

make them. There can be no question that the new volume was published with care and intelligence, and in good faith—the question is only in what that faith was placed. We might invest our faith in Elizabeth Bishop's own judgment, or in that of her literary executrix—or in the judgment of Alice Quinn or Lloyd Schwartz, or even of Bishop's worldwide readership. Schwartz, for one, seems to favor the latter: he argues that the literary value of Bishop's best poems is "indestructible,"

and thus there is no reason not "to err on the side of generosity."

Such generosity may extend, in a way, to future generations of poets. Earlier this year, Louise Glück, former poet laureate of the United States, told an audience at Harvard Hillel that reading the juvenile or unfinished works of great poets had helped encourage and embolden her as a young poet. One can imagine something similar happening for young readers of Bishop's new collection. In its final form,

however, her most celebrated poem, "One Art," seems to send a different message. It begins: "The art of losing isn't hard to master;/so many things seem filled with the intent/to be lost that their loss is no disaster." As Bishop made clear, the art of losing—knowing when to hold tight to things, and when to let them go—has much in common with the art of poetry.

Leland de la Durantaye is an assistant professor of English and American literature and language.

Cultural Chaos

From the "dystopian heyday of Maoism" to the making of modern China

by EDWARD S. STEINFELD

FORTY YEARS AGO, millions of China's urban youth rose up in response to the Great Helmsman's call to "bombard the headquarters." Laying waste to whatever manifestations of revisionism and counterrevolution they could find in their midst—oppressive bonds of authority within schools, parental authority in the household, governmental authority in the person of privileged local party elites—they seized their moment in the revolutionary sun as the vanguard class, furthering historical progress under the banner of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong thought. In the ensuing Cultural Revolution decade, more than a million Chinese citizens would perish and millions more would be injured physically and psychologically. In the process, China's entire social fabric—governmental institutions, the Communist Party organization, the basic urban workplace, the neighborhood, and the family itself—would be torn asunder.

Mao's Last Revolution, by Roderick MacFarquhar, Williams professor of history and political science, and Michael Schoenhals, a lecturer on modern Chinese society at Lund University, in Sweden, provides an unparalleled account of this extraordinary event, one made almost unfathomable, even dreamlike, by the distance China has traveled economically, socially, and even politically since the dystopian heyday of Maoism. In 1966, China's best and bright-

est, their Little Red Books in hand, converged on Beijing to rally before the Chairman and then spread throughout the country to make revolution, more often than not through internecine violence and wanton destruction. In 2006, China's best and brightest cram desperately to gain entry into the nation's top universities, land jobs with top multinational enterprises upon graduation, achieve professional success, and immerse themselves via the Internet in global flows of information and culture. How times have changed.

At one level, *Mao's Last Revolution* can be read as an historical benchmark, a reminder of how different things once were and, indeed, of just how terrible they became—terrible enough, as MacFarquhar and Schoenhals argue, to have necessitated the sweeping counter-response of Deng Xiaoping's post-Mao reforms.

At a deeper level, however, this brilliant narrative is a reminder of the profound complexity of Chinese society today. As any visitor to Beijing knows, and as every Chinese citizen takes for granted, a gigan-



tic portrait of Mao Zedong still hangs above the central arch of Tiananmen Gate, the geographic fulcrum of Tiananmen Square and the symbolic fulcrum of the seal of the People's Republic of China. MacFarquhar, author of a three-volume history, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, and Schoenhals leave no doubt regarding Mao's culpability for the Cultural Revolution. The Mao of their extensively documented account may not have been a detail-oriented policy person, but neither was he a dreamy utopian, an "ideas man" removed from the darker exploits of those below him who contested viciously for power throughout the Cultural Revolution. Instead, Mao appears as a prophet of mayhem, an active societal instigator driven by an abiding faith in the cleansing



AP/GETTY IMAGES

power of violence and upheaval. He was not only aware by 1967 of his country's having slipped into something resembling civil war, but effectively egged matters on.

