

LIU BINYAN

TWO KINDS OF TRUTH

STORIES AND REPORTAGE FROM CHINA

Edited by Perry Link



Stockholms
universitetsbibliotek

Indiana University Press
BLOOMINGTON AND INDIANAPOLIS

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Editor's Note

The present volume is a revised and expanded version of Liu Binyan's *People or Monsters? And Other Stories and Reportage from China after Mao* (Indiana University Press, 1983). In 1981, when I began to work on that book, I had never met Liu Binyan. The year before, my requests in China to meet him had met with stock answers such as "He is traveling," or "Your request is not too convenient." I wrote to him, but my letter seems not to have been delivered. Liu had become for me the high priest of post-Mao "scar literature," a gray eminence who, although unreachable, best exemplified the exciting literary protest in those years.

I needed to be careful in preparing a book of his writings for English publication in the United States. Those were days in which such an event could cause—or at least become the pretext for—a writer to be branded "bourgeois liberal" and to suffer accordingly. Hence in my author's note to the published book I wrote, "Liu Binyan was not consulted about this book and bears no responsibility for its conception or the selection of pieces."

Since then much has changed. I have met Liu Binyan and we became good friends. He was expelled from the Communist Party in 1987 (or "re-expelled," since this also happened in 1957). He left China in 1988, and after he denounced the Beijing massacre of June 1989, Party leaders never allowed him to go back. He

spent his later years not far from me in New Jersey. I was able to consult him in detail about the present version of the book, and this time there was nothing to be lost in saying so.

I know of no one outside China, among either Chinese or Western "China-watchers," who has followed social and political conditions inside China over the last two decades as assiduously as Liu Binyan did. He was indefatigable: he read every scrap of reporting he could find, interviewed travelers, and even broadcast his home fax number on Radio Free Asia so that listeners in China could send him their perceptions directly. Most important, though, was his ability to interpret the broad flow of information he received. His mind combined a powerful analytic ability with a rich bank of memory and knowledge of life at many levels of Chinese society. He knew how to put the pieces together, and how not to be fooled.

His exile from China was painful to him, but, in broader perspective, what China lost by the separation was greater than what he lost. How much could this magnificent ancient country, in trying to conceive and to build a modern version of itself, have benefited from the knowledge, analytical power, and idealism that Liu Binyan offered? Where could the Chinese people have found someone more devoted to their well-being, and to the building of a just and decent modern society? When the top leaders of the Communist Party in the early 1990s issued their blacklist barring Liu and fifty-two others from returning to China, they were obsessed with protecting their own grip on power. By the same act they were also wasting one of China's finest resources.

This book includes two pieces of reportage and two review essays that did not appear in the earlier edition. It also includes, in lieu of an introduction, an extended interview with Liu Binyan.

The dedication to Zhu Hong, Liu's wife, was the result of consultation among family and friends shortly after Liu died on December 5, 2005. By chance, it was only a few days before Liu's death that editors at Indiana University Press asked me whether there would be a dedication for this book. On my last visit with Liu, as he lay in a hospital bed, I gently raised the question. I believe he understood it, but was too weak to answer. Later I consulted with Liu Xiaoyan, Binyan's daughter, with whom he was

particularly close, as well as with some of Liu's friends. Everyone felt the dedication to Zhu Hong was the right choice.

I am grateful to Human Rights in China for a grant in support of publication of this volume, to *The New York Review of Books* for permission to reprint "An Unnatural Disaster" and "A Great Leap Backward?" and to my friends and colleagues who contributed translations.

Perry Link
Princeton, New Jersey
January 2006

An Interview with Liu Binyan

Perry Link, September 2004

Q: How did you get interested in writing?

A: I liked art and fiction when I was young. When I was about eleven or twelve, I thought I wanted to be a fiction writer when I grew up, but I had no materials to work with. In those days, in China, nobody did. To Westerners in the twenty-first century, the daily life of China in the 1930s might be unimaginable in a literal sense. China may be famous for its “four great inventions”—one of which was paper, another printing—but that doesn’t mean there were a lot of books around. Quite the contrary.

My home, for example, wasn’t too bad by standards of the time: my father was a Chinese-Russian interpreter for the Central Manchurian Railway, and we had what you might call a “middle class” home in Harbin in the 1930s. But what books did we have? We owned a collection of Sun Yat-sen’s essays and the *Liaozhai zhiyi* stories,¹ but that was about it. The only other printed things I remember seeing around the house as a boy were an almanac and a poster of the kitchen god. That was it. In that context, to aspire to be a writer was a huge leap of imagination. I also really liked

music, and at one point thought I would like to be a Peking Opera singer—but again didn't have much chance actually to hear music.

I was lucky in the parents I had. They gave me a lot of freedom. They let me read whatever I could find, and the more I read the more curious I became. I was curious about everything.

Q: And the attachment to reading and writing has been with you ever since?

A: Yes, but as I read I got more and more interested in political questions—like Japan's attacks on China, and Hitler's invasion of Czechoslovakia. Intense political interests began to overshadow my earlier interests in literature—although the passion for reading was the same. I started worrying about the World War, and then about the world in general. I got interested in the Soviet Union and communism. I joined a reading group—what the communists called a "peripheral organization"—and started reading Marxism-Leninism. We read literary theory, too, and read some Russian writers. Turgenev was a major author for our group—bigger than Dostoevsky. But my interests in the looming world crisis determined my choices in life.

Q: What did you do?

A: I joined the Communist Party underground. In 1943 I went to Tianjin, hoping to go from there to Yan'an. But the Party told me there was plenty of work to do right there in Tianjin and that I should stay there, so I did.

Q: "Liberation" in 1949 must have felt good to you.

A: For a while everybody felt good. Those were heady times. People were volunteering, donating things, supporting the new government, and looking to the future with optimism. And yet, looking back, I can see that those were exactly the years when my dissent was born. That may seem odd—since the early 1950s were easy years, and safe years compared to what I had just been through and would go through later. But to me there was something worrisome about the public mood. The unity of thought was disturbing. The people at the top announced what to think, word was passed from top to bottom, and everybody agreed. Peo-

ple weren't forced; most agreed willingly. But I was somehow bothered that there weren't any different opinions. My job was reporter and editor for *China Youth News*, the main newspaper for young people, but I found the work fairly unappealing. There was a lot of recording of the words of the leaders and mechanical passing of them down to the readers.

