Modern China's Long Decade

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Between the Fall of the Gang of Four and the Rise of Best-Seller: Modern China's Long Decade

Why write about the 1980s? Surely the past fifteen years during which China has risen to be the world's second most powerful economic power is a much more interesting period? And in the cultural sphere so many more spectacular cultural products seem to have been produced than before.

It is true that the 1990s witnessed the popularisation and economic exploitation of new literary and artistic trends, but these by and large had first emerged in the preceding decade. For example new (for China) forms such as 'avant-garde' art and Wang Shuo's "hooligan literature", and the poets and novelists, such as Gao Xingjian who would later be awarded the Nobel Prize, were active in China in the immediate post Mao, post 1976, period before going into exile at the end of the 1980s. Nowadays, if the 1980s are mentioned at all, and they rarely are in China, it is as a moment of hesitant transition, or a period of missed

opportunities, at best a period of preparation for real wide-ranging economic reforms of a hitherto socialist economy.

But the 1980s constituted not merely an interval, the middle card of a three card trick in which the first and third cards were respectively the Revolutionary period, and the post-modernist capitalist era, but a major moment in China's recent cultural history, the last, so far, period of an intellectual and cultural activity that was defined by an engagement with, or contestation of, national, state-dominated political life.

After the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, the revolutionary period was declared over, and its achievements deemed nugatory, by the ruling group led by Deng Xiaoping that gained power in the late 1970s following the political coup called “the toppling of the Gang of Four”. But the ideology and values that had dominated China's political and intellectual elite for much of the twentieth century continued to exercise their influence. Even those who were now disillusioned with Communist ideology were still in thrall of its logic, its mechanisms, and its ideals; embedded in the contestatory discourse and action of the

dissident intelligentsia was an idealistic, utopian notion of communism. In other words, young dissident former Red Guards were driven by a sense of injustice. They felt duped and even incensed, by the betrayal of the ideals of egalitarianism, liberation and total revolution that had so convinced them at the start of the Cultural Revolution.

Beyond communist ideology, but also central to it, was the inheritance of the intellectual class's revolutionary discourse that had its beginnings in the mid to late nineteenth century. This patriotic, anti-imperialist discourse demanded educated youth consecrate their ambitions and their abilities to serving China. This 'China' was understood as a post-traditional state defined and coalesced into a fictional oneness in reaction to the aggression of numerous foreign powers.

After the First World War, China emerged badly treated from the Versailles peace process, more like a vanquished power than the ally China had been to Britain, France, the USA and Japan. The reaction of China's intellectual class was to adopt the same logic as many other Asian and African countries seeking sovereignty, that is to say the logic of the attainment of independence and sovereignty

by a mandatory and inevitable emulation of the modernized nation-state model, to which there was deemed to exist no alternative. While denied to most of the world's non-white colonized peoples, the principle of national self-determination and the notion of the nation-state as the epitome of modernity had been consolidated and reaffirmed by Wilson's doctrine and the new Europe founded upon it. In China, the nexus between Versailles and the future path to be followed was dramatically illustrated by the 4th May 1919 student demonstrators who protested against the outcome of the treaty talks by marching across Tiananmen Square. The protests evolved into renewed demands for Western-style scientific and political methods to be adopted. As such what became known as the May 4th Movement merely reiterated more intensely and vociferously demands and initiatives in favour of cultural and scientific changes that were, in fact, already under way.

But more than providing a new impulse to a process of modernization (known as "Westernization" during the first half of the twentieth century) that was contradictorily supposed to liberate China from Western dominance, the

May 4th Movement, echoing the fervour of the 1917 Russian Revolution, provided a model of romantic revolutionary fervour for urban elite youth to emulate. Indeed, the behaviour and ideological orientation of the ex-Red Guard, post Cultural Revolution intelligentsia can be traced back to that model.

But while Deng Xiaoping took advantage of these young dissenters of the 1978-79 Democracy Wall to assure his own position in the new hierarchy, he simultaneously courted the original May Fourth generation (to which he himself belonged) and reinstalled the literary and intellectual personalities that had peopled the Communist literary scene since the 1930s.

