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POLITICAL DRAMA AND EMOTIONAL DISPLAY—SELF AND REPRESENTATION IN THE 1989 PROTEST MOVEMENT

史 Hung-yok Ip 葉紅玉

Reflecting on the 1989 protests, many China specialists highlight the theatrical nature of the whole movement.¹ However, this striking convergence of interpretive perspectives is shaped by a few not so surprising facts: the students' language was filled with reference to stages²; historians always read each other's work³; and eminent scholars such as E. P. Thompson and Clifford Geertz have long demonstrated "the value of interpreting politics in theatrical terms."⁴

One essential theme that tends to corroborate analyses of the 1989 protests in terms of theatrical student performance is political idealism—whether viewed as a series of lavish displays which borrowed heavily from the political theater and radical cultures of twentieth-century China,⁵ or as a production substantially shaped by the Confucian tradition,⁶ or only as a half-hearted attempt at organized and coherent opposition to the status quo.⁷ By examining student protest(s) as political theater, historians can provide insights into the ways in which those demonstrations challenged the legitimacy of the Communist-ruled government of China, and how the students were able to incite other social groups to take action both in support of themselves and for their own autonomous ends.

We should note, however, that existing works which use the concept of political theatre as an interpretive model for understanding the 1989 protest movement in the main discuss how the student groups utilised drastic and dramatic acts, including the mass hunger-strikes and gestures of martyrdom, as "performances." Despite the illuminating attention drawn to their externally visible performances, I would argue that what is still lacking is a more penetrating examination of the student protesters' expressions of political emotions, an appreciation of which is crucial if we are to understand the tremendous effect of the students' political actions. Moreover, it is also worth asking how these external and theatrical elements reveal something more of the internal

My thanks to the editor for his extensive assistance with this paper.

¹ See also Perry Link's comment on student petitioning at Tiananmen Square. He stresses the parallel between this and "morally charged Beijing opera" (Elizabeth Perry, "Casting a Chinese democracy movement: the roles of students, workers, and entrepreneurs," in *Popular protest and political culture in modern China*, ed. Elizabeth Perry & Jeffrey Wasserstrom [Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1994], p.36; David Strand, "Protest in Beijing: civil society and public sphere in China," *Problems of Communism* 34 [1990]: n.31).

² Joseph Esherick and Jeffrey Wasserstrom, "Acting out democracy: political theater in modern China," in *Popular protest and political culture in modern China: learning from 1989*, ed. Elizabeth Perry and Jeffrey Wasserstrom (Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1992), p.37.

³ *Ibid.*, p.32.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Perry and Wasserstrom, eds, *Popular protest and political culture in modern China* (1994), pp.49–56.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.36.

⁷ Geremie Barmé, "Beijing days, Beijing nights," in *The pro-democracy movement in China: report from the provinces*, ed. Jonathan Unger (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1991), p.50.

—that is, the dissidents' and protesters' psychology and sentiments. By analyzing the 1989 activists' self-representations partly, but not exclusively, in terms of political theater, this paper attempts to probe the political emotions displayed and involved in the political behavior of student and intellectual protesters.

Theatrical Performance, Emotion and Tradition

⁸ Jane Macartney, "The students: heroes, pawns, or power-brokers," in George Hicks, *The broken mirror: China after Tiananmen* (Harlow, Essex: Longman Group, 1990), pp.9–10.

⁹ Victor Turner, *From ritual to theater: the human seriousness of play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), p.72.

The 1989 activists phrased many of their published self-representational statements (speeches, broadcasts, pamphlets, manifestos, etc.) as political performances which were aimed at specific audiences. Such self-representations, which should be regarded as part of their enactment of political theater, include written, verbal and behavioral statements working on different but sometimes overlapping registers. There were articles and statements which were written by identifiable student and intellectual leaders and deliberately addressed to a nationwide or even international audience. The students, it seems, were particularly interested in targeting this presumed international audience: as foreign journalists were present in Beijing to cover the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's historic visit to China, protest leaders were eager to draw the attention of Western reporters to their own cause.⁸ But many other self-representative statements were exclusively aimed at fellow participants. In addition, we should note the numerous statements written by anonymous authors or by those using pen names and posted up in the area at or around Tiananmen 天安门 Square which quietly and unassumingly added to the general environment of political theater on the streets. To a certain extent, it is also evident that the drama of 1989 continued long after the crackdown, as those conceptualized by Turner as "star-groupers" talked to the international mass media, discussed their experiences and reminisced about their political views in public, and composed and promoted their 1989 memoirs.⁹

