Breaking Through: Literature and the Arts in China, 1976-1986

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One of the most notable features of the fifties and sixties in China was the public willingness of the literary and art world to submit to the dictates of the political leadership. The reasons for their cooperation, heavily qualified though it might have been, and the various methods by which the authorities ensured it, have been described elsewhere and are not the topic of this paper.[1] What I am interested in here is the way in which this cooperation was undermined in the seventies and openly flouted in the eighties. Instead of submission, a significant number of people in literature and the arts offered challenges both within the system and outside it, ranging from flagrant rejection of accepted conventions to a more cautious testing of the limits of tolerance, and from demands for professional autonomy to private arrangements outside existing organisations. The limit-setters and upholders - that is, the overlapping groups of orthodox Party leaders, the entrenched cultural bureaucracy, and writers and artists claiming positions of authority - found themselves restricted in their response to these challenges by the post-Mao modernisation program. The reform faction in the new leadership, acknowledging a complex relationship between the superstructure and the economic basis, found themselves to a certain extent obliged to yield ground, supporting the challengers and restraining the orthodox. The more detached of the Party intellectuals might also have noticed how, with a keen grasp of Marxist imperatives, the new activists began by establishing their own means of production and distribution.

From Underground to Unofficial

The key to the changes among writers and artists lies in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution proper, 1971-1978. The physical removal of the old cultural leadership and its replacement by a band of extreme dogmatists had the effect of creating a vacuum in literature and the arts. At the same time, the dispersal of urban educated young men and women to the countryside and

the general breakdown in law and order allowed budding writers and artists a kind of personal liberty, free from neighbourhood, school or Youth League supervision and control. Finally, the excesses which these young people had either indulged in or witnessed brought about in some of them a deep revulsion against any form of support for the current leadership (including becoming officially-accepted writers or artists). Since political activity of any other kind was not only extremely dangerous but also implied a kind of radical anarchy which few Chinese have ever found attractive, the alternative activity for some of the restless young was to create their own kinds of literature and art and to circulate them, unobtrusively but with a great deal of pride, among friends and friends of friends.

The fervour and political puritanism of this period reminds one of the early days of the May Fourth movement, with one significant difference: the May Fourth activists were able to set up their own journals and even publish their work in existing commercial publishing houses. The activists of the early and mid-seventies had no such opportunity, and were therefore obliged to rely on private publication, either hand-copied or mimeographed individual works. For obvious reasons, the easiest kind of manuscript to circulate was poetry; and poetry enjoyed a tremendous popularity during the years 1971-78. By the time they went above ground in 1978-80, the underground writers and artists had already produced a considerable body of privately published work. Varying considerably in quality and type, it included popular romances and thrillers as well as confessional and politically declamatory fiction. For largely mechanical reasons, it was chiefly in the form of shorter written literature, sometimes illustrated with line drawings, woodblock prints and other forms of visual arts that were also relatively cheap and quick to produce and to reproduce.[2]

Participation in underground publication implied at the very least a rebellious attitude on the part of the producers and their audiences, and though the writers generally avoided overt attacks on the system, the sense of rebelliousness is clear in their work. They were frequently associated with or even part of other informal groups whose political disaffection was expressed more directly, and when the opportunities were seized, the two groups offered mutual support and encouragement. From this point of view, the Tiananmen Incident of 1976, or the April Fifth movement as it later became known with self-conscious reference to May Fourth, was the most spectacular demonstration of the political uses of poetry in modern Chinese history. Underground publications increased in number and circulation during the excite-

ments of the death of Mao and the arrest of the "gang of four" in late 1976, the reinstatement of Deng Xiaoping in 1977, and the reversal of verdicts in late 1978 on the 50s' "rightists" and the Tiananmen demonstrators.[3]

The Democracy Wall movement that surfaced in November 1978 traced its origins to the April Fifth movement and exhibited a similar spontaneous expression of political concern in literary form.[4] Beginning with posters, the movement soon turned to magazines which circulated openly but unofficially above ground, even advertising subscription addresses for out-of-town readers. Most of the magazines included stories and poems along with articles on politics and society, and within a month literary magazines also made their appearance.

By taking this step from underground to unofficial, the young writers and artists simultaneously demanded that the authorities recognise their legitimacy and widened the audience on which their legitimacy was based. Their political activities in the period 1976 to 1978 were of tremendous importance in consolidating within themselves a sense of their own moral worth in society, their ability to make correct judgements on the political process in their own country, and therefore their right or even their obligation to express their views on the society around them. Since 1942, few had possessed this kind of confidence in their authority as creative artists to comment on their society. The precedent was in the twenties, when the May Fourth movement became the means by which the Literary Revolution gained its direction just as the Literary Revolution became the means by which the May Fourth movement found its broadest propagation.

Reshaping the Mainstream

In late November 1978, when Deng Xiaoping expressed support for the aims of the democratic movement, some two thousand demonstrators from the Democracy Wall thereupon marched thirty abreast down Changan Boulevard towards Tiananmen to express support for Deng's policies. A central work conference was then in session, preparing for the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee. The Third Plenum met in December, and on December 23 issued a communique cautiously endorsing the principle that practice be considered as the sole criterion for testing truth.[5] Two days after the plenum and on the same day that its communique was published, a statement was also published by a forum of established writers and critics urging a

guarantee of protection by law for writers and artists and free discussion in literature and the arts. Official comment in China subsequently suggested that the Third Plenum "conferred" on writers the right to express themselves more freely in literary works, but as far as some of the writers were concerned, this right had been seized from below rather than conferred from above.[6] Nevertheless there was briefly in 1978-80 a temporary community of interest between young activists, older writers and artists, and the emerging leadership faction under Deng Xiaoping, based on a common conviction that the future of China depended on intellectual emancipation, the rule of law and the elimination of restrictive practices in all spheres of productivity (including literature and the arts).[7]

The bold initiatives of the younger generation in practising the skills of writing, editing and publishing under their own steam therefore met with temporary toleration. The respite they continued to enjoy from supervision from their elders, including literary critics, was unprecedented in China even during the twenties and thirties, and the result was the tremendous upsurge of both official and unofficial publications in 1978-80.[8] Works from the whole period of the seventies were included in the unofficial press, but the very possibility of semi-open publication itself inspired a new outburst of productivity and experimentation.[9] Individual works, collections of works, and magazines all circulated unofficially above ground and underground, and distribution radiated from the urban centres to the provinces and back again. In addition to publishing, another important activity was the formation of poetry clubs or circles, sometimes consisting of only a few people, sometimes of several dozens in the bigger cities; poems were read and discussed at meetings, and open-air recitals were held in Beijing and other cities in the late seventies.

Alarmed at the boldness of these initiatives and at the possible backlash they might arouse, the Deng leadership shifted direction in March 1979 and tried to call a halt to this free flow. It seemed at the time that the activists had only two alternatives: to go back underground, risking arrest and imprisonment, or to move into the mainstream and lose their integrity. In the tense days of that spring the new writers, artists and editors prepared themselves unhappily but courageously for self-sacrifice in the cause of their principles. In fact the choice was not necessarily so dramatic. The compromise that many of the brightest talents adopted over the next few years was to continue to write or paint in their own ways independently for private distribution, at the same time taking jobs on the fringes of the literary and art world. Simultaneously, especially in the

first few years, they found it increasingly easier to get their work accepted by mainstream publications, since the official magazines themselves were changing quite remarkably, in number, variety and circulation.[10] More importantly, the magazines were also creating and responding to a new audience that above all demanded truth and honesty in its reading but also appreciated that truth may have to come in artistically more demanding forms than the old fare. The tremendous upsurge in official publications over the five years from 1978 to 1983[11] was to some extent due to the recruitment of former underground writers and their sympathisers to publishing houses throughout the country.

The participation in mainstream publication of the former underground and their influence on the publishing fever of these years was a complex phenomenon. First, at the simplest level, they were "educated youth waiting for jobs", and, unless they had become particularly notorious during the democratic movement, were thereby entitled to jobs where literacy was required. Even without any particular backing, some lucky or enterprising juniors were assigned to the staff of existing magazines or allowed to set up new magazines within established publication units as part of the effort to overcome the severe unemployment problem of the post-Mao years. The rehabilitation of their seniors (former "rightists" or other people who had suffered discrimination in the fifties or sixties) also required placement on editorial staffs, but their numbers were not great nor in many cases their enthusiasm. There were also cases of middle-aged people being transferred from unsuitable positions to editorial jobs for which they were better qualified. Given the rigidity of the bureaucracy, this was not very frequent, and as the number of new publications expanded, the young but educated unemployed became even more in demand. Whatever the composition of the staff, moreover, it was very often its younger members that tended to be most active in soliciting and selecting material. From the periphery, they inched in towards the centre.

