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Banner calligraphy Huai Su 懷素 (737–799), Tang calligrapher and Buddhist monk

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THE EMERGENCE OF INDEPENDENT MINDS IN THE 1980s

刘擎 Liu Qing 刘擎

At the beginning of the 1980s, the project of reform and openness enjoyed popularity among the general public and was especially welcomed among young people. The young generation was living in an atmosphere of freshness and richness unprecedented in the history of the People's Republic of China in terms both cultural and material, and they were considered as most fortunate. The party-state also placed great hope on young people, praising their patriotism, encouraging their initiative and having faith in their loyalty. They shared the goals of the Four Modernisations (*Si ge xiandaihua* 四个现代化) and wanted to work together toward 'the bright future'. This spirit was very well captured by the popular song *Young Friends Come Together* (*Nianqing de pengyou yiqilai* 年轻的朋友一起来). When it was first broadcast in 1980, I was among thousands of youths deeply moved by this song. It was very appealing to identify oneself with the 'new eighties generation' as the realisation of the Four Modernisations would be glorious for the nation as well as for every individual. But the loyalty of young people to the party did not last long. At the end of the 1980s, a substantial portion of this fortunate generation turned out to be 'unfilial children' who were intellectually critical, socially disobedient, and even politically rebellious. What happened to them?

A comprehensive analysis of Chinese aspirations in the 1980s is beyond my ability. In this essay, by combining personal experience with theoretical reflection, I attempt to explain how independent minds and spirits emerged from the discursive practices of the new campus culture, which led to the birth of the 'awakening generation' and contributed to a broader transformation of the social imaginary in the 1980s. The aspirations of young people were diverse but in many aspects beyond the grid of the official ideology. Their ideas of a good life gradually diverged from 'the bright path' set by the party-state for the new eighties generation. The heyday of the awakening generation ended

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- 1 Liu Qing, 'University Students and China,' *Renmin ribao* 15 November 1983.
- 2 *Wenhui bao*, 29 October 1983.
- 3 Zhou Yang, 'Several Theoretical Issues of Marxism,' *People's Daily* 16 March 1983.
- 4 Zhang has been disabled since she was five because of illness, but she made advances in the fields of translation and literature. She was designated by the CYL a model youth in the 1980s.

in 1989, but its legacy remains and deserves a re-examination. I will start with personal stories, and then move to general observations on the campus cultural movement, and, finally, offer some theoretical analysis on the intellectual and political implications of the new youth culture.

My First Trip to Beijing

I spent my youth in the 1980s and made many unforgettable memories. In October 1983, something happened to me. I was called up in class and was assigned by the Shanghai Communist Youth League (CYL) (*Shanghai gongchan-zhuyi qingniantuan* 上海共產主義青年團) to a delegation called the 'Revitalising the Chinese nation speech group'. The delegation was to make a speaking tour of Beijing in a 'patriotic education program' organised by the Central Committee of the CYL. As a two-time prize winner of the Shanghai college student speech competition, I was included. During a week's stay in Beijing, the members of the delegation were received by CYL leaders including Wang Zhaoguo 王兆国 and Hu Jintao 胡锦涛. We delivered speeches at Tsinghua University (*Qinghua daxue* 清华大学), Renmin University (*Renmin daxue* 人民大学), *Red Flag* magazine (*Hongqi* 红旗), the Central Military Commission (CMC) (*Zhongyang junshi weiyuanhu* 中央軍事委員會), and, finally, at the Jingxi Hotel (*Jingxi binguan* 京西賓館), to those who were attending the second Plenary Session of the 12th Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee. We met Hu Qili 胡启立, who was a member of the Secretariat of the Central Committee and was about to become a member of the politburo. Hu Qili personally asked Hu Jintao to have the *Renmin ribao* 人民日報 publish my speech.¹

I was twenty years old at that time, in the second year of my masters program in Chemical Engineering. This was my first trip to Beijing; my first meal at the Jingxi Hotel; and also my first time on an airplane, which turned out to be 'flying high' – not only literally but also metaphorically. The whole experience was overwhelming. What happened on the second day after I returned to Shanghai shocked me even more: *Wenhui bao* 文汇报, a Shanghai-based major national newspaper, published a feature on me on its front-page, as well as an editorial entitled 'Learn from Liu Qing to Take the Road Both Red and Expert'.² I was portrayed as a model student for being 'both politically and professionally excellent'. In the following month, I received hundreds of letters from readers and dozens of invitations asking me to give speeches.

