

Public Intellectuals in China

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Testimony

of

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The Role of China's Public Intellectuals at the Start of the Twenty-first Century

“Public intellectuals” are not unique to Western civilization. Public intellectuals have played a role throughout Chinese history. It was the responsibility of the Confucian literati to criticize officials and even the Emperor when they diverged from the Confucian ideals of morality and fairness. Public intellectuals helped to bring about the end of the dynastic system and prepare the way for the 1911 revolution. Sun Yatsen personified a public intellectual. Even though the Kuomintang government of Chiang Kai-shek (1927-1949) attempted to stifle criticism and dissent, it was too weak to silence the public intellectuals, who continued to criticize repressive officials and policies and advocate political reforms. With exception of during the Hundred Flowers period (1956-June 1957) and a short time in the early 1960s, it was only during the era of Mao Zedong (1949-76) that public intellectuals were silenced and unable to play their traditional role. Of course, one major difference between the West and China is that during the dynastic, Kuomintang, and Mao Zedong eras there were no laws to protect public intellectuals when what they said displeased the leadership, who could silence them with relative impunity.

In the post-Mao period, beginning soon after Mao's death in 1976, during the era of Deng Xiaoping (1978-97), there were also no laws to protect political and civil rights. Nevertheless, virtually all the intellectuals whom Mao had persecuted were rehabilitated and most found positions in the political and intellectual establishment. The public space for political discourse opened up in the media, books, universities, and research centers. Yet, even though a number of the rehabilitated intellectuals became members of the intellectual networks of party general secretary Hu Yaobang (1980-1986) and his successor, Zhao Ziyang (1987-89), when these intellectuals called for reform of the Communist party-state, they were purged once again. But unlike in the Mao era, though they were silenced for a while, China's move to the market made it possible for them to make a living, speak out, and publish on political issues by means of the new communications technologies, private publishing, and contact with the foreign media, such as VOA, BBC and Radio Free Asia, which would then beam back their views into China. For example, though the prominent political scientist Liu Junning was purged in 2000 from the Institute of Political Science of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences for having criticized party secretary Jiang Zemin (1989-2002) for demanding that the nation rally around his leadership, Liu was not jailed and completely silenced. He was able to get his ideas discussed by setting up his own website and as a free-lance writer, often publishing under pseudonyms.

When the fourth generation of leaders, led by Hu Jintao came to power in 2002-2004, it appeared that they would continue the opening up of public space for political discourse, though circumscribed within

certain limits, as we see in the case of Liu Junning. But that has not proven to be the case. In fact, there has been a contraction of public space for political discourse since Jiang Zemin announced he would step down from his last position as head of the state military commission in the fall 2004 and Hu gained full power over the government. The Hu leadership has cracked down on a number of people who use the Internet or publish their own websites to discuss political issues. A number of cyber-dissidents have been imprisoned as a warning to others as to how far they can go in discussing political reforms on the Internet. Independent intellectuals who speak out on controversial issues have been briefly detained as well. For example, the military doctor, Jiang Yanyong, who had countered the party's assertion in 2003 that the SARS epidemic had been brought under control, was detained and then put under surveillance when in 2004 he called on the party to reassess the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations as a "patriotic" movement.

Ironically, the Hu Jintao crackdown coincided with the publication of a list of "Top Fifty Public Intellectuals" in September 2004 in the Southern People's Weekly (Nanfang renwu zhouban), connected to the Guangzhou Southern Daily media group. With China's move to the market, most of China's media were no longer funded by the state and were forced to be self-financing. One result has been a more daring and interesting media in an effort to gain readership and survive financially. The Guangzhou Southern Daily media group is one of the most daring. In an accompanying commentary, the Weekly praised public intellectuals, pointing out that "this is the time when China is facing the most problems in its unprecedented transformation, and when it most needs public intellectuals to be on the scene and to speak out."¹ Although the list included intellectuals in a variety of professions—writers, artists, film directors, cartoonists, lawyers, environmentalists, and a number of overseas Chinese intellectuals-- the list was dominated by intellectuals who in the 1990s had called for political reforms, free speech and association and greater political participation.

On November 23, an article in the Shanghai Party Committee's hard-line Liberation Daily (Jiefang Ribao) attacked the concept of "public intellectuals," claiming that their "independence... drives a wedge" between the intellectuals and the party and the intellectuals and the masses.² It insisted that China's intellectuals belonged to the working class, under the leadership of the party and therefore could not be independent. Moreover, it called the concept of "public intellectuals" a foreign import. The Liberation Daily article was then reprinted in the party's official newspaper, People's Daily, giving the criticism of public intellectuals the party's official imprimatur.

Although the Hu Jintao leadership is much more concerned with the increasing inequalities spawned by China's economic reforms, and particularly with alleviating poverty in the countryside than Jiang Zemin, the Hu leadership has suppressed the very people, other than those they officially designate, who try to draw public attention to the growing inequalities and distress in the countryside. This can be seen in its treatment of *A Survey of Chinese Peasants*, written by Chen Guidi and Wu Chuntao and published in January 2004, based on interviews over several years with farmers in the poor province of Anhui.³ This husband and wife team, who were both born in the countryside and had spent their early years there, described the developers' seizure of the land of rural residents without providing adequate compensation, the imposition of unfair taxes by local officials, and the lack of recourse available to farmers to right these wrongs. Their vivid depiction of the increasingly impoverished lives of peasants was exactly what the new generation of leadership had declared it sought to alleviate. Most importantly, the survey revealed the official abuse of power, which the new leadership seeks to remedy because of fears it would undermine the party's hold on power. Yet, in February 2004, just one month after its publication, their book was banned. Nevertheless, because of China's market economy it continued to be sold on the black market and by private book-sellers.

