Foreword

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Much of world literature, both fictional and autobiographical, is devoted to tales of coming of age: the provincial moving to the city; the young traveler discovering the sights and smells and unfamiliar customs of new cultures; the awakening of one's sexuality; the passionate adherence to, and often later disillusion with, political beliefs; the coming to terms with one's own family; the realization of the horrors and wonders of the world; the thrill of making art and finding others equally thrilled to be making art.

The extraordinary essays in this book belong to the genre, and yet are not quite like anything else within it, for these are stories told about a unique and unrepeatable political and social moment, and told not from the heat of that moment, but from the perspective of some thirty or forty years later. These writers were not provincials enamored with, and bewildered by, the cosmopolitan. They were educated urban youths, largely from prominent families, who were suddenly transformed into manual laborers in the alien worlds of poor villages

in the remote countryside, massive government work projects, and even, in one case here, a prison cell on death row. They were young people adrift not in the usual crosscurrents of youth, but caught in unpredictable whirlpools of national trauma.

Revolutionary China was, in its way, as hierarchical as Confucian China. The Cultural Revolution—in which many of these writers participated—upended the hierarchy, yet still retained the ancient system of genetic determination. One's family was one's fate, and these youths became the victims of what many of them had set in motion. Formerly on track to important positions because of their parents, they had now become "dog spawn," the bottom of the heap, and the perennial adolescent sentiment of "not belonging" had been made literal by the government. The traditional conflicts between young people—especially the artistically inclined—and their parents were distorted and hugely magnified, for it was the state, not the children, renouncing the parents, and the children suffering for their parents' political sins.

What strikes an outsider reading these memoirs is the unfettered emotion and continual fickleness—not of the youths, but of the state. The adolescents themselves have no choice but to be reserved—to behave, in a way, like parents—for it is the state that acts like teenagers. Like a nightmarish version of high school social dynamics, those who deviate from conformity are shunned or punished, and what is considered conformity seems to be in constant flux. "In" (revolutionary) becomes "out" (counterrevolutionary) and back again, but with, of course, dire consequences. Friends disappear into prisons—and one wonders if one will join them—and suddenly reappear, or don't. Some have mental breakdowns or commit suicide. Yesterday's flower becomes today's "poisonous weed." "Trying to understand what is going on," the universal hallmark of youth, here pertains not to emotional turmoil or the general way of the world, but to political upheavals and reversals

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that were occurring far from the villages where these young people were marooned.

Unusual for coming-of-age stories, there is the vague awakening but no realization of sexual passion, as the society maintained strict repression. The word for teenage love was "delinquency"; one needed to "struggle forcefully against selfish thoughts." Good-looking girls and boys are seen from afar, and remembered here with great longing. A young woman is expelled from the "propaganda team" because natural voluptuousness, however involuntary, is counterrevolutionary. Clothes are baggy and shapeless; the girls show off their allure with a brightly colored barrette in their hair or the glimpse of a flowery blouse; the boys slick their hair with oil. In one comic account, a young man sends a love letter composed entirely (and safely) with lines from Chairman Mao: "We come together for a common revolutionary purpose. We must share intelligence about important affairs." Another hands the object of his affection a blank piece of paper.

Yet it was in these isolated and artistically starved circumstances—that blank piece of paper—where so many found the art that would occupy their lives: sketching portraits for the villagers as keepsakes or painting revolutionary posters, improvising scenes for the continually changing content of revolutionary plays, discovering that repetitive work was conducive to writing poems in one's head, producing a handwritten or hand-stenciled newspaper, taking officially sanctioned documentary photographs, singing songs and creating new lyrics for them, surreptitiously circulating often-forbidden books and secretly copying passages into notebooks, retelling the stories from old novels or inventing new ones to entertain the comrades in the absence of any other diversions. In one memorable scene in this book, a famous chef in prison recalls, for his starving cell mates, the exacting recipes of his most elaborate dishes. Imagination filled an unadorned world.

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The intensity and vivacity of these experiences is apparent in the astonishing detail of these memories that are decades old: the sights, sounds, and smells of the factories and farms; the passionate debates, away from the required and censored meetings, about art and the future of China; the large and small deprivations of living in poverty; the wisdom and traditions of the folk, as well as their sometimes stubborn ignorance, in villages so remote that one old man was even seen wearing a queue; the snatched festive moments and the small victories of adolescent ingenuity in evading the system.