As MacFarquhar and Schoenhals further demonstrate through extensive use of original historical documentation, few if any redeemable characters were to be found among China's top-tier officials during the Cultural Revolution. The radical "Leftists" surrounding Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, certainly bore considerable responsibility for the calamitous decade, as the Chinese government's official post-mortem on the events concluded in the early 1980s, but so, too, did virtually every other senior official at the time, including even ostensible "victims" like Deng Xiaoping. The one person arguably in a position throughout the duration to temper Mao's excesses, Zhou Enlai, the prime minister, appears to have served more as a

facilitator than a brake. The point is that few senior luminaries were purely victims, and almost all of them were in one

way or another active participants.

The issue of victimization and culpability leads to an even more significant theme of *Mao's Last Revolution*. The Cultural Revolution, as MacFarquhar and Schoenhals demonstrate, should not be understood as something akin to a Stalinist purge. It did not operate through the proverbial midnight knock on the door, the unannounced visit by the state security appa-

rat assigned to round up designated victims and "dis-

appear" them into eternity. Rather than a carefully orchestrated purge or even a carefully coordinated manipulation of public sentiment, the Cultural Revolution was a wildly unpredictable and intensely participatory event, something that reached into the deepest interstices of civic life and, in so doing, took on a momentum and trajectory of its own. Mao's repeated proclamation that "rebellion is justified" stoked intense passions among ordinary people, whether the young or, frankly, anybody else harboring feelings of resentment, dissatisfaction, and envy—which is to say, virtually everybody. People were stirred to participate and participate violently. Mao's directive to "bombard the headquarters" may have been a figurative call to attack revisionists within the central Communist Party bureaucracy, but it translated in the citizen's mind as license to attack any semblance of social hierarchy and authority, the closer and more personal the better.

Opting out of politics may not have been an option in the totalitarian context of Maoist China, but during the Cultural Revolution, many, many citizens rushed to join in voluntarily. Indeed, many Chinese today can still recall the initial sense of euphoria, liberation, and exhilaration that accompanied their participation in the movement. Many, too, look back in wonder, and often horror, at what they did and how eagerly they did it. The Cul-

Peasants in Hungching engaged in studying and applying "Mao talk" in this 1969 photo.

tural Revolution would be an easier event to understand if clearer boundaries existed between victims and victimizers. Instead, it is a difficult period to comprehend precisely because most Chinese citizens who lived through it were both. Tragically, it is, in this sense, *their* event—not something they simply suffered through, but rather something they *own*.

And that brings us back to the portrait of Chairman Mao on Tiananmen Gate. In the 30 years since Mao Zedong's death and the end of the Cultural Revolution, China's reformist leaders have dismantled virtually every vestige of Maoist policy. China today in almost every way—save for the monopoly on political authority still claimed by Party—represents a rejection of Maoism, and arguably even socialism. As outsiders, then, it becomes easy for us at once to view contemporary China as a repudiation of the past and to wait expectantly for the citizenry to cast off the government that victimized them in the past and still lionizes Mao Zedong in the present. Yet for Chinese citizens, just as the Cultural Revolution is their own, so, too, is Mao Zedong and the Chinese Revolution more broadly. Their revolution's track record is undoubtedly ambivalent, encompassing the full gamut from exhilarating liberation to grotesque calamity, but—in the minds of many—it is an event still in the process of unfolding. The economic burgeoning and global presence of China today is, for many Chinese, as much a part of that revolution as the portrait of Mao Zedong on Tiananmen Gate, and the wrenching historical events to which that portrait is linked.

To read *Mao's Last Revolution*—an unsurpassed account of an era at once gone by and still so present in the minds of Chinese citizens today—is to come face to face with the complexities of political legitimacy, historical memory, and the evolving social contract in what has become one of the world's most influential nations. ♣

Edward S. Steinfeld '88, Ph.D. '96, associate professor of political science at MIT, focuses on the political economy of China. His current research projects examine contemporary Chinese industrial competitiveness and the management of China's energy sector. As a Harvard senior, he took Roderick MacFarquhar's "Cultural Revolution" course (Foreign Cultures 48) in its inaugural year.

Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, \$35).