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NOTE DE L'ÉDITEUR

Translated from the French original by Jonathan Hall

- 1 The death of Mao in 1976 saw the eclipse of the leading light of the communist cause, and the dawning of new possible ideological and political horizons for the People's Republic. Scarcely three years later, a wide-ranging reform movement was launched by Deng Xiaoping, in the name of a return to Marxist orthodoxy. This reform movement has lasted up until the present, and it has brought about a spectacular transformation in the social landscape. A series of ideological and intellectual debates preceded the reforms, so that a general movement towards freedom of thought was already in place to guide and accompany the reforms throughout the 1980s, until it was cut short by the bloody repression in Tian'anmen Square in 1989.
- 2 Cheng Yinxiang's work is a study of this "unfinished cultural renaissance" of 1976-1989. From his perspective, this intellectual movement was the very soul of the reforms and a driving force for their implementation. It is therefore no exaggeration to say, as Cheng Yingxiang does, that this movement was "the second awakening of the Chinese intelligentsia", following its predecessor, the famous May 4th movement, whose origins lay in the years after 1910. In order to retrace the outlines of "this unexpected and promising process of cultural renewal", and especially in order to understand how the struggle against despotism was conducted from within by the intellectuals themselves, the author has chosen to let certain of them speak in their own words.

- 3 His book is a collection of interviews between himself and 14 intellectuals, which he conducted in the decade between 1984 and 1994. The majority of these interviewees played leading roles in the initiation and continuation of the reform movement. The author seeks to throw light on the circumstances surrounding some of the major intellectual or political events, by questioning these leading protagonists and privileged observers.
- 4 Since the author refrains from intervening, either to analyse or to interpret their different contributions, the reader is invited to decipher this first-hand information for himself, to understand the participants' reactions, and to reflect along with them on the twists and turns in an epoch which is still pivotal for anyone wishing to understand the reforms in China. In the course of his discussions, which are always skillful and to the point, the role played by each participant observer gradually emerges, throwing light on their respective positions and their individual views on past events.
- 5 These 14 intellectuals can be roughly categorised into three groups. Chen Yizi, Ruan Ming, and to a lesser extent Feng Lanrui and Wang Ruoshi are virtually "privy counsellors". Their contribution consisted largely in making proposals and suggesting methods for achieving this or that policy adopted by the Party leadership, or in assessing the possible risks entailed.
- 6 Fang Lizhi, Jin Guantao, Liu Qinfeng, Su Shaozhi and Yan Jiaqi are scientists or philosophers. Through their innovative articles and outspoken pronouncements, they addressed an audience of intellectuals, students and an educated urban public searching for intellectual expansion and thirsty for new ideas. The main target of their attack was the rigid ideological discourse that had remained unchanged since 1949.
- 7 Liu Bingyan, Bai Hua, Bei Dao, Su Xiaokang and Zhang Xinxin are journalists or writers. Through their literary works or newspaper reports they awoke slumbering and twisted minds, bringing everyday monstrosities to light and showing up the real incoherence beneath the surface of the regime.
- 8 Naturally, these three categories are purely relative. In fact, individual roles were frequently interchangeable. Yan Jiaqi, who started as a philosopher and scientist, became one of the intellectuals most respected by the students on Tian'anmen Square, and was one of Zhao Ziyang's closest advisers! In normal times, Wang Ruoshi, assistant chief editor of the *People's Daily*, and Su Shaozhi, director of the Institute for research into Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought in the Academy of Social Sciences, would be expected to inform and advise the party leadership. And yet, during this decade of cultural upheaval, they opted to make use of their official channels to raise fundamental questions in public, undermining the bases of the dominant ideology through their support for the reforms. Their analyses, and the positions which they took, gave rise to major debates. In Wang Ruoshi's case, the key issue was his position on humanism, and in Su Shaozhi's, his thesis on the three stages of socialism. Fang Lizhi, vice-principal of the Chinese University of Science and Technology at Hefei, and the well-known journalist and writer, Liu Binyan, were also able to sow the seeds of doubt, and mount direct challenges to the regime, through their influence on students and the public at large.
- 9 The six chapters of this book pose the following six major questions:
- 10 1. Why was it necessary to conduct an ideological debate before initiating the reforms and, viewed from within, how did it take place?

- 11 2. How did the conservative camp react when confronted with the growing freedom of thought?
- 12 3. Following the success of the reforms in the countryside, how were they able to spread to the cities, and into the political field?
- 13 4. How did the free-thinking and questioning spirit slowly manage to take over literature and the universities?
- 14 5. From the “cultural fever” to the television film *River Elegy* (*Heshang*), how were the cultural underpinnings of the communist utopia dismantled in China?
- 15 6. How did the Tian’anmen tragedy of 1989 come about, and could it have been avoided?
- 16 The 14 interviewees each responded to these questions in their own way, giving us their analyses and comments on those events which have become milestones for the whole epoch, such as the “April 5th movement” in 1976, the “Democracy Wall” in 1978, the campaign against “spiritual pollution” in 1983, the campaign against “bourgeois liberalism” in 1987, and, of course, the pro-democracy movement and its tragic end in 1989. These personal testimonies reflect the thoughts and feelings of the protagonists at the time. From the historiographical standpoint, of course, they are no substitute for written records or historical analyses. But neither can documents, official or unofficial, or the later analyses of the historians, replace this “living oral history”. The testimony gathered together here is all the more important for being still close to the events. Given this, it is regrettable that the author did not give more precise dates for the interviews themselves.
- 17 This 560-page volume is a rich mine for topics for further research. It provides keys for a deeper understanding of how these talented and bold intellectuals helped to shake the totalitarian regime from within. It is particularly interesting to see the relationship between the authorities, the intellectuals, and the students, as revealed by these witnesses themselves. In the eyes of the authorities, the intellectuals are an important category of privileged people, for better or for worse. According to the shifting political situation, they may either be listened to or disregarded. This situation explains why they can exercise a certain influence over considerable periods of time, only to be persecuted when the times change. It also explains their ambiguous demeanour towards the state authorities on the one hand, and the students or other social groupings on the other.
- 18 During the ten years which were favourable to scientists and thinkers, the latter took part enthusiastically in advancing the freedom of thought. They managed to raise the hopes of the students, and to get over the message that social change was possible. Some of them even showed considerable insight into the nature of the ruling order. But in general, as these testimonies show, they were unable to rid themselves of their illusions about the regime, and this prevented them from foreseeing the serious turn that events were about to take. They were also unable to point out the limits of the thinking of the students, who were guided by a hope which may indeed have been somewhat naive, but which the intellectuals themselves had aroused. They saw themselves as the spiritual mentors of the students, but at the same time they sided with the authorities as their docile advisers. In the end it was this ambiguity which lost them the confidence which they had enjoyed among the students, and prevented them from matching their deeds to their words. The 1980s were a moving decade of openness

to many possibilities, but at the same time they turned out to be years of ambiguity and indecision.