For one writer here, "each day seemed like a year"; for another, it was "truly the best time of my life." But for all of them, the government program of "struggle, criticism, and transformation" had opposite and unforeseen consequences. These budding intellectuals were sent into the villages and factories to integrate them into the national collective, but the result of stranding them in isolation, so far from home and with limited access to ideas and art, was a preoccupation with, and a discovery of, their own selves. It was, strangely, almost like the Native American practice of sending a young person out into the wilderness on a "spirit quest." They did indeed struggle, criticize, and transform, but not in the intended manner, and they would go on to become the major creators of literature, art, and films in twentieth-century China. The art they later produced was scandalously subjective and personal, sometimes surreal, and contrary to the reigning dogmas of social realism. The collective had inadvertently created individuals, and those individuals, the "orphans of the times," would lead a revolution within the revolution.

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Preface

Li Tuo
Translated by Theodore Huters

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It's hard to imagine that eighteen years have passed since *The Seventies*[1] was first published in Hong Kong.

Since that time the world has undergone earth-shaking changes.

When Bei Dao and I were editing this collection, did we think that when the English version appeared eighteen years later that it would face a world that had undergone such tremendous change? That it would be read by a group of readers in this new world who were complete strangers to "the seventies" and could not understand it all?

Of course not. Our illusion at the time centered around whether we could produce sequels[2] to *The Seventies*—and not just one volume,

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1 *The Seventies* is the title of the original Chinese edition of this book, *Qishi niandai* 七十年代 (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2008).

2 *The Seventies* does have a sequel for the Hong Kong edition, published by Oxford University Press in 2014, which included a broader spectrum of authors than the first volume.

but better yet a number of sequels, because there were just too many records of people and events that needed to be passed down in history. What is more, the essays in this collection were essentially all written by intellectuals, with other social strata basically left out, so we thought to remedy this in the sequel. Not only that, but out of our naivety at the time, we even entertained the extravagant hope that we could also produce *The Eighties* and *The Nineties*. Wishful thinking, however, is nothing more than wishful thinking, and reality eventually caused us to understand something: being able to produce this edition was already our great good fortune—history had granted us a fleeting opportunity, and Bei Dao and I had simply seized it.

In our present moment eighteen years later, however, what will readers think of this book when they read it? Why will they want to read it? After all, *The Seventies* is so clearly remote from today, so unfamiliar, to the point that it may be said that whether from the temporal or spatial perspective we are separated from it by what seems to be a series of sturdy stone walls. Thus, why read it?

I believe there is a reason.

Because China has become the issue of the greatest concern to the entire world, and because that is a structural matter, it can be divided into a number of aspects and many levels: Why has the China that not long ago was still regarded as an emerging nation now considered a great nation that, both in the present and in the future, will influence the development of the world? Why is it that of all the third-world nations, including so many that had been subject to colonization, only China has built a comprehensive modern industrial system? Moreover, it has essentially achieved its developmental goal of establishing a moderately prosperous society. And another question: Is China socialist or capitalist? And so on—in pursuing each of these questions, one can break them down into even more questions, and so on and

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on. And also because of this, the more people concerned with and considering these matters there are, the more answers there will be, and this will also go on and on.

I think that re-reading this book today can be of substantial assistance in considering these issues. After the book was initially published, the authors of the various essays themselves were more often than not the focus of readers' attention: They bore the imprint of the "growing pains" of the times, particularly owing to the massive mental stress that era's youth suffered from being in a seldom-seen historical "rupture," as well as the gloom resulting from this stress and the struggle against it; these were the principal concerns of the readers of the original edition. Since, however, when the English rendition of *The Seventies* appears, both the world and China have entered a twenty-first century full of new challenges and new opportunities, should not the focus of readerly attention change somewhat?

I think we can change our way of reading.

In my preface to the 2008 edition of *The Seventies* published by the Oxford University Press in Hong Kong, I wrote the following:

> Readers will certainly notice that in these stories and personal accounts there emerge no unified picture of "the 1970s" that all the authors would accept. On the contrary, whether disguised or overt, significant differences in ideological tendencies and political attitudes shine through in these essays, some of them even at odds with one another. Some of these differences were obviously already there in the period being described, while others only took shape through the process of recent recollection. In editing this book we took these differences very seriously and tried to hold onto them by scrupulously not editing them out, thereby enabling these essays to as far as possible maintain their "original flavor."

