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China's Beleaguered Intellectuals

MERLE GOLDMAN

Political scientists have long differentiated between totalitarian and authoritarian regimes. The distinction is particularly relevant in contrasting the reform era in the People's Republic of China with the period that preceded it. Under Mao Zedong, who ruled from 1949 until 1976, China was governed by a totalitarian system in which Mao and the Communist Party dominated not only the country's political life but also the intellectual, artistic, economic, and personal lives of their subjects.

After Mao died in 1976 and was succeeded by his former Long March comrade Deng Xiaoping, China moved from a totalitarian to an authoritarian regime. The party still dominated the political system and, except for elections at the village level, it determined the political hierarchy. But the government's economic reforms and its loosening of controls over nonpolitical activities, together with the country's opening to the outside world, allowed a degree of freedom into people's personal, economic, cultural, and intellectual lives. The post-Mao period has witnessed a proliferation of ideas, activities, and artistic endeavors outside the party's control.

Of course, there is risk in giving too much weight to the totalitarian-authoritarian distinction. China's government today remains under the control of the Communist Party, and so do most Chinese citizens. A new generation of party leaders, led by former Shanghai Mayor Jiang Zemin, came to power after the violent crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrators in Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989. That leadership—and particu-

larly the current generation of leaders headed by President Hu Jintao and his associates, who came to power in 2002—have sought to re-indoctrinate party cadres in Leninist ideology. While strengthening the government's capacity to deal with the increasing inequalities and rampant corruption unleashed by China's move to a market economy, the country's leaders have also recentralized political authority.

Perhaps nowhere are the limits of freedom in the post-Mao era more conspicuous than in the party-state's treatment of public intellectuals. While a degree of pluralistic discourse and openness to foreign ideas exists in China's universities, academic journals, and think tanks, particularly in the sciences, these institutions are still under the control of party officials. And the Hu regime has detained, put under surveillance, and thrown out of the academic establishment scholars who dissent politically and criticize the party's policies publicly.

Nevertheless, public intellectuals in post-Mao China have found ways to promote political reform. In the Mao era, any intellectual who dissented not only from the party's political views, but also from its scientific, artistic, historical, or economic views, generally lost his or her job, was unable to make a living, and was literally banished from the intellectual community. In the post-Mao era, China's economic reforms and opening to the outside world have made it possible for dissident intellectuals to publish abroad and in Hong Kong and to support themselves and their families with freelance jobs.

In short, while China's movement from a totalitarian to an authoritarian polity has not protected public intellectuals from reprisals and detention, it has made it possible for them at times to speak out publicly on political issues and to have an impact beyond their immediate intellectual circles.

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HEIRS OF CONFUCIUS

Public intellectuals are not unique to Western civilization. Indeed, although they were repressed during most of the Mao era, they have played a significant role in China throughout the country's history. China's premodern intellectuals, the Confucian literati, not only ran the governmental bureaucracies but were also viewed as the conscience of society. Their commitment to improving the human condition led them to assume responsibilities comparable to those of public intellectuals in the modern West. They were generalists who publicly discussed and contended with political, economic, and social issues. They organized philanthropic efforts and supervised education. Most important, the Confucian literati regarded it as their responsibility to criticize officials and even the emperor when official policies or practices diverged from the Confucian ideals of morality and fairness.

Public intellectuals helped to bring about the end of China's dynastic system and prepared the way for the 1911 revolution, whose leader Sun Yat-sen personified the public intellectual. Even though the Kuomintang government of Chiang Kai-shek (1928–1949) attempted to stifle criticism and dissent, it was too weak to silence intellectuals, who publicly criticized repressive officials and Kuomintang policies and advocated political reforms. But under Mao's totalitarian leadership—with the exception of brief interludes such as the “Hundred Flowers” period in 1956 and 1957—public intellectuals were silenced and unable to play their traditional role.