This dazzling experience made me more confused than excited, because there was something unrecorded in the newspaper report about my trip to Beijing. My original speech was about the humanist aspects of Marxism, which relied on Zhou Yang's 周扬 (1908–89) famous article commemorating the centenary of Marx's death.³ I also gave a fresh interpretation of Zhang Haidi 张海迪 as China's Helen Keller, an exemplary youth pursuing humanism and self-realisation.⁴ In the roundtable discussion held by *Hongqi*, my speech was seriously criticised for being 'politically problematic' and 'misunderstanding Marxism'. When I tried to respond to the criticism by referring to Zhou Yang's article, one senior editor replied: 'Zhou Yang's article is his personal view and does not represent the official line of the Central Committee and, to be frank, the *People's Daily* is not the official voice of the Central Committee. It is *Hongqi* that is designated as the official organ of the Central Committee.' I was warned that the Central Committee of the CCP would soon launch a project called the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign (*Fanjingshen*

wuran yundong 清除精神污染). The consequence was that I had to work all night to rewrite my speech, and, as advised, to downplay its individualism and humanism and shift the emphasis to young people's obligations to our motherland. It was not the original piece but the revised one that was delivered at the Jingxi Hotel and then published in the *People's Daily*.

For a while, I suffered from an inner struggle so intense that it burned me out inside. To be honest, there was temptation in being a model student. It not only satisfied the vanity that many at my age would have, but, may have also, as suggested, paved the way to a promising future. Especially in China at that time, the state system was almost the only conceivable space in which a young person could have an outstanding career, professional or political. In other words, it was a great opportunity to 'fly high'. On the other hand, I was not sure that this was the way I'd like to fly. First, the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign was notorious and evil in the eyes of most young people. To serve this campaign in any way made me feel ashamed and manipulated. Second, the fame I received was based on a fabricated story. The image bearing my name in the newspaper report was not who I actually was. This might be a moral issue but it seemed to be more than a matter of honesty. Here, I found in myself an example of 'self-alienation'. To accept the image or to live with the story meant that I would be alienated from myself. Only after many years did I find a more appropriate term for this when reading Charles Taylor. It was a matter of authenticity. To be truthful to oneself is the ideal of authenticity, which is an intrinsic value of any meaningful life.⁵ Eventually, I decided not to conform to the title of model student. In retrospect, it was a turning point of my life. I recalled a line from Robert Frost's poem *The Road Not Taken*: 'I took the one less travelled by, and that has made all the difference'.

One good thing happened during my trip to Beijing. I became friends with a member of the speech group, Tao Jun 陶骏, a talented playwright. The play *Rubik's Cube* (Mofang 魔方), which he wrote and directed, caused a sensation on the Shanghai stage in 1985.⁶ It was regarded as one of the most important Chinese experimental plays of the 1980s. In 1985, Tao and I, along with other two university students, founded an experimental drama club named White Bat. This was the first independent theatre group in Shanghai.⁷ The first work we did was an adaption of Shakespeare's 'Four Great Tragedies', titled *To Be or Not To Be*. We took original lines from Shakespeare and mixed them with Shakespearean-style lines that we made up. Audiences who were not familiar with the original could hardly tell the difference. This was a sort of postmodern collage in which Hamlet, King Lear, Macbeth, Othello, and a modern Chinese youth are seemingly having conversations with each other across the boundaries of time and space. The central theme is searching for the meaning of life and pondering moral problems against the uncertainty of social change. We presented this theme as both a timely and eternal issue. The play was presented at several universities in Shanghai and finally as part of the program of the First Shakespeare Drama Festival of China in 1986.⁸

The Rise of the Campus Cultural Movement

White Bat was but one example among many, some of which I was personally engaged in or witnessed. At that time, there were hundreds of campus-based and self-initiated cultural groups and many more loosely organised activities with multifarious interests and themes. Some favoured pop culture, entertainment, and hobbies such as dance parties, pop songs, photography,

5 Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

6 Geremie R. Barmé and John Minford translated an excerpt of this work and included it in their edited volume *Seeds of Fire: Chinese Voices of Conscience* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1988).

