

# LEGACIES OF RADICALISM: CHINA'S CULTURAL REVOLUTION AND THE DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT OF 1989

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**ABSTRACT** Students in 1989 were at pains to distinguish their actions from those taken by students in the Cultural Revolution. Yet there were important similarities. In the present paper, we identify influence on the Democracy Movement from the Cultural Revolution through (1) the expansion and/or widespread familiarization of repertoires of collective action available to Chinese activists; (2) precedents for collective action that may have lowered the barriers to action for some while raising them for others; (3) the participation of people at different stages of their lives in both movements; (4) the transformation of the significance of the ideas of democracy and political authority wrought by the Cultural Revolution for many Chinese; (5) the impact of the Cultural Revolution on Chinese intellectuals; (6) the material consequences of the Cultural Revolution which contributed to China's position in the post-Mao era and the specific issues reform and protest sought to confront; (7) the discourse of corruption which provided the 1989 movement with its strongest links between students and ordinary citizens, and which was accentuated in the Cultural Revolution; (8) the affirmation of the value of ordinary life by which students in the 1980s, encouraged by the 'literature of the wounded', rebelled against the Puritanism and denigration of 'unauthorized' personal relationships that had been characteristic of the Cultural Revolution; (9) the role of the Cultural Revolution as a cautionary tale, shaping the movement itself, inhibiting some older intellectuals from participating, and determining much of how the government viewed and responded to the Democracy Movement; and (10) the embeddedness in different ways of both Cultural Revolution and 1989 protests in an international context.

**KEYWORDS** China • Cultural Revolution • protest • Tiananmen

*Thesis Eleven*, Number 57, May 1999: 33–52

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[0725-5136(199905)57:33–52;008026]

The mass demonstrations of tens of thousands to more than one million people incited by the hunger strikers have exceeded even the 'revolutionary linkups' of the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution, resulting in the reappearance of anarchy . . . Particularly insidious and evil have been the rumor-mongering . . . and the anti-democratic, illegal incidents that have occurred. – Li Ximing, Beijing Party Secretary, secret speech to officials, 19 May 1989. (Barmé and Jaivin, 1992: 66)

We hope you [government leaders] will act out of concern for the interests of the whole country, and recognize this pure patriotic student movement as the successor to the May Fourth Movement of seventy years ago. This movement should not be so much as mentioned in the same breath with the movement of the Red Guards . . . who were manipulated and deceived by others. – A handbill by graduate students at Beijing Normal University, 30 April 1989 (Han, 1990: 113–14)

The 1989 democracy protests remain the focal symbol for democratic aspirations in China. The Great Proletarian Revolution of the 1960s remains the great cautionary tale about the evils of Maoism. Yet, the two movements may be more closely linked than is often thought, albeit in complex and sometimes paradoxical ways. A look at the links not only helps put 1989 in context, but reveals some enduring issues bearing on the struggle for democracy in China.

As one might expect of a massive mobilization that stretched over most of a decade, by turns exhilarating and traumatic, the Cultural Revolution left a heavy mark on subsequent Chinese social movements. But we should not assume that historical connection means simply continuity or positive influence. For most participants in the 1989 events, the Cultural Revolution was as much a model to be avoided as one to be followed. Indeed, as Simon Leys has noted, it may have influenced the Deng regime's interpretation of the 1989 protests more profoundly than it influenced the movement itself (Leys, 1989).

At the height of the student occupation of Tiananmen Square, there seemed good reason for all who sided with the movement to simply dismiss as unfounded obfuscation all attempts to draw connections between the actions and motivations of the Red Guards and those of the protestors of 1989. After all, the notion that the two groups were analogous was spread mainly by Chinese Community Party (CCP) officials and writers for government-run newspapers. At the same time, as handbills by student groups made clear, participants in the protests insisted that all Red Guard comparisons were misleading.

Students in 1989 were at pains to distinguish their actions from those of the Red Guards because the Cultural Revolution had been represented in post-Maoist China as a virtual paradigm case of chaos and political evil. The story of the Cultural Revolution was in circulation only from the perspective of the wounded and the 'rectifiers' of its wrongs, such as Deng Xiaoping. For

the latter, indeed, the Cultural Revolution was not only a model of evil, but a sort of lightning rod absorbing criticisms of the Maoist era that otherwise might have fallen on actions and campaigns in which they were leaders, or on the whole communist party.<sup>1</sup>

In order to explore connections between the Cultural Revolution and the events of 1989, it is important to move beyond simplistic black-and-white treatments of each. A first requirement is to resist reducing the Cultural Revolution to a stylized collective 'memory' of a 10-year period that began with anarchy on the streets and ended with the machinations of a power-crazed group known as the Gang of Four. The Cultural Revolution was not a simple manifestation of evil or chaos, nor merely an object lesson in communist political manipulation. Neither were the 1989 events simply the spontaneous product of naïve but idealistic youth.

Perhaps the most important difference between the Cultural Revolution and the 1989 events is simply disparity in scale. The Cultural Revolution involved many more people, lasted much longer, and had more profound effects on the lives of China's citizens. The 1989 student protest movement lasted only six weeks. It was the most important in a series of protests during the post-Mao era, but the series never coalesced into the kind of continuous nationwide mobilization that characterized the Cultural Revolution era.