Secondly, many of the young writers and artists were helped by family and friends to find office jobs in literature and the arts, not because of their special creative ability, but simply because they were as well qualified educationally as any other applicant. A large number of the literary and political activists of the seventies had useful family connections in the political, state or cultural bureaucracy.[12] These family connections had offered a kind of safety net for their activities, and now helped them find jobs in publishing or other cultural organisations that would at least give them access to free stationary and art

materials, the chance to meet influential cultural personnel and the leisure in which to write or paint. Compared to the furtive and indigent days of the underground, these new conditions removed some of the pressures to write but made the writing process itself a great deal easier.[13]

Thirdly, there were many senior people in positions of authority who were at least mildly sympathetic to their cause, and believed the breath of fresh air that they brought to their work was fine if kept under restraint by responsible people such as themselves. These senior personnel hired and encouraged innovative young editors and arranged for the publication of young writers' and artists' works. Although the top leadership implemented a gradual tightening of control from 1979 to 1983, there was still enough indecision or ambivalence to allow considerable discretion in publishing.

Fourthly, when critics were summoned to assess the newly emergent work in fiction, poetry, painting, theatre and cinema, it soon appeared that just as in publishing, the new generation had also managed to penetrate the universities, research institutes and professional associations where critics drew their salaries. Thus, the debates over "shadows poetry" in 1981-82 and the theatre of the absurd in 1982-83 featured support for the new wave from young critics in academic or professional institutions who were often personal friends of the people whose works they defended and of the young editors who offered them publishing space to do so.

Fifthly, there was a committed readership that pursued the new literature and art with enthusiasm and discrimination. Even the so-called "obscure" or "bizarre" poetry of the late seventies was read with sympathy or curiosity by an audience which may not have understood all its meanings but which appreciated its appearance none the less. The contents of magazines were regularly listed in *Guangming Ribao*, and a magazine with a poem by Bei Dao, Gu Cheng or Shu Ting would be sold out almost immediately upon publication. As the senior staff in publishing units began to realise this, more leeway was given to their juniors to solicit more of the same.

Finally the numbers were on their side: there were more than enough of the new writers and artists to keep up an oversupply of material to feed the rapidly growing young audiences of the late seventies and early eighties. As their popularity among readers became apparent, their ranks swelled correspondingly. Although in bulk their works may only have occupied a small part of any issue of any magazine, their influence should not be underestimated. The young editors who favoured the new writers and artists also selected the better from among the more conventional contributors, thus also exerting some

influence over the mass of middle-brow writers and artists and their audience.

Not everything was ideal or ran smoothly. One very talented young poet found himself in a junior editorial post on an agricultural newspaper, where it was impossible for him to publish his own or his friends' modernistic work. Bei Dao was employed by the Esperanto magazine, for which he wrote only hackwork under a pseudonym; nevertheless he was at times able to introduce short stories or paintings not as avant-garde as his own work but still not without merit. At its best, however, the system worked to the advantage of the new wave. Young people, sent down or native to the provinces, might chafe in their small town obscurity, but as junior editors for provincial magazines they could recruit the work of the younger and more controversial writers and artists who still found it difficult to break into the national press. These provincial magazines, once they had established their reputation as publishers of the new wave, would sell well, earning the publishers money and the young editors prestige; and with their money and prestige they could then attract more writers. A somewhat astonishing phenomenon of the early eighties was to see these young editors, some of them former red guards, flying from city to city, offering their friends hospitality, travel expenses and other perks to supplement rather meagre royalties.

For young writers and artists, even the royalties were of secondary importance compared to the glamour of being published in the overground press, but the material rewards certainly helped considerably in giving them a sense of their "right" to voice their opinions. Financial rewards, of whatever shape and through whatever channels, are ultimately a form of social recognition of the worth of the recipient, and their effect in boosting the morale of the recipients - most of them only in their late twenties or early thirties - can hardly be overestimated. In short, it was the confidence of these young writers, a confidence stemming from their personal achievements in the seventies and early eighties, that allowed them to challenge the authorities and write according to their own conscience.

The Avant-Garde, the Reformists and the Orthodox

Up to this point the description has been chiefly of writers and artists born since 1949 who began their careers during the underground or unofficial movements of the seventies: they form the avant-garde in Chinese literature and the arts over the decade since Mao's death. Most of them came from

families of middle or low-ranking cadres and intellectuals who had suffered most during the Cultural Revolution. Western journalists and diplomats observing the Tiananmen Incident and the Democracy Wall movement reported that the demonstrators were mostly young workers and not students, thus giving a rather misleading idea of their social background. Students at that time were the offspring of high ranking cadres and intellectuals who occupied top positions during the Cultural Revolution; the children of disgraced intellectuals and cadres were mostly workers or agricultural labourers. Reduction in social expectations was a common family history among May Fourth writers, and the same was true of the new writers of the seventies' avant-garde. Few in number, they nevertheless exerted a disproportionate influence due to their courage and dedication.

What about other writers and artists during this complicated, unstable, dangerous and challenging period? Who were they and what were they doing? Both Chinese and Western scholars usually confine their attention to a very small group of what might be called the literary elite and their audiences. The revival of traditional highbrow and folk culture in the seventies and eighties has attracted research in China and abroad, but despite considerable concern on the part of the authorities about commercialism and vulgarity or obscenity in popular urban and rural culture, we know little about it apart from journalistic reports. Regrettably, this paper is also confined to the "elite", that is, the thousand-odd writers and artists who have achieved some artistic success in the modern idiom, and their audience of maybe several million.

The usual Chinese classification of this elite is based on age relative to the revolution. Writers are divided into three or sometimes four "generations": the young, born after the revolution; the middle-aged, whose literary careers began during or after the revolution; and the elderly, remnants from the May Fourth or the Yanan period.[14] Though there is neatness and plausibility to this scheme, it is flawed in regard to the literary values held by these writers. To begin with, there was considerable variation and change in the attitudes of elder writers and artists towards the authorities and towards the newly emergent literature and art. Ai Qing, for instance, as a newly rehabilitated writer in 1979 was at first eloquent about the need for new standards in honesty and integrity, but in 1983, he awarded himself first prize for the best poetry collection from 1979 to 1982; in the late seventies he was rather sympathetic towards the new poets, but possibly because of an imagined personal slight, became in 1983 one of their most vicious detractors.[15] Xia Yan's speech at the Fourth Congress of Writers and Artists in October-November

1979 was one of the most moving in its self-awareness and honesty, but in 1984 and 1985 he called for young writers to practise self-censorship, and bitterly opposed the new film makers.[16] On the other hand, Ding Ling in 1983 like Ai Qing and Zang Kejia actively prosecuted the avant-garde, but by 1985 had come to regret it and included the avant-garde in her new literary journal *Zhongguo* (China). There were also a number of senior literary figures who all along had been privately sympathetic to the avant-garde and to some extent used their high positions to help them find, if not publication, then at least sinecures in the literary and art world to give them a basic living. In China where social control is chiefly exercised through the work unit, assignment to jobs in literary or cultural bodies was one of the major ways in which the new writers were drawn into the existing literary world, influencing it and being influenced by it in turn.

Many of the younger generation of writers and artists in the late seventies and early eighties, in contrast, adopted a thoroughly orthodox attitude towards the authorities, either because of lack of imagination or because of private opportunism; it must not be forgotten that the rewards to writers and artists who conform are and have always been high. Some of these younger writers and artists adopted mildly innovatory techniques in their works (for example the poet Luo Gengye) and sought more openly than was possible in the past an audience of students and other young urbanites (for example the fiction writers Wang Anyi and Tie Ning), but their main connection with the avant-garde was merely sympathy with its broader aims.

A similar distinction can be made between two groups of writers in their forties and fifties. Most of those who were already professional writers either disappeared from the limelight in the eighties or else made more or less feeble attempts at cosmetic camouflage. The other group, who though roughly the same age made their names as writers only after the Cultural Revolution, attracted much wider audiences than their more established contemporaries: for example, Liu Xinwu, Chen Rong (who prefers the pronunciation Shen Rong) and Li Tuo. Even more notable were the rehabilitated "rightists" from the fifties - writers whose early careers had been broken off in the late fifties and early sixties, but whose achievements in the present decade quickly sent them to the top: among them the most outstanding were Wang Meng and Liu Binyan. These middle-aged, highly experienced and mentally vigorous writers, together with the more emancipated of their juniors and even some established writers like Ru Zhijuan, form a loose grouping which might best be described as reformist within the system. (The term "reformists" has been

chosen to parallel Stuart Schram's use of "reformers" for the Third Plenum majority)[17] Many of them were already Party members or became Party members in the early eighties, for instance Liu Shaotang, Deng Youmei and Zhang Jie; Wang Meng became an alternate member of the Central Committee in 1983.