7 For the story of White Bat, see Liu Yonglai and Zhang Ying, *Independent Theater: Shanghai 1985 to 2007* (Shanghai: Shanghai Science and Technology Press, 2008), Ch.1.

8 'To Be or Not To Be' was recently translated into English and included in Ryuta Minami, ed., *Shakespearean Adaptations in East Asia: A Critical Anthology of Shakespearean Plays in China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan* (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

9 Pan Xiao was a 23-year-old factory worker. She wrote a letter in 1980 entitled 'Why is Life's Road Getting Narrower and Narrower?' to the magazine *China's Youth*, in which she confessed her loss of faith in the communist ideals that she had believed in her youth. Over the next few months, about forty thousand young people from all over China responded to that letter.

10 For debates around these topics and events, Barmé and his collaborators provide the most informative and useful materials in English in three edited volumes: Geremie R. Barmé and John Minford, eds, *Seeds of Fire: Chinese Voiced of Conscience* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1988); Geremie R. Barmé and Linda Jaivin, eds, *New Ghosts, Old Dreams* (New York: Times Books, 1992); and Geremie R. Barmé, *In the Red: Contemporary Chinese Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

fishing, and stamp collecting. Many others were intellectually orientated, with book readings, speech contests, debating competitions, poetry and novel writing, experimental theatre, student publications, and 'cultural salons' holding invited lectures and discussions. With the large-scale introduction of Western thought (from Nietzsche, Freud, and Sartre to historians and theorists of social sciences), newly available intellectual resources inspired new thinking. While some concentrated on scholarly matters, many others were concerned with social, political, and moral issues relevant to China. Notable discussions included, among others, those on 'the Pan Xiao 潘晓 problem'⁹ and 'obscure poems' (*menglong shi* 朦胧诗) in the early period, on the fifth-generation movies on 'feudal traditions' as a reason for China's backwardness, especially in the television documentary series *River Elegy* (*Heshang* 河殇) during the years of 'Cultural Fever' (*wenhua re* 文化热), and on the student demonstration of 1986, the ten-year anniversary of the Cultural Revolution, and Wang Shuo's 王朔 novels in the late 1980s.¹⁰

What would be the proper term to characterise this variety of activities? And what are their implications? I want to argue that these practices could be seen as an *independent cultural movement*. It created discourses alternate to the orthodox ideology and significantly contributed to a broader social transformation. I am aware of plausible doubts with this argument, three of which need attention. First, these cultural practices were not truly independent, given the fact that in the 1980s all student groups and campus activities took place within the official organisational framework. Second, neither did they really qualify to use the term 'movement', as they seemed to be fragmentary actions lacking both coherent goals and clear leadership. And third, their claimed significance may also be rejected as exaggeration because those activities were apparently so ordinary and common to any Western campus that nothing in them appears extraordinary. These are legitimate questions. But I believe that we may have a different view if we put these campus activities in the historical context of 1980s China and if our analysis moves beyond the perspective of institutional structures.

First of all, it is correct to say that all public activities in the 1980s were dependent on the state in terms of formal institution. As the state overwhelmingly penetrated and occupied society, the private sector and non-governmental organisations were underdeveloped, if they existed at all. There was little institutional space and few resources outside the party-state system for cultural activities in the 1980s (especially in the early years of the decade). Both physical spaces and legally sanctioned sponsors remained in the hands of state-owned units (*danwei* 单位). Under these conditions, cultural activities of any kind (performances, publications, exhibitions, conferences, and so on) had to be held by or affiliated with a unit. To the extent that the university was also a unit, campus culture was institutionally not independent of the state. Institutional structures do matter, for in many ways they shape social practice, but nevertheless they do not determine it. The fact that all universities in 1980s China were state-owned did not mean that a certain degree of autonomy was impossible, nor did it mean teachers and students had no agency.