Despite the many differences between the 1960s and 1989, there were similarities. A key question for historical and sociological analysis is to what extent similarities stem from causal influences exerted on the later movement by the earlier, and to what extent they stem from similar causes operating on both. For example, both movements were shaped in important ways by the much broader modern Chinese project of affirming national identity and strengthening the nation. This is not something the Cultural Revolution brought to the 1989 student movement, but rather a basic problematic of the last hundred years of China's history.

Too briefly, we will delineate 10 different kinds of historical connection. We cannot explore all the dimensions of each. Rather, we must limit ourselves to raising issues and suggesting how investigation of connections needs to – and can – move beyond the sort of 'black and white', 'yes or no' approaches that have characterized most commentary to date. This is important because both movements – and the responses of ordinary people as well as officials to both movements – continue to shape struggles for democracy in China today.

## **BIOGRAPHICAL LINKS**

The young students of 1989 were not the Red Guards of 1966, but some of their teachers and close advisors were. So were a number of those with links to reform-oriented branches of the Communist Party who tried

to negotiate a settlement to the conflict. The participation of the same people at different stages of their lives thus forms a key connection between the Cultural Revolution and the 1989 events.

This biographical connection was embodied primarily by members of China's 'in-between' or 'lost' generation. This was a generation that participated in the Cultural Revolution as young Red Guard activists, experienced profound disillusionment with both the failure of the Cultural Revolution and the later revelations that they had been manipulated from above, and yet was shaped powerfully by those early experiences. For many members, the simple and limited economic reformism offered by Deng Xiaoping could never speak to the depths of their concerns. Many had a hard time fitting into conventional institutions, not only because of their own tastes, but because of suspicions harbored towards their generation. Their educations had been lacking, many charged, because they spent too much time in 'struggle', and because of the political ideology governing schooling in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Deng had criticized the generation en masse, holding them both accountable for and shaped by the Cultural Revolution. To say anything positive about experiences in the Cultural Revolution, moreover, ran so contrary to prevailing currents in the late 1980s as to appear almost as an admission of irrationality.

Many of the intellectuals whose critical analyses of China's predicament influenced students in the 1980s came from this generation. They were in a sense a living link to the Cultural Revolution. Many were Red Guard activists; some had been active in the Democracy Wall protests. In the 1980s they pushed the government to go beyond economic reforms and embrace both cultural and political change. Some served as advisors to the student protests of 1985–8. Their sense of the importance of culture reflected not only their scholarship as intellectuals, but the close links between culture and politics in the Cultural Revolution. They rethought the content of that link in line with different theories and historical understandings, but they seem never to have doubted that the link was basic.

Su Xiaokang, Jin Guantao, and Liu Qingfeng (collaborators in *Heshang*, or *River Elegy*, the important 1988 TV program of cultural critique) are prominent examples. Though in many ways *River Elegy* challenged China's Maoist inheritance, presenting Mao as yet another dynastic leader incapable of overcoming China's inwardness and vulnerability, the film also brought Mao back into the spotlight. The Deng regime had largely attempted to relegate Mao to polite official discourse, removing him (and Maoist ideas of rebellion and radical democracy) from the sphere of popular activism. As Geremie Barmé has pointed out, 1988 was:

the year in which Mao Zedong initially showed signs of making a popular comeback. *River Elegy* featured documentary footage of Red Guard adulation for Mao and study sessions from the Cultural Revolution, the first of their kind to be seen on Chinese television for years. Such scenes enthralled younger viewers

who had grown up after the Red Guard Movement in an age when the religious ecstasy of mass political action was virtually unknown. (Barmé, 1996: 16)

Protestors in 1989 both drew on Maoist images and sometimes were able to play with them, escaping from a simple determination by earlier examples. When workers and other residents of Beijing (generally not students) decided to carry portraits of Mao into Tiananmen Square in mid-May at the time of the hunger strike, for example, this was partly sincere protest and partly playful manipulation.

Intellectuals of the 'in-between generation' were influenced by the ideas of radical democracy current during the Cultural Revolution, and helped to pass these on in revised form to younger students. But, crucially, they thought of democracy in large part as always ideally in service to national strengthening. As Li Zehou, another important linking influence, argued in his widely read *Essays on Modern Chinese Intellectual History*, the central theme that dominated all revolutionary movements in 20th-century China was national independence (Li, 1980: 367). The Cultural Revolution was no exception to this. The youth of the 1960s carried this same theme forward as social commentators in the late 1970s and 1980s, including in underground publications. These intellectuals presumed to be the conscience and spokespersons of the nation – drawing not only on old intellectual traditions but on their experience as young activists. They were disillusioned with what they learned of the government's manipulation of the Cultural Revolution, but many never gave up the will to link cultural critique to political engagement. Mao betrayed the youthful idealists of the Cultural Revolution, scarring them deeply, but some Maoist ideals remained formative.

