

## Time's Arrows: Imaginative Pasts and Nostalgic Futures\*

Geremie R. Barmé

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### Observations, fifty years on

In January 1999, a new semi-independent journal was launched in Beijing. To evade relatively stringent official regulations covering periodicals, it was produced as part of a book series. The inaugural issue carried a full translation of the Czech dissident-cum-president Václav Havel's famous essay 'The Power of the Powerless', and an introduction to a recently published collection of Havel's writings by a leading advocate of democratic liberalism, Li Shenzhi, formerly vice-president of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and head of the Academy's American Studies Research Institute.

In his essay Li quoted the newly appointed Czech president's 1990 New Year's address to the nation in which he considered the baneful social legacy of totalitarianism:

The worst thing is that we live in a contaminated moral environment. We fell morally ill because we got used to saying something different from what we thought. We learned not to believe in anything, to ignore each other, to care only for ourselves... .

When I talk about contaminated moral atmosphere, I am not talking just about the gentlemen who eat organic vegetables and do not look out of the plane windows. I am talking about all of us. We had all become used to the totalitarian system and accepted it as an unalterable fact of life, and thus we helped to perpetuate it. In other words, we are all--though naturally to differing extents--responsible for the operation of totalitarian machinery. None of us is just its victim: we are all also its co-creators.<sup>1</sup>

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\* A draft form of this chapter was presented at the conference 'Was the Chinese revolution really necessary?', organized by David Goodman and Werner Dragun and held in Hamburg, September 1999. My thanks to them and other confreres for their responses. More importantly, for the present incarnation of these remarks, I am deeply indebted to Gloria Davies for the constantly challenging and insightful comments that have made this work what it is now. Chris Buckley and Miriam Lang also made a number of timely observations on a final draft of this essay. The title 'Time's Arrows' was inspired by Martin Amis's novel *Time's Arrow*, a narrative about the Holocaust that is told in reverse, that is from the end to the beginning.

<sup>1</sup> Li Shenzhi, 'Wuquanzhede quanli he fanzhengzhide zhengzhi--houjiqianzhuyi shidaide rensheng zhexue: *Hawei'er wenji xu*', *Guancha wencong*, no.1 (January 1999), p.104. For this English translation, see Václav Havel, *The Art of the Impossible, Politics as Morality in Practice (Speeches and Writings, 1990-1996)*, trans. Paul Wilson (New York: Fromm

Li Shenzhi was one of the most public advocates of liberalism in China during the late 1990s. His was a liberalism that was not wedded to the crude neo-liberal economic agenda that informed much of the Communist Party's reformist program, nor was it a liberalism that cleaved to the egregious and disparate forces of political dissent that were so strenuously outlawed by the authorities. As Li remarked of Havel, 'His politics of anti-politics was originally premised on an opposition to the forming of political parties, and an opposition even to efforts to formulate a political agenda. What he did advocate was that every person should rely on their conscience and speak the truth; that each and every person should engage in practical actions. His was a philosophy of action... a belief that "we should all act in the way we think most appropriate, to take responsibility for ourselves"'. Although many would say that isolated actions of good conscience and decency would be to no avail in challenging the party-state, Havel believed in their long-term efficacy. In concluding his preface to Havel's works, which was written in November 1998, Li Shenzhi asked his readers: 'What value and insights does Havel's thinking and his practice have for us in China today?'<sup>2</sup>

Li's question was posed at a time of renewed political and ideological strife in China, at a time when long forgotten and arbitrarily silenced ideas and agendas were being presented in public forums for the first time for years, if not decades. It was a time when the paths not taken by Chinese reformers, thinkers and revolutionaries because of the events of 1949 had been enjoying a rare attention in the elite media of the major urban centres of the country; a time when histories revived through publication projects and nurtured through personal (or caste) affinities were playing into the making of the history of a post-totalitarian society; a time when nostalgia for grand purpose and a fascination with deconstructive projects exercised global Chinese elites to an unprecedented extent. Li's interrogation came at a time when transhistorical debate about the imagined past and a nostalgia for the future that had originally been promised by revolution united and divided the cultural and intellectual scene.

These concerns were formulated in an era depicted as being one of 'transition' or 'ideological retreat', a time when published critical surveys of the past few decades of intellectual life led to the questioning of abiding, transhistorical issues such as

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International, 1998), p.4. Not coincidentally, this same passage was quoted by Yu Jie in his controversial essay on Havel and Kundera discussed below. See Yu, 'Kundela yu Havel'er--ni xuanze shenme? Women chengdan shenme?', collected in his *Shuo, haishi bushuo* (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 1999), p.132.

<sup>2</sup> Li, op.cit., p.105.

modernity, scientism and the role of the intelligentsia. Engagement with these issues generated heated debate that found an outlet in the mass media where intellectual discourse was amplified and commercialized. While there was much talk from the mid 1990s of the precipitate fall from public prominence of the intellectual and serious writer, popular high-brow journals, an aggressive publishing market, an expanding cultural reading audience and new technologies gave them unprecedented, and relatively uncircumscribed, access to the public.

Václav Havel's essay and Li Shenzhi's preface both appeared in the inaugural issue of *Guancha wencong* (The Observer Collection).<sup>3</sup> This journal was launched a decade after the pro-political reformist monthly *Xin GuanCha* (The New Observer) was closed in the wake of 4 June 1989; it was also ten years after the publication of the journalist Dai Qing's study of the editor Chu Anping and his late-1940s' weekly forum for liberal opinion, *GuanCha* (The Observer).

Chu's magazine had been one of the most popular independent journals of political and social analysis in China following the Sino-Japanese War. At the height of its influence it had an estimated readership of over one million. It was banned by the Nationalist government in late November 1948, at the climax of the civil war which led to the defeat of Nationalist forces on the mainland. That ban was one of many attempts to silence independent critical opinion as the conflict with the Communists escalated. As we all know, the outcome of the civil war was that the Nationalists retreated to Taiwan and the Communist Party established the People's Republic of China on the mainland, the fiftieth anniversary of which was celebrated on 1 October 1999. Events in 1999-2000 showed that the dynamics of that earlier state of civil war were not far from the political realities of cross-strait relations, or indeed intellectual disputation, at the turn of the millennium.

Chu Anping was given support by the new government in Beijing to revive *The Observer* and publication recommenced with the blessing of the premier, Zhou Enlai, on 1 November 1949. Under the management of a group of editors installed by the Communist Party—Chu had little say in the process--the reconstituted version of what had only recently been one of the most popular current affairs magazines in the country turned out to be a dismal production. It celebrated its launch by printing a groveling editorial self-criticism written by Chu Anping that confessed in part that, 'stalled in our

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<sup>3</sup> Later that year Li's preface, along with the text of Havel's book in Chinese translation, was posted on the internet. See <[www.sixiang.com/haweier/xuyan01.htm](http://www.sixiang.com/haweier/xuyan01.htm)>.

bourgeois nationalist phase... we unwittingly came to believe that we occupied some middle ground [between the Nationalists and the Communists], and pursued a sentimental belief in reformism'.<sup>4</sup> With the magazine's pages filled with eulogistic articles about the new society (not to mention special features like a column devoted to Stalin's seventieth birthday), reader numbers fell off dramatically, with only some 3,000 direct subscribers.<sup>5</sup> After six months the authorities instructed the new editors to turn the magazine into a fortnightly under the title *The New Observer*. It appeared under this name until it was forced to discontinue publication at the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>6</sup> Revived during the early reform era to become a leading forum for debate during the 1980s, it was, as we have noted earlier, closed down again in 1989.

These publications, separated though they were by half a century, had more in common than may be suggested by a mimicry and repetition of titles. They shared in a lineage of liberalist thought that, after half a century of socialist revolution and counter-revolution, was at the turn of the century central to political and cultural debate in China once more. During the anti-rightist purge of 1957, nearly ten years after that initial Nationalist ban, Chu Anping's long-defunct journal *The Observer* was attacked again, but this time by functionaries of the Communist Party. The editor of the *Guangming Daily*, the party's leading educational and intellectual newspaper, denounced *The Observer* for 'being a most reactionary publication, one that had poisoned the minds of China's intellectuals and students in the most insidious fashion'. And Chu Anping himself, previously a tolerated fellow traveler of the Communist government, was decried as 'the most sly, venomous and vile enemy of the people's revolution.'<sup>7</sup>

Over thirty years after those attacks, and more than twenty years after the old editor himself had disappeared at the height of the Cultural Revolution, Dai Qing published the first positive evaluation of his life and writings, 'Chu Anping and "the party empire"' in a new, Nanjing-based journal.<sup>8</sup> Dai's study was a work of historical investigative

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<sup>4</sup> 'Fukan ci: Womende ziwo piping, gongzuo renwu, bianji fangzhen', 16 October 1949, published in *Guancha*, vol.VI, no.1 (1949), and collected in Zhang Xinying ed., *Chu Anping wenji* (Shanghai: Dongfang chuban zhongxin, 1998), vol.II, p.284.

<sup>5</sup> Figures related to the circulation and readership of *The Observer* come from Xie Yong, *Shiqude niandai--Zhongguo ziyou zhishifenzide mingyun* (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 1999), p.405.

<sup>6</sup> Xie Yong, *Shiqude niandai*, pp.271-272, 404-405, and 408-409.

<sup>7</sup> From a statement by the editor of *Guangming Daily*, quoted in Dai Qing, *Chu Anping yu 'dang tianxia'* (Beijing: Zhongguo huaqiao chuban gongsi, 1989), p.31. It should be noted that for a time prior to his purge Chu Anping was himself the editor of *Guangming Daily*.

<sup>8</sup> Dai Qing, 'Chu Anping yu "dang tianxia"', *Dongfang jishi*, 1989:1, pp.94-137, subsequently printed in book form and banned following 4 June. Edited by some of China's most controversial writers, including Dai Qing herself, *Dongfang jishi* was closed down on official orders after 4 June having only produced four issues. An uncensored version of Dai Qing's

journalism that juxtaposed the enterprise of that late-1940s liberal with that of China's contemporary intellectual activists. The title, 'Chu Anping and "the party empire"', was a reference to a speech Chu addressed to Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai at the height of the 1956 Hundred Flowers campaign, in which he warned the party leaders that the communist strategy to turn China into a 'party-empire' was leading to the wholesale disaffection of the intelligentsia.<sup>9</sup> For years the expression 'party empire' or 'total party domination', *dang tianxia*, was the unforgotten fragment of a journalistic career much concerned with the freedom of speech and the ideals of liberalism; that speech was also the last statement Chu made as an independent (albeit loyal) critic of communist rule. Dai Qing's study was published as a book shortly before 4 June 1989, following which it was banned and pulped. After an hiatus of nearly a decade, in 1998 and 1999, Chu Anping's complete works were published for the first time, and a major study of *The Observer* appeared in a volume devoted to the fate of the liberal intelligentsia in the People's Republic.<sup>10</sup> In early 2000, despite a continued interdiction on her works appearing in print on the mainland, Dai Qing's own tract on Chu Anping was reprinted in a multi-volume series of works of contemporary reportage edited by Zhou Ming.