Thus, in the early 1980s the literary and cultural field was still dominated by authors and literary establishment bureaucrats who had first risen to prominence in 1930s Shanghai. It was this old guard that Deng Xiaoping promoted and protected. Needless to say, the vast majority were radically out-of-step with the realities of the changed times and the new literary and cultural strategies that the generation of ex-Red Guards were thirsting for.

The lives and works of this older generation occupied

almost entirely the official literary-cultural organs and structures of the late 1970s and early 1980s. It was as if being able to step back to before the Cultural Revolution would suffice to fill the cultural void left by the eradication of Cultural Revolution policies. But the world and China's urban elite had moved on and craved something more and something different. Much of the antagonism in the cultural sphere throughout the 1980s resulted from, first, this inability of the establishment to grasp that the old Marxist-Leninist literary formulae were inappropriate to China's and the world's changed circumstances, and, secondly, the inability of the authorities to produce new cultural content to match the new consumer-oriented society that Deng's policies heralded and promoted. Throughout the 1980s, for instance, the availability of television sets in China increased dramatically, but there was a lack of content to accompany this economic and technological sea-change in urban China's culture and consumption habits.[1]

In the domain of elite culture, it was the underground,

1 In 1978 less than 1%of China's urban population possessed a television set, ten years later the figure stood at nearly 40%, according to Joshua Aleksandr Harman in "Relative Deprivation and Worker Unrest in Mainland China" (http://mcel.pacificu.edu/aspac/papers/scholars/harman/ Harman.htm, consulted 15 February 2007).

non-official poets who were avidly read in the universities and by the young intellectual class in general, and not the newly re-installed and newly productive old men of letters such as poets Ai Qing and Bian Zhilin whose cultural and political vision had been honed by decades of surviving the twists and turns of cultural and political campaigns.

It is thus difficult to understand fully the cultural politics of the 1980s without alluding to earlier politico-cultural debates. During the 1980s not only would controversies of the People's Republic of China prior to 1976 re-emerge, but also resonances of arguments and feuds dating back to the 1930s.

In 1949, at the end of the Civil War between Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists and the Communists, China had three locii of power. Nanjing (Nanking) that had been the administrative capital of the Republic of China (1911-1949), Yan'an the terminus of the Long March and revolutionary base of the CCP from which its military offensives were launched and where Mao's dominance and his ideological leadership had triumphed, and spectacular Shanghai: cultural, intellectual and

commercial metropolis of Republican China.

After the Civil War all power shifted to the much less glamorous but symbolically important northern capital, Beijing. Nanjing now returned to its position as a former imperial capital. Yan'an in the popular imaginary would become a mythic decentred centre of the Revolution. But the political line that had been elaborated there by Mao and his supporters would continue to constitute the dominant ideology of New China's socio-cultural topology.

Yan'an had provided not only a military haven for China's communists during the 1930s and 1940s, but also a base for the production of the cultural forms necessary to win over China's people. Hundreds of city-bred cultural producers flocked to the revolutionary base, especially after the Japanese occupation of Shanghai in 1937. But the Communist Party had a very specific notion of culture as an instrument to attain its ends.

In 1942 to mark Women's Day, the early revolutionary feminist writer Ding Ling wrote an editorial in the Communist Party organ's literary supplement to draw attention to the lot of women in areas under Communist

control and Ai Qing wrote an article entitled "Understand Authors, Respect Authors". Subsequently, Mao summoned all "literary workers" to a conference that would set down the rules to be observed by those engaged in literary production; a rigid policy that would remain effective for the following four decades. It was in what became known as the "Yan'an Talks on Literature and Art" that Mao had made clear the strict and dogmatic guidelines for literary and cultural production. In a passage doubtlessly aimed at Ding Ling, Ai Qing and their comrades Mao warned:

> Intellectuals of petty-bourgeois origin always stubbornly try in all sorts of ways, including literary and artistic ways, to project themselves and spread their views, and they want the Party and the world to be remoulded in their own image. In the circumstances it is our duty to jolt these "comrades" and tell them sharply, "That won't work! The proletariat cannot accommodate itself to you; to yield to you would actually be to yield to the big landlord class and the big bourgeoisie and to run the risk of undermining our Party and our country."[2]

Yan'an, the new cultural centre of revolutionary China was far removed from the freer and more bohemian leftist milieu of 1920s and 1930s Shanghai that had nourished modern China's intelligentsia. Shanghai had constituted a centre of exploration and of innovation replete with burgeoning cinema industry, bookshops and literary

2 Mao Tse-tung, *Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art*, Peking : Foreign Languages Press, 1967, p. 38.

presses that transmitted Western ideas and culture, thus allowing new intellectual and literary trends to develop.

