

# Introduction<sup>\*</sup>

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If the seventies are remembered at all in the United States, it is as the place where the exhilarating and boisterous sixties went to die, overwhelmed by the blare of disco music and execrable taste in wearing apparel. But also, and more ominously, as the becalmed period before the incoming Reagan and Thatcher revolutions and the full force of the neoliberal order they did so much to usher in. In China, however, the period has quite a different valence, as the temporal site of the greater if vastly less incandescent part of the Cultural Revolution, or to use its proper name, The Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution. The essays selected here represent but a fraction of those gathered in the original Chinese edition published by the Hong Kong Office of Oxford

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University Press in 2008 as *Qishi niandai* (The Seventies), edited by Bei Dao and Li Tuo. They are all memoirs of the authors' experiences of that fraught decade and range from nostalgic recollection to traumatized memories of the real horrors of the time. They all also reflect on how the writers developed both intellectually and artistically in circumstances that rendered such development more than a little challenging. One can clearly discern, for instance, in reading Ah Cheng's account of his life in rural Yunnan in those years, "Listening to Enemy Broadcasts," much of the inspiration for his extraordinary breakthrough as a creative writer in the ensuing decade. The collection thus stands as a crucial benchmark of a period that, while it has generally not received the attention it deserves, nevertheless was crucial to the evolution of Chinese society and culture in the years that followed.

As several of the writers represented in this collection maintain, the decade as a comprehensible whole should perhaps actually be dated from the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 to the death of Mao Zedong in September of 1976. In retrospect, a circular issued by the Communist Party on May 16, 1966 can be seen as the opening salvo of the movement. Intended as the resolution to an ongoing debate over the implications of a play by the historian Wu Han, *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*, the notification was first distributed to the Politburo and then published for public consumption in *People's Daily* the following day. The play—the story of an upright Ming official removed from office after criticizing the emperor—was reasonably regarded by Mao and his supporters as a critique of Mao's removal of the prominent general Peng Dehuai from power, who had criticized the failings of the Great Leap Forward of the late 1950s. The circular itself was relatively limited in scope: a denunciation of certain higher authorities in the Party who were seen as moving toward restoring the old order. A key passage in the document is worth quoting at some length:

The whole party must follow Comrade Mao Zedong's instructions, hold high the great banner of the Proletarian Cultural Revolution, thoroughly expose the reactionary bourgeois stand of those so-called "academic authorities" who oppose the party and socialism, thoroughly criticize and repudiate the reactionary bourgeois ideas in the sphere of academic work, education, journalism, literature, art, and publishing, and seize the leadership in these cultural spheres.<sup>1</sup>

The focus on the "cultural sphere" set out above is key to understanding the beginnings of the movement as a "cultural" revolution. Not only was the initial impetus a dispute over a literary work, but the criticism then moved on to a sharp castigation of the cultural sphere as a whole. This perhaps explains the extraordinary focus on written work that persisted throughout the Cultural Revolution and why reading and writing are such an important topics in many of the essays in this volume.

It was only in August of 1966, however, that the critique was expanded to identify "capitalist roaders" throughout society, with the movement rapidly going out of control during the relatively brief period of society-wide turbulence that ensued. A clear distinction needs to be drawn, however, between the tumultuous and more open-ended early months of the movement and the subdued and constricted atmosphere of the rest of the period, when the much-weakened Communist Party and government sought to reassert its political and ideological control. For all the comment on treating the 1966 to 1976 period as one, however, the distinction between the raucous early months and

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1 "The CCP's May 16th Circular (1966)," Alpha History, accessed March 20, 2026, <https://alphahistory.com/chineserevolution/ccp-may-16th-circular-1966/>.

the extended period that followed is perhaps best illustrated by the content of the memoirs themselves: They contain very little discussion of the crucial initial period of the movement and whatever involvement the authors had in it. In other words, the tumult of the early period is eschewed in favor of strictly focusing on the less gripping events of the actual seventies. The one apparent exception is the story “A House,” imbedded in Zhang Langlang’s “A Quiet Horizon,” but the events therein are conspicuously marked as fictional, and as a story within a story it is thus bracketed and kept at a significant remove from the main happenings recounted in the essay as a whole.

While there are conflicting versions of the motivations behind the launching of the Cultural Revolution, its genesis must be seen against the backdrop of the massive transformation of the Chinese government and society after 1949. After a protracted civil war that followed the devastation of the long war against Japan, the Communist Party, a revolutionary organization committed to equality, social levelling, and a new cultural order, finally took control of virtually the entire country that year. This commitment entailed the overthrow of what the Party regarded as a backward social and political dispensation harmful to China both internally and in its relationship to the rest of the world, particularly with the great powers that had often forcefully manipulated events in China since the mid-nineteenth century. The Party took power with a formidable and well-organized military, but was immediately faced with creating a functioning state in a country afflicted both by the aftermath of armed conflict and widespread poverty. The task it faced now required setting up an apparatus dedicated to maintaining state power rather than undermining it, a position thus the complete opposite of the one the Party had taken as an oppositional force during the extended period of civil strife following its founding in 1921.

