



SPECIAL COMMENTARY

**The Reemergence of Public Intellectuals in Late
Twentieth-Century China: Reflections on the
Twenty-fifth Anniversary of Tiananmen**

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With the establishment of the People's Republic of China, headed by the leader of the Communist Party, Mao Zedong, China was ruled by a totalitarian political system. What then made possible the students' demonstrations in Tiananmen Square that spread to the rest of urban China in the spring of 1989? Mao and the party had not only dominated the country's political life, but also the economic, intellectual, artistic and personal lives of its subjects. With Mao's death in 1976, his successor and former Long March comrade, Deng Xiaoping, became China's paramount leader until his death in 1997. During this period, China moved from a totalitarian to an authoritarian regime. The party still dominated the political system and except for elections at the village level, determined the political hierarchy. Yet, at the same time that China moved to a market economy and participated in the international community, controls over the economic, social, cultural, and personal lives of its populace were loosened. Along with China's opening to the outside world, these changes gradually made possible a degree of freedom in people's personal, cultural and intellectual lives. Though an authoritarian one-party state, the party's loosening of controls over people's every-day lives unleashed a proliferation of ideas, activities and





artistic endeavours outside the party's control.

These changes in the post-Mao era also made possible the emergence of public intellectuals in the People's Republic, a phenomenon not unique to Western civilization. Public intellectuals have played a major role throughout Chinese history. China's pre-modern intellectuals, the Confucian literati, not only advised the emperor and ran the governmental bureaucracies, they were also viewed as the conscience of society. Their ideological commitment to improving the human condition led them to assume responsibilities comparable to those of public intellectuals in the West. They were generalists, who publicly discussed and dealt with political, economic and social issues, organized philanthropic efforts, and supervised education. In addition, a number of Confucian literati regarded it as their responsibility to criticize officials and even the Emperor when they believed their actions diverged from the Confucian ideals of morality and fairness.

Public intellectuals also helped to bring about the end of China's dynastic system during the Hundred Days of Reform in 1898 in the late Qing dynasty and they prepared the way for the 1911 revolution, whose leader Sun Yat-sen personified a public intellectual. Even though the Kuomintang government, led by Chiang Kai-shek (1928-1949) attempted to stifle criticism, it was too weak to silence dissident intellectuals, who publicly criticized repressive officials and Kuomintang policies and called for democratic reforms, such as freedom of speech and association. With the exception of brief periods, such as the Hundred Flowers period, 1956-June 1957, it was only during the totalitarian rule of Communist Party leader Mao Zedong (1949-1976) that China's public intellectuals were silenced and were unable to play their traditional role. A major difference, however, between the West and China during the dynastic, Kuomintang, Mao Zedong, and post-Mao eras, has been that there were and still are no laws to protect public intellectuals when what they say displeases the leadership, who could silence them with relative impunity.

Even before the Chinese Communist Party established the People's Republic of China in 1949, there was already evidence that its leader, Mao Zedong would not tolerate public criticism or dissent from his



policies. In the early 1940s, in the party's Yanan revolutionary base area, Mao launched a campaign against a group of writers who were committed to the humanitarian aspirations of Marxism and believed they were true to its basic ideals when they publicly called for equality, democracy and intellectual freedom.

As intellectuals in the past had criticized their government in the name of Confucian ideals, these writers did so in the name of Marxist principles. Several of them published their critiques in the party's official newspaper in Yanan, *Liberation Daily* (*Jiefang Ribao* 解放日报), in which they expressed disillusionment with finding that life in the revolutionary base area had not measured up to their ideal of an equal, just and free society that they had expected. They criticized the bureaucratism, corruption and inequalities they found there. In reaction, Mao launched a rectification campaign against them and their associates in spring 1942. He also issued his "Talks on art and literature", in which he served notice that henceforth literature and all aspects of intellectual activity were to be dictated by the party. At the same time, he initiated a campaign against writers and intellectuals who had dissented from his policies. Thus, even before the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, Mao served notice that any intellectual, who deviated from the party's policies and Mao's teachings would be purged and their views publicly attacked.