I was still interested in the Soviet Union, and thought the Soviets were doing better than China in allowing a variety of views. Their newspaper *Pravda* [*Truth*] tolerated at least a small amount of critical opinion. They also had a magazine called *The Crocodile* that specialized in satiric cartoons, and another satire magazine called *Hot Peppers*. I admired the Russian writer Valentin Ovechkin, whose literary reportage exposed problems in society. So why, I thought, did China have to be so unified, so straight—so boring? The Chinese Communists had done even better than Stalin at homogenizing everyone's views. Why, I wondered, was this? How could it come about?

Q: What would be your own answer to that question?

A: I'm afraid it has something to do with the nature of the Chinese people. They generally submit to authority, seek an appearance of public unity, and are embarrassed by breaks in decorum. In 1957, when word came from the government that "rightists" should be criticized, most people didn't know—didn't even ask—what a "rightist" was supposed to be. They just joined everybody else in the "correct" criticism of rightists. Ironically, if they had looked into the question of what a rightist was, they would have found that we rightists had been voicing many of their own complaints, and that actually they agreed with us. But they didn't ask.

I can also answer your question using myself as an example. When I heard in 1957 that I had been named a rightist, I felt inside that something was wrong. There must be a mistake, I thought. But on the surface I accommodated the pressures and went with the flow. A person does this not just because of threats from the authorities. There is also the sense of a great ocean of public opinion. All of those workers, peasants, and soldiers—and their organized movements—surround a person. To surrender to the multi-

tude offers a person a sense of security. To oppose it one has to stand all alone—or at least it feels that way. The pressures can be overwhelming.

Q: But some people—like you—do resist. How do you explain that?

A: The reasons no doubt differ from person to person. In my own case, I think, several factors were at work. Harbin, where I grew up, had more of a free-speaking atmosphere than other places. The people of China's Northeast, as you may know, are mostly migrants from Shandong and often think of themselves as refugees, of a sort, from the traditional rigidities of the Chinese heartland. Harbin in my youth also had some Russian—that is, European—influence that contributed to the freer atmosphere. In addition my own parents, as I have said, gave me unusual freedom. I read whatever I could lay my hands on, and they let me. Another important seed of my rebelliousness was the shock of having to drop out of school. When the Japanese invaded my father lost his job. My parents couldn't afford tuition for me, and I had to leave after the ninth grade. I deeply resented this. It is a major reason why I was drawn to the Communist Party underground. I felt the revolution was not only going to help China as a whole but would liberate me personally. I joined the revolution as a rebel, not as a follower.

Q: So all of this helps to explain why you dared to write "On the Bridge Construction Site" in 1956?

A: I think so. That piece was based on a true story I encountered in Lanzhou, Gansu Province, but it illustrated an important nationwide problem. It showed why a clear-thinking practical manager was better than a narrow, obedient bureaucrat. I had been inspired, too, by events in the Soviet Union, where literary policy had relaxed since Stalin died in 1953. I sent "Bridge Site" to Qin Zhaoyang, the editor of *People's Literature*. He published it and went out of his way to praise it. The story was the first example since Mao's 1942 "Talks at Yan'an"³ of "criticism" being aimed at friends. (Mao had said that criticism was only for the enemy.)⁴ Overnight I found myself famous. I was surprised. Then, pretty soon, we heard about Khrushchev's "secret speech" denouncing Stalin and I was even more encouraged. My next piece, "The In-

ternal News at This Newspaper," was fiction, not reportage, but it discussed very real and obvious problems of the fetters on expression in the Chinese media. It had a big influence in literary circles. It also had a major impact on journalists, who championed it as a sort of manifesto for freedom of the press. I'm afraid I made a lot of "rightists."

Q: What do you mean by that?

A: I mean that a lot of young people grabbed the story's point and ran with it, and as a result were labeled "rightists" a year later. This wounded many of them for life, and they never regained their willingness to speak out.

Q: And of course you yourself were made a "rightist."

A: Not just a rightist but an "extreme rightist." I was made an example in the media, and then banished to the countryside for four years. My time in the countryside taught me a lot about China, but was very hard on my wife and family. My wife, Zhu Hong, was an editor at *China Children's News*; she had plenty of talent but was not a Party member, so couldn't go to certain meetings or see certain reports, and never got promoted. When I was sent away she had to care for our two children and two of my sister's children as well. She did this on her own salary, staying up nights to mend socks for everybody, and so on. I had free time but couldn't help, and my salary had been cut to a pittance. I felt terribly guilty toward Zhu Hong. I was afraid, too, that my political taint had become a burden to my family. More than half of the 1957 "rightists" got divorces—mostly trying to protect their children from political taint (even though it didn't help, because the taint survived divorce). When people asked Zhu Hong why she didn't "draw a clear line" between herself and me, she had to answer them. But she never even mentioned divorce to me.

In late 1961 all the rightists at *China Youth News*, where I was working, had their "rightist caps removed"—all except me, anyway. Getting one's cap removed didn't mean freedom from taint. You were still a "former rightist," which was something like being a former child molester in the U.S.—people always suspected and despised you. In subsequent campaigns, former rightists were always among the first to be targeted as possible troublemakers.

“Un-capping” was much less a relief than “rehabilitation” [*ping-fan*], which implied that the original charges had been wrong and that a person was due an apology.