The revival of interest in earlier advocates of liberal thought and their publications in late-1990s China was not merely the by-product of a market-driven publishing industry anxious to exploit every new angle to sell books and further buoy the already inflated periodical market. It was undoubtedly linked to the latest round of cultural liberalization and intellectual debate that unfolded after the mini-purge engendered by the party's spiritual civilization campaign of late 1996 when some semi-independent journals had been censured or banned. During the debates about the next stage of economic and political reform that subsequently unfolded in 1997,<sup>11</sup> and as an integral part of the short-lived Sino-American detente of 1997-98, liberal thinkers and pamphleteers were particularly active. One leading advocate of what was eventually dubbed Chinese 'neo-liberalism', the Shanghai philosopher Zhu Xueqin, even posited that the commemorative articles published in the Chinese press following the death of the English liberal thinker Isaiah Berlin in late 1997 marked the transition of pro-liberal

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study was serialized in the Hong Kong monthly *Ming Pao*. See *Mingbao yuekan*, 1989:1, pp.36-48; 1989:2, pp.44-54; 1989:3, pp. 54-64; and, 1989:4, pp.48-57. For evidence of the renewed currency of the term '*dang tianxia*' in 1989 as a result of Dai Qing's work, see Chen Kaige's remarks in *On The Eve: China Symposium '89, Bolinas, California, 27-29 April, 1989*, Session II, posted at <[www.nmis.org/gate/film/Bolinas5barme.html](http://www.nmis.org/gate/film/Bolinas5barme.html)>.

<sup>9</sup> Dai, op.cit., pp.126-127.

<sup>10</sup> See Zhang Xinying ed., *Chu Anping wenji* (Shanghai: Dongfang chuban zhongxin, 1998), 2 vols.; and Xie Yong, *Shiqude niandai*, pp.245-412.

<sup>11</sup> For details, see G. Barmé, *In the Red: on contemporary Chinese culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp.346ff; and Willy Wo-lap Lam, *The Era of Jiang Zemin* (Singapore: Prentice Hall, 1999), pp.276-277 and 348.

thought and debate from the cloistered environment of academic discussion into the restive sphere of public political and cultural debate.<sup>12</sup> For many others, however, it was the appearance of Wang Hui's magisterial appraisal of Chinese intellectuality around this time that played a crucial role in galvanizing the intellectual world once more.<sup>13</sup> However, the authors of both the academic debate and public mass-media contestation over these issues generally took place among a tight coterie of combatants. This propinquity encouraged a level of vituperation that betrayed and frustrated the open dialogue that their writings advertised as being so necessary to a renewed consideration of the predicament of intellectuals and intellectuality in China.

The cultural history of the 1980s, the new Enlightenment, and the intellectual, bureaucratic and market struggles that informed that time had a profound influence on amplifying intellectual debate in the mass media, creating the cultural marketplace and relative freedoms of the 1990s, and in nurturing the oppositionist or independent stance of cultural critics of all persuasions. Indeed, as has been witnessed throughout this book, economic modernization was something that the Chinese intelligentsia--not to mention many segments of the broader population--had declared was central to their aspirations.

### **Love and loathing for the 1980s**

During the months before the national protest movement of 1989 swept China, supposedly well-informed members of the intelligentsia bewailed the fact in both the mainland and offshore media that few young people had any social ideals or were interested in the pressing political and social issues of the day; they were characterized as being driven by crass and commercial instincts, and the desire for fun, gambling and overseas study (in these depictions they were divided into 'mahjong players' *mapai*, 'discoers' *wupai*, and 'TOEFL candidates' *tuopai*). Such views were soon confounded by the spontaneous student-led mass protests in Beijing and other cities. Throughout the 1990s it was once more common for people, both within the intelligentsia and the wider community, to talk of the loss of idealism and political enthusiasm among the nation's youth, to lament the unconfined spread of commercial culture and apathy, and the general demise of social engagement. Yet while some would argue that money-making

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<sup>12</sup> Zhu Xueqin, '1998 ziyoushuyide yanshuo', originally published in *Nanfang zhoumo*, 1998:12, and reprinted in *Guancha wencong*, no.1 (January 1999), p.143.

<sup>13</sup> A modified English translation of Wang Hui's 'Dangdai Zhongguode sixiang zhuangkuang yu xiandaixing wenti' [originally published in *Tianya*, no.5 (1997): 133-150]

and overt materialism were a diversion from the big issues related to China's economic, environmental and social ills, it was patently obvious to others that it was time to reassess the underpinnings of the nation's intellectual and cultural presumptions, and to address the realities of market-socialism itself.

After 1989, one of the ways in which the authorities decided to deal with the restive student population, in particular that of Beijing (the city with the greatest concentration of tertiary institutions in the country and one in which students had a strong tradition of political activism), was to introduce periods of military training and patriotic indoctrination for freshmen. During a year of intensive People's Liberation Army induction students were expected to learn the basics of patriotism and socialism along with army discipline. One student of Chinese literature at Peking University who went through the pre-academic boot camp was Yu Jie. It had a profound impact on him and when, during his later undergraduate career, he came to read Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, it gave him cause to reflect on his own experience.<sup>14</sup> As Yu subsequently wrote in an essay on Foucault (whose works enjoyed a prodigious rise in profile in Chinese intellectual debate during the 1990s--witness his appearance in Huang Ping's work as quoted in chapter one and that of Wang Hui--even if most 'Foucauldian' approaches tended to remain relatively reductive, or resulted in generic statements), 'Rather than claiming the state deploys a systemic panopticon, one could observe that the machinery of state is grounded in small-scale, fragmentary and diverse panoptical systems.'<sup>15</sup>

Surveillance--real and imagined, political and commercial--was something to which writers and activists responded, at times profited from, and were regularly stymied by throughout the decade. As the publishing boom continued and from 1999 internet journals began to flourish, however, it wasn't only the authorities that were on the lookout, and the mainstream intellectuals and writers discussed in this book, including Yu Jie, were subjected to a level of public scrutiny that was previously unknown. With instant net postings and the assurance of relative anonymity for authors, debates and discussions could unfold beyond the parameters of the editors and publishers who had previously exercised such assiduous control over their journals. Now the elite and

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appeared as "Contemporary Chinese Thought and the Question of Modernity," *Social Text* 55, vol.16, no.2 (Summer 1998): 9-44.

<sup>14</sup> He Zhijun, 'Bianfuxia Yu Jie', an appendix in Yu's *Tiewuzhongde nahan--Beida guaicaide "chouti wenxue" zhi er* (Beijing, Zhonghua gongshang lianhe chubanshe, 1998), p.426.

<sup>15</sup> Yu Jie, 'Shenti yu linghun--du Fuke *Jiandu yu chengfa*', in his *Tiewuzhongde nahan*, p.297.

demotic were thrown together, levelled and juxtaposed; for all intents and purposes it seemed that finally for the intelligentsia there was nowhere left to hide.<sup>16</sup>

Yu became an active university-based author in the mid 1990s, initially through the surreptitious distribution of samizdat booklets of his essays, although gradually his writings appeared in the pages of prominent literary journals. Then, in 1998, he became something of a national figure and commercially-packaged engagé writer when his first two collections of essays were published in the capital to media acclaim. Thereafter further volumes of causerie, book reviews, and feuilletons appeared at an extraordinary clip.<sup>17</sup> Like other soulful public writers (Liu Xiaobo in the 1980s and Wang Hui in the 1990s, among many others), Yu's stance as a voluble cultural critic invoked the tradition, and at times impersonated the diction and personality, of Lu Xun, the acerbic paragon of twentieth-century Chinese letters.<sup>18</sup>

In an essay entitled 'Intellectuals: the end or a rebirth?' published in his second book, *A Call to Arms from the Iron Room*--the title itself was a compression of two terms used by Lu Xun which had powerful contemporary resonances<sup>19</sup>--Yu Jie wrote,

I'm attracted to the 1980s. My greatest regret is that I didn't catch a ride on the last train of that decade...

The historical significance of 1980s intellectuals can't be overestimated. The only generation that can be compared with them is that of the May Fourth period. There were three rare things about them: they shared a simple and clear idealism, an indomitable desire to participate in history, and an unprecedented self-awareness regarding the status of the 'intellectual'. They hoped that in the

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<sup>16</sup> This was particularly evident during the fracas surrounding the '*Dushu Changjiang jiang*' (*Reading* Cheung Kong Awards) of June-August 2000 when the editors of *Reading* were variously lambasted and defended for a conflict of interest over the award of prizes of considerable monetary value donated by Hong Kong billionaire Li Ka-shing's multinational Cheung Kong Holdings to, among others, Wang Hui himself.

<sup>17</sup> These were *Fire and Ice* (Huo yu bing--yige Beida guaicaide chouti wenxue) (Beijing, *Jingji ribao* chubanshe, 1998), which was followed later in the year by *A Call to Arms from the Iron Room* (Tiewuzhongde nahan--Beida guaicaide 'chouti wenxue' zhi er), and subsequently *To Speak, or Not to Speak* (Shuo, haishi bu shuo, 1999), *Age of Awkwardness* (Gan'ga shidai, 1999), and *Wings to Fly* (Xiangfeide chibang, 2000). See also Barmé, *In the Red*, pp.351-354.

<sup>18</sup> Another salient point about Yu Jie's work pointed out to me by Chris Buckley is, and I quote, that, 'his masters thesis (also slated to appear as a book!) was about intellectuals and the print media in the late-Qing/early-Republican period, and in it he speaks admirings of late-Qing intellectuals' efforts to create a public sphere from and through which to address a wider audience'.

<sup>19</sup> The title is a double reference to Lu Xun's (d.1936) first volume of stories, published in 1923. In his introduction to *Call to Arms* (Nahan) Lu Xun spoke of his writings as being a warning to the people of China who were sleeping trapped in a windowless 'iron room'. See Lu Xun, 'Zixu', in his *Nahan, Lu Xun quanji* (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1981), vol.I, p.419. 'Call to arms' was, it will be recalled, also written on a massive banner that was hung at Tiananmen throughout the student hunger strike of May 1989.



space of a decade they would be able to complete the historical mission that had taken a period of centuries for Western intellectuals to realize.<sup>20</sup>

With this rhetorical flourish Yu conflated the efflorescence of the May Fourth era with that of the 1980s 'New Enlightenment' and sought in his own writing to embody the spirit of both ages. As an independent critic and voice of conscience in *fin-de-siècle* China he related both his and those earlier intellectual efforts to the universalized narrative of modern(izing) Western history.

