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The Beijing University Student Movement in the Hundred Flowers Campaign in 1957

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April 29, 2011

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Qian Liquan is one of the very first scholars who wrote about the students of 1957, and he also happened to teach me when I was in high school. On the front cover of his book *Refuse to Forget - '1957 Studies' Notes*, it says: "It was my dream to write this book - I hope to inspire more people, especially young scholars, to focus on 'the 1957 incident,' so as to establish '1957 studies.'" I almost feel as if I am one of the people he expects to carry out his words, and hopefully I am on the right track.

Introduction

After the 1989 Tiananmen protests, Chinese student activism has become a popular topic among Western scholars. In retrospect, 1989 was the final climax of student movements in twentieth-century China. This paper examines the beginning of student activism in the People's Republic period by focusing on the activities of Beijing University students during the Hundred Flowers Campaign in 1957. The students commonly referred to their movement as the "May 19th Movement," the date when the first "big character poster" appeared on campus, as their own way of responding to the Party's call to "Let a Hundred Flowers Bloom, and Let a Hundred Schools of Thought Contend." The Beijing University student movement lasted barely half a month, and was soon repressed in the nation-wide Anti-Rightist Campaign, when the most outspoken students were punished as "rightists." The questions this essay addresses are the following: What events and motivations triggered this movement? How did the movement develop and wither over this short period? How do participants and the Party reflect on the movement today? And what is its lasting significance in the history of dissent in contemporary China?

In answering these questions, the paper is organized into three chapters. The first chapter situates the Hundred Flowers Movement in historical perspective, and specifically looks at domestic as well as international background, and how the repression of the Hundred Flowers Movement foreshadowed a series of political and social catastrophes in the Maoist period. The second chapter delves into the student movement and applies analytical frameworks of social movement theories to this particular case, especially in terms of repertoires of protests, organization and leadership, framing of dissent, and how political opportunities and constraints operated at various points throughout the movement. The third chapter explores both the official reevaluation of the Anti-Rightist Campaign in the post-Mao period, and memoirs of the participants and observers of the Beijing University student

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movement after nearly half a century of silence and oblivion. Through this discussion of historical memory and construction, I will conclude with an analysis of the factors that contribute to the ignorance of this brief episode in the history of dissent in contemporary China.

Chapter 1: The Hundred Flowers Movement in Historical Perspective

The Beijing University student movement in 1957 did not happen by chance. It was a response to the Hundred Flowers Campaign of 1956-1957, which aimed at mobilizing intellectual opinions and support for the Party's policies. Both domestic and international factors led to the launching of this campaign.

Domestic Background

The Hundred Flowers Campaign occurred between January 1956 and early June 1957 when Mao Zedong launched a series of "liberal" policies to loosen the Communist Party's control over the intellectuals.¹ The term came from one of Mao's speeches in 1956, when he raised the slogan "Let a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend." The category of intellectuals ranged from scientists to writers and artists. The total number of people categorized as "intellectuals" was relatively small: 3,840,000 including 100,000 "higher" intellectuals.² Among them, Mao particularly aimed at non-Communist Party politicians and intellectuals, thus creating a channel for them to criticize Party bureaucracy from the outside. Non-party members also happened to "constitute a large proportion of the country's managerial and technical experts."³

One reason for Mao to launch the Hundred Flowers was to gain the intellectuals' enthusiasm and talents to contribute to the first Five Year Plan. This was an intensive program for modernizing China, based on the Soviet economic model. It stressed industrialization and agricultural collectivization. Granted a degree of freedom and criticism, the intellectuals were expected to actively participate in the Party's plans.

¹ Roderick MacFarquhar, ed. *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao: From the Hundred Flowers to the Great Leap Forward*, Harvard contemporary China series 6 (Cambridge, Mass: Council on East Asian Studies/Harvard University, 1989), 4

² MacFarquhar, ed. *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao*, 5

³ Ibid., 6.

On May 2nd, 1956, Mao officially announced the policy “let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools contend” at the Supreme State Conference.⁴ He claimed the policy was a guideline to developing sciences and arts. The phrase “a hundred schools contend” reminded people of the Spring and Autumn (722 – 481 B.C.) and of the Warring States (403 – 221 B.C.) periods of ancient Chinese history, when the Hundred Schools of Thought of Chinese philosophy blossomed. Among them, the most influential schools such as Confucianism, Taoism and Legalism were founded. Now Mao strived to use the historical allusion to suggest wide-ranging debates.

Three weeks later, on May 26, 1956, the Director of the Central Committee’s Propaganda Department, Lu Dingyi, gave a speech specifically to the intellectuals, which elaborated some main themes of the policy. He clarified the various aspects of freedom the policy sought: “freedom of independent thinking, of debate, of creative works; freedom to criticize and freedom to express, and to maintain and reserve one’s opinion on questions of art, literature, or scientific research.”⁵ However, these “freedoms,” as he stressed, should only be restricted to the people, and “no freedom should be extended to counterrevolutionaries: for them we have only dictatorship.”⁶ There was a strict distinction “between the battle of ideas among the people and the struggle against counterrevolutionaries.”⁷ His words seemed positive and encouraging, but nobody knew where the line between friend and foe began, or how to tell the difference between the struggle among the people and the struggle against counterrevolutionaries. As MacFarquhar writes, “the party retained the right to define where the boundary line between the people and counterrevolutionaries should be drawn and who

⁴ MacFarquhar, ed. *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao*, 6

⁵ Hualing Nie, ed. *Literature of the Hundred Flowers*, Modern Asian literature series (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 23-24.

⁶ Ibid., 24.

⁷ Ibid., 25.

fell into which category.”⁸ The seemingly liberal wind had the potential to be reversed, because the party held the power to interpret its policies according to its own wishes.

The intellectuals’ initial response toward the policy was lukewarm and cautious. Traditionally, only rich families could afford a good education for their children, and advanced education aimed at government employment. Therefore, intellectuals had long been classified as bourgeois class members, and they were required to reform their thinking in order to serve socialist China. In the 1950s, most intellectuals were reluctant to air grievances because of their bitter past experiences, such as self-criticism sessions during the ideological remolding campaign in 1951, and more recently the outcomes of two campaigns aimed at them. The first was the “Anti-Hu Feng” campaign in the summer of 1955 criticizing and attacking the prominent left-wing author and literary theorist who had challenged Mao’s vision of revolutionary literature. After Hu’s fall and imprisonment, came the “Su Fan” campaign – the Movement for the Liquidation of Counterrevolutionaries, which was also targeted in part at intellectuals.

With this history, intellectuals were unwilling to raise any opposition to the Party. According to a professor at Beijing Normal University speaking during these years,

The intellectuals ... are still not free from misgivings and fear that they might be trapped. They fear that, once their idealistic thoughts appear in print, they might be required to undergo the process of rectification once again in the future . . . they fear that they would be criticized and suffer the loss of prestige and face once their views are found to be unsatisfactory. As a result they have not the courage to contend although they very much want to do so.⁹

After repeated campaigns aimed at reforming the intellectuals, the Hundred Flowers was framed as the first major liberalization since the founding of People’s Republic in

⁸ MacFarquhar, ed. *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao*, 7.

⁹ René Goldman, “The Rectification Campaign at Peking University: May-June 1957,” *The China Quarterly*, no. 12 (December 1962): 140.

1949.¹⁰ Some people had learned the lesson from previous campaigns and remained silent this time, while others believed that this time would be different.

In February 1957, Mao gave an important speech at the Supreme State Conference, *On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People*. The published version of June 1957 was quite different from the original notes, which indicates how the political atmosphere changed within months. In April, as a further push to the Hundred Flowers policy, the Party initiated a Rectification Campaign aimed at leadership failures, which finally convinced the intellectuals to air their grievance. This was when the student movement at Beijing University arose. Only three weeks later, Mao felt the criticisms had gotten out of hand, and brought a halt to the liberal period through the Anti-Rightist Movement. Not only were many intellectuals' and students' lives changed for the worse, the state suffered from decades of human disasters for the rest of Maoist period.

International Crises and Mao's Response

Outside of China, the year of 1956 was eventful, especially in Soviet Union and East European communist countries. In February 1956, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev gave a speech to the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party (CPSU) entitled "On the Personality Cult and its Consequences." He repudiated Stalin's personality cult and the ruthlessness of the purges of the military and the Party.¹¹ Khrushchev's supposedly "Secret Speech" was leaked to the Western world within a short time, which caused immense shock, confusion and a questioning of the world Communist movement.

Not all countries reacted to the "Secret Speech" peacefully. In June 1956, Polish workers demonstrated in Poznan, but the government soon put down the protests. In October, the government appointed the reformist Gomulka to negotiate with the Soviet government,

¹⁰ Merle Goldman, "Mao's Obsession with the Political Role of Literature and the Intellectuals", in MacFarquhar, ed. *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao*, 39

¹¹ Nikita Khrushchev, "Speech to 20th Congress of the C.P.S.U.," *Speech to 20th Congress of the C.P.S.U.*, February 24, 1956, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/khrushchev/1956/02/24.htm>,

and thus ended the era of Stalinization in Poland, initiating a policy of modest liberalization. More violence occurred in the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. Only two days after the “Polish October,” the students and intellectuals organized a demonstration in Budapest “demanding free elections and the removal of Soviet forces.”¹² The revolt evolved into battles between the revolutionaries and the State Security forces along with Soviet troops. Eventually the U.S.S.R. established a new government in Hungary and suppressed public opposition.

The “Secret Speech” became widely known in China even though the Party never officially published it. It was translated into a brochure and attached to the periodical *Reference Material*, with a notice: “internal publication, please preserve.” Any student could order *Reference Material* because Mao decreed that its publication increase from 2000 to 400,000 copies. Besides that, the *New York Daily Worker* published the “Secret Speech” and this newspaper was sold at the foreign language bookstore in Beijing. Soon it was sold out since many university students in Beijing sought copies.¹³ Two students and a teacher’s assistant at Beijing University later translated the report from the newspaper and shared it among the students,¹⁴ who later were charged as “rightists” for translating and spreading the report.

Mao’s reaction to the speech was ambivalent. As he put it, Khrushchev “tore off the lid and poked a hole.”¹⁵ Later on, he explained his attitudes toward the “Secret Speech” in the talk *On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People*: “To expose the cult of Stalin, to tear off the lid, to liberate people, this is a liberation movement; but his [i.e., Khrushchev’s] method of exposing [Stalin] is incorrect; [he] hasn’t made a good analysis,

¹² MacFarquhar, ed. *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao*, 8

¹³ Li Shen-zhi, “Mao zhuxi shi shenme shihou jueding yin she chu dong de?” in Niu Han and Deng Jiuping, eds. *Liuyue xue: ji yizhong de fa youpai yundong*, 1st ed. (Beijing: Jingji ribao chubanshe, 1998), 117.

¹⁴ Chen Fengxiao, *Wo suo zhidao de Beida zhengfeng fanyou yundong*, in Ji Xianlin, ed. *Meiyou qingjie de gushi*, 1st ed., Suiyue wencong (Beijing: Beijing shiyue wenyi chubanshe, 2001), 503.

¹⁵ Qian Liqun, *Jujue yiwang: “1957 nian xue” yanjiu biji* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press (China) Ltd, 2007), 111.

clubbing [him] to death with a single blow.”¹⁶ On the one hand, Mao acknowledged the basic points of Khrushchev’s report, which implied that not everything Stalin did was correct; he felt relieved that he no longer had to follow whatever Stalin did. On the other hand, Mao worried about the way Khrushchev attacked Stalin posthumously and the problem of personality cult. For a long time, Mao assumed himself to be China’s Stalin, and therefore the criticism of Stalin was just like a denial of Mao’s power. In the 1950s, Mao gradually developed his personality cult through propaganda, but people seemed to buy into it and rarely questioned it. During the Hundred Flowers Campaign, however, some active students explicitly associated the personality cult with the socialist system, even if they did not extend the problem to Mao. However, Mao was still paranoid of the idea of being criticized after his death, and thus he tried all means to get rid of his political rivals in various campaigns when he was still alive.

Mao publicly expressed his opinions on the “Secret Speech” through an editorial in the *People’s Daily* on April 5, 1956, entitled *On the Historical Experience of the Proletarian Dictatorship*.¹⁷ It acknowledged the mistakes of Stalin, and emphasized evaluating Stalin from a historical perspective. At the conclusion, Mao wrote,

Now it is time to thank Khrushchev for tearing off the lid, and we should consider from every aspect how to act according to the Chinese situations, and no longer be superstitious. ... Now [we] should work harder to search for a concrete path to construct socialism in China.¹⁸

In other words, in learning a lesson from the Soviet Union, China should find its own path to build socialism, instead of copying the Soviet model. Since this editorial came out before the launching of the Hundred Flowers policy, the latter can be read as an endeavor to develop Chinese socialism without Soviet influence.¹⁹ Although the Hundred Flowers

¹⁶ MacFarquhar, ed. *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao*, 178.

¹⁷ Ibid., 6.

¹⁸ Qian, *Jujue Yiwang*, 113.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Campaign was targeted toward domestic intellectuals, it was affected by and came partly in response to international changes.