Unlike in the West, no laws afforded protection to intellectuals in China during the dynastic, Kuomintang, and Mao eras. When critics said something that displeased the leadership, they could be silenced with impunity. In the 1980s, virtually all of the intellectuals whom Mao had persecuted were rehabilitated, and most found positions in the political and intellectual establishments. Public space for political discourse and pluralistic views opened up in book publishing, the media, universities, and research centers. Even then, however, no laws were enacted to protect political and civil rights; thus public intellectuals remained vulnerable to the whims of party leaders. Most of the intellectuals rehabilitated in the post-Mao era became members of the establishment and the

party, but when a small number of them called for reform of the party-state, they were purged once again, particularly in the aftermath of the Tiananmen protests.

And yet, even though critics were silenced for a while, China's move to the market made it possible for them in the 1990s to make a living, speak out periodically, and publish on political issues. They were able to do so by means of new internet technologies, private publishing, and contact with foreign media outlets such as Voice of America, the BBC, and Radio Free Asia, which would beam back their views into China.

THE HU CRACKDOWN

When the generation of leaders led by Hu came to power in 2002, it was expected that this younger group of officials—many of whom had roots in the China Youth League, an organization supposedly less doctrinaire than the party itself—would continue the opening up of public space for political discourse, even if it remained circumscribed within certain limits. That, however, has not proved to

be the case. The public space for political discourse in fact has contracted since the late 1990s, when Jiang headed the party.

The Hu regime has cracked down on a number of people who use new communications technologies—for example, those who set up websites to discuss political issues. Scores of cyber-dissidents have been imprisoned as a warning to others regarding how far they can go in discussing political reforms on the internet. Public intellectuals who speak out and publish essays on controversial issues have been briefly detained as well.

One example is Jiang Yanyong, a military doctor who had treated victims of the violent June 4 crackdown and contradicted the party's assertion in 2003 that the SARS epidemic had been brought under control. He was detained and then put under surveillance in 2004 when he called on the party to change its designation of the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations from a “counterrevolutionary” to a “patriotic” movement.

In addition to suppressing a number of well-known independent intellectuals and imposing a ban on the discourse of public intellectuals, the Hu government has tightened controls over the media and various outlets for dissent. Media reports on

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growing protests against corruption, abusive officials, property confiscation, and job conditions have been banned. Jiao Guobiao, a journalism professor who criticized—on the internet—the party's repressive control of the media, was no longer allowed to teach at Peking University. Another public intellectual, Wang Yi, a Chengdu University law lecturer who called for a system of checks and balances in public life, was also barred from teaching. The journal *Strategy and Management*, which had been an outlet for intellectuals of a liberal persuasion, was closed down.

FINDING A WAY

Despite the continuing crackdown on critical voices and the media, and despite censorship of the internet, the role of public intellectuals in China has nonetheless changed significantly as a result of policy differences between the Mao and post-Mao eras, as well as because of changes in the critics' own strategies. Millions were harshly persecuted in the Anti-Rightist campaign (1957–1958) and during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), though only a small number had engaged in criticism and protests. By contrast, in the post-Mao era, persecution for public dissent has not reached far beyond the accused and their immediate associates. Moreover, although they might lose their jobs in academia or the media, and may be briefly detained, public critics have been able to find employment and outlets for their views in China's expanding market economy.

Thus, unlike during the Mao era, public intellectuals have not been completely silenced. Some still try to function as citizens, either on their own or along with others, and they continue to express their political views in unofficial publications, and in increasingly organized petitions and protests. Although their writings may be officially banned, they have found ways to distribute their views on street corners, through private publication, and over the internet by means of connections to outside servers. In addition, for the first time in the People's Republic, a number of lawyers have been willing to defend those accused of political crimes, and journalists have reported on the party's repressive policies in some media outlets, such as the *Southern Metropolitan Post*, based in Guangdong province.

There are also differences between intellectuals' behavior in the 1980s and in the first decade of the twenty-first century. A number of public intellectuals in the 1980s called themselves

“Marxist humanists” and pointed out how the party's policies diverged from the ideals of Marxist doctrine. Since then, because of the increasing bankruptcy of Marxism-Leninism as a governing philosophy, most public intellectuals have moved away from a focus on ideology and instead emphasize the establishment of new institutions to achieve political reforms.

