

## Introduction

---

**Q. S. Tong**

By any measure, China's economic reform is of world-historical significance. Since it formally adopted the open-door policy in 1978, the country has been undergoing radical socio-historical transformations that have created not only unprecedented wealth, new freedoms, and possibilities, but also, for us, analytical and interpretative difficulties that are derived from widespread and significant inconsistencies, discontinuities, and contradictions that characterize the everyday life of China at the present moment. One cannot fail to note that concurrent with the remarkable advances in living standards and the rise of China's national power is a whole range of social and moral regressions. The proliferation of corruption, so deeply and palpably woven in the fabric of its social life at all levels, for example, demands an understanding of the internal mechanisms that have produced, nurtured, and sustained it. Widening and deepening chasms in Chinese society, such as inequalities between urban and rural communities<sup>1</sup>

1. During the period of reform, especially the last two decades, the Chinese government has concentrated the state resources on the development "of the urban-industrial sector, particularly in coastal areas, with rural and agricultural investment lagging behind. State-

*boundary 2* 38:1 (2011) DOI 10.1215/01903659-1262527 © 2011 by Duke University Press

and the gaps between the rich and the poor, present a major challenge to our understanding of the foundational ideology of the People's Republic of China (PRC) that had once envisioned a utopian sociopolitical space, a classless structure in which forms of inequality would be reduced to the minimum and eventually eliminated. It might be argued that some of those problems are necessary and inevitable social, political, and even moral costs the country has to pay for the undertaking of a reform project on such a scale.<sup>2</sup> But the "trial-and-error" approach to the market reforms is manifestly the product of a consciously and doggedly implemented policy that has contributed both to the country's remarkable economic growth and to the creation of a serious moral crisis that the nation is going through. Is it possible to sustain and deepen the reforms and keep under control such problems as systematic corruption that have astonished and alarmed many both inside and outside the country?

The past three decades are often dubbed the era of *gaige* (reform) and *kaifang* (opening), a pair of keywords in China's political vocabulary that suggests a bifocal emphasis on two closely related aspects of the new phase of development in the history of the PRC. In thinking of China's present conditions, it would be useful to keep in mind their temporal and spatial points of reference. *Gaige* proceeds with close reference to the dominant forms of political and economic practice in the pre-reform period and is thus a historical response to the period that precedes it; *kaifang* is more about the country's relations with the external world and about how it would need to negotiate Western ideas and values that have come to assert their dominance in the new era. The sixty-year history of the PRC may be conveniently periodized into two phases of thirty years each. However it might be understood, the relationship between the present and its immediate past constitutes a point of departure for the assessment of the reform program itself. Underlying Deng Xiaoping's approach to the political, social, and economic problems he had inherited from the preceding period is the pragmatist belief that these problems were attributable to the economic unproductivity in the years of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76)

---

owned banks have also focused their efforts on financing urban-industrial development, while rural and agricultural financing were neglected. In the last two decades, rural per capita income has never exceeded 40 percent of the urban level." See Hung Ho-Fung, "American's Head Servant," *New Left Review*, no. 60 (November/December 2009): 13.

2. For an analysis of widespread corruption as structural and as innately related to the reform and open-door experiment, see Wu Jinlian, "Zhongguo fubai de zhili" [Containing China's corruption], in *Zhanlue yu guanli* [Strategy and management], no. 2 (2003): 1–8.

and that a radical solution to them would be to increase the nation's wealth and affluence and thereby to realize and maximize the potentialities of Chinese socialism. Insofar as the market reform is propelled by the needs to understand what Chinese socialism has attempted to achieve and what it has stood for, it is necessary to understand its present in close relation to its immediate past and to mediate between its newly adopted practice and a political legacy that does not fully explicate or lend credence to the economic and social changes at present. Though often called China's "second revolution," the thirty years of economic reform represents a major departure from the revolutionary tradition, and as such it is perhaps a tacit admission of the needs to revise, if not reject, the kind of social and political practice in the pre-reform period and to make obsolete some of its accepted ideas, values, and practices. However, as long as China maintains a political economy that is defined in terms of its founding ideology, as long as it continues to consider itself a socialist state, its successful installment of a market-oriented structure of production may be perceived to be an alternative model of social progress and political vitality. After all, the economic restructuring, at least for those who had planned and organized it, was intended to continue and legitimate the political and social practice that was defined and accepted at the time of the founding of the PRC.