Besides Khrushchev's speech, the Hungarian Revolution also had multiple impacts on Mao. As he commented on this incident:

Do you think the Hungarian incident was good or bad? I say [it] was both good and bad. Of course it was bad, since they had disturbances. But Hungary did one very good thing; the counterrevolutionaries really helped us. Since the end of the Hungarian incident, things have been more secure than before. Hungary now is better than the Hungary of the past when there were no disturbances.²⁰

First, it reinforced Mao's distrust of the intellectuals, who "could under some circumstances prove to be enormously dangerous."²¹ His constant reference to Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin and the Hungarian upheaval signaled his concern that similar incidents could happen in China.²² Second, Mao still believed that different from the Hungarian intellectuals, their Chinese counterparts "'basically' accepted the system and were basically patriotic – basically, 'part of the people.'"²³ The differences between the two countries' intellectuals were more important than their similarities. Third, in order to prevent a Hungarian-like uprising from taking place in China, Mao tried "liberal" methods instead of repression and violence.²⁴ The Hungarian uprising was positive, as long as it did not happen in China. Maybe Mao did not believe that a similar case would ever occur in China, thus he insisted on calling on non-Party members to criticize the Party in the Hundred Flowers.²⁵

After the Hungarian Revolution, Mao wrote another editorial *More on the Historical Experience of the Proletarian Dictatorship*, which was published on December 29, 1956. In contrast with the earlier editorial, Mao not only emphasized the achievements of Stalin, but

²⁰ MacFarquhar, ed. *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao*, 177

²¹ Benjamin Schwartz, "Thoughts on the Late Mao: Between Total Redemption and Utter Frustration," in MacFarquhar, ed. *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao*, 27.

²² Goldman, in MacFarquhar, ed. *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao*, 46

²³ Schwartz, in MacFarquhar, ed. *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao*, 27

²⁴ Goldman, in MacFarquhar, ed. *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao*, 46

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 47

also warned of the appearance of anti-Soviet and anti-socialist tendencies.²⁶ He rejected Tito's recent speech, which claimed that Stalinism was not a problem of personality cult, but "an inevitable outgrowth of the Soviet system."²⁷ Mao pointed out that Stalin's mistakes were not caused by the socialist system, and in order to correct these mistakes, it would be unnecessary to "correct" the socialist system.²⁸ Later on during the student movement, the relationship between personality cult and the socialist system became a heatedly discussed topic on college campuses. Furthermore he criticized those so-called "socialists," who spoke highly of democracy without connecting it with the dictatorship of the proletariat. He denounced those as bourgeois who opposed the proletariat, and demanded capitalism instead of socialism.²⁹ Many intellectuals could not fathom Mao's undertone here until they were labeled as "rightists" for promoting democracy.

Fragrant Flowers or Poisonous Weeds

On February 27, 1957, Mao gave an important speech, *On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People*, to an extended session of the Supreme State Conference. For unknown reasons, the transcript was not published until June 18 of the same year, when the Anti-Rightist Campaign had already begun.³⁰ Meanwhile, the speech "was only commented on and interpreted at different levels, inside and outside the Party,"³¹ but the political atmosphere had switched from liberalization to repression since June. Mao's original speaking notes are translated in *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao*, and the published version is translated in *The Literature of the Hundred Flowers*. Comparing the two versions of the same speech, one can see many significant changes, such the length from 28,000

²⁶ Qian, *Jujue yiwang*, 114

²⁷ MacFarquhar, ed. *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao*, 9

²⁸ Qian, *Jujue yiwang*, 114

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ See footnotes from "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People," in Nie, ed. *Literature of the Hundred Flowers*, 13.

³¹ Goldman, "The Rectification Campaign at Peking University," 139.

characters to 24,000,³² in the tone from soft to harsh, in focus from encouraging critiques to listing criteria to fulfill. All verbal changes reflected the shift of political orientation within a few months.

In the original notes, Mao used the Hu Feng campaign to talk about constructive thoughts and counterrevolutionary thoughts, which were described as flowers and weeds respectively. He differentiated Hu Feng's case from others and encouraged people to "cultivate that little flower." As he said,

He [Hu Feng] organized a secret group; that's not good. So long as you do not run secret groups, you [Hu Feng types] can cultivate that little flower; [since] China's area is so big, nine million square kilometers, what's so serious about this little flower blooming? Cultivate that little flower for everybody to see, [and] people can also criticize flowers like his, saying I don't like your flower. [We're] talking about weeds and fragrant flowers. Some are poisonous weeds. If you want only grain, want only barley, wheat, corn, rice, millet, and absolutely don't want any weeds, that's unachievable. ... To ban all weeds, not allowing their growth, is that possible? In reality it is not; they will still grow, [and] you will still have to hoe [to get rid of them]. ... But in reality so many weeds compete with grain, [and] among them are poisonous weeds.³³

Mao was aware that, as long as he allowed people to speak out, or "cultivate flowers," weeds would naturally come out as well. He mentioned the notions of "fragrant flowers" and "poisonous weeds," but there were no concrete definitions of the two, nor did he give a solution to get rid of weeds. Instead, he gave an example: "Stalin in the past was 100 percent a fragrant flower; Khrushchev in one stroke turned him into a poisonous weed. Now [Stalin] is again fragrant."³⁴ In other words, fragrant flowers and poisonous weeds were exchangeable, depending on who played the role of judge. Mao disliked Khrushchev's judgment of Stalin, though he did not explicitly say that Khrushchev was a counterrevolutionary.

In this document, Mao was aware of student activism, as he quoted some statistics that

³² See footnotes, in MacFarquhar, ed. *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao*, 132.

³³ MacFarquhar, ed. *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao*, 165.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 167.

“last year [1956] among universities and middle schools in 28 cities there were reportedly over 7,000 students involved in disturbances in 29 schools.”³⁵ Rather than blaming the students, he agreed with the analysis that

The cause of the disturbances was nothing more than bureaucratism [by leaders] and student naïveté; youth, workers, [and] students did not understand the complexity of the world, did not understand arduous struggle. At the same time, the school authorities [and] the administrators used various methods to deceive them [and] didn't share weal and woe with them.³⁶

Mao treated the students as immature children, who could not mobilize themselves on their own, but as having been deceived by the school officials. He did not believe students could cause disturbances on their own, which explained why the student movement in 1957 shocked him. In dealing with these disturbances, instead of punishment, Mao claimed that there was a lack of enforcement of political studies, thus the Party failed to lead people's minds and behaviors. As he said,

There are counterrevolutionaries, but they are very few. [We] can't say that these agitators are mainly counterrevolutionaries. On the contrary, it is mainly the defects in our work: We don't know how to educate, we don't know how to lead. ... Make the process of the disturbance serve as an educational process, serve as a political course. Our political work has been insufficient, [our] ideological work hasn't been done well; [this is] bureaucratism. [We] must look upon strikes, student strikes, [and] the peasants waving their poles as the process of remolding our work, [and] educating workers [and] students.³⁷

Mao thought that counterrevolutionaries were the minority, but there was no specific standard to distinguish who really was a counterrevolutionary. Mao highlighted the responsibility of education on ideological work, about which he had earlier said that self-remolding needed to be further emphasized among youth and the intellectuals.³⁸

Mao's encouragement of criticism was evident in the original draft, but not much so in the revised version. Most important, the published speech added a list of six criteria to

³⁵ MacFarquhar, ed. *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao*, 174.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 175, 176.

³⁸ Ibid., 156.

distinguish between fragrant flowers and poisonous weeds:

1. Words and actions should help to unite, and not divide, the people of our various nationalities.
2. They should be beneficial, and not harmful, to socialist transformation and socialist construction.
3. They should help to consolidate, and not undermine or weaken, the people's democratic dictatorship.
4. They should help to consolidate, and not undermine or weaken, democratic centralism.
5. They should help to strengthen, and not discard or weaken, the leadership of the Communist Party.
6. They should be beneficial, and not harmful, to international socialist unity and the unity of the peace-loving people of the world.³⁹

Among these criteria, the socialist path and Party leadership were the most important principles to follow.⁴⁰ That is to say, socialism and the Party's legitimacy were not open to criticism, even though all kinds of criticisms were welcomed. Different from the first draft, the revised version took a harder line in terms of "wrong" ideas: "it certainly would not be right to refrain from criticism, to look on while wrong ideas spread unchecked and allow them to monopolize the field. Mistakes must be criticized and poisonous weeds fought wherever they crop up."⁴¹ However, incorrect ideas were not to be banned or deprived their freedom of speech, for "it is only by employing the method of discussion, criticism, and reasoning that we can really foster correct ideas and overcome wrong ones, and that we can really settle issues."⁴² Ironically, Mao stated that "it is harmful to the growth of art and science if administrative measures are used to impose one particular style of art or school of thought and to ban another,"⁴³ which was exactly what was done in the Anti-Rightist Campaign.

In the revised version, the intellectuals were placed in the same category as the bourgeoisie who came from the old society, but it also recognized that they "are patriotic and

³⁹ MacFarquhar, ed. *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao*, 165.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 156

⁴¹ Nie, ed. *Literature of the Hundred Flowers*, 17.

⁴² Ibid., 16

⁴³ Ibid., 13-14

are willing to serve their flourishing socialist motherland; they know they will be helpless and have no bright future to look forward to if they turn away from the socialist cause and from the working people led by the Communist Party.”⁴⁴ It had an undertone that the intellectuals would certainly cooperate with the state either because of genuine patriotism or lack of alternatives.⁴⁵ For this group of people, suppression should not be pursued, but rather allowing them to express their ideas, arguing with them, and directing appropriate criticism at them was the appropriate method.⁴⁶ The text leads to the conclusion, which only became obvious in the Anti-Rightist Campaign, that the intellectuals could not escape being criticized no matter what they would say.

As a continuation of the Hundred Flowers, on April 27, 1957, the Central Committee announced “the instructions on the Rectification Campaign,” which was published in *People’s Daily* on May 1st. Consistent with the Hundred Flowers policy, and intended to further push the liberal line, the principle of the campaign was, “Speak all you know and speak it fully; no fault will be attached to the speaker, while the listeners will learn a lesson thereof.”⁴⁷ It aimed to fight bureaucratism, sectarianism and subjectivism, which were summarized as the “three evils” in the “style of work” among Party cadres, and the slogan of the campaign was “Unity-Criticism-Unity.”⁴⁸ Rectification of work style was among Mao’s favorite methods previously utilized in 1942 and 1950 in order to unite the Party leadership. This time, it invited democratic parties’ members to help the Party eradicate the “three evils,” and thus it was called an “open-door rectification,” which distinguished itself from the other two intra-Party movements.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Nie, ed. *Literature of the Hundred Flowers*, 15

⁴⁵ MacFarquhar, ed. *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao*, 30

⁴⁶ Nie, ed. *Literature of the Hundred Flowers*, 16

⁴⁷ Goldman, “The Rectification Campaign at Peking University,” 141

⁴⁸ Nie, ed. *Literature of the Hundred Flowers*, 18.

⁴⁹ Schwartz, in MacFarquhar, ed. *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao*, 30.

René Goldman, a foreign exchange student at Beijing University from 1953 to 1958,⁵⁰ revealed another detail, which could not be found in the published text. According to him, the instructions warned that the Rectification Campaign “must be earnest and yet like a mild breeze and a thin rain; meetings should be limited to small groups of a few people and assume the form of comradely talks.”⁵¹ This instruction meant that criticism should not be bold but be kept within limits, which left enough space to reinterpret what was counted as breeze and drizzle. The intellectuals might not catch these words or fully understand the meanings behind them, but at least the Rectification Campaign could sweep away their doubts and concerns. As Mao anticipated, the intellectuals, especially non-Party members, finally began to speak openly. The “airing” period lasted only a short time, before the Anti-Rightist Campaign was launched in June 1957.

The Anti-Rightist Campaign silenced the intellectuals and non-Party politicians who had different opinions of the Party leadership and socialism, even though these people were invited to voice their grievance. From then on, no one dared to raise any opposition to Mao and challenge Party policies. It was not only the fear of repression that discouraged people from speaking the truth, but the Party system itself, which had no reliable channels to hear opinions from the bottom. Thus Mao held absolute power to carry out whatever he had in mind. Mao later launched the Great Leap Forward in 1958, which caused severe famine for three consecutive years, and eventually the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) at his own will. Mao himself felt the lack of checks and balances as well, as he said at a conference in 1962, “when the rightists attack, you have to fight back, or what else can you do? But the downside is that people no longer dare to speak out.”⁵² It was indeed the consequence of the Anti-

⁵⁰ Dennis J Doolin, *Communist China - The Politics of Student Opposition* (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, Stanford University, 1964), 12.

⁵¹ Goldman, “The Rectification Campaign at Peking University,” 140.

⁵² Ye Yonglie, *Fanyoupai shimo*, 630.

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Rightist Campaign summed up in one sentence. This was the movement that foreshadowed a series of political and social catastrophes afterward.

Chapter 2: May 19th Student Movement at Beijing University

The Hundred Flowers policy brought the liberal wind to Beijing University, a school famous for its student activism in twentieth century China. The first big character poster supporting the movement appeared on May 19, 1957, igniting the students' enthusiasm for participating in the Rectification Campaign. Besides putting up posters, the students held speeches, debates, and even published journals. The most active students gathered to form a loosely organized group "The Hundred Flowers Society," and made efforts to publish their own journal "The Square." They viewed themselves as a grassroots democratic movement answering the Party's call. However, the Party saw their actions as attacks and considered the students to be counterrevolutionaries. Though the students reacted to political opportunities granted by the Party, they did not realize that the Party had the power to withdraw these opportunities and impose constraints at any time. Consequently, the movement resulted in a tragic ending.

