Post-Mao China: Post-Tiananmen Intellectual Development in the 1990s

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On the evening of 3 June 1989 and into the early morning of June 4th, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) opened fire with assault rifles and tanks on the student-led pro-democracy movement.¹ This crackdown came to be known as the Tiananmen Square Massacre, or the June 4th Massacre, as troops inflicted heavy casualties on unarmed citizens. It is estimated to have resulted in approximately 2,000 deaths and up to 10,000 injuries after the protests were condemned to be counter-revolutionary riots. A year and a half later, the government initiated a criticism campaign in which student and intellectual groups were purged. Between the later half of 1989 through 1990, those who had advocated for the ideas such as democratic rights and freedom to criticize government that developed in the 1980s were attacked and silenced. Intellectuals lost what free expression and autonomy they had painstakingly gained in the decade prior.² Intellectuals were shocked into silence by the enormity of what had happened at Tiananmen. Many believed, particularly Western scholars, that this use of brute force would mark the end of the Communist regime. Following the events of 1989, intellectuals felt alienated and distanced from the political leadership—having little desire to participate in political discussions. Moreover, due to the suppression of intellectuals as well as internal and external conflicts, the political leadership had little patience to deal with intellectual expression.³ Thus, in the years following Tiananmen, intellectual life was quite evidently more repressive in comparison the 1980s.⁴ During the early years of the Communist leadership under Mao, party policies towards intellectuals swayed back and forth, between stifling intellectual activity to encouraging the creativity needed to modernize the state.⁵ As a result, these contradictory goals led to cyclical periods of repression and relaxation for the intellectual community. However during the 1990s, new ideas about the state and society appeared, gaining much greater acceptance among intellectuals.⁶ As such, the 1990s was a decade characterized by the emergence of a new post-Tiananmen generation of Chinese scholars.⁷ By focusing on the intellectual development of post-Tiananmen China in the 1990s, this paper will look at intellectual freedoms, the development of nationalism, intellectual relationships with the state, and the role of culture during this fascinating decade of Chinese political life.

Only a year after Tiananmen, dissenting voices began to resurface in academic journals and prominent state newspapers, demonstrating that many intellectuals were unwilling to surrender their freedom. Unorthodox ideas re-emerged in terms that were acceptable to the regime leadership—in other words, using language that did not attack the regime directly. These same articles also challenged views that had been expressed during the criticism campaign from 1989–1990.⁸ Intellectuals took advantage of the regime's increased tolerance of academic discussion in 1990, particularly on issues of human rights, as a means of expressing their ideas.⁹ The party's loosening of control over everyday lives unleashed a proliferation of intellectual ideas, activities, and artistic endeavors outside of government control. As a result, a resurgence of public intellectuals and intellectual activities revolving around the ideas of Tiananmen in the form of written work, as well as protestations, emerged.¹⁰ Unlike the Mao-era, intellectuals and their families or colleagues did not face persecution for the supposed 'crimes' of their associates—as still practiced in modern-day North Korea. Rather, scholars cut themselves off from political activities, disengaging from political movements regardless as to whether or not they agreed with the government.¹¹ Although some intellectuals were silenced, they continued to make a living publishing articles and essays through new Internet technologies, private publishing, and contact with foreign media—

such as the BBC via Hong Kong.¹² Because market reforms made it possible for intellectuals to publish abroad, their views could be projected back into China through Internet and foreign publishing. Therefore, although some intellectuals were disillusioned, they were not *as* alienated from the regime as they were during the Mao-era. It demonstrates that access to the outside world was not completely limited. Debates between ‘centre left’ versus ‘centre right’ indicates that intellectuals were thoroughly familiar with various Western schools of thought.¹³ Hence, the acceptance of Western liberalism by mainstream intellectual circles—particularly those involved in politics—demonstrates the value of individual freedom and human dignity during the period of economic modernization.