During the early years of the People's Republic, the party's policies toward the intellectuals oscillated between stifling intellectual initiative and encouraging creativity needed to modernize. The party's approach was contradictory. On the one hand, it sought to indoctrinate intellectuals in Marxism-Leninism and Mao's doctrine; on the other hand, it tried to stimulate intellectuals to work productively and creatively in their disciplines. These contradictory goals evoked a cyclical policy toward intellectuals that oscillated between periods of repression and briefer periods of relative relaxation. Each cycle was determined by internal political and economic factors as well as international events.

Thus, in 1950, shortly after it came to power, the party briefly relaxed its controls over intellectuals as it sought to consolidate its rule over all of China. Then in 1951 it began an effort to reorient China's



intellectuals away from the West and toward its major ally at the time, the Soviet Union, by denouncing liberal values and indoctrinating intellectuals in Marxism-Leninism. In the process, the party attacked the ideas of the well-known Western-oriented Chinese scholar, Hu Shi, who in the early decades of the twentieth century had introduced John Dewey's theory of pragmatism into China. In 1955, the party launched an ideological campaign against the writer Hu Feng and his disciples, who had rebelled against being ordered to write in the Soviet style of socialist realism. The Hu Feng campaign established the model for future campaigns. It broadened its scope beyond a small number of intellectuals into a nation-wide campaign that encompassed virtually all intellectuals and professionals, who were ordered to purge themselves of non-Marxist-Leninist ideas and conform to party dictates.

Because of the unprecedented ferocity of the Hu Feng campaign, by the end of 1955, a large segment of China's intellectuals was silenced. The campaign's crusading zeal had even alienated some of the China's much-favoured scientists, whose help the party sought in its efforts to modernize the economy. Confronted with a passive intellectual community and in urgent need of its services, Mao then launched a new campaign called "A hundred flowers bloom, hundred schools contend" in 1956 and first half of 1957, in which he relaxed ideological controls and provided a degree of freedom in the intellectual realm. Intellectuals were urged to engage in independent thinking, wide-ranging discourse and critical thought. In addition, Mao urged intellectuals to criticize officials and point out how they had misused their power. He even encouraged discussion of political issues and airing of grievances.

In response, intellectuals began to question Marxism-Leninism and called for far-reaching political and cultural reforms. They not only criticized Mao's "Talks on art and literature", they also called for intellectual autonomy and demanded that the cases against writers who had been publicly criticized, such as Hu Feng, be reopened. When the Hundred Flowers in spring 1957 spread beyond the intellectuals to the population at large, who also demanded more freedom, Mao suddenly reversed his policy of tolerance and relaxation of controls. In June 1957, he launched the Anti-Rightist campaign in which sweeping attacks were



directed against those who had been outspokenly critical of Mao's policies. People who had voiced criticisms, as well as their families and colleagues were labeled "rightists", were forced to make public confessions, and were dismissed from their positions. By late 1957, the cycle had come around full circle to the ideological rigidity that had prevailed before the Hundred Flowers.

With the subsequent launch of the Great Leap Forward in 1958-59, the gap between the party and the intellectuals widened still further as Mao sought to turn China quickly into a true Communist society before the Soviet Union. In this effort, intellectuals were dispatched to factories and villages to be remolded through manual labour at the same time they were to bring culture to the masses. Even esteemed scientists were "sent down" to learn from the achievements of the peasants and workers. Intellectual endeavours came to a standstill.

The failure of the Great Leap Forward, which caused the death of thirty million Chinese, due to food shortages in the countryside and economic chaos in the cities, caused disillusionment with Mao's policies not only among intellectuals and technocrats, but also among his party colleagues. As Mao withdrew from policy-making in the early 1960s, a brief period of intellectual relaxation ensued in which intellectuals published essays in the traditional "*zawen* 杂文" style of short critical essays and used the traditional Chinese opera subtly to criticize Mao's policies.