Beijing University before the Movement

As the cradle of the May Fourth Movement in 1919, Beijing University is well known for its democratic tradition and student activism. The May Fourth Movement was symbolized by student demonstrations that gathered at Tiananmen Square, protesting against the weak government and the provisions of the Treaty of Versailles that undermined China's sovereignty. All subsequent student movements framed themselves as following the tradition of 1919, and continuing a new May Fourth Movement, though none of them are equivalent on the same scale until 1989.

After the triumph of the Communists in 1949, the university's autonomy and academic freedoms were limited. Party organizations took control over all levels of university life. Even though the university president was Ma Yinchu, a prominent economist with a Ph.D.

from Columbia University, “the real power was concentrated in the hands of the vice-presidents and the assistant-deans who were Party members.”⁵³ The Party’s leadership in the university was one of the most controversial issues debated among students during the student movement.

In the 1950s, access to university education expanded greatly. As for Beijing University, “by 1958 it had grown into an enormous institution of nearly 10,000 students, a five- or six-fold increase as compared with 1952, with at least twelve departments and a large number of foreign students.”⁵⁴ Besides the increasing number of the students, the composition of the student body was reshaped, with a rising percentage of students from peasant and worker origins. As the statistics indicated, “this percentage was about 19 per cent in 1954 and probably about 35 per cent in 1958.”⁵⁵

However, Mao had not kept up with the recent changes at universities. When he spoke at a conference with provincial Party leaders, he assumed that “our university students, according to the Beijing municipal government, are mostly descendents of landlords, rich peasants, or the bourgeois class. The students from proletarian background and poor peasant families are less than twenty percent. It might be the case nationwide.”⁵⁶ The misjudgment partly explains Mao’s worries about the students’ class backgrounds, and it also helps explain why he would overestimate the severity of the situation when the students participated in the campaign of criticism.

The Hundred Flowers policy affected Beijing University in a variety of ways. As René Goldman reported,

The curriculum for the academic year 1956-57 was lightened, the number of meetings was greatly reduced and the teaching was liberalized to the point that even seminars were organized. These seminars however did not go much beyond formal discussions. The

⁵³ René Goldman, “Peking University Today,” *The China Quarterly*, no. 7 (September 1961): 102.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Qian, *Jujue yiwang*, 32-33.

Marxist-Leninist Weltanschauung was not subject to controversial discussion.⁵⁷

In another article, René Goldman detailed how the seminar was conducted under the professor's guidance, but he also pointed out that "the very fact that debates were held constituted a marked improvement."⁵⁸ Before 1957, campus life remained academic and peaceful, except for the "Anti-Hu Feng" campaign and the following "Movement for the Liquidation of Counter-Revolutionaries" in the summer of 1955.⁵⁹

During the Hundred Flowers Campaign, Mao mainly anticipated politicians and intellectuals from democratic parties would speak out rather than the students. There were eight minor democratic parties that already existed before 1949, and continued under Communist Party guidance. Their members included a large number of intellectuals, especially scientific and technological intellectuals. Most studies of this period have focused on their criticisms of the Party and socialism. The students were not expected to participate in the movement, and the sources on student participation are rare. Nevertheless, the students were different from non-Party politicians. Sometimes their criticisms were more vehement than the older intellectuals, and they touched on a wide range of issues, from their first job assignment after graduation to the nature of socialism in China. They questioned the principle of Party leadership and demanded limits on Party authority. Such issues were far beyond the boundary of "breeze and drizzle," and could be regarded as "poisonous weeds." As René Goldman pointed out, "What really shook the Party was a feeling that it faced the loss of its control over the youth. Young people brought up under Communist rule had become the loudest in denouncing the Party which had vested its hopes in them."⁶⁰

Mao not only worried about losing the students, but also about the potential spread of the student movement from Beijing University to other campuses. Another trend Mao was

⁵⁷ Goldman, "Peking University Today," 105.

⁵⁸ Goldman, "The Rectification Campaign at Peking University," 139.

⁵⁹ Goldman, "Peking University Today," 102.

⁶⁰ Goldman, "The Rectification Campaign at Peking University," 139.

frightened would grow out of proportion was “the widespread distribution of these ideas outside the schools,” which might connect the students with the broad masses and provoke far-reaching consequences.⁶¹ He may have feared a Hungarian-type uprising.⁶²

Though the students raised harsh criticisms of the Party, they were not immune to Chinese Communist indoctrination. They trusted Mao, and they were pro-Socialist, anti-Nationalist, anti-imperialist and anti-Stalin. Their thoughts “can be viewed as courageous attempts at free thought, but within essentially Socialist limits.”⁶³ The students exercised their critical thinking and spoke in a different way from the Party, but they could not avoid being influenced by how they were educated.

Repertoires of the Movement

1. Big character Posters

This section explores the repertoires students utilized during the movement, specifically in terms of big character posters, speeches, debates and journals. Students were familiar with some of the tactics, but the big character poster was carried over from the Nationalist period, which had been invisible since 1949. It was a creation attributed to the students at Beijing University. During the movement, people all over Beijing would come to visit and check out these posters, and daily visitors would reach over ten thousand.⁶⁴ Mao in 1958 praised them as “an extremely useful new weapon,” “a revolutionary form created by the masses,” “a form of the mass struggle” and “a form to the advantage of the proletariat and to the disadvantage of the bourgeoisie.”⁶⁵ The big character posters were widely seen in later political movements. However, the students were later punished as “rightists” for the content of their big character posters during the Hundred Flowers Campaign.

⁶¹ Goldman, “The Rectification Campaign at Peking University,” 152.

⁶² MacFarquhar, ed. *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao*, 57.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Goldman, “The Rectification Campaign at Peking University,” 152.

⁶⁵ Xu Shanbin, “Zhengzhao Zhongguo 1966-1976,” Xinhua Publisher, http://www.china.com.cn/book/txt/2009-07/27/content_18214229.htm, accessed April 2, 2011.

On May 19, 1957, the first big character poster appeared on the east wall of the main dining hall at Beijing University. Written in black on red paper, the poster was noticeable to passersby. It asked how the university had selected representatives to the third national conference of the new democratic Youth League.⁶⁶ According to the Youth League principles, their members should select representatives, but nobody knew who those representatives were.⁶⁷ Before the question had been answered, people's attention was shifted to the second poster with "an audacious suggestion" to establish a democratic forum or a democracy wall, in order to help the Rectification Campaign.⁶⁸ The idea of a democracy wall as a space for free speech reappeared in Beijing in 1978 after more than twenty years, but people did not credit the idea to the Beijing University students of the Hundred Flowers period.

Overnight the walls of the dining halls, the classrooms and the dorms were covered with big character posters. By the afternoon on the second day, there were altogether 162 posters.⁶⁹ The number grew by the day. On May 22, "the number of posters was 264 at 11 a.m. and grew to 317 by 7 p.m."⁷⁰ Posters displayed were full of variety: "long-winded articles, short essays, miscellaneous prose, poetry, cartoons, and serialized novels."⁷¹ Some signed their real names and others pseudonyms, some signed their identification card numbers, and some remained anonymous. René Goldman made an acute observation about the chaotic scene:

It seemed as if the Party had every critical poster surrounded by many others stating the Party viewpoint and attacking the criticizers. Those posters which raised controversial issues usually attracted gatherings of students who reacted to their content by scribbling on these very posters brief remarks.⁷²

⁶⁶ Wang Shuyao, *Yanyuan fengyu zhu rensheng* (Laogai Research Foundation, 2007), 23.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 33.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 34.

⁶⁹ "Notes on Beijing University Democratic Movement," *Beijing Daxue youpai fandong yanlun huiji* (Beijing: Beijing University, 1957), 251.

⁷⁰ Goldman, "The Rectification Campaign at Peking University," 141.

⁷¹ Doolin, *Communist China - The Politics of Student Opposition*, 15.

⁷² Goldman, "The Rectification Campaign at Peking University," 141.

Posters instantaneously created an atmosphere of free speech and inspired discussions among the students. They might not necessarily agree with what was written on the posters, but at least it was provocative enough to see what their peers thought. The postings reached a climax by the afternoon of May 20, when a poem entitled “It Is the Right Time” was posted. It contained what became a widely quoted phrase: “My poem is a torch, which burns all barriers in the world. Its radiance cannot be masked, because the fire comes from the May Fourth.”⁷³ It was probably the first time that the students compared themselves to the events of 1919, when students initiated a patriotic movement against feudalism, which the Beijing warlord government represented, and imperialism, meaning the Western powers who granted areas of Shandong province to Japan without considering China’s sovereignty. Such comparison caused controversy, as some students found resonance with the poem because they experienced “a similar sense of liberalization from the oppressions of the past and a similar feeling of freedom and power to strike out against established orthodoxies and institutions.”⁷⁴ Some other students thought the poem was exaggerating the parallels and the current order should be maintained.⁷⁵ They asked in response: “What is the time? Is it the time to tear down socialism?”⁷⁶ For them, it seemed inappropriate to make parallels between a moment in national crisis and the one in socialist order.

Simultaneously, a senior physics student Tan Tianrong started his series of posters all entitled “poisonous weeds,” which reminded people of Mao’s speech differentiating them from “fragrant flowers.” He even signed his signature as “a strong and wicked guy” to express his confidence and challenge to the authorities. He admitted that in doing so he meant to attract people’s attention, and he intentionally used some extreme words,⁷⁷ but he also

⁷³ Guo Luoji, *Lishi de xuanwo*, 181.

⁷⁴ Meisner, *Mao's China and After*, 187.

⁷⁵ Goldman, “The Rectification Campaign at Peking University,” 149.

⁷⁶ Guo, *Lishi de xuanwo*, 192.

⁷⁷ Tan Tianrong, “Save the soul,” in Niu Han and Deng Jiuping, eds. *Yuanshang cao: jiyi zhong de fan youpai yundong* (Jingji ribao chubanshe, 1998), 56.

believed that what he said was correct and a real “fragrant flower,” even though people might view it as a “poisonous weed.”⁷⁸

In Tan’s first “poisonous weed,” he sarcastically criticized the traditional standards of good students, as he wrote:

Besides those 'Three-Good Students' (or morons, model students, 'small nails' or 'sons and daughters of Mao Tse-tung' or whatever you call them, it's just the same) who have annihilated their thinking faculties, there are still among Chinese youth thousands of talented and remarkable persons.⁷⁹

“Three-Good Students” refers to excellence in morality, intellect and physicality, the standards to cultivate well-rounded students even till today. Here Tan mocked such standards as training students to obediently follow the Party, and real talented students were not included in the same category. If the first poster just gave people a taste of Tan’s style, the second “poisonous weed” was more critically focused on the Party. He wrote,

The masses believe that everything the Party does is correct, and in any situation the Party is correct. If non-Party members raise different opinions, that must be wrong, that should not be allowed to exist, that should be punished and suppressed, until they make satisfactory self-criticism.⁸⁰

Here he pointed out the myth of the always-correct Party, and the logic that different opinions from the Party were equal to anti-Party, anti-socialism and anti-revolution viewpoints.⁸¹ The same logic was applied in each political movement till the death of Mao. In the Cultural Revolution, the myth of the Party developed into the personality cult, and absolute loyalty to the Party turned into the absolute loyalty to Mao.⁸² Tan clarified that “what we are against is not socialism itself, but the distortion of socialism.”⁸³

In other posters, Tan mentioned the crisis of Marxism. He said, “Marxism is an objective truth, not a religion. Those who assert themselves as Marxist and prohibit others

⁷⁸ Qian, *Jujue yiwang*, 174.

⁷⁹ Goldman, “The Rectification Campaign at Peking University,” 142.

⁸⁰ Tan, in *Xiao neiwai youpai yanlun huiji*, 27.

⁸¹ Goldman, “The Rectification Campaign at Peking University,” 142.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 178.

⁸³ Tan, in *Xiao neiwai youpai yanlun huiji*, 45.

from speaking are anti-Marxism.”⁸⁴ He was sensitive in his awareness that Marxism in China had been revised, even though he still believed in real Marxism. In contrast to Tan’s aggressive posters, he spoke like a gentleman with his Hunanese accent. No matter how others shouted at him, he maintained his smile and politeness.⁸⁵ He was the most famous student activist in Beijing University, though he reflected many years later, “Throughout my life, I had only two months to care about politics – between mid May and mid July of 1957.”⁸⁶

2. Debates and Speeches

Till the night of May 20, students were not satisfied only with writing posters, but included other tactics in their repertoires: speeches and debates at the “Democratic Plaza.” They brought tables from the dining halls, and set them up as podiums. Anyone could go on to make a speech within a limited time, while others waited in line.⁸⁷ Sometimes two students stood on stage debating, surrounded by crowds in circles.⁸⁸ René Goldman has a vivid description of the scene: “At times students stood in tight knots around speakers at other places on the campus, creating an atmosphere which reminded one of Hyde Park in London.”⁸⁹ Both the “big character poster” and “big debate” created in the movement were highly applauded and even written into the 1975 Constitution,⁹⁰ because in some way they provided a space for “free speech,” which had to be in accordance with the Party, and exemplified “people’s democracy,” as the public had such a channel to participate in politics.

