

Social Change, State and the Civil Society



Dissent and the Chinese Communists before and since the Post-Mao Reforms

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Abstract

This paper looks at extra-party dissent under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) before and after 1949 and today. It distinguishes between opposition and dissent under Communist systems. It argues that Chinese communism and the democracy movement never wholly excluded one another until the 1980s. Officially sanctioned movements of extra-party criticism punctuated every decade of Mao's ascendancy and each of the first two decades after his death. In them, members of the "basic masses" or extra-party intellectuals were summoned to subject the party to criticism, and were briefly able to criticise bureaucratic abuse and call for democratic rights. These movements of criticism invariably ended up overstepping the limits set to them by the leadership and were then closed down. Each movement had an inner, unofficial history separate from its officially tolerated trajectory, and the passage from one movement to the next over the years was a process of cumulative learning, towards greater maturity and autonomy. Dissent under Chinese communism has changed radically since the 1980s. It is no longer a preserve of students and intellectuals, it lacks the social coherence of previous movements, and its concerns are more varied. But while it lacks organisational cohesion, some dissenters have begun to produce coherent political programmes.

Keywords: *Chinese communism, Mao, dissent, opposition, reform*

1. Introduction

This paper is about extra-party dissent under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) before and after 1949 and today.¹ Until the 1980s, the Chinese communists alternated between repressing extra-party dissent and using it, episodically, to help achieve their goals. The paper looks at extra-party dissent in the Mao and the immediate post-Mao decades and its relationship with the

politics of the Communist Party, and goes on to consider its changing role in China now.

My thesis is that Chinese communism and the democracy movement never wholly excluded one another, at least until the 1980s. The CCP was born of a campaign for democracy and science, the New Culture Movement of the 1910s, which climaxed in 1919 in the May Fourth Movement at whose heart was Chen Duxiu (Ch'en Tu-hsiu 陳獨秀), founder of the CCP. I refer to democracy movement rather than democracy, for the democracy the CCP talked about was never fully articulated, and never consummated.

In making this point, it is helpful to look at the distinction two Hungarian thinkers active during the Soviet era drew between opposition and dissent. The political scientist Rudolf Tökés argued that oppositionists have the “will to power” whereas dissenters are a “within-system opposition” loyal to the regime in some respects and critical of it in others, and they are therefore “a culturally conditioned political reform movement seeking to ameliorate and ultimately to eliminate ... the Communist-party leadership’s authoritarian rule” by reforms conducive to greater democracy, equality, human rights, and cultural modernization (Tökés, 1974; 1975). According to G. M. Tarás, a political philosopher, dissidents practised “the conspicuous exercise of rights”, avoided openly seditious appeals, used “existing social criticism, historical awareness, and conceptual vocabulary”, and deliberately blurred the boundary between their own views and officially approved “reformist” criticism (Tarás, 1993). By such definitions, all but the latest of China’s democracy movements (that of 1989) were dissent rather than opposition, and even the 1989 movement was not entirely without dissident qualities.²

A feature of Chinese dissent that distinguished it from much of the dissent in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe that began appearing after 1956 is that it was largely indigenous. It is interesting to ask why. One reason is that the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe were culturally and intellectually closer than China to the West. Another is that Western intelligence agencies put great effort into identifying “neuralgic points of disaffection” (desire for personal and intellectual freedom, desire for improvement in the quality of life, and the persistence of nationalism) in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union to undermine Soviet power and shape dissident opinion.³ In China, on the other hand, for a long time they were less capable of or interested in doing so.⁴ Last and not least, Soviet power was imported to Eastern Europe at bayonet point. The perception of it as an alien imposition held even in some non-Russian Soviet republics, whereas Chinese communism was home-grown and less widely viewed as illegitimate. Nationalism and communism were consonant, so dissenters were less likely to seek inspiration abroad.

2. The Stalinization of the CCP

The founders of the CCP were inspired by critical ideas drawn from the Enlightenment, including humanism, freedom, democracy, individualism, and scientific method. Chen Duxiu was their greatest exponent, but others shared his outlook. Li Dazhao (Li Ta-chao 李大釗), who died a martyr in 1927, also championed the idea of national, social and individual liberation and insisted on the necessary coherence of individualism, socialism and liberalism in a democratic system of “commoners’ politics” (Tong, 2006). However, Enlightenment thinking was only shallowly rooted in Chinese radicalism and fought a losing battle in the CCP against the autocratic tradition of bureaucratic centralism imported from the Soviet Union in the 1920s and China’s own autocratic culture. This led to the ousting of Chen Duxiu as General Secretary and his expulsion in 1929. At the time of his expulsion, he reminded the other party leaders that “democracy is a necessary instrument for any class that seeks to win the majority to its side” and warned against the suppression of dissident viewpoints.⁵ However, the Chinese communists ignored his advice and came in time to look more like the Russian Stalinists, who set many of the CCP’s goals and tactics and reshaped its institutions along Soviet lines. Among Soviet practices it adopted was the violent purge, which led to a Stalin-style regime of terror in its rural bases after 1927.