In reaction, Mao in 1966 then launched the Cultural Revolution in which he sought to transform Chinese society and retaliate against those whom he believed were conspiring against him. For almost ten years, with the exception of a small number of young radical intellectuals who acted as Mao's spokesmen, most intellectuals, their families and colleagues were ostracized, persecuted, imprisoned or driven to suicide in the most severe intellectual repression in modern Chinese history. Great damage was done to China's educational institutions, intellectual endeavours and cultural life. Even China's prized scientists, who were supposedly to lead China's economic modernization, were persecuted and cut off from the outside world. At the time of Mao's death in September 1976, China's intellectual community was demoralized and



its educational institutions were not functioning.

Although the People's Republic still remained under the political control of the Chinese Communist Party, when Mao's Long March comrade, Deng Xiaoping became China's paramount leader in the late 1970s, China could no longer be categorized as a totalitarian state. China still remained under the political control of the Communist Party, but Deng's policies of moving China to a market economy and opening the country to the outside world made possible a degree of personal, intellectual, and artistic freedom. In 1987, however, Deng purged Hu Yaobang, whom he had appointed as head of the party in the early 1980s and in June 1989, he purged Zhao Ziyang, who had replaced Hu as the head of the party, because they had both advocated political as well as economic reforms. Moreover, Zhao had refused to go along with Deng's order to use the military to crack down on the demonstrators in Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989. Nevertheless, after a brief pause, the intellectual, artistic and personal spheres of Chinese life continued to remain relatively open and engaged with the outside world.

China's third generation of Communist Party leaders, who assumed power in the aftermath of June 4, 1989, led by former Shanghai mayor Jiang Zemin (1989-2002), and the fourth generation, headed by Hu Jintao and his associates, from the China Youth League, who assumed power in 2002, sought to recentralize political authority and re-strengthen the party's capacity to deal with the increasing inequalities and rampant corruption unleashed by China's move to a market economy. Yet, despite a retightening of the party's power over academic and cultural institutions after June 4, a degree of pluralistic discourse and openness to foreign ideas continued to prevail in China's universities, artistic circles, academic journals and think tanks, particularly in the sciences. Nevertheless, the Hu Jintao leadership continued to detain, put under surveillance and purge from the academic establishment intellectuals who dissented politically and criticized the party's policies publicly.

Unlike in the Mao era, however, when any intellectual who dissented from the party's scientific, artistic, historical, or economic views lost his or her job, was unable to make a living, and was





ostracized from the intellectual community, China's market reforms and opening to the outside world made it possible for intellectuals to publish abroad and in Hong Kong and support themselves and their families with free-lance jobs. While in the post-Mao period, there were still no laws to protect political and civil rights, most of the intellectuals whom Mao had persecuted were rehabilitated in the 1980s and were able to find positions in the political and intellectual establishments. Public space for political discourse and pluralistic views opened up in the media, books, universities, research centres and cultural institutions.

Yet, even though most of the rehabilitated intellectuals became members of the establishment and the party, when a small number of them called for reform of the China's Leninist party-state, they were purged once again. Unlike in the Mao era, however, although they were silenced for a while, China's market economy and increasing interaction with the outside world made it possible for them to make a living, speak out periodically and publish on political issues by means of the newly-introduced Internet technologies, private publishing, and contact with the foreign media, such as VOA, BBC, Radio Free Asia and Hong Kong, which would then beam back their views into China.