When in the mid-1980s the so-called "cultural fever", a new found passion for Western culture and theory, was at its height in China, and Western literature and ideas were being heatedly discussed in elite intellectual circles, what tended to be forgotten, or more probably was not ever known, was that this renaissance of interest for the foreign, echoed a process that had already taken place in Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s. Freud, for instance was "discovered" in 1980s Beijing, but in fact was merely rediscovered since the 1930s modernist writer and translator Shi Zhecun had already made extensive use of Freud's theories in the writing of his short stories that attempted to account for the alienation of the individual in the modern urban world that was Shanghai. In short, as was the case in the debate on *menglong* or obscure poetry in the 1980s, the politico-literary arguments over freedom of expression, and the purpose of creative writing, had already been rehearsed fifty years previously. Indeed, what would give greater substance to the impression of repetition was the participation in the 1980s debate of a

number of authors such as Ai Qing and Bian Zhilin, who had themselves already been active in the 1930s. In the debate over the need for literature to be transparent, a position maintained by the official establishment writers and academics, for instance, while the immediate object of discussion was *menglongshi*, this was in part displaced onto a discussion of 1930s modernism, and specifically onto the poetry of the francophile Shanghai modernist poet Dai Wangshu (1905-50).

But behind the argument over the capacity of a non-realist mode to express adequately the realities of everyday life, there was a further objective: to oppose the political position of the Shanghai modernists who while largely on the left and supportive of radical change in China, obstinately maintained that writers should be left their autonomy. This was a position that attracted much opprobrium from the mainstream 1930s Communist writers and the major fellow-traveller Lu Xun, historically the best known literary figure of the twentieth century.

The recuperated 1930s debate over the relative merits of realism and modernism, intertwined with the question of writerly freedom, was thus used during the early 1980s as

a vehicle to criticize contemporary literary tendencies. What had been politically incorrect in the 1930s remained so in the 1980s. For instance, Ye Deyu in a fairly liberal Communist literary journal entitled *Modern Chinese Literary Research*, published in March 1981, and therefore written probably in 1980, the author reproduces Mao Zedong's 1926 analysis of China's middle class as an authority to condemn the 1930s writer, Du Heng's pretensions to writerly independence.[3] The citation from Mao's 'Analysis of China's Social Classes' concludes that the Chinese bourgeoisie's aspiration to « independent » revolutionary thought, was purely and simply an illusion. This discussion is intended to be read in the context of early 1980s, for at the same moment the debate over contemporary poetry was much in the literary and even extra-literary official press.

The year 1979 had seen numerous non-official poems published, largely in the underground magazine *Jintian/Today*. Meanwhile many of the older generation of official poets had begun to re-publish in the official national poetry magazine *Shikan*.

The January issue of 1980 foregrounded a poem by 1930s

3 1981, pp 25-26.

poet, Xu Chi, who would later publish a book entitled *Modernization and Modernity*.[4] The poem entitled "The Eighties" begins with an admonition (addressed to the authorities?)

> Don't try and use locks to lock up minds,
> To do so would be a fruitless effort,

And continues with an exhortation (to the reader?)

> The eighties have already shaken hands with you,
> Modernization wants to embrace you

What seems at first an appeal for openness is in fact an appeal for China's population to embrace not modernity as such but the Party's official credo of targeted modernizations: "The four modernizations are unstoppable."

It will be recalled that the four modernizations (of China's industrial, scientific, agricultural and military infrastructures) constituted the major policy plank of the CCP reform faction. But it was Wei Jingsheng who, the year before Xu Chi's poem was published, had called for a fifth political modernization: democratization. But in Xu Chi's poem, there is no question of defining modernization as anything other than the official road to

4 First published as an article in *Wenyibao*, II (1982).

material and infrastructural development.