Yu Jie rejected contemporary criticisms of the cultural and intellectual *mêlée* of the 1980s as being a time of confusion, naïveté and self-importance; he was particularly scathing in his observations on proponents of both 'national studies' and 'post studies' (as we have seen elsewhere in this volume, terms used in Chinese to lampoon a complex range of intellectual debate from the mid 1990s). Yu Jie said that disciples of 'national studies', scholars who were primarily engaged in research into traditional Chinese learning, 'merely look into our distant past, while those [interested in the] latter concentrate their attention on the distant future.' Though these are vastly different intellectual endeavors, he despaired that both 'have one surprising thing in common: they avoid the pressing issues of the here and now.' Yu Jie availed himself of a metaphor related to the latest carry-all device for knowledge production, that is the computer, to declare that: 'It is as if they have deleted a document from a computer; they have wiped out their own memories of the 1980s.'<sup>21</sup>

It was a crude but evocative characterization, one that worked as a form of self-justification for a writer promoted in the mass cultural market as an unruly and independent 'dark horse' by his publishers. For Yu Jie the intricate public intellectual debates of the 1990s over such issues as humanistic values, the *enrichissez-vous* mentality, resistance to commercialism, globalization, and so on, were 'neither disagreements about academic issues nor controversies over theoretical matters; they were nothing more than naked power play. That is why they all eventually degenerated into what verged on shameless personal vituperation... . Every kind of voice could be heard in those debates; the only thing that was missing was a search for true

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<sup>20</sup> Yu Jie, *Tiewuzhongde nahan*, p.178.

<sup>21</sup> Yu Jie, *op.cit.*, p.180.

understanding, a sympathy for pluralism, and the respect for one's opponents.'<sup>22</sup> He asked,

In a society in which everything is up for sale, has the role of the intellectual really come to an end? Although the bindings appear to be loosening all the time, the independence of the intelligentsia is waning with the passing of each generation.<sup>23</sup>

Inspired again by Foucault and taking a line from various U.S.-based authors, Yu Jie observed that 'this is an age of the proliferation of power. Power is not the province of the government or a political party alone. It is implicated in everything. A soap opera, a song on the radio, a newspaper, a leisure magazine, a street advertisement: they are all an expression of power. It is in just such an environment that an intellectual must respond to every invasion of power with awareness--regardless of how tender and beguiling those invasions might be.'<sup>24</sup> With this one gesture, however, Yu Jie (like many other writers who were given to gloss Foucault strategically) transforms the French philosopher's critique of power into a truism while sidestepping a concern that is central to that critique: the role of 'the intellectual'.<sup>25</sup>

In 1998-2000, Yu Jie prospered as a media firebrand, an accessible intellectual who was writing for a general audience from within an elite academic institution. His views did not go unchallenged, however, and even erstwhile supporters began to question his approach when he published an essay entitled 'Kundera and Havel--what are our choices? What are our responsibilities?'<sup>26</sup> In it Yu juxtaposed the two Czech writers--

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<sup>22</sup> Yu Jie, *op.cit.*, p.184.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Yu Jie, *op.cit.*, pp.184-185.

<sup>25</sup> 'For a long period, the "left" intellectual spoke and was acknowledged the right of speaking in the capacity of master of truth and justice. He was heard, or purported to make himself heard, as the spokesman of the universal. To be an intellectual meant something like being the consciousness/conscience of us all. I think we have here an idea transposed from Marxism, from a faded Marxism... The intellectual is thus taken as the clear, individual figure of a universality whose obscure, collective form is embodied in the proletariat...'

'Some years have passed now since the intellectual was called upon to play this role. A new mode of the "connection between theory and practice" has been established. Intellectuals have become used to working, not in the modality of the "universal", the "exemplary", the "just-and-true-for-all", but within specific sectors, at the precise points where their own conditions of life or work situate them (housing, the hospital, the asylum, the laboratory, the university, family, and sexual relations). This has undoubtedly given them a much more immediate and concrete awareness of struggles. And they have met here with problems which are specific, "nonuniversal" and often different from those of the proletariat or the masses.' From Michel Foucault, 'Truth and Power', in Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (Peregrine Books, 1984), p.67.

<sup>26</sup> Yu, 'Kundela yu Hawei'er--ni xuanze shenme? Women chengdan shenme?', *op.cit.*, pp.127-133. This essay was originally published in the January 1999 issue of *Beijing wenxue* (Beijing Literature), subsequently also the forum for the 'Rupture' survey discussed below.

both of whose works were available, to a greater or lesser extent, in Chinese translation--and declared the reason that Kundera had been popular in China from the 1980s was that the characters in his novels revealed a studied disengagement with society that resonated deeply with China's own intellectuals, whose silence regarding such periods as the Cultural Revolution, was tantamount to complicity. Havel, on the other hand, was--according to Yu Jie's interpretation--a sage *shengren*, a paragon of engagement and social conscience, the very things that are anathema to people who are wary of taking moral responsibility for the morass of contemporary life.<sup>27</sup> 'The loss of a sense of responsibility,' he declared after having lambasted the renewed popularity of supposedly 'disengaged' writers of the pre-1949 era like Zhou Zuoren, Lin Yutang and Liang Shiqiu, 'means the loss of dignity and absence of the soul.'<sup>28</sup>

It is perhaps worth noting that although Havel argued in favor of signing petitions in reality (and reiterated this point when discussing Kundera's work) the particular historical context of his argument is blurred by Yu's reading of the character Tomás's refusal to sign a petition in Milan Kundera's novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*; Yu extrapolated Tomás's refusal into real life and then employed it to pass judgement on 1990s Chinese intellectuals as a whole. Havel himself summarizes Tomás's fictional stance (against which he argues) in the following way,

The petition will not help the political prisoners, and as a matter of fact, that's not why it was drawn up in the first place. Above all, it's a way for the authors to draw attention to themselves and to reassure themselves that they can still have an impact on history, whereas in fact they're doing this in a situation in which they've lost everything, and are in fact risking nothing at all by circulating the petition. Instead of the less conspicuous but more effective course of trying to aid the families of those prisoners, they are in fact parasites on the prisoners' misery, and through them are building a monument to themselves without taking into account that this may make things worse for the prisoners.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> For more on the role of the 'sage' or moral superman in contemporary China, see Liu Xiaobo on the passing of Hu Yaobang in Barmé and Linda Jaivin, *New Ghosts, Old Dreams: Chinese Rebel Voices* (New York: Times Books, 1992), p.42ff; and Barmé, *In the Red*, pp.53, 304 and 320ff.

<sup>28</sup> Yu, *op.cit.*, p.133. For another view of the posthumous fates of such writers, see the Epilogue of my *An Artistic Exile: a life of Feng Zikai (1898-1975)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming); and Susan Daruvala, *Zhou Zuoren and an Alternative Response to Modernity* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp.169-196 *inter alia*. Gloria Davies has pointed out that it is noteworthy that the attribution of certain fixed properties and socio-political roles to (trans)historical cultural 'types' is widely employed in contemporary Chinese intellectual discourse, but rarely as a consciously psychoanalytical approach, nor as one that engages with the issues that emerge from the psychoanalytic readings of texts.

<sup>29</sup> Václav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace*, translated by Paul Wilson (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p.173.

This is also just the point for which Qian Liqun, one of Yu Jie's teachers at Peking University, takes his student to task. As Qian said in a letter that he wrote to Yu in response to his judgement on the differences between Havel and Kundera,

It gives rise to an extremely pointed question, and one that is unavoidable: Are you capable of acting like such a 'sage'? For example, when faced with the many abuses of human rights in China can we act like Václav Havel and raise our voices in protest? I for one must admit that I don't have the courage. Therefore, is your avowed logic that 'silence is itself a kind of crime' applicable to ourselves? More to the point, what right do we have to judge others for something that we are ourselves incapable of doing? Of course, we may be constantly critical of our weakness, but I limit my critique to my own failings, I don't use it as an excuse to attack others from some higher moral ground.<sup>30</sup>

Qian's remarks raise the issue of how fluid contemporary identities, like Yu Jie the commercial polemicist, constitute themselves as--or dress in the garb of--historicized figures and icons in a way that allows them to position themselves in a particular rhetorical relationship to others.

In 1919, Lu Xun wrote an essay, 'The Obligation of Today's Fathers', that extolled the idea that the young should be liberated from their traditional subservience to their elders and parents, and tradition in general. He claimed that it was the duty of thinking individuals--mostly middle-aged people and teachers--to hold open the gate of darkness *hei'ande zhamen* and give the young a chance to get through to a brighter future.<sup>31</sup> What was a gesture of agonized personal commitment for Lu Xun in the 1920s was for his admirers from the 1980s often a posture of intellectual afflatus and superior mission; what had been an area of ambivalence that related both to the past and future for the earlier writer, became a liminal 'third space' for contemporary intellectualising. Writing some seventy years after Lu Xun, Yu Jie opined that he hoped to continue the tradition of the earlier writer's cultural criticism by holding open the gate of darkness. However, he wrote, 'It's not that I don't want to let the children through [the gate]; it's just that the children don't want to go anywhere. They claim they're happy right where they are.' By

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<sup>30</sup> Qian Liqun, 'Gei Yu Jiede yifeng xin' in Yu, *Xiangfeide chibang*, p.348. Both Qian's letter, and the remarks made by Cui Weiping, a noted translator of Havel's works into Chinese, should be read in their entirety as it is impossible to do justice to their arguments here. See Yu, *Xiangfeide chibang*, pp.346-354, and 369-375 respectively.

way of reflecting on the lack of seriousness and commitment among his contemporaries he then tells of a fellow student who asked a girl that he wanted to impress: 'What if I held open the gate of darkness for you--what would you do?' She replied, 'Tickle you.'<sup>32</sup>

Yu Jie was one of the leading media writers who despaired of the fall from social prominence of the nation's intellectuals. One could claim that his criticism of the members of his generation was a cry of despair for the lack of influence that writers like himself now enjoyed, compared in particular with the 1980s when literary debates and intellectual controversies had brought a swath of academics, philosophers and cultural activists national, and in some cases international, celebrity. Of course, where some found a young writer of conscience issuing his own 'call to arms', others saw a hypocrite who 'knew whom to blast and whom to present bouquets to', a commercial writer who was on the make and ready to play the aggrieved dissident if necessary.<sup>33</sup> Regardless of these contrasting evaluations, Yu's own framing of the 'intellectual dilemmas' of late 1990s China was a continuation of the practice of sequestering elite 'cultural fever' from the broader society and from the cultural practice of the so-called popular, that is, mass, realm. He also affirmed, like so many others, the epochal role given to 4 June 1989 and its meaning for the supposed demise of a certain kind of intellectual and high cultural activity.