When I turned out to be the only rightist at *China Youth News* that didn't even get “un-capped,” the psychological pressure that I felt increased severalfold, and I felt even guiltier toward my family. The leaders did let me come back and work at the newspaper in 1962, but only to do technical tasks—nothing remotely political. In 1959 there had been another campaign against “rightist tendencies,” and in 1962 almost all of its victims were being “re-screened” and even “rehabilitated.” At the same time a number of people high in the Party felt that the 1957 rightists should be treated the same way, and many places began to move in that direction. But Mao stopped this in its tracks. He issued a statement that “there can be no question of re-screening or rehabilitating” 1957 rightists. I think he did this because he knew there had been so many wrong accusations in 1957 that to handle the problems of a comprehensive re-evaluation would just be too much, and the whole Anti-Rightist Movement, which he himself had initiated, might be repudiated.

Q: So your hat stayed on.

A: Yes, until March of 1966, when it suddenly came off.

Q: Really? I never knew that.

A: Yes, for me and some others. We were thrilled. But in real terms it was only a very modest change. The “rightist” labels came off but we still walked around as “uncapped rightists,” and that was still pretty bad. For a while, though, it felt like a whole new life had begun.

Q: A spiritual emancipation, at least.

*A: It didn't last. Just a few months later, in August, the Cultural Revolution descended. The “rebel faction” at *China Youth News* “seized power,” reversed the decisions, and declared me an “unreformed rightist.” Then came charges that I was a “traitor” and a “Soviet spy.” I belonged to the “cow ghosts and snake spirits” and was confined in “cow sheds” for a few years.*

Q: How many?

A: From summer 1966 until spring of 1972. At first I was confined right at the newspaper office. In 1969 I was sent to “cadre school” in Henan, where the inmates did labor and lived in some pretty poor conditions. Yang Jiang has written about this life in “Six Chapters in a Cadre School,”²⁵ but her treatment is too rosy. In 1969 Zhu Hong was sent to the same cadre school, where we could glimpse each other, but were forbidden to talk. She brought our son, Dahong, with her. Our daughter, Xiaoyan, stayed behind in Beijing, and was alone for a year even though she was only fifteen. She couldn't get a job assignment because she was the daughter of a rightist, a spy, etc., so she ended up volunteering for farm labor. She wrote us long, politically correct letters. She studied English, but after three years the only English sentence she could write was “Long Live Chairman Mao.”

Q: What were your own feelings about Chairman Mao through all of this? Did you start to have doubts?

A: In 1957 the “rightist” label shocked me but did not make me doubt Mao. Even though I thought the charge was a mistake, I peered inside myself to see if there was some problem Mao could see that I had missed. When things went wild during the Cultural Revolution, I still generally assumed that Lin Biao or the Gang of Four was causing the trouble—not Mao. The Lin Biao incident⁶ in 1971 led many people, especially young people “sent down” to the countryside, to start doubting Mao. If Lin Biao was a traitor, and had also been Mao's “closest comrade in arms,” then, they began to ask, how clean could Mao be? But my own serious doubts about Mao came only in 1975.

Q: 1975? Why then?

A: In 1975 Mao decided to let Deng Xiaoping come back for another stint in the central leadership. Deng immediately set to work trying to end the Cultural Revolution and begin to repair the damage. Word also spread through the grapevine that Mao was distancing himself from his wife, Jiang Qing, the leader of the radical Gang of Four. We political outcasts thought China had some hope again. But then, very abruptly, Mao seemed to reverse

himself and launched yet another crackdown on Deng Xiaoping.⁷ For me that was it. I began to doubt Mao then. People like me started turning our hopes toward what might happen after Mao died. Some who had access to books turned to the *Comprehensive Mirror for Self-Government*, Sima Guang's eleventh-century classic that contains plenty of examples of what happens when dynasties fall.

Q: A few years later, in 1979, you wrote "People or Monsters?" You became pretty bold pretty quickly.

A: People say I was "bold," but it didn't really feel that way to me at the time. The story of Wang Shouxin [the center of corruption in "People or Monsters?"] had already been reported in the newspapers. Wang had already been convicted. I was not breaking the story, but did feel that the published reports hadn't dug deep enough. In spring of 1979 the top leaders were discussing "practice as the test for truth." This slogan was code for de-Maoification; it meant that blind adherence to Maoist theory was no longer necessary and that the truth of actual conditions is what should count. There were some general conditions in Chinese society that the Wang Shouxin story made clear, and I thought we writers should dig deeper into them.

Q: For example?

A: Well, for example, what did it mean that all ten of the guilty parties in the Wang case were Communist Party members? And why, after the case was over, were there still people defending Wang and the way her group had behaved? There was something deeper, more systemic about the corruption, and it had to do with the Party—and these factors had been ignored.

Q: But still—why was it you who saw these things and asked these questions? Didn't anyone else notice?

A: Oh, sure, many people noticed. Local writers in Harbin were much closer to the facts than I was. But I had, in an odd sense, the advantage of being a sort of outsider. My work as a reporter had been suddenly cut off in 1957, so when I returned to look at Harbin in 1979 it was as if from a time capsule. The corruption and cynicism that I saw shocked me. Problems jumped out at me

because I still had the standards of the mid-1950s in mind. To local writers in Harbin, all the economic devastation and social decay since the 1950s had become so pervasive that it seemed almost normal, sort of like bad weather. That doesn't mean people liked what they saw. I knew a young writer in Harbin who couldn't write anything because he was too depressed.

Q: And it was exactly the "normality" of the corruption problem that gave "People or Monsters?" such broad national impact, right?

A: Yes. The impact was obvious from the readers' letters that poured in from all across the country. Official reaction indirectly told the same story. I was attacked by Party leaders not only in Heilongjiang, where the "People or Monsters?" story happened, but in many other places—Liaoning, Shandong, Shaanxi, Hubei, Shanghai, and elsewhere—where similar things had been going on.

Q: How did provincial leaders object? What did they say?

A: In Heilongjiang the Party leaders wanted people to believe that after Wang Shouxin was tried and executed the whole problem of corruption was finished and over with—it was a thing of the past, a creation of the Gang of Four, and now that the Gang was gone, corruption was gone, too. They complained that "People or Monsters?" implied that corruption was pandemic and still a problem. On that point they were right, of course. That was exactly what I wanted to say, as well as the reason why readers liked the piece so much.

