



# East Asian History

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

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## GUEST EDITOR'S PREFACE

 Shih-Wen Sue Chen

The death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and the rise of Deng Xiaoping in 1978 with his policy of Reform and Opening Up led to a series of major changes in Chinese society in the decade that followed. The 1980s has been characterised as a decade of transition, of various 'fevers' (*re* 热 in Chinese), of discos, karaoke, pop music, fashion, Flying Pigeon bikes, radios, and wristwatches. This period has been frequently overlooked by researchers who focus either on the Cultural Revolution or the rise of commercialisation and commodity culture in the 1990s and beyond. The few English-language studies conducted on the 1980s have concentrated on topics such as intellectual culture, high politics, or reform economics, and have mostly viewed this period through the lens of the June Fourth Incident at Tiananmen Square. Publications focusing on the 1980s, such as *Returning to the 1980s* (Chongfan bashi niandai 重返八十年代), *1980s and I* (Wo he bashi niandai 我和八十年代), and *The Eighties: Interviews* (Bashi Niandai Fangtanlu 八十年代访谈录), reflect a sense of nostalgia for the decade which has been characterised as 'full of potential and freedom', 'an age of innocence, idealism, and enthusiasm', and an era where the cultural aspirations of the Chinese people were widened as a result of the 'open door' policy.<sup>1</sup>

Deng's new economic policies and guidelines provided people with more access to material goods and services, more opportunities to acquire knowledge of the outside world, and more leisure time. It is worth reconsidering this early reform period by focusing on the everyday and examining how the lives of ordinary people were transformed during this time. The many aspects of changes to everyday life and how they influenced the outlooks and experiences of people living in the 1980s have largely been ignored because daily life is often dismissed as mundane, trivial, repetitive, or depoliticised. However, as Henri Lefebvre and others have argued, the political cannot be divorced from the everyday and the political is often hidden in the everyday. Ben Highmore, interpreting Lefebvre, states, 'the singularity of the everyday event (a woman

1 Cheng Kuangwei 程光炜, ed., *Chongfan bashi niandai* 重返八十年代 (Beijing: Beijing da xue chu ban she, 2009); Ma Guochuan 馬國川, ed., *Wo he bashi niandai* 我和八十年代 (Hong Kong: Sanlian shudian, 2010). Zha Jianying, ed., *Bashi Niandai Fangtanlu* 八十年代访谈录 (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2006). S. Wang, 'The Politics of Private Time: Changing Leisure Patterns in Urban China,' in ed. D.S. Davis, R. Kraus, B. Naughton and E.J. Perry, *Urban Spaces in Contemporary China: The Potential for Autonomy and Community in Post-Mao China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp.149–72 (at p.166).

2 Ben Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p.25.

buying sugar, for example) reverberates with social and psychic desire as well as with the structures of national and global exchange'.<sup>2</sup>

The papers in this issue illuminate the plurality of relationships and networks of new voices that emerged in this decade. Focusing on a changing religious landscape, Scott Pacey discusses the re-emergence of Buddhism and its relationship with atheism in 1980s China, examining articles published in the Chinese Buddhist Association's journal *Voice of Dharma* (Fayin 法音), Li Ping's novel *When the Sunset Clouds Disappear* (Wanxia xiaoshi de shihou 晚霞消失的时候), and other examples from popular culture to delineate how they aspired to enlightenment. Utiraruto Otehode and Benjamin Penny examine the role of activist practitioners in the Qigong boom of the 1980s, focusing on the case of Soaring Crane Qigong (*Hexiangzhuang Qigong* 鹤翔庄气功) activists in Luoyang municipality. Turning to literature, Rui Kunze analyses pulp science fiction published in the early reform era, using sociocultural and psychoanalytical approaches to dissect the texts. She argues that these stories reflect concerns about the national project of modernisation, the control of the Chinese Communist Party, and the reading publics' anxieties and desires as they engage with a new economy.

The two invited papers present recollections of the authors' personal experiences of 1980s China. Liu Qing 刘擎, who was hailed as a model student by the Shanghai-based newspaper *Wenhui Daily* (Wenhui bao 文汇报) in 1983 while studying for a masters degree in chemical engineering, reflects on the new campus culture that emerged in this period. He characterises the various activities happening across campuses as an 'independent cultural movement' and places them in the historical context of 1980s China, pointing out how they challenged and questioned the dominant official ideology. Sang Ye 桑晔 writes on what was lost and gained in the 1980s, using diverse examples such as the 'Four Gentlemen' of the 1980s (Weng Yongxi 翁永曦, Huang Jiangnan 黄江南, Zhu Jiaming 朱嘉明, and Wang Qishan 王岐山), the changes to public toilets, and the 1984 survey of a county in Heilongjiang province to illustrate the changes that occurred in this decade.

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The seemingly singular or fragmented nature of the 'snapshots' of everyday life described can be combined to provide a multifaceted portrait of how people lived and dealt with transitions in society as a result of Reform and Opening Up.