Qian Liqun, Jujue yiwang: “1957 nian xue” yanjiu biji (Refusal to forget: Notes for “1957 studies”) 

Zhang Yinde
Earlier in 2009, the Chinese Encyclopaedia Press (Zhongguo dabaike quanshu chubanshe) published a collection of essays by Qian Liqun entitled *Refusal to forget*, the reissue of a 1999 work devoted to Lu Xun and diverse intellectual debates. The subject of the present review bears the same title, but deals with a forbidden issue on which the Chinese authorities remain silent and have refused to amend their verdict. For political, historical, and social reasons, the 1957 Anti-Rightist Movement constitutes a memory hole in the history of the People’s Republic of China. The regime’s legitimacy depends on the contention that such a coercive campaign was necessary, despite jurisdictional incoherencies and reparation demands. In fact all but 98 of the campaign’s 550,000 victims have been rehabilitated, although without any compensation; it remains a matter of “rectification” (*gaizheng*) rather than of “rehabilitation” (*pingfan*). This political decision is compounded by an unfavourable historical context. The tragic event was never followed by the ideological relaxation that characterised the immediate aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, which was labelled a “catastrophe” through some sort of consensus: the “post-Anti-Rightist Campaign” period, on the other hand did not take place, or disappeared within the “post-Cultural Revolution” era. Finally, the regime’s long-held dichotomy between the intelligentsia and the working class did not encourage empathy for a trauma regarded as having affected only intellectuals. Therefore, the construction of a collective memory is more difficult than in the case of the Cultural Revolution. However, that task is increasingly imperative as survivors are growing old and dying off.

Qian’s work stems from a noble sentiment that implies an act of commitment. The Peking University emeritus professor was a direct witness to the events: he was a second-year student of journalism in that institution when he was branded a “moderate rightist” (
Qian Liqun, Jujue yiwang: “1957 nian xue” yanjiu biji (Refusal to forget: Not...
column” (Taiyang zongdui) and “Group X” (X xiaozu), which, rather than upholding the May Fourth movement’s liberal humanism, drew inspiration from the thoughts of Mao. But they took a reflective rather than dogmatic approach and denounced the system’s abuses.

Qian’s studies, which are presented as academic despite being limited to individual investigations, proceed from specific cases to take a certain longer-term view. They have achieved the author’s aim of showing the continuity of a dictatorial policy in its implacable logic: a personality cult mixed with the Party’s haloed status, in which the slightest criticism, howsoever justified, was treated as condemnable transgression. The Anti-Rightist Campaign serves as an exemplar of the state’s compulsion to crush any deviant individual. The author deserves credit for having prepared the ground by unearthing some unknown documents, such as the writings of repressed students, and treating them with lucidity and empathy. Qian has been largely inspired by Lu Xun, on whose works he is an expert. In entitling the book Refusal to forget, the author is inspired more by concern for fact and compassionate humanism than by philosophical, psychological, or literary motives: there is little in the way of analysis on memorial discourse of the trauma undergone or on the symbolic value of sites where repression was carried out. Meanwhile, the recent accounts of experiences in camps such as Jiabiangou, the desert-edge twilight zone under a tyrannical administration, have tended to unveil a system and process of dehumanisation in every way comparable to the Gulag: the identification of a symbolic site should go hand-in-hand with nurturing a collective awareness of the catastrophic nature of the 1957 events. But the book does contain an informed rejection of the sophistry of some new left rhetoricians such as Wang Shaoguang, who defend the indefensible with scant regard for historical truth or the suffering of millions of individuals whose lives were broken.

Translated by N. Jayaram