Q: So "People or Monsters?" put the question of systemic corruption squarely into the public domain, where the Party could not pretend that it wasn't there.

A: Yes. At the Tenth Plenum of the Twelfth Party Congress—in late summer, 1983—there was a lot of talk about "rectifying the Party," and that plenum actually passed a resolution about it. In Party jargon "rectification" meant, in fact, rooting out corruption, but you couldn't use the word "corruption" [*fubai*]. It was taboo. That word was supposed to apply only to the death of the Guomindang regime in the 1940s. It couldn't apply to the Communist Party. For the Communist period you had to refer to "use of power for private purposes," "improper tendencies," or "excessive

eating and drinking.” You could summon “the glorious tradition of our Party to overcome all obstacles,” but you couldn’t mention the word “corruption,” let alone refer to the structural problems it created.

Q: Structural problems? Like what?

A: There were two major facts in the structure of corruption that no one at the Tenth Plenum dared to mention. One was the role of “backstage supporters.” Whenever corruption cases were exposed, everything was blamed entirely on the person who got caught. No matter how serious the offense—even if the person was executed—no one probed deeper into the web of how higher-ups had chosen and protected that person, had exacted fealty in return for protection, and so on. These corruption webs were omnipresent in China, had been around for a long time, and there is no way that higher-ups were not involved. The second problem was revenge and fear of revenge. Everyone knew that if you crossed the wrong people in China they would come after you with a vengeance—and this deterred most people from even complaining about corruption. But the Party reports at the Tenth Plenum wouldn’t go near these two problems; the top Party leaders didn’t dare to try—and didn’t even want—a cleanup of corruption that went that far. The “rectification” effort was not really sincere, in my view.

Q: But better than nothing?

A: No, actually. Somehow it actually made things worse. In 1983 it led to the campaign to “Eradicate Spiritual Pollution,” which was an attack on the reformers. There is an odd pattern in Chinese Communist Party history in which efforts to “rectify” the Party always seem to precipitate crackdowns on the rectifiers—the liberals. This happened at Yan’an in 1942, when the Party’s first rectification campaign turned into an arrest and denunciation of Wang Shiwei, the literary dissident. It happened on a larger scale in 1956–57, when invitations to help the Party correct itself turned into the Anti-Rightist Campaign. And here, in 1983, the same pattern appeared. I don’t know what makes this pattern happen; someone should study the question.

Q: So you’re not sure why the top leaders launched the campaign to Eradicate Spiritual Pollution?

A: The deep reasons for it are hard to explain, but the surface reason, anyway, was pretty clear. 1983 was the hundredth anniversary of the death of Karl Marx, and the Party set up a big meeting to observe the occasion. Zhou Yang delivered a speech, which Wang Ruoshui, editor of People’s Daily, and Wang Yuanhua, a literary scholar from Shanghai, had helped to draft. The speech pointed to a major problem of “alienation” in Chinese society.

Q: And that got them into trouble . . .

A: Did it ever! It became the pretext for an all-out assault on intellectuals that lasted several years. The leftists claimed that Marxism was being misquoted, that alienation was impossible under socialism, and that Zhou Yang and Wang Ruoshui were badly misleading the people.

Q: Misleading them?

A: In real life, the term *yihua* [alienation] was so strange that most people had no idea what it meant. You had to explain it to them. Once you did, though, they recognized it immediately. “Of course! Of course there’s *yihua*!” But meanwhile the campaign to Eradicate Spiritual Pollution steamrollered forward, eliminating all external signs of “pollution”: lipstick, curly hairdos, bell-bottom jeans, and the like. And the chilling effects went much deeper than that.

Q: Did you see any of those effects personally?

A: Oh yes, I was witness to perhaps the biggest chill of all. I saw the purge of Hu Jiwei and Wang Ruoshui at the *People’s Daily*. In the early 1980s the newspaper office was a stronghold of the reformers; Hu Jiwei was chief editor and Wang Ruoshui was deputy chief. One day in late October of 1983—it was a Sunday—the conservative heavyweights Hu Qiaomu, who had been Mao Zedong’s secretary in Yan’an, and Deng Liqun, another Maoist ideologue, announced a meeting for all Party members at the *People’s Daily*. They came in person to the newspaper office to preside. They denounced the paper’s “liberal tendencies”; all the good things that we had accomplished were, in their view, bad things.

Wang Ruoshui was publicly humiliated. They didn't even give him a chair to sit in. As he took verbal abuse in turn from both Hu and Deng, he looked like the accused at a trial. But I admired him because he refused to resign; he obliged them to fire him. Hu Jiwei resigned, which was more face-saving, but there was a cost: once you resign, you cannot be reinstated.

Q: It must have devastated the staff.

A: That's what I expected, too, but I was surprised to see how many of my colleagues at the meeting clapped in support of Hu Qiaomu and Deng Liqun. How in the world, I wondered, could they clap? It was a real eye-opener. I saw how willingly some people—even my good colleagues at *People's Daily*—could bend with the wind when a power holder came along. And that made me wonder whether my perception of *People's Daily* as a stronghold of reform had been right in the first place. Maybe these benders-with-the-wind had only been pretending to agree with the reformist spirit, too. Maybe it was only a matter of two different kinds of wind. In retrospect, though, I should have realized that some people at the *People's Daily* had been opposed to reform all along. There had already been incidents where people at the paper had sided with my opponents in cases that I had been investigating. I hadn't paid enough attention to these details.

Q: You were too idealistic.

A: And even afterwards, I kept on feeling optimistic. I had a gut feeling that the repression couldn't last, that it would only be a passing thing. I did feel sorry for my friend Wang Ruoshui, though. He had had a long string of bad luck.

Q: Oh? What do you mean?

A: In 1979, some young editors and activists from Democracy Wall came to the *People's Daily* offices, noticed Wang Ruoshui in the hallway, and asked if they could have a chat with him. Wang said yes, had the chat, and then it turned out that one of the youngsters had been an undercover agent for State Security. That same afternoon a report on Wang went into the secret police system. After that he became a marked man; nobody's "good word" could save him now. Even his wife slandered him, saying that he

had opposed both Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, and claimed that he had had extramarital affairs. She divorced him, then induced their daughter to rifle through her father's drawers in search of more incriminating evidence. It had been a long, awful story even before he was fired.

