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Contact [eastasianhistory@anu.edu.au](mailto:eastasianhistory@anu.edu.au)

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

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## 1984: WHAT'S BEEN LOST AND WHAT'S BEEN GAINED

李 Sang Ye 桑晔

For China the country and myself the individual, the 1980s was quite a special decade, and to list the multifarious aspirations and demands and all the shifting situations of that period, layer upon complicated layer, would present an insurmountable task. I will discuss three disparate topics: what's been lost, what's been gained, and lost and found.

This paper has been adapted from a speech presented at the workshop "I Want to Fly High": Chinese Aspirations in the 1980s', 18-19 February 2013, held by the Australian Centre on China in the World at The Australian National University.

### *What's Been Lost*

On 16 January 1980, the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) convened a meeting of leading party, state and army cadres, at which Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 (1904-97) delivered a 'Report on the Present Situation and the Tasks Before Us'. Such meetings differed from the usual party gatherings attended by Central Committee members in that the grassroots workers, peasants, and soldier representatives who made up the majority of the Central Committee — what are known as 'flower vases and hand-raising machines' — were completely shut out. They were told, 'You're all busy, so you don't need to attend'. Such a meeting was held at only one other time in the history of the party. It would be some nine years later, late at night on 19 May 1989, at a time when the Communists were faced with an intensifying protest movement in Tiananmen Square. On that occasion, the premier Li Peng (1928-) 李鹏 first called on his audience to 'mobilise in this emergency and to curb turmoil in a clear-cut manner', and then Yang Shangkun 杨尚昆 (1907-98) declared, 'We have no choice but to move a group of the PLA to the vicinity of Beijing'.

But, back to the meeting of 16 January 1980. In his report, Deng Xiaoping solemnly announced that in the decade of the 1980s, the CCP and the People's Government would carry out three major tasks: first, it would continue to oppose hegemony and safeguard world peace; second, it would bring back the

province of Taiwan into the embrace of the motherland and realise national unification; and third, it would strengthen economic construction and step up the pace of the Four Modernisations.

How time flies. Most of the participants in that meeting are now dead, and those three major tasks not only went uncompleted in the 1980s but also in the 1990s, and now, more than 30 years on, it's still hard to say what the state of play is.

Opposing hegemony was a little strange. It seemed that the more China opposed it, the more hegemony spread throughout the world. When the old man made his speech, he was facing 2.5 hegemony — the United States and the Soviet Union as major hegemony, and Vietnam as a minor hegemony — but at least the other countries in the vicinity did not dare to harbour ambitions, or did not do so openly. The rise of a great central power embarking on a road to revival — what a wonderful thing — but in the end they screwed it up somehow, and even what were thought to be just fawning, servile dogs and cats raised their heads and bared their teeth and claws. Look no further than the ten countries in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations: apart from Cambodia, which is just thinking of ways of getting more money, each of them is a party to 'hyping the South China Sea issue'. The Chinese authorities are helpless before their messing around and can only complain to all that 'small countries cannot bully great powers'. The domestic situation is even worse, with hegemony actually on the increase rather than lessening as hegemony 'manipulated by outside forces' run rampant. It is said that Tibetan separatists want to carve off a large chunk of land, and East Turkestan separatists also want to carve off a large chunk of land, hence resisting foreign aggression requires internal pacification, but internal pacification first requires resisting foreign aggression, which makes the complex task of opposing hegemony even more complicated. I suspect that when Deng Xiaoping drew up the agenda in the 1980s, he never would have imagined our world's swift, colourful transformation, much less that the cost of safeguarding national peace — not to mention world peace — would be so high. If it had occurred to him, Deng would certainly have set at least a century for the task, rather than a decade, with the notion that he could lead the industrious, intrepid, and wise Chinese people to victory before the sun had dawned on the 1990s.