Furthermore, the 1989 activists' writings also vary radically in the degree of self-reflection that is contained therein. What were the main problems of our movement? Why did we become involved in it, and so on? Students and intellectuals debated these issues virtually from the beginning of the demonstrations. Among the post-1989 memoir-writers, they are questions that have elicited a wide range of responses: from shameless self-aggrandizement to half-hearted and half-baked self-criticism; from attacks launched against fellow activists to bitter remorse for personal culpability.

What, then, can we learn from such a wide variety of self-representations, written by their authors largely, though not solely, for public or media consumption? With this question in mind, I find the following argument made by Joseph Esherick and Jeffrey Wasserstrom fails to do complete justice to the complexity of many of the foremost of self-expressions among 1989 protesters:

Our point is rather that it makes a good deal more sense to analyze performed actions and utterances not for their truth value but for their symbolic meaning. For example, on April 21 and again on April 27, many students wrote out last testaments They proclaimed their willingness to die for democracy, freedom, their homeland It makes little sense to ask whether these students really knew what “freedom” and “democracy” meant, and still less sense to ask whether they were truly prepared to die for their beliefs. These last testaments were powerful public statements of great symbolic meaning. They revealed a fundamental alienation from the regime and a willingness to make great (perhaps even the ultimate) sacrifice for an alternative political future.¹⁰

With regard to the specific examples they give, in studying the symbolism of the students’ testaments, these two writers seem to give only passing consideration to the emotion and passion embodied in that symbolism itself. At a more general level, if we stand back from any concrete examples, I would argue that such a neglect of the emotional dimension of the 1989 activists’ statements—including their symbolic statements—prevents us from penetrating into emotion(s) as one of the most forceful dynamics in shaping the political behavior of the 1989 actors. Besides this, despite the importance of symbolism for any form of political theater, the politically theatrical should not be, and is not constituted as being, purely symbolic.¹¹ If we insist that by focusing on the symbolism of what the activists did and said in 1989 makes “more sense,” we shall perhaps overlook the non-symbolic dimension of their political theater and of their various kinds of self-expression.

In addition, I would contend that there is no clear boundary between theatrical performance and authentic expression of emotion. Melodramatic though some of the 1989 self-representations may be, to some extent they do nonetheless tell us something about their authors’ emotions: the ways in which these political actors beautified, defended, criticized or just talked about themselves all inevitably reveal what they treasured, what they thought other people should know about their movement and themselves, and what they considered legitimate.

Furthermore, in view of the massive scale and relatively long time-span of the 1989 protests, and the media’s close attention to them, it was difficult for the participants to conceal what they did not intend to reveal in public—in other words, what was not intended as an integral part of their street theater—from the public. How, for instance, they lived every-day lives and dealt with one another in the Square could not escape the attention of outsiders.¹²

While discussing contemporary political actors’ self-representations, this paper also attempts to address the issue of tradition. In *Student Protests in Twentieth-Century China*, Wasserstrom mainly emphasizes how much the 1989 demonstrators inherited the patterns of protests, or the scripts, provided to them by their cultural repertoire.¹³ In one of his more recent articles he discusses the relevance of history for contemporary politics in much more

¹⁰ Esherick and Wasserstrom, “Acting out democracy” (1994), p.44.

¹¹ For instance, giving interviews to journalists, or writing poems and last testaments, the students sometimes showed their feelings in straightforward ways.

¹² Jane Macartney’s article, which is quite critical in tone, is a good example showing how the students failed to hide their less than idealistic side from a journalist (Macartney, in George Hicks, *The broken mirror: China after Tiananmen* [Chicago, Ill.: St. James Press, 1990]).

¹³ Jeffrey Wasserstrom, *Student protests in twentieth-century China* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1991), pp.308–20.

¹⁴ Jeffrey Wasserstrom, *Putting 1989 in historical perspective: pitfalls and possibilities* (Duke University, Durham, NC: Working Paper in Asian/Pacific Studies, 1993): 20.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.6.