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<sup>31</sup> See *Lu Xun quanji* (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 1981), vol.I, pp.130 and 140.

<sup>32</sup> Yu Jie, *Tiewuzhongde nahan*, p.447. As Gloria Davies observes of this: 'Even in Yu Jie's ironical rehearsal of Lu Xun's "gate of darkness" there seems to be little awareness or willingness to engage with what such irony implies for Chinese critical inquiry. Is it merely clever wordplay, a continuation of the dissipating irony of Wang Shuo? What is the point of shooting such an "arrow" at Lu Xun's Superman? Does Yu Jie ask this of himself?'

<sup>33</sup> Wang Shuo published just such a pitiless critique of Yu Jie in the form of a conversation with 'Laoxia' in August 2000. See his *Meiren zeng wo menghanyao* (Changjiang wenyi chubanshe, 2000).

## Rupture in the 1990s

Yu Jie was only one of the new set of angry young people who made a mark on late-1990s Chinese letters and questioned the cultural status quo by claiming an authoritative position in relationship to the past. His fellows, however, were not necessarily as taken as he was with the glory days of the 1980s and the cultural fever of that decade. Around the time of Yu Jie's appearance on the scene a varied and vocal group of writers came to prominence in the major publishing cities of the nation through their fiction, poetry, and criticism. When in 1998 fifty-four of them, men and women born since the 1960s, and living in thirteen cities and provinces, responded to a survey of the arts, they collectively gave what was probably the most blanket critique-cum-condemnation of both official and nonofficial culture to appear since the mass denunciations of the party-state establishment during the early years of the Cultural Revolution. The survey was initially published under the title 'Rupture' in the prominent cultural monthly *Beijing Literature* and was later reproduced with accompanying interview material as a book in early 2000.<sup>34</sup>

The 'Rupture' inquiry was, according to its authors, a group of writers and editors based in Nanjing, a 'performance' or a 'happening' that was designed to be provocative, even aggressive. By framing the event in terms of a 'rupture', *duanlie*, its authors were playing on the tropes of schism, disconnection and intergenerational conflict that provided much of the defining vocabulary of twentieth-century cultural depiction. In the context of the circulation of cultural elites and hegemonic contestation in the 1990s arts scene, the category of 'freelance writer', *ziyou zhuangaoren*, or rather 'independent' or 'free writer', *ziyou zuojia*, accrued to it the status of the fringe, with all the attendant possibility, resistance and *éclat* (just as in the art world the 'avant-garde' was construed as representing all Chinese new art), not to mention commercial viability.<sup>35</sup> The questionnaire they devised for the survey encouraged and affirmed a certain critical stance from a cultural coterie that had already convinced itself that it was marginal, edgy and pure. For example, it contained questions like, 'Which contemporary writers have had a major impact on you?', 'What kind of Chinese literary criticism has major significance?', 'Have you read Heidegger, Barthes, Foucault and the Frankfurt School? Which of these authoritative theoreticians or theories have had an influence on you?',

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<sup>34</sup> Zhu Wen, 'Duanlie: yifen wenjuan he wushiliu fen dajuan', *Beijing wenxue*, 1998:10, pp.19-40, 47; and Wang Jifeng, *Duanlie: Shijimode wenxue gushi--ziyou zuojia fangtan lu* (Nanjing: Jiangsu wenyi chubanshe, 2000).

'Has the [state-run] Writers' Association been of any practical help to you during your writing career?', and so on. The responses were often in the negative or generally dismissive of any suggestion that the major trends in contemporary thought, cultural theory or criticism had any impact on those surveyed. For instance, in reply to the question whether any post-1949 authors have had an influence on his writing, the Nanjing literary critic Li Xiaoshan remarked: 'They all seem to be diminutive, insignificant people who hide behind the skirts of politicians. Their IQ seems very low as well, though things improved a little in the 80s.'<sup>36</sup>

According to Han Dong, one of the initiators of the survey, what the exercise seemed to indicate was that the official post-4 June cultural establishment, its organizations, its awards, and approval, were of little significance to these younger authors--and presumably to their audiences as well. The claim that he made was that outside the 'corrupt old cultural order', there were two other literary worlds functioning in China. One consisted of commercially viable and politically adroit writers like Wang Meng, Liu Xinwu, Jia Pingwa, Han Shaogong, Mo Yan, Wang Shuo, Liu Zhenyun, Su Tong, Yu Hua, and so on, authors who formed a particular, if diffuse, literary clique, that (according to Han) was 'accommodating, that transforms itself in keeping with the prevailing order, and that eventually adds its authority to that of the status quo. In return its members enjoy self-affirmation; it is a mutually-beneficial relationship....' The other, in contrast, was made up of younger writers, people like those surveyed in 'Rupture', who had a 'natural distrust of and caution in regard to the literary environment' and the regnant 'literary order'.

What we mean by the existing 'literary order' is not simply the various manifestations of official culture. More importantly, we are talking about the powerful monopoly exercised over cultural aspirations and taste by the authorizing system, which expresses itself through its ground rules, standards, homogeneity, and styles. It suffuses everything with its undeniable, overwhelming and superior ambience.

Some of the participants in the 'performance' (one that was also part of a publishing campaign that featured the appearance of a series of novels by 'Rupture'

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<sup>35</sup> For a discussion of these issues, see my *In the Red*, and Zhu Wen's comments on 'A Dog's-eye View of the World' (*Gou yan kan shijie*), reprinted in Wang Jifang, *Duanlie*, p.331.

authors) were in particular mindful of how the freelance art and music scenes (that is, 'avant garde' art and pop-rock music) had developed a set of alternative protocols that had supposedly allowed them to flourish, while the literary world was lagging far behind.<sup>37</sup> Those protocols were not as directly swayed by the mass commercial market, as non-official art and music had viable offshore outlets as well as a strong base in Beijing. For these aspiring younger writers, however, the Chinese capital already seemed crammed with the official and alternative literary establishments. Yet, while artists were generally admired for their ability to circulate on the international scene, the failure of most writers to go global was seen as being the result of a system that hampered the cultural production of literature in China and therefore its viability elsewhere. Not surprisingly then the 'Rupture' writers' comments on Sinologists and China experts, often the brokers of artistic exchange, were part of a wholesale rejection of international attempts at cultural evaluation and affirmation. The blanket condemnations were particularly diverting for this writer, and they are worth noting here. In response to the question, 'Do you take any notice of the comments made about your work by Sinologists? Are their opinions important?', for example, one author replies: 'They're a pack of stupid cunts.' Another prefers to call us/them 'a pile of dog shit' and declares that, 'Anyone who takes them seriously is a dog.' Han Dong observed that China specialists 'merely create trouble', while Li Xiaoshan's view was somewhat more politically honed: 'They're basically the same as the bosses of multinational corporations. The only reason they come to China is in search of personal gain.'<sup>38</sup> Li was equally querulous about the theoretical fads that had swept China since the mid 1980s. 'The crazes come and go, at the moment it's postmodernism and post-Orientalism. Chinese theorists are just like mediators. To use a metaphor from real estate: they have no housing, nor are they real estate agents--they're simply middlemen. Thus the tides [*chao*, also 'fashions'] come in and go out but the beach remains unchanged; it's still just sand and you can't build anything on the sand.'<sup>39</sup>

Although the 'Rupture' writers declared that it was no longer particularly hard to maintain a distance from official culture, what was truly unsettling were the enticements of the international cultural industry, the Nobel literature hierarchy and the false value systems of mainstream literary history: 'These are the true enemies of real,

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<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Chen Wei's comments in Wang Jifang, *Duanlie*, op.cit., p.25.

<sup>38</sup> Op.cit., pp.24-25.

<sup>39</sup> Wang Jifang, *Duanlie*, op.cit., p.65. Li Xiaoshan had been a prominent iconoclastic art critic since the mid 1980s. See Barmé and John Minford, *Seeds of Fire: Chinese Voices of Conscience* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1988), p.241.



creative art.' The aim for these writers, Han Dong claimed, was not a pursuit of self-validation through a crude opposition to orthodoxy. Rather, the literature of independence that he and others avowed was an expression of the fact that, 'I am myself, and not of you. It is not about saying: "You are my enemy and I want to destroy you and take your place".'<sup>40</sup>

In the rhetoric typical of this style of anodyne transgressive resistance Han Dong declared, 'Such a literature is always in the minority, on the fringe, not of the mainstream, within the public sphere, rejected and ignored.' In response to a question that asked whether he thought he and his fellow authors were engaging in a new form of 'class struggle', he replied, 'At best we should think of ourselves as being a thorn in the side of the corrupt system. A malignant tumor, a cancer, a foreign object within it; we don't want to be part of its rotten being.'<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps Han saw no anomaly in the fact--although it was equally possible that he revelled in the delicious irony--that his statements and this iconoclastic survey were published in a leading orthodox Beijing literary journal, one ostensibly edited by none other than Hao Ran, a novelist whose literary reputation in the party system had risen, and declined, in tandem with his career as a prominent Cultural Revolution-period arts propagandist. Although having profited from the present official and commercial cultural order, the surveyed 'Rupture' writers proclaimed that they were alert to its enticements and dangers. Their response to the dilemmas created by the voracious commercial arts market and the latitude of post-totalitarian or secular socialism was, paradoxically, to call for a kind of cultural idealism that had a lot in common with that propounded by self-styled intellectual devotees of the 1980s like Yu Jie. 'We don't want a new order but rather principles and aims....,' they said as they called, *sans ironie*, for a return to some presumed moment of cultural purity. 'The present status quo is maintained by sacrificing the true ideals of literature. Literature that pursues truth, creativity, freedom and artistic perfection is under attack and without any refuge.'<sup>42</sup>

## A Janus Mien

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<sup>40</sup> The quotations in this paragraph are from Han Dong, 'Beiwang; youguan "duanlie" xingweide wenti huida', *Beijing wenxue*, 1998: 10, pp.42-43.

<sup>41</sup> Han, 'Beiwang', op.cit., p.43.

<sup>42</sup> Han, 'Beiwang', op.cit., p.45.

In the 1980s, intellectual contestation generally centered on debates about abstract ideas and theoretical issues--and a rich review of the ins and outs of that history as evoked in the late 1990s is provided by various voices in the present volume.