Despite this new intellectual atmosphere that came about in the 1990s, there were in fact many intellectuals who were more supportive of their own government and critical of the West.¹⁴ Although the regime appeared to be highly repressive toward political dissenters, the reemergence and development of intellectual ideas indicates a greater tolerance towards the academic community in the 1990s. Contradictory treatment on the other hand, may indicate that while some leaders agreed with intellectuals on the need for political reform—as a means of dealing with the problems provoked by rapid economic reforms—the regime was hesitant to actively move in that direction.¹⁵ However, the year 1992 in particular saw a dramatic change in the political climate as the result of Deng Xiaoping’s *Nanxun* (Southern Tour).¹⁶ It triggered a wave of articles criticizing ‘leftists’ and demanding the liberation of the mind.¹⁷ As the result of Deng’s tour, the political atmosphere was opened that emboldened liberal intellectuals of the 1980s to call for political reforms along with the release of the June 4th prisoners.¹⁸ Thus, the immediate consequence of Tiananmen was the revival of key ideas about state and society, which developed in intellectual circles in 1980s. As long as the content and style of intellectual work stayed away from politics, the regime tolerated and sometimes even *encouraged* an apolitical culture.¹⁹ Intellectuals were able to use such topics to break the post-Tiananmen silence. Nevertheless, the ideas intellectuals put forward continued to be influential individually; their influence is demonstrated by their ability to publish in prestigious journals and newspapers, as well as introducing new ideas within a government-controlled society.²⁰

Throughout the 1990s, Chinese intellectuals shared a ‘*qiangguomeng*’ (dream of a strong China).²¹ This dream of a strong China started during Mao’s reign, and even after the decade following Tiananmen into the present day. After the events of Tiananmen, intellectuals rediscovered the value of the Chinese cultural legacy that the regime had attacked for so long. This meant shifting away from Western influence and going back to traditional values that encompassed Chinese culture. A new awareness was established among intellectuals for the need to articulate a more vivid sense of collective identity for the Chinese people.²² In other words, Chinese intellectuals sought something to unite the people after the events of Tiananmen, where many felt a disconnection between society and the state. As a result, a conservative, nationalistic intellectual discourse emerged—promoting anti-West, cultural nationalism. Not only were there critiques of Western-influence and advocacy of anti-West sentiments, but intellectuals also found themselves contributing to the creation of a ‘new’ Chinese identity. This discourse supported the official version of state nationalism by arguing that a centralized power structure must be strengthened in order to maintain stability within the country.²³ In 1992, a group of politically ambitious intellectuals published widely circulated articles, arguing it was necessary to develop a new ideological vision rooted in Chinese traditional culture.²⁴ By advocating economic development first, these intellectuals emphasized the nation’s interests above personal freedom. This increasingly diversi-

fied, export-oriented Chinese economy redefined the intellectual field by changing its interaction not only to the daily political life but also with its relationship to the state.²⁵ Nationalistic writing promoted cultural nationalism, positioning Chinese culture as a symbol against Western cultural hegemony. For example, the book *The China That Can Say No*, despite being hastily written, demonstrates genuine rage over what the authors see as an American containment policy; narrated by a bitter sense of disillusionment.²⁶ It was used to argue that intellectuals should form 'genuinely humanistic' spirit and to rebuild 'academic lineage' and 'ethical traditions' with Chinese culture as a form of liberation.²⁷ For that reason, a 'learning fever' developed to replace Western ideas with Confucian schools of thought among intellectuals and debates, were refined in terms of 'Chinese-ness.'²⁸ In the post-Tiananmen period, nationalism became an indispensable and rational choice as a means of advancing the national interests of China. Being fundamentally different from the state rhetoric of patriotism, this new nationalism signaled a voluntary, rather than forced, overlap between the nation and the state.²⁹ Nationalistic language gave intellectuals cultural power and greater influence countenanced by the regime.³⁰ The rising tide of nationalism was able to cut across all schools of thought in post-Tiananmen China—neo-Maoists, neo-conservatives, and neo-Confucianists.³¹ The new mood of the 1990s generated a mixture of traditionalism, conservatism, utopianism, and nationalism.³² Thus, in the decade following Tiananmen, nationalism served as a gateway for intellectuals for put forth their ideas and establish influence in a society dominated by an authoritarian regime.