The CCP’s Stalinization was linked with the imposition of a series of Moscow-appointed leaders, culminating in 1931 in the rise to power of Wang Ming 王明 and the “28 Bolsheviks”. This group was also known as the Returned Students, to indicate its origins in universities in Moscow, where its members learned their politics and methods. In 1935, on the Long March, they lost power at Zunyi 遵義 to a coalition under Mao Zedong (Mao Tse-tung 毛泽东), leader of the CCP’s “outsider” faction, who blamed them for the defeat of the Chinese Soviet that had necessitated the Red Army’s flight from its bases in southern and central China. By 1938, Mao had cemented his ascendancy and become undisputed leader.

Seen from the angle of factional alliances, Mao’s rise to power represented a defeat for the party’s Stalinist group. He moderated the worst excesses of the terror, and his rectification campaigns emphasized persuasion rather than coercion. This moderation won the support and gratitude of party veterans alienated by the earlier regime of permanent alert. However, Mao remained essentially dirigiste and authoritarian. Although he avoided coercion where possible, he kept it as a last resort, to employ whenever the leadership was split or the external environment was perceived as threatening. He was most likely to adopt techniques of persuasion when the party was united and secure.⁶ The party remained Stalinist in conception, though dictatorial methods were more lightly applied than in the Soviet Union.

Why the lighter touch and the emphasis on persuasion and cohesion? Mao's rise to the top represented the repatriation of power in the CCP to China, after more than a decade of its remote manipulation by Moscow, with decisions taken in Moscow's interest. Mao had never been to Moscow, nor would he go until after 1949. All the CCP's early leaders were inspired by nationalist sentiment, but some younger and more malleable communists educated in Moscow equated China's fate with the security of the Soviet Union, an equation unacceptable to the older, less cosmopolitan Mao. The CCP's early power struggles were closely bound up with the politics of Moscow. After Mao's rise to power and the sidelining of Wang Ming, the CCP's main Moscow-educated leader, the leadership was more unified and less open to external interference and destabilization, so it was easier for Mao than for his predecessors to use pacific methods in shaping policy and keeping his grip on power.

The CCP in the early years had never experienced a crisis of the sort that led to the Soviet regime's loss of legitimacy and the atomization of society. Mao's strategy depended on mobilizing broad sectors of society, for which persuasion and reward were better suited than repression. In the Soviet Union, the classes that had helped make the revolution were alienated by purges, forced collectivization, Stakhanovism, and Stalin's regime of bureaucratic privilege and corruption. In China, not until the late 1950s did the CCP begin to lose its ties to the classes that had helped lift it into power: first the intellectuals (after the Hundred Flowers campaign), then the peasants (after the Great Leap Forward), and then the workers and even its own members (in the Cultural Revolution).

Mao and Stalin differed in character, in ways that also influenced their politics. Stalin was a terminal paranoid who saw conspiracies and enemies on all sides (Post, 2004). Mao ruled by charisma, and could inspire people by his supposedly superhuman powers. Stalin suspected everyone, including his party, his family, and especially the peasants and intellectuals: Mao was boundlessly self-confident and convinced that the masses would follow him wherever he went, although he also launched successive campaigns to purge his comrades.

In the Soviet Union under Stalin, all mass movements were directly and in all minutiae controlled by the party. Some historians have argued that the Lenin Levy, organized in the mid 1920s (before Stalin's rise to undivided power) by the Stalin-Zinoviev-Kamenev triumvirate, signalled the party's "commitment to a proletarian identity" and mass-rootedness. The levy led to the recruitment of two hundred thousand workers into the party, and the Triumvirs praised it as an experiment in proletarian democracy. However, most observers see it as an act of calculating cynicism.⁷ Others have pointed out that its aim was more to Bolshevize the workers than to proletarianize the Bolsheviks and encourage

workers to express opinions. The levy was not repeated: it was at most a one-off instance of mass involvement in Soviet politics.

In China, Mao's confidence in his powers of leadership resulted in a greater degree of mutual reciprocity between leaders and led. In Yan'an (Yen-an 延安) in the early 1940s, shortly after the final confirmation of his ascendancy in the leadership, he took a step without parallel in the Soviet Union under Stalin, by inviting extra-party "masses" to enter the political stage. The practice he initiated was followed on other occasions, also after his death, and was an institution peculiar to Chinese communism.