Even the enormously widely read and influential 'misty poets', often seen as rejecting the close involvement of art in politics that Maoist communism promoted, were also activists. As Barnstone has remarked:

Bei Dao's 'Answer', like Hemingway's, is not only one of rejection, but is also a search for something new to believe in, in a world drained of meaning. It is a vital engagement with the possibility of cultural, as opposed to economic, renewal. (Barnstone, 1993: 14)

Much the same could be said for Jiang He, Shu Ting, and others linked to the journal *Jiantian*. The popular singer Cui Jian has been, in a sense, a successor to the misty poets, working in a different but related medium. Songs like 'A Piece of Red Cloth' share much with Bei Dao's poetry in expressing the sense of disillusionment of those who had participated in the Cultural Revolution as children or youth. Their work describes a movement from initial idealism and blind loyalty through gradual doubt and disillusionment to a growing sense of alienation and betrayal. But it is important to see that their anger is kept alive in large part by a (largely hidden) continuity in their idealism, however frustrated. The mixture is one of the reasons that both Bei Dao and Cui Jian were such influences on the students

who made the 1989 protests happen (Calhoun, 1995: ch. 6; Jones, 1992). Paying attention to the links of the 'in-between' generation to both the Cultural Revolution and the 1989 events helps us to recall that the youth of the Cultural Revolution were not simply blind followers. Many were actively engaged in questioning received orthodoxy, in trying to think hard as amateur intellectuals (Zhu, 1995). That the pleasures and insights of such thinking were tied to the tribulations and ideological manipulations of the Cultural Revolution is a continuing frustration.

The 'in-between' generation not only influenced the ideas – and the mixture of idealism and alienation – current in 1989. It also had a more direct political and organizational influence through figures like Ren Wanding and especially Chen Ziming and Wang Juntao (Munro and Black, 1993). As proprietors of a prosperous correspondence college and the Beijing Social and Economic Sciences Research Institute, they were in a position to provide student activists with funds, links to reform-minded Party members, and organizational advice.

As the above examples suggest, it is important to think not just in terms of the *legacy* of the Cultural Revolution, but in terms of multiple *legacies*. Not all Red Guard veterans gave the same advice; neither, of course, did they experience the Cultural Revolution in the same way, partly because it was a heterogeneous movement, varying with location, faction, and period. With varying degrees of self-consciousness, many of the Red Guard veterans saw their experience of the Cultural Revolution as something important to pass on to younger activists.

### **DEMONSTRATION OF RISKS AND POSSIBILITIES**

One of the biggest predictors of engagement in collective action, the sociological literature suggests, is prior participation in collective action (McAdam and Marx, 1994). Protest appears to most people as inherently risky. Strong, authoritarian political regimes enhance such a view. But actual experience (as well as visible proof of the experience of others) can suggest that it is possible to challenge power. The tremendous mass mobilization of the Cultural Revolution, and the many smaller, more local mobilizations and counter-mobilizations within it, gave a powerful demonstration of the potential for collective action – even if it was not successful. One overall effect of such precedents was to lower the barriers to collective action.

Though the Democracy Wall movement was much closer in spirit to the events of 1989, the Cultural Revolution remained the single most dramatic precedent for collective action, including protest, on a large scale. But its impact was not unambiguous. It helped to make some people activists, but it inhibited others. The Cultural Revolution showed that large-scale action could be mounted, but also that there were considerable risks. These included both personal consequences and overall chaos. Direct experience

made many older people extremely wary. Moreover, the risks of collective action in China have always been different for workers than for students. In 1989, for example, knowledge of how long Wei Jingsheng had spent in jail may have been more sobering for workers than for students. In addition, of course, knowledge of the Cultural Revolution may have added to the scale of the protests in another, more paradoxical way. During the Cultural Revolution, the apparently risk-averse strategy of failing to get involved was often punished. The course of events offered, among other things, a demonstration that relative safety lay often in joining with dominant currents of action, not in opting out.

The impact of the Cultural Revolution on 1989 was not entirely direct. It was mediated by a series of other protests. The Tiananmen Incident of 1976 was the first important link in the chain of connections (Heilman, 1994a,b; Niming, 1990; Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, 1995). The Democracy Wall movement of the late 1970s was perhaps the single most important link. Its central protagonists were all veterans of the Cultural Revolution, and many were former Red Guards. This movement lasted long enough to produce much more ideological development than did that of 1989. Political repression meant that few of the 1989 student protesters had actually read the texts written by Wei Jingsheng and others, but the general idea of a pro-democracy protest – and of government repression of such protest – was familiar partly because of this movement. It led fairly directly to the attempts at school election reform in some provinces in 1980. Precedents for protest were also established by anti-Japanese demonstrations in 1985, and the 1986–7 winter demonstrations in several cities – which were largely student affairs. These had a special connection to 1989 because it was the blame for failing to control these protests that led to Hu Yaobang's demotion. In 1988 there were protests at Beijing University over various issues, some already anticipating the concerns of 1989. Nonetheless, as significant as all these 'dress rehearsals' for protest were, the Cultural Revolution remains of unique importance. One key reason is because the scope of participation – and ideological concern – was so much broader in the Cultural Revolution. The 1985–8 protests, for example, were all focused on fairly immediate student interests, and for the most part were localized to campuses. The Democracy Wall movement, however, was a mediating link between a Cultural Revolution generation disillusioned about China's leadership, but not about democracy or activism, and the 1989 events in which former Red Guards and Democracy Wall activists would be 'elder brothers', but not protagonists.