¹⁶ I define the Communist tradition of revolutionary heroism as follows: traits of political devotion that the Communist state publicly praised in order to cultivate its citizens' ideological commitment before the Cultural Revolution, and that it attempted to make use of once again after 1976. Following this definition, I include in the tradition those post-1976 literary products mainly aimed at celebrating the "revolutionary spirit" of many famous Communist heroes. However, I exclude the post-Mao publications which attempt to "humanize" revolutionaries, or to portray revolutionary lives in a more aloof, less passionate way (for instance, Wang Ruowang's *Hunger Trilogy*). Although most of these writings still show an appreciation of revolutionary heroism, they do not treat political devotion as their most prominent motif.

¹⁷ Liu Xiaobo, *Mori xingcunzbede dubai* [The monologue of a survivor] (Taipei: Shibao Wenhua Chuban Qiye Youxian Gongsi, 1992), p.136.

¹⁸ Wang Dan, *Yuzhong huiyulu* [My prison memoir] (Hong Kong: Guanghai Chuban Youxian Gongsi, 1997), p.32.

¹⁹ Barmé, "Confession, redemption and death," in George Hicks, *The broken mirror: China after Tiananmen* (Chicago, Ill.: St James Press, 1990), pp.76–80; Liu Xiaobo, "That holy word 'revolution'," in Perry and Wasserstrom, *Popular protest and political culture in modern China*, pp.309–24; and Esherick and Wasserstrom, "Acting out democracy," p.56.

subtle ways. He criticize historians, himself included, for stressing too much the influence of history on the 1989 movement.¹⁴ Moreover, he also examines the relevance of tradition for the present at different levels—comparisons that help illuminate the present, historical figures and identities whom contemporary political actors attempted to associate with or disassociate from, knowledge useful for political actors when they made decisions, patterns of history that shaped contemporary political behavior, memories that guide people to shape perceptions of contemporary activists, and history as an ongoing process that influences the action and behaviour of political actors.¹⁵ Wasserstrom draws our attention to how tradition influences historical actors and audiences in various ways, whereas I will analyze here the complexity of the content of tradition itself. In examining the 1989 activists' self-representations, I will focus on how contemporary political actors were wedded to and at the same time deviated from the Communist tradition of revolutionary heroism.¹⁶

This is not to say that an examination of non- and pre-Communist radicals has no significance for our understanding of the 1989 movement. As a matter of fact, the protesters themselves consciously treated some non-Communist and celebrated idealists as inspirational models. For example, the students at Tiananmen Square compared themselves to Tan Sitong 譚嗣同¹⁷; in his memoir Wang Dan 王丹 mentions his admiration for Chen Tianhua 陈天华 and Zou Rong 邹容.¹⁸ Moreover, there are strong parallels between both Communist and Nationalist (Guomindang) imagery concerning their celebration of their own revolutionary traditions—the worship of martyrs, the emphasis on the spirit of self-sacrifice, and so forth. However, given the limits of space, it is a more realistic goal to concentrate on a discussion of Communist culture as the most relevant and intimate tradition for the 1989 demonstrations.

Scholars have noted the influence of Communist revolutionary heroism on the student manifestations of political idealism in 1989.¹⁹ In examining the Communist revolutionary tradition here, what I propose to do is focus on popular images of dedicated revolutionaries and martyrs that mainly feature in revolutionary literature, images that were used to personify revolutionary idealism. I will demonstrate how this tradition imbricated with incoherence, ambivalence and self-contradictions influenced these contemporary activists. In this paper, I look at both the explicit and implicit domains of the Communist revolutionary tradition, both of which crucially shaped—but in their various ways—the performances of historical actors in their expression of "political theater." I will argue that the explicit domain of public activism can be defined as the range of emotions and action that the official tradition of revolutionary heroism openly and directly praises, the implicit domain the more subtle, ambivalent, and even non-idealistic messages that such activism conveys.