Secondly, the independent dimension of campus activities should be understood in terms of their discursive features and not their formal institutional setting. Campus culture in the 1980s developed discursive practices that produced discourses more or less independent of the state ideology

within institutions dependent on the state. I use a loose Foucauldian definition of discourse: a 'discursive formation' relates to distinct or invisible regularities that encompass values, norms, and attitudes in almost all aspects of life.¹¹ It is in the sense of changing discursive formation that a wide range of cultural practices in the campus could be called an independent movement. While these spontaneous activities were apparently not well integrated, as discursive practices, they converged in a nearly identical direction in terms of values, norms, and attitudes, orientated to questioning, criticising and rejecting the regularities of the orthodox ideology. It was an independent movement also in the sense that it refuted the validity of the centre-periphery relationship of the dominating and dominated discourses. The sublime seriousness of the ideological orthodoxy was derided and became the target of mocking, joking, and criticism. Abstract categories of the grand narrative, such as 'the people' (without individuals), 'socialism' (without society), 'the public' (without the private) and so on, were derided as false and their symbolic value depreciated. In this movement, mainstream discourse became marginal and its central position of domination was taken over by alternative ideas, values and attitudes.

Thirdly, the movement also cultivated a new kind of community. Young people who had felt frustrated and repressed by the official orthodoxy were able to 'find each other' in campus cultural activities. For example, students attending a speech given by a 'highly controversial figure' on one campus could quickly get to know each other in the ensuing discussion. Some of them would start to 'hang around', and this would likely lead into organising another event. Once the transcript of the speech and the discussion disseminated onto other campuses, it would connect a broader range of teachers and students, creating an informal network of readership. These people were able to associate with one another in different ways: direct and tangible, remote and imagined. Eventually, they came together to form what I call a 'discursive community of unofficial China'. They encouraged each other to express frustration, discontent, disappointment, and resistance, felt individually and privately in overt or subtle ways. For instance, a student who was reading Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* could make fun of the political study session (regularly scheduled on Wednesday afternoons) by calling it 'the unbearable boringness of Wednesday afternoons' and elicit tacit smiles from his roommates who shared the same language code. In this community, long-repressed knowledge, emotions, and aspirations were liberated and articulated in new vocabularies, invented or adopted.

By expressing their own ideas in their own languages, these young people were awakening and consciously diverging from the official discourse, not only from the conservative orthodoxy but also later from the reformist discourse, which I will discuss in the next section. Consequently, the movement exposed serious problems in the ideology — being intellectually dogmatic and contradictory, morally hypocritical, aesthetically dull, and spiritually barren. The official ideology was facing bankruptcy and could no longer provide what it claimed, including a framework for understanding the world, history and society, justification for political legitimacy, norms and rules for moral conduct, and a guide to the good and meaningful life. People connecting to and identifying with this community were no longer isolated in a fearful and vulnerable situation. They could feel 'I am not alone' and acquire a sense of belonging to their imagined community. As the community developed, it claimed the name of 'the awakening generation'.

11 See Michael Barrett, *The Politics of Truth: From Marx to Foucault* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p.123.

The Legacy of the Awakening Generation

12 See Tang Tsou, 'Back from the Brink of Revolutionary-'Feudal' Totalitarianism', in eds Victor Nee and David Mozingo, *State and Society in Contemporary China* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), pp.53-88.