## **REPERTOIRES OF COLLECTIVE ACTION**

Neither in 1989 nor during the Cultural Revolution did student activists pull tactics and symbols out of thin air. They drew on a repertoire that had been developed over generations, passed on in history classes and through

films. This repertoire is linked to traditions of remonstrance stretching back for centuries; Chinese scholars have been joining together to criticize corrupt officials and call for national salvation for more than a millennium. The exam-takers' rebellion of the late Qing dynasty drew on and furthered these precedents. The student-led mass movements of the Republican era (1912–49) – during which educated youths offered streetside lectures, organized mass rallies at central gathering places, descended on the capital by trainloads to demand redress for their grievances, put their lives on the line in various ways, and reached out for and received support from members of other social classes – were particularly influential (Strand, 1993; Wasserstrom, 1991; Wasserstrom and Perry, 1994).

Both the Cultural Revolution and the 1989 events thus were situated in a stream of historical connections stretching back through many earlier movements (and continuing in intermediate protests like those of 5 April 1976). In both cases, participants were often unaware of the precise historical genesis of tactics they deployed, organizational strategies for protests, symbolic gestures, etc. They often imagined their actions to be more novel than they were, and understood them through a rhetoric of 'spontaneity' (Calhoun, 1995: ch. 4). The Cultural Revolution was a kind of watershed in this stream of historical connections. There were so many public performances that the repertoire was plumbed deeply by Red Guards and others seeking to make their demonstrations stand out. In addition, images from the Cultural Revolution were widely reproduced and transmitted throughout China. Among the important effects of the Cultural Revolution, indeed, was communication of this and a host of other kinds of information on a national scale.

The Cultural Revolution thus helped to pave the way for the 1989 events by familiarizing a very wide cross-section of Chinese people – especially educated youth – with a range of existing modes of and techniques for collective action. In addition, it helped to make non-participants into audiences better able to interpret the form and content of collective actions.

This does not mean that the entire repertoire predates the Cultural Revolution.<sup>2</sup> The Cultural Revolution did produce innovations that influenced activists in 1989, as well as spreading and transmitting older forms. Perhaps not least in this regard was a style of direct address and interrogation of elites, as distinct from more traditional forms of petitioning and remonstrance. Both figured in 1989, and both potentially encourage democracy and rule of law.

### **TRANSFORMATION OF THE DISCOURSE OF POLITICAL AUTHORITY**

The very slogan of the Cultural Revolution, 'to rebel is justified', signifies a break with traditional claims of authority (Huang, 1996). That this slogan was



promulgated from on high by Mao could not help but give it special force. It was traditional to assert that individual scholars might remonstrate with rulers as a matter of individual conscience. The Cultural Revolution introduced the notion that rebellion was a right vested in the Chinese people. This introduced a bottom-up rather than top-down account of legitimacy, and broke with the identification of the Chinese people as the subjects of Chinese rulers or the state in favor of a more autonomous conception of the people. It helped transform Chinese nationalism by introducing a stronger notion of the people as citizens. Students claimed a special status as the voice of this national conscience. It authorized them, they suggested, even to challenge the Party in the name of the nation.

In 1989, student activists placed a positive value on individualism that ran contrary to the ideals of the Cultural Revolution, but they shared the notion that they were spokespeople for the national conscience, and that this identification with the people gave them a basic right to rebel. Though they made use of the older rhetoric of remonstrance, they also claimed (at least partly in continuity with some of the student protestors of the Republican era) a right to challenge not only the policies of leaders but the legitimacy of leaders themselves.

Mao's role in the Cultural Revolution was problematic and clearly motivated by concerns for his own power as well as for the fate of his revolution. Nonetheless, Mao's arguments about the tension between bureaucratization and democratization were neither entirely cynical nor without purchase. As early as 1956, Mao had pointed out that 'We are in favor of great democracy', and 'great democracy can be directed against bureaucrats, too' (Mao, 1977). Throughout his works – including those excerpted and sloganized in the 'Little Red Book' – Mao reiterated that the revolution was in large part about building democracy.<sup>3</sup>

Transformation in the discourse of political authority was closely linked to a new significance for the idea of democracy. The Cultural Revolution certainly did not introduce this notion to China, or even to Chinese communism. But it did transform understandings of 'proletarian democracy'. It introduced a stress on popular participation, over and above the representation of popular interests (Nathan, 1985). Interpretations of the 1989 events have often imagined that students drew their focus on democracy primarily or even exclusively from the contemporary west. This is clearly not so. As their affection for the 'misty poets' suggests, they learned much from frustrated democrats of the Cultural Revolution.