The rehabilitated official poets were amply fulfilling the contract that Deng had concluded with them in 1979. But the official national poetry journal could not continue to pretend that the non-official poetry that was everywhere posted up on walls, distributed in samizdat broadsheets, and recited in impromptu poetry 'salons' did not exist. The fact that the renaissance of poetic interest and creativity was happening unsupervised and unbridled was of concern not simply to the political authorities but also to those charged with reviving a genre that had not prospered since the 1940s.

In the September 1980 issue of *Poetry Journal*, Li Yuanluo addresses the question of the new « hazy and hard to understand » poetry.[5] Li goes on to remind readers that the modern Chinese poetry movement had already embraced such poetry in the 1920s and 1930s, and cites a poem by Li Jinfa whose poetry at the time was deemed unreadable. While Li Yuanluo believed that poetry need not necessarily by easy to understand, it nevertheless had to be socially useful and "advance the great cause of our

5 *Shikan* 1980, n°.9, pp. 47-48.

four modernizations".[6] He concludes:

> As for people who say those incomprehensible poems mark the beginning of "poetry's modernization", I simply believe that such a "beginning" is in fact its "end".[7]

This was nevertheless immediately followed by the announcement that out of 2000 odd poems considered for publication; those of 17 young poets had been retained for publication in the following month's, October's, edition of *Poetry Journal*. The list includes the names of several notoriously "misty poets": Jiang He, Gu Cheng, and Shu Ting. All the poets on the list had attended a poetry workshop with older official poets Ai Qing, Zang Kejia and Tian Jian in July and August 1980.

Shu Ting's and Jiang He's contributions were unexceptional, but among Gu Cheng's poems was what was to become an emblematic "misty" poem, "Distant and Close"

> You,
> Now you look at me
> Now you look at the clouds.
>
> I think
> When you look at me you are very distant
> When you look at the clouds you are very close.

The "menglong" polemic continued in the next issue,

6 *Shikan* 1980, n°.9, p. 48.

7 *Shikan* 1980, n°.9, p. 48.

N°11, and flowed on into 1981.[8] In the March issue of the journal another old-time poet, Yuan Kejia wrote:

> Poems cannot be evaluated as good or bad unless they are understandable in the first place… The incomprehensibility of some poems results from the mechanical imitation of Western poetry.

An astonishing statement from one of the pioneers of the anti-traditional iconoclastic New Poetry Movement of the 1920s and 1930s that was almost entirely founded on Western models of versification and form.

The debate on 'misty poetry' or ‘obscure poetry’ was no mere esoteric, academic quarrel, it was indeed part of an ideological struggle at the highest levels. The word in China, in revolutionary China, had always been a political vehicle. It was inconceivable that the authorities should ignore the literary and cultural sphere, on the contrary it was one of their main concerns and constituted a battle-ground between conservatives and reformers. This explains the apparent contradictory and seemingly haphazard discourse and actions of the reform faction. While the reformers wished to unleash the country intellectual and cultural capital, they could not be seen to be slack in allowing dissident literary and cultural voices to go unchecked. Moreover, it was not in the interests of

8 *Shikan* 1980, n°11, pp. 50-53.

the Party machine as a whole to allow intellectuals to have unrestrained freedom of expression.

Apart from a number of poems from the 1970s that alluded relatively clearly to a general disillusionment with Maoist ideology, the politicalness of "misty poetry" was generally to be found in its very refusal to be political in a habitually ideological way. It did not overtly challenge the regnant authority on its own ground, but rather established a new or alternative terrain beyond or outside traditional political controversy. It was a poetry that attempted to give back autonomy to the writer and reader, agency to the imagination, and power to language. Witness this poem by Duo Duo written at the height of the "misty poetry" controversy:

> Language is made in the kitchen
>
> If language is made in the kitchen
> The heart is the bedroom. They say
> If the heart is the bedroom
> Wishful thinking is its master
>
> From the wishful thinking expressed in the bird's eyes
> The boy who fiddles with the trumpet mute
> Agrees: commotion
> Is just like meter
>
> A brain incapable of dream
> Is just a stretch of time's wasteland
> The boy who fiddles with the mute recognizes
> But does not understand
>
> Contracepted seed
> Just cannot produce images