Each instance followed a common pattern, although the group mobilized and the size of the mobilization always differed. The occasion was always the supreme leader's perception that other leaders and officials were thwarting the realization of his policies, or acting in ways that threatened the stability of party rule. The targets were the political factions opposed to him. The essence of the strategy was to direct external pressures onto the supreme leader's rivals and the party-state's perceived shortcomings. Despite the factional dimension, it would be wrong to view these movements as mere power struggles, for their wider goal was to prevent the party's bureaucratization and the alienation of its social support. Mao calculated that his own reputation was strong enough to guarantee that the forces invited to exert pressure would stay within the limits he had set them. He believed he had a unique tie to the "masses", that his concerns were theirs. He wanted a movement that would rise and quietly subside once it had done its job of scourging "bad tendencies". He had no wish to destabilize the party by allowing such a movement to go on for too long.

The strategy was risky, and in the end the movements always got out of hand. The idea was to intimidate "bureaucrats", "dogmatists", and "sectarians" by attacking them and thus causing them to change their behaviour, but the unleashed critics were never content to act as mere vehicles. Every time, sooner or later, they ended up saying or doing things not in the script Mao had written. At that point, the dissenting opinions and the dissenters were suppressed.

How to explain Mao's persistence with a tactic that always seemed to go wrong? Some would say that his hubris was so great that defeats failed to dent it, or that he thought a messy denouement a price worth paying. He always seems to have thought carefully about which group to choose for his policing missions, and never chose the same group twice. So routine was the progression from mobilization to arrest that one could be forgiven for wondering why the critics never wised up to it. But they were not always unaware of the risks, as we shall see.

In the following section, I look at the four main movements of extra-party criticism: those launched by Mao in 1942, 1956, and 1966 and the one encouraged by Deng Xiaoping (Teng Hsiao-p'ing 邓小平) in 1979, together

with the protest movement of 1989.⁸ I then conclude by asking why similar movements have not happened since 1989.

3. Movements of Extra-Party Criticism

1942

The name most closely associated with the Yan'an writers' movement of 1942 is Wang Shiwei (Wang Shih-wei 王實味). Although far from its biggest name (it also included Ding Ling, Xiao Jun, and Luo Feng), he was the boldest critic and the only one known to have paid for his words with his life.⁹ The setting for the writers' movement was the campaign Mao began in early 1942 to rectify "bureaucratic tendencies" in the party. The writers were patriots and communists who had gone to Yan'an after the outbreak of war with Japan in 1937. In 1942, the party's rural bases were in crisis due to Japanese pressure and a Guomindang blockade, and the party urgently needed to stabilize its support. Mao thought many communist officials were acting more like mandarins than like revolutionaries, so he decided to purge them of their vices. Coincidentally, he aimed a terminal blow at the "right opportunist" tendency led by Wang Ming, the party's main Russia-returned leader and Mao's rival, by then already greatly weakened. The critical writers were heartened by Mao's attack on bureaucracy and responded enthusiastically to his invitation to support his "orthodox" attack on the "unorthodox" faction. In wall posters, they denounced Yan'an's elitism, privilege, and moral degeneration. They demanded a return to the revolutionary ideals of equality and solidarity and for writers to be free to monitor and criticize bureaucracy. Wang Shiwei called for democratic rights and elections.

The writers won strong support, especially among young people, but within weeks Mao started criticizing their excesses and launched an "ideological struggle" against Wang Shiwei's "ultra-democratic", "ultra-egalitarian" ideas. The writers were not tightly knit and their common stand collapsed.

What were their chief characteristics as a group? They were more strongly tied to the party than later critics, but even so they had the same basic attachment to anti-elitism and democracy, with which they tried to infuse Mao's Rectification Campaign. They were the CCP's first real dissidents, in the sense that term later acquired in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. They were even communism's first real dissidents, for they blazed a path not taken in other communist countries until the 1950s. Their arguments, and even their turns of phrase, echoed until the 1990s in writings and speeches of other Chinese democratists, who read their views in essays reprinted by the party in 1958 as "negative teaching materials".

1956-57

In January 1956, Mao launched the Hundred Flowers campaign, but it did not catch on until more than a year later. This was partly because of the obvious and ominous analogy with 1942. Mindful of the writers' fate, those summoned to criticize the party at first stayed silent. Of the surviving Yan'an writers, only Ai Qing (Ai Ch'ing 艾青) is known to have dared bloom and contend.