THE COMMUNIST TRADITION OF REVOLUTIONARY IDEALISM

The Dissemination of a Tradition

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the party has invested considerable effort in preserving what it calls its precious revolutionary legacy. For instance, beginning in the '50s, the propaganda authorities collected and published the writings of revolutionary martyrs such as Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白 and Fang Zhimin 方志敏. Later the China Youth Publishing House (中国青年出版社) produced *Poetry of Revolutionary Martyrs* (革命烈士诗抄), edited by Xiao San 肖三, a veteran revolutionary.²⁰ Writers also chose revolutionary idealism as the motif for their novels, and many feature films were based on popular works of fiction like *The Song of Youth* (青春之歌) and *Red Cliff* (红岩).

Obviously, intellectuals in their thirties or above were influenced by the above repositories. In Lao Gui's 老鬼 *Blood Red Sunset* (血色黄昏), Xu Zuo 徐佐, one of the main characters, when struggled against by the military authorities of Inner Mongolia, chants a poem originally written by Xia Minghan 夏明瀚, a famous revolutionary martyr: "I fear not decapitation; / All-important is the truth of my ideology."²¹ Writing their post-June 4 defenses in jail, Wang Juntao 王军涛 and Chen Ziming 陈子明, two noted activists in the late '80s, mentioned that the awe-inspiring acts of previous generations of party icons in defiance of the executioner's axe were a major inspiration of the 1989 protesters.²²

Examining the student generation of the movement, we should not underestimate the influence of the Communist tradition of political idealism. Official publishers reprinted much of the pre-Cultural Revolution literature after 1976. And the government and the educational authorities integrated these revolutionary pieces into the school curriculum and extra-curricular activities. Let me give just a few examples:

In 1983, in an announcement addressed to teachers, the education department recommended books like Fang Zhimin's *My Beloved China* (可爱的中国) and a biography of Zhou Enlai 周恩来 to high-school students.²³ In another document the authorities stressed the importance of the teaching of patriotism—an educational program including such localized practices as visiting "revolutionary sites" (*geming yizhi* 革命遗址) and memorial parks dedicated to revolutionary martyrs (*lieshi lingyuan* 烈士陵园).²⁴

To make political education more appealing to students, some school authorities experimented with screening of movies, including "classic" revolutionary and patriotic films like "Winning Eternity in the Burning Fire"

²⁰ The collections of Fang's and Qu's works were published in 1952 and 1953 respectively; and see Xiao San, ed., *Geming lieshi shichao* [Poetry of revolutionary martyrs] (Beijing: Zhongguo Qingnian Chubanshe, 1962), Introduction, p.1.

²¹ Xia Minghan (written in 1928), in *ibid.*, pp.27; translation based on Hung-yok Ip, "Politics and individuality in Communist revolutionary culture," *Modern China* 23.1 (1997): 43.

²² See Liu Xiaobo, "That holy word, 'revolution'," p.317.

²³ Guojia Jiaowei Zhongxuesi, ed., *Zhongxue jiaoyu wenxian xuanbian* [Selected official documents on high school education] (Beijing: Guangming Ribao Chubanshe, 1987), pp.401–2.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Zhonggong Zhongyang Xuanchuanbu Jiaoyuju he Zhongyang Jiaoyu Kexue Yanjiu Bu, eds, *Shehui wenhua shengbuo yu zhong-xue jiaoyu deyu diaocha wenji* [Surveys on cultural life and moral education in high schools] (Beijing: Zhongguo Renmin Daxue Chubanshe, 1990), pp.180–3.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.207–9.

(在烈火中永生, based on *Red Cliff*), “The Song of Youth” (青春之歌), “The Sino-Japanese War” (甲午风云), and so on.²⁵ In the early ’80s, teachers in a middle school in Qingdao even used the stamp-collecting club to discuss the lives of famous revolutionary martyrs and the history of the CCP.²⁶

We have yet to determine how such practices varied geographically. Moreover, official attempts, however widespread and systematic, to teach the “revolutionary” and “patriotic” tradition tell us nothing about the degree of student receptivity. But it seems that the constant propagation of revolutionary tradition did leave complex impressions on the minds of the Chinese populace, including people who came of age after the Cultural Revolution. In the 1989 activist Gao Xin’s 高新 reminiscences of his imprisonment, *Vileness and Glory* (卑微与辉煌), he described how he and other inmates, most of whom were still in their twenties, discussed the film “Winning Eternity in the Burning Fire,” jokingly comparing the Nationalist and Communist prisons, one filmic, the other very real.²⁷ The writings of 1989 student activists show convincingly, as scholars have noted, that the Communist revolutionary modes of political idealism had a significant impact on their methods and styles of self-expression (see below).