Each seed is a reason…
Wanting to speak

A reason, just like an address
Does not speak. The wild man smoking a cigarette
Does not speak just presses the walnut
Into the table top. They speak

Saying all discussion
Must cease -- when
Horses all around are so silent
When they, are inspecting people's eyes

1983

Most of the so-called Misty Poets, including Bei Dao, Mang Ke, Gu Cheng, and Duo Duo, had been writing 'unofficial' poetry inspired by a modernist aesthetic and a revulsion for Mao-idolatric lyric products, since the early 1970s.

Mang Ke, for instance, in a 1973 poem that could be interpreted as dissenting from the political line describing the sun as having 'sunk' is at the very least departing from the officially sanctioned and required lyric praise for Mao, the Party and the Motherland. This poem by Duo Duo dated 1973 and thus composed during the Cultural Revolution, would only be officially published in the 1980s:

Night

On a night full of symbols
The moon is like an invalid's pallid face
Like a mistaken shifted time

And death, like a doctor standing before the bed:
Some merciless emotions
Some internally chilling changes
Moonlight in the void before the room softly coughs
Moonlight hinting clearly at exile…

1973

The situation was perhaps more difficult for older establishment writers such as novelist and screenwriter Bai Hua, and reportage writer Liu Binyan than it was for the non-official (and therefore theoretically non-existent) young poets.

In January 1980, barely three months after Deng Xiaoping had addressed the Writers' Congress, ostensibly encouraging free literary creation, his protégé, the liberal Hu Yaobang warned a gathering of playwrights that they should take into account the social impact of their literary production. Throughout 1980 the atmosphere became even more restrictive.

In April 1980, the Standing Committee of the 14th Session of the 5th National People's Congress (China's parliament), abrogated Article 45 of the Constitution which accorded the right to post up *dazibao*, or big character poster. There would be no more "democracy walls".

Also during the year, most of the surviving unofficial or 'underground' magazines were suppressed, although the

most well-known underground literary magazine *Today* struggled on a little longer. The tone hardened yet again in 1981 with democracy activists being described as "dissidents" or even as supporters of the Gang of Four. In April the last of the democracy magazines, *Zeren*, ceased publication, after joint CCP Central Committee and State Council directives were issued on 20th February 1981 calling for the closure of « illegal » magazines and organizations. A number of editors and activists were then arrested and incarcerated. Bei Dao and Chen Maiping, editors of *Today*, escaped this fate since theirs was a more 'misty' less directly political publication. The question of 'underground' and non-official *buguanfang* literary and political activity had therefore been settled. The message was a short and straightforward one. Such 'fringe' activities would be ill-received. The authorities then turned their attention to the official cultural sphere.

In late April 1981 just within the South Gate of Peking University there appeared a blackboard notice written up in brightly coloured chalks; this was a frequently used, cheap although temporary medium, with which to attract people's attention to political and cultural events. The text

defended the playwright Bai Hua who had been criticized in the authoritative PLA publication *Liberation Army Daily* on 20th April 1981.

The Bai Hua controversy came at an unwelcome moment for the reformists who were pushing forward with their consolidation of power. The campaign against Bai Hua was reminiscent of out-dated revolutionary methods and the international reaction embarrassed that part of the Chinese leadership wishing to enhance China's image.

Bai Hua was an "official" writer. Born in 1930, he was a member of the intermediate category of writers between the 'old guard' of the May 4th generation now in their seventies and the former Red Guards now in their twenties. A member of the Communist Party from 1946, he entered the People's Liberation Army in 1947 and was assigned to its propaganda unit. He started writing in 1951 while remaining in the army. In 1957 he was a victim of the anti-rightist campaign and denounced as a "bourgeois rightist", excluded from the Party, discharged from the army, and condemned to 'reform through labour'. He started writing film scripts on his release in 1961 and was reintegrated by the PLA into its Arts and

Literature Department. At the start of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, he was labelled a member of the counter-revolutionary "black gang", separated from his wife until 1973, and denied the right to write until 1976; being denied the privilege of writing was meant literally, it did not simply signify being barred from publishing.

