the country, the author finds that the highly fragmented nature of the rebellion ensured that some rebels were inevitably left out of local power seizures, creating rifts between rebels who had seized power and those who had been excluded.

The arrival of military units sent by Mao to support "genuine leftists" (however this label might be interpreted), crystallized the nascent divisions between rebel groups into broader factional alliances. The formation of factions was followed by the outbreak of violence, and Walder proceeds to correlate the intensity of factional warfare to the length of time it took to establish a revolutionary committee capable of suppressing this violence. In areas where violence continued through 1968, the anticipated retribution against factions that failed to prevail over their rivals increased accordingly, creating an "escalation trap" that exacerbated local conflict (152). Following the suppression of intransigent rebel factions by military force, the state ensured that a return to normalcy was achieved by carrying out a series of more quotidian, though no less deadly, political campaigns. When Walder compares the scale and intensity of these later campaigns to the insurrectionary violence characteristic of the Cultural Revolution's initial months, he finds that these efforts to rebuild the party-state exposed far more ordinary Chinese to persecution and violence.[2]

In *A Decade of Upheaval*, Dong and Walder analyze the Cultural Revolution from a local perspective, allowing the reader to observe how some of the processes Walder identified

in his earlier works unfolded in the region. After the movement was expanded to include workers and state cadres in late 1966, bureaucrats in Feng County's local propaganda office joined the rebellion by attacking their superiors in January of the following year. Fearing the retribution of student rebels, whom they had persecuted during the movement's initial months, these cadre rebels banded together to form an alliance within the county's administrative organs. Consistent with Walder's interpretation in *Agents of Disorder*, the authors emphasize how these erstwhile representatives of the party-state condemned their superiors in the bureaucracy while staking a claim to be genuine rebels, retroactively opposing the suppression of the movement by the county's party committee.

The Cultural Revolution in Feng County diverged from the national pattern of events Walder explicates in *Agents of Disorder*. Even though conditions in the county seemed favorable for a power seizure by rebel groups, leaders of the county's dominant faction made the fateful decision not to seize power. What was remarkable about events in the county was not the absence of a power seizure by rebel forces - 20 percent of Chinese counties never experienced one (*Agents*, 81) - but that the two separate branches of the military called on to support "genuine leftists" clashed over which faction represented "the left." Leaders in the local militia force, the People's Armed Department (PAD), sided with one faction while the PLA regular troops dispatched from a neighboring province declared for their rivals. Echoing Walder's thesis in *Agents of Disorder*, *A Decade of Upheaval* tells the story of how military intervention, far from reimposing order, helped define factional divisions and deepened disputes between rival groups, as local political conflicts were overlain by intrabureaucratic rivalries within China's military establishment.

Much of the book delves into several failed attempts to end the county's bitter factional strife. Central leaders summoned leading figures from each of Feng County's factions and their supporters in the military to Beijing and forced them to resolve factional disputes. Even though a tenuous peace was negotiated in the capital, this compromise was largely ignored by rebels back in Feng County who escalated the intensity of factional warfare. Factional violence would ultimately be suppressed by the imposition of military rule in September 1969, but a series of political reversals in Beijing prompted protest among former rebels who had suffered under the military's harsh suppression campaigns. Linking the top-down political campaigns of the early 1970s to the factional divisions that had emerged in the initial phase of the Cultural Revolution, the book concludes that factional conflict survived the imposition of military control and the suppression of rebels, lasting right up until Mao's death in 1976.

Agents of Disorder and *A Decade of Upheaval* provide readers with comprehensive and astute analyses of the Cultural Revolution viewed at both the national and local levels. They reveal understudied and insufficiently understood dimensions of the movement, notably the active participation of two key groups, state cadres and military personnel, who were essential in collapsing the authority of the party-state and shaping the course of the movement. One of the authors' core arguments, that cadres with a stake in preserving the existing state structure were ultimately responsible for its collapse, contributes profoundly to the scholarly understanding of the movement and will have a lasting impact on further studies. Their observation that military intervention in the localized political conflicts that had emerged during the initial months of the movement, far from alleviating strife among mass organizations, actually served to crystalize factional identities and perpetuate violence, broadens our understanding of how mass factionalism emerged during the Cultural Revolution and helps to explain the tenacity of factional warfare. Moreover, these two works shed light on how the dynamic interaction between actors and groups operating at different levels within Chinese society (at the national, provincial, or local levels) may have pushed the movement toward new and unexpected directions.