The return of Taiwan to the motherland and the unification of the country is a pretty awkward formulation. If this province of the Republic of China or People's Republic of China were in the hands of the Americans or the Japanese or the Koreans, then its return to the motherland would be an issue. The problem is that the island was in the hands of President Chiang of the Republic of China, and today it remains under the management of President Tsai Ying-wen of the Republic of China, so what does it mean to talk of Taiwan's 'return' to the motherland? Fortunately, this awkward formulation did not seem all that awkward at the time. In those days, the Chinese people knew that the emergence of 'Taiwan's return to the motherland' was just a euphemism for 'the liberation of Taiwan', which had been shouted for three decades. And, in fact, it was Mao Zedong 毛澤東(1893–1976) in 1961 who first used 'Taiwan's return to the motherland', but he had something else entirely in mind. The man believed that there was no such thing as the Taiwan problem, and the supposed problem between the mainland and Taiwan was actually a problem between China and the United States. US imperialism was the actual sover-

eign of Taiwan, and American imperialists ought to give it back. In Mao's hands, that simple situation got worked up into something complicated, and then Deng worked it into something even more complicated. Well stocked in both conciliatory smiles and aggressive bluster, both of which had their uses, the end result was that at noon on 16 May 1989, when Deng Xiaoping entertained Gorbachev in the Great Hall of the People, he admitted, 'There is one thing I'm afraid I cannot accomplish, and that is the Taiwan Question'. Almost three decades have passed and the situation is still dragging on without end. A country has risen to the extent that it is poised to overtake the world's largest economy, but it is one country with two systems, and in addition to that it is a country split in two. This is unprecedented in history.

The task of economic construction seems to have gone the furthest toward completion, and has continued to the present day, so that Wen Jiabao 温家宝 could assure the heroic souls in North Korea, 'Now our country is strong, and our people's lives are happy'. After a series of doublings beginning in the 1980s, China's GDP reached 40 trillion *yuan* in 2010 — second in the world. The ordinary people of China ought to be happy, but they can't really laugh: medical treatment is hard, schooling is hard, housing is hard, food is unsafe, drink is unsafe, and even breathing is unsafe, so many people believe that life is not happy. At the same time, the enemy of the Chinese people, American imperialism and the outside world it represents, lives well, and their healthy and contented poor enjoy the hearty fruits of China's reform: a flood of cheap, low-quality consumer goods. So too do their jackal-thin rich enjoy the hearty fruits of China's reform: the dividends of free-flowing capital. It is also said that this happy outside world still hasn't given up its tendency toward reckless acts and subversion, and that the only reason they behave so wantonly is that they hold a trump card. This deadly slip of paper contains a list of names of the children and grandchildren of those party, government, and army cadres who listened to Deng Xiaoping's agenda in the 1980s, and who now hold overseas deposits. The paper may be more lethal than a missile or aircraft carrier. It's the ace and, once played, the war is over before it's begun: China goes the way of the Soviet Union. And China going the way of the Soviet Union would be a grim outcome, although it does have its plus side. The first two major tasks that have remained incomplete from the 1980s to today would be easily solved, finished without even acting on them.

There are many many other losses among the gains and losses, and those addressed here are but a small number of examples. China's missed opportunities in the 1980s are probably more regrettable.

### *What's Been Gained*

Looking back today, the 1980s was an uncertain, transitional decade that saw the exit of some certain old things, while some anticipated new things did not actually arrive, and thus, in those days people, no matter who they were, often found themselves in awkward situations. Sensitive young people felt more stifled under rediscovered authoritarian control, and while the elderly ought to have felt better, that was not necessarily the case because they had no way to rid their minds of the shadow of class struggle and the campaigns they were frequently reminded of. And so it was that in this decade the expectations for flight became exaggerated and many people simply wanted to leave without any consideration for whether they'd be able

to return once they left. Still, there were those whose ambitions mirrored the ambitions of the three major issues on Deng Xiaoping's agenda, and they firmly believed that Chinese history would experience a fundamental turning point within the decade and, whether tomorrow or the following year, everything would be possible and one should not miss the opportunity to take part.

In Beijing in 1980, four young people — Weng Yongxi 翁永曦, Huang Jiangnan 黄江南, Zhu Jiaming 朱嘉明, and Wang Qishan 王岐山 — threw themselves into the formulation of the initial reform strategy. Based on their respective strengths, they were called 'the Four Gentlemen of systemic reform': Weng Yongxi the brains, Huang Jiangnan the mouth, Zhu Jiaming the letters, and Wang Qishan the legs. The first three — the brains, mouth, and letters — were truly exceptional, but Wang was the legs in name only. He ran fast because he owned a beaten-up motorcycle, and anyone who had a motorcycle in those days was practically a superman. By the last year of the decade, the Four Gentlemen had become senior cadres in the party. Most of them took the wrong side in the June fourth disturbance and were excluded from the centre of power by Jiang Zemin 江泽民 and Hu Jintao 胡锦涛 after him, and they either went abroad or turned to business. Wang Qishan was the exception. He is now on the Standing Committee as the final member China's seven-strong ruling group.