At the same time, of course, students had other models. Some of China's dissident intellectuals thought the 1989 student leaders had learned rather too much from Mao and not advanced far enough beyond the style of oratory and leadership common in the 1960s. Liu Xiaobo, for example, has argued that the 1989 events demonstrated how effective the communist/Maoist socialization of a new generation had been. He writes that:

Chai Ling's remark that 'courage is the standard' can be understood as meaning that bravery is righteousness or, more exactly, that it is the kind of self-righteousness that causes us to believe that we can carry forth democracy without understanding the attendant responsibilities of democracy; and freedom without understanding the responsibilities of freedom. In other words, it causes us to understand democracy as the passion for giving one's life and the bravery of sacrifice; to understand it as a lot of soaring passion, a grand spectacle of large crowds, a profusion of slogans. We simply were not wont to know that democracy is the design, implementation, and operation of a rational system. . . . Perhaps only by having learned the lesson of blood can we be aware that courage is not righteousness and resistance is not democracy. (Wasserstrom and Perry, 1994: 317–18)

It is crucial to recall that however much it may have been manipulated from above, and however much it may have degenerated into factional fighting and other disasters, the Cultural Revolution is not summed up by either of these characterizations. It was also a mass movement in which many people were deeply moved by shared experiences and by a commitment to radical democracy.<sup>4</sup> This was democracy without much in the way of civil liberties, to be sure, but it was still democracy and it was lived in the experience of collective action as well as conceptualized in large character posters, slogans, and quotations from Chairman Mao.<sup>5</sup> Members of the Red Guards were not just passive followers of a charismatic leader, but agents actively involved in a variety of ideological disputes and contests for power. Even the most simplistic slogans could occasion debate over local interpretations. And, as Zhu Xueqin has recently argued, there was among many Red Guards a genuinely questioning spirit and an excitement in charting new intellectual and political territory. Disillusionment was only possible because faith had been strong, and despite a sense of betrayal, aspects of this faith survived and were passed on both directly and through works of literature.

### **INTELLECTUALS AND CULTURAL CRISIS**

In some regards, the 1989 student protests were not so much continuous with the Cultural Revolution as a response to conditions that the Cultural Revolution created or highlighted. This is especially true in two closely related areas. Intellectuals – dubbed the 'stinking ninth' category of bad elements, rusticated, humiliated, and abused during the Cultural Revolution – struggled afterwards to renew a sense of their importance in China's contemporary society, history, and future. Students, as cadet intellectuals, inherited anxieties about the place of intellectuals from their elders. At the same time, they observed both the importance given to technical specialists as agents of China's modernization and the neglect of broader cultural and political concerns which they felt intellectuals ought also to address.<sup>6</sup> Herein lay the second concern. The Cultural Revolution had accentuated modern China's sense of cultural crisis.

The notion of cultural crisis could be applied to at least the last 100 or 150 years of Chinese history, if not to the whole period since the fall of the Ming dynasty. Internal weaknesses and external threats raised questions about the adequacy of Chinese culture to make the country strong in its new global situation. Cultural innovation and importation both responded to and in some cases accentuated the sense of crisis. The self-strengthening and May 4th movements both responded to versions of this sense of crisis, as did at least dimensions of both Republican and Communist revolutions. This crisis reached a kind of crescendo with the Cultural Revolution, however, when the call was not for reform of traditional Chinese culture but an outright attack on it. 'Declaring War on the Old World' might be partly a front for settling scores in the present, as ancient officials served as rhetorical proxies for contemporary enemies, but it was clearly more than this. As the Red Guards of Beijing No. 2. Middle School wrote, 'We are critics of the old world. We want to criticize and smash all old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits' (Benton and Hunter, 1995: 109). Intellectuals were, of course, precisely those in the business of transmitting the 'olds' as well as, sometimes, innovating.

The Cultural Revolution left Chinese intellectuals as a group with a sense of anxiety, a range of grievances, and a plethora of unfulfilled aspirations. Students found it easier to overcome the material fears of their elders – and hence to make the protests of 1989 happen – than to transcend their deeper cultural insecurities. Partly because the Cultural Revolution had inhibited creativity among older intellectuals, indeed, younger ones felt the need for it all the more acutely. Students in 1989 absorbed the negative critiques of many members of the 'in-between' generation – like those embodied in the enormously widely watched and influential *River Elegy* – and believed themselves to be called on to articulate new cultural visions for China. Whether they had those visions in any depth is not the point: the lack could motivate protest as well as the presence.

The Cultural Revolution gave students, as young intellectuals, not only the strong sense that they needed to assert themselves to claim their rightly leading place, but that China needed them to do so because its cultural crisis was so acute.

## **MATERIAL CONSEQUENCES**

The Cultural Revolution of course wrought havoc on China's economy and related fields like education, science, and technology. It thus contributed to the situation in which China found itself in the post-Mao era and the specific issues that both government-sponsored reform and student protest sought to confront.

The 1989 student protestors shared with the government reformers a sense that China needed to make up for lost time, to progress in areas where the Cultural Revolution – and much of the communist era – had seen a

regress. Unlike the government, of course, they argued that political reform should accompany economic reform. But crucially, the students saw a China that looked weak and backward in comparison to the images of the west they had gained from mass media, returnees from foreign study, and other sources. This was one source of their commonality with the May 4th protestors of 70 years before. Like those who were frustrated by their government's weakness at the Versailles Peace Conference, those in 1989 saw a government that had come into power as a result of revolution, carrying the promise of making China strong, presiding over weakness and corruption.