With their own experience as collaborators, witnesses and victims in the fifties, sixties and seventies, the members of this rough alliance shared many of the attitudes of the avant-garde without their rejection of authority. Reaching early adulthood in the forties, fifties and sixties, they had accepted the legitimacy of Party control over culture; it was excessive control, or abuse of power, that they rejected. Believing that political stability was the most essential need for post-Mao China and for themselves in the eighties, but also aware that the Cultural Revolution was to some extent an intensification of earlier Party policies, they saw the Deng leadership as the most promising force for reform within this framework. At the same time, encouraged by the demand for autonomy by the avant-garde, they sought the right to express their own opinions and perceptions in their professional activities, and in their works produced the effect of a continual exploration of the limits of official tolerance. Sometimes in technique, sometimes in personal honesty, and sometimes in breaking into former forbidden ground, these "testers" were responsible for the transformation of the great bulk of material appearing in the literary magazines and presses. The melodramatic and self-pitying "literature of the wounded" of 1978-79 gave way to the more restrained "engaged literature" of 1979-80, which then set the tone for the subjectively and socially analytic writing of the early eighties.

Because of the ready availability and also perhaps because of the less demanding nature of their work, not to mention the highly flattering publicity they received in critiques and interviews in 1979-83, the reformist writers enjoyed great prestige among readers, especially among those not so young. Flaws were readily forgiven because of strengths. Zhang Jie's writing style is banal and her social understanding superficial, but she had a lively eye for political intrigue. Wang Meng was solidly orthodox in his endings but his dense, evocative prose and grasp of social reality won him respect from other writers. In society as a whole, Liu Binyan was the most respected of the new writers for his conviction and courage; his loyal readers never dreamed of criticising his clumsy formal structures and language. All of these writers kept firmly within the main current of the mainstream of publication and distribution. Reformist rather than revolutionary, they saw themselves as acting

responsibly in seeking autonomy without provocation. Their conception of challenge within the system was both parallel to and supportive of the prevailing political line of Deng Xiaoping and his reformers, and despite continuing suspicion on both sides, there was also mutual sympathy from the time of the Third Plenum up to 1983. When Western commentators assert that "Chinese writers" differ from dissident writers in the Soviet Union in being "firm supporters of the socialist system", they generally base their judgements on the literary work or public statements of these reformists.[18] Bearing in mind the generous rewards given to officially recognised writers in China, one may believe their professions of support for socialism to be at least partly genuine. At the same time, given the severity of punishment for active hostility or even lack of overt support, one may equally wonder why such professions are so often accepted at face value, and admire the social skills of these writers in managing to convince foreign interviewers of their high moral qualities, among which patriotism, sincerity and altruism would happear to be dominant.

Bourgeois Liberalism, Spiritual Pollution, and Bourgeois Liberalism Again

The sudden attack on the literary world in the campaign against "spiritual pollution" launched at the beginning of autumn 1983 gave the reformists a nasty shock, despite the warning signals of the previous few years. The Deng leadership in the period 1978 to 1980 had certainly encouraged, within limits, "the emancipation of the mind", but the "crisis of faith" which this emancipation laid bare had been met since 1981 with repeated admonitions from the authorities against signs of "bourgeois liberalism".[19] In the literary and art world, this reaction began as early as Hu Yaobang's criticism of the play *Jiaru wo shi zhende* (If I were for real) in February 1980,[20] and continued with the attempt to forbid writing on the problems of the Cultural Revolution in January 1981, the campaign against Bai Hua's script for the film *Kulian* (Unrequited Love) from April to November 1981 (in which Hu Yaobang took a part, trying to limit the campaign without denying its correctness),[21] and Hu Yaobang's attack on "bourgeois liberalisation" among writers and artists at the Lu Xun centenary in September the same year.[22] These events were taken seriously by the avant-garde, who were conscious that since 1979 they had been losing as much as they had gained. Reformists, however, had also been worried about the effects

of a backlash from unredeemed hardliners, and at the time of the Bai Hua criticism there were even nervous whispers about the possibilities of an army coup. To the reformists, therefore, the warnings from the top were as much comforting as threatening, especially when tempered with episodes such as the protracted debate over modernism in 1981-82[23] and Zhou Yang's article on alienation and humanism in March 1983.[24] A general shift in published opinion was also seen in the way in which all sides adopted the democratic movement's term *tansuo* ("search" or "exploration") as praise, in marked contrast to the terms of discourse in the three previous decades. More comforting still, the sense of common cause between the Party reformers and the literary reformists was apparent in the manner of the Party's skirmishes into the literary world in this period, which took the form of general warnings rather than specific actions against groups or individuals. In the case of Bai Hua, for instance, the authorities went to some lengths to stress that he was not being discriminated against personally but retained his job, his Party membership and the right to publish.[25]

In autumn 1983, however, the rhetoric changed appearance and at the same time became translated into concrete action.[26] Words like *tansuo* appeared within quotation marks and were no longer favourable; reference to "emancipation of the mind" virtually disappeared from the press for the rest of the year; and a new term, *jingshen wuran*, became the catchphrase until the campaign was laid to rest in mid-1984. Some foreign friends of the Chinese authorities regretted that the standard English translations of this term, "spiritual pollution" and "cultural contamination", sounded so ludicrous, but in Chinese the term also sounded so absurd that in the beginning it was hard to take seriously. "Pollutors", however, could expect to be punished, and they were. Among the avant-garde and its supporters, young editors were transferred sideways or downwards to positions of restricted influence, or, in a few instances, suspended from duty, while the more radical writers and artists contemplated the possibility of their arrest and imprisonment. Most could rely on protection from their families or backers against more serious forms of punishment, but nevertheless suffered criticism and the curtailment of minor privileges in their jobs, and were deprived of opportunities for open publication. Some of the reformists were as bitterly criticised as the avant-garde themselves, but even those not directly targeted drew in their horns, and for about a year there was a serious dearth in the supply to literary magazines of their staple diet. Leading writers were pressed to take part in the denunciation of spiritual corruption, but the response of many was at most half-hearted (e.g. Wang Meng),[27] and

some refused to take part at all (Liu Binyan, Xiao Qian). On the other hand, establishment figures like Ding Ling, Ai Qing and Zang Kejia pounced with undisguised enthusiasm on unfortunate writers like Bei Dao and Dai Houying, in what many people felt to be an opportunity to pour out long stored-up personal jealousy at their relative eclipse by the reformists and avant-garde.[28]

Whether justifiably or not, the reformers in the spring of 1984 managed to wind down the campaign and keep it quiescent during the summer and autumn on the grounds of its repercussions on foreign trade and domestic enrichment, and therefore of its damage to the whole modernisation program. It has been suggested that poor economic performance was a cause rather than a result of the campaign, but whatever the cause of the turnaround, it took some time for writers and artists to recover confidence in the Party leadership. The widespread belief that Deng Xiaoping had personally been responsible for the campaign to some extent undermined former support for him as a guarantor of stability and moderate reform, especially since Deng Liqun remained head of the Party's propaganda department despite persistent rumours of his retirement.[29] Nevertheless the Party leadership stuck to its open door policy, and by the spring, as far as the reformists were concerned at least, culture began to profit again from the Party's desire to continue with economic and political restructuring. By the summer the recovery was almost complete. One common opinion current at this time was that the failure of the campaign had demonstrated to the authorities that the public would no longer countenance this kind of bullying and manipulation; with the authorities realising that campaign politics were no longer effective, they would - so the speculation went - abandon this discredited weapon. Even the avant-garde gradually recovered a certain amount of optimism during the latter half of 1984, and differences between them and the reformists seemed to shrink. Another Third Plenum, of the Twelfth Central Committee, confirmed in October a new impetus for political as well as economic reform.