Mao planned through this campaign to mobilize intellectuals, scientists, and the small "democratic parties" (tolerated as ornaments on the party after 1949) in a campaign against the official abuse of power. These groups had been targets of "thought reform" in the early 1950s, an experience that had alienated and demoralized many of them. Mao, however, believed their years in the thought furnace had purged them of wrong ideas and they could now be trusted to help overcome "dogmatism" and "bureaucratism" in the party. Risings in Eastern Europe in 1956 confirmed Mao in his belief that some liberalization was needed to resolve social "contradictions". At first, there was little response. Some officials even turned the campaign on its head by identifying "extreme democracy" as the danger. Not until May 1957, after Mao's speech "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People" attacking bureaucracy and calling for "great democracy", did the criticism finally take off.

Just as in 1942, intellectuals filled Mao's concern at bureaucratic abuses with a radical content. They argued that the abuses had a structural cause in the party's monopoly of power, which they hoped to reform or abolish. Some said democracy was a necessary part of socialism and attacked the privileges of the "new class", a view that foreshadowed radical critiques developed on the fringes of the Cultural Revolution.

The upsurge of seditious views and the bitterness of some of the criticisms alarmed Mao, who wound up the campaign and returned to "class dictatorship". Half a million critics classed as "rightists" were imprisoned or sent into internal exile, some for decades.

The Hundred Flowers campaign was Mao's first experiment after 1949 with a liberal approach to socialist construction. Its failure convinced him of the intellectuals' unreliability as a class, and that it would be dangerous to try to use them a second time to rectify the system. This experience shaped his thinking over the following years. He had not given up his ambition to end wrong thinking and bureaucracy, but he needed a more malleable vehicle.

1966-69

The Cultural Revolution is most remembered for plunging China into years of terror and weakening the party's institutional base and claim to legitimacy. The Hundred Flowers had not destroyed Mao's optimism and self-confidence,

but it had taught him to look for new, “blanker” “masses” to campaign on his behalf. These he identified among students and other youngsters. 1957 had also persuaded him of the need to reserve a key role for the PLA, as a model of “class discipline” and in case things got out of hand.

Was the Cultural Revolution a movement of dissent, like the writers’ movement and the Hundred Flowers? Studies agree that Mao initiated it to oust Liu Shaoqi (Liu Shao-ch’i 刘少奇) and his supporters, the so-called “capitalist-roaders”. It was part of a power struggle in which the Red Guards (*Hong Weibing* 红卫兵) were manipulated to act as Mao’s political enforcers. However, the mobilization of millions of young people, the relative looseness of the controls, the general air of chaos, and the attacks on the establishment at all levels created opportunities for unauthorized groups to air their grievances. Some, like Shengwulian and Li-Yi-Zhe, produced sophisticated political analyzes that made profound criticisms of the political system, despite their florid style. These critics drew on ideas like “humanism” and “alienation” in the works of Marx and Engels and unconsciously echoed the “new class” theory developed by the Yugoslav Milovan Djilas in his 1955 prison book.¹⁰ For understanding the Cultural Revolution it is helpful to distinguish between three groups: leaders who used it for their own ends, Red Guards who mixed anti-bureaucratic and egalitarian impulses with violent factionalism, and a minority of independent-minded dissidents.¹¹

After 1967, the group around Mao that won power in the Cultural Revolution set about suppressing the Red Guards they had brought into being, denouncing them as advocates of “extreme democracy”. Millions were sent down into the countryside. Many retreated into apathy or cynicism, or a melancholy romanticism epitomized by the “scarred literature” of the 1970s. Others favoured extreme individualism as a reaction to their disillusionment with the fake collectivism promoted by the official Maoist faction.

However, the experience of the Cultural Revolution was deeply etched onto the minds of many young people of the period. It had expanded their mental and geographic horizons and taught them to “link up”, write, and work a mimeograph. It had also taught them that “to rebel is justified” and increased their distrust of political leaders.

Studies on dissent in China tend to not to make a link between its various waves but to treat them as separate and distinct. This is understandable, given the big differences in their social composition and the apparent finality of their dispatch down the memory hole once they had served their purpose. But it is important to understand the cumulative nature of this dissent. The 1942 texts fed into subsequent upsurges. Those arrested in 1957, together with some of the Red Guards disbanded at the end of the Cultural Revolution, turned up again in 1979 and 1989, when they helped bring new generations into ferment.

1979

After the Cultural Revolution, a new democracy movement sprang up at what became known as Democracy Wall, in Xidan 西单 in Beijing, and quickly spread to other cities. Like the earlier movements, it owed its existence to the protection of a faction in the leadership, in this Deng Xiaoping's, newly returned to power. It also enjoyed support in the universities and the media.

Deng Xiaoping was not by nature inclined to throw the party open to mass criticism – in 1956 he had opposed the Hundred Flowers, and in 1966 he was a main target of the Red Guards. However, in 1979 a democracy movement was useful to him, for he faced opposition from surviving Maoists and Hua Guofeng 华国锋's centrists. Having spent the Cultural Revolution behind bars, he could not be criticized for its excesses. He was one of few party veterans at the time who could risk threatening his leadership rivals with a movement on the streets and thus forcing his views through the Politburo.