The Deng regime focused overwhelmingly on the goal of reversing material declines and producing rapid economic growth. With this end in mind, it invested heavily in training – even if it was biased towards the more technical subjects, and even if it was led by men who were hardly intellectuals themselves. Under Deng, schools and universities grew, selection became more meritocratic, and – even though students thought of themselves as suffering – the material conditions of student life improved. Students had radios and televisions, access to books – including translations of western works – opportunities to travel, and other goods that were not available to their counterparts at the outset of the Cultural Revolution. They had these partly as byproducts not just of economic development in general, but of a crash program that government leaders undertook to make up for previous reversals, most especially during the Cultural Revolution. Without this sense of crisis, of having to make up for the Cultural Revolution, it is unlikely that China's still relatively conservative communist leaders would have tolerated as many of the byproducts of economic liberalization as they did.

Not least of all, the government was willing to treat student protestors with kid gloves in all but the most serious cases. Not just in 1989, but throughout the 1980s, it treated university students gently when they engaged in protests for which it would have punished factory workers severely. This was at least in part because it was conscious of needing the active compliance of intellectuals in its modernization program. The result, however, was to encourage among students a sense of the practicability of officially prohibited political activity.

### **REACTION TO CORRUPTION**

One of the key commonalities between the Cultural Revolution and the protests of 1989 was a central focus on corruption. Both drew upon and added new dimensions to an ongoing discourse about corruption. This has deep roots in China's past, and reflects among other things the inverse of the widespread positive value on purity. As Hsu remarks, contemporary 'dissident discourse emphasizes the fact that wholesale corruption is not going to go away without traumatic and deep changes in Chinese society – and the CCP is not capable of those changes' (Hsu, 1996: 24). The corruption narrative also has the effect of placing instrumental change – reform aimed at honesty and

efficiency – in the foreground. It allows sometimes elitist dissident students and intellectuals to continue to think of themselves as democrats while hesitating to give the vote to illiterate peasants. Corruption is a sign of backwardness, Hsu notes, and ‘Chinese society must progress into modernity, led by an educated vanguard’ (Hsu, 1996; Thornton, 1996). The theme of corruption was well worked during the Cultural Revolution, particularly as more traditional sorts of class enemies were supplanted in political demonology by bureaucrats and others benefiting from the people’s revolution and scheming to protect their own positions at the expense of democracy.

One heritage of Maoism was a belief that society ought to approach perfection, and public administration ought to be omnipotent. Such a perspective suggested that social ills not obviously due to external enemies must be due to internal failings, quite likely corruption. In 1989, thus, an unprecedented rate of inflation appeared not as a general economic malaise but as a sign of corruption. More generally, the Communist Party had taught Chinese people to despise as corrupt feudal inheritances a set of practices that its own bureaucratic and inefficient administration now made ubiquitous. Relying on personal connections or being forced to make open payments to profiteering officials to secure services officially guaranteed to everyone indicted the government all the more because the latter continued to profess an ideology of communist purity.

The very economic success of the 1980s had produced new wealth and new social inequalities. Government repression, however, had limited the extent to which there could be an open public discourse about the legitimacy of these. While Deng Xiaoping had declared that ‘to get rich is glorious’, the extreme egalitarianism of the Cultural Revolution still called into question the justice of distributive arrangements. Since the Cultural Revolution, no ideology of comparable clarity and force had been developed to account for social conditions. Instead of nurturing such a new development, the government clung to watered-down and increasingly superficial Marxist rhetoric. Continued appeals to communism meant that understandings developed during the Cultural Revolution were often not challenged. Distributive arrangements of the late 1980s seemed manifestly to be neither meritocratic (with doctors earning less than taxi drivers) nor egalitarian. Predictably, the face of corruption most seized on was official profiteering, and especially the fortunes made by Party elites and their families. When these began to engage in conspicuous consumption, driving foreign cars and playing golf, while ordinary citizens had to pay bribes to get access to housing, the discourse of official corruption was readily available.

#### **AFFIRMATION OF ORDINARY LIFE**

In one important sense, the 1989 events were a reaction to the Cultural Revolution and more generally to the communist Puritanism of which it offered the most extreme examples. Students in the late 1980s not only participated

in China's greatly improved material standards of living, they joined with others in developing much more explicit cultural values on the pleasures of ordinary life: friendship, family, material well-being (Calhoun, 1995). In an important but sometimes paradoxical way the Cultural Revolution paved the way for this.

During the 1960s, tens of thousands of students set out on a 'great linkup' to make connections with activists in other locales. Taking a cue from Mao's own early investigations into conditions in Hunan, many went into the countryside to see what life was like for China's peasant majority. The travels were exhilarating, but what students saw was often a shock. China's peasants commonly lived in abject poverty. It was not clear that the communist state – at least as run by the bureaucrats of the day – was doing much to solve the problem. The issue became more personal for many of the urban students when they were sent down – only sometimes voluntarily – to live with and learn from the peasants. They not only shared the peasants' poverty, but often suffered the peasants' contempt for urban elites. Many remained stuck in remote villages for years, and even when they left could not recover from the blow to the material conditions of their lives. Lack of education blocked their opportunities; they were stigmatized as former members of the now reviled Red Guards. Simply forming and providing for a family became a struggle for many.