The Fourth National Congress of the Writers' Association held in late December 1984 and early January 1985 was seen by many of its 800-odd delegates to be an exercise in goodwill and cooperation between writers and the Party.[30] Neither Hu Qiaomu nor Deng Liqun attended, and the keynote speech was given by Hu Qili with Hu Yaobang looking on, in what appeared to be a definitive (though not explicit) repudiation of the campaign against "spiritual pollution".[31] It appeared that relatively few writers and artists had aquiesced in the excesses of the campaign, and the mood of the meeting was one of pride in the autonomy they had defended or at least not easily

surrendered. Public humiliation, on the other hand, was the fate of the few active supporters of the attempted repression, and the secret elections to the new writers' association presidium almost toppled former powerful members such as Ding Ling. Ba Jin, widely respected because of his refusal to take part in the campaign, was reelected president, and new council members included new writers Shu Ting and Jia Pingwa, both criticised during the campaign.[32]

Hu Qili at the opening session and Wang Meng at the close both highlighted "creative freedom" as the new catchword, and Wang Meng offered *tansuo* as well.[33] This position may be read as an agreement reached between writers and the authorities rather than as a unilateral ultimatum from either side, and yet Hu Qili still upheld the dominant authority of the Party: "writers' thinking and feelings and their creative activities ... must be compatible with the environment of freedom the Party and the state have provided for them." The tone of threatening benevolence was especially apparent in the *China Reconstructs* report of the congress, for instance, which describes the "tears in the eyes of veteran writers" as they listened to Hu Qili's criticism of leftist and bureaucratic interference in relations between the Party and writers, and the "electrifying" effect of the top Party leaders' presence.[34]

Gifts can be taken away. At the end of the same year, Wang Meng's citations at the Writers' Association working conference in November 1985 of Hu Qili's speech carry a warning on the persistence of two unacceptable directions in freedom of expression: sex and violence on the one hand, and distance from "real life" and current policy directives on the other hand.[35] Bans on film (see below), drama and popular song were disturbing though not actually intimidating.[36] In response to a new upsurge in tension, people speculated on the significance of the coming year: first there was '56, followed by '66, then even more fateful '76: what would '86 bring?

The hardliners retreated; the reformers offered minor compromises in return for taking major advances; the avant-garde seized the hour: and the chilly winter of late 1985 was followed by the glorious summer of '86. The remonstrances of a few months earlier fell on deaf ears, while the speculation on numbers continued but with new interpretations. 1986 became a year of explosive creative energy and independence. A new cultural leadership stood by with smiles, promising support. A special national conference of cultural officials in July 1986 heard directives for "flexible" policies in the arts from the new minister of culture Wang Meng, the new vice-ministers Liu Deyou and Gao Zhanxiang, and the new head of the central committee propaganda

department, Zhu Houze.[37] Perhaps the most remarkable event of the summer was the appearance of a new literary critic, Liu Xiaobo: in damning the new literature as well as the old, he perhaps gave the most convincing demonstration of the new movement's maturity. To a visitor to Beijing returning after five months' absence, the change in atmosphere was remarkable: things were being said and done that had been almost inconceivable a few months earlier.[38] As it turned out, they also became inconceivable a few months later. Before passing to this last chapter in our story, however, let us take a closer look at some of the issues and phenomena of the middle eighties.

Four Phenomena of the Middle Eighties

The autonomy that the avant-garde and reformists had been demanding or requesting since the seventies was not a bid for direct political power-sharing in Party or state organs, but referred almost exclusively to their own creative work. (The most remarkable example of this was the reluctance of Wang Meng in late 1985 to accept the position of minister of culture; although his involvement in the Party was already considerable, he did not finally agree until the spring of 1986. The jostle for positions in the literary hierarchy was not so much for the sake of political power as such but for improvement in generally poor economic conditions). The demand for creative autonomy, however, was not merely a quest for new forms of expression, but as indicated above, included the right to comment critically on current social and political trends, including Party policy, and to offer new solutions to the "spiritual crisis" on whose existence everyone over the age of thirty seemed to be in general agreement. To this end, the first half of 1986 was dominated by renewed demands for legal protection of creative freedom.[39]

As of the mid-eighties, the publication of genuinely creative and original fiction and poetry was not a burning question. The avant-garde and the reformists occupied increasing space in the press, and if some of them, for instance Wang Meng, seemed to have run out of inspiration, others, like Wang Peigong and Liu Xinwu, seemed to have found new strength. The avant-garde split into two directions, offering as an alternative to Western-style modernism a kind of neo-traditionalism that in at least some of its manifestations was hopefully welcomed by the authorities. Younger poets, like younger poets everywhere, complained about not getting published and were obliged to rely on privately mimeographed, handbound publications, but it seemed that this

kind of "underground literature" no longer attracted much attention from public security bureaux. On the other hand, the production and distribution of films and painting, and the related question of their audiences, remained a problem for the authorities as well as for the artists themselves.

I now propose to focus on four phenomena that characterise the atmosphere in literature and arts in the middle of the eighties: the bohemian challenge to the avant-garde; the debates over the so-called experimental cinema; the warm reception given to the neo-traditionalist trend in fiction; and the emergence of painting as part of the new wave in literature and the arts generally.

The New Bohemians

After the apparent collapse of the campaigns against "spiritual pollution" in 1984-86, the challenge to the avant-garde and reformist writers came from a different direction. An even younger group of poets had appeared in the early eighties who now disputed their immediate seniors for the title of avant-garde. Their humour, amorality and indifference to China's political fate were more or less equally shocking to the engaged writers of the "old" avant-garde, the reformists and the orthodox establishment. (More precisely, one might say that it was the openness or defiance in their attitudes that was so shocking, since it should not be imagined that the moral rectitude public figures are obliged to profess is universally sincere). They mimeograph their poems then turn up at Maxim's, spend long nights eating and drinking themselves silly (closing the door to swap salacious stories about the leadership), and have their girlfriends move in as they wait for a break, usually in the form of a foreign translator. Some actively seek out foreigners, defining in advance the kind that can be of greatest use; others are pursued with corresponding vigour by foreign journalists and scholars. Foreign recognition often though not invariably precedes and ensures local acceptance, but there is also to be considered the delicate balance between the kind of behaviour that appeals to foreigners and the kind that can land people in jail. Appearances can be deceptive: many of the bohemians in their turn are also protected by family connections and backers. The worth of their eventual contributions to literature is open to question, but to the extent that they have already established a foothold, their existence in itself is significant. Inhabiting the fringe of the literary world, they constitute a self-appointed "fourth echelon" that is not exactly welcome but accepted with some resignation.

In hindsight, the appearance of these independent, tough-minded, humor-

ous, often irresponsible and frequently opportunistic poets is an unsurprising reaction to the ultra-serious seventies. By the mid-eighties, many of the "old" avant-garde had achieved positions of respectability. Their works were published and their material conditions greatly improved; several of them were able to travel abroad, and at home many were drawn into the professional associations of writers and artists. Now in their middle to late thirties, they married, had children and got divorced. In their social activities they moved with a self-conscious weight, their original sense of social and political engagement now augmented by the sense of responsibility engendered by their domestic and foreign renown. In a society which pays so much respect to hierarchy, success very quickly leads to a rather ponderous self-regard. Not unnaturally, their positions and attitudes provoked cries from their juniors that they had become part of the establishment, but strictly speaking, this was unjust: the avant-garde did not in fact moderate their demands for autonomy and independence. What the bohemians were instead seeking was an emancipation from the political engagement and moral seriousness of their predecessors, just as the latter had won emancipation from the political submissiveness and moral ambivalence of theirs.

The Experimental Cinema, 1983-84

If poetry is the easiest and cheapest of the arts to produce and circulate, then film, at least in China where the hardware is not obtainable by private citizens, is undoubtedly the most difficult and expensive. It is for this reason that the new wave of films did not break until 1984, following the graduation of the first post-sixties batch of students from the Beijing Film Academy in 1982. Many of these young graduates were sent to the small and newly established studios in the provinces, and it was not accidental that the two most controversial films, *Yige he bage* (The one and the eight) and *Huang tudi* (The yellow earth), came from the tiny Guangxi Studio in remote Nanning. The former, directed by Zhang Junzhao and photographed by Zhang Yimou, was completed at the end of 1983; the latter, directed by Chen Kaige and photographed also by Zhang Yimou, was first presented to the Film Board in August 1984. A commentator has speculated that one reason for the more drastic censorship imposed on *The One and the Eight* was that the repudiation of the "spiritual pollution" campaign was then still incomplete. In any event, although shown in public cinemas at the end of 1985 and twice on TV in 1986, the revised *The One and the Eight* has still not been approved for release abroad. *The Yellow Earth*, on the other hand, though under constant attack since its first screenings, has

been more widely seen by foreign audiences and received more international film awards than any other film in the history of Chinese cinema. What the two films have in common is a fresh approach to film as an art form in combination with an unorthodox approach to sensitive questions of Chinese political history and national identity.[40]