On the eve of my departure to study abroad, a friend of mine had a farewell dinner for me. He was a senior theorist of the party, reformist, and admirer of Hu Yaobang 胡耀邦 (1915-89). It was in the summer of 1991, the time that the nation was struggling to recover from the tragedy of June fourth and yet trying to find a way to move forward. On that evening, he revealed a deep sense of regret and sorrow as he felt that the ruling party was losing the support and trust of young people. 'Losing the young means losing the future', he said to me. He thought that even after the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign, the party still had a chance to regain the support of young people by citing an example from the celebration of the National Day parade in 1984, when Peking University students surprised the audience with an unexpected banner reading 'Hello Xiaoping!' He believed that young students supported reform and opposed these 'stubborn conservatives'. He missed these early years of the 1980s, nostalgically wondering if things could have been otherwise. 'Where did things go wrong?' he asked, and followed this with: 'Haven't we been open enough? Do we give you too much freedom or not enough? You do not oppose the entire system, do you? If we started all over again, what would they expect us to do?'

I ponder these questions but was not able to answer them, instead replying with my own question: 'What would have been your expectations for our young people?' 'Patience,' he replied firmly. 'I hoped you could have been more patient and given the reformists some more time.' In his view, there could have been another way, which would have avoided the June fourth tragedy. Here was his version of *The Road Not Taken* and hence the sense of a missed opportunity.

Would the road he wished our young people to have taken be connected to the one I did not take? To put the question less metaphorically, what if young people simply joined the reformist camp, followed its leadership and fought against these 'stubborn conservatives'? Would that have been a way out? More than twenty years have passed, and today I can say with some confidence that there is a profound reason why the road we wished for was not taken.

During the early period of the reform era, there were some encouraging developments, including the rehabilitation of many university professors who had been repressed during the Cultural Revolution, the relaxation of ideological controls, and the import of foreign culture and ideas. Later on, reformist leaders in the party decided to yield its strict supervision of social relationships, consumption, and lifestyle to individual choice and market forces. Tsou Tang has labelled these changes a historic watershed, before which the state had steadily expanded its reach, and after which it began to retreat from an increasingly wide social sphere.¹² As a result, political criteria were not as strict as before. The resulting compromise can be described as a retreat from 'everything is forbidden except what is allowed' to 'everything is allowed except what is forbidden'. This gave many intellectuals and students the idea that the coalition favouring the official reform agenda could increase intellectual autonomy and pave the way for the freedom of public expression. It was against this background that the new campus culture emerged and boomed.

However, while reformist discourse was intended to adapt to the new situation of post-Mao China, it was theoretically less coherent than the conservative orthodoxy and unsustainable in the long run. Consequently, the

reform project of the 1980s had caught itself in a dilemma. It had to rely on principles of the orthodox ideology that in time it intended to abandon. This eventually resulted in a serious problem of political legitimacy. In Mao's era, official ideology had claims to be both science and religion. Political legitimacy on the one hand made truth-claims with a modern scientific guise, and on the other appealed to the sacredness of the revolution and the charisma of revolutionary leaders. It was, in a sense, a mix of political philosophy and political theology. These two elements reinforced each other and became as one, providing the party-state a political legitimacy that could not be challenged. Following the death of Mao, the rise of Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 (1904–97) in 1978 drove the party in the direction of 'de-Maoisation', involving the repudiation of 'the personality cult' and the dogmatic excesses of the Cultural Revolution and the justification of pursuing economic production and material interests. In the struggle against party conservatives, who insisted on the 'Two Whatevers', reformists launched the 'thought liberation movement' (*sixiang jiefang yundong* 思想解放运动) in a coalition with intellectuals within the party system.¹³ The movement started with a debate on the 'criteria for testing truth' — an ideological confrontation between those supporting the 'Two Whatevers' and those opposed to them. The debate ended with Deng Xiaoping's strong endorsement of the principle that 'practice is the sole criterion for verifying truth'. He sharply criticised dogmatism, calling on the party and the people to adhere to the practice of seeking truth from facts, smashing spiritual shackles, and emancipating their minds.