Rejecting the asceticism that Mao and the revolutionaries had promoted, students (and others) in 1989 chafed at lack of privacy and were openly consumerist. They celebrated sexuality and personal friendships (as in a marriage improvised in the midst of Tiananmen Square). They demanded the right to pursue happiness, not only material well-being or public virtue. In all this, they were encouraged by the 'literature of the wounded', which probed the injuries inflicted during the Cultural Revolution. In these stories of children who had been forced to betray their parents, wives who had been pressed to condemn husbands, and lovers who had been separated by rustication, a new value on personal relationships and ordinary happiness was nurtured – alongside a critique of the kind of political interventions into personal life that had shattered both. This new positive valuation of private life helped to underwrite students' and workers' claims to speak as individual citizens rather than simply members of the masses as they were addressed by the Party.

Achieving a sense of positive agency and personal efficacy was an important theme of discourse for Chinese students in the late 1980s and a subtext of the protest movement. Along with the notion of autonomous citizens, it helped to shape the students' insistence that they were nothing like the protestors of the Cultural Revolution. Those earlier student protestors – in the eyes of their 1989 successors – had been deprived of their autonomy and manipulated by the Party.<sup>7</sup>

The ideology of sacrifice never lost all its force, of course, and became increasingly important in the last weeks and days of the 1989 protests. In

1989, however, students who were prepared to sacrifice for the sake of the country were not prepared to sacrifice for the sake of the Party. Much of the Party's loss of prestige and identification with the country as a whole can be attributed to the latter stages of the Cultural Revolution and to the highly public critique of the Cultural Revolution which helped to legitimate the new post-Mao regime.

### **CAUTIONARY TALE**

Though the government was relatively lenient with students, it also viewed them through a problematic memory. All senior government officials – not just in the center but on university campuses, in the military, and in local administration – could remember the Cultural Revolution in personal terms. Most had suffered. As soon as students began appearing in public in ways that recalled the Red Guards, panic was predictable.

The Cultural Revolution example thus had a very negative influence on the government. It discouraged many officials from taking up the olive branches offered by 'reformers' and others hoping to negotiate a peaceful end to the protests. It led the government to see large-scale student protest as an almost inherently irrational and deeply dangerous phenomenon. And it helped to shape its violent response to the Democracy Movement.

The Cultural Revolution provided a discouraging template for viewing the 1989 protestors – not only for the government, but for older professors who might in some other ways have been sympathetic to the students. Such older intellectuals remembered the way the Cultural Revolution had spun out of control, and remembered the humiliations they themselves had suffered; and these memories made them hesitate to support their students wholeheartedly. It is not clear that closer ties to older intellectuals would have made much difference, but they might have facilitated more effective early bridge building to parts of the government and reduced the impetus towards massacre. In the event, many older intellectuals found more common perspectives with government officials, because of their shared memories of the Cultural Revolution, than with students whose cause they might otherwise have helped to interpret to the government officials.

On the other hand, the Cultural Revolution was also an important cautionary tale to students. Student organizers went far out of their way to prevent the 1989 movement from following what they had learned (not only from official histories but from more personal stories, especially from the 'in-between' generation) was a path of degeneration during the Cultural Revolution. Suspicions of those without clear student identification, for example, and the use of techniques like linking arms while marching in order to keep out agents provocateurs were based partly on a desire to maintain a level of organization control that early leaders of the Cultural Revolution lacked. Above all, students were wary of manipulation from above, recalling the ways

Mao and others in high positions had first tried to control and then betrayed the Red Guards.

### INTERNATIONAL REPERCUSSIONS

The Cultural Revolution was for the most part explicitly anti-international. Its rhetoric and much official government practice was suspicious of foreign influences and sought an autonomous path for Chinese development. At the same time, it is not mere coincidence that the Cultural Revolution coincided with the global surge of student movements in the late 1960s.

Most of the causal arrows run outward from China: the Chinese model was exported to innumerable student struggles, local political factions, and even revolutionary movements around the world. It takes an effort to recall, but the Maoism of the Cultural Revolution was of substantial international import: it inspired some of the radical fringe of Euro-American student culture, of course, and also very influential parts of Parisian intellectual culture (including many closely linked to the emergence of 'poststructuralism'). With more practical political moment, it shaped Norwegian political activism for a generation and influenced the founders of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front who would lead a newly independent country nearly 30 years later.

There are also underlying connections between the Cultural Revolution and the global activism linked mnemonically to the year 1968. The Cultural Revolution was rooted partly in a demographic swelling of Chinese youth, similar to (though slightly younger than) the post-war baby boom generation central to student movements in Europe and North America. The Cultural Revolution was also in part a reaction to 'bourgeois' influences from the west as well as 'internal' backsliding on revolutionary values. Recall the 'bizarre bourgeois hairstyles', described sometimes as 'cowboy' styles, that were among the targets of criticism in the early Cultural Revolution (Benton and Hunter, 1995).

The 1989 student movement was explicitly international, in part in response to the very closure of China against foreign influences that had been taken to its extreme in the Cultural Revolution. The recurrent motif of the *River Elegy* – the yellow river opening into the blue sea, the need for inward-looking China to join the world's seafaring cultures – reflected (and also shaped) much of the students' thinking (Bodman and Wan, 1991). Students were drawn to and influenced by translated foreign texts, a global media culture, and interactions with foreigners. Their enthusiasm was not simply a settled evaluation, but a rush of discovery. To see that Hong Kong had fantastic skyscrapers could be a revelation, proving that Chinese could be wealthy global citizens.