The all but inevitable routinization of hierarchy and authority that resulted, which in many ways uncannily replicated the evolution of the revolution described by George Orwell in *Animal Farm*, eventually led at least some in high positions in the newly established party state, notably the Party Chairman, Mao Zedong, to fear that the new structures of power originating in the process of state creation had the potential to undermine the whole emphasis of the revolution on social equality, democracy, and the elimination of privilege. He came to see the new status quo as the emblem of a profound backsliding away from his utopian vision of the revolution. Based on well-documented utterances of Mao from the 1950s and early 1960s, we can see where some of the notions that triggered the Cultural Revolution originated. For instance, in November 1956 he gave a speech that can be understood as virtually predicting what would eventuate a decade later: “Now there are people who seem to think that, as state power has been won, they can sleep soundly without any worry and play the tyrant at will. The masses will oppose such persons, throw stones at them, and strike at them with their hoes, which will, I think, serve them right and will please me immensely. Moreover, sometimes to fight is the only way to solve a problem.”<sup>2</sup> It is from statements like this that a consensus has emerged that the chaotic rebellion that broke out in 1966 was inspired from the top rather than originating in discontent at the bottom, although there was plenty of unhappiness in non-elite reaches of society available to harness, especially among the young.

The “Hundred Flowers” movement of 1957 no doubt reflected Mao’s feelings of a few months before, when it at first enthusiastically

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2 Quoted from Mao Zedong, *Selected Works 5*, in Yiching Wu, *The Cultural Revolution at the Margins: Chinese Socialism in Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 31.

encouraged criticism of bureaucratic malfeasance and rigidity. Once the leadership sensed this popular criticism was getting out of hand, however, the nascent movement was to be rigidly suppressed only a few months after its inception. If nothing else, these events show how the support of state leaders for mass protest blew hot, then cold, something that was in many ways to be repeated after the initial turbulent months of the Cultural Revolution. The major difference between the two events, however, was that the attacks on both personnel and state structures that followed in the months after the summer of 1966 were vastly more disruptive than anything that took place in 1957, with the extended ramifications of the later movement and the reactions to it evident in all of the essays included in this volume.

The irruption of youthful exuberance that we associate with the sixties in the West was in China intensified and explosively concentrated within the first few months after Mao's call to arms at Tiananmen on August 18, 1966. While there had been considerable organizing and political activity prior to that date, the mass rally at the square on that date, where Mao personally identified with the assembled Red Guards (even donning a Red Guard armband), marks the symbolic beginning of the mass movement, and with it the release of a sense of utopian possibility, free travel around the country for "revolutionary link-ups," endless demonstrations, as well as the worst of the often quite violent factional battles and denunciations of "class enemies" that marked those months until it all began to be reined in by the beginning of 1967.<sup>3</sup> The deceptively placid façade and lack of drama that seemed to mark China after the reining in or suppression of the most active Red Guard activity soon after it began, has tended to

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3 The most thoughtful account of the upheaval and its eventual suppression can be found in Yiching Wu, *The Cultural Revolution at the Margins*.

leave the impression that the seventies were a relatively blank period in modern Chinese history, with little happening worthy of note. The essays gathered here should go far toward dispelling that notion by opening a window on the considerable social and intellectual activity percolating just beneath that superficially placid surface.

The educated urban youth (*zhishi qingnian*, generally abbreviated as “*zhiqing*”), who are both the authors and the subjects of the essays collected here, were also among the most active participants as well as the most evident victims of the Cultural Revolution, have since that time emerged to leave an outsized mark on the cultural life of contemporary China.<sup>4</sup> In most ways these young people had been on track to take their places as members of the elite of the People’s Republic, educated as they were completely under the new socialist regime and, more often than not, from families close to the centers of political and social power. It is somewhat ironic that it may well have been the sense of privilege ensuing from their status that led so many of this generation to play a pivotal role in the early period of the Cultural Revolution—after it was officially launched by Mao in August of 1966—as well as in the quieter time that followed.