Another prominent student, thanks to her passionate speeches, was Lin Xiling, a law student at the nearby People’s University. This institution trained Party cadres from peasant

⁸⁴ Tan, in *Xiao neiwai youpai yanlun huiji*, 40.

⁸⁵ Guo, *Lishi de xuanwo*, 194.

⁸⁶ Tan Tianrong, quoted in Ji, ed. *Meiyong qingjie de gushi*, 564.

⁸⁷ Wang, *Yanyuan fengyu zhu rensheng*, 44.

⁸⁸ Tan, in Ji, ed. *Meiyong qingjie de gushi*, 564.

⁸⁹ Goldman, “The Rectification Campaign at Peking University,” 141.

⁹⁰ Article 13, Constitution of People’s Republic of China (1975), <http://news.163.com/09/0805/14/5FV9PNDA00013HTJ.html>

or worker background. The composition of its student body reflected that purpose: “nine percent young model industrial workers; fifty-one percent revolutionary cadres with three to eight years of practical revolutionary experience; forty percent intellectuals who had already graduated from special political courses.”⁹¹ Before attending People’s University, Lin joined the military and then worked as a journalist for *China Youth*, when she witnessed people’s lives at the bottom of the society.⁹² Lin was sponsored for studying at the university by the military, who paid her fees, but she acted as a maverick, which attracted the attention of top officials. As the newspaper *China Youth* later wrote of her, “her rightist utterances were for a time all the rage among young people throughout the country, particularly university students.”⁹³

Lin visited Beijing University for the first time to see the big character posters. After she returned to People’s University, she gave a speech criticizing Stalin and the Party’s “leftist” policies. On May 23, Lin was invited to Beijing University to give a talk on similar topics.⁹⁴ During the “airing of grievances” period of the movement, she made six speeches at the two universities.⁹⁵ She compared the different atmospheres between the two schools, which again associated contemporaneous Beijing University students with those in 1919. She said,

I am very excited today to be able to breathe the fresh air of Beijing University. The People’s University is a great beehive of dogmatism with too heavy a bureaucratic atmosphere. Peita [Beijing University], after all, is Peita and inherits the traditions of the May Fourth movement.⁹⁶

After her opening remark, the first issue Lin touched on was the sensitive Hu Feng case. She questioned whether Hu was a counterrevolutionary, because what Hu demanded was conceded and practiced in the Hundred Flowers. As Lin asked,

⁹¹ Goldman, “The Rectification Campaign at Peking University,” 141.

⁹² Qian, *Jujue yiwang*, 119.

⁹³ Goldman, “The Rectification Campaign at Peking University,” 141.

⁹⁴ Chen Fengxiao, in Ji, ed. *Meiyou qingjie de gushi*, 501.

⁹⁵ Lin Xiling, *Lin Xiling zixuanji*, 1st ed. (Taipei Xian Xindian Shi Zhong yang xin cun: Lin Xiling, 1985), 84.

⁹⁶ Lin, in Ji, ed. *Meiyou qingjie de gushi*, 501.

Hu Feng held different views on socialist realism; now that a hundred schools of thought are contending, aren't there many people who hold different views? ... If Hu Feng's program were proposed today, he would not be spoken of as a counterrevolutionary.⁹⁷

Many students at Beijing University echoed Lin's opinions on Hu Feng. As some pointed out, "Hu Feng's only crime was to have wanted 'blooming and contending' too early."⁹⁸ Students put up posters demanding an open court for his case, if not his release, asking the Party to prevent such cases from recurrence.⁹⁹

Another controversial issue Lin talked about was her views of Stalin's personality cult and its relation to socialism:

The cult of personality is a product of the social system. ... Marxism tells us that all social phenomena have their social and historical origins. The problem of Stalin is not the problem of Stalin the individual; the problem of Stalin could only arise in a country like the Soviet Union, because in the past it had been a feudal, imperialistic nation. China is the same, for there has been no tradition of bourgeois democracy. ... The socialism we now have is not genuine socialism; or if it is, our socialism is not typical. Genuine socialism should be very democratic, but ours is undemocratic. I venture to say our society is a socialist one erected on a feudal foundation; it is not typical socialism, and we must struggle for genuine socialism!¹⁰⁰

Among the students, there had been many discussions about whether Stalin's personality cult was associated with the socialist system. In Mao's articles he denied the concurrence as inevitable, but his argument was not convincing to the students, though no one dared to openly doubt it.¹⁰¹ Now using Marxist categories, Lin openly argued that the personality cult had originated within Soviet socialism, and with the same system, China might have the same problem. Lin even criticized Chinese socialism for its feudal elements and lack of democracy. No one had ever said or heard such bold criticisms, and no matter

⁹⁷ Lin, in *Xiao neiwai yo pai yanlun huiji*, 151; translation from Doolin, *Communist China - The Politics of Student Opposition*, 24.

⁹⁸ Goldman, "The Rectification Campaign at Peking University," 143.

⁹⁹ Doolin, *Communist China - The Politics of Student Opposition*, 17.

¹⁰⁰ Goldman, "The Rectification Campaign at Peking University," 143.

¹⁰¹ Qian, *Jujue yiwang*, 121.

whether her opinions were right or wrong, she shared some new perspectives with other students, who had not considered such questions before.¹⁰²

Like Tan Tianrong, Lin also explored how the Party treated dissidents:

When you disagree with the leadership, you are opposed to the leadership; to be opposed to the leadership, is to be opposed to the organization; to be opposed to the organization is to be anti-Party; to be anti-Party is to be opposed to the people; to be opposed to the people is counterrevolutionary. Applying this formula in rendering a verdict is nothing but the method of Stalin.¹⁰³

Lin constantly compared the problems in China to Stalinism, but she made a distinction between Mao and Stalin. Lin and most students still respected Mao. She acknowledged that Mao made a small mistake on the Hu Feng case, and that a personality cult did exist in China, but she did not associate Stalin with Mao, or viewed them as sharing the same problem.¹⁰⁴ While the students felt that Mao supported them, in fact Mao was no longer on the same side as the students.

As a veteran journalist, Lin noticed that the authorities attempted to suppress the media in order to deceive the people. She said,

During the tempest of the revolution, Party members stayed together with the people; but after the victory of the revolution, they climbed up to the ruling position and ideological limits were imposed. They want to suppress the people; they adopt policies aimed at deceiving the people. Actually, this is the most foolish of methods. Now they block the news. For example, why do the newspapers not report on such a dynamic movement at Beijing University?¹⁰⁵

Soon after May 19, many journalists came to view the posters at Beijing University, but almost no newspapers reported on the student movement, which was isolated and kept from spreading out of the campus.¹⁰⁶ The government controlled most newspapers, and thus the flow of information. The silence of the *People's Daily* irritated the students, who petitioned

¹⁰² Qian, *Jujue yiwang*, 123.

¹⁰³ Lin, in Niu and Deng, eds. *Yuanshang cao*, 163-164; translation from Doolin, *Communist China - The Politics of Student Opposition*, 40-41.

¹⁰⁴ Lin, "The Second Speech at Beijing University," in Nie and Deng, eds. *Yuanshang cao*, 157.

¹⁰⁵ Lin, in *Xiao nei wai you pai yan lun hui ji*, 153; translation from Doolin, *Communist China - The Politics of Student Opposition*, 27.

¹⁰⁶ Wang Shuyao, *Yanyuan fenguu zhu rensheng*, 55-56.

the Beijing Municipal Committee, asking why there was no coverage of the movement at Beijing University. One official replied in a harsh tone: “The *People’s Daily* is our Party’s newspaper, so we decide what we want to publish. If you want our newspaper to promulgate your wrongheaded thoughts, that is absurd!”¹⁰⁷ The only newspapers publishing favorable accounts of the student movement were the *Guangming Daily* and *Wen Hui Bao* on May 26 and 27, because they were under the control of democratic parties and the intellectuals.¹⁰⁸

Lin also described the Party cadres’ privileges based on her own experiences:

Some Party members rushed to join the Party in order to enjoy the resultant privileges; those who do not join the Party have no future. Someone asked me to join the [Communist Youth] League, saying that if I did not join the Party or the League, how could I manage to settle my future, marriage, and rank? Hearing this, I was very angry. I will never join the League for this reason [emphasis in the original].¹⁰⁹

According to René Goldman, the privilege of Party cadres was a common student criticism. Many posters exposed the personal immorality of Party cadres, who were considered as “the new class.”¹¹⁰ In a famous poster “On the Development of Classes,” Qian Ruping, a student from a poor peasant family, wrote:

The experience of the past seven years has proved that it is not so beautiful; a new class oppression is just building up. . . . Following the destruction of the old classes, a new class has emerged, which is naturally different from the old ones, but has nevertheless characteristics of its own.¹¹¹

In 1957, the Party had been governing for only eight years, but some students were already aware of the emergence of a new class. In retrospect, the problem of Party privilege did not disappear but got even worse, just as the students in 1957 had foreseen. In Lin’s speeches in 1957, as well as in later years, she epitomized the role of an intellectual, who is

¹⁰⁷ Chen Fengxiao, “The Movement I know at Beijing University,” in Ji, ed. *Meiyou qingjie de gushi*, 502.

¹⁰⁸ Goldman, “The Rectification Campaign at Peking University,” 149.

¹⁰⁹ Chen, in Ji, ed. *Meiyou qingjie de gushi*, 502.

¹¹⁰ Goldman, “The Rectification Campaign at Peking University,” 149.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

never satisfied with social reality but always brings a critical eye to it. A famous quote from her was:

If I were to live in “X” society five hundred years from now, I would be dissatisfied, for society is progressive. If we are satisfied with the existing society, there will be no further development. Had the apes been content with reality, we would not be humans today.¹¹²

The same attitude was found in other posters. In Qian Ruping’s “On the New Development of Class,” he asked, “Are we looking ahead toward a slave society or toward a more rational one?”¹¹³ They both exemplified the role of intellectuals as the society’s conscience, and their critiques were not only toward the Communist regime, but also for the sake of a better future.

Not everyone agreed with Lin; on the contrary, Lin’s speeches polarized the students at Beijing University. Some students applauded her, asked for her autographs or took photos with her, while others debated with her, shouted at her or wrote insulting notes to her.¹¹⁴ Lin lived in controversy throughout her life, regardless of wherever she went.

3. Journals

Since 1949, all publications were controlled by or affiliated with the Party, which gave no chance for independent journals to exist. During the student movement, the newly established “Hundred Flowers Society,” a student organization initiated by several student activists such as Tan Tianrong, Chen Fengxiao and Zhang Jingzhong, founded a student-run journal, which they named *The Square*, as a reference to the plaza at Beijing University, where big character posters and students speeches and debates were to be found.¹¹⁵ The journal was intended to accept submissions from all students, and also from thoughtful and

¹¹² Lin, “My Thoughts,” in Niu and Deng, eds. *Yua shang cao*, 162; Doolin, *Communist China - The Politics of Student Opposition*, 37.

¹¹³ Goldman, “The Rectification Campaign at Peking University,” 146.

¹¹⁴ Qian, *Jujue yiwang*, 123

¹¹⁵ Chen, in Ji, ed. *Meiyong qingjie de gushi*, 500.

well-known big character posters. Journals were more advantageous than posters in that they were easier to carry around, whereas posters had to be read in one particular place. Journals could also be saved for the future, but posters might be covered over, removed or swept away by rains.

The Square envisioned a free space for students to voice their opinions. On the one hand it differentiated its language from official propaganda, but on the other hand it still supported the Hundred Flowers Campaign. As the forward stated,

Our “Square” is a real “wide” “space,” a forum for all speeches that are not detached from socialism. For the purpose of “Truth, Kindness and Beauty,” the square is open to all songs in all tones for the youth! Our “Square” is open for the airing of all views, a place for the hundred flowers to bloom!¹¹⁶

“A wide place open for all views” summarizes the purpose of this journal, and one can see how these active students interpreted the Hundred Flowers policy. There was no discrimination against certain thoughts, and no “poisonous weeds,” because everything was welcomed here.

The Square attracted attention both from students and university officials, and it inevitably encountered problems with funding and publishing. Without support from university officials, Tan and his friend, Chen Fengxiao, another student activist, sold all their books and belongings except for their blankets and the clothing they wore to finance the venture. They also asked for donations from students, when they put up a banner “save the child” at the main dining hall.¹¹⁷ The “child” here refers to the journal, and the banner adopted the same title as an essay written by Lu Xun, the most influential Chinese author of the twentieth century. In that essay, he denounced the Chinese society and the family system for ruining the children, the future of China.

¹¹⁶ *The Square* editorial committee, *Beijing Daxue youpai fadong yanlun huiji*, 249.

¹¹⁷ Chen, in Ji, ed. *Meiyong qingjie de gushi*, 500.