Moreover, until the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations, public intellectuals considered themselves an elite and did not join with other social classes in political actions. But starting with the 1989 protests, a small number began to join with workers and operators of small businesses in petition drives and in organizing groups to bring pressure on the government for political reforms. Thus, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, despite continuing repression, a qualitative change has occurred in the thinking and actions of China's public intellectuals: They have become increasingly independent political actors and have shown a willingness to join with other social groups in advocating reforms.

China's increasing interaction with the rest of the world, particularly with the West, has been another factor promoting a degree of liberalization in the intellectual environment. China signed the United Nations Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in October 1998, having already signed the UN Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights in 1997.

Although China's rubber-stamp National People's Congress has confirmed the Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, it has not done the same with the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Nevertheless, the party's endorsement of the UN rights covenants as well as the easing of political controls at home has been part of China's effort to create goodwill abroad, particularly with the United States and other Western countries. At the same time, thousands of Chinese students have gone abroad to study at Western universities. China's relaxation of ideological controls at home has correlated with its engagement with the international community.

THE 1998 SPRING

Intellectuals and students have periodically made demands for political reform in post-Mao China. In addition to the best-known such effort—the Tiananmen protests in the spring of 1989—two later episodes, occurring 10 years apart, help illustrate public intellectuals' evolving role in society

and relationship with the state. Perhaps the most broad-ranging public discourse on political reforms since Tiananmen occurred in 1998—a century after China's Hundred Day Reforms, a movement that led to later political change and the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911.

Like the Hundred Day reformers, and indeed like the major exponents of political reforms throughout the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, public intellectuals in 1998 were establishment intellectuals—academics, writers, journalists, lawyers, and ex-officials—who were not at the center of power. They worked at think tanks, universities, newspapers, and law offices, or were retired; yet they managed to promote their reformist ideas in books, scholarly journals, academic forums, and other channels in the public arena. At times, they even joined with those outside the establishment to call for political change.

Although none of China's establishment intellectuals publicly proposed a multiparty system or direct elections of the political leadership by universal suffrage, a small number advocated the establishment of other institutions associated with liberal democracy. Some emphasized the rule of law; others stressed freedom of expression and association; still others called for more competitive elections. Some were concerned with intraparty democracy; others with grassroots democracy. Virtually all, however, called for a political system based on some form of checks and balances. All emphasized the need for political reform in order to deal with the rampant corruption and accelerating economic and social inequalities accompanying China's economic reforms.

Those expressing liberal political views in 1998 differed from the Marxist humanists of the 1980s in that they were relatively more independent of political patronage—not only because of China's accelerating market economy and openness to the outside world, but also because of their desire to acquire more intellectual autonomy. Also, with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union and the communist states of Eastern Europe in 1991, intellectuals no longer called for reforms within a Marxist-Leninist framework. The younger generation of liberals cited a range of Western thinkers from Adam Smith to Karl Popper to support their arguments.

LIBERAL FORUMS

In 1998 economists, political scientists, philosophers, and historians spoke out publicly on the need for democratic reforms in two journals—*Reform (Gaige)* and *The Way (Fangfa)*—which became major forums for liberal views. On the occasion of its 10th-anniversary issue in January 1998, *Reform* published a speech given by Li Shenzhi, a former policy adviser to Prime Minister Zhou Enlai, entitled “Also Push Forward Political Reform” (“Ye yao tuidong zhengzhi gaige”). Li, born in 1923 to a wealthy merchant family in Wuxi city, Jiangsu province, had received a Western-style education and graduated in economics from Yenching University, the precursor of Peking University, before joining the Communist Party in the early 1940s.

Li was labeled a “rightist” in 1957 for questioning one-party rule and as a result was ostracized for almost two decades. After Mao's death, however, he was rehabilitated to advise on foreign policy. Li became a vice president of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and established the Institute of American Studies there in 1981.