In 1977, he once again turned to writing, and in 1979 published his *Bitter Love* in the official literary magazine *October* (N°3, 1979). In 1980 Bai Hua produced the film script version of *Bitter Love* which went by the title *Sun and Man* and the Changchun film studio produced the film. It would however never be publicly screened.

The scenario of *Bitter Love* recounts the story of a Western-style painter, Ling Chenguang who leaves China and achieves a degree of success abroad. He returns, as many thousands of young intellectuals did in response to the government's appeal, after the founding of the PRC in 1949, to help build New China. Rapidly branded a "rightist" and persecuted during the Cultural Revolution, he resists the temptation to leave China once more, as his daughter, in a line of dialogue that would draw intense criticism, foregrounds the unreciprocated nature of his

fidelity to his country: "You love your motherland, but does your motherland love you?" Almost deranged he flees to the wintry countryside where before collapsing in the snow he sees traced in the sky by a flock of storks the Chinese character *ren*, 'person' or 'human'. His corpse is then represented in the form of a question mark in the snow. The significance of the question mark is clear: the interrogation of an intellectual's sacrifice for a society, here defined as the country, the motherland. The sense of the Chinese character *ren* is less transparent perhaps, but given that the revolutionary ideology denounced the privileging of the individual as bourgeois humanism and favoured a class vision of society, this would doubtless be read as inferring that hope lay in a valorization of the individual human being, a humanist vision of society.

Not only was the film denounced as unpatriotic and verging on the unacceptably 'bourgeois humanist', but there were also scenes that seem to criticize the Mao cult. In other words, there was sufficient in the film to make it detestable to the Party higher echelons' conservative elements who saw the film as a prime object for critique. In other words, it could be used as an excuse to launch a

campaign which indirectly would target the liberal faction of the Party associated with Hu Yaobang. Conservative elements persuaded Deng Xiaoping that the film was not only unpatriotic but that it also represented an anti-Deng tendency. The affair dragged on for most of 1981. A compromise solution was found: Bai Hua was encouraged to sign a self-criticism that had been prepared for him and this was then published in the national press.[9]

In 1983, the campaign against independent expression was launched, it was called the "campaign against spiritual pollution", in other words the adoption of Western sociocultural habits and practices. What was targeted by this campaign included everyday practices such as the wearing of lipstick and Western hairstyles. But the principle objective of the conservative cultural authorities was the writerly class and above all, and once again, literary modernism.

The year 1985 has been called the year of the "book series craze" (the Chinese publishing industry has always been heavily invested in the production of series of books

9 For Bai Hua's own full account of the 'Bitter Love' controversy see his interview with Cheng Yingxiang in Cheng Yingxiang, *Dégel de l'intelligence en Chine 1978-1989*, Paris, Gallimard, 2004.

rather than free-standing monographs).[10] The year has also been denoted as the year when the Cultural Fever took off. However, my own experience and frequentation of figures in the cultural sphere did not leave me with any impression of frenzied activity, or indeed of an atmosphere particularly conducive to cultural creativity. While there were still poetry salons, and heated discussions in my apartment or those of poet-friends or thinkers such as Zhou Duo (who would be one of the last protestors at Tiananmen in June 1989), as 1985 drew to a close the atmosphere was nevertheless morose. There had also been acts of censorship reminiscent of the Anti-Spiritual Pollution campaign that was now supposed to be a closed affair. Once again, the habitual linear history of campaigns followed by long moments of freedom of activity is too neat and simple; see for instance the *fangshou* or 'relax and restraint' political science model which sees political policy as a series of alternate liberal and conservative moments. The reality is much more complex and resists the simple geometry of a two-dimensional model.

10 See Chen Fong-Ching and Jin Guantao, *From Youthful Manuscripts to River Elegy: The Chinese Popular Cultural Movement and Political Transformation, 1979-1989*, Hong Kong, Chinese University Press , 1997, p.124.