When the students sent their drafts and papers to the printer of the *Workers' Daily*, they were asked to pick them up a week later. But when they returned, the workers attacked them and confiscated their drafts, because many articles were found to include anti-Party, anti-socialist speeches. According to a letter written by the workers to the students,

Our workers think we only gain happiness and freedom through the Communist Party and socialism. Today's socialism is so great, much better than before. The Communist Party and socialism are embedded in our destinies, and our proletariat class will not acknowledge whoever is against the Party and slanders it.¹¹⁸

The students suspected that it was the university and local officials who had intervened with the printers, and nothing would change their minds about printing the journal.¹¹⁹ But that was an assumption, because there was no evidence to prove whether the workers truly disagreed with the students or the officials had coerced them. When the students failed to publish the journal through letterpress printing, their alternative was to use mimeograph. It was during the Anti-Rightist Campaign that the journal was finally published, when the atmosphere already shifted to repression, and a large number of the copies were burnt in the square in front of the dining hall.¹²⁰

The Square was not the only journal on campus in 1957, but it was the only one that claimed independence from leadership of Youth League or Party officials. Another journal, *Hong Lou*, was under the guidance of Youth League, and it experienced no trouble with budget or publishing.¹²¹ During the student movement, in pursuit of reflecting the real situation on campus, it adopted a neutral position by including comments from both “rightists” and their opponents. In the fourth issue of 1957, an editorial announced that it would develop struggles on two lines: one was anti-“rightists,” and the other was supporting

¹¹⁸ Qian, *Jujue yiwang*, 71

¹¹⁹ Chen, in Ji, ed. *Meiyou qingjie de gushi*, 505.

¹²⁰ Wang Shuyao, *Yanyuan fenguu zhu rensheng*, 148.

¹²¹ Qian, *Jujue yiwang*, 78

the Hundred Flowers campaign by airing sympathetic criticism.¹²² University officials condemned its “neutrality” as a mistake of “bourgeois objectiveness,” which meant it “lacked a sharp class standpoint and willingness to fight, and seemed like an outsider but not a participant.”¹²³ In January 1958, *Hong Lou* was restructured and admitted that their journal served as a tool for the Party propaganda.¹²⁴

Afterwards, the journal’s editors suffered as “rightists,” including a female Chinese major named Lin Zhao. Later on her name signified the cruelty of the Cultural Revolution, when the state charged her mother five cents for bullet fees for her execution. During the student movement in 1957, she differentiated herself from other student activists. As a Youth League member, Lin supported Party leadership without suspicions or critique. At the same time, she disagreed that the Party represented pure truth or everything that was perfect. Thus, she struggled between following Party disciplines and listening to her own conscience.¹²⁵

One journal that fully embraced the Party’s views on the Anti-Rightist Movement was *Lang Tao Sha*, which not only attacked “rightists” but also people in the middle. In other words, it targeted journals like *The Square* and *Hong Lou*. It accepted the Party as the sole leader on the way to socialism, and it argued that there was no need for liberalization of thoughts, but instead promoted a continuing thought reform campaign.¹²⁶ As the Anti-Rightist Movement progressed, *Lang Tao Sha* stood out as a party-supporting journal, which conveyed a viewpoint completely opposite that of *The Square*.

Student Organizations

As Jeffrey Wasserstrom has pointed out, “the social world of the Chinese campus was highly organized and structured by a complex network of formal and informal group

¹²² Qian, *Jujue yiwang*, 103

¹²³ Ibid., 102

¹²⁴ Ibid., 104

¹²⁵ Ibid., 308-309

¹²⁶ Ibid., 107-108

affiliations that bound students to their classmates and provided a foundation for political mobilization.”¹²⁷ Different from colleges in the West, Chinese universities had formal student groups based on majors and years at school, and the students with the same major in the same class were usually well acquainted with each other since they took classes or had political studies together for several years. As a reflection of this fact, the work, *Collection of Rightist Students' Thought at Beijing University*, is organized in the terms of the students' majors and years in college.

During the student movement, the students who wrote posters did not know those outside their own departments. As Chen Fengxiao, who later became an organizer of a student group, remembered, he thought it would be better to found a coalition among the students and have a uniform voice for student opinion. He contacted some activists in each department, and at a secret meeting they came up with the idea of starting an organization. One of the participants was Tan Tianrong, who suggested calling the group “Hegel-Engels School,” but most students disagreed and later “Hundred Flowers Society” became the name.¹²⁸ It was probably the first student organization since 1949 not organized under Party auspices.¹²⁹ Besides the vague ideas of publishing a journal and keeping correspondence, they did not have any clear principles or program to follow.

Without leaders and goals, the loosely constructed organization was doomed to fail. However, the students at the time were optimistic. As Wang Shuyao reflected,

Among the students, there would not be a leader; what mattered the most were personality and individual views. There was no organization if there was no leader, and there was nothing to fear if there was no organization. This was a democratic movement, which should exclude leaders. There were continuously updated core figures, but not leaders. The democratic movement excluded individual authority.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Jeffrey N Wasserstrom, *Student Protests in Twentieth-Century China: The View from Shanghai* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1991), 127.

¹²⁸ Chen, in Ji, ed. *Meiyou qingjie de gushi*, 499-500.

¹²⁹ Qian, *Jujue yiwang*, 93.

¹³⁰ Wang, *Yanyuan fengyu zhu rensheng*, 57.

The Hundred Flowers Society did not function like an organization, and active students did not identify themselves as student leaders. If there was any type of mobilization among the students, it should be due to the Hundred Flowers policy and Mao's incessant encouragement. No one at that point expected the mobilization could turn out to be a "trap." After the Anti-Rightist Campaign replaced the Hundred Flowers Campaign, joining the Society became one of the rightist students' crimes, and the most outspoken students were deemed as student leaders, though they had self-consciously rejected such roles.

From Chen's memoirs, we learn that one of the activities of the Society was to reach out to other universities in Beijing and Tianjin. They were eager to share their experiences during the movement at Beijing University, but were not always welcomed to do so. On May 26, when Qinghua University was holding a collegiate sporting event, a few students from Beijing University went there to introduce the movement to the Qinghua campus. Unexpectedly, they were attacked and expelled from the school's grounds.¹³¹ The Society selected five student representatives, including Tan, to visit a few colleges in Tianjin, but each of them had different opinions in terms of what ideas to introduce. Some students also went to the Beijing Normal University to ask for a coalition in support of a student of strike.¹³² Most of these efforts were unsuccessful, which made Beijing University more isolated from other schools in the region.

Even within Beijing University, the students were not unified. They split into three major groups. As René Goldman observed,

There were students openly expressing their dissatisfaction and also some taking the Party stand (probably mainly Party and Youth League members and other activists). However, we can assume that the majority of the students stood somewhere in between, displaying a whole range of feelings from utter confusion and hesitation to semi-approval and unexpressed sympathy, an attitude which might be termed

¹³¹ Guo, *Lishi de xuanwo*, 205.

¹³² Zhu Zheng, *1957 nian de xiji: cong baijia zhengming dao liangjia zhengming*, 1st ed. (Zhengzhou: Henan renmin chubanshe; Xinhua shudian jingxiao, 1998), 299.

“wait and see.”¹³³

The movement was a stage for the students who spoke the loudest, either criticizing or justifying the Party, but in fact both of them were minorities. There were still a large number of students who remained silent for different reasons. Qian Liqun, one of the first scholars to study this particular student movement, was among the majority then, and he echoed Rene Goldman’s views. Some students had learned their lesson from previous campaigns, and decided not to criticize the Party no matter how Mao encouraged them to do so. Some students disagreed with the extreme views of some posters, but thought it was their right to exercise free speech, which should not be suppressed. Some other students had never thought of those political questions and had never been interested in politics, thus they had nothing to say. All these students were classified as in the “middle,” which seemed like the safest and least criticized stance. However, later in a campaign to “unmask hidden rightists,” even these “middle” students were denounced for being indifferent rather than actively supporting the Party.¹³⁴

Different Framings

When Sidney Tarrow discusses the relationship between frames and social identities, he argues that “natural, or inherited, identities are often the basis of aggregation in social movements.”¹³⁵ In 1957, the students at Beijing University consciously presented themselves as drawing on the May Fourth heritage. As the editors of *The Square* wrote,

Beijing University is the home to the May Fourth Movement, and the students at Beijing University are descendents of the May Fourth students. Our veins are filled with the blood from the May Fourth Movement. In the socialist May Fourth period, we need to learn from our May Fourth Movement predecessors, their spirits of courageous questioning and creativity. We are endeavoring to pursue real socialist democracy and culture!¹³⁶

¹³³ Goldman, “The Rectification Campaign at Peking University,” 150.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ *The Square* editorial committee, *Beijing Daxue youpai fandong yanlun huiji*, 249.

Despite the students' highly charged emotions, the movement in 1957 was not equivalent to the events in 1919. An immense gap existed between what the students desired to achieve and what the students actually influenced. Tarrow states that "much of the 'work' of framing is cognitive and evaluative – that is, it identifies grievances and translates them into broader claims against significant others."¹³⁷ What can be said of the movement in 1957 is that the students indeed claimed some broad frames when they imagined potential goals of the movement. As one article in *The Square* said,

This democratic movement is mainly based on the premise of supporting socialism, a bottom up political movement for enlarging socialist democracy. It is the enlightenment that the youths get rid of all restraints and achieve thought liberation. It is the prelude of the Eastern Renaissance.¹³⁸

The students certainly had grand visions of their movement, and if given a longer time and a wider space, the movement might reach out to more colleges and influence more students' minds. Nevertheless, within the short amount of time and a limited space on campus, the students' ideals were nothing more than illusions. Another crucial factor was that the students were facing a much more omnipotent "opponent:" the Party. It was not appropriate to name it an "opponent," because the students wished to justify themselves as helping the Party instead of opposing the Party. As Chen Fengxiao wrote in a poster,

We not only try to help the Party with the Rectification Campaign, but beyond that, we need to further enlarge the scope of democracy. These two are intrinsically inseparable. ... We are making group activities, but what we are making are democratic groups, not anti-Party groups. We are attacking the Party leaders in our school, because their bureaucratism is too severe. If this kind of bureaucratic atmosphere continues, it is hard to say whether they still represent the Party. Attacking bad Party members is not equal to attacking the Party.¹³⁹

¹³⁷ Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action, and Politics*, Cambridge studies in comparative politics (Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 111.

¹³⁸ *The Square* editorial committee, *Beijing Daxue youpai fandong yanlun huiji*, 254.

¹³⁹ Chen, in *Beijing Daxue youpai fandong yanlun huiji*, 8.

The students sought to help the Party, or more directly, college Party officials, with sympathetic criticism, but unfortunately the Party leadership misunderstood the students. At the same time, the students did not accurately sense the shifting focus from liberalization to repression, but imagined that the Party was their ally. Originally, Mao sought, in part, to rectify lower-level cadre behaviors through this campaign, which presumably included university-based cadres. Later when the criticism proved too widespread and difficult to channel, the Party leadership shifted the focus and reassessed the campaign. All these shifts took place through discussions among higher-level Party officials, and the public, including the students, had no inkling of the shift until the Anti-Rightist Campaign approached all of a sudden.

When the Hundred Flowers Society was founded, a student said, “This movement is in the interest of the Party, and the Central Committee sympathizes with us.”¹⁴⁰ Such wishful thinking was obvious in Tan’s “poisonous weeds” posters as well, as he assumed, “We are responsible to support the top-down Rectification Campaign. It seems like our dear comrade Mao is in a difficult situation, and our responsibility is to lead the bottom-up democratic movement to the least destructive path.”¹⁴¹ These student activists frequently used the phrase “bottom-up democratic movement,” and they shared the consensus that it was the best way to respond to the top-down Rectification Campaign.

While the students were busy with posters and speeches, both the Party Central Committee and university officials deliberately kept quiet. As Mao ordered in late May, “When the rightists attack, our policy is, listening but not speaking. ... Do not inform Youth League members, Party members or Party secretaries. Let them fight and make up their own minds.”¹⁴² Based on this instruction, many people concluded that Mao set up an “open trap”

¹⁴⁰ Lu Yang, in *Beijing Daxue youpai fandong yanlun huiji*, 10.

¹⁴¹ Tan, in *Beijing Daxue youpai fandong yanlun huiji*, 28.

¹⁴² Guo, *Lishi de xuanwo*, 205.

before the Anti-Rightist Campaign started. Many students were curious about the university officials' attitude toward their movement, but officials remained silent.

Not until June 8, 1957, did the Party signal a change in course, with a short editorial in *People's Daily* entitled "What Is This For?" which warned people that class struggles still existed during the campaign, and there were "rightists" who sought to overthrow the Party.¹⁴³ From then on, the Hundred Flowers Campaign moved onto the second stage, known as the Anti-Rightist Campaign.¹⁴⁴ The *People's Daily* finally reported on the movement at Beijing University, but not in the tone that the students anticipated. On June 21, an article directly criticized the Hundred Flowers Society as a reactionary clique, and their journal *The Square* as a reactionary publication.¹⁴⁵ It enraged the students, who could not fathom such attacks and felt they had been deceived. Based on the official judgment, Beijing University started its own Anti-Rightist Campaign.¹⁴⁶

The language in the forward of the brochure *Look! What Kind of Talk Is This?* reveals how Party and university officials framed the students' actions:

We also find that the rightists, in the guise of helping the Party in this rectification, have circulated certain destructive statements hostile to socialism and the Party. They have attempted to mislead the masses onto an evil and criminal road and have utilized the criticism campaign [to attempt] to realize their objectives of overthrowing the People's Democratic Dictatorship and denying Party leadership.¹⁴⁷

Most student activists were charged with writing reactionary posters, organizing a reactionary group – the Hundred Flowers Society, and publishing a reactionary journal – *The Square*. Usually "rightist" students underwent criticism sessions among the students in the same department, and only the most famous "rightist" students were granted the "privilege"

¹⁴³ People's Daily editorial, "What Is This For?" http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2004-12/31/content_2401225.htm.

