

Dissident Chinese Gather in the West

By RICHARD BERNSTEIN and SPECIAL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES MAY 3, 1989

About the Archive

This is a digitized version of an article from The Times's print archive, before the start of online publication in 1996. To preserve these articles as they originally appeared, The Times does not alter, edit or update them.

Occasionally the digitization process introduces transcription errors or other problems. Please send reports of such problems to archive_feedback@nytimes.com.

It was 70 years ago that a movement of Chinese students and intellectuals, shocked by their Government's weakness in the face of Japanese aggression, engaged in a period of soul searching and re-evaluation known as the May Fourth Movement. A result was the formation of the Communist Party that now rules China.

The anniversary of the May Fourth Movement has been recalled in many ways these days, most spectacularly in large pro-democracy marches by students and others in Beijing and elsewhere.

The anniversary was also very much on the minds of some 30 leading Chinese writers, scholars, film makers, editors and journalists who met with a dozen or so Western experts on their country in an unusual conference in this small California town to talk about what virtually all participants saw as China's continuing 20th-century search for an identity.

The four-day conference, attended by some of the leading advocates of further democratic change in the country, in itself reflected the changes that have swept China under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, the country's most powerful figure. Many of the Chinese participants flew here directly from China to attend the meeting, something that, they all acknowledged, has only recently been allowed. A
New Boldness

The meeting also reflected a new boldness on the part of many Chinese intellectuals. Among the participants were several figures who recently signed petitions to the Chinese leadership, demanding the release of political prisoners - something that has not happened before in China's recent history. Indeed, even though the conference mixed genuine dissidents with several figures who are still members of the Communist Party, the near-unanimous tone was one of sharp criticism of the current leadership, both for failing to press ahead rapidly with democratic changes, and for allowing corruption to become rampant in the Government.

"We must get rid of the idea of one leader, one ism, one party," said Ruan Ming, who was once an official at the party school, where cadres are taught.

Another participant, Wu Zuguang, who at 72 is a leading playwright, said, "In the May Fourth Movement, we called for democracy and science."

The allusion was to the major slogan of the era of protest and re-examination 70 years ago, when China seemed to progressive intellectuals to be suffocating in superstition and tyranny.

"Now, 70 years later, we are still seeking the same things," Mr. Wu said. Other Major Participants

Among the participants in the conference were several people who have been sharply criticized by Chinese leaders and the controlled press for their critical boldness.

Liu Binyan, a well-known investigative journalist who was expelled from the Communist Party two years ago after publishing articles on malfeasance in office, attended. So did Wang Ruoshui, a onetime deputy editor of the official Communist Party newspaper, People's Daily, who was dismissed from his post for writing that "alienation" still existed under Communism. Bei Dao, one of China's best-known poets, was a conferee, and so were Wu Tianming and Chen Kaige, two of the country's best-known movie directors.

Some of these figures, like Mr. Liu, were already in the United States. Others, like Bei Dao, which is a pen name, came just for the conference.

But five others, serving as reminders of continuing political difficulty at home, were refused permission to travel abroad. Among the five was Fang Lizhi, the astrophysicist who has emerged as China's leading human rights advocate.

Conferees at one point gathered round a television to watch a taped interview of Mr. Fang by Orville Schell, a writer who was the prime organizer of the

conference, and his wife, Liu Baifang, another conference organizer. A New Brand of Patriotism

They applauded as Mr. Fang explained his view of patriotism, saying that calls for democratic freedoms represented a higher form of love of country than did calls for party obedience.

But while disenchantment with the Government was a clear theme of the meeting, the conference also addressed underlying questions concerning China's identity, like whether there is a link between the country's culture and its economic backwardness and the authoritarian political system. Are the country's problems due to its traditions, or to the failures of Communism itself?

Many of the conferees maintained that the Chinese tradition, which always stressed collective and group interests over individualism, laid the basis for the suppression of individual rights under Communism.

Mr. Chen, the film maker, who was born after the Communist takeover in 1949, recalled how he grew up always hearing about "the party" as the representative of everybody in society, and that controlled everything about individual life. But, Mr. Chen maintained, this political system was close enough to Chinese tradition to gain widespread acceptance, even when a single individual, Mao Zedong, came to be worshiped as a kind of god.

As intellectual and cultural figures, many of the conference participants were persecuted, not only during the Cultural Revolution of the mid-1960's, but also during the "anti-rightist campaign" of 1957, when some 500,000 people, mostly intellectuals, were sent to labor camps. The conference thus mingled personal recollections with attempts to analyze why the intellectuals so meekly submitted to the party. 'The System Is the Problem'

Even as recent history and Chinese identity were discussed at the conference, lying in the back of virtually all minds were the student demonstrations. Chinese conferees frequently telephoned friends back home for the latest information, which was then conveyed to the conference as a whole.

Ge Yang, the 72-year-old editor of the official magazine New Observer, said at the conference's end:

"Corrupt governments have always been overthrown by the people in Chinese history, and this Government is certainly corrupt. There are many good people in the Government. It is the system that is the problem. It is the system that has to be reformed. Deng Xiaoping himself has said as much, but he has not been able to do

it, and now he is too old."

A version of this article appears in print on May 3, 1989, on Page A00008 of the National edition with the headline: Dissident Chinese Gather in the West.

© 2019 The New York Times Company