To take *The Yellow Earth* as the more outstanding of the two films, one can list among its original artistic achievements: the relative absence of dialogue, understated acting and unorthodox characterisation in the four leading roles; the emphasis given to environment and atmosphere rather than to plot and characterisation; the influence of traditional Chinese landscape painting in the picture composition, especially in the depiction of human figures against the yellow earth and muddy yellow river; the daring use of fixed camera and natural interior light; and the balance between stasis and movement (often stylised and exaggerated) in individual shots and whole sequences. All this would have been sufficient to make the film controversial. What kept it out of the cinema for most of 1985 was the content, or, more accurately, the treatment of the innocuous-sounding subject-matter. The film was accused firstly of glorifying the backwardness and ignorance of the peasants by showing, with great brilliance and evident respect, peasant ritual and superstition, even though a major theme of the film was the cruelty of feudal customs. The second charge, usually made in disguised and indirect terms, was that the film implied a failure of the Party to solve the problems of the peasants. Given the location of the film, "the cradle of Chinese civilisation", and its historical setting, the sacrosanct Yanan period when the Party first achieved substantial political power, this failure is by implication extended to the whole of China and to the whole period of Communist Party power in China. The film makers have never denied these charges, though there has been heated debate between the film's supporters and detractors as to whether the film does in fact glorify rural (or national) backwardness or rather expose and denounce it.[41]

The first public screening of *The Yellow Earth* was in September 1984, a month after its completion. The initial hostile reaction of the film authorities prevented any advance publicity for the film, and box office returns were low. Once the controversial nature of the film began to be known, however, and especially after the film's sensational reception in Hong Kong in April 1985, it was rereleased in Beijing and other major cities and attracted bigger audiences. Together with a handful of other films by the same graduating class, it had already been dubbed "experimental cinema" at the annual assessment of the year's films at the end of 1984.[42] When *The Yellow Earth* came up for consider-

ation for the Golden Rooster film awards in April 1985, the question of the audience for art films formed a major part of the panel discussion.[43] As noted by the film critic Luo Yijun, the term "experimental" is not really appropriate for films like *The Yellow Earth* and *The One and the Eight*; unlike Western experimental films, they are not low-budget experiments in form for limited audiences of film buffs.[44] Representing the oldtime hardliners, however, Xia Yan, without any apparent sense of the absurdity of what he was saying, claimed that the audience for Chinese cinema was the whole population of China in all its millions, and that film makers must direct their efforts towards these millions.[45] Given the considerable financial investment in film, it was reasonable that the authorities wanted both tangible and intangible returns in audience outreach. On the other hand, it was equally apparent that in the past, when political criteria were primary, financial returns and audience enthusiasm were alike disregarded, and that at the current time, when box office returns were carefully assessed, the actual composition of the audience (in this case, maybe students and intellectuals instead of students and young cadres and workers) was irrelevant; and that with the possible exception of current *kongfu* movies, at no time was there a cinema in China that attracted the vast bulk of China's rural audience. Unfortunately, the sensitivity of the question prevented frank discussion, and no statistics were even given on actual and ideal box office returns and audience sizes and composition. In the end, most of the panelists agreed, reluctantly or otherwise, that *The Yellow Earth* would not attract a mass audience and was therefore not qualified for a "best film" award. The director's award went to one of the panelists, Ling Zifeng (as Ai Qing had given himself a prize two years earlier), for his *Biancheng* (The border town), a film which had equally low box office returns in 1984.

Following this fiasco, a general debate on the experimental films of 1984 took place in the press in the summer of 1985. In some quarters, the debate was reduced to the question of generations again. As one reporter noted, a common saying of the day was that the film audience were people in their twenties and thirties, the film makers were people in their forties and fifties, and the film critics and judges were people in their sixties and seventies.[46] At the same time, the film industry became conscious of pressure from another direction. As empty cinemas in urban centres reported plunging revenues, the Chinese Film Distribution and Exhibition Corporation was finally forced to carry out an investigation of the figures and reasons for declining audiences.[47] TV serials and smuggled videotape pornography rather than highbrow art films were found to be the major villains, and faced with the prospect of turning

cinemas into skating rinks, the film industry tried a new strategy. Abandoning the pretence of a single unitary audience, the corporation announced in August its decision to open up special cinemas for showing "experimental films" in major cities, starting with Shanghai and moving on to Guangzhou (Canton) in the autumn. By the end of 1985, however, the revolution in the film world seemed to have fizzled out. The new wave films of 1983-84 were not followed by equally startling movies in 1985, only a batch of moderately controversial but artistically undemanding prize winners such as *Ye shan* (Wild mountain) and *Heipao shijian* (The black cannon incident).[48] The special experimental cinemas never reached Beijing at all, despite initial plans, and none have been set up elsewhere. (It is said by Beijing residents that audiences in commercial Shanghai and Guangzhou are culturally much below Beijing audiences, so that Beijing did not need special highbrow cinemas. It was in Shanghai, however, that the stereotyped, boring old films of director Xie Jin were first criticised in *Wenhui Bao* in July 1986.) The most controversial movie of 1985 was Chen Kaige's second film, *Da yuebing* (The grand parade). First presented in spring 1986, it was immediately sent back for revision. A revised version was completed in August 1986 and finally passed for release in November. Not a word about the controversy over *The Grand Parade* appeared in the public press in these two years.

The small number of films produced annually in China has always made central censorship over the cinema possible in a way denied organizations involved in written literature. With the expansion in the number and size of film studios and the addition to the work force of the new batch of graduates from the Beijing Film Academy in the early eighties, this figure peaked in 1984 with 144 feature films as the main fare. Of these a rather large number was attacked by the upper bureaucracy as either vulgarly commercial or artistically weird. Reacting to the criticism, the studios produced only 127 feature films in 1985. Film officials were falling down on the job, in the eyes of even higher authorities, and in January 1986 it was decided to shift control of the film industry from the Ministry of Culture to a new, expanded Ministry of Radio, Cinema and Television.[49] Since Party control over the mass media had always been even stricter than over the arts, this move provoked considerable unease in the film world. As writers went on the offensive in 1986, film makers remained tense. Attempts at private fund-raising were made in 1985 and 1986, but the film makers' best bet remained an enlightened studio head, such as Wu Tianming in Xian, or a small studio in the sticks. Guangxi no longer spread out

the red carpet to the class of '82, and in the summer of '86 Chen Kaige's third film was contracted to Xian.

Neo-Traditionalism in Fiction

The best new writing from the early seventies to the early eighties can broadly be characterised as modernistic in form and humanist in spirit, representing a return to urban intellectual values after the cultural wasteland of the Cultural Revolution. By 1983 and 1984, however, disillusionment with modern urban life began to make itself felt among former sent-down youth and intellectuals. One sign of this was the number of suicides by returnees to the city who were unable to bear the changes in social life - from comradeship in adversity to opportunism in the new struggle for private enrichment - that accompanied the new reforms. These changes were a frequent topic of conversation in the early eighties, especially among people whose adolescent years coincided with the Cultural Revolution. Under the impact of this disillusionment, some writers and artists began to reexamine their experiences during the Cultural Revolution and reassess the knowledge they gained at that time of village life and traditional customs and beliefs. Since this trend seemed to give a more positive view of recent Chinese history, its first products were initially welcomed by the authorities; later instances were not treated so kindly. By 1986, interest in "roots", or "primitivism", as it was less favourably termed, was ranked as one of the problem areas in modern literature and the arts.[50]

Briefly, primitivism or neo-traditionalism may be defined as a search for meaning in neglected areas of traditional Chinese culture. Its origins lie in the rustication and self-education of urban youth and intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution, to whom it appealed as an alternative to the bankruptcy of orthodox or Maoist communism, the crass materialism of the "Four Modernisations", and the alienation of Western-style modernism. From its first manifestations in Yin Guangzhong's sculptured masks of 1983-84, it spread to the theatre in Gao Xingjian's *Ye ren* (The wild man; 1985), to the cinema in Chen Kaige's *The Yellow Earth* and Tian Zhuangzhuang's *Liechangzhasa* (The hunting ground; 1984), and to painting in Ding Fang's rural landscape oils from 1983 and Mi Qiu's abstract ink paintings incorporating primitive scripts from 1985.[51]

The best known examples of primitivism were in fiction, in works such as Shi Tiesheng's "Wo de yaoyuan de Qingpingwan" (My faraway Qingpingwan; 1983), Zhang Chengzhi's "Hei junma" (Black stallion; 1984) and "Beifang de he" (Rivers of the north; 1984), Jia Pingwa's "Layue, zhengyue"

(December, January; 1984) and Ah Cheng's "Qi wang" (The king of chess; 1984). Although described by sympathetic critics as inhabiting the same world as *The Yellow Earth*,[52] these stories at first gained a very favourable reception, and several managed to win prizes in 1983-84.[53] Above all it was Ah Cheng who attracted most attention and became the most discussed author of the middle eighties.[54]