While 'thought liberation' was ideologically necessary to legitimise the reform agenda outlined by the reformist leadership, the movement virtually eliminated political theology from the official ideology, and also, at least in principle, made political philosophy open to rational criticism and empirical testing. As political theology was abandoned, the legitimacy of the ruling party had to be justified in a rational way, by being tested and subjected to 'the sole criterion of practice'. But there was an insoluble tension between a monopoly on ideological truth and scientific testability. As Leszek Kolakowski explained, ideologies 'want the facts to confirm them in the same way that scientific hypotheses are confirmed, being thereby compelled to distort and conceal unfavourable facts. They are supposed to possess absolute truth and to be testable at the same time.'¹⁴ But once the space of rational debate and criticism is opened to the public, scientific testability allows counter-examples and counter-arguments to contradict the assumed truth of ideology. In this regard, the 'thought liberation movement' opened up a Pandora's box that released self-defeating intellectual forces. In other words, to claim absolute truth and, therefore, absolute political authority, would be extremely difficult if not impossible. 'Thought liberation' created a discursive space where radical challenges to the orthodox ideology were conceivable, which went beyond the political boundary that the party, both the reformist and the conservative wings, had to secure.

It is not surprising that these young faculty and students who seriously adopted thought liberation would eventually experience disillusionment with the official reform agenda. The Anti-Bourgeois Liberalisation Campaign in 1987 resumed the ideological and political repression that the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign in 1983 had attempted to achieve. It made clear that thought liberation was not allowed to cross the line that the reformers and conservatives agreed on. There existed an intellectual and political 'forbidden zone', where rational debate and criticism were subject to indis-

13 Hua Guofeng, the then Chairman of the CCP, advocated that 'whatever policy decisions Chairman Mao made must be firmly upheld, and whatever instructions Chairman Mao gave must be unswervingly followed'.

14 Leszek Kolakowski, *Modernity on Endless Trial* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), p.234.

putable and absolute authority. Young people soon realised that the limited freedom they could sometimes enjoy was not protected by formal and legal guarantees, but was merely something vouchsafed by the party. The criticism voiced by intellectuals and students was contained within the ideological scope and institutional framework designated by the party's leadership (albeit the reformist faction). Any radical moves beyond the party's needs and limitations would not be tolerated and, most likely, would be suppressed. But having felt disillusionment does not mean that young people were willing to accept and live with the status quo. Disillusionment created a condition for awakening. As the 1989 event indicated, many attempted to conceive their own visions of the future and formulate their own agendas, instead of taking whatever road the party (even its reformist leadership) directed.

What, then, does 'independence' mean in the context of the campus cultural movement of the 1980s. It is true that young people in general preferred the reformists to the conservative and that they would support the reformist if a political choice had to be made between the two camps. But it would be a mistake to assume that the way the awakening generation denied the validity of the existing situation could still be fully understood as a 'reformist-conservative struggle'. It is fair to say that the awakening generation was born in the reform era and owed its growth to the reformist camp of the party. In the view of many reformists, the relationship between the party reformist and young people was conceived as being that of a benevolent father and his loyal children. However, this view was still deeply embedded in the patriarchy that has such a long history in the Chinese tradition. The awakening generation began by challenging the orthodox ideology that the conservatives wanted to defend but, along with its growth, ended up rejecting the patriarchy (benevolent or not) itself. Throughout the 1980s, this generation came to realise that replacing old players with new ones might be good but was not enough; the point was to change the game itself.

The very meaning of 'awakening' is to refuse blindly to follow any authority (be it reformist or conservative) and to establish the principle that, in imitation of Socrates' famous sentence, 'an unexamined doctrine is not worth believing'. This was a paradigm shift in both a cognitive and a normative sense. It led to a new 'social imaginary' in which politics are conceived as dialogues among morally equal members of a political community, not the monologue of an elite group, and political legitimacy should be justified by critical and rational discussion not self-claimed truth. This is, in my view, the true and far-reaching legacy of the awakening generation.

I'd like to end the essay by citing Gu Cheng's 顾城 famous poem *Yidairan* (*A Generation* 一代人). Only two lines long, it accurately captures the spirit of the awakening generation:

黑夜给了我黑色的眼睛
我却用它寻找光明

The night has given me dark eyes,
but I use them to look for light.

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