After June 4, 1989, he was dismissed from his positions because of his criticism of the Tiananmen crackdown. Yet, in the late 1990s, Li was still one of the most public and eloquent advocates of liberalism and political reform. Li's essays in *Reform* and *The Way* unreservedly proclaimed a liberal political agenda.

Also in the 10th-anniversary issue of *Reform*, the well-known economist Mao Yushi emerged as an outspoken advocate of political reform. Mao Yushi, born in 1928, had like Li been branded a rightist in 1957. His works were banned from publication, and he was stripped of his job. Although Mao was from a revolutionary family, when he was invited to join the Communist Party during the 1980s, he refused. As an economist at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, he established an independent economics think tank called Unirule. He also organized a forum to discuss a new Chinese translation of *The Constitution of Liberty* by Friedrich Hayek. (Hayek, the philosopher and economist who was one of socialism's harshest critics and a proponent of individualism and property rights, is widely read by liberal Chinese intellectuals.) Mao Yushi wrote a long essay entitled “Liberalism, Equal Status, and Human Rights” in 1998, in

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which he praised Western liberalism and called for human rights. He argued that market economies require a loosening of political controls in order to develop fully.

Even a revolutionary elder, Mao Zedong's former secretary Li Rui, published an article in *Reform's* January 1998 issue calling for political reform. His article was an abridged version of a letter he had written to an unidentified comrade in the central government on September 10, 1997, in which he complained of continuing leftist influence in the party. Citing an August 18, 1980, speech by Deng, Li Rui pointed out that "after 17 years, problems criticized by Deng's speech, such as . . . over-concentration of power . . . , the inability to separate the functions of the party from government administration, the substitution of the party for the government, the abnormal inner-party democratic life, and the imperfection of the legal system have not been solved well."

Many of the articles calling for political reform that were published in *Reform* and *The Way*—as well as in several other journals and newspapers in 1997–1998, even including a few in the official *People's Daily*—were collected in two major volumes that appeared in July and September 1998 respectively: *Political China*, subtitled *Facing the Era of Choosing a New Structure*, and *Liberation Literature 1978–1998*. The concentration of articles advocating political reforms in these two volumes, written by a number of academics, journalists, and members of think tanks, helped increase the impact of the liberals' proposals.

Particularly significant, the funding sources for these volumes revealed that a few members of China's new business class were beginning to use their profits to sponsor debate on political issues and to advocate political change. Most of China's rising entrepreneurs have colluded with local officials in order to improve their own economic status (though there have been a few exceptions, such as Wan Runnan, head of the Stone Group, which Wan set up as a think tank in the 1980s to study political reform and which supported the 1989 demonstrators in Tiananmen Square). Consequently, most businesspeople have stayed away from efforts to engender political change.

Yet these two volumes were funded by private businesspeople, some of whom, because of their

previous participation in political activities in the 1980s, had been excluded from the intellectual establishment and had gone into business instead. By the late 1990s, they were willing and able to fund such political and intellectual endeavors.

CHARTER 08

A more recent episode in China's public discourse points to a new phenomenon that has emerged in the past decade: public intellectuals and other citizens calling on the government to live up to principles to which it has given written approval. On December 10, 2008, the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a group of people from all walks of life launched a movement called Charter 08. It presented a blueprint for fundamental legal and political reforms with the goal of achieving a democratic political system.

Patterned on Václav Havel's Charter 77 movement in the former Czechoslovakia, Charter 08 criticized China's government for failing to implement human rights provisions that its leaders had

signed on to, such as the UN Covenant on Political and Civil Rights, signed in 1998, and 2004 amendments to China's constitution that include the phrase "respect and protect human rights." Charter 08 pointed out that

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"Unfortunately, most of China's political progress has extended no further than the paper on which it is written." The political reality, it declared, "is that China has many laws but no rule of law; it has a constitution but no constitutional government." Charter 08 called for a political system based on democratic institutions of checks and balances.