It had been expected that when China's fourth generation of leaders, which came to power in 2002, led by Hu Jintao, who were better educated than previous generations and came primarily from the China Youth League, a supposedly less doctrinaire organization than the party, the opening of public space for political discourse would expand, though circumscribed within certain limits. That, however, did not happen. In fact, there was a contraction of public space for political discourse since the late 1990s when Jiang Zemin had headed the party

The Hu Jintao leadership cracked down on a number of people who used the new communications technologies and websites to discuss political issues. Scores of cyber-dissidents were imprisoned as a warning to others as to how far they could go in discussing political reforms on the Internet. Along with the suppression of a number of well-known independent intellectuals and the imposition of limitations on the discourse of "public intellectuals", the Hu Jintao government tightened controls over the media. Reports on growing protests against corruption,



abusive officials, property confiscation and peasant and worker demonstrations were banned from the media. Journalism professor, Jiao Guobiao, who on the Internet had criticized the party's repressive control of the media, was no longer allowed to teach at Peking University. A law lecturer at Chengdu University, Wang Yi, who called for a system of checks and balances, was also barred from teaching. The journal *Strategy and Management* that had been an outlet for intellectuals of a liberal persuasion, was closed down.

Although the party itself publicly reported that 87,000 protests had taken place in 2005, journalists were ordered not to report on the myriad of demonstrations spreading across China. When China was struck by devastating earthquakes in Sichuan province in 2008, initially the media and civic groups were allowed to report freely on the event, but when parents of children, who were killed in their class rooms, began to point out publicly that the quake had led disproportionately to the collapse of schools due to cheap construction, media openness was quickly curtailed. Nevertheless, despite the crackdown on public intellectuals and the media and censorship of the Internet, unlike during the Mao period when millions were harshly persecuted as in the Anti-Rightist campaign (1957-58) and in the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) for the acts of a small number, in the post-Mao period persecution for public dissent did not reach far beyond the accused and their associates. Moreover, though they might lose their jobs in academia and the media and may be briefly detained, they were able to find jobs and outlets for their views in China's expanding market economy, media outlets and abroad.

Thus, unlike during the Mao era, public intellectuals were not completely silenced. Some still tried to function as citizens, either on their own or with others and they continued to express their political views in unofficial publications and increasingly in organized petitions and public protests. Although their writings may be officially banned, they found ways to distribute their views on street corners, through private publication and over the Internet by means of connections to outside servers. Moreover, in the post-Mao era, for the first time in the People's Republic, a number of lawyers were willing to defend those

accused of political crimes and journalists reported on the party's repressive policies in a small number of media outlets, such as the *Southern Metropolitan Daily*, based in Guangdong province.

There were also major differences between the actions of public intellectuals in the 1980s and in the first decade of the early twenty-first century. Whereas a number of prominent public intellectuals in the 1980s, such as the journalist Liu Binyan and the poet Ai Qing, called themselves "Marxist humanists" and pointed out how the party's policies differed from the ideals of Marxism, because of the increasing bankruptcy of Marxism-Leninism as a governing philosophy by the end of the twentieth century, most public intellectuals in the early decades of the twenty-first century gradually become imbued with a myriad of political views and used different political strategies. They moved away from the focus on ideology and emphasized the need to establish new institutions in order to achieve political reforms.

Another major change was that whereas until the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations, public intellectuals considered themselves an elite and did not join with other social classes in political actions, starting with the Tiananmen Square multi-class demonstrations in spring 1989, a small number of them began to join with workers and small business people in petition drives and in organizing diverse groups calling for political reforms. Journalists wrote about these events and lawyers defended the leaders of such movements when they were detained. Therefore, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, despite continuing repression, there was a qualitative change in the thinking and actions of China's public intellectuals: they became increasingly independent political actors and showed a willingness to join with other social groups in political actions.

China's increasing interaction with the rest of the world, particularly with the West, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, was another factor promoting a liberalizing intellectual environment. China signed the UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in October 1998, having already signed the UN Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 1997. Although the latter Covenant was confirmed by China's rubber-stamp National People's Congress, the Covenant on Civil



and Political Rights has not. Nevertheless, China's signature on UN human rights covenants as well as an easing of political controls at home were part of China's effort to create goodwill abroad, particularly with the United States and other Western countries. At the same time, thousands of Chinese students and scholars went abroad to study at American and West European universities. China's engagement with the international community correlated with relaxation of ideological controls at home.