Furthermore, there was a renewed belief among elites that it was through cultural transformation that China itself would be revitalized. Educated urbanites long anathematized under Maoist cultural policy presumed that this new 'Enlightenment project', itself formulated by themselves, was also their sole responsibility; and members of the intelligentsia were anxious to play the role of patriot-savant.

Following the successes, and excesses, of the economic reforms during the 1990s, however, engaged intellectuals related their disagreements more directly to economic and political programs, as well as to class or group differences. In an age during which much of the 'capital accumulation' (that is, the superficial economic prosperity that had been the goal of earlier reforms and revolutions) seemed to have been realized, the nature of this affluence and the inequities it presented came to the fore as issues of pressing importance. Throughout the twentieth century, the intelligentsia had argued bitterly over the merits of a dizzying array of developmental theories, political programs, economic systems and cultural paradigms. Now, at the century's end, debates and intellectual programs began to revolve around not simply how to achieve wealth and power, but the dilemmas of wealth and power *per se*.

In this environment ideas were not mere abstract formulations, and the historical narratives in which they were cast had powerful contemporary resonances. Economic wealth and the vision of a strong and prosperous China--or even the reverse, the looming menace of an economically imperilled, crisis-ridden and socially divided nation--made the debates about the history of modernity in China, its legacy and significance to contemporary thinkers and activists, and the future it faced both relevant and urgent. Although past controversies had been launched from a presumed common ground, and a general wariness of monopolistic party rule had existed among the diverse cultural and intellectual groups from the late 1970s, now questions were disputed on the basis of vastly different, even mutually exclusive, academic and theoretical frameworks, as well as social experiences.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Some of the material in these paragraphs has appeared in a different guise elsewhere. See my essay 'The Revolution of Resistance', in *Social Change in Contemporary China: Conflict and Resistance*, edited by Elizabeth Perry and Mark Selden (London: Routledge, 2000), pp.203-204.

In the late 1990s, both sides in the rhetorical stand-off between the schools of what were called the 'neo-liberals' and the 'new left' allowed polemicists to characterize the shifting stances and unsteady alliances between individuals and groups to be cast in Manichean terms, very much in the same way that individuals and groups active in the 1980s were homogenized and typified in subsequent depictions. Heightened rhetorical warfare also tended to deplete the intellectual civic breathing spaces that had opened up in the preceding years. For a swath of 1990s thinkers and polemicists, a number of whom were academics with a background in late-Qing and Republican-era intellectual history, the framing and understanding of these questions lay, unsurprisingly, not only in a future which seemed to become increasingly unthinkable, but more importantly in a range of creative nostalgias related to the political stances of non-aligned thinkers or noted polemicists in the past. Paragons were chosen and invoked in the struggle for contemporary intellectual authority in the 'field' or *jie* of intellectuality discussed earlier by Gloria Davies. In terms of the academic performative value of these disputations 'quotational contestation' played a key role, as did historical evocation. Indeed, the escalation of hostilities was marked by a furious quotation and counter-quotation of Euro-American theorists.<sup>44</sup>

As has been noted in this book, the creation of an aura of independence among the intelligentsia in the 1980s fed off the self-views and historicizing acts of intellectuals in late-Qing and Republican China as they were retold to eager contemporary audiences. A range of writers stood then, and again in the 1990s, rehearsing the pose of the cultural superman Lu Xun holding open the metaphorical gate of darkness, looking back into the past while making it possible for the children to run through the gate 'to bright, wide-open spaces'.

With all of this talk of the 'gate of darkness', those steeped in the current canon of Anglophone academic theory will invariably recall Walter Benjamin's famous remarks on Paul Klee's painting 'Angelus Novus' where he describes the angel of history, face turned to the past. 'Where we perceive a chain of events,' Benjamin wrote, the angel 'sees a single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from paradise; it has got caught in his wings

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<sup>44</sup> Wu Jiaxiang lambasted this maniac rivalry in his essay 'Xinzuopai: Jiangshi huan hun', posted in the 'Cultural Salon' (*wenhua shalong*) at <[www.csdn.net.cn](http://www.csdn.net.cn)> on 2 August 2000. In this context, the 'Janus mien' of those disputants who wrote both in English and Chinese, respectively using widely different rhetorical registers, needs to be considered in understanding how Anglophone academe was now constructing its Chinas.

with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.<sup>45</sup>

To extrapolate from this would-be apocalyptic scene, one could argue that Lu Xun wrote of the ability and need for enlightened individuals to hold open the gate of darkness because his face was indeed turned toward the past (and its horrors which made the act of keeping the gate open necessary in the first place); he could not see the bright future that he abstractly imagined in 'The Obligation of Today's Fathers'. While it was often difficult to discern in which way other presumptive gate-holders were themselves looking, I would suggest that Lu Xun's deeply-felt ambivalence about his own position is further voiced in 'The Shadow's Farewell', written in 1924.

If a man should sleep to a time when time is no more, then his shadow may come and bid him farewell, saying:

There is something about Heaven that displeases me; I do not wish to go there.

There is something about Hell that displeases me; I do not wish to go there. And there is something about your future Golden Age that displeases me too; I do not wish to go there either.

What displeases me is you.

Friend, I do not wish to go with you. I will not stay.

I will not.

Alas! Alas! Let me drift in the land of nothingness.<sup>46</sup>

The propulsion storm of 'Angelus Novus' aside, within contemporary intellectual debates there are inquiries that move in the direction of the past, interrogating the present as holding the possibility of a number of pasts and promising any number of futures. The bright future was detected by some as being the rubble of a past from which shards could be salvaged and used as the building blocks of something that 'should be', even though the promise of that 'be' was located in that which 'was'. The presumed future of socialism/communism was located in a past over which contemporary intellectuals strove to lay claim, while other seemingly possible futures, that is pasts

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<sup>45</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' in his *Illuminations* (Fontana: 1982) pp. 259-260.

<sup>46</sup> Lu Xun, 'Yingzide gaobie' in his *Yecao*, collected in *Lu Xun quanji*, vol.2, p.165; translated in Barmé and Minford, *Seeds of Fire*, p.322. The line *wo buru panghuang yu wudi* in the poem is used for a very different end in Wang Hui's book *No Place to Hesitate*, which Gloria Davies quotes in Chapter One, and where he writes of his labors on behalf 'the glorious Chinese civilization'. In Wang's version the hesitation and agonized choice of Lu Xun, his burden of decision, has a markedly different resonance.

imperfect (those pasts frustrated by the utopian history of the future promised in the 1940s and 50s by the communists), could now be imagined.

### Arbitrage

Critiques of the 1980s nostalgia flourished during the mid and late 1990s, not only among people of Yu Jie's generation, but also within the disparate groups of older semi-establishment and fringe writers and thinkers who witnessed their public profile and influence wane in a diverse commercial and nuanced political environment. They also became something of a commonplace in Anglophone scholarship about the Chinese intellectual scene. Writing in an introductory essay for a special 1998 issue of *Social Text* devoted to post-1989 Chinese intellectual debate, Xudong Zhang commented that intellectual life on the mainland was marked by 'deeply aristocratic and authoritarian assumptions that underlay the sham public consensus of the euphoric New Era' of 1979 to 1989. He remarked on the precipitous fall in the influence of liberal-humanist intellectuals in the 1990s, in particular after the new wave of reforms ushered in by Deng Xiaoping's Tour of the South in 1992, something I too have remarked on at some length elsewhere.<sup>47</sup> However, Zhang identifies the rise of what he dubs the 'consumer masses' as having 'rendered the intellectual elite irrelevant in both social and political terms.' 'Socially speaking,' and again I am quoting Zhang, 'the surge of the masses onto the center stage of consumer modernity pushed intellectuals to the sidelines (except for the new advocates of such "dismal sciences" as economics, who became the self-appointed spokesmen of the New Age.)'<sup>48</sup> Although a useful observation, such characterizations--first voiced from another perspective by other writers in the mid 1990s--overlooked the fact that intellectual debate (including the elite disquisitions on nationalism as seen in the writings of He Xin, Liu Kang, Song Qiang, et al) itself had long been commodified in the media market and was deeply embedded in the culture of the 'consumer masses' (a category that included, however uncomfortably for some, the intelligentsia itself). This is to say nothing of the, the 'surge of the masses' as evident in the Falungong protests that began with the encirclement of party headquarters at Zhongnanhai in 1999.

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<sup>47</sup> See Barmé, *In the Red*, p.303ff.

<sup>48</sup> Xudong Zhang, 'Intellectual Politics in Post-Tiananmen China', introduction to a special issue of the same name of *Social Text*, 55, vol.16, no.2 (Summer 1998), p.5.

Zhang went on to identify a range of intellectual presumptions that have constructed a particular socio-political role and caste afflatus for the educated elite in the post-Cultural Revolution era. He saw this role as being based on:

- (1) the assumption that intellectuals and the bureaucratic state are natural, inseparable partners in herding the people through wholesale change while maintaining order;
- (2) the assumption that intellectuals are the moral conscience of the people and always have the ability and even the right to articulate the people's desires and longings; and
- (3) the assumption that the actualization of Chinese modernity, understood implicitly or explicitly as a process of incorporation into the world system, is fundamentally an economic, libidinal, or even an 'aesthetic' passage that can be envisioned without radical social and class differentiation, ideological conflict, and political struggle.<sup>49</sup>

This argument about contemporary elite cultural discourse provides a useful insight into the background to the reasons for widespread intellectual hand-wringing in the 1990s. Zhang's eloquent summation positions itself within a body of contemporary writings on China generated particularly within U.S. academia. It authored a handy gloss that conveniently covered the public pronouncements and writings of a range of intellectuals as they set to rework the history of the 1980s, but it was also a descriptive formulation that generated its own prescriptive and proscriptive category. After all, it constituted 'the intellectuals' as something of a monistic caste. This putative homogeneous group, negatively characterized by the above set of all-inclusive presumptions, was summoned forth (only to be excoriated) as an impotent yet eristic historical actor. Meanwhile a realm for a 'positive' practice composed of a particular range of theorized approaches to China with valency in the Anglophone humanities and social sciences is pioneered. These approaches, not surprisingly, appeared to be validating a certain intellectual stance vis-à-vis 'lived China', while at the same time authenticating the knowledge production of those who were presumed to enjoy intellectual sympathy and theoretical synchronicity with it. That these PLUs<sup>50</sup>--and a number of them were featured in the pages of that issue of *Social Text*--include

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<sup>49</sup> Op.cit., p.3.