The greatest contribution made by the Four Gentlemen in the 1980s was the '24-character principle' of the early reform period: 'curb demand, stabilise prices; develop appropriately, seek stability; reform slowly, adjust repeatedly; concentrate the large, disperse the small'. Deng Xiaoping and Chen Yun 陈云 seized upon this mantra and proposed the formulation, 'Reform must be beneficial to adjustment, adjustment means retreat on certain fronts, and the retreat must be sufficient', to advance by retreating and thus implement economic reform. However, if we consider the matter from another perspective, the Four Gentlemen's velvet glove approach was actually harmful. When they came up with these 24 characters, election campaigns for urban grassroots People's Congress representatives were in full swing, and the candidates, in some university constituencies in particular, proposed ideas for comprehensive economic, political, social, and institutional reform in their speeches and on their posters that were more enlightened and more thorough than the new Xiaoping policy, and whose broad support pitted the two forces in a desperate struggle. Hence the Four Gentlemen's greatest contribution could be said to be providing the CPC Central Committee with an effective means of maintaining the old institution and fighting those outside it, thereby prolonging its life. Whether this is merit or transgression is hard to say even now.

Elections and campaigns for grassroots People's Congress representatives in major cities, particularly among university constituencies; the Five Stresses, Four Beauties, and Three Loves; special economic zones; the Strike Hard campaigns; eradicating Spiritual Pollution; the 'break-through gold medal' at the Los Angeles Olympic Games; One Country, Two Systems; No Turning Back in modern art; Chinese character input methods; a billion people, nine of ten in business, and the rest waiting to open accounts; the dual pricing system in industry; studying Old Deng Xiaoping during the day, listening to young Deng Lijun 邓丽君 (1953–95) at night; 'everyone's a cheat, and the Henanese are the masters'; the Tiananmen

Square protests and bloodshed ... these are the big issues when talking about the 1980s.

Looking outward, Philips brought out the world's first compact disc; the rescue at the US embassy in Tehran failed, showing that superpowers aren't invincible; the two Germanies began to dismantle the Berlin Wall ... these too were big issues that had a large influence on the Chinese people when talking about the 1980s.

Everyone who talks about the 1980s, be they someone who personally experienced them, someone who was an observer, or a researcher who came later, will bring up lots of issues, and perhaps some of the demands will be enlarged, some of the facts reduced, and some things might be quietly papered over — the history of the Chinese people has always been written thus, so it is not surprising.

If I must pick out something that China gained from among the gains and losses of the 1980s, I'd try as hard as possible to choose something uncontroversial: urban Chinese since that decade began to get public toilets in which they could shut the door so that no one else could see how they shitted and pissed. Before the 1980s, China did not have stalls with individual partitions in public toilets, much less doors on those stalls. Public toilets consisted of an open line of latrines, the larger toilets with two lines facing each other, the smaller ones with only one line, and a short one at that. The distinction among different classes of public toilets lay in the construction materials used for the pits and the floor. The public toilet in Tiananmen Square was the best in China, with inside walls of marble, terrazzo floors, and two lines of white ceramic squatters where you and your friends could choose neighbouring pits to help each other out, or facing pits to engage in friendly conversation. In addition to the lack of partitions and doors, one other distinguishing characteristic of the public toilets was that they were rivers of faeces and filthy beyond belief. So whenever someone returned from a trip to mainland China, whether a foreigner or a compatriot from Hong Kong or Macao, one of the most important pieces of information they'd return to was the toilet, and the toilet was one of their most significant experiences. According to CY Leung 梁振英, the current chief executive of Hong Kong, in the summer of 1980, when he was just 26 years old, he was heading steadily northward from Hong Kong providing professional land zoning consultation for China's special economic zone construction, and at the behest of Liang Xian 梁宪, a researcher with the Policy Research Office of the Merchants Bureau of the Ministry of Transport (*Jiaotongbu zhaoshang ju zhengce yanjiu shi* 交通部招商局政策研究室) (now the Research Division of China Merchants Group, *Zhongguo zhaoshang ju jituan yanjiu bu* 中国招商局集团研究部), he used Hong Kong's public toilets 'that you can shut yourself up inside' as a template for stamping out copies in mainland China.