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In reading this passage now, my original intent was for readers to take particular note of the life experience of the intellectuals caught in this "rupture," and pay attention to how the experience of maturation shaped their intellectual outlook and political dispositions, as well as how the coming-of-age experience determined their behavior in the period of socio-economic reform that followed.

Can we not, however, alter our perspective on this book and see it more as a valuable historical document and thereby regard it as a set of historical texts that can be used for deep reading and interpretation? If we adopt this standpoint, our reading and comprehension will no longer be limited to the people and their fates in the texts, but rather to how these texts produce the history of the period. Or rather, put this way, if we regard *The Seventies* as a stage resulting from a historical "rupture," then our focal point will not merely be on people's "performances," but also on the "stage" of this rupture itself and its relationship to how people "performed." Why make this adjustment to our way of reading? Because by now, the issues readers of the book are concerned with have undergone a major change: Readers are not just interested in people's stories, but are also interested in the historical narrative of this period, perhaps even more so. This is because these stories are relevant to why what is referred to as the miraculous rise of China in the past several decades has taken place, and also relevant to how to explain this so-called miracle.

If we take *The Seventies* as a historical text, a new set of questions crops up: If each essay within it is actually a historical narrative pointing toward the period of reform, then aside from presenting the differences among such factors as individual class status, social position, and personal knowledge, what content has not been "expressed"? What in these narratives has been either consciously or unconsciously "suppressed"? Or, what conflicts and contradictions lurk in the narratives

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that have been diluted by the stories themselves? Beyond that, how do we go about explaining and analyzing these things that have not been "expressed" at an ideological level? Further still, what is the relationship between these discrepancies and conflicts and the national ideology that resided in the period of "rupture"? Where are they consistent with the national ideology of the time, and where are they in conflict with it? We should be aware that the publication of the article "Practice is the Sole Criterion for Testing Truth" in May of 1978 is, to a certain extent, not only the marker of the beginning of the post-Cultural Revolution period, but the society-wide discussion of the "criteria for truth" that followed can in fact also be thought of as the mark of the beginning of the "reform" in the realm of ideas.

These beginnings, however, unexpectedly brought with them a huge question to society as a whole: Where is China headed? This question was particularly pointed for the generation thinking and growing up in the 1970s' "rupture," because accompanying this question were unavoidable complications: In all spheres, such as politics, culture, and ideology, conflicts and divisions appeared unlike any seen since the foundation of the country in 1949; there were any number of differing opinions, all sorts of ideological convictions, all of which clashed with one another. As a result, all the members of this generation were either consciously or unconsciously cast into this intellectual whirlwind. It was also because of this that their growing pains, wounds, and suffering did not stem merely from their individual lives, nor were they conscious of them at the time, nor did they write about them in their later memoirs. They were, rather, the product of the complicated environment created by that period of history's thinking and ideology, emanating as well from where they were positioned in that complicated environment, and from the scope of their particular actions and the directions in which they were headed.

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All of this is to say that when we now look at that generation, *The Seventies* proves to be a most valuable collection of historical texts, and when readers pick it up, they are not just entering into the story of the individual narrator, but entering history as well.

From our current perspective, the recollections of people in the seventies are highly diverse, but the thing most worthy of note about them is their collective expression of the intellectuals as a body, as I stressed in my 2008 preface:

> … the highly peculiar experience they had of growing up in the 1970s unmistakably left a deep brand on them, causing their attitudes, styles of life, and ideas to share an unfettered character as well as a general unwillingness to cater to power. It is no doubt this quality that brought this group to play an irreplaceable role in China's great transformation—if not for them, neither "Thought Liberation" nor the "New Enlightenment" would have taken place in the 1980s, or even if they had, they would have taken quite different forms.

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I do regret not having explained the two movements, Thought Liberation and the New Enlightenment in my earlier preface, and owing to space considerations for this preface to the English edition, there is no room to do the necessary introduction here. I have written, however, an essay analyzing the two movements, which has been translated into English as "The Two Movements in the 1980s: Forces That Shaped Contemporary China" and published in *positions: asia critique*;[3] those interested may consult it.

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3 Li Tuo et al., "The Two Movements in the 1980s: Forces That Shaped Contemporary China," *positions: asia critique* 33, no. 3 (2025): 527–66.

The two movements, Thought Liberation and the New Enlightenment, were, of course, but a part of the complex development of thinking and ideology in the period of Chinese reform. I do believe, however, that if one reads this book as a historical text, by reading each individual narrative and linking them all to the history of the great reform of that time, it will be of immeasurable assistance in comprehending contemporary China.

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