<sup>50</sup> 'People Like Us', an expression with currency in another caste system.

prominent editors and economists with complex institutional and establishment affiliations appears in no way to have detracted from their aura of 'independence'.

Of course, in the context of this weighty enterprise my own work (including the present essay) can be neatly subsumed under the rubrics of 'cultural reporting' or 'intellectual exposé'. These are characterizations that pigeonhole the writer as an assiduous observer who records a diffuse reality while only appreciating its immediate, quotidian and contemporary significance. Indeed work that engages with theoretical approaches not readily identified with the mainstream academic politics of quotation and validation is glibly caricatured as 'undertheorized' and dismissed for its woeful (Sinological) attention to detail. The calibration of meaning and value according to familiar theoretical signposts--the invocation of and obeisance to authoritative texts and the writers who are at any one time enshrined in the pantheon of academic discourse--provides us all with a notional path of intellectualizing that is preordained by ideas and paradigms marshalled according to a linear order of discovery (or currency). While these approaches are set up and then policed by those who presume the existence of an intellectual-moral ascendancy, there seems to be surprisingly little self-reflection on what multivalent processes are at work. In the context of the discussions in the previous chapter, for example, acts of self-identification result in a malodor of moral superiority that excites a range of hostile responses in its wake, not to mention an indulgence in a kind of obscurantism that sits uneasily with the accompanying populist gestures.

This is perhaps a suitable juncture to recall another perspective on the 1980s, one formulated by a participant in the foment who was never complacent about the intellectual bonhomie and self-congratulatory mission of the revived educated elite. The powerful ruminations of Liu Xiaobo, a self-styled iconoclast whose caustic writings scarified the intellectual world from the mid 1980s until his arrest following 4 June, offer an alternative appreciation of the differing trajectories of the '1980s'.<sup>51</sup>

Writing in May 1989, Liu anticipated later re-evaluations of the 1980s (and his remarks are a salutary reminder of the *post hoc* pitfalls of subsequent intellectual afflatus) when he wrote,

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<sup>51</sup> For a study of Liu's role in the events of 1989, see my 'Confession, Redemption and Death: Liu Xiaobo and the 1989 Protest Movement', in George Hicks (ed.), *The Broken Mirror: China After Tiananmen* (London: Longmans, 1990), pp.52-99.

Theoretically speaking, you don't need to be incredibly well informed to engage in a self-examination and criticism of Chinese culture. In fact, you don't even need to be creative. That's because the theoretical constructs of which I avail myself in examining Chinese culture are givens, ready-made, and do not require any new discoveries. These theories, which Chinese intellectuals treat as profound and innovative, have been clearly explicated by Westerners; they have been around for hundreds of years in the West and are regarded as old-hat. They don't need us to add any footnotes to them. I think I'll be doing well if I can achieve a passably solid and accurate understanding of them.<sup>52</sup>

At that time--a time, it should be recalled, that saw most of the intellectuals who are now scripted as having been 'independent' deeply enmeshed with the state, its legislated institutions of knowledge production and its reformist agendas--what particularly gnawed at Liu was a sense that all of his intellectual training and local celebrity left him unprepared to deal with the world that he found when, after traveling overseas in 1988, he ended up for a short time in New York. 'When New York tore away all of the external embellishments and illusory fame that I had in China,' he wrote, 'I suddenly realized how weak I really was. I was incapable of immediately finding the courage to face myself; nor could I possibly engage in a dialogue with the upper strata of the international intellectual world.' And he goes on to reflect critically upon his own passage to intellectual status.

My position was that of a narrow nationalist trying to use Western culture to reform China. My critique of Chinese culture was based, however, on an idealized version of Western culture. I overlooked, or purposefully avoided, the limitations of the West, even those weaknesses of which I was already aware. I was therefore incapable of a higher level of critical examination of Western culture, which would focus on the weaknesses of mankind itself. All I could do was to 'ingratiate myself' with Western culture--glorifying it in a manner quite out of proportion to reality, as if it not only held the key to China's salvation, but contained all the answers to the world's problems. But now, looking beyond this, it is obvious that my idealization of the West was a way of making myself out to be a veritable Messiah. I always despised people who assumed the role of

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<sup>52</sup> Liu Xiaobo, "The Inspiration of New York: Meditations of an Iconoclast", translated by G. Barmé, *Problems of Communism*, January-April 1991, vol.XL, p.116.



saviour; now I realized that, drunk on the notion of my own beneficence and power, I was playing--consciously or not--a role that I detested.<sup>53</sup>

Long before there was talk of 'scientific paradigms' and 'designer pidgin scholarship', Liu Xiaobo offered his own meditations on the human condition.

The overriding arrogance of mankind is reflected not only in the self-satisfied Ah Q spirit of China, but also in the Western belief in the omnipotence of rationalism and science. No matter how strident in the criticism of rationalism those in the West may be, no matter how strenuously Western intellectuals try to negate colonial expansionism and the white man's sense of superiority, when faced with other nations, Westerners cannot help feeling superior. Even when criticizing themselves, they become besotted with their own courage and sincerity. In the West, people can calmly, even proudly, accept the critiques they make of themselves, but they find it difficult to put up with critiques that come from elsewhere. They are not willing to admit that a rationalist critique of rationalism is a vicious cycle of self-deception. But then who can find a better critical tool?<sup>54</sup>

If intellectuality is about analyzing and critically reflecting on how it is being both generated and validated by itself, and is also about attempting a positive engagement with the empirical world then, apart from the self-advertisement of verbiage (honed and aimed as it is at a particular cultural or academic market), what is actually taking place? If, for example, intellectualizing takes a superior moral stance as it 'speaks' on behalf of the dispossessed or downtrodden, the 'blue and non-collar workers' that Xu Jilin referred to earlier, then is the actual work of labor activists to be supported or judiciously ignored because to engage with actual agitation would be far too risky? Is the 'unpacking', 'problematizing', 'opening up of discursive space', and so on, actually an endless project of valorization in which no activist stance need seriously be considered, and, if so, then what is its own endgame? As these questions do not seem to be asked, does that mean that something must already be assumed, for to be able to ask such

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<sup>53</sup> Op.cit., p.117. But it was Liu's then wife, Tao Li, who made the most incisive observation about his status and his manipulation of it in late 1980s China. He quoted from a letter she had written to him: 'Xiaobo, you may appear to be a famous Chinese rebel, but, in reality, you have made a sly pact with society. You are tolerated and forgiven. Our society envelops you, even encourages you, while all along appearing to reject you. You are an adornment, a decoration; your very existence is a negative validation of the system.' [Op.cit., p.118.]

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. Liu's meditation continues and should be read in full to appreciate not only the scope of his argument, but also of his personal dilemmas at the time.

questions one needs to engage with time as a continuity and that entails the issue of why the same things are still being said.

If time is constituted as history, or inescapable history, or, for that matter, the meaning of history itself (that is an inquiry into what our own endgame may be by exploring what an earlier one might have been)--all of which are 'arrows' of time, if the metaphorical 'arrow' is employed to represent the idea of 'a passage to a destination or meaning'--then a number of issues come to the fore. If a writer assumes that his or her destination or meaning is already known, then 'time's arrows' become superfluous because the omnipotent mind of the intellectual can transcend its own specificity (that is to say, it can be anywhere at any time, with a Havel, a Kundera, or a Lu Xun), thereby obviating the need to trace the actual journey that the writer's own 'arrows' must take, for their end is in their beginning. Liu Xiaobo consciously charts and reflects on the 'arrows' that led him to his own sense of predicament (and that resulted in his activism, repeated imprisonment, and eventual status in the 1990s as an intellectual 'non-person'), and he is unerringly and painfully aware of the spatio-temporal distance between 'theories explicated by Westerners for hundreds of years' and late-arriving Chinese thought that features at best as a footnote, or case study, in Western academe.<sup>55</sup>

In the late 1990s, the interrogators of the Chinese intelligentsia worked to set themselves apart from the restive throng of the educated by claiming a unique purchase on critical inquiry. In their writings they too indulged in a project of visualization towards a 'China imaginary' that would cast all liberal intellectuals as being of one cloth. Throughout this process 'China' itself was reified. In the late 1940s, as the People's Liberation Army gained the upper hand in the Civil War, 'China' was claimed as both the means and the end of revolution. In the ensuing years, the PLA occupied the territory legislated by the old Republican government in accord with the contours of the defunct Manchu-Qing empire, including Xinjiang and Tibet. This 'China' was a post-colonial legacy of the Manchu-Qing expansion, and under communist rule it and its inhabitants became the physical terrain for the practice of utopian revolution and pragmatic counter-revolution in turn. When at the dawn of the new millennium members of the Han intelligentsia debated programs and possibilities for the 'beautiful future' of a 'great China' and 'glorious Chinese civilization', certain questions were rarely addressed. These were, among others, questions related to Han dominance over the non-Han

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<sup>55</sup> My thanks once more to Gloria Davies for her help in articulating and clarifying these reflections. See also my remarks on these issues in *In the Red*, pp.191-194 and 357-358.

territories of the People's Republic, and the particular histories of these territories and their frustrated and negated trajectories, as well as the contemporary historical predicament that encompassed both Han and non-Han peoples in the People's Republic and Taiwan.

By the same token, or on the inescapable other side of this coin of the realm, America and the 'new world order' were posited as the 'palimpsest other' of China. Since the U.S., and the world as seen from its shores, was the only 'international' point of reference, or relevance, for many writers, this meant, as Liu Dong has pointed out, that Chinese intellectual discourse was often seen from an epicentre on one or the other side of the Pacific.