At the same time, like the Cultural Revolution, the 1989 student protest movement was of international significance. It did not export ideology as its



predecessor had. But the images of it broadcast around the world helped to inspire public protests in Eastern Europe that were not without influence in the fall of Soviet-style communism. It also created a diaspora of exiled activists who may never return to the positions of leadership for which many hope, but who nonetheless inform investment decisions and the global political for China.

## CONCLUSION

China's 1989 pro-democracy movement was not simply a continuation or repetition of the Cultural Revolution. Neither, however, was it a movement without a history. In this discussion, we have tried to suggest both that later vilifications distort the Cultural Revolution and that it itself helped in significant ways to pave the way for later pro-democracy activism. Some of the connections are paradoxical, as in the ways in which Mao's betrayal of the ascetic idealism of the Red Guards encouraged the development of a renewed positive valuation of ordinary life that has helped to provide demand from below for economic, and to a lesser extent political, reform.

One of the weak points of the Cultural Revolution may be an appropriate point on which to close. This was a movement in which most activists (if not all elite actors) genuinely pursued democracy. But it offered a conception of democracy rooted in an ascetic, perfectionist idealism and devoid of liberal safeguards. In particular, it made little provision for an effective rule of law. This weak point was recognized by many former Red Guards who championed not only economic reforms, but the development of an effective framework of legal procedures and accountability. The examples of Wei Jingsheng and other former Red Guard members jailed for their oncelonged efforts to promote democracy gave compelling evidence of the importance of law as an institutional guarantee for democracy and freedom. In 1989 protestors implicitly sought to remedy this deficiency of the Cultural Revolution by stressing throughout the legal and constitutional nature of their protests. Indeed, their rhetoric often took the form of demanding that the government live up to its legal obligations. In this way, as in others, they both were directly influenced by the Cultural Revolution and resistant to some of its problematic aspects.

The continued struggle for democracy in China is apt to involve both broad shifts in culture and society, and occasional periods of activism. The Cultural Revolution and the 1989 protests will figure both in the mythology guiding activists and in the forces shaping the circumstances under which they struggle. They are episodes in a process with much older origins, to be sure, but they are also turning points. As the complicated influence of the Cultural Revolution on 1989 shows, historical turning points do not always reveal their directions immediately, but only in the patterns of later events.

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### Notes

An earlier version of parts of this article appeared in Chinese as 'Wenhua da geming yu 1989 nian minzhu yundong de lishi guanxi' in *Hong Kong Journal of Social Sciences*, no. 11, Spring 1998, pp. 129–49.

1. The range of retrospective sources on the Cultural Revolution has since grown more nuanced (see e.g. Yang, 1997).
2. Neither does it mean that all the inheritances were positive. Students in 1989 all too often showed tendencies towards a Maoist style of leadership that exaggerated the role of leading personalities and a monological style of discourse.
3. By 1989, Mao was of course an ambivalent figure. Students by and large were reluctant to claim support from his writings, though there were exceptions. More telling, perhaps, than the incident in which ink was splashed on Mao's giant Tiananmen Square portrait is Li Lu's use of one of Mao's favorite folktales ('moving the mountain') to frame his autobiographical memoir focused on the protests. Li disingenuously claims to have heard this story from an old peasant, but it is in fact undoubtedly one he and nearly everyone his age in China grew up with precisely because Mao popularized it, using it often as a parable. Mao's thought, thus, had a kind of ubiquitous influence even where little explicit engagement was involved.
4. In the words of a 'senior Red Guard': 'I honestly think that over 90 percent of the Red Guards were deadly serious about carrying out the revolution' (Feng, 1991 [1987]: 90).
5. In fact, so pervasive was the influence of Maoist rhetoric – both content and form – that it figured on both sides of the 1989 events. Maoist rhetoric informed the infamous 26 April editorial in which the Party first defined its view of the protests, and equally provided the students with slogans and insults to shout, and a form – all too monological – for making speeches. As Barmé notes, 'Even the language of a key document of the protests, the students' Hunger Strike

Declaration, reflected the style of the Chairman. Indeed, some of the lines were an unconscious paraphrase of one of Mao's earliest articles' (Barmé, 1996).

6. In this regard, the Deng era echoed but went beyond the old 'ti-yong' call of foreign learning for practical matters and Chinese learning for matters of essence. It engaged in the importation of technical expertise, calling on members of the intellectual classes for help, but rejected as dangerous even deep explorations of Chinese culture as well as foreign political and cultural ideas.
7. It is not clear that the Red Guards were in fact as completely deprived of individual agency as later accounts and the image of the 1989 protesters would suggest. Especially at a local level, there may have been a good deal of opportunity for individuals to take initiative and to shine for their particular roles and abilities, albeit only within an authorized rhetorical template. That they were 'true believers' in Mao's charismatic authority did not stop them from being rational actors (see Wang, 1995). It was precisely in their pursuit of variable local objectives, moreover, as well as of emotional enthusiasms, that millions of Chinese who believed themselves to be Mao's followers pushed and pulled the Cultural Revolution in directions that Mao did not intend. The Cultural Revolution was also an occasion for new freedoms, e.g. in sending boys and girls together on long train rides as Red Guards from different towns established linkages.

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