However, in the world of academe and intellectually serious publishing, it is a fact that a thirst for knowledge, especially for Western twentieth-century knowledge, was being assuaged by new collections of books that were produced by intellectuals close to the reform faction and organisms that were part of or close to the CASS.

What has generally been called 'cultural fever' was no mass phenomenon, but more like a localized and intense exchange of ideas amongst an elite intellectual sphere.

But the cultural world, the film-makers, the writers and poets, were less interested in theoretical writing and direct intervention in the political debate than they were in the cultural products of the Western modern canon, films and translations of fiction and poetry. The year 1986 was known as a high point in the production and reception of the new poetry.

However scientists, academics, and writers did share the pre-occupation and the sense of duty to participate in political debate. When poets intervened in things political, it was not like their forbears through their writing, but through their celebrity. They literally put their reputations on the line by initiating and signing up to petitions and

open letters. For example, in early 1989 the poet Bei Dao launched the "33 name petition" of writers and artists to demand the release of dissident Wei Jingsheng incarcerated since the so-called Peking Spring of 1979. But the tenth anniversary of Wei's imprisonment was juts one of the many anniversaries that could be exploited politically and in spectacular fashion. It was also the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution, the 70th anniversary of the 1919 May 4th Movement, and 1989 also marked the 40th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic. The untimely death of deposed Prime Minister Hu Yaobang incited mass-mourning, students protested and occupied Tiananmen Square. The confrontation between students and government wih intellectuals and cultural producers desperately trying to mediate ended as we know in the bloody night of 3rd-4th June 1989, which surely imposes itself as the inevitable terminus of the long post-Mao decade.

Yet, from political economic perspectives the Dengist consumerist legacy which pervades China today, cannot be said to have commenced before 1993 when an ailing Deng found the strength to visit southern China and re-

launch his economic reform programme. Between 1989 and 1992 China, and especially Beijing, was gripped by an almost palpable moroseness. This constituted a sort of inter-regnum before the great consumerist euphoria made possible not just by material incentives but by a sense of resignation and of powerlessness. The only means of expression left to ordinary people, in other words the politically powerless, in the face of a system now clearly based on a willingness to employ military strength to maintain itself, was wealth accumulation, and consumption. With political participation now closed off to elite intellectuals and masses alike, the line of least resistance was to acquiesce in the party-induced but later on self-generative collective amnesia concerning the events of 1989, and eventually with regard to the whole 1970s-1980s pre-consumerist, politicized period. Official ideology once again thus succeeded in instituting itself as dominant collective imaginary.

Politicization, even after the deception of the Cultural Revolution and in part because of that deception, was a characteristic of the 1980s. It was a decade marked also by intellectual, cultural and political negotiation between the

Party on the one hand and on the other civil forces represented by students, and public intellectuals such as party dissident journalists.

It was also a period dominated by an ideology that was promoted by reformers within the party, and espoused by many intellectuals, and feared by hard-liners. That ideology was the credo fed in large part by the old Cold War illusion that economic reforms, leading to the installation of capitalism would inevitably and naturally lead to a process of political reforms and 'democratization'. History since 1989 in China and elsewhere has proven otherwise. [11]

It is as if the warning signs that announced the ground rules that had been made clear in 1979 with the arrest and imprisonment of dissidents and the introduction of strict censorship were ignored. In any case, throughout the 1980s and, frequently encouraged by elements within the official structures, intellectuals and cultural producers pushed against, tested and transgressed the limits that had been imposed in 1979. Such political participation has not been evident since.

11 The participation in the global capitalist economy of former state-controlled socio-economies has not significantly democratized them, while democracy in those countries that 'won' the Cold War has suffered serious reverses.

The major shift in the cultural sphere that took place in the 1990s was the liberalization of the economics of the literature and culture industries. What mattered now was not gaining membership in the writers' union that hitherto had guaranteed job security, a steady income and the freedom to travel abroad, but rather the ability to produce best-sellers. But while the state w as willing to cede to the economic realities of the publishing industry, it was not, and is still not, prepared to relinquish its role as censor.

The "deal" has been observed by writers, artists and academics. While they are now free to get rich, in post-1989 China, they would be ill-advised to attempt to intervene in critical debate.

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