The evaluation of Ah Cheng's fiction has several aspects. Overseas Chinese readers have been particularly struck by his original and versatile use of language, which combines phrases from traditional Chinese vernacular fiction with modern Chinese urban slang and local peasant dialect. In contrast to the beautiful but formal poetic language in the first-person narratives of Zhao Zhenkai's "Bodong" (Waves),[55] the first-person narrative in Ah Cheng's stories echoes the dialogue in its liveliness. At home, at the same time as *The Yellow Earth* was being criticised for glorifying rural backwardness, critics were praising Ah Cheng for introducing a new perception of rural life and its impact on urban youth.[56] Other readers have been most impressed with the underlying themes of his stories, which differ significantly from both the modernist literature of the avant-garde and "the wounded" of the late seventies. It is significant that Ah Cheng, despite his early experience as a storyteller in the countryside, did not write fiction for publication in this period. Ah Cheng's narrators are, like the author, urban youth who suffer material and spiritual privation in the remote jungles of southwest China during the Cultural Revolution, but instead of bewailing their lot, they reach a new understanding of life in discovering through bitter experience man's real needs: basically food, and as a bonus, friendship - the rest, by implication, is hollow. The Buddhist and Daoist overtones in the stories, although picked up by some critics, are slight and subtle, while the narrative style appears so naive, and the surface is sketched with such meticulous attention to physical detail, that any subversive underlying message is easy to overlook.

In their philosophical outlook, one may perhaps compare Zhao Zhenkai and Ah Cheng as reflecting Confucian and Daoist attitudes towards society. Zhao Zhenkai's characters want to join and influence society, but society is so hostile that they are left facing various forms of alienation, including suicide, barrenness, and insanity; despite the cynicism forced on them by the corruption around them, nevertheless they retain a surprisingly moral seriousness. Ah Cheng's characters, in contrast, are outsiders who create a kind of harmony in self-awareness and self-sufficiency.

In terms of the search for new means of artistic expression, "The King of

Chess" lies equally far from both "Waves" and *The Yellow Earth*: the latter are self-conscious artistic innovations, whereas Ah Cheng's stories are almost "anti-art". Nevertheless in several very significant areas, "The King of Chess" and *The Yellow Earth* have much in common. First, by portraying in detail and with great respect the lives of people beyond or outside the political process, they imply the irrelevance of politics in the most basic aspects of people's lives. Secondly, by finding in the past a powerful tradition now absent from the present, they offer an alternative to the Party-prescribed vision of a socialist civilisation. In Ah Cheng's story, it is not so much the ancient game of chess itself that is the alternative, but rather the mystic, Daoist idea of the integrity of things, and in his other stories one finds a similar respect for intuitive knowledge and ability, especially among peasants.

It is hardly a coincidence that most of the neo-traditionalists, although natives of Beijing or Shanghai, have spent long periods in the remoter parts of the Chinese countryside. Chen Kaige and Ah Cheng (real name Zhong Acheng) attended the same high school in Beijing (where Ah Cheng was in the same class as Bei Dao, two years ahead of Chen Kaige), and their parents are well-known figures in the Beijing film world. Both young men spent several years in the mountains of Xishuangbanna in southwest China during the Cultural Revolution, and despite personal ties with the unofficial literary movement in the late seventies, did not find their own aesthetic perceptions until the middle of the eighties. To complete the link, Chen Kaige returned to Xishuangbanna in the autumn of 1986 to shoot his third film, based on Ah Cheng's story "Haiziwang" (The king of the children).

Returning to *The Yellow Earth* and "The King of Chess", one may conclude by noting the many layers of meaning in both works. Chen Kaige likes to say that both are about hunger. It is also possible to say that they are also about the inadequacy of politics versus the power of artistic creation (reading chess as a symbol for art). It is further possible to say, as suggested above, that they are both very subtle and indirect criticisms of Party policies, not only in its "left" phases from the forties to the seventies, but also in the modernising phase of the current leadership. These three statements are perhaps only different expressions of the same idea. What makes it possible for such subversive ideas to find ready publication is the strain of populism in Mao's thinking which can justify reference to primitive life.

The New Painting

In regard to the production and distribution of their work, painters and

sculptors lie somewhere between writers and film makers. In as far as their work can appear in magazines and books as illustrations and reproductions, they are in much the same position as writers; in as far as they need public displays of their work and financial recompense for the cost of materials, they are similar to but not as hampered as film makers. During the late seventies and early eighties, it was impossible for most younger painters to hold one-man or group shows in suitable surroundings, since virtually no private galleries existed and the public galleries were too few and too stuffy to show the work of young and unorthodox artists. They therefore took the initiative in seeking their own exhibition space and their own buyers.

In the days of the Democracy Wall, two groups of painters held unofficial exhibitions at Xidan and contributed illustrations to the unofficial magazines. The most well known of these two groups, *Xingxing* (Stars), favoured an abstract but comprehensibly angry style, and soon found an audience and customers in Beijing's small foreign community. Most of them (Ma Desheng, Huang Rui, Li Shuang, Shao Fei (Bei Dao's wife), Yan Li and the sculptor Wang Keping) are now permanently or temporarily abroad.[57] The other group consisted of five young men from Guizhou, including Yin Guangzhong. Without a residence permit but with help from friends, Yin Guangzhong managed to stay on in Beijing and in December 1984 took part in a privately-sponsored joint exhibition in Beihai Park. The exhibition was closed down by the authorities within a few days, but not before a highly favourable review had appeared in the *China Daily*.[58] Similarly, a younger painter, Lin Chunyan, held an exhibition of landscapes and abstracts in oils and woodblock prints at the Yuanmingyuan in November 1984, which was closed by the police a few hours after it opened.

By 1985-86, the situation had improved considerably. Yin Guangzhong's further experiments with masks and settings were viewed by large numbers of Beijing's young intellectuals in his stage designs for the Beijing Art Theatre production of Gao Xingjian's *The Wild Man* in May 1985, the season's most sensational production.[59] Some of his work was also included in an exhibition that toured the United States in the summer of 1986.[60] Yin Guangzhong returned to Guizhou, where he now lives as a local celebrity within the shelter of the art department in the Minorities' University. Mi Qiu (penname for Mi Qiuling) and You Si (penname for You Siqun) showed particular ingenuity and enterprise in hunting up hanging space, displaying their work in the exhibition room of the Old Observatory in Beijing (conveniently close to the foreigners' quarters in Jianguomenwai) in January-February 1986, at Qinghua

University and Beijing University in November 1986[61] and (Mi Qiu separately) at the Canadian Embassy in December 1986. On the other hand, Ding Fang, a serious young man from Nanjing who lacks the opportunities offered in the capital, won major prizes and found security like Yin Guangzhong in the academy.

In the late seventies and early eighties, there was hardly any domestic market for private sales by young painters, but by the mid-eighties this had also changed. An important step forward was the publication in 1985 of *Zhongguo Meishu Bao* (Chinese art), an alternative to *Meishu Yuekan* (Art monthly), the official art magazine. *Chinese Art* featured the work of the new painters as well as the establishment, and also gave space to broader debates on the new issues. Its readership was small but select, and its many unsolicited contributions helped make new painting one of the liveliest and better known of the new art movements. More concretely, private companies were set up to act as dealers for young artists with collective or private enterprises such as hotels that need decorative effects, and also to act as middlemen for foreigners seeking to buy Chinese paintings outside official channels. With the increasing ease of contact between locals and foreigners, it became possible even for newcomers to China to set up meetings with young artists in hotels or in private homes. Some young painters therefore managed to become independent of official patronage; while they enjoyed little security or material comfort, their general situation was not so much unlike any struggling young painter in any big city around the world.

Future Prospects

This study has looked at three major issues in contemporary literature and art in China: the changing relationships between writers and artists of the elite, and the authorities; their search for new forms of expression to convey their personal and unorthodox experiences and reflections; and the difficulties they encounter in the production and distribution of their work. In the ten years since the death of Mao, there have been several changes in political line that have affected the literary and art world very drastically, but it remains very sensitive both in the eyes of the authorities and in its direct vulnerability to fluctuations in the economic climate.