Deng's relationship with the democracy movement of 1979 was quite different from that of Mao's to the Red Guards. He did not summon it into being: his role can best be described as tolerating a campaign initiated by young people with political experience gained in the Cultural Revolution and their own political resources. Its points of intellectual reference were many, and it was probably the most socially diverse of the movements discussed so far. Many of its supporters were state-employed workers and technicians, including children of party members who had got them jobs in industry to save them from being sent down to the countryside. They were therefore well-informed about political developments. They tended to identify with the workers and peasants and displayed little of the elitism of Soviet dissidents. Some tried to organize *xiafang* 下放 youth who had returned illegally to Beijing and the peasant petitioners who took their grievances to the capital. Students, poets, painters, and writers joined the movement, in their hundreds. Some of those who contributed to the wall posters also edited or wrote for dozens of unofficial journals. A big issue at Democracy Wall and in these journals was how to assess Mao. Some activists took the criticism of him further than Deng would have liked. Others criticized the whole system of party rule.

The tactic of allowing a measure of dissent helped Deng achieve victory in the Politburo. However, his attitude towards Democracy Wall was always ambivalent, and some bolder activists made no secret of their doubts about him. He was in favour of some democracy and intellectual freedom, but was not prepared to compromise party power. When it seemed to him that the movement was overstepping this limit, he cracked down on it. Wei Jingsheng 魏京生, the most prominent activist, was gaoled for fifteen years. Democracy Wall was scrubbed clean and the Four Great Freedoms – to contend, bloom,

put up posters, and debate – were removed from the Constitution. Thus the old pattern of relaxation followed by repression was repeated.

Yet the experience in 1979-81 was in some respects different from that of previous movements. The activists were more experienced and better prepared, less prone to personalize their politics by looking to this or that leader, and therefore less susceptible to manipulation. The Cultural Revolution was an earthquake whose effects could not be erased, and many young people radicalized by it were still interested in politics. The “antifascist” mood was such that an all-out crackdown of the sort Mao ordered in 1957 and 1969 was out of the question and would have made a nonsense of Deng Xiaoping’s claim in 1979 to stand for democracy and legality. Although Deng remained popular, the country and the party were less united behind him than they had once been behind Mao. So although Democracy Wall was closed down, many activists remained at large, determined to continue their campaign.

1989

The democracy movement of 1989 took several years to mature, although it was often represented at the time as sudden and unexpected. It began with demonstrations in 1986; others followed in the intervening years, as precursors of the great event.

Like its predecessors, it had a complex relationship with currents and factions in the party. It sheltered at times behind sympathetic forces in the official world, using the opportunities offered by them and borrowing and adapting their arguments. However, whereas all the other extra-party or democracy movements in China under the communists were associated with leading powerholders, who called them into being (in 1942, 1956, and 1966) or actively encouraged them (in 1979), the democracy movement of 1989 was mainly identified with a dismissed and dead reformer (Hu Yaobang 胡耀邦), a dismissed reformer (Zhao Ziyang 赵紫阳), and three expelled party democrats (Fang Lizhi 方励之, Wang Ruowang 王若望, and Liu Binyan 刘宾雁). The top leaders denounced it as a “counter-revolutionary rebellion” and bloodily suppressed it. It was the first more or less independent democracy movement, more opposition than dissent. It kept a close eye on the leadership debate, but chiefly to take advantage of the divisions it revealed.

Like earlier democracy movements, it drew on the experiences of its predecessors. Although few of its activists identified with the Cultural Revolution and most would probably have denounced it, their egalitarian politics and organizational tactics looked a lot like those of some Red Guard organizations, a parallel the party leaders spotted and made much of. Even some students noted the commonalities and envisioned the Red Guards as a

“righteous movement”.¹² They also drew an explicit parallel with May Fourth and revived Chen Duxiu’s call for “science and democracy”.

Much Western commentary explained the movement as a reflection of the growing influence on China of foreign ideas, due to Deng’s Open Door, but some well-placed Chinese and foreign observers took a different view. They noted that the crisis and the movement were essentially home-grown, a spontaneous product of strains and tensions engendered by the Deng Xiaoping reforms.

2010

Observers agree that dissent under Chinese communism has changed radically since the 1980s. It is no longer a preserve of students and intellectuals, as it usually was (in one way or another) in the past. It lacks the social coherence of previous movements. And its concerns are more varied. One can add a fourth and at first sight paradoxical observation: while dissent today lacks the cohesion of previous extra-party movements, dissenters in the liberal tradition have begun to produce coherent political programmes that draw on but deepen the CCP’s official agenda of democratic reform and human rights.