Thus, one hundred years after China's Hundred Days' Reform in 1898 that ultimately led to the beginnings of political change and to the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911, the late twentieth century ushered in broad-ranging public discourse on political reforms. And like the Hundred-Day reformers in 1898, the major exponents of political reforms in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries were establishment intellectuals – academics, writers, journalists, lawyers, and ex-officials – who like their predecessors were not at the centre of power. They worked in think-tanks, universities, newspapers, and law offices, or were retired, but they managed to promote their ideas of political reform in books, scholarly journals, academic forums, and other channels in the public arena that opened up in the post-Mao era. At times, they even joined people outside the establishment in their calls for political reforms.

Advocates of political reform in the early years of the twenty-first century represented a broad ideological spectrum, from the older generation of Marxist humanists to younger intellectuals in the universities and the party's think tanks, such as the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, China's premier centre for social science research. Unlike the earlier generation who still cited Marxist texts as the basis for their arguments for reform, the younger generation cited a broad range of Western liberal thinkers from Adam Smith to Karl Popper to support their arguments and were more direct in calling for political reforms.

Although none of China's establishment intellectuals publicly proposed a multiparty system or called for direct elections of the political leadership by universal suffrage, a small number advocated the establishment of other institutions associated with liberal democracy:



some emphasized the rule of law; others stressed freedom of expression and association; and still others called for more competitive elections. Some were concerned with inner-party democracy; others with grassroots democracy. A few urged the establishment of an elected parliamentary system. Virtually all advocates of reforms, however, called for a political system based on some form of checks and balances. Though of a variety of political views, what they had in common was a shared emphasis on the need for political reforms in order to deal with the rampant corruption and accelerating economic and social inequalities accompanying China's economic reforms. Those expressing liberal political views in the early decades of the twenty-first century differed from the Marxist humanists of the 1980s in that they were relatively more independent of political patronage than the latter – not only because of China's accelerating market economy and openness to the outside world that made it possible, but also because of their desire to acquire more intellectual autonomy.

Another new phenomenon in the People's Republic in the early years of the twenty-first century was the public demand by a small number of Chinese citizens that the party live up to the principles to which it had expressed verbal and written approval. For example, on December 10, 2008, the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Right, a group of people from all walks of life launched a movement called Charter 08. They put forth a blueprint for fundamental legal and political reforms with the goal of achieving a democratic political system. Patterned on Václav Havel's Charter 77 movement in the former Czechoslovakia, Charter 08 criticized the party for failing to implement human rights provisions to which its leaders had signed onto, such as the United Nations Covenant on Political and Civil Rights and amendments to China's constitution in 2004 which included the phrase "respect and protect human rights". Charter 08 pointed out that "Unfortunately most of China's political progress has extended no further than the paper on which it is written." The political reality, Charter 08 explained, "is that China has many laws but no rule of law; it has a constitution but no constitutional government." Charter 08 called for a political system based on the democratic institutions of checks and



balances.

These demands for political reforms have been periodically and publicly expressed in post-Mao China by intellectuals and students. The most well-known effort was the 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstrations of students and intellectuals. Although just before the Party crackdown on the 1989 Tiananmen movement workers and their families had started to join the movement, what made Charter 08 qualitatively different from past protests was that it became a political movement which crossed class lines. Past demonstrations were usually carried out by specific classes focused on particular economic issues, such as peasant protests against confiscation of their land by local officials or workers' protests against non-payment of salaries or poor working conditions. Even during the 1989 student demonstrations in Tiananmen Square, students at first linked arms to keep workers and other urbanites from participating, because they knew that the party feared an alliance between intellectuals and workers. When other social classes forced their way into the 1989 protests by late May and the movement spread to other cities and classes, the party's then paramount leader Deng Xiaoping, fearing a threat to the party's rule, ordered the army to suppress the movement which it did in a violent crackdown on June 4.