In an environment where the bureaucratic state takes the lead in developing a socialist market economy, intellectuals found themselves denouncing the emergence of the working classes within that market economy.³³ This meant that while criticizing the problems resulting from economic reforms, intellectuals were also criticizing the very people who had no choice but to be a part of it. In other words, while chastising poverty, intellectuals began to reprimand the peasantry rather than the state. However, in doing so, liberal intellectuals failed to acknowledge the ideology of development and integration that they shared with the reform bureaucracy. In other words, they had the same thinking as the government they were trying to criticize. Tiananmen did not shatter the rhetoric of democracy, but instead the aristocratic and authoritarian assumptions entrenched in the New Era.³⁴ This included the assumption that intellectuals and bureaucrats are natural, inseparable partners guiding social change while also maintaining order. This also includes the assumption that intellectuals were not only the moral conscience of the people but had the right to articulate people's desires and longings. In contrast, the intellectual locus sometimes directly affected the political atmosphere, whether intellectuals were a part of the regime or not.³⁵ This meant that in the 1990s, the existence of an intellectual sphere had some impact on policy reforms. Post-Tiananmen political alienation and increased opportunities in the market economy increased the independence of intellectuals and its distance from the regime. Paradoxically, although alienated from the regime, there was still evidence of a close partnership. The regime actively sought intellectual advice in areas of human rights and legal reforms—although intellectual ability to influence public discourse was still limited.³⁶ By using intellectual knowledge to engage in issues of human rights, the party hoped to demonstrate that the regime was empathetic to the people. Intellectuals responded to this call as a means of bringing forward their own ideas, using human rights as a catalyst to both criticize the regime but also to assist in its reformation.

In terms of intellectual relations with the state, discourses continued to take the form of coded, philosophized language. The interpenetration of market, media, fashion, and ideas from the outside allowed intellectuals to articulate politically relevant intellectual agenda in China.³⁷

Hence, there was a lack of commitment from self-styled liberal intellectuals in the 1990s, who sought refuge in counterrevolutionary discourses. Rather, conversion of state activism—the intellectual activism under state control in order to strengthen it—into social initiative was subject to debate when practical means and tactics were discussed. Intellectuals were willing to participate in the political process within the structure because they believed in the reform *of* the structure.³⁸ In other words, having them work within the political system, intellectuals felt it was a sign of significant change. While many were willing to perform the function of limited counterweights to state power, some continued to criticize this ambiguous autonomy and wanted to express the new power of intellectuals. Because of the lack of a sphere of politics that expresses social interests independent of state power, the role of intellectuals characteristically reflected internal and external influences.³⁹ In many instances, intellectual status diminished; and although most were aware and proud of their in-built strength, not many could express it or act against the state. Nevertheless, intellectuals who broke from the within-without patterns of non-political autonomy in the public sphere experienced isolation.⁴⁰ Transformation of the state became a prerequisite for intellectuals to join the process of modernizing China. Tiananmen was only one step towards the emergence of civil society from totalitarianism. Still, a significant portion of intellectuals continued to be skeptical of the process of globalization.⁴¹ As a result, intellectuals and the state each began to explore, in their own ways, issues of state legitimacy, state-society relations, and China's relation with the outside world. Thus, it can be said that the relationship between the state and the wider intellectual community both narrowed and broadened after the events of Tiananmen in 1989. Government leaders were oftentimes intellectuals themselves, and shared the same general background knowledge and education as other intellectuals.⁴² However, this increased specialization also meant that government officials were better informed on specific issues than their intellectual counterparts. As a result, public intellectual views were seen as irrelevant and frequently dismissed.