¹⁴⁴ Goldman, "The Rectification Campaign at Peking University," 151.

¹⁴⁵ Guo, *Lishi de xuanwo*, 220.

¹⁴⁶ Goldman, "The Rectification Campaign at Peking University," 151.

¹⁴⁷ Doolin, *Communist China - The Politics of Student Opposition*, 21.

to be condemned at campus-wide meetings. The students were not completely unacquainted with the Party's tactics and its duplicitous nature. As one poster said,

Some people always clamor for the development of the May Fourth spirit, but when the youths actually hold up their torches, these people become scared and shout, "Why not follow the way of 'gentle breeze and fine drizzle?'" They quickly bring forth accusations of going against the Party and being counterrevolutionary!¹⁴⁸

It was not the first time that the Party applied incriminating charges against the intellectuals. The characteristic that made the case in 1957 peculiar was that the intellectuals only expressed their criticism after constant invitations from Mao. Therefore, many students thought speaking out was to follow Mao's instruction, without realizing that the authorities possessed the power to welcome as well as to reject criticism.

Political Opportunities and Constraints

As Tarrow argues, "Contention is more closely related to opportunities for – and limited by constraints upon – collective action than by the persistent social or economic factors that people experience."¹⁴⁹ This proposition fits well with the movement of 1957, which was both mobilized and soon suppressed by the authorities. Even though the students had various dissatisfactions with the Party, which arose from their previous experiences, they would not dare express them explicitly until given the opportunity. The key political opportunity in this movement came from Mao's launching the Hundred Flowers Campaign. Likewise, the constraint arose from Mao's decision to transform the focus of the campaign from Party cadres to their critics.

In contrast to other authoritarian regimes that discourage popular politics, China in the Mao period witnessed numerous political movements that encouraged the participation of the masses. Mao seemed to be particularly fond of mobilizing the people to struggle against each

¹⁴⁸ Qian Ruping, in *Beijing Daxue youpai fandong yanlun huiji*, 188; translation from Doolin, *Communist China - The Politics of Student Opposition*, 47.

¹⁴⁹ Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, 71.

other, and he believed that only after total chaos could there come order.¹⁵⁰ Most times the movements were under the Party's domination, but in 1957, the Hundred Flowers policy backfired. The intellectuals' grievance and bitterness terrified Mao, who was convinced that things got out of hand and a "Hungarian-style uprising" could occur.¹⁵¹ The policy remained ambiguous in several ways. When Mao called for all points of views, he did not tolerate challenges to socialism or to Party leadership. When he used terms like "fragrant flowers" or "poisonous weeds," he left space for interpretation to the people, but eventually, only his version of interpretation was correct.

More elusively, Mao's attitude toward the movement had been reshaped by the developments of the movement. Originally he was confident that criticism would not damage the Party's reputation, and there was no chance for a "Hungarian incident" in China. However, after May 14, terms like "inclined-rightist" and "anti-Communist" appeared in documents from the Central Party Committee. One such document ordered that,

Our local newspapers should continue to cover speeches from people outside the Party, especially speeches from inclined-rightists and anti-Communists. We must report in its original form without trimming, so as to let the masses know their faces. It is good for educating the masses and people in the middle.¹⁵²

This was a signal that Mao's focus was shifting from the liberalization to repression. Superficially, newspapers were still allowed to publish critiques, but it was no longer for the sake of helping the Party, but instead for exposing "poisonous weeds." On the next day, Mao wrote another article, "Things Are Changing," circulated among top leaders yet not available to the public until 1977. For the first time in the Hundred Flowers period, Mao raised the idea of "rightist" activities in the movement.

Rightists make up one, three, or five to ten percent, depending on the situation. Recently, in democratic parties and higher institutions, the

¹⁵⁰ A famous saying by Mao during the Cultural Revolution was "Tianxia daluan, cai neng Tianxia dazhi" 天下大乱，才能天下大治 (Only when there is great disorder in the world can the world be well ordered).

¹⁵¹ Qian, *Jujue yiwang*, 67.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 61.

rightists displayed the most determination and rampancy. ... Now the attack from the rightists has not reached its peak yet ... we still need to let them be rampant for a while, to reach their pinnacle. The more rampant they are, the more favorable to us.¹⁵³

From these words, one could draw the conclusion that Mao was setting up a trap, and “waiting for the snake to come out of the cave.” Letting the “rightists” criticize did not mean to sincerely hear what they said and correct them when they went wrong, but rather to reveal how “poisonous” these people were. At this point, Mao still differentiated between “rightists” and genuine criticism. It might seem contradictory, but Mao wrote,

Most people’s criticisms are reasonable, or basically reasonable, including those perceptive criticisms that are not published in the newspaper, such as the one from Professor Fu Ying at Beijing University. Their purpose of criticizing is hoping to improve the mutual relationship [between intellectuals and the Party]. Their criticisms are sympathetic. But criticisms from the rightists are ill willed, because they have hostility.¹⁵⁴

Mao acknowledged that many critics had good intentions, but how to classify these criticisms as sympathetic or ill-willed was murky. However, Mao was confident about one thing: “rightists” would not successfully influence the majority of the students to join with them. As he argued,

You know many college students are descendents of landlords, rich peasants and bourgeois, who might be attracted to the rightists. A part of those students with ideas that incline to the right might [follow the rightists], but to attract the majority of the students, that is a fantasy.¹⁵⁵

Mao did not doubt that the students from “wrong” family background would have “wrong” thoughts. However, what happened as the student movement began at Beijing University after he wrote the article was completely unexpected. They spontaneously started criticizing bureaucratism and challenging Party leadership, even without influence from the democratic parties’ politicians or other “rightists.” Mao was enraged and disillusioned by the intellectuals, including the students. In an address to the Communist Youth League on May

¹⁵³ Mao Zedong, “Things are changing,” http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2004-12/31/content_2401244.htm.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

25, he warned against the wrong direction the campaign was taking: “Any speech or action which deviates from socialism is entirely wrong.”¹⁵⁶ Later in the Anti-Rightist Campaign, he calculated the quota of “rightists” at Beijing University,

Beijing University has more than 7,000 people, but the rightists are only one, or two, or three percent among all. What does it mean by one, or two, or three percent? It means those determined backbones that always make trouble and seek to turn things upside down. These are only around fifty people, less than one percent. The other one or two percent of people are applauding and supporting them.¹⁵⁷

As it turned out, the number of students who were criticized as “rightists” at Beijing University reached 800, nearly ten percent of all students, many more than Mao imagined.¹⁵⁸ Obviously Mao was not in charge of those petty details as to which student should be labeled as “rightist,” that was the responsibility of the university officials. During the student movement, it was their hesitance and ambivalence that provided opportunities for the students. Like the students, university officials at first attempted to respond to Mao’s initial calls for blooming and contending, and tolerated students’ speeches and posters.

The students initiated the movement by writing big character posters without negotiating with university officials, thus they were not guaranteed support from the beginning. This also left the university officials room to maneuver as the political conditions changed. On the night of May 19, at the campus-wide Youth League members’ meeting, the college Party deputy secretary said, “Big character posters are not the best way. We neither support them nor are against them.”¹⁵⁹ This cautious statement annoyed the students, who wished to hear a definite answer. Then the following night, the secretary corrected the previous night’s statement, claiming that “big character posters are an effective way to raise suggestions, and the college Party committee fully supports them.”¹⁶⁰ After that, many

¹⁵⁶ Meisner, *Mao's China and After*, 198.

¹⁵⁷ Zhu, *1957 nian de xi ji*, 300.

¹⁵⁸ Wang Shuyao, *Yanyuan fengyu zhu rensheng*, 171.

¹⁵⁹ Guo, *Lishi de xuanwo*, 183.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 177-178.

students devoted their time to writing posters even in class. After Lin's speech of on May 23rd, even though the school did not announce a suspension of classes, nobody went to class, and finals had to be rescheduled.¹⁶¹

At the same time, the university Party committee remained silent. Every day some students ran to the committee office, asking for their opinions on certain issues the posters brought up. At a secret meeting with Party leaders, the secretary explained, "Based on instructions from above, the Party committee will not take a stance. We want to see how chaotic the world will be under the Communist Party's control. Communist members and Youth League members, you need to swim in the sea and set the direction yourselves."¹⁶² The university officials were temporizing, waiting to see which way the wind blew, so that they could move in either direction.

The majority of the students were left in a blind state, not realizing the real intention of either the university officials or the Party. They still believed that both Mao and the university officials agreed with their movement, and their actions were nothing but helping with the Party's Rectification Campaign. Many students expressed on their posters that the Campaign was not an "opportunity" to speak out, but rather that a democratic authority should offer a regular channel for expressing public opinions. As one poster said, "I do not consider the Rectification Campaign as a bestowal from above. Just the opposite, I think this is a means all political parties with a bit of common sense would employ. The ruling regime needs to gratify people with democracy and freedom."¹⁶³ The idealism reflected in these words would eventually collide with the harsh reality of Party control.

A Tragic Ending

At Beijing University, the Anti-Rightist Campaign lasted from the summer of 1957

¹⁶¹ Guo, *Lishi de xuanwo*, 204.

¹⁶² Ibid., 205.

¹⁶³ Yan Zhongqiang, "Words from a 'Crazy person'," in *Beijing Daxue youpai fandong yanlun huiji*, 55.

until January 1958. As Rene Goldman writes, “the students did not go home as usual during holidays, but instead took part in endless rounds of ‘struggle meetings’ designed to get the ‘rightists’ to confess their ‘crimes’.”¹⁶⁴ Besides endless meetings, more political studies were introduced into the curriculum in the fall of 1957, such as a course on “Socialist Ideological Education” scheduled for eight hours a week.¹⁶⁵

As for those labeled “rightists,” some of the most active ones, about twenty to thirty students and teachers, were tried and imprisoned, and around a hundred were sent to “reform through labor,” while others stayed at school under supervision.¹⁶⁶ The different treatment was according to Mao’s instructions. As he wrote,

Expelling leaders of strikes and student strikes, this is a bourgeois method; in general [they] shouldn’t be expelled. ... Why should we help the incorrect ones? They should be kept as “instructors.” Because [they] have committed errors, [say] a few individuals have been identified as spies, should they be kicked out of school? I think let [them] study, just so long as they’re not active criminals.¹⁶⁷

Mao’s instructions sounded benevolent, but he was not the one to carry them out. All “rightists” from Beijing University were isolated once they were labeled, and many suffered in prisons or labor camps, including five who were executed.¹⁶⁸ The book *Beijing University Chronicles (1898 - 1997)*, records the number of “rightists” at the school. As of January 31, 1958, Beijing University had 589 students and 110 faculty and staff, altogether 699 people classified as “rightists.”¹⁶⁹ The section on 1982 says that 716 rightists were criticized at Beijing University during the Anti-Rightist Campaign.¹⁷⁰ According to the *People’s Daily* in an article published after the end of the Cultural Revolution, Beijing University had classified 715 “rightists,” and there were 842 “uncapped rightists” who received all kinds of punishment. At that time, the total number of students at Beijing University was 8,983, and

¹⁶⁴ Goldman, “The Rectification Campaign at Peking University,” 153.

¹⁶⁵ Goldman, “Peking University Today,” 106.

¹⁶⁶ Goldman, “The Rectification Campaign at Peking University,” 153.

¹⁶⁷ MacFarquhar, ed. *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao*, 176.

¹⁶⁸ Wang Shuyao, *Yanyuan fengyu zhu rensheng*, 172.

¹⁶⁹ Wang Xuezheng, *Beijing daxue jishi (1898-1997)*, 1st ed. (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1998), 527.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 890.

faculty and staff amounted to 1,399. That means seven percent of all the school's population were denounced as "rightists."¹⁷¹

At the time when Mao came up with the idea that "rightists" were using the campaign to attack the Party and felt "things are changing" around May 15, Beijing University students had not started their own movement yet. Except for a few top Party leaders who learned of Mao's shifted focus, most ordinary people were not aware of the shift. Besides that, Mao also did not expect to include students in the Hundred Flowers Campaign. So the tragic part was, without knowing Mao's intention, the students voluntarily exposed themselves as targets of the campaign against "rightists."

It seems inevitable that the student movement was doomed to failure in 1957. Under the Communist regime, even the democratic parties' politicians had succumbed and accepted the fact of being "rightists," not to mention the students. There was a tremendous power imbalance between the Party and the students, and in such an illiberal state, any individual or group that tried to challenge the authorities would risk their lives doing so. The tragedy in 1957 was that no students or other intellectuals who raised criticism were thinking to overthrow the Party; rather they were expressing their genuine concerns about the country, with the permission of the Party. As a graduate student in the 1950s later vividly described, "Nothing hurts more than to mean well and get kicked in the teeth. ... The Communist party could have had our loyalty for free, and they just wasted it. They could have put our brains to good use, but just threw them away."¹⁷² The sense of being cheated and a sense of uselessness spread among the intellectuals, who had no ways of contributing their wisdom to the country they loved.

¹⁷¹ Wang Youqin, in *Fanyou yanjiu wenji* (Research on the Anti-rightist campaign), 1st ed. (Washington D.C.: The Laogai Research Foundation; China Information Center, 2008), 126-127.