Q: It sounds like 1983 was the low point of the 1980s—until 1989, anyway.

A: 1985 was even worse, in my view.

Q: Oh? I thought 1985 was a good year, especially for writers. Wasn't that the year of the "creative freedom" slogan, and the year when the Writers' Association was allowed for the first time to elect its own leaders? Ba Jin and you won that election, right? From the outside, anyway, 1985 looked pretty good.

A: Yes, and that part of the story is true. Until the Writers' Association meeting, which spanned the last days of 1984 and the first of 1985, Deng Liqun and the conservatives had handpicked all of the Association's officers. But that year Hu Yaobang turned the whole system around by announcing free elections and unveiling the "creative freedom" slogan. I think he probably had a go-ahead from Deng Xiaoping before he did these things.

Q: But then what was so bad about 1985?

A: It was a turning point, the beginning of the end of serious political reform in China. Wang Zhen, the hard-line military leader who had made speeches about "cleaning the ranks" during the spiritual pollution campaign, was furious about the results of the Writers' Association election. He and the other conservatives began to turn the tide against the reformers in 1985. Hu Yaobang was forced to retreat step by step, and two years later had to resign.

Q: But when Hu died in April 1989, his death sparked the famous Tiananmen Movement, so he obviously still had a popular following. What do you think of the 1989 Tiananmen Movement—looking back now after more than 15 years?

A: Too much media attention, both then and now, has gone to some fairly superficial aspects of that movement: the students in the Square, on television before the world, with their banners and

slogans about democracy, and the Goddess of Democracy in the background. People don't perceive the longer-term trends toward more openness that lay deeper in society among the ordinary Chinese people.

Q: Tell us more about those deeper trends.

A: By the late 1980s the attitude of the Chinese people toward political authority was very different from what it had been in the 1950s. Just compare how I was viewed after my two expulsions from the Communist Party—first in 1957 and again in 1987. In 1957 I became a pariah overnight. Nobody but a few close relatives would have anything to do with me. I think I had two visitors in twenty-two years. But in 1987 things were entirely different. People lined up at my doorway to express their support. They didn't care that my apartment was probably bugged, and they knew that plainclothes police were watching outside, taking down names—but it didn't matter! They came anyway. They brought me presents—medicine, food, money, *baojianqiu*.⁸ People sometimes dared to stand up in political meetings to defend me. Some told me that when they heard officials reading out lists of my offenses, they actually thought, at first, that I was being praised.

The point here isn't me. The point is the sea change in the Chinese people's attitudes. In the 1950s Mao was amazingly successful at turning all the Chinese people into his blind followers. He was a genius at that. But after he led China into a number of blind alleys the people began to wake up. By April 5, 1976, resistance had grown to a point where millions of protesters—when Mao was still alive!—headed for Tiananmen Square to denounce the Cultural Revolution. A few years later, in 1978–79, we saw a Democracy Wall movement. By the late 1970s farmers were demanding to till their own land. Most of the people in these movements were not intellectuals. They were from the lower levels of society—mostly young workers and farmers who were only modestly educated. China's resistance movements had very different origins from those of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, where intellectuals were the leaders and had very little contact with workers or farmers. In China the breakthroughs came from the lower classes, and in 1989 those classes were ready to keep on marching.

Q: Who opposed them? The official class?

A: Not really. The rank and file of the Communist Party had also changed over the years, and by the 1980s was also looking for more flexibility and freedom. The Party's two original pillars of strength—by which I mean its almost religious unity of thought and its ironclad organizational control—both crumbled during the Cultural Revolution. When the post-Mao leaders spoke of “reform,” people were really ready for it. Reform in China faced much less resistance than, by comparison, it did in the Soviet Union after Stalin. The conservatives in China tried several times during the 1980s to bring back Maoism—and launched a few campaigns against “liberalism”—but never could make it work. With each attempt the liberals somehow ended up stronger than they had been before. The last time this happened was after 1987, when Hu Yaobang was sacked. The man who replaced him, Zhao Ziyang, turned out to be just as strong a proponent of reform as Hu. Political reform under Zhao actually sped up.

The overall point here is that powerful momentum for change had been building in China both inside and outside the Party. In 1989 Deng Xiaoping labeled the Tiananmen movement “counter-revolutionary turmoil,” and you would think that would have scared people. Yet most Party, government, and military officials in Beijing—probably 70 percent or more—supported the protesters anyway. Some even joined them in the streets.

Q: With these large, long-term trends undergirding the Tiananmen movement in 1989, why did it fail? Why has political change remained beyond reach?

A: Several reasons. Most important, I think, is that there was nothing for the movement to believe in at that point in history. This was a global problem. The revolutions of the twentieth century had failed, and the socialist movement was in tatters. As of 1989 the great majority of Chinese intellectuals looked to America and to capitalism for models, but what Deng Xiaoping was advocating then already was—to put it bluntly—capitalism, so how could capitalism be a rallying cry for an alternative? This vacuum in thought, theory, and strategy was the major reason for the failure.

Q: What about the intellectuals? Isn't it their job to supply thought, theory, and strategy?

A: In my view intellectuals—and especially writers—must bear a major responsibility for the failure. On the whole the role of China's literary elite over the last twenty-five years is not very pretty. In the 1980s some writers did push for reform, but only in a superficial way. More often than not, "reform" boiled down to more social status, material comfort, and creative freedom for themselves. They were not very interested in moving the larger society forward.

Q: What do you mean by "not very interested in moving the larger society forward"?

A: After 1978 no one in China had more freedom than writers, especially fiction writers. No one had a better opportunity to influence society. But what did they do with this opportunity? Mostly they pursued wealth and fame, while questions of social justice, especially for society's downtrodden, drifted into the background. A few leading fiction writers led young writers down the road of modernist escape fiction. One of these senior figures, sometimes called "China's most clever writer," was clever enough to become a minister in the central government, where he wrote fiction that indirectly supported the Communist Party while at the same time enjoying the cachet of "dissident writer" both inside and outside China.