While *gaige* as a state project aims to restructure China's domestic social relationships, the open-door policy is formulated to adjust and define its relations with the rest of the world, in particular with the United States, for sustaining and deepening the reform program. The country's external relations have always been a site of convergence for nationalistic feelings. To some extent, the Chinese Revolution in the twentieth century was a delayed response to the operations of historical imperialism and colonialism, the memories of which constitute the single most important source of modern nationalism in China. The country's economic ascendancy and its growing global influence seem to have offered a real opportunity for a nationalist catharsis. The phenomenal resurgence of populist nationalism we've seen in recent years, both in the culture of everyday life and in the discourse of more formalized articulation, has to be considered in close reference to both its historical origins and its present development. The publication of *Unhappy China* in March 2009 offers an example of such populist nationalism.<sup>3</sup> The book has stayed at the top of several best seller lists;

3. Song Xiaojun et al., *Zhongguo bugaoxin* [Unhappy China] (Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Publishing House, 2009). The publication of the book was widely reported in the media in and outside China. For example, Malcolm Moore wrote a review of the book for *Teleg-*

within a matter of one month after its publication, it went through more than ten printings, and over half a million copies were sold. Its success brings to mind an earlier popular publication, *China Can Say No* (1996).<sup>4</sup> In *Unhappy China*, the authors' unconcealed rage at what they consider to be the practice of a U.S. containment policy toward China is narrated in conjunction with the story of their generational disillusionment with the United States, a country they said they once admired and loved. To add to this list of works is *China's Dream*, which openly advocates China's military buildup for resisting and contesting U.S. global dominance.<sup>5</sup> As a historical problematic and as an evolving and living force, nationalism plays an increasingly significant role in shaping and defining China's responses to international as well as domestic crises.

Though it would miss all the complexities of the reform period to say that nationalism has replaced socialism in China as a unifying and ruling ideology,<sup>6</sup> to continue to describe China as a socialist state without contextual specifications and qualifications would be even further from the truth. Is China's substantially marketized economy sufficient evidence of its abandonment of socialism and its founding ideology? Is it a socialist market economy or marketized socialism? Is it a socialist state with "Chinese characteristics" or a socialist state without socialism? Would the continuation of economic liberalization lead to democracy? Thirty years after the reform, China emerges as a site of paradoxes, inconsistencies, and discontinuities, an example of what Jürgen Habermas has called, in a different context, the "new obscurity" of our time.<sup>7</sup> The language we have had is increasingly inadequate and ineffectual for an analytical description of the present conditions of China, especially of its sociopolitical model of development.

Discussion of China in the post-cold war context and after thirty

---

raphy, "'Unhappy China' Bestseller Claims Beijing Should 'Lead the World,'" available from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/financetopics/g20-summit/5071299/Unhappy-China-bestseller-claims-Beijing-should-lead-the-world.html>, March 29, 2009 (accessed August 5, 2010).

4. Song Qiang, Zhang Zangzang, and Qiao Bian, *Zhongguo keyi shuo bu* [China can say no] (Beijing: Zhongguo gong shanglian chubanshe, 1996).

5. Liu Mingfu, *Zhongguo meng* [China's dream] (Beijing: Zhongguo youyi chubangongsi, 2010).

6. See William A. Callahan, "National Insecurities: Humiliation, Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 29, no. 2 (2009): 199–218.