Again, intellectuals and students in China have periodically made such demands. What made Charter 08 qualitatively different from most previous protests is that it became a political movement that crossed class lines. Past demonstrations were usually carried out by specific classes focused on particular economic issues, such as peasants' protests against confiscation of their land by local officials or workers' protests against nonpayment of salaries. Even during the 1989 demonstrations in Tiananmen Square, students at first linked arms to keep workers and other urbanites from participating, because they knew that the party feared an alliance between intellectuals and workers. By late

May 1989, when other social classes had forced their way into the protests and the movement had spread to other cities and classes, Deng feared a threat to the party's rule. That is why he ordered the army to suppress the movement.

Another feature making Charter 08 unusual in China is that, although originally it was signed by just 300-plus intellectuals, very quickly ordinary Chinese citizens from all walks of life—entrepreneurs, professionals, local officials, workers, farmers, housewives, and street vendors—added their names as it circulated on the internet and elsewhere. Also new to grassroots political movements in the People's Republic was the participation in Charter 08 of a number of lawyers who have defended those accused of political crimes.

Despite the detention of Charter 08's originator, the writer Liu Xiaobo, and despite the government's harsh denunciation of the movement, just before the party completely shut down the Charter 08 website in mid-January 2009, more than 8,000 people had managed to sign their names.

The Charter 08 episode reveals that it is not only intellectuals who are expressing dissatisfaction with China's authoritarian system; it is also farmers, workers, and small entrepreneurs who are the supposed beneficiaries of China's political model. Their participation in the Charter 08 movement may be attributed in part to worsening economic conditions in late 2008. Factories in many of China's export industries were closed because of slackening demand for consumer goods in the West, and many college graduates, for the first time in the post-Mao era, were having difficulty finding jobs.

More fundamentally, the Charter 08 movement questioned a political system that bases its legitimacy on the Communist Party's ability to deliver economic growth. Despite the crackdown, and the detention of Liu and a few other signers, Charter 08 represented a multi-class movement for political change that is likely to continue.

Such a movement needs the support of the international community, including the United States, to succeed. International outcries over a crackdown on the Charter 77 movement in Czechoslovakia marked the beginning of the unraveling of the communist system in Eastern Europe. China's leaders, like the leaders of the former Soviet Union, are not immune to foreign pressure on political issues.

It is hoped that the Barack Obama administration can be a catalyst in efforts to achieve more

academic and intellectual freedom for China's intellectuals by continuing and increasing academic exchanges and international discourse on political as well as scientific and economic issues. In this endeavor, increased international engagement with China's intellectuals, as well as China's political leaders, can play a role in protecting those who call for political reforms. Such engagement could influence the party's treatment of public intellectuals.

TOWARD DEMOCRACY?

In the spring of 2009, during the run-up to the 20th anniversary of the Tiananmen crackdown, China's Propaganda Department censored the foreign media's discussion of the events of 1989. It blocked pages of the *International Herald Tribune* and the Hong Kong newspaper *South China Morning Post*, as well as discussion on the BBC, YouTube, and Twitter. Yet those in China's population who cared about what happened at Tiananmen found ways to find out about it through their Blackberries and internet access to foreign servers.

As seen in the Charter 08 episode, the post-Mao era has seen a growing consciousness of citizenship and an increase in organized efforts to assert political rights, among both ordinary people and intellectuals. These developments do not necessarily imply movement toward democracy, but they are indeed prerequisites for a freer intellectual environment and for the eventual establishment of democratic institutions.

Democracy depends on the desire of organized citizens to participate in the political process in order to hold political authority accountable for its actions and to improve the public welfare. Therefore, although efforts to assert political rights in China are quickly suppressed, and although few political reforms have been introduced, it would be wrong to discount the impact of such efforts.

Unlike in the Mao era, when any dissent was brutally and utterly suppressed, China's public intellectuals today are experiencing intellectual pluralism, vigorous debate, and engagement with the international community. Just as remarkably, they are joining with other classes and social groups in calling for political reforms. While China's movement from a totalitarian to an authoritarian regime has not ended the repression of political discourse, neither has it prevented intellectuals from periodically performing their historic role as public critics or from seeking a broader impact on Chinese society. ■