It is here, as we consider the varied roles of participant-observers, theorizing non-activists and academic middlemen (among whose number I would, of course, include myself), that a term current in the world of international finance suggests itself. It is called 'arbitrage', that is 'the purchase of securities in one market for resale in another.' As André Aciman comments on the practice in terms of nostalgia and time,

As soon as a profit is made, the cycle starts again, with subsequent purchases sometimes paid for with unrealized profit drawn from previous sales. In such transactions, one never really sells a commodity, much less takes delivery of anything. One merely speculates, and seldom does any of it have anything to do with the real world. Arbitrageurs may have seats on not one but two exchanges, the way the very wealthy have homes in not one but two time zones, or exiles two homes in the wrong places. One always longs for the other home, but home, as one learns soon enough, is a place where one imagines or remembers *other* homes.<sup>56</sup>

### **Third ways, new and old**

In the mid 1940s, following the end of the war with Japan, China's major contending political parties--the Communists and the Nationalists--were trapped in a stalemate. A short-lived period of relatively peaceful contestation between the antagonistic camps emboldened members of the urban intelligentsia who championed a vague program of

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<sup>56</sup> André Aciman, 'Arbitrage', *The New Yorker*, 10 July 2000, p.36.

moderate liberalism--a social democratic platform of gradual economic and political reforms that would theoretically strengthen an urban middle class, foster constitutional democracy and allow for the evolution of a Euro-American style pluralistic society--to become politically active. This 'explosion in participation' lasted from 1945 to 1949.<sup>57</sup> During this time some liberals cast aside more traditional methods of Chinese political activity; instead of offering measured advice to the power holders or participating directly in government bureaucracy they chose to establish their own political parties. Nearly one hundred new organizations appeared in the year immediately following the end of the war. Others concentrated their energies on producing journals that acted as forums for social and political debate (some 1,000 journals, including *The Observer*, were published in the Nationalist-controlled areas alone that boasted a distribution of some two million copies). The intellectual origins of many of the proposals of this 'liberal' camp of activists could be found in the late 1920s when a group of May Fourth writers, including Hu Shi, Luo Longji and Zhang Junmai, organized a Fabian socialist discussion group to introduce the political theories of Harold J. Laski (1893-1950) of the London School of Economics.<sup>58</sup> Although the nature of participation, in particular among activists in the new post-war parties, may have found inspiration in both early Republican and dynastic political habit and proclivities,<sup>59</sup> here I will concentrate my discussion on a group of non-aligned writers and political thinkers.

In the mid 1940s, some supporters of a liberal agenda in China took heart from the electoral victory of the Labour Party in Britain and adopted a strategy to create a 'third force' that would reconcile the contending politics of the Communists and Nationalists. Disparate groups, and even parties, that proposed alternatives to the major political groupings had existed for some time and had actively advocated forms of parliamentary democracy. Now, on the eve of what would be a tumultuous civil war, public activists spoke of their search for a common ground that avoided the respective failings and dangers of colonial capitalism and totalitarian socialism as being an attempt to forge a middle path or a 'third way' *zhongjian luxian* or *disantiao daolu* in Chinese politics, a way

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<sup>57</sup> See Xu Jilin, 'Yimu beizhuangde canzheng shijian', in his *Xunqiu yiyi: Xiandaihua bianqian yu wenhua pipan* (Shanghai: Sanlian shudian, 1997), p.41.

<sup>58</sup> See Jiang Yihua, 'Lun Hu Shi yu renquan wentide taolun', in Liu Qingfeng, ed., *Hu Shi yu xiandai Zhongguo wenhua zhuanxing* (Xianggang: Zhongwen daxue chubanshe, 1994), pp.75-77, quoted in Xu Jilin, 'Shehui minzhuzhuyide lishi yichan' in his *Xunqiu yiyi*, p.15; and Roger B. Jeans ed., *Roads Not Taken: The Struggle of Opposition Parties in Twentieth-Century China* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), pp.37-53, *inter alia*.

<sup>59</sup> See Lloyd E. Eastman, 'China's Democratic Parties and the Temptations of Political Power, 1946-1947', in Jeans, *Roads Not Taken*, pp.195-198.

that would presumably occupy the ground between the ideological opposites represented by the two main political organizations.

This third way would ostensibly embrace a range of political positions although, as one 1946 definition put it,

People adhering to the middle path should support liberalism, although certain individuals may well tend towards socialism. They oppose all forms of ideological control and ideological unity; they have no belief in fixed dogmas. Their actions should be pacifist and reformist, they are opposed to violent revolutionary acts. They therefore choose democratic means to resolve questions; they oppose arbitrariness and dictatorship.<sup>60</sup>

Writing in *Objectivity* (the predecessor of *The Observer*) in the same year Chu Anping said,

We should employ all means at our disposal to encourage China's middle class to take a stand and become the core political cadre of the nation so that we can realize the aim of creating a democratic country. We should encourage in particular free thinkers in the universities, noted professors and authors, to speak out in public. This will contribute towards the creation of a healthy environment of public opinion making that is essential to the workings of any democratic nation.<sup>61</sup>

The efforts of the intellectual activists resulted in failure, and they were eventually identified by the Communists as part of the problem that a revolution would resolve. As Mao Zedong declared in 'Carry the Revolution Through to the End' in December 1948 as the Civil War reached its climax,

If the revolution is to be carried through to the end, we must use the revolutionary method to wipe out all the forces of reaction resolutely, thoroughly, wholly and completely; we must unswervingly persist in overthrowing imperialism, feudalism and bureaucrat-capitalism... . If the revolution is abandoned half-way, it will mean going against the will of the

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<sup>60</sup> Shi Fuliang, 'He wei zhongjianpai?', *Wenhui bao*, 14 July 1946.

people, bowing to the will of the foreign aggressors and Chinese reactionaries and giving the Kuomintang a chance to heal its wounds, so that one day it may pounce suddenly to strangle the revolution and again plunge the whole country into darkness. Which of these two roads to choose?... What is needed here is unanimity and co-operation, not the setting up of any 'opposition faction' or the pursuit of any 'middle road'.<sup>62</sup>

Although Dai Qing first reintroduced the writings of Chu Anping and the proponents of the third way to a popular readership in early 1989 (a project that had a direct impact on her subsequent role in the protest movement, and her post-4 June fate), it was not until some ten years later in the late 1990s that more systematically organized information about the alternative paths to social and political development became readily available. At that point some writers reviewed the programs of vanquished political forces like that of the 1940s 'third party', the Democratic Alliance (*Minzhu tongmeng*), and its social democratic program.<sup>63</sup> For them, as we have seen in the previous chapter, the third way was not an arcane topic of historical interest or academic debate; and the middle path was not simply a choice between the socialism of the Communist Party and the comprador capitalism of the Nationalists. But the rise of this strand of liberal thought came after years of state-orchestrated economic growth that had seen a marriage between the party conglomerates and international capital. The resulting blurring of ideological differences and approaches to socio-political issues by both the party-state and the neo-liberals (whether market democrats or new third way thinkers) left the unfinished business of liberal debate of the 1940s and 50s open to attack by groups of critics both within the old party bureaucracy and among a range of thinkers characterized from the mid 1990s as belonging to the 'new left'.<sup>64</sup> The conflict between newly-aggregated poles of left and right signalled to some thinkers like Xu Jilin that it was the endemic strife of the 1920s rather than of the 1940s that was being re-enacted. As he wrote in his summation of the intellectual landscape in late 1998,

A unified intellectual sphere in which people can engage in profitable dialogue no longer exists. The consensus of the New Enlightenment has collapsed, very

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<sup>61</sup> Chu Anping, 'Zhongchanjieji ji ziyoufenzi', *Keguan*, no.12 (1946), p.1, quoted in Xie Yong, *Shiqude niandai*, p.253.

<sup>62</sup> Mao Tse-tung, 'Carry the Revolution Through to the End', *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1969), vol.IV, p.302.

<sup>63</sup> 'Zhongguo minzhu tongmeng gangling', October 1945. See also Xu Jilin, 'Yimu beizhuangde canzheng shijian', pp.43-45.

much in the way that it did during the original May Fourth movement. Does this mean we are experiencing some inescapable historical destiny?<sup>65</sup>

Liberal thinkers in China in the late 1940s were alert to the fact that the rise of the Communist Party would not provide a solution to the dilemmas of capital and authoritarianism that existed under Nationalist rule, let alone lead to an equitable and open society. However, many of them were swayed by the party's avowed commitment to democratization and social equity.<sup>66</sup> In the 1990s, it was thinkers who searched for ideological resources beyond the revived corpus of Chinese liberal writings who declared that the new third way and the market-socialism of the reformist bureaucracy of the Communist Party shared a common lineage and ideological identity that failed to express, let alone engage with, strategies aimed at addressing the issues facing China's diverse population. According to this view (one that echoed Mao Zedong's line of half a century earlier), free-market capitalism and parliamentary democracy were a discredited duo, fealty to which hampered Chinese intellectuals in dealing with the socio-political realities of China fifty years after the revolution.

Meanwhile, during the 1990s, in England, Europe, the U.S., Latin America and Australia centre-left advocates were actively promoting their own Third Way, one that supposedly propounded 'social justice and individualism in the context of the global-market society.'<sup>67</sup> Anthony Giddens, a leading advocate of this formulation was, like Laski in the 1930s and 40s, a thinker based at the London School of Economics. Like Laski, Giddens was also an adviser to a Labour government, but one that was led to power by Tony Blair in 1997. The new Third Way, however, eschewed its associations with the social democracy of the 1950s. Al From, head of the US Democratic Leadership Council and an energetic salesperson for the Third Way of the 1990s, described it as 'the worldwide brand name for progressive politics for the Information Age. In America, the local brand is New Democrat; in Britain, it is New Labour.' But, as one sceptical observer

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<sup>64</sup> This uneasy affiliation is nowhere more clearly demonstrated than in the main 'leftist' website, 'Culture China'. See <[www.go.163.com/~culturechina/](http://www.go.163.com/~culturechina/)>.

<sup>65</sup> Xu Jilin, 'Qimengde mingyun--ershi nian laide Zhongguo sixiangjie', originally appeared in *Ershiyi shiji*, 1998:12, and was collected in Xu, *Ling yizhong qimeng*, op.cit., pp.267-268. A full translation of this paper appeared under the title 'The Fate of an Enlightenment--twenty years in the Chinese intellectual sphere (1978-1998)' in *East Asian History*, no.20 (December 2000), pp.details.[to be added in proof stage.]