Why are students, who in 1989 spearheaded the dissent, today no longer to the fore? In part because of the unprecedentedly intense stress that competition for grades and jobs now places on them, leaving most with no time or mental energy for other things. But also because of a shift in student attitudes, in the direction of greater pragmatism, materialism, and nationalism. The regime has delivered rapid economic growth and unprecedented prosperity to the middle class, now estimated by some sources at up to one fifth of the urban population (Johnston, 2004), to which students belong or aspire to belong. At the same time, China has become Asia’s least equal country. Social polarization is not conducive to democratic sentiment among the beneficiaries of growth, who can find individual solutions to their problems, view potentially vengeful losers as a threat, and resign themselves to authoritarian government as a defence against it.¹³ For these and other reasons, the students, who spearheaded previous dissent, are less visible in it now.¹⁴

As for the intellectuals, who articulated past criticisms and grievances, helped create the climate in which students dared to go onto the streets, and generally acted as China’s conscience, most have been co-opted into the decision-making process, rewarded with perks and privileges, and are no longer available as a source of inspiration (Lewis and Xue, 2003: 933; Ma, 2007). In his study on Chinese cultural criticism after 1989, Ben Xu mapped intellectuals’ retreat from “politically engaged and intellectually oppositional topics” to inquiries reconcilable with the prevailing order and designed to

legitimate the hegemonic order (Xu, 1999: 1, 168). This retreat has robbed the democracy movement of crucial support.

Even so, the events of 1989 were of such magnitude that they continue to reverberate in people's imagination and the collective memory – and in the sleep of party leaders and officials, as a nightmare. The experience of facing down the government created a generation no longer prepared to act as an off-stage army for party factions, an attitude passed on to the protestors' children. Although most of the 1989 generation have stopped being active, some continue to work for political and social change. The Chinese democracy movement in exile has survived in the current harsh environment and there have been many attempts to organize a political opposition in China, for example, the establishment of the China Democracy Party in 1998. As Guobin Yang pointed out in an article on the Tian'anmen movement “two decades after”:

The fateful experiences in 1989 gave the participants the collective identity as a new political generation. This generational identity carries with it the historical consciousness of a repressed revolutionary movement, and it helps to sustain a level of civic participation. The political experiences people gained and the social ties they forged in 1989 contribute to their new roles as environmentalists, human rights activists, Internet activists, legal activists, and organizers of homeowner associations.

(Yang, 2009)

The second feature of contemporary extra-party politics in China is its fragmentation and absence of a feeling of commonality. Jeffrey Wasserstrom pointed out in a comparison of different waves of Chinese dissent over ninety years that there is now “no unifying thread that connects the actions of different disgruntled groups” (Wasserstrom, 2009). This fragmentation is a result of actions of the regime, which censors and cracks down on generalist dissent, perceived as the most threatening. It is also a result of the increasing complexity, differentiation, and individualization of Chinese society, which is no longer monochrome and predictable but as diverse as other contemporary societies, and geographically even more diverse.

A third feature, also noted by Guobin Yang, is that “the goals of this new activism are more concrete and down to earth, the means are more moderate, and the issues are more diverse”. The new issues include environmental protection, HIV/AIDS, anti-discrimination, legal aid, domestic violence, and citizens' rights, promoted by non-confrontational means. China's greater openness has led to a new-style grass-roots activism embodied in the new non-governmental organizations (NGOs), hundreds of thousands of which are registered, with an estimated eight million unregistered (Mooney, 2006).

These three features of extra-party politics are linked. Past democracy movements espoused big issues relevant to the future course of the revolution,

but today's activists – while not indifferent to broader political questions – are more likely to engage with everyday concerns. They are connected, but mainly by the Internet, which (as its recent vicissitudes in China show) cannot be a substitute for political organization.¹⁵

In the past, factions in the Chinese state were prepared to settle conflicts with their political rivals by mobilizing extra-party forces. Today, a revival of this practice is inconceivable. The government is no longer led, as it was in the last century, by members of the generation that founded the revolutionary state, men and women whose rule rested on society's acceptance of their legitimacy and on their own boundless and even reckless self-confidence. Those in power now cannot forget the experience in 1989 of loss of control of the streets and of popular consent. In the intervening years, they have developed more settled ways of governing and rules for managing the political succession that avoid the need for manipulated "participation" by the "masses", now seen as risky if not impossible. So the democratic openings party leaders created in the past no longer happen.

But while the extra-party activism remains disjointed, two developments point up the potential for a democracy movement more rather than less focused, sophisticated, and united than its predecessors. One is the growing trend towards an independent labour movement. Before 1989, workers never played more than a marginal role in democracy movements, and even in 1989 their role was supportive rather than central. The other is the beginnings of the emergence in the political sphere of a systematic alternative to the politics of the CCP.