The two books under review significantly complicate the conventional narrative of the Cultural Revolution that generally portrays cadres as victims of the movement. The authors have gone to great lengths to show that cadres played a crucial role in the insurgency by resisting the restoration of authority and exacerbating local conflicts. However, did cadres remain a cohesive political formation during the Cultural Revolution to the degree that we can properly call the collapse of civilian political authority a "rebellion of the cadres?"[3] A potentially significant cleavage among state cadres described in both *Agents of Disorder* and *A Decade of Upheaval* was the rift between those in relatively junior positions - whom Walder describes as "ordinary cadres, personal aides, or office staff" (*Agents*, 96) - and their superiors, toward whom these low-level bureaucrats adopted a militant stance. Likewise in Feng County, state cadres were also divided according to the positions they held within the bureaucracy, and this was reflected in the membership of the county's factions (*Decade*, 58).

Similar divisions can also be observed among the military personnel who joined the movement in early 1967. Leaders in the PAD occupied a lower position within the country's military hierarchy compared to regular PLA troops. Walder and Dong explain the cleavage that emerged between PAD officers and their PLA rivals as a conflict between insiders and outsiders, but how might their relative position within the state's military structure, and Chinese society more broadly, have influenced how they experienced, interpreted, and reacted to the ongoing movement, as well as their opposed stances toward local developments in the region. Cadres and military personnel, it would seem, were far from unitary or homogenous groups, and it appears plausible that their political orientations and choices may have varied depending on their positions within China's administrative hierarchy. Although Walder and Dong deftly identify the prominent role of state cadres in collapsing political authority from within the party-state, there may be room for their analysis to push further in exploring the relationship between cadres and military personnel positioned differently within China's vast and extraordinarily complex bureaucratic structure.

Taking China's highly centralized party-state as their primary point of analysis, Walder and Dong offer what might be referred to as a "state-centered" interpretation of the Cultural Revolution. The account delivered in Walder's *Agents of Disorder* begins and ends with the structure of the party-state. The collapse of civil authority, in his view, proceeded in a top-down cascade through the lines of the national bureaucratic hierarchy, as cadre rebels reacted to signals from above and events in the upper echelons of the state's administrative apparatus. In the end, it was state agents whose behavior was conditioned by the intertwined political and military hierarchies at the very core of China's Leninist party-state that ultimately collapsed these same structures of authority from within. This focus on state structures returns us to the decisive role played by cadres during the movement. Walder and Dong interpret their behavior as being conditioned "from above," but it may also be the case that these rebel cadres acted in response to pressure "from below."

Agents of Disorder provides little information about the relationship between cadre rebellions from within and rebel challengers from below. One reason this connection is largely overlooked may stem from the sources that form the evidentiary base of the study, the "chronology of major events" (*dashiji*). These retrospective accounts were compiled in the 1980s and 90s after the Party's verdict on the Cultural Revolution had been published in 1981, and when the basis for the Chinese Communist Party's political legitimacy hinged on the thorough repudiation of the movement. Written under such conditions, it is unlikely that these officially compiled local annals would include statements made by rebel cadres at the time that could shed light on how they understood the ongoing movement and their position relative to the student and worker rebellions. Exploring the connections among different kinds of political actors during the Cultural Revolution may reveal how the cadre rebellion was not only conditioned by signals from above but also precipitated by the expanding rebel movement from below, suggesting that bottom-up forces may have continued to shape the trajectory of the movement, even after the rise of cadre rebels.

If the evidence Walder marshals to develop an overarching national pattern of events in *Agents of Disorder* perhaps obscures the links between cadre, student, and worker rebels, then how might Walder and Dong's fine-grained local account of the Cultural Revolution in Feng County, which draws on both oral histories and rich contemporary sources, help to bring these connections to light? In *A Decade of Upheaval*, the authors hint at the relationship between the cadre rebellion from within and the student and worker rebellions from below, but they do not explore this intriguing thread at length. Walder and Dong describe how local activism in Feng County expanded in the latter half of 1966 to incorporate new participants into the movement: workers, office staff, and state bureaucrats. Workers at the county's largest industrial enterprise, a cotton textile mill, organized their own rebel groups in late January 1967 "under the influence of student activists" and began to demand higher wages and improved working conditions for contract workers (*Decade*, 26). If student Red Guards aided in the formation of rebel groups in factories, then how might the expansion of the Cultural Revolution in the autumn of 1966 have triggered the decisions made by state cadres to rebel?
It is noteworthy that the cadre rebellion in Feng County occurred after the return of student rebels who, coming home from travelling across the country to exchange revolutionary experiences, were radicalized by the political trends they had observed in large cities. It is precisely at this moment that we begin to see the movement expand locally to include workers and cadres who quickly formed their own mass organizations. In the turbulence of the movement's general expansion, it is worth considering how cadres, influenced, or even pressured by political developments emerging from below, may have been motivated to seize power before student and worker rebels could do the same.