Perhaps because of the tensions engendered by political swings and economic vulnerability, and also because of differences in production and

marketability, different arts and personalities seemed to take their turn under the spotlight, and fashions changed quickly. A poet may be famous one year and old hat the next; theatre may be explosive one year, cinema the next. Suddenly painting was the big topic for 1986;[62] modernistically primitivist music by composers like Tao Dun and Qu Xiaosong which baffled audiences in 1985-86 found enthusiastic acceptance in 1987. In Beijing and other big cities, there was a tremendous sense of things happening in these two years, an atmosphere of sustained excitement and confusion hardly witnessed before in most people's lifetimes. The excitement was created mostly by men between the ages of twenty and fifty: there were several new women writers but few among the new painters, sculptors, playwrights, composers or directors; the over-fifties of both sexes mostly restricted themselves, if they participated at all, to recapitulation of old glories or encouragement from the sidelines. The encouragement given by foreigners, in the form of critical appreciation, financial support or opportunities to go abroad, was a crucial element in the scene, but it is hard to gauge its importance to those not directly affected and to the authorities. While many of the elder generation shake their heads over the obvious Westernisation of their young, Western observers, especially perhaps sinologists, might well wonder at the strong survival of national or traditional traits in the creative work, manners and personal attitudes of Chinese writers and artists in the eighties. This, however, is another topic.

The events of early 1987 were a heavy and perhaps fatal blow to the exuberance of 1986. Again, in hindsight, we can trace the muttered warnings which preceded them, but at the time few had paid much heed to them: they seemed, as it were, a semi-permanent part of the background which could be ignored, like muzak.[63] The initial reaction from bohemians, avant-garde and reformists in early January ranged from deep shock to confusion, resentment and distress. The role that Wang Meng and Deng Youmei may have played in the spring sacking of their old colleague Liu Binyan is a matter of speculation, but they clearly had the authority to move against their former protege Liu Xinwu, who had clearly offended some of the reformists now consolidating powerful positions, as a secondary level victim. With reformists thus playing an active role in the new campaign against "bourgeois liberalisation", it was commonly believed that the effects would be even more devastating than its predecessor of 1983.

Over the next few months, as it became apparent that the new campaign was going to be relatively restricted in its targets compared to 1983, shock

gave way to a kind of numbed gloom. Many people had been badly frightened in 1983, but the collapse of the campaign then had persuaded them that the leadership would not dare try again. The fact that the very same leadership did, less than four years later, produced the feeling that these campaigns would henceforth come again, and again, and again - offering life as a constant succession of campaigns. The chief response was a kind of negative passivism which even affected the upholders of cultural orthodoxy (with the exception of Zang Kejia). In 1983 they had seen a chance to reassert their authority, but in 1984 they were attacked in turn, and now in 1987 they cannot be sure what might happen in 1988...

At the centre of the problem is the sense that the cultural world, including cultural bureaucrats as well as creative writers and artists, had lost confidence in the political leadership, and that the political leadership had lost confidence in the cultural world. The unwritten contract of 1978-80 had finally been damaged beyond repair. To the Party, writers and artists had misused their freedom, not just in their criticism of the Party but in ignoring or misunderstanding the fundamental problems of agricultural productivity, population control, urban growth and national identity. To writers and artists, the Party had lost its credibility as an authority able to provide a stable environment of flexible control, of predictable rewards and punishments, in which they could pursue their private and public concerns. One natural consequence of loss of confidence was simply withdrawal, in some cases quite literally: getting out of China, or getting one's children out of China, is seen as the only chance for a less threatened existence. Relatively few people were directly affected by the blows of 1987, and the world of Chinese literature and arts, from bohemians to the old garde, is not a big one. There are more pressing problems in China than their personal wellbeing and productivity. But their dispersal or submission is still surely a sad loss for China, and also for the world culture to which they were beginning to contribute so boldly.

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NOTES

1 See T.D. Huters, "Critical Ground: The Transformation of the May Fourth Era" and Bonnie S. McDougall, "Writers and Performers, Their Works, and Their Audiences in the First Three Decades", both in Bonnie S. McDougall (ed.), *Popular Chinese Literature and Performing Arts in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 54-80, 269-304, esp. pp. 270-80.

2 Bonnie S. McDougall, "Dissent Literature: Official and Nonofficial Literature in and about China in the Seventies", *Contemporary China*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (Winter 1979), pp. 49-79, esp. pp. 50-58.

3 A good sense of the excitement of these two-three years is conveyed in Roger Garside, *Coming Alive: China After Mao* (New York: New American Library, 1981); for the Tiananmen demonstrations, see pp. 101-26; for the events since Mao's death and the fall of the "gang of four", see pp. 154-95.

4 See for instance David Goodman, *Beijing Street Voices: The Poetry and Politics of China's Democracy Movement* (London: Marion Boyars, 1981). Eyewitness accounts by Western journalists of the Democracy Wall movement include Garside, *Coming Alive*, pp. 195-277; John Fraser, *The Chinese: Portrait of a People* (London: Fontana, 1982), pp. 203-71; Fox Butterfield, *China: Alive in a Bitter Sea* (New York: Times Books, 1982), pp. 405-15 *et passim*.

5 *Renmin Ribao*, December 24, 1978; summarised in *China Quarterly*, No. 77 (March 1979), pp. 166-73.

6 See for instance comments by reformists even in the warmth of summer 1986: Wang Meng, *Beijing Review*, 1986, No. 27, pp. 14-19, esp. p. 17; Liu Zaifu, reported in *China Daily*, September 11, 1986, p. 3.

7 See Stuart R. Schram, *Ideology and Policy in China Since the Third Plenum, 1978-84* (London: Contemporary China Institute, School of Oriental and African Studies, 1984), pp. 16-19. An earlier and briefer version of this pamphlet was published as "'Economics in Command?' Ideology and Policy Since the Third Plenum, 1978-84", *China Quarterly*, No. 99 (September 1984), pp. 417-61.

8 See Perry Link, "Fiction and the Reading Public in Guangzhou and Other Chinese Cities, 1979-1980", in Jeffrey C. Kinkley (ed.), *After Mao: Chinese Literature and Society, 1978-1981* (Cambridge, Mass.: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1985), pp. 221-74.

9 Bei Dao, poet and co-editor of the unofficial literary magazine *Jintian* (Today), for instance, began writing fiction again and revised his short novel "Bodong" (Waves) for publication.

10 By the end of 1980 there were 180 literary magazines at the national and provincial level; in addition, literary magazines were also published by municipal and local cultural bureaux, the armed forces and universities. Some of the national level publications had a circulation of up to a million.

11 In 1983, despite the campaign against "spiritual pollution", 5,000 titles in literature and the arts were published, a rise of 8.4% over the previous year.

12 See Deng Xiaoping's complaint about security leaks because of these connections, quoted in Schram, *Ideology and Policy in China Since the Third Plenum, 1978-1984*, p. 18.

13 In a recent interview with John Gittings, Bei Dao described how on the pretext of developing photographs of buildings he used to lock himself in the factory darkroom to write "Waves"; many still

consider it his best work of fiction. See *The Guardian*, May 11, 1987, p. 15.

14 For an example using four "generations", see Feng Mu and Liu Xicheng, "Recent Trends in Chinese Writing", *China Reconstructs*, January 1982, pp. 16-18.

15 See for instance *Jingji Ribao*, November 1, 1983, p. 1; *Beijing Ribao*, November 2, 1983, p. 4; *Guangming Ribao*, November 2, 1983, p. 1; also below, in the section on "Bourgeois Liberalism, Spiritual Pollution, and Bourgeois Liberalism Again".

16 Compare "My Hopes" and "Closing Address to the Fourth Congress of Chinese Writers and Artists", translated in Howard Goldblatt (ed.), *Chinese Literature for the 1980s: The Fourth Congress of Writers and Artists* (Armonk: Sharpe, 1982), pp. 148-56, 161-68, with his remarks in *Renmin Ribao*, June 15, 1985, p. 1 and his call for self-censorship in *Renmin Ribao*, November 4, 1985, p. 1. In 1981 the 81 year old critic went on record as complaining that too many of the year's films were on love themes; see *Xinhua News Bulletin*, December 26, 1981.

17 Schram, *Ideology and Policy in China Since the Third Plenum*, pp. 9, 12.

18 For example Kyna Rubin, "An interview with Mr Wang Ruowang", *China Quarterly*, No. 87 (September 1981), pp. 501-17, esp. p. 502. In the case of Wang Ruowang, disillusionment with socialism probably went back to the fifties but could not be publicly proclaimed until the middle of the eighties.

19 Schram, *Ideology and Policy in China Since the Third Plenum*, p. 30.

20 See Geremie Barmé, "A Word for the Imposter - Introducing the Drama of Sha Yexin", *Renditions*, No. 19/20 (Spring & Autumn 1983), pp. 319-32.

21 Summarised in Paul Clark, "Film--making in China: From the Cultural Revolution to 1981", *China Quarterly*, No. 94 (June 1983), pp. 304-22, esp. pp. 318-21.