¹⁷² E. Perry Link, *Evening Chats in Beijing* = [Pei-Ching Yeh Hua]: *Probing China's Predicament*, 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 1992), 142-143.

Mao interpreted those criticisms as challenges to the power of the Party, but he overestimated the potential resistance. The active students were loosely organized with no clear goals to achieve and no leaders to follow. The Hundred Flowers Society existed in name, but was not politically strong. Many students had ambivalent opinions during the movement, as they were neither willing to speak out, nor willing to suppress others' right to criticize. The student efforts were not strong enough to bring their collective actions onto the level of contentious politics.

Ultimately, the Hundred Flowers Campaign did not, and was not allowed to spread from the intellectuals to the masses. The liberal policy mainly involved the intellectuals and students, without extending to the workers or peasants.¹⁷³ Though some students were conscious of the potential problems of Party leadership and socialism in China, the other groups might not share the same feelings, as revealed by the conflict between some students and printers for publishing the student journal. Without support from all walks of life, the movement did not last long and was easily suppressed.

¹⁷³ Meisner, *Mao's China and After*, 187.

Chapter 3: Reflections on the Past

After the death of Mao and the end of the Cultural Revolution, if there was any consensus among Party leaders and ordinary people, it was that such human disasters like the Cultural Revolution could not take place ever again. Everyone, including victims and victimizers during previous political movements, was searching for ways to come to terms with the unbearable past. The Party composed a document evaluating Mao and his political campaigns after 1949, which briefly mentioned the Hundred Flowers and the Anti-Rightist Movement. It caused controversy among “rightists,” because it only recognized the problem of the Anti-Rightist Movement as excesses in implementation, but maintained its overall correctness, despite the fact that most “rightists” were “rectified” after 1978. When top officials started reforming the Party and the country under Deng Xiaoping’s leadership, many problems they identified were identical to the ones the students discussed in 1957. In other words, the reformers, who were originally critics of the students, implicitly endorsed the students’ earlier criticisms and carried them out through the reforms. In memoirs written by the students of the time, most avoid touching on the movement in 1957, considering its sensitivity, while a few express their inner conflicts and regrets.

Official Reevaluation of the Anti-Rightist Campaign and its Controversies

History turned to a new chapter after the death of Mao, especially after the power transition to Deng Xiaoping, who initiated wide-ranging economic reforms, but very limited political ones. He reoriented the political focus from class struggle among Party leaders and ordinary people to bringing wealth into the country and opening China to the world. Despite that, an inescapable challenge he had to tackle was the evaluation of Mao and his catastrophic political movements, including the Anti-Rightist Movement.

In a speech titled “Current Situation and Task” made on January 16, 1980, Deng spoke about the Anti-Rightist Movement:

The problem was that along with the development of the movement, it was extended to a wider scope and the scope of the attack was too large. Most people were indeed handled inappropriately. They were treated unfairly for many years, and thus were not able to exercise their talents and wisdom for the people. This is not only their own personal loss, but also the loss of the whole country. Therefore, taking off the “caps” of all the “rightists,” correcting the judgment made by the majority, and distributing them appropriate jobs are all very necessary and important political measures. However, we cannot jump to the conclusion that there was no anti-socialist ideological trend in 1957, or such trend should not be attacked. In all, the Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1957 itself was not wrong, but the problem was the amplification of it.¹⁷⁴

Deng fully sympathized with those innocent “rightists,” recognized their suffering and promised to correct the mistakes of the movement. Yet he, nevertheless, insisted on the existence of the anti-socialist trend and the correctness of the initial campaign. In other words, there had been fewer “rightists” and they should have been criticized, but the blows should not have been as extensive or harsh. Deng’s judgments may have reflected the fact that as Party General Secretary in 1957, he had been in charge of the Anti-Rightist Campaign.

On June 27, 1981, the significant government document, entitled “Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party since the Founding of the People’s Republic of China,” echoed Deng’s view. Four thousand party leaders and theoreticians drafted the document over the course of fifteen months, and Deng repeatedly revised it with detailed “suggestions.”¹⁷⁵ The document reviewed and evaluated Mao’s historical role in the revolution and in the People’s Republic of China, which recognized his contributions as well as mistakes, but avoided total denunciation as Khrushchev did to Stalin. In regard to 1957, the document praised the Hundred Flowers policy and credited it with remarkable influences:

These measures spelled out the correct policy regarding intellectuals and their work in education, science and culture and thus brought about a significant advance in these fields. Owing to the Party’s correct policies, a fine quality of

¹⁷⁴ Ye, *Fanyoupai shimo*, 627.

¹⁷⁵ Meisner, *Mao's China and After*, 463.

work and the consequential high prestige it granted among the people, the vast numbers of cadres, masses, youth and intellectuals earnestly studied Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought and participated enthusiastically in revolutionary and constructive activities under the leadership of the Party, so that a healthy and virile revolutionary morality prevailed throughout the country.¹⁷⁶

Besides lauding accomplishments since 1949, the document admitted to “serious faults and errors,” including in the Anti-Rightist Campaign that followed the Hundred Flowers:

In the rectification campaign a handful of bourgeois Rightists seized the opportunity to advocate what they called “speaking out and airing views in a big way” and mounted a wild attack against the Party and the nascent socialist system in an attempt to replace the leadership of the Communist Party. It was therefore entirely correct and necessary to launch a resolute counter-attack. But the scope of this struggle was made far too broad and a number of intellectuals, patriots and Party cadres were unjustifiably labeled “Rightists,” with unfortunate consequences.¹⁷⁷

The document reiterated what Deng previously mentioned in his speech, that the Anti-Rightist Campaign was entirely correct and necessary, but the only mistake was its broad scope and the numbers unjustifiably labeled “rightists.” The remaining ambiguous questions were how broad should be counted as broad and how many people exactly were mislabeled.

Chen Fengxiao, a student “rightist” at Beijing University in 1957, disagreed with the official decision. He pointed out that it was not rightists who were “speaking out and airing views in a big way,” but Mao himself.¹⁷⁸ When Mao summoned the masses to criticize the Party, people were afraid to participate initially. Only after Mao repeatedly stressed that people should be more courageous, did people become more critical, but then Mao reversed this view by saying he set the trap to draw the snake out of its hole. Another point Chen discovered was that Deng actually took charge of the campaign in 1957, thus he could not

¹⁷⁶ “Resolution on certain questions in the history of our party since the founding of the People’s Republic of China,” <http://www.marxists.org/subject/china/documents/cpc/history/01.htm>.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Chen Fengxiao, *Meng duan Weiming hu*, vol. 12, Black Series (Washington D.C., U.S.: Laogai Research Foundation, 2005), 311.

completely condemn it. If he did, to a certain extent he would discredit himself by admitting his mistake.¹⁷⁹

Ironically, Deng was not the first one asserting that the Anti-Rightist Campaign was too large in scope, but Lin Xiling already figured out that problem as early as 1957. In a letter Lin wrote to Deng in June 1980, she claimed that she brought up the critique “when the campaign was in full swing.” As she wrote:

It has been borne out by reality that my contention before the party in 1957 that “the Anti-Rightist Campaign has overreached itself” has proved to be true and by no means a mistaken notion nor crime in the nature being of a “rightist” or “counter-revolutionary.” The unfortunate thing was its being presented prematurely.¹⁸⁰

Similar to the fate of many other suggestions raised by “rightists” in 1957, it turned out to be correct decades later, even though those “rightists” underwent innumerable tragedies for decades because their opinions were considered to be counter-revolutionary. While history saw some suggestions go from wrong to right, Lin reflected on her initial thoughts but came to a stronger conclusion:

The campaign conducted in 1957 not only overreached itself, but had been wrong and inappropriate all along. ... If we grant the existence of that 1 percent of “rightists,” was there enough justification to launch an Anti-Rightist Campaign of such proportion as to engulf directly up to one million culprits and implicate indirectly a countless number of innocents? ... I hold it both deceiving and self-deceptive to ornament the Anti-Rightist Campaign with the festoons of “appropriateness” and “necessity.”¹⁸¹

The statement that most innocent “rightists” were rectified also indicates that there still remain a few “rightists” who are not rectified, including some of the most celebrated democratic party leaders, and student leaders like Lin. As she understood the intentions of the Party,

In order to make the festoons of “appropriateness” and “necessity” stick for political reasons, there must be a certain number of “rightists” left uncorrected and unredressed to serve as a “showcase” or a “sample”

¹⁷⁹ Chen, *Meng duan Weiming hu*, 312.

¹⁸⁰ Lin Xiling, “Letter to Comrade Deng Xiaoping,” *Chinese Law & Government* 17, no. 4 (1, 1984): 28.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 28, 40, 41.

(unfortunately, I have been so selected). ... I wonder if there is also a definite proportion or quota in the correction of “rightists,” too, and if a definite number of “rightists” must be left uncorrected.¹⁸²

Lin was viewed as the epitome of a student “rightist,” who might be even more well known than the “May 19th Movement” at Beijing University itself. She felt her fame as a target rightist “was blown up out of all proportion by the propaganda machine, which made me a celebrity through repeated repudiations.”¹⁸³ Implicated even indirectly in her case, 170 people were labeled “rightists” in Beijing.¹⁸⁴

At an academic conference in memory of the fiftieth anniversary of the Anti-Rightist Campaign in 2007, Lin showed up and gave enthusiastic speeches. She still vividly remembered the day when she visited Beijing University,

I was extremely busy, but out of curiosity as a journalist, an author and a law worker, I went to Beijing University [to see their posters]. ... That night, there was a debate between the students majoring in physics and in law about whether Hu Feng was an anti-revolutionary. I was particularly sensitive about that topic. Some law students argued that Hu was an anti-revolutionary. The physics students did not understand law, and asked me a favor to speak for them. I was very hesitant, and said I was there to listen, not to speak. But without my consent host announced ‘welcome Lin Xiling, a law student at People’s University and a young author, to speak.’ I was utterly unprepared, and was pushed onto the stage. Half a century later, I still cannot get off the stage.¹⁸⁵

Being a famous “rightist” was not what she wanted, as we can see from her very first speech. She did not consider herself anti-Party, anti-socialist and a “rightist,” but instead claimed herself to be a mere leftist.¹⁸⁶ Lin presented her consistently critical personality, which had not been erased after all these years. She ventured to speak what she thought, without contemplating the consequences for herself. In her later years, she offered perspicacious critiques wherever she went around the world, especially in Taiwan and

¹⁸² Lin Xiling, “Letter to Comrade Deng Xiaoping,” 42, 51.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 51.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 54.

¹⁸⁵ Lin Xiling, in *Fanyou yanjiu wenji*, 46.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 47.

France. In September 2009, she passed away in Paris, and her “rightist” identity was still unrectified.

Criticizers Acknowledge the Criticisms

What the students discussed in 1957 and what the Party leaders concluded based on historical lessons might be different, but in some major areas, they were similar and compatible. Examples include the idea that some of the problems that occurred while developing socialism had to do with the system of implementing it; the insistence on carrying out democratic reforms of the system, and fighting against over-centralized power, privileges, and unequal relationships between leaders and ordinary people; and the suggestion to extend socialist democracy and strengthen the socialist legal system.

After Deng came to power in 1978, one of his urgent tasks was to learn the lessons from the catastrophes in Mao’s period, especially the Cultural Revolution, in order to bring the country back on track economically and politically, instead of lingering “on the verge of breaking down.” In his August 18, 1980 speech “On the Reform of the System of Party and State Leadership,” Deng summarized the problems that plagued the current system, including “bureaucracy, over-concentration of power, patriarchal methods, life tenure in leading posts and privileges of various kinds.”¹⁸⁷ Deng mentioned China’s feudal autocratic tradition and lack of democratic legality,¹⁸⁸ which almost sounded like Lin Xiling in 1957, when she delivered spontaneous speeches at Beijing University and People’s University. Deng also touched upon the personal privileges of Party cadres who regarded “themselves as masters rather than servants of the people.”¹⁸⁹ The same topic was popularly debated and posted in 1957, such as Qian Ruping’s poster on the “new class.”

¹⁸⁷ Deng Xiaoping, “On the Reform of the System of Party and State Leadership,” <http://web.peopledaily.com.cn/english/dengxp/vol2/text/b1460.html>.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

In Deng's speech, he traced the problems of the Party back to the system, in part to problems of leadership and organization, as he said:

It is true that the errors we made in the past were partly attributable to the way of thinking and style of work of some leaders. But they were even more attributable to the problems in our organizational and working systems. ... I do not mean that the individuals concerned should not bear their share of responsibility, but rather that the problems in the leadership and organizational systems are more fundamental, widespread and long-lasting, and that they have a greater effect on the overall interests of our country.¹⁹⁰

Deng's views resonate with student critiques in 1957 when they claimed that the origin of the bureaucratism, sectarianism and subjectivism was the system, which should be strengthened by democracy and the legal system. That same suggestion appeared twenty years earlier than what Deng had said in 1980.