Q: And you feel that writers' neglect of society contributed to the failure at Tiananmen?

A: Yes. Writers in the 1980s did not dig into society to reveal and clarify the large popular trends that were taking place. As a result, when spring of 1989 came, both the students in the square and the political intellectuals who were helping them were largely out of touch with those deeper social trends. The great tide of popular discontent that underlay the nationwide protest movement was beneath their feet but largely invisible to them, so they were unable to use that strength to tactical advantage. Student leaders appeared tame and again before the television cameras of the world, brimming with their youthful confidence, but what was in their

minds? Only a few catchwords about "freedom" and "democracy" borrowed from the West. Their self-conception as the originators and cutting edge of China's democracy movement, the heroic leaders whom all the workers and farmers had been waiting for, was extremely naïve. How could they possibly not have lost out to the pack of wily old scoundrels whom they were up against?

Q: And after Tiananmen the intellectual elite has done no better?

A: Worse. In June 1989 few people thought the regime could hang on much longer. But it has. Part of the "credit" for this must go to a craven intellectual elite that has made a bargain with the regime: political support in exchange for personal privilege. The regime has bought off other social groups, too—notably the bureaucratic class and the new business elite—but no group, if you think about it, has gained as much from the bargain as the literary intellectuals have. Their material standards have risen sharply; their social status, which under Mao had hit rock bottom, has skyrocketed; and the expanding latitude for creative writing (a life-or-death matter in their line of work) has been another special bonus for them. It is hardly surprising that they feel grateful to the regime and are ready to grovel before it. Some even say the June Fourth massacre was justified—after all, it kept China "stable" and avoided the chaos that one sees in Russia. They say that Jiang Zemin, despite the repression, rampant corruption and polarization that came to China during his years in power, has been cleverer than Zhao Ziyang.

And whatever their views, they tend to see only the elite events—demonstrations at Tiananmen or the jockeying leaders in Zhongnanhai—and see nothing of the big changes deeper in society. They think the Communist Party is just a matter of struggles between conservative and reformist leaders at the top; they overlook its deeper role as a foul, reactionary force that pervades society and feeds resentment at all levels.

Q: There was a kind of "Mao nostalgia" in the 1990s. Where did that come from? Why would people feel nostalgic?

A: For Mao everything depended on "thought." He exaggerated the importance of thought and downplayed or ignored the flesh-

and-blood side of life. The Long March survived on “spirit,” and the Great Leap Forward was supposed to run on spirit, too. By now, though, China has swung to the opposite extreme. Now everything is material, nothing spirit. This leaves people who remember the Mao years feeling odd, yearning for something to believe in. Mao led China to disaster, but at least he gave you something to believe in.

Q: Do any Maoist ideas still survive in popular thinking?

A: Yes—equality, for example. Mao said workers were “masters” of the country. This was never more than half true in his day—because workers never really did have their own unions or their own power—but merely championing the slogan at least raised the status and self-respect of workers. Peasants, too, were never treated equally by Mao, but the slogans about “people’s communes,” “learn from the peasants,” and so on at least promoted the idea of equality—and it still survives. In the thinking of Chinese people today, you can have more money or status than I do, but if so there had better be a good reason for the difference. You’re not supposed to be born better.

The importance of equality can also be measured by looking at suicide. There was a lot more suicide in China in the 1990s than in the 1940s. Is that because material conditions were much worse in the 1990s? No, for the most part. The difference is that in the 1940s destitute or despised people accepted their fates more easily. They did not expect social respect. In the 1990s, though, to be laid off or unemployed had become a tremendous loss of face. The idea of equality gave people pride, and when the equality was snatched away, it brought unprecedented shame.

Q: Your view of these “deeper” movements toward political change in Chinese society are fresh and interesting. Western China-watchers seldom speak in these terms.

A: That’s because they can’t see what’s happening under the surface. You have to spend time in the grassroots in China in order to sense them. Even in my own case, I discovered these trends without really meaning to.

Q: What do you mean?

A: I mean what happened to me in 1957. Being labeled a “rightist” was a disaster for me in many ways, but it also caused me to learn a lot about China that I hadn’t known before. As of 1956 I was part of socialist China’s new elite: I had a good job as a reporter and a certain fame as a writer. My salary was 158 yuan per month, about five times what an ordinary worker got, and pay for individual manuscripts came on top of that. I was on my way to the new upper class. Then, as a “rightist,” I was forced to go live in the countryside and mountains among some of China’s poorest people. That was new to me. Always before I had lived in cities. I learned a lot about the ordinary people and came to respect their gutsy struggles with life.

In the mid-1980s, on three trips to Shaanxi as a reporter, I was startled once again at the feistiness of China’s ordinary people. People formed lines outside my door waiting to tell me their grievances. They kept coming and coming. At dinnertime someone brought me food so that I wouldn’t need to take a dinner break. These were ordinary folk, not intellectuals; no one needed to lecture them on democracy; they knew what was right and wrong, fair and unfair, and were very articulate about it.

Q: The Chinese government argues that the Chinese people are not ready for democracy because their “quality” [suzhi] is too low.

A: (*Laughs*) Ridiculous! The opposite is nearer the truth. Chinese workers and farmers for a long time have been more ready for democracy than their counterparts in Russia and Eastern Europe—and maybe many other places, too.

Q: Why do you think China has been different?

A: Mostly because of the Cultural Revolution. It is a mistake to view that huge event one-dimensionally. It brought beating, smashing, cruelty, and torture, to be sure. But it also had the unintended consequence of jolting people into thinking for themselves. People like Wei Jingsheng and Zheng Yi were forged by the Cultural Revolution. They didn’t go to college; they learned from life—from sharing the lives and sufferings of ordinary people. They learned to challenge authority, and they set a goal of changing the system. The “big-character posters” of the Cultural Revolution truly did give people a new sense of power.