Certainly, the officially-defined tradition of revolutionary idealism is a complex and fluid one, in terms of how it was represented by the state to the public, what kinds of channels were used to convey the nobility of political devotion, and so forth. All this, together with other cultural, social and political factors, conditioned various generations to interpret differently that tradition, or to pay attention to different parts of that tradition. But it is precisely by comparing what was available in the repertoire of revolutionary idealism and how the 1989 political activists made use of such a repertoire that we can think about the unique psychology and sentiments of these historical actors in contemporary China.

The Explicit Level of Revolutionary Idealism: the Art of Political Devotion

²⁷ Gao Xin, *Beiwu yu buihuang* [Vileness and glory] (Taipei: Shibao Wenhua Chubanshe, 1991), pp.31, 52–4.

The Communist revolutionary tradition contains vivid images of revolutionaries who demonstrated their political passion and this, according to Wang Juntao and Chen Ziming, inspired the 1989 political activists.

In the tradition of revolutionary idealism, political passions always manifest themselves in terms of sacrifice. One of the most well-known examples was Jiang Xueqin 江雪琴, the fictional incarnation of Jiang Zhuyun 江竹筠, a woman revolutionary and the most outstanding heroine of the novel *Red Cliff*, as well as of the film “Winning Eternity in the Burning Fire.” Luo Guangbin 罗广斌, the author of both the novel and the film script, who stayed in the same prison with Jiang Zhuyun from 1948 to 1949, described how in refusing to provide information to the enemy she chose to submit

herself to being tortured by having bamboo slivers inserted under her finger nails.²⁸ The poetry of revolutionaries also frequently highlights both their and their comrades' ability to endure physical torture. To commemorate a comrade who demonstrated extraordinary will power in tolerating pain, Xu Xiaoxuan 许晓轩, who was executed by the Nationalist government in the late '40s, wrote: "Ten torture sessions failed to mute his powerful condemnation of the enemy; /A true hero he is, confronting execution with unsurpassed courage."²⁹

It is evident in revolutionary literature that in addition to withstanding physical torture devoted revolutionaries also accepted death as a drastic form of sacrifice. Zhou Wenyong 周文雍, arrested after the failure of the Guangzhou uprising in 1927, wrote the following poem on his cell wall: "For the party a brave man can give up his head; /Committed to the collective a hero can let his body be torn apart."³⁰ The message was crystal clear: when it was necessary, a revolutionary should sacrifice his life for the revolution. Fang Zhimin even conceived of there being joy in death: "Sacrificing for Communism; /Shedding my blood for the Soviet—all this I will do most willingly."³¹

Obviously, the willingness to be sacrificed—or even to die—was a crucial aspect of the revolutionaries' fortitude and commitment. But so were the ways in which one sacrificed oneself.

Revolutionary literature prescribes how one should behave when confronting death. Good revolutionaries could cry and weep for their comrades'

²⁸ Luo Guangbin and Yang Yiyan, *Hong yan* [Red cliff] (Hong Kong: Sanlian Shudian, 1978), pp.278–9.

²⁹ Xu Xiaoxuan (1948), in Xiao San, *Geming lieshi shichao*, p.344.

³⁰ Zhou Wenyong (1928), in *ibid.*, p.21; this translation is taken from Ip, "Politics and individuality in Communist revolutionary culture," p.43.

³¹ Fang Zhimin (1935), in Xiao San, *Geming lieshi shichao*, p.187.



Figure 1
Memorial park for revolutionary martyrs in Guangzhou, commemorating martyrs of the modern Chinese revolutionary tradition

³² See Luo and Yang, *Hong yan*, pp.240–1, 610. Certainly, some revered martyrs wept as they knew that they were going to leave behind their loved ones. (See the introduction by Xiao Hua in *Geming lieshi shuxin* [Letters of revolutionary martyrs, I] [Beijing: Zhongguo Qingnian Chubanshe, 1979], p.3.) However, the image of the revolutionary crying over his or her death is by no means prominent in the Communist revolutionary tradition.