Were the power seizures carried out by state cadres calculated moves to preempt the expanding student and worker rebellions that were becoming more radical and more threatening from below? Of course, posing this question does not rule out the possibility that these cadres also responded to positive signals emanating from Beijing. If the rebellion of state cadres was indeed induced from above, as *Agents of Disorder* and *A Decade of Upheaval* suggest, then can we infer that local power seizures were coordinated events set in motion by central leaders who had grown wary of a rebel movement that now seemed beyond their control? Or, if there was support for the rebel cause within a divided state apparatus, especially among junior cadres and low-ranking office clerks, then did these "agents of disorder" seize the opportunity offered by the movement's general expansion to pursue their own political agenda? How should we interpret the significance of the cadre rebellion within the wider context of Cultural Revolution mass activism?

The two works under review both highlight the important role played by Beijing in transmitting signals down the national bureaucratic hierarchy to shape the overall trajectory of the movement. But the authors' findings would also seem to suggest that local actors and central leaders existed in a dynamic relationship that continually redefined the parameters of local and national politics throughout the Cultural Revolution. When student Red Guards returned to Feng County in December 1966 to agitate for the seizure of power by rebel forces, a course of action that apparently had the backing of central leaders in Beijing, their efforts were rebuffed by the leadership of the county's dominant faction. The interference of state and military actors only intensified factional strife in the county, and this forced central leaders to intervene directly in a conflict that had escalated beyond anything that could have been predicted from the small-scale political disputes characteristic of the movement's early months. Party leaders in Beijing may have helped push events toward desired outcomes by transmitting signals to actors at lower levels, but just how their instructions would be interpreted and implemented within the rapidly changing political situation brought forth by the Cultural Revolution was far from clear. This leads to the question of how we should understand the relationship between the Party center and the periphery during the movement. Was

the nature of this relationship unidirectional, emanating from the capital out toward the periphery? Or, if central and provincial leaders were indeed reacting to unexpected developments at lower levels, then how might localized conflicts have influenced the decisions of party officials situated at different levels of China's administrative hierarchy, and what effects would such a dynamic have had on the overall trajectory of the Cultural Revolution?

The works of Andrew Walder and Dong Guoqiang have made significant contributions to our understanding of the Cultural Revolution. By revealing the prominent role played by party-state agents, be they civilian cadres or military personnel, in collapsing the structures of civil authority and expanding the movement beyond China's urban centers, the authors have challenged and substantially revised existing interpretations of one of the most crucial and yet bizarre periods in modern Chinese history. Their attention to the distinctive roles played by a myriad of political actors operating at different levels of Chinese society during the Cultural Revolution brings forth a fuller understanding of the processes that shaped a movement that was as puzzling as it was so often tragic. The task that remains for scholars is to build upon the authors' keen insights to explore the complex interactions between individuals, groups, and localities across China during these turbulent years. Probing these interactions will undoubtedly lead to further insights into this extraordinary period, and for this, we will once again have Andrew Walder and Dong Guoqiang to thank.

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[1] In the late 1970s, Andrew Walder helped pioneer a social interpretation of the movement in which he emphasized the social origins of Shanghai's January Revolution. See Andrew Walder, *Chang Ch'un-Ch'iao and Shanghai's January Revolution* (University of Michigan, 1978). He has since radically revised his original interpretation, highlighting the importance of political processes and interactions for shaping the factional identities of Red Guards. See "Beijing Red Guard Factionalism: Social Interpretations Reconsidered." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 61, no. 2 (2002): 437–71; and *Fractured Rebellion: The Beijing Red Guard Movement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

[2] See also Andrew Walder, "Rebellion and Repression in China, 1966–1971," *Social Science History* 38, no. 4 (2014): 513–39.

[3] See also Andrew Walder, "Rebellion of the Cadres: The 1967 Implosion of the Chinese Party-State," *The China Journal*, no. 75 (2016): 102–20.