22 September 25, 1981; see also speeches at the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress and at the special meeting of writers and artists earlier the same month, *Xinhua News Bulletin*, September 9, 1981. Hu Qiaomu's long speech attacking bourgeois liberalism, delivered in August 1981 and printed in the December issue of *Hongqi*, indicates the continuing nature of the concern in 1981.

23 See D.E. Pollard, "The Controversy over Modernism, 1979-84", *China Quarterly*, No. 104 (December 1985), pp. 641-56.

24 Summarised in Schram, *Ideology and Policy in China Since the Third Plenum*, pp. 41, 44-45. The speech became one of the first targets in the campaign against "spiritual pollution" later that year; see for example *Guangming Ribao*, November 5, 1983, p. 1.

25 On the day that one overseas broadcast was asking "Where is Bai Hua now?" he was actually having dinner at the foreigners' Friendship Hotel in the western suburbs of Beijing.

26 For a brief summary of the rhetoric, see *China Quarterly*, No. 97 (March 1984), pp. 160-63, 169-70; No. 98 (June 1984), pp. 399-400; No. 99 (September 1984), pp. 663, 672; No. 102 (June 1985), p. 366.

27 See *Guangming Ribao*, November 7, 1983, p. 1.

28 Much of this went on behind closed doors and was not reported in full in the press. For press reports, see for instance *Renmin Ribao*, October 31, 1983, p. 8; *Guangming Ribao*, October 29, 1983, p. 1; *Guangming Ribao*, October 30, 1983, p. 1; *Beijing Ribao*, November 9, 1983, p. 4; *Guangming Ribao*, November 11, 1983, p. 1; *Beijing Ribao*, November 11, 1983, p. 4; *Renmin Ribao*, November 12, 1983, p. 4; *Guangming Ribao*, January 26, 1984, p. 3.

29 *China Quarterly*, No. 99 (September 1984), p. 663.

30 See announcement in *Wenyi Bao*, January 1985, p. 3. For a brief summary, see *China Quarterly*, No. 102 (June 1985), p. 379.

31 Hu Qili's speech is given in full in *Wenyi Bao*, February 1985, pp. 3-5. See also the summary of initial proceedings in *China Daily*, December 31, 1984, p. 1.

32 *Wenyi Bao*, February 1985, p. 10; partial listings in *Guangming Ribao*, January 8, 1985, p. 1 and *China Daily*, January 9, 1985, p. 1.

33 *Wenyi Bao*, February 1985, pp. 8-10; see also the report in *China Daily*, January 7, 1985, pp. 1, 4.

34 *China Reconstructs*, May 1985, p. 34.

35 *Guangming Ribao*, November 5, 1985, p. 1; November 6, 1985, p. 1; *China Daily*, November 9, 1985, p. 4. See also *China Quarterly*, No. 105 (March 1986), p. 190.

36 For a general impression of the cold wind at this time, see the special feature in *Far Eastern Economic Review*, December 26, 1985, pp. 36-47.

37 See *China Daily*, July 15, 1986, p. 3; July 17, 1986, p. 1; July 18, 1986, p. 3.

38 For an outsider's impression of the range and variety of culture at the time, see *The Economist*, August 30, 1986, pp. 65-66; not all details are accurate but the atmosphere is nicely caught.

39 *China Quarterly*, No. 106 (June 1986), p. 393; No. 107 (September 1986), p. 582. The first demands date from the time of the Third Plenum.

40 For a more detailed discussion, see Bonnie S. McDougall, *The Yellow Earth: A Film by Chen Kaige* (forthcoming).

41 For a selection of articles about *The Yellow Earth*, see Chen Kaiyan (ed.), *Huashuo <Huang tudi>* (Talking of The Yellow Earth) (Beijing: Chinese Film Press, 1986).

42 Xiao Ou, "Duocai de xinxi, kegui de tansuo - zai jing bufen yishujia, pinglunjia tan 84 nian guochan gushipian" (Richly varied news, valuable exploration - artists and critics from Beijing discuss domestic feature films of '84), *Dianying Yishu*, March 1985, pp. 2-7.

43 "Diwujie jinjijiang pingweihui bufen pingwei guanyu yingpian <Huang tudi> de fayan zhailu" (Extracts from speeches evaluating the film *The Yellow Earth* at the Fifth Golden Rooster adjudication commitee), in Chen Kaiyan, *Huashuo <Huang tudi>*, pp. 1-36.

44 *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

46 Dong Xin, "Ba dianyingjie bancheng chuangzuo ziyou de xin tiandi - ji gushipian biandao chuangzuo huiyi" (Make the film world into a new universe of creative freedom - notes on a meeting on creative writing and directing in feature films), *Wenyi Bao*, May 1985, pp. 4-5.

47 See the series of articles in the September, October, November and December issues of *Dazhong Dianying* in 1985, under the general heading "Dianying shangzuolü di de yuanyin he zai?" (Wherein lies the reason for the low attendance rate for films?). Further discussion can be found in Bonnie S. McDougall, *The Yellow Earth*.

48 For a more favourable outside impression of the Chinese cinema in 1984-85, see for instance *The Economist*, November 22, 1986, pp. 96-99.

49 *China Quarterly*, No. 106 (June 1986), p. 375.

50 See for instance Wang Meng interviewed in *Beijing Review*, 1986, No. 27, pp. 14-19, esp. p. 15.

51 For an impression of the interrelatedness of these different manifestations of primitivism, see the May issue of *Zhongguo Qingnian* with a review of *The Yellow Earth*, an article on Shi Tiesheng, and a review of *The Wild Man* with illustrations of Yin Guangzhong's masks.

52 See for instance Zheng Dongtian, "<Huang tudi> suixiangqu" (Random thoughts on *The Yellow Earth*), *Dangdai*

Dianying, February 1985; reprinted in Chen Kaiyan, *Huashuo <Huang tudi>*, pp. 37-47, esp. p. 41; and Ni Zhen, "Qitiao de gao du" (Leaping heights), *Beijing Dianying Xueyuan Xuebao*, 1985, No. 1; abridged version reprinted in Chen Kaiyan, *Huashuo <Huang tudi>*, pp. 67-81, esp. p. 67.

53 Shi Tiesheng's "Wo de yaoyuan de Qingpingwan" won a Writers' Association short story award in 1983 and his "Nainai de xingxing" (Grandmother's star) won again in 1984; Zhang Chengzhi's "Beifang de he", Ah Cheng's "Qi wang" and Jia Pingwa's "Layue, zhengyue" all won short novel awards for 1983-84.

54 See for instance *China Daily*, July 19, 1985, p. 5. In 1987 the overseas edition of *Renmin Ribao* ran a series of articles about Ah Cheng, in acknowledgement of his overseas fans. See also Zhong Chengxiang, "A Note on Ah Cheng", *Chinese Literature*, Winter 1986, pp. 78-81.

55 Definitive version in Zhao Zhenkai, *Bodong* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1985), pp. 1-138; translation in Zhao Zhenkai, *Waves* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1985), pp. 1-146. Zhao Zhenkai is better known under his penname, Bei Dao.

56 See for instance Ye Zhongqiang, "Zhigen yu chuantong wenhua he xianshi shenghuo de wotu" (Planted in the fertile soil of traditional culture and real life), *Wenxue Bao*, October 30, 1985; Li Ziyun, "Huashuo Ah Cheng" (Talking of Ah Cheng), *Jiushi Niandai*, June 1986, pp. 92-93.

57 For ex-Xingxing in New York, see Alisa Joyce, "Obstacles to Expression", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, November 27, 1986, pp. 40-42. Most ended up in Europe, e.g. Ma Desheng, Wang Keping, Li Shuang and Shao Fei; Huang Rui went to Japan.

58 *China Daily*, December 6, 1984, p. 5. *The China Daily* seemed to take a particular interest in the work of the avant-garde (especially in the plastic and performing arts), partly because many of the reporting staff were of the same generation, and partly because such news appealed to foreigners.

59 See review in *China Daily*, May 21, 1985, p. 5.

60 See report in *China Daily*, December 12, 1986, p. 5.

61 See report by Carroll Bogert, *Washington Post*, December 10, 1986, p. B4; *China Daily*, November 25, 1986, p. 5.

62 See for instance Bai Jieming (Geremie Barmé), "Zhongguo meishujie xinrui de houshe" (A keen new voice in the Chinese art world), *Jiushi Niandai*, July 1986, pp. 92-93.

63 There is, for instance, in *China Quarterly* a hint of the coming campaign in the report on political developments in the quarter October-December, but not in regard to literature and the arts; *China Quarterly*, No. 109 (March 1987), pp. 149-50, 164.