The idea of an independent labour movement is not new in post-Mao China. On several occasions activists have taken steps in that direction, for example during the demonstrations of 1989, when Han Dongfang 韩东方 convened the Autonomous Workers' Federation in Beijing (Han, 2005). Independent trade unions have not yet emerged, but collective bargaining by elected shop stewards is now a feature of industrial relations in some factories. More and more workers, emboldened by legislation designed to strengthen their contractual rights, are calling for greater rights, and a few are calling for trade unions separate from the state-controlled National Federation of Trade Unions.¹⁶ Chinese authorities oppose independent unions and deal harshly with strikes in Chinese state-owned factories, but they are less likely to crack down on strikes against foreign interests. They may even try to use such strikes to blow new life into the official unions, bring the activists under control, get a handle on foreign firms, and play up to nationalist sentiments. But such tactics risk setting off a wider movement, for wages, rights, and conditions in Chinese-owned factories are usually even worse than in foreign-owned ones. Observers point out that workers are not yet striking for independent unions and are only campaigning for independent workers'

councils, but the step from the one to the next is not so great, as the history of *Solidarność* shows.¹⁷ While most observers agree that an independent labour movement is not yet imminent, the conditions for the emergence of one are better today than at any time since the 1920s.¹⁸

The 1989 democracy movement was broader rather than deep: despite mobilizing huge numbers of people of all classes in political demonstrations, it did not produce a sustained and coherent critique of the party. It could be argued that even the 1979 Democracy Wall had greater depth and theoretical engagement. Today, there is no critical movement of comparable breadth, yet perhaps the main legacy of 1989, more than twenty years after its suppression, has been the birth of a coherent and organized political opposition. Charter 08 (named after the Czech Charter 77), whose three main founders learned their politics in 1989, has called for open democracy and an end to one-party rule. Feng Chongyi, the Sydney-based democracy activist and critical scholar, has called it “the most important collective expression of Chinese liberal thought to emerge since the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949”. The Communist Party responded to Charter 08’s invitation to debate the issues of democratic reform and human rights by imprisoning its leader Liu Xiaobo 刘晓波 for eleven years, but has not so far taken similarly drastic measures against the Charter’s other signatories. Feng points out that the imprisonment of Liu has not yet had the effect intended: “This strategy has not succeeded in forcing one single signatory to withdraw, nor has it prevented more than ten thousand Chinese at home and abroad from adding their names to the document.” He concedes that it may have led “many more who share the values and aspirations of Charter 08 to remain silent” (Feng, 2010).¹⁹ However, the selective and guarded nature of government’s response suggests that it is aware of the risks of a more general crackdown.

4. Conclusions

Unlike other communist parties, the CCP was born not of a labour movement but of a cultural movement inspired by nationalist and democratic aims. Its founders, Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao, saw no contradiction between democracy and socialism, and tried to integrate the two. However, the party’s initial democratic moment was short-lived. Chen and Li’s understanding of Enlightenment ideas was sketchy, and their thinking was overwhelmed by another view of revolutionary politics, founded in the Bolshevik notions of “iron discipline” and extreme centralism.²⁰

In 1942, shortly after Mao’s definitive rise to power in the CCP, members of the “basic masses” and extra-party writers were summoned to subject the party to criticism, and for a brief while they raised issues like democracy, equality, and revolutionary humanism previously denounced as “petty-

bourgeois". This movement of criticism was soon closed down, but it was repeated on several subsequent occasions. Students of Mao Zedong Thought will recall that in 1966 Mao told Jiang Qing (Chiang Ch'ing 江青) that a "movement for sweeping up the ghosts and monsters" would be necessary once every seven or eight years.²¹ In fact, movements of extra-party criticism punctuated every decade of Mao's ascendancy and each of the first two decades after his death.

Each movement derived much of its flavour from what was happening in the party leadership at the time. Each was therefore focused on central political issues of the day – unlike China's contemporary dissent, whose lack of focus reflects its political autonomy, local rootedness, and cellularization. Each movement without exception dramatically surpassed its mandate, which was never defined with much precision and therefore highly susceptible to stretching in unauthorized directions.

Each movement had an inner, unofficial history separate from its officially tolerated trajectory, and it is a matter of record that the passage from one movement to the next was a process of cumulative learning, towards ever greater maturity and autonomy. The writers' movement of 1942 was dissent, not opposition. The Hundred Flowers campaign and the Cultural Revolution, as realized by the "masses", were more dissent than opposition. Democracy Wall in 1979 was dissent with a strong element of opposition. The protest movement of 1989 was more opposition than dissent. As for the movement now, it is less focused and more disjointed, yet if its elements of constructive dissidence and full-blown opposition were joined together it would represent China's truest democracy to date. But this summary description of China's extra-party movements is deceptively neat and hints at an automatic unravelling towards ever greater freedom, a comforting thought but an illusion. Where China goes from here – a more equal and democratic society, a rapacious and despotic capitalism, or something else entirely – will be determined by the choices Chinese people make, not by a hand of history.