What made the Charter 08 movement unprecedented in the People's Republic was that while initially it was signed by over 300 intellectuals, as it circulated on the Internet and elsewhere it became a multi-class movement. Ordinary Chinese citizens from all walks of life – entrepreneurs, professionals, local officials, workers, farmers, housewives, and street vendors – signed their names. Also another new phenomenon in grass-roots political movements in the People's Republic was the participation of a number of lawyers, who volunteered to defend those accused of political crimes, an unprecedented action in the People's Republic. Despite the party's denunciation of Charter 08 and the detention of one of its originators, the writer Liu Xiaobo, just before the party completely shut down its website in mid January 2009, over eight thousand people from all walks of life had managed to sign their names in support.



The Charter 08 episode revealed that not only intellectuals were willing to voice public dissatisfaction with China's authoritarian market economy, but also farmers, workers, and small entrepreneurs, supposed beneficiaries of China's post-Mao political system. The broad class participation in the Charter 08 movement may be attributed to worsening economic conditions in late 2008 due to the closure of a number of China's export industries because of slackening demand for Chinese consumer goods in the West undergoing a recession and college graduates, who for the first time in the post-Mao era had difficulty finding jobs. The economic situation also led to questioning of the political system which in the post-Mao era based its legitimacy on the Communist Party's ability to deliver economic growth. Despite the crackdown and the detention of the writer Liu Xiaobo and a few other signers, the appearance of Charter 08 represented an emerging multi-class movement for political change in the post-Mao era.

Equally significant, unlike the Mao era, when intellectual dissenters were brutally suppressed, in the post-Mao era and especially the early years of the twenty-first century, China's intellectuals not only experienced intellectual pluralism, they also participated in vigorous debates and engaged in the international academic community. They were not completely silenced politically and at times, they joined with other classes and groups in calling for political reforms. Thus, while China's movement from a totalitarian to an authoritarian polity does not protect public intellectuals from reprisals and detention, the party's less repressive rule and its engagement with the international community make it possible for intellectuals periodically to speak out publicly on political issues and have an impact beyond their immediate intellectual circles.



Note

- * Dr Merle Goldman, Professor Emerita of Boston University and an Associate of the Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies at Harvard University, was born on March 12, 1931. She received her Bachelor's degree from Sarah Lawrence College in 1953, earned her Master's degree from Radcliffe in 1957 and Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1964. She was influenced both by her undergraduate advisor, Martin Wilbur at Sarah Lawrence and her mentor at Harvard, John Fairbank, who never lost interest in her work, even though Goldman had four children while in graduate school. Fairbank encouraged her to follow her particular area of interest, the role of the intellectuals in the People's Republic of China. Goldman's first academic appointment was at Wellesley College, where she was an instructor in Far Eastern history from 1963 to 1964. She was a lecturer for the Radcliffe Seminars from 1968 to 1970, and in 1972, she was appointed a professor at Boston University, where she remained until her retirement in 2004. At the same time, she had and continues to have a research appointment and office at the Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies at Harvard. Two of Goldman's three books were selected as Notable Books by *The New York Times*. The third book, *Sowing the seeds of democracy in China: Political reform in the Deng Xiaoping decade*, also won Best Book on Government Award from the American Association of Publishers, Professional and Scholarly Publishing Division. Goldman edited or co-edited five additional books and is the author of over fifty scholarly articles and numerous newspaper and magazine articles. She also updated the Fairbank textbook, *China: A new history*, republished in 2006. Her most recent book is *From comrade to citizen: The struggle for political rights in China*. Goldman has been the recipient of numerous awards, including the Sarah Lawrence Distinguished Alumni award and the Radcliffe Graduate Medal for Distinguished Achievement. She served as a fellow at the Radcliffe Bunting Institute. She has received grants from the Guggenheim Foundation, the Social Science Research Council, the State Department, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the Wang Institute. In addition to her professorship at Boston University, Goldman has been a Research Associate of the Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies at Harvard University since 1964. Goldman's professional service also includes committee appointments to the American Historical Association, the Association of Asian Studies, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Social Science Research Council. She served as vice-president and





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