How could Deng Xiaoping have turned Maoism around so fast in the 1980s if he had not had strong popular sentiment on his side? If the Cultural Revolution had not happened—if China had continued with the system it had in the mid-1960s—I'm afraid China today would look like North Korea. Socialist China and North Korea both started with a basically Confucian society combined with a Mao-style (or Kim-style) dictator. The only major difference was that China was too big and couldn't be sealed and controlled as North Korea was. China's slide into the Cultural Revolution was neither accidental nor really very abrupt. It was the culmination of a rising popular distaste for Communist Party control. The history and effects of the Cultural Revolution still need a lot more study.

Q: So this popular rebellious spirit rose out of the Cultural Revolution and continued until when? Through the 1980s?

A: At least to the 1980s, for sure. Remember that the 1989 demonstrations were not just in Beijing. They were in hundreds of cities across China, and millions of people took part. And this happened—can you believe it?—without any political organization or publicity equipment. Could it all have happened because a few student leaders at Tiananmen were waving banners and giving interviews to CNN? No. It came out of a deep, long-term recoil from Maoism.

In the same month as the Beijing massacre—June, 1989—the literary magazine *Reportage* published a piece by Mai Tianshu called “Worship of a Living Legend.” It tells about a deputy mayor in Yueyang City, Hunan Province, who in the late 1980s required his officials to go on television every month to answer questions from representatives of ordinary citizens. The bureaucrats were so embarrassed by the questions that they decided to frame the deputy mayor and get him fired. That, in turn, led to two full days of spontaneous street demonstrations by thousands of indignant commoners. Such populism was not unusual in China then. It was the true background of the Tiananmen movement.

Q: Did the June Fourth massacre stop this whole trend?

A: It certainly slowed it down. In the 1990s people pulled back. Jiang Zemin's policy of using economic incentives to buy people's

consciences began to work at many social levels. Here we can see a less attractive side of Chinese popular responses. The Chinese people sometimes show a weakness of conviction, a herd mentality.

Q: What do you see as the state of the popular mind since 1989?

A: Many people have embraced a simpleminded response that says, well, if the socialist road didn't work, then the capitalist road must be correct. To them, the end of Eastern European socialism and the collapse of the Soviet Union reinforces the message that there must be only one way out. Money-making becomes the only value because nobody can come up with anything better. There are no public ideals, nothing to believe in. On the surface, the Chinese people seem once again, as in the early twentieth century, to be a “tray of loose sand.” But if you look more closely, you can see that those grains of sand have changed. They have their own assertive power now; they won't suffer oppression passively, and under the right conditions could become strongly cohesive.

Q: What would your own wishes be for China's “path” into the future?

A: I often wonder what Czechoslovakia would have been like if the Soviets had not crushed the Prague Spring in 1968. That phrase that the Czechs used—“socialism with a human face”—appeals to me. I think a formula of political democracy combined with some planned social ideals is something the world should still try. If “reform” means jettisoning ideals and not replacing them with anything else—no, that's not the answer. You can see this problem of the “two extremes” even in the way words are used.

Q: What do you mean?

A: Through all of the Mao years, there were certain words that never—and I do mean almost literally never—appeared in an official document.

Q: Like what?

A: Like *ziyou* [freedom] or *kuaiile* [happiness]. Things like “happiness” just weren't on the agenda. Even *ren* [human being] and *wo* [I] were rare. But if you look now at official documents, there are certain other words that never appear. *Geming* [revolution], *dou-*

zheng [struggle] and *jieji* [class] used to be everywhere, but now—nowhere. Even worse, *lixiang* [ideals] is never used—it's just not in the official vocabulary.

Q: So you still hope for a middle way, somewhere between Maoism and where China is now?

A: It was right to repudiate Maoism—in fact even today we still haven't done enough to repudiate it. But that doesn't mean we need to go to the other extreme, as some of today's dissidents do. Some of them look at history and conclude, for example, that since the Communists were so horrible, everything the Guomindang did in the 1930s and 1940s was right. That's too simple. One of these good people, for example, wrote an essay called "Anti-Communism Is Not Patriotism, But a Patriot Must Be Anti-Communist."¹⁰ I would love to ask the author exactly where he finds any "communism" at all in today's China or today's Chinese Communist Party. What precisely is he wanting to oppose? What could his sweeping statement really mean? The Chinese Communist Party in the 1940s was hardly the same thing that it is today. It had a lot of popular support back then. Some of the problems it solved in the early 1950s—corruption, crime, unemployment, gambling, prostitution, drug abuse, foot binding, illiteracy—had been intractable problems in China for a long time. The Party used force, yes; but I'm not ready to say that a certain amount of coercion, in working on problems like that, is always a bad thing. And my question is this: Would a "patriot" have to reject all of those activities just because communists carried them out?

Q: Back in the 1950s people in the West didn't see much of the positive side of Chinese communism, either.

A: The West's mishandling of China at mid-century is one of the saddest aspects of the Cold War. Stalin and Mao had their differences in the 1940s—as some U.S. diplomats knew, and said, at the time. Communism was not an international monolith, and even if it had been, the Soviet Union after World War Two was in ruins, hardly in a position to launch a takeover of the world. The U.S. could have dealt with Mao separately, and could have compromised with him. Mao would probably have accepted some kind of sharing of power, either geographically—north and south

of the Yangzi River or something like that—or politically in some kind of multi-party arrangement. In retrospect, the only real chance for China to avert the disasters that befell it came in 1946–47 with the peace talks between the Nationalists and the Communists. If those talks had succeeded, and the Communists had not gained their monopoly of power, Mao Zedong would not have dared to go berserk in the way he did. But the U.S. leaned all the way to the Nationalists' side, driving the Communists into hostile opposition in Korea and elsewhere, and inadvertently creating the conditions that paved the way for Mao. The history of the Cold War is another topic that deserves a lot more study and reappraisal than it has had.

Q: The whole Cold War?