<sup>66</sup> The reasons for the attractiveness of the Communists' public program can be appreciated if one reviews, for instance, the party press in the mid to late 1940s. An anthology of editorials and lead articles that featured in the CCP-controlled *Xinhua ribao* (New China Daily) and *Jiefang ribao* (Liberation Daily) was published (with pointed reference to the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic) in 1999. See Xiao Shu, *Lishide xiansheng--bange shijiqiande zhuangyan chengnuo* (Shantou: Shantou daxue, 1999).

of the expanding franchise of Third Way 'branding' in Western politics (it was, after all, employed by such disparate leaders as Chrétian of Canada, Menem of Argentina and Schröder of Germany) put it, 'for those on the mainstream left looking for a sustainable political path to the future, the central question is whether the third way represents a new *dimension* for social democratic politics in the post-cold war era or merely a deftly crafted slogan designed to make the capitulation to a conservative agenda intellectually and morally respectable.'<sup>68</sup>

While Third Way strategies in England, the U.S. and elsewhere were often lampooned in the late 1990s for merely providing 'an articulation of the agenda of the multinational corporate community',<sup>69</sup> in China liberals argued that a commitment to basic democratic principles--and the pursuit of freedom of expression, association, and so on--was a central issue in the political transformation that would enable the country to continue along the trajectory of modernization both enjoined on it by the party and promoted by various elites. The comments on this question by Qin Hui, a significant 'third way' liberal based in Beijing was that, while he and his fellows borrowed some of their sources and rhetoric from the West, their motivations were really closer to the proponents of the Chinese 'third way' of the 1940s. That is, whereas the Blairite Third Way was an ideological gesture that expressed the defeat of labourism by neo-liberalism, Qin's argued that the debilitating conflicts between liberals and leftists in China were left both sides prey to strategies of divide and rule, making it all the more difficult for intellectuals and activists alike to advance certain minimal demands for political freedom and economic justice. In other words, as we have seen in Xu Jilin's earlier remarks, the rearticulated Chinese 'third way' was an attempt to overcome the polarization, rather than collapse, of political agendas.<sup>70</sup>

For their part critics on the left gave voice to concerns that, fifty years previously, had been central to the public appeal of the Chinese Communist Party: that the international capitalist paradigm of development, while good for the latter-day powers like the U.S., Japan and the EU, undermined the independence of the local economy, militated against labor rights in China, and were leading to the complete domination of fiscal policy by

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<sup>67</sup> Anthony Giddens, Director of the London School of Economics, quoted in David O'Reilly, 'Charting the Third Way', *The Canberra Times*, 8 June 1998.

<sup>68</sup> For this and the previous quotation, see Faux, 'Lost on the Third Way', pp.67-68. Writing this in Canberra I'm reminded of the fact that it was during the heyday of Paul Keating's Prime Ministership that Tony Blair, then still in opposition, visited Australia in search of the 'Third Way' as it was being practised in the Antipodes.

<sup>69</sup> Jeff Faux, 'Lost on the Third Way', *Dissent* (Spring 1999), p.72.



foreign influence. Moreover, some thinkers on the new left a series of trenchant interrogations raised in the intellectual arena that attempted to question the modernizing project not only of the liberal intelligentsia and technocracy, but of the Communist Party itself.<sup>71</sup>

Just as liberalism--whether in the form of economic neo-liberalism, or more vaguely defined liberalist agendas--reached a post-1949 apogee in mainland China, Giddens travelled to Beijing in October 1998 and introduced his view of the Third Way to mainland scholars of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.<sup>72</sup> His appearance in Beijing coincided with the publication of a number of his books in Chinese translation and a high tide of neo-liberal advocacy on a scale unseen since the late 1940s. As we have seen, Xu Jilin went so far as to echo speculations that the new century might witness the 'advent of a Giddens' era'. 'Perhaps', he remarked, 'this is a positive portent for the future.'

For other thinkers, the advent of a new era had been marked a decade earlier by the Beijing massacre of 4 June 1989. Interpretations of the protest movement essayed in the late 1990s would claim that the suppression of that social unrest marked the true dawn of a capitalist revolution. Although this explication would eventually be proffered as an original view of the cultural logic of early capitalism in late-socialist China, such interpretations were hardly new, since the Taiwan leftist novelist Chen Ying-chen had declared more than ten years earlier in the wake of 4 June that this 'unfortunate incident' marked the perilous capitalist drift of the country.

The contradictions arising from the revisionist and semicapitalist Deng-Hu-Zhao line helped foster the Beijing student movement. In ideological terms the movement not only failed to criticize revisionism and semicapitalism, it actually demanded further moves in that direction! The students opposed corruption and bureaucratism and demanded a greater role for the masses in production, distribution and political life. But they didn't criticize the roots of corruption and the bureaucratic system--the social contradictions caused by the

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<sup>70</sup> My thanks to Chris Buckley for his comments on Qin Hui in this context.

<sup>71</sup> Examples of this can be found on the website 'China and the World' (*Zhongguo yu shijie*) at <<http://www.chinabulletin.com/>> and in print publications such as *Zhenlide zhuiqiu* (Pursuit of Truth) and *Dangdai sichao* (Contemporary Currents of Thought), both produced in Beijing.

<sup>72</sup> See Ge Tingting and Zhu Hong's record of Giddens' talk at CASS, 'Andongni-Jidengsi chanshu Disantiao daolu: yizhong xinde shehui zhengzhi linian', *Zhongguo gaige bao*, 20 October 1998. My thanks to Chris Buckley for bringing this material to my attention.

decentralization of power, the open door, and reform--they actually called for these to be further enhanced. The Beijing students and liberal intellectuals were endorsing the very source of the official racketeering and bureaucratism they found so intolerable! This is in fact the greatest internal contradiction and tragedy of this unfortunate Tiananmen Incident.<sup>73</sup>

While newly left-leaning writers in 2000 belatedly echoed Chen's analysis in their reassessments of the events of 1989--and would identify in the revival of liberal agendas of the 1940s another stage in the historical invention of the Chinese bourgeoisie--others who were positioned at a different point on the political (and temporal) spectrum like Li Shenzhi, who was mentioned at the beginning of this essay, saw 4 June as marking an end rather than a beginning. In an anguished reminiscence controversially posted on the internet on the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic, Li recalled the excitement he felt when he had participated in the ceremony at Tiananmen on 1 October 1949. It was as though for China 'time had now begun' (*shijian kaishile*). Writing to party leaders half a century later to protest against the profligate extravagance of the upcoming commemoration, Li said that when, ten years earlier, the authorities ordered the tanks into Beijing, they 'not only killed who knows how many innocents, but simultaneously crushed the sprouts of awakening among the Chinese people'. For him the violence of 4 June brought to a peremptory end the political transformation of the country. In the intervening decade the government had sought economic growth and political stasis at any cost. He warned that a continued refusal on the part of the power holders to consider democratization--a democratization originally promised in 1949--would inevitably lead to China falling into chaos once more.<sup>74</sup> In early 2000, as yet another political campaign launched to shore up the prestige of the Communist Party was launched, Li Shenzhi's comments generated a heated internal debate about the increased dangers of democratic liberalism, and as part of the ensuing 'soft purge', Liu Junning's journal *Res Publica* was closed down and writers like Qin Hui and Qian Liqun, both mentioned earlier, were castigated.

### Time's Arrows

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<sup>73</sup> See Chen, 'Dengdai zongjiede xiezi' (A prologue awaiting a conclusion), *Renjian*, 1989:7, pp.72-73, translated in Barmé and Linda Jaivin, *New Ghosts, Old Dreams: Chinese Rebel Voices* (New York: Times Books, 1992), p.109.

<sup>74</sup> Li Shenzhi, 'Zhongguo wenhua fengyu canghuang wushi nian' (The vicissitudes of fifty years of Chinese culture), posted on the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the PRC. See the website of *Sixiangde jingjie* at <[www.sixiang.com/000214/1.htm](http://www.sixiang.com/000214/1.htm)>.

Disdain for politics and politicians is only one thing that thwarted the liberal agenda in the late 1940s; for many of the 'democratic' political forces of the 1940s were also undone by factional strife and competition for patronage from the Nationalists and the Communists. Half a century later, as intellectuals at many points on the political spectrum were engaging in the most rancorous debate within non-party culture since 1949, the question of political activism and organization was assiduously avoided. Quirky individuals who were presumed to have a unique purchase on the truth, historical knowledge, or social or theoretical insight were well and good, but as in that earlier age when a restive population, economic uncertainty, political fragility and international pressure brought climactic change to China, would the intellectual and cultural elite once more find itself lost on the third way?

Both sides involved in the public intellectual contestations from 1998 spoke of democratization, but it was a concept grounded in opposite historical trajectories. If trajectory is the essence of intellectual-ideological disputation, was there a common ground between them? Where they did share a commonality there was also a fetishization of time itself, a calibration of epochal moments and turning points, the marking of watershed years, the commemoration, valorization and reinterpretation of significant twists and turns. It was as though imagination could be held captive by time's arrows. If there was at work a pilgrimage to late capital in Chinese cultural discourse, the *via sacra* was measured out in moments of gravity, imagined and thus 'lived' as powerful separations of episodic time.

The gate of darkness itself had gained powerful currency among intellectuals who presumed that it was they who were empowered both to identify where the gate was and who was to hold it open. While they concentrated their gaze on the past they would perchance offer a better future. Whereas in the late 1980s Liu Xiaobo expressed doubts about his assumed intellectual mission, few others gave voice to such concerns in the late 1990s onwards. Furthermore, in the shadows surrounding the gate of darkness lurked another figure, an intellectual paragon and activist who was rarely acknowledged in polite discourse, but whose spectral presence remained undeniable--Mao Zedong.

It is easy to labor the parallels between the late 1940s, the late 1980s and the late 1990s, but it is instructive to follow the evocations of these moments by participants in contemporary intellectual debate and critical inquiry as part of their strategies to formulate positions and possibilities for themselves. As the country was about to begin

its conversion to a Marxist-Leninist planned economy directed by a communist government in Beijing, liberal thinkers and activists had warned of the dangers of totalitarianism, although later for the most part they were swept up in a wave of nationalist fervor and support for the communist-led revolution. Half a century later, a disparate group of liberal thinkers, be they identified as neo-liberal or neo-leftist (or left-wing), were actively debating the consequences of the further transformation of the state-run system into a market-oriented economy that was enmeshed in global networks. The trajectories may appear to be those of two arrows of socio-political time headed in different directions. One was bound for an unfulfilled past that had been construed as an inevitable future, while the other sped towards a future as promised, though thwarted, in the past.

Although in naming this article I took a lead from Martin Amis's novel *Time's Arrow*, in the end the intersecting 'plot lines' and temporal shifts that have been discussed here in terms of the trajectories of history, ideologies in conflict, paths taken, and roads rejected, bring to mind a 1941 short story by Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Garden of Forking Paths'. The labyrinthine and complex garden around which that tale and its Chinese and Western characters--and the surreal denouement--revolve contains a secret, 'an enormous riddle, or parable, whose theme is time.' The garden in Borges' story was a universe of times as conceived by a fictional Chinese philosopher who rejected notions of uniform or absolute time, creating instead a multivalent realm in which all ends lead to multiple beginnings. Indeed,

...he believed in an infinite series of times, in a growing, dizzying net of divergent, convergent and parallel times. This network of times which approached one another, forked, broke off, or were unaware of one another for centuries, embraces *all* possibilities of time. We do not exist in the majority of these times; in some you exist and not I; in others I, and not you; in others, both of us. In the present one, which a favorable fate has granted me, you have arrived at my house; in another, while crossing the garden, you found me dead; in still another, I utter these same words, but I am a mistake, a ghost.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Borges, 'The Garden of Forking Paths', in *Jorge Luis Borges, Collected Fictions* (Penguin Books, 1998), p.127.