7. See Jürgen Habermas, "The New Obscurity: The Crisis of the Welfare State and Exhaustion of Utopian Energies," in *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians' Debate*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989), 48.

years of reform requires efforts to rethink those familiar paradigms and categorizations that have been employed to narrate divisions and divergences between ideological and political formations in China. The row between the New Left and the liberals, for example, has been one of the most prolonged and divisive debates among Chinese intellectuals, despite the fact that on a range of aspects of the reform program their views converge.<sup>8</sup> They are scornful of each other's positions, views, and formulations, but a substantial part of their disagreement is attributable to their divergent methodological and disciplinary positions. Within China, political and ideological divisions are never so unambiguously drawn as we may be prepared to believe. One group may be described as the Left or the New Left, but would it be possible to identify another group at the other end of the political spectrum so as to render the designation of the "Left" politically, socially, and historically meaningful? Who would admit to being a member of the Right in China? In what sense could we speak of a political Left in the absence of an accepted understanding of the political Right in China? Is there indeed such an ideological spectrum as the one used to describe the political formations in the West? The conspicuous absence of institutionalized political diversities, in particular of an alternative and oppositional medium through which individuals live out their relations to and struggles against a dominant political power and ideology, should allow us to develop a more nuanced critical language for contemporary Chinese politics. Added to the complexities of such political categorizations in China are occasional unexpected turns and twists. One would not normally associate the Left with cultural nostalgia and intellectual conservatism, but a major concern for some who identify with the Left has been the perceived need to integrate the revolutionary tradition with China's cultural past, in particular Confucianism, and they have exhibited an unmistakable political and intellectual propensity that could only be appropriately described as cultural conservatism, not to mention their sympathy toward neoliberalist positions on economic development and social management.<sup>9</sup>

8. In a rare conversation between Wen Tiejun, Qin Hui, and Wang Hui, while differences remain among them, it has become clear that there is an overlapping consensus over a range of social and political issues, especially on the fate of farmers who are marginalized, underprivileged, and to some extent victimized in the process of the economic reforms. See Wen Tiejun, Qin Hui, and Wang Hui, "Zhongguo nengfou zouchu yitiao dute de daolu" [Can China find a unique way forward?], *Tianya* (Frontiers), no. 4 (2003): 57–66.

9. In an overview of the New Left published in two installments in a Hong Kong newspaper, Gan Yan describes it as "Liberal Left" and is not shy to admit that China's New Left

Essays in this volume may not be in full agreement with one another, and it will be clear to readers where their theses differ and on what grounds they do. As editors, we are more inclined to present divergent arguments, which we think would point toward the inherently contradictory character of any narratives or analyses that attempt to describe the last three decades in consistent ideological and categorical terms. Even though differences remain, these essays all accept the task to identify, and to reflect on, significant problems and challenges China faces today, from its sociopolitical system (Arif Dirlik) to the question of freedom (Jiwei Ci), from the rise of cultural conservatism (Kam Louie) to China's historical understanding of its cultural identity (Wang Hui), from the controversy on its human rights (Wang Ban) and the new modalities of life in rural areas (Yunxiang Yan) to the development of the public media (Qing Liu and Barrett McCormick).

Much of the thinking and editorial work for this special issue was done in 2009, a year of celebration for China. It was the ninetieth anniversary of the May Fourth movement as a turning point that marked the beginning of a conscious history of the Chinese revolutions in the twentieth century. The year 2009 marked the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the PRC, which concluded what Mao Zedong called China's "semi-colonial" and "semi-feudal" history.<sup>10</sup> It was also the thirtieth anniversary of China's unprecedented social and economic reforms, whose significance would be as far-reaching as all major historical events in the twentieth century, including the May Fourth movement and the founding of the PRC. We felt then, as we do now, that it would be desirable to review the thirty years of reform and to offer critical reflections on what Raymond Williams has called the "dominant," "residual," and "emergent" in contemporary Chinese society.<sup>11</sup> Paul A. Bové, editor of *boundary 2*, has been an unfailing source of intellectual energy for this special issue; we are grateful for his support of the project.

---

is sympathetic to neoliberalism and conservatism in the United States. See Gan Yang, "Zhongguo ziyou zuopai de youlai" [Origins of the Chinese liberal Left], *Ming Po*, October 1–2, 2000.

10. See Mao Zedong, "On New Democracy," in vol. 2 of *Selected Works of Mao Zedong* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1961–1977).

11. See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 121.