Without question, doors for public toilets was a major event, creating room for debate on a wide range of matters including public health, personal privacy, urban construction, and the growth of the middle class.

### *Lost and Found*

I have had great opportunities as a writer, for in the 1980s literature still mattered in China. Roland Barthes wrote, 'I don't know if it should be

called an intellectual or a thinker, but at any rate it's a new type of non-author figure', but this new figure had not really taken the stage in China, and although the tradition of the rule of literature was in decline, it was still far from dead. Literature still mattered, and literature could be used to say things, and this was extremely important for us at the time. Chinese history, particularly modern and contemporary history, was off limits at the time if you were a nobody, so the oral histories that Zhang Xinxin 张辛欣 and I collected in *Chinese Lives* were published in China under the category 'oral documentary literature'. 'Oral', and 'documentary', together with 'literature' gave us the pass we needed, and without 'literature' on there, it's hard to imagine what we would have done.

In brief, I wrote two books in the 1980s, one that was translated into more than ten different languages and sold quite well, and the other, despite being co-authored with the noted Australian writer Nicholas Jose, was a total loss because of me. I also took two long-distance bike trips, one in 1986 along the old course of the Yellow River, and the other in 1987 from Adelaide to Darwin.

In addition to this, in 1984 I helped out a friend conduct a survey of rural society for which I chose an incredibly tacky name, 'Memories Left for the Future' (*Liuge weilai de huiyi* 留给未来的回忆). In the three years following, I only spoke of the survey with a very limited circle of friends.

The choice of 1984 was, of course, due to the significance of the year: Big Brother is Watching You. But it's also because conspicuous changes took place in China that year; for example, some people no longer held out any hope or gratitude. On National Day, a Peking University student named Guo Jianwei 郭建威 and his associates held up a home-made banner reading 'Hello, Xiaoping'. Besides this, there were the small calculations I will now discuss.

I conducted the survey in a county in Heilongjiang province that was home to a total of 684,000 people from fifteen ethnic groups. With ethnic Manchus numbering 130,000, or nearly twenty per cent of the total, it had the highest Manchu population out of any of the several dozen counties in the black soil of old Manchuria.

The entire Manchu population in this county had come from Beijing, the capital of the Qing dynasty, and its old capital Mukden (now Shenyang) and had emigrated beginning in the twentieth year of the Jiaqing Emperor (1815). The first year 1,000 people were sent over, and they erected eight banner (*qi* 旗) camps; five years later another 2,000 people were sent over, to form 120 banner villages. By 1984, the first eight banner camps had become townships, and the majority of the 120 banner villages were now villages.

These Manchu people sent to the wilderness from the capital were the idle scions of the eight banners. For the long-term stability of the Qing empire, the emperor sent them out of the city to open up the countryside. They were the rusticated youth of the imperial system, and ought to be considered the ancestors of the first red guards sent down to the countryside for re-education by Mao Zedong.

The bannermen's children had enjoyed several lifetimes of ease in the capital and knew nothing of farming, nor were they willing to farm, so their source of food and clothing after emigration came from ethnic Han migrants from the provinces of Hebei and Shandong. A landlord-tenant relation-



ship gradually took shape between the two ethnic groups, with most of the Manchu people becoming landlords. To satisfy the needs of these landlords, the Xibe 錫伯 people, who were adept at cultivating the dry land; the Mongol people, who were adept at raising livestock; the Korean people, who were adept at working the rice paddies; and the Muslim people, who were principally engaged in food service, also willingly migrated by the hundreds to settle here.

Through interviews conducted during the survey, recollections supported by formal documentation prior to 1945 (when the Communist Party regime was established here) of the basic annual income for local farmers were as follows: for first-class long-term employment, the equivalent of 2,000 kg of corn, or slightly more; for second-class long-term employment, the equivalent of about 1,500 kg of corn; the lowest annual income, of 'half-person' minors was the equivalent of 500 kg of corn. After 1945, from the land reform to the people's communes, farmers' incomes decreased every year, until by 1962, they had an annual per capita average of 45 *yuan* (or the equivalent of just 70 kg of corn, not enough to survive on), the lowest level in history.