Notes

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Huai, 1938-1941 (Berkeley 1999) also won an award. He is currently finishing a translation of Mei Zhi's prison memoir of her husband Hu Feng and a sourcebook on Chinese Trotskyism. <Email: benton@cardiff.ac.uk>

1. I would like to thank my friend and colleague Feng Chongyi for comments on this paper.
2. For a study on the CCP's earliest organized opposition, see Benton (1996). For other oppositions, see also Jeans (ed.) (1992).
3. See relevant CIA files. <<http://www.fas.org/irp/cia/product/frus1969.pdf>>
4. On the CIA's poor understanding of China, see the comments by Robert L. Suettinger, a career intelligence analyst and China scholar, as reported in Douglas Jehl, "Secret Papers about China Are Released by the C.I.A.," *New York Times*, 19th October 2004.
5. Chen Duxiu 陈独秀, "Zhi Zhonggong Zhongyang (Guanyu Zhongguo Geming Wenti) 致中共中央 (关于中国革命问题)" [To the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (on the question of the Chinese revolution)], in *Chen Duxiu Shuxin Ji* 陈独秀书信集 [Chen Duxiu's letters], edited by Dai Shuiru 戴水如, Beijing: Xinhua Chubanshe 新华出版社, 1987, pp. 434-454, at p. 449.
6. Frederick C. Teiwes made this argument in "The Origins of Rectification: Inner-Party Purges and Education before Liberation," *The China Quarterly*, No. 65, March 1976, pp. 15-53.
7. The arguments are reported in Hatch (1989).
8. I treat these movements synoptically, since I have written a detailed account of them elsewhere, in Gregor Benton and Alan Hunter (eds), *Wild Lily, Prairie Fire: China's Movement for Democracy, Yan'an to Tian'anmen, 1942-1989*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.
9. Some fifteen thousand suspected spies are said to have been interrogated, detained and tortured in Yan'an during the Rectification Campaign. In the spring of 1947, when Yan'an was lost to the Guomindang (Kuomintang/KMT 國民黨) army, Kang Sheng 康生 ordered more than one hundred suspects who had still been kept in detention to be executed (Gao, 2000: 599). They may have included other critics arrested at the time of the writers' movement.
10. Milovan Djilas, *The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System*, New York: Praeger, 1957.
11. For a recent systematic account of dissenting views in this period, see Yin (2009).
12. This is a main thesis of Feigon (1990). See also Chan and Unger (1990: 271).
13. This is Ed Friedman's argument in "China: A Threat to or Threatened by Democracy?" <<http://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/?article=1318>>, Winter, 2009, accessed 12th June 2010.
14. On the pragmatism and materialism of Chinese students now, see Yan (2006).
15. On the Internet's limitations, see Merkel-Hess and Wasserstrom (2010).
16. In 2008, "nearly 700,000 labor disputes went to arbitration, almost double the number in 2007 ... [T]he number of labor cases in [civil] courts was 280,000, a 94 percent increase over the previous year ... In the first half of 2009, there were 170,000 such cases" (Edward Wong, "As China Aids Labor, Unrest Is Still Rising", *New York Times*, 20th June 2010). Writing in *China Daily* on 18th

- June 2010 (“Labor Unrest and Role of Unions”), Anita Chan noted that striking Honda workers “were well organized, strategic and assertive, demanding sizeable wage increases, proposing a pay scale and a career ladder, electing their own representatives, re-electing office-bearers to their union branch and demonstrating solidarity and a determination to win”.
17. Keith Bradsher, “A Labor Movement Stirs in China”, *New York Times*, 10th June 2010; “Strike Breakers: Strikes Are as Big a Problem for the Government as They Are for Managers”, *Economist*, 3rd June 2010.
 18. For a rich study on the effects of the reform of state-owned industry in China on factory workers, see Hurst (2009).
 19. See also Peter Beaumont, “Why Is China So Terrified of Dissent?”, *The Observer*, 17th January 2010.
 20. On the suppression of the liberal tradition in the CCP, see Feng (2009).
 21. Mao Tse-tung [Mao Zedong], “Private Letter to Chiang Ch’ing [Jiang Qing] (July 8, 1966)”, in *The Lin Piao Affair*, White Plains: International Arts and Sciences Press, 1975, pp. 118-21.

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