At the close of 2004, the party detained a number of well-known public intellectuals. In December, the writers Yu Jie and Liu Xiaobo, both typical examples of public intellectuals, were taken into custody, supposedly because their independent chapter of PEN had given an award to the writer Zhang Yihe for

her memoir *The Past is Not Like (Dissipating) Smoke* about the party's 1957 Anti-rightist campaign against intellectuals. Ironically, even the Deng Xiaoping leadership had denounced the campaign in the 1980s. Though the book was banned, it too continued to be sold on streets corners and pirated copies continued to circulate. The political theorist Zhang Zuhua was likewise detained. All three were criticized for articles they had originally published in overseas journals and then had found their way back to China via the Internet. Although the three were later released, they remained under surveillance and served as a further warning to public intellectuals.

Along with the crackdown on a number of well-known independent intellectuals and the banning of discussion of "public intellectuals," the Hu Jintao government tightened controls over the media. Reports on the growing protests against corruption, abusive officials, and property confiscation as well as reports on peasant and worker demonstrations were banned from the media. Journalism professor, Jiao Guobiao, who on the Internet had criticized the repressive controls of the media by the Propaganda Department (now referred to as the Publicity Department) was no longer allowed to teach at Peking University. Another public intellectual Wang Yi, a law lecturer at Chengdu University, who called for a system of checks and balances, has also been barred from teaching. The journal *Strategy and Management* that had been an outlet for intellectuals of a liberal persuasion such as Liu Junning was closed down. The administrative editor in chief of the monthly *China Reform* magazine, Chen Min was briefly detained. Using the penname Xiao Shu, or Smiling Sichuanese, Chen had declared in one of his commentaries that a natural gas explosion in December 2003 in Chongqing that had killed several hundreds of people demonstrated a lack of concern for human lives.⁴ The *China Reform* magazine also published many articles on the plight of the peasants. Even the editor in chief of the *China Youth Daily*, the newspaper affiliated with Hu Jintao's China Youth League power base, which had been very aggressive in exposing official corruption, was detained.

Nevertheless, despite the crackdown on public intellectuals and the media, unlike during the Mao period when millions were harshly persecuted for the acts of a small number, in the post-Mao period persecution for political dissent has not reached far beyond the accused and their immediate associates. Moreover, though they might lose their jobs and may be briefly detained, they have been able to find jobs and outlets for their views in China's expanding market economy. Thus, unlike during the Mao era, they are not completely silenced. Some still try to function as citizens, either on their own or with others and they continue to express their political views in unofficial publications, on the Internet, and in increasingly organized petitions and protests. In addition, though their writings may be officially banned, they continue to be distributed over the Internet and sold on street corners.

There were also differences between the public intellectuals in the 1990s and at the start of the twenty-first century from the public intellectuals in the Hundred Flowers or even in the 1980s. It was not so much that the 1990s public intellectuals are imbued with a different political consciousness, but that they use different political strategies. Unlike their Marxist humanist predecessors of the 1980s and earlier,⁵ most public intellectuals in the 1990s came to believe that more had to be done than just educating the people ideologically in order to bring about political change. It is necessary to establish new institutions to make possible the practice of democracy. Moreover, whereas until the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations, public intellectuals acted as an elite who did not join with other social classes in political actions, in the 1990s they began to join with workers and small business people in organized petition drives and political groups to try to bring about political change. Therefore, at the start of the twenty-first century there has been a qualitative change among public intellectuals, a willingness to join with other social groups in political actions, that may make them increasingly independent actors in China's struggles and may allow them to have a greater impact on China's political scene.

Clearly, it is in the U.S. interest that China move in the direction of political reform. Although the U.S. can bring pressure on China to release public intellectuals from detention and imprisonment, it is difficult

for the U.S. to make China's political reform the central issue in the America's policy toward China. Not only is China becoming a power with considerable international economic and strategic clout, there are other interests in the U.S. relationship with China, such as prodding China to put more pressure on North Korea, reducing China's huge trade imbalance with the U.S., and negotiating a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue. The U.S. can use external pressure to encourage China to live up to the two UN Covenants on Human Rights which it signed onto in 1997-98 and to have its National People's Congress (NPC) ratify the Covenant on Political and Civil Rights. (The NPC has already ratified the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.)

A genuine transformation of China's Communist party-state into a democracy, however, can only be achieved by the Chinese themselves. Although China's public intellectuals are unable to speak freely, it is through their efforts in alliance with other social groups, that can bring pressure on the Chinese government to reform. One way to help those seeking political change in China is for the U.S. government to criticize China's repression of public intellectuals. Since China's present leadership wants to be considered a responsible member of the international community, it is sensitive to U.S. and European criticism of its human rights abuses. It does not want to be seen as a pariah in the international community. Therefore, while the U.S. cannot be a major actor, it can be a catalyst in the effort to democratize China's Communist party-state.

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2. David A. Kelly, "The Importance of Being Public: Gagging China's Thinkers," *China Review* (London), Issue 31 (Winter 2004/2005), pp. 28-37.
3. Chen Guidi and Chun Tao, *Zhongguo nongmin diaocha* (A Survey of Chinese Peasants) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2004) .
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5. Merle Goldman, *Sowing the Seeds of Democracy in China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994) .