The 1990s were essentially a free-flow of labor, goods, and capital along with a boom in information and cultural symbols that presented the nation in vivid terms.⁴³ China's entry into, as well as penetration by the world market enabled Chinese consumers to encounter a world of difference and newfound innovations. For many intellectuals, Tiananmen became a turning point whereby they began to seek out material success and a 'celebrity status' of being a figurehead. This was in contrast to 1992, the era that provided the conditions for achieving that success. However, Chinese intellectuals—such as writers, artists, critics, and educators—were bestowed with a sense of a historic mission, as they assumed a position of vanguard for 'enlightenment.'⁴⁴ The semi-frozen condition of elite intellectuals, combined with the ambiguity of state ideological doctrines presented obstacles in addressing the post-Tiananmen complex social relations. Although liberal intellectuals had considerable prestige within post-Tiananmen society in the 1990s, their discursive dependency on theory weakened their thought-provoking descriptions and analyses of the new socio-cultural space.⁴⁵ As a result, intellectuals engaged with the social and political realities of post-Tiananmen China through the skillful appropriation of the language of Western popular art—that is, using Western popular art forms as a medium to discuss political issues.⁴⁶ In other words, intellectuals sought to enter into the *cultural* sphere as a means of pushing forward their ideas within the changing society. Intellectuals were able to state counterhegemonic discourses to Euro-American hegemony as a result—ironically using the very thing they were criticizing.⁴⁷ In terms of how culture played a role in intellectual development after Tiananmen, it is important to note that the role of intellectuals was changing as well. The taste in art, literature, and culture was no longer dictated by the intellectual elite, but by the masses. The emerging discourse of Chinese

nationalism and mass culture in the 1990s happened with neither the sanctioning of the state nor the participation of the intellectuals. However, while some stood on the sidelines, overwhelmed by a sense of alienation; others were busy navigating the new social space in search of a new class of affiliations.⁴⁸ Generally, still recovering from the events of 1989, intellectuals now faced more ruthless market forces in conjunction with the state. Hence, to formulate practices of resistance to commodification and consumerism, mediating between local and global, and political and contemplative was important in envisioning the new position of intellectuals.⁴⁹ The expansion of popular culture meant the marginalization of intellectuals, who had been previously at the center of culture.⁵⁰ However, amidst the voices of opposition and contempt, expression of popular culture and using popular culture as an instrument for consolidating intellectual ideas gained ground. An example would be television soap operas, which projected and captured the new state of affairs in the Chinese social life.⁵¹ They were used to adapting to culture and value orientation of emerging popular society. By attracting audiences using the understanding of the state within daily life, concerns, and hidden desires, culture and media became the gateway into intellectual thought. In the decade following Tiananmen, the cultural growth as the result of opening up to the world allowed a proliferation of media, ideas, and culture. New forms of messages that came into China signified something different and easily touched the hearts of the people.⁵² For example, popular music became a vehicle for common people to express a range of complex feelings, but also provided an opportunity for intellectuals to put forth their ideas in a form that the Chinese people could relate to.⁵³ In music, intellectuals could set out their discontent with the present and the lingering nostalgia of the past—such as the events of Tiananmen and the ways that it was handled afterwards—not only in cryptic lyrics, but the emotions evoked through harmonies. Similarly, the soft, sentimental melodies that were found in popular songs struck a different note in people—one that was different than the official language of revolution and class struggle that ‘national songs’ portrayed. Thus, both groups of intellectuals began to use music of this form to publicize different ideas, whether it was party propaganda or criticism of the regime and its leadership. Intellectuals provided an oppositional and alternative culture in China as a result of their usage of media and popular culture. On the other hand, it can also be said that intellectuals themselves are a dominant culture in itself since they had a tendency to present themselves using their traditional positions as representatives of Chinese culture to raise the consciousness of the masses.⁵⁴ Intellectuals in post-Tiananmen China would use their hegemonic position to further consolidate their power when they would make alliances with the regime, using the culture established by market reform as a justification. Nonetheless, although the shift and growth of culture in post-Tiananmen China marginalized intellectuals on the basis of dictating the Chinese culture, this does not mean some did not benefit from it. Many intellectuals would also “succumb to the lure of commercial success,” sending a message that the fate of intellectuals was shifting. Nevertheless, intellectuals would also use this growing culture to their advantage, using music, television, and art as a means of pushing forward their rational ideas different from the state.