In terms of over-concentrated power, he reflected that:

Over-concentration of power is liable to give rise to arbitrary rule by individuals at the expense of collective leadership, and it is an important cause of bureaucracy under the present circumstances. ... Moreover, the power of the Party committees themselves is often in the hands of a few secretaries, especially the first secretaries, who direct and decide everything. Thus "centralized Party leadership" often turns into leadership by individuals. ... Over-concentration of power is becoming more and more incompatible with the development of our socialist cause. The long-standing failure to understand this adequately was one important cause of the "Cultural Revolution," and we paid a heavy price for it. There should be no further delay in finding a solution to this problem.¹⁹¹

Over-concentration of power pointed to Mao's personality cult, though Deng did not and would not express the point explicitly. Deng considered it to be one of the contributing factors of the Cultural Revolution, but over-concentrated power existed long before that catastrophe. Wang Shuyao, a Beijing University student in 1957 wrote a poster warning people of the danger of over-concentrated power:

At any time, over-concentrated power, no matter whether in an individual, or in a self-claimed always glorifying and correct and great clique, is extremely dangerous. It is a hundred times more dangerous when the masses are stupefied and fooled! Because if the clique makes severe mistakes or changes

¹⁹⁰ Deng, "On the Reform of the System of Party and State Leadership,"

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

its ideological nature, there is no other strength powerful enough to conquer it!¹⁹²

Because of this poster, Wang was no longer a good student leader, but a “counter-revolutionary rightist.” Now reviewing what he wrote after more than fifty years, he felt ashamed by his naïve writing, but also sad because history unfortunately followed what he said.¹⁹³ He noticed the similarities yet differences between him and Deng:

Only after China had been cleansed by fire and blood, did Deng express the view that the power cannot be concentrated in one person, because it is dangerous in that way. But I, twenty years earlier, which was 1957, said: over concentration of power is dangerous. I said it twenty years early, and I was a rightist; Deng said it twenty years later, and Deng was a national leader.¹⁹⁴

The students were perceptive in foreseeing the problems of the Party and state. However, many people in 1957 did not realize the importance of the problems some students discussed, because those problems had yet to become obvious. At that time, many people blindly followed whatever the Party instructed. Thus, the active students had to sacrifice for their foresight, which was treated as “anti-Party and anti-socialist” thoughts in 1957, and they were severely punished. Then in the 1980s, these ideas became the guidelines of Chinese reform, and concepts like democracy and rule of law were widely accepted. No one anticipated that the critics of those “rightists” could eventually accept their thoughts, and to some extent even actualize their thoughts.¹⁹⁵ Officially, there was no acknowledgement of connections between the student movement in 1957 and the top-down liberalization in the 1980s, and most people would not even realize what was practiced in the reform had been raised as early as 1957. Certainly, there are challenges to carrying out these concepts, but at least nobody will denounce them as “counter-revolutionary” today.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹² Wang Shuyao, “Lessons from Stalin’s Mistakes,” in *Beijing Daxue youpai fandong yanlun huiji*, 67.

¹⁹³ Wang, *Yanyuan fengyu zhu rensheng*, 81.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁹⁵ Qian, *Jijue yiwang*, 8.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

Despite the similarities, the students and Deng brought up the problems in completely different circumstances, and thus had varied scales of influences. First, the students noticed the advent of personality cult and Party privileges eight years after the founding of People's Republic, when the problems were by no means severe, while Deng realized the severity of these problems after they had reached an extreme in the Cultural Revolution. If the students and other intellectuals' critics had been heard in 1957, the following disasters might have been avoided. Second, the students had no political interests or plans to challenge the authorities, because they were speaking their minds without considering potential consequences, while Deng confronted the urgency to evaluate Mao's legacies and reform the regime, so as to maintain the legitimacy of Party leadership. Third, due to tight political constraints, the student grassroots movement had limited influence beyond the campus or outside Beijing, while Deng's reform was carried out around the country and has transformed China.

Coming to Terms with the Past

A school's anniversary is a key moment for alumni to reunite and reminisce about their college years. The centennial of Beijing University fell in 1998. During all the festivities and ceremonies no mention was made of the student movement in 1957. It seemed as if nothing had happened at the university in 1957, no nationally influential big poster movement, no hundreds of incorrectly labeled "rightists," no people sent to "reeducation through labor" or sentenced because of being "rightists," and no people who died as a result. Nothing had happened, no pursuit of democracy or the truth, or sacrifice for such a pursuit. It was a blank space.¹⁹⁷ As one participant remembered, on the day of the centennial, "we talked about those good old days, but it seemed all limited to before the Anti-Rightist Campaign. It made sense

¹⁹⁷ Wang, *Yanyuan fengyu zhu rensheng*, 22-23.

though, because it's hard to talk about such things afterward.”¹⁹⁸ It is a period of embarrassing and heartbreaking history, which nobody is willing to dig into it.

Then what do Beijing University students think of that movement in 1957 today? A partial answer to that question can be found in a collection of essays written by a group of alumni of the class of 1955 at their fortieth year anniversary. They all majored in Chinese language and literature at school. Most of the contributions were not “rightists,” but did participate in the Anti-Rightist Campaign. Understandably, many of them did not mention or just briefly touched upon the student movement in 1957, and the following campaigns, as a bitter episode among other enjoyable moments. Despite that, some of the accounts are worth comment.

A common feeling shared among several students is a sense of conflict and dilemma. As one put it,

On the one hand, we answered the call of the Party. With the revolutionary excitement, we passionately and angrily criticized the “rightists” and “bourgeois academic authorities.” With the “revolutionary storm,” we gained competence through struggle. On the other hand, affected by the ultra-left trend formed in and outside of the Party, and our ignorance, sometimes we thought we were righteous, but in fact we were emotionally biased and unintentionally hurt our classmates and teachers.¹⁹⁹

At that time, everyone, including the “rightists,” believed in the Party and was actively involved in whatever the Party required. There were simply no other choices. Only in hindsight did the participants realize that they were puppets directed by the Party and that they hurt their peers inadvertently. People today no longer share the same “class struggle” mentality as decades ago, and it now seems incredible that they truly believed the ideology at that time. The time and disillusion of the Party enable people to reconceive themselves as outsiders.

¹⁹⁸ Qian, *Jujue yiwang*, 1.

¹⁹⁹ Xie Mian, ed, *Kaihua huo bu kaihua de niandai: Beijing daxue zhongwen xi 55 ji jishi*, 1st ed. (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2001), 61-62.

Some people might not have realized their roles as victimizers until afterward, but some others were conscious about their inner conflicts at the time. As Xie Mian, another editor of *Hong Lou*, reflected on a similar dilemma as Lin Zhao,

I responded to the call of the Party, and against my will to criticize those “rightists” who were classmates and friends I privately admired them for their talent, wisdom and courage to fight. At the same time, what I criticized was exactly what I felt deeply in my soul. With such inner depression and extreme conflict, I was unwillingly but irresistibly pushed into that big struggling swirl. Due to my own need for self-protection, or in order to present my “determination,” I “consciously,” or more exactly, against my will, did what I was supposed to do and could do.²⁰⁰

There were a number of students who held different views from those the Party indoctrinated, but were afraid to speak publicly for fear of the consequences. For the sake of self-protection, they stood in the same stance as others who criticized “rightists,” even though they had mental reservations. No matter in which situation, critics acted as victimizers to those “rightists,” though they themselves were victims of the political movement as well. However, it is up to these critics to take responsibility for hurting their peers, instead of attributing it to politics. As one former student wrote of the past,

During that time, our generation had done wrong things, stupid things, silly things and hurtful things, but we cannot cover them up and avoid talking about them by one excuse: these were all caused by the time. Though, in essence, I was the same as many other students, and did not intend to hurt our brothers and sisters, and I sincerely believed whatever the Party instructed us to do. Nevertheless, I was more active than others, and those simple, ignorant, repetitive and violent criticisms did not hurt others on purpose, but they pushed the wave of political struggle that hurt other students. Such behavior was unforgivable for my morality and conscience. Now we are stepping into our senior years, and looking back to those youthful years, I bear the inescapable responsibility for doing things wrong for that generation.²⁰¹

It is high time today to hear regrets and apologies from victimizers of those political movements decades ago, and most notably, the Red Guards who practiced violence in the Cultural Revolution. Everyone who lived through the Maoist period was a victim of those political movements, though someone who should be innocent suffered more because of

²⁰⁰ Xie, ed. *Kaihua huo bu kaihua de niandai*, 18

²⁰¹ Zhang Juling, “Beida, wo shengming de gen,” in Xie, ed. *Kaihua huo bu kai hua de niandai*, 70

others who followed the majority. When everything turns to the past, it is difficult for victims to figure out who to blame, and an apology actually does not matter much to the victims, but more to the conscience of the victimizers. The students in 1957 now have reached their 70s, thus it is up to them whether they wish to take their grievances or regrets to the grave, or decide how to come to terms with the past.

During the Anti-Rightist period, high tensions and pressures spread around the campus. To those who wrote posters, they anxiously waited for the day to be labeled as “rightists.” To the rest, they were afraid to say anything wrong, and tried to follow the Party as closely as possible. Another alumnus recalled the relief when the Anti-Rightist Campaign ended,

Now I seem to no longer feel the weight of all the burdens on my shoulders, which does not matter whether they stay or not. But they remind me of those thrilling days, when you were scared every day, not knowing when the disaster would come down upon your head. Finally, there was a day when the school announced that there were no more “rightists,” and then you hid yourself in a corner that nobody could find, and burst out crying.²⁰²

Not everyone actively participated in the movement, and in contrast, quite a lot people remained silent. Some even “escaped” the movement by studying in the library, which at least two students mentioned in a similar reflection:

I did not raise any objection [during the Hundred Flowers], not because I had foresight knowing that it was “fishing” or “waiting for the snake.” I really did not have any good suggestion to make, and I paid all my attention to studying. Now in retrospect, I should thank myself. If not for plunging into the sea of books, but being outspoken just as the others were, it would be hard to predict my fate afterward.²⁰³

Some stayed uninvolved in the movement by remaining silent. For the sake of security, some actively participated in the movement by keeping the same tone as the authorities. Some others, who offered criticisms of the Party, became victims. As a spontaneous grassroots movement initially mobilized by Mao, the students did not

²⁰² Sheng Jiuchou, “Beida sui xiang,” in Xie, ed. *Kaihua huo bu kaihua de niandai*, 176.

²⁰³ Zhang Yumao, “Yanyuan yigui,” in Xie, ed. *Kaihua huo bu kaihua de niandai*, 58.

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speak in unison but presented a variety of voices. Their different positions then have determined how they remember the movement today.

Conclusion

People around the world were shocked by the crackdown at Tiananmen Square in 1989 on the student-initiated movement gathered there. In contrast, very few people know about the activities of Beijing University students during the Hundred Flowers Campaign of 1957, which was actually the beginning of student activism after 1949. The students voiced their dissent through a variety of means during that fleeting liberal period, and as a result some of the most outspoken students suffered as “rightists” for the rest of their lives. Opinions and suggestions from the students were seen as attacking socialism and the Party, and not until after the Cultural Revolution did the second generation of leaders learn the lesson and begin reforms, which shared almost the same spirit as the students pointed out more than twenty years ago.

Many reasons contribute to the loss of the historical memory of the student movement in 1957. First, censorship on researching or publishing books related to the Anti-Rightist Campaign discourages scholars from research and participants from writing memoirs. The archives covering that period are not open to the public, thus keeping primary resources, especially personal and official records, out of reach. However, numerous compilations of “rightist” comments, originally published as targets of criticism, now become the best available primary resources. However, not all of them are credible, due to exaggeration in the process of compilation by people who opposed those comments. From a historical perspective, not all of them are valuable either, because many were merely personal opinions about specific officials. Serious debates and critiques appeared among the recorded views mainly involve democratic parties’ members and college students.

Second, the negative connotations associated with the category “rightist” still exist despite official recognition of mislabeling. In government documents, the majority of “rightists” have been rehabilitated after 1978, but they did not automatically earn social

respect. Among intellectuals, there is a sense of honor attached to the label “rightist,” which has not been shared by the whole society yet.²⁰⁴ As a result, many “rightists” try to hide their past, and very few are willing to talk about it today. Being survivors, they would rather enjoy a peaceful life than get involved in politics again. Thus they inadvertently cooperate with the authorities, which hope to erase history of this period when they committed so many errors and injustices.

Third, contemporary China, including the government and its people, tends to look forward instead of backward, and enjoys economic prosperity instead of learning historical lessons. Influenced by the social atmosphere, Chinese college students today care more about their individual futures, rather than uncovering the past. It seems to most people that the past has already passed, and today follows a completely different script, which makes history inapplicable and irrelevant. It is a common mentality that China has already borne too many historical burdens, and only if we get rid of them can we move on to the future. Then why bother digging into this history, if nobody cares? As the student movement in 1957 indicates, the problems they criticized have not been improved but deteriorated after over twenty years, and the authorities accepted and even adopted some criticisms.

The student movement at Beijing University in 1957 has long been ignored for all these reasons. Unlike other officially sanctioned memories, this movement falls out of the memory hole, and is not even included in the school narrative. Nevertheless, looking back to the students’ posters and speeches, we can still feel their emotions, get inspired by some provocative thoughts and make connections with the present. The student movement at Beijing University in 1957 deserves a wider audience, and hopefully this paper contributes to that effort.

²⁰⁴ Ding Shu, ed., *Wushi nian hou chongping "fanyou": Zhongguo dangdai zhishi fenzi de mingyun* (Jiulong, [Xianggang]: Tianyuan shuwu, 2007), 514.

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