Following the interviews, a survey of income and expenditure and durable goods ownership of 120 rural households was conducted using systematic sampling methods. The 120 households surveyed comprised 580 family members with a total income of 327,000 *yuan*, or 408 *yuan* per capita, nine times that of 1962. Total expenditure was 260,000 *yuan* (a deficit). Living expenditure, mostly food, clothing, fuel, household goods, and medical fees, accounted for 135,000 *yuan*. Culture and entertainment expenditure was just 3,000 *yuan*, the apportioned cinema fee. Durable goods ownership was: bicycles 56, sewing machines 39, alarm clocks 34, black-and-white televisions 3, tape recorders 3, sofas 4, wardrobes 26, writing desks 27, beds 20. The owners of the 3 televisions also owned the 3 tape recorders, 7 of the bicycles, the 4 sofas, 3 wardrobes, 3 desks, and 4 beds. These 3 households had assets of 10,000 *yuan*, and had become rich first.

Some of you may be familiar with rural life in Heilongjiang and could point out that many local people are accustomed to sleeping on the heated sleeping platform (*kang* 炕) instead of in a bed, and therefore for me to say that the 120 households own just 20 beds is unfair and unkind and alarmist. But the fact is that I really am that bad: in light of the fact that most locals sleep on the *kang*, we counted anyone that had a *kang* covered by a mattress as a bed. The problem is that more than a hundred households didn't even have a mattress but slept directly on the earthen *kang* and a straw mat.

They were poor. But a friend of mine who read this survey surprisingly exclaimed, ah, the abundant northeast — it's not too poor. He said he'd conducted a similar survey in the Dingxi 定西 area of Gansu 甘肅 in 1983, in a rather more extreme village in which more than half of the households had total assets of less than ten *yuan*. A mud-and-straw shack not worth even a cent, two rice bowls, and less than a pair of trousers per person was all these families had, just like in the vicious attacks of the bandit Chiang Kai-shek 蔣介石 (1887–1975) in Taiwan.

Upon completion, the survey was not published. They were 'memories left for the future', so they were left for the future. Leaving them for the future: I really had energy back then, and I believed that the future would arrive. The future I imagined was 2014, when I'd be 59, or my last year before

retirement according to standard practice in those days. I planned to return before retirement to observe its transformations and metamorphosis, what had been lost and gained, and whether it retained its charm.

Then, using the material from 1984 and 2014, I would write my final book.

I've already said why it was 1984, but I never said why it was that place. I chose it because it is a countryside established when the old emperor, in order to oppose revisionism and to prevent a peaceful evolution, drove people from the cities to the countryside. The original new rural reform, under the reform and opening up of Deng Xiaoping and his successors, ought to be urbanisation, but at what time and in what form this urbanisation ought to happen is a very interesting question. In the 30 years after 1984, I would devote 30 years to waiting for urbanisation. Perhaps this was sufficient, perhaps not, but at any rate it would be a test of my patience. Apart from the above, I chose this land, uninhabited until the arrival of the bannermen and, therefore, a place absent of other traceable history, as a contrivance. Its earliest records are in 1815; it is clean, simple, and easily managed and manipulated.

For nearly 30 years, I had been past that place many times but never stopped, because of the anxiety of nearness, and because I had to leave it aside until later. But I kept ties with some of the people there, and through them, I know that there's an expressway, an airport, a high-speed railway station, joint ventures, and real estate developments — half of the eight banner encampments-turned-townships are now thickets of tall buildings. And I also know that in many of the villages the water is undrinkable; unless you want to get sick, you drink bottled water. Many of the villages have no young people; they've gone off to find work in Shenzhen or Beijing, and people hired from populous provinces like Sichuan and Henan work the fields.

Finally, I will answer a question that will inevitably come up: why did I choose to use systematic sampling from among the four commonly used sampling methods? I was well aware that this method is not simple to operate, and is particularly difficult for just one or two workers, but it can effectively improve the accuracy of the estimate. In simple random sampling, there is no association or exclusion between elements, and since I was aware that elements varied to a great degree, using this method would be deceptive. Stratified sampling can ensure that the sample structure is close to the population structure, but it requires selecting stratification variables and was highly inconvenient for me. Cluster sampling requires less work because it combines clusters, but accuracy suffers, and since I was young and fit, I was unwilling to do it that simply.

*Sang Ye*

Australian Centre on China in the World  
The Australian National University  
sangye001@hotmail.com