After participating in the hyper-politics of the initial months of the Cultural Revolution, these young people were first sent back to school and then, following Mao’s directive for “educated youth to go to the countryside and receive reeducation from the poor and lower-middle peasants” of 1968, in many cases sent down from their relatively comfortable lives in China’s largest and most prosperous cities to the

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4 The most complete account of the educated youth in the Cultural Revolution can be found in Michel Bonnin, *The Lost Generation: The Rustication of China’s Educated Youth (1968–1980)*, trans. Krystyna Horko (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2013).

countryside, often to quite poor areas. The educated youth thus ended up spending the better part of the seventies either in inhospitable border regions, on poor farms, or on large government and military-run projects engaged in various sorts of manual labor. Ironically, whether they originally opted for them or not, these rural experiences confronted many of these youth with the choice to become what is often celebrated in the West as a Gramscian “organic intellectual,” that is, an educated person with a deep understanding and sympathy for the common people. The difficulties and contradictions associated with being forced into that status is one of the leitmotifs of many of the essays included in this collection. As told in his essay, “Nourished by Ignorance,” the one author who seems to have embraced this status wholeheartedly and gained much from it is Xu Bing, who was to go on to become a renowned artist.

Following Mao’s death in 1976, a brief interregnum ended with the advent to power of Deng Xiaoping, clearly ratified by the Communist Party plenum at the end of 1978. After this landmark event, most of these rusticated youth began making their way back to their old homes in the city, with a number of the most fortunate being able to continue their educations at the universities being revitalized following the educational doldrums that marked the Cultural Revolution years. Eventually, many of the figures represented here became among the most important Chinese “public intellectuals” of the following decades, commenting on events both contemporary and historical as well as having an attentive audience among a broad spectrum of the educated population. While the category of public intellectual in the West has much languished from the time when its collective voice was so important at least through the 1960s, in China its social importance has lasted, arguably up to the present day. Quite a few of the veterans of what the Party now officially calls “the disastrous

decade” began to write about their experiences, with the first of these efforts bearing fruit as the genre of “Scars Literature” (or “Literature of the Wounded”) that came to prominence on the Chinese literary scene around the time of the 1978 plenum and continued on into the early 1980s. Writing about those pivotal years has continued, with a substantial amount of it having been translated into foreign languages.

The essays collected and edited by Bei Dao and Li Tuo in their *Qishi niandai*, of which we have only been able to include a relative few, reprise events of the post-1967—and longest, most tedious—years of the Cultural Revolution, but in key respects they differ from earlier narratives of the same period. One obvious difference is that these essays were composed toward the end of the first decade of the present century, so there is a thirty-year gap between the events recalled and the writing about them. The authors thus have literally had decades to think about their experiences, which has added depth and substance to their recollections. As Li Tuo stresses in his introduction, there is a striking diversity among the accounts, even in the relatively small sample represented here. For all the sense that outsider memories of the Cultural Revolution, especially that part of it that took place in the 1970s have by now faded to a uniform grey (or perhaps better to say blue, the dominant color of clothing during that period), rendered monochrome by the oppressive political correctness that suffused Chinese life at the time. We see in the writing gathered here, however, records of extremely divergent experiences, from the terrifyingly Orwellian travails recounted in Zhang Langlang’s description of life on death row in his “A Quiet Horizon” for what can only seem to us a trivial “crime,” to the benign, almost pastoral account of Wang Anyi’s experiences in a drama troupe in Xuzhou in her “Wei Village,” to Xu Bing’s positive nostalgia for the desperately poor village to which he was assigned as a “*zhiqing*.”

One of the themes throughout the collection is of the writers themselves grappling to understand their own processes of maturation. Several writers stress that the seventies was the time of their own twenties, in modern China, at least, generally seen as the most vibrant and creative period of one's life. Paradoxically, these same writers note that for all the stultifying pressure for political conformity they faced, the period still had to be counted as a vibrant and creative epoch for them personally. Bei Dao's "Out of Context" provides a sensitive delineation of the various moods of the time, as well as a vivid account of his tentative beginnings as a writer, bringing to life his terror of being found out and severely punished. It also describes his visit to the pioneering writers gathered at Baiyangdian, which offers eloquent testimony to the creative and intellectual growth that took place in an underground that barely dared to exist. Equally memorable is his harrowing narrative of learning of Mao's death while in Beijing.

While the atmosphere of repression is a feature common to all these accounts—with the omnipresent fear that its full weight will descend upon each writer perhaps a source of greater anxiety than any particular state-induced action that actually came to pass—the reader of today will be struck by any number of things that seem quite anomalous in these pieces. One of these is the account in Han Shaogong's highly stimulating essay of the powerful thirst for reading these authors developed in this time and the impressive erudition that resulted. This was in many ways spurred on by both the drastic suppression of most books during the period and the rarity of even those works that were notionally available.

While Han makes it clear that he is in no way defending the draconian censorship of the authoritarian regime of the time, he cannot help but be bemused by the puzzling contrast between the intense reading proclivities of the educated youth during the Cultural