A: Yes, the question matters right to the present day. The Cold War helped to cause the "terrorism" that we see today. Where does today's terrorism come from? It comes because people feel resentful. The Cold War led the U.S. to prop up anti-communist governments around the world—and even engineer coups, sometimes. Social and political reform usually ground to a halt whenever such governments were propped up. The U.S. pounded small countries like Nicaragua and Panama; when the tiny country of Grenada wanted to build an airport it got invaded. These are the kinds of things that drive people toward martyrdom. I remember a story in a Chinese newspaper in 1954 about Cheddi Jagan, a leader of the Marxist People's Progressive Party of Guyana, who won a national election in 1953 but was deposed and imprisoned the next year by British and American agents. In 1992, when Guyana was finally able to hold another election thirty-eight years later, guess who won? Cheddi Jagan. See? People have memories. The Cold War led the U.S. to do a lot of things that hurt its reputation in the world, and that have to do with terrorism today.

Q: And you feel that, absent the Cold War, China's communist movement could have taken a different path.

A: At least it's possible. Without a Cold War, China would not have used the Soviet model as much as it did, and a "human-face" socialism would have had a better chance.

Q: You were hoping for a revival of that possibility in the 1980s, no? Your reportage piece "The Second Kind of Loyalty" seems to say so.

A: Yes, and quite a few people shared that hope in the 1980s. The two I wrote about in "The Second Kind of Loyalty" were not Party members, but there were people inside the Party very much like them. They wanted a better kind of socialism and were still ready to work for it. "The Second Kind of Loyalty" made a splash when it appeared. It kept getting republished. Meanwhile I began taking criticism from two very different sides. Party hard-liners of course did not think a "second" kind of loyalty was necessary. The first kind was fine. But from the other side came the view that because the Party was so rotten, I should have opposed it outright—not go looking for another way to be loyal. In my view all-out confrontation was a mistake. It overlooked those idealists who, despite everything, still wanted humane socialism to work.

Q: Do any ideals survive today?

A: Ideals are submerged today. The popular desire for values is not well articulated or organized, but it's obviously still there. You know it's there because complaint and criticism remain so audible. Farmers and workers protest almost all the time. Among the long-repressed liberal intellectuals, a new left wing that criticizes injustice toward the poor and underprivileged has emerged in recent years. Criticism, by its nature, must be grounded in a belief that things can be better than they are. It implies ideals. The Chinese people are groping for something better, so there is hope that today's cynicism won't last forever.

Q: Does that "something better" include democracy?

A: I think so, but survival is still the first question for people.

Q: What do you mean?

A: I remember, as a young man the 1940s, seeing refugees crowding the railway station in Harbin. They were fleeing poverty in the "free areas" of north China and coming to Heilongjiang, which was under Japanese control. I wrote a poem about them in which I bemoaned their new bondage to the Japanese. But later I thought about it and realized survival comes before freedom. Before you can live free, you first have to stay alive.

Q: Today Communist Party leaders use this argument to oppose the spread of human rights in China. They say China needs more wealth first, before it can "afford" freedom. You agree?

A: I agree that survival has to come first, but completely deny that that is what the leaders in China are doing today. Look at China: suicide and other violence are on the rise; AIDS, schistosomiasis, and other diseases are increasing, and where do people turn? The public health-care system has collapsed from lack of funds. Even poor little Cuba can provide free education and medicine, but China, now much richer, does not. Wealth grows, but so does the number of people living in poverty. Education used to be basically free in China, but today is available only to those who can pay their own ways.

Q: So you think these problems need to be solved before China can turn toward democracy.

A: I think the problems need to be addressed at the same time that democracy comes. Too many Chinese intellectuals these days think that all you have to do is to insert Western models of democracy into textbooks, send Chinese people to go study them, and—presto!—you've got Western democracy. These people should take a look at a recent survey I saw of nineteen Latin-American countries. It shows that when democracy changes only the political mechanisms while leaving social or economic injustices in place, it doesn't mean very much to people. They don't pay it much attention. I think China is similar. When you look at the huge social problems that have exploded in China since the 1980s—corruption, inequality, cynicism—I'm afraid that "one man, one vote" alone is not going to do much.

Q: What are you working on currently?

A: I am working on a book that is largely on the topic of this interview: how the Chinese people have changed in several ways between the 1940s and now. Other people have written extensively about China's political and intellectual elites, and these topics of course have their place, but I want to describe trends that are deeper in society, in the daily experience of ordinary Chinese people.

NOTES

1. *Liaozhai's Record of Wonders*, stories of the supernatural by Pu Songling (1640–1715).
2. “Zai Qiaoliang gongdishi,” *People's Literature* no. 4 (1956): 1–17. The story was a main piece of evidence for the attack on Liu as a “rightist” the following year.
3. Mao Zedong's classic statement of literary policy. See Bonnie S. McDougall, *Mao Zedong's Talks at the Yan'an Conference of Literature and Art: A Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Center for Chinese Studies, 1980).
4. In 1957, a year after Liu's “On the Bridge Construction Site” appeared, Mao delivered a long speech on “Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People” in which he distinguished between criticism of the enemy from criticism among the people.
5. Translated by Howard Goldblatt as “Six Chapters from my Life ‘Downunder,’” *Renditions*, no. 16 (Autumn 1981): 6–61, and by Geremie Barmé and Bennet Lee as *A Cadre School Life: Six Chapters* (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 1982).
6. Lin Biao, a longtime leader of the People's Liberation Army and Mao's “second in command” during the late 1960s, died in September 1971 when an airplane he was riding in was shot down over central Asia. The official story is that he was attempting to flee to the Soviet Union after a failed coup attempt against Mao.
7. In a movement “to oppose the right-leaning tendency to reverse correct verdicts.”
8. Steel balls to manipulate in the hand to promote general health.
9. Wang Meng.
10. Xu Shuilang, “Fangong budengyu aiguo, dan aiguo bixu fan-gong,” *Baijia zhengming*, February 29, 2004. http://www.boxun.com/hero/xushuilang/122_1.shtml, accessed December 4, 2004.

PART ONE

SPEECH TO THE CONGRESS OF LITERATURE AND ART WORKERS