In essence, the post-Tiananmen era was one of uncertainty and stability. Although the immediate period following Tiananmen was characterized by criticism campaigns, the 1990s held a different atmosphere. New ideas regarding the state and society reemerged soon after being criticized and gained greater acceptance among other intellectuals. Although many had been silenced following the events of 1989, the 1990s saw the rise in intellectual development as well as the emergence and expansion of a new generation of Chinese scholars. This paper hoped to discuss intellectual developing in post-Tiananmen China in the subsequent decade following the event. Looking in areas of intellectual freedom, the development of nationalism, intellectuals in relation

to the state, and the role of culture, this paper intended to demonstrate that despite being under Communist leadership, academics continued to flourish. Although the regime appeared to be highly repressive toward political dissents, the reemergence and development of ideas indicates that there was a greater tolerance toward the intellectual community in the 1990s. Because the events of Tiananmen in 1989 created a divide between the state and society, intellectuals sought a way to unify the Chinese people. Hence, this shared *qiangguomeng* (dream of a strong China) developed into a pseudo form of nationalism different from that of the state, whereby the value of the Chinese cultural legacy was emphasized to create a collective identity. In the ensuing decade after Tiananmen, the greater intellectual community both narrowed and broadened in terms of its relationship with the state. As government leaders become intellectuals in their own right, they shared the same general background as other intellectuals. However, this increased specialization also meant they were oftentimes better informed on specific issues than their other intellectual counterparts—leading to the regime seeking out public intellectuals for advice much less, or ignoring their views entirely. Similarly, the expansion of popular culture—as the result of economic reforms—resulted in the marginalization of intellectual, who had been the center of culture, but also provided a gateway for intellectuals to voice their ideas in a way that would reach the masses. The post-Tiananmen era of the 1990s was therefore a decade of intellectual development because although initially repressive, there was intellectual freedom as long as the academia directly stayed away from politics of the regime. Nevertheless, there is little question that many intellectuals in the 1990s enjoyed more intellectual freedoms, access to the outside world, and a pluralistic cultural environment, than any other period during and after the reign of Mao. With the succeeding leadership appearing to tolerate political discourse among intellectuals that did not directly challenge the regime’s legitimacy, the Chinese intellectual community without a doubt flourished. In many cases, this development was even encouraged by the regime itself.

Notes

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6 Goldman “Reemergence of Public Intellectuals,” 277-279.

7 Yijiang Ding, *Chinese Democracy After Tiananmen* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2001), eBook, chap. 3, 30.

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11 Jonathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013), 681.

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14 Fewsmith, *China Since Tiananmen*, 7.

15 Merle Goldman, “Politically-Engaged Intellectuals in the 1990s,” *The China Quarterly*, no. 159 (1999): 710, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/655763>.

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- 20 Spence, *Modern China*, 689.
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- 26 Zhang, "Nationalism, Culture, Intellectual Strategies," 110.
- 27 Zhao, "Intellectuals' Quest," 735.
- 28 Zhao, "Intellectuals' Quest," 736.
- 29 Zhang, "Nationalism, Culture, Intellectual Strategies," 110.
- 30 Zhao, "Intellectuals' Quest," 735.
- 31 Goldman, "Politically-Engaged Intellectuals," 705.
- 32 Fewsmith, *China Since Tiananmen*, 7.
- 33 Xudong Zhang, "Intellectual Politics in Post-Tiananmen China: An Introduction," *Social Text*, no. 55 (1998): 4, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/466683>.
- 34 Zhang, "Intellectual Politics," 3.
- 35 Ding, *Chinese Democracy*, 45.
- 36 Ibid., 46 ; Fewsmith, *China Since Tiananmen*, 10.
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- 42 Ibid., 12.
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- 52 Lu, "Postmodernity, Popular Culture, Intellectual," 153.
- 53 Ibid., 156.
- 54 Ibid., 153.