deaths but not usually for their own.³² A determined revolutionary is one who not only accepts but even despises death. Confronting torture and the threat of death in *Red Cliff* Cheng Gang 成纲, a fictional character based on a young revolutionary called Chen Ran 陈然, wrote the following poem:

The most vicious torture and beatings are nothing for me;
Even death tries in vain to open my mouth ...
Facing my impending death I laugh freely;
The devil's castle crumbles amidst the roaring of my laughter ... ³³

While Cheng Gang denigrated the threat of death with fierce insolence,

others faced their end with dignified calmness. When Jiang Xueqin learnt that she was about to be executed, she combed her hair, smoothed out the wrinkles of her dress, and told her weeping comrade: "When we need to die for our Communist ideals, we, every one of us, should face this ultimate sacrifice with a peaceful mien and tranquil heart."³⁴ Her heroic grace was echoed by the behavior of another woman revolutionary, Lin Hong 林红, in *The Song of Youth*. A seasoned radical, Lin left a final testament and distributed her property to her cellmates in a mood of complete calmness and control. As she was taken away by the prison authorities, she led the others in

Figure 2

Tomb of the martyrs of the 1927 Guangzhou uprising in which Zhou Wenyong and others lost their lives



³³ Luo and Yang, *Hong yan*, pp.171–2; Xiao San, *Geming lieshi shicbao*, pp.337–43.

³⁴ Luo and Yang, *Hong yan*, p.524.

³⁵ Yang Mo, *Qingchun zhi ge* [The song of youth] (Hong Kong: Sanlian Shudian, 1978), pp.396–7.

chanting revolutionary slogans.³⁵

To its audience revolutionary literature conveys a loud and clear message that death is an honorable and heroic thing. Equally, however, a sophisticated revolutionary does not regard death as the most cherished goal; more important is one's determination to work incessantly for the just cause. In the novel *The Song of Youth*, when talking to Lin Hong, Lin Daojing 林道静, an aspiring revolutionary, expresses a premature readiness to die: "I'm not a party member, but I want to give my life for the party and the greater cause of humanity. I believe that the time has come. All I'm thinking of is how to prepare myself for the last moment." Lin Hong loses no time in criticizing this unseemly eagerness:

You mustn't think that being arrested is the end of everything, or that death is sure to follow Wherever a Communist finds himself, even in prison, he should continue working for the revolution. We must work till the last

moment, till our last breath. We want to live to see a Communist China, and to welcome that day with joy ...³⁶

In a similar fashion, in his *Death!—a Communist Martyr's Memoir*, the imprisoned Fang Zhimin stresses the art of living: "Should we passively await our execution? No, absolutely not! We should act; we should struggle A Communist should try his best till his death; a Communist should struggle till his death."³⁷

In addition, a devoted revolutionary should also cultivate a particular life style—that is, a contentment with poverty and simplicity. Li Linguang 李临光, a revolutionary who participated in party work in the Jiangsu 江苏 area in the late '20s, loses his health after a few months in jail. Returning home he is pressured by his mother to abandon the revolutionary cause. He refuses and leaves with his wife, explaining his decision in a farewell letter:

After we leave we will resume our simple (*qingku* 清苦) lives as revolutionaries. Our existence will certainly not be comfortable and peaceful, but we shall feel more at ease. Our food is basic and coarse, but for us it tastes a lot better than the delicacies at home ...³⁸

Emphasizing that he had spent all the money he had raised to foster the revolutionary cause, Fang Zhimin proudly declares: "leading a simple and impoverished (*qingpin* 清贫) life contributes crucially to our victory over the many difficulties we encounter."³⁹ Given this attitude, no wonder it was thought that those who were more concerned about personal comfort would degenerate almost too easily and readily into treachery. In *Red Cliff*, for example, Fu Zhigao 甫志高, a revolutionary who enjoyed decorating his home and was reluctant to give up his comfortable life, defects to the Nationalist side after his arrest.⁴⁰

Perseverance amidst poverty, the will power to struggle to the end, and most importantly, the courage to accept death—all these things conjured up the image of the devoted revolutionary as a spiritually formidable individual. Having survived torture, Jiang Zhuyun tells her comrades: "Bamboo slivers are merely bamboo; the will of the Communist is made of iron and steel."⁴¹ In fact, iron and steel became important Soviet-inspired symbols that signified the Communist's fighting spirit. Yin Fu 殷夫, a young Communist poet executed by the government in 1931, wrote: "We are young Bolsheviks; / Everything of ours is iron and steel—/Our brains, /Our language, /Our discipline."⁴² Also visible in Yin Fu's portrait of young Bolsheviks is the image of the powerful youth. Zhang Chi 张炽, who had joined the Nanchang uprising of 1917, wrote to his younger brother in praise of the image of young idealists: "The youth are the pillars of our society. Therefore, we should choose this path—revolution ..."⁴³

What sometimes accompanied the images of the dynamic revolutionary and of powerful youth was the nurturing portrait of the mother, frequently used as being symbolic either of the party or China itself. Revolutionaries'

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.385–6.

³⁷ Fang (1935), in Fang Zhimin, *Fang Zhimin yuzhongyizhu* [Fang Zhimin's prison works] (Jiangxi: Jiangxi Renmin Chubanshe, 1977), p.27.

³⁸ Li Linguang (1928), in *Geming lieshi sbuxin*, p.81.

³⁹ Fang (1935), in Fang Zhimin, *Keaide Zbongguo* [My beloved China] (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 1952), p.3.

⁴⁰ Luo and Yang, *Hongyan*, pp.4, 137, 144–5.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.290.

⁴² Yin Fu (1930), in Xiao San, *Geming lieshi sbichao*, p.88.

⁴³ Zhang Chi (1924), in *Yubuatai geming lieshi sbuxinxuan* [Letters from revolutionary martyrs executed at Yuhuatai] (Nanjing: Nanjing Yuhuatai Lieshi Lingyuan Guanlichu Shiliao Shi, 1983), p.93.

⁴⁴ Lin (1934), in Xiao San, *Geming lieshi sbichao xubian* [Poetry of the revolutionary martyrs II] (Beijing: Zhongguo Qingnian Chubanshe, 1982), pp.179–80.

⁴⁵ Lin (1935), *ibid.*, p.179.

⁴⁶ Li Ce (1941), *ibid.*, pp.201–2. Let me emphasize here that emotional strength and independence as revealed in the poetry of revolutionaries are different from independence in political thinking.

⁴⁷ Fang (1935), in Fang Zhimin, *Keaide Zhongguo*, p.22–4.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.27.

⁴⁹ Chen Hui (1942), in Xiao San, *Geming lieshi sbichao*, pp.250–2.

poems highlighted their own emotional attachment to the party. Lin Qing 林青 is arrested for organising underground party activities in Guizhou and writes: “I rely on my heartbeat to communicate with my mother; /... Let us, as in a chorus, /sing as loudly as we can./The west wind/will send our songs to our mothers’ hearts.”⁴⁴ We should note, however, that according to the revolutionary tradition, attachment to the highest authorities in this supplicant-like fashion did not make the revolutionaries weak and dependent rebels. Lin Qing emphasizes that although jailed he and his comrades remained “spirited.”⁴⁵ A good revolutionary should, moreover, utilize his internal resources to maintain his loyalty to the party. Mistreated by party leaders, Li Ce 李策 says to his wife: “The enemy’s whipping I can bear;/Our mother’s misunderstanding I am willing to tolerate.”⁴⁶

This image of the strong sons and daughters is often more directly paired with the love for another mother—China. In *My Beloved China*, Fang Zhimin exclaims:

My friends, can you hear our mother’s weeping and wailing? ... Look, friends! Behold the ravenous face of that devil “imperialism”! ... Our mother China is surrounded by five of these imperialist devils ... Mother, ... are they soon going to drain all your blood?⁴⁷

He then cries out: “My friends, ... our urgent task is to save our dying mother from the cannibalism of the imperialist devils!”⁴⁸ It is in such passionate passages that the patriotic and revolutionary Chinese represent themselves as being the strong progeny of mother China. Combining aesthetic sensitivity with political passion, Chen Hui 陈辉, who enjoyed writing poetry while busily engaged in revolutionary work, expressed his love for China in 1942 in the following lines:

Oh motherland [*zuguo* 祖国],
I am yours—
A young warrior with dark purple skin.
...
Oh motherland,
You nourish me with the milk [*rujiang* 乳浆] of your love [*aiqing* 爱情].
I shall then defend you with my flesh and blood.
...
Perhaps I shall fall tomorrow ...
The flower of love will grow
In the yellow soil where my bones are buried.⁴⁹

Although he did not explicitly address China as his mother, Chen did make use of the maternal symbol of milk to describe his country. Unequivocal, at any rate, is the image of a powerful son defending his ancestral land.

Nevertheless, even in the array of officially-approved revolutionary literature, images of devoted Communists and self-images are imbued with traces of ambivalence—that is to say, political idealism is often interwoven with less than idealistic attitudes.

*The Implicit Level of Revolutionary Idealism: Non-Idealism*50 Deng (1921), *ibid.*, pp.138–9.51 Cai (1949), *ibid.*, pp.370–1.

Revolutionary literature ironically points to the hardships and pains of a revolutionary life while exploiting the act of sacrifice—whether martyrdom, an exhausting and materially poor life, or something else—to portray the political life of the revolutionary. For sacrifice per se connotes forsaking what one finds valuable, what can bring joy and comfort, and what many people in this world regard as enticing.

Travelling back and forth between Changsha 长沙 and Hankou 汉口 as part of his revolutionary activities around 1921, Deng Zhongxia 邓中夏 was very sensitive to, though not necessarily unhappy about, his hectic political life: “boundless is Lake Dongting 洞庭湖 /which I cross twice in five days.” However, even at such an early stage of his revolutionary career, he was proud of his ideological choice although deeply aware of his hard life: “What will our world become? /Communism is its future. /Lonely and strenuously I struggle for my ideals, following my own heart (*candan jingying zhi, Wo xing shi wo su* 惨淡经营之, 我行适我素).”⁵⁰

Cai Mengwei 蔡梦慰, a newspaper reporter jailed by the Nationalist government in Chongqing 重庆, highlighted his comrades’ political devotion by stressing their internal struggle:

Like the priest overcoming the devil's temptation,
you reject the allure of wealth and status.

...

You pause not, when passing gold heaped high;
Nor cast a glance at the official cap, all decorated.
Your lover's eyes;
Your mother's smile—

How many hearts of revolutionary youths are torn by emotions?
Nodding in assent, or refusing with a shake of the head?

A glorious conqueror, you make your admirable choice only after winning
in fierce battles!⁵¹

The representation of sacrifice, therefore, becomes a site where both dedication to and emotional ambivalence about one's revolutionary career are displayed.

We should note, in addition, that in the milieu of revolutionary literature, self-sacrifice co-existed, to borrow from Communist terminology, with “individual heroism.” In his “On the Cultivation of Communist Party Members,” a pamphlet widely studied by Communists during the Yan'an period and in the '50s, Liu Shaoqi 刘少奇 defined and attacked personal heroism:

Arrogance, individual heroism and exhibitionism still persist in the minds of many comrades A person who has all these problematic tendencies likes to calculate his status in the party He is highly concerned about his own reputation [*baoming* 好名] [H]e wants to make himself a great historical

Figure 3

Yan'an—the hall where the CCP held its Seventh Congress (from April 23 to June 11, 1945) in which Mao delivered one of his celebrated reports, “On United Government” (Lun lianhe zhengfu 论联合政府)



⁵² *Zhengfeng wenxian* [Documents of the rectification campaign] (Jiefang Shi, 1950), pp.82–3.

⁵³ Editorial, *Renmin Ribao*, 4/8/1957.

⁵⁴ Fang (1935), in Fang Zhimin, *Keaide Zhongguo*, p.7.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Fang (1935), in Fang Zhimin, *Wo congsbi geming douzhengde lueshu* [A brief account of my revolutionary struggle] (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1980), p.20.

figure, a hero When he experiences frustration and senses other comrades' indifference toward him, he naturally tends to lose his revolutionary stand⁵²

The criticism of individual heroism was accompanied by praise for selfless sacrifice:

Before the victory of our revolution, Communists and many revolutionaries disregarded the danger of decapitation, and the possibility of imprisonment. They left their hometowns, leading wandering and unstable lives; they put aside all considerations of fame and profit, forsaking personal comfort. Their minds only concentrated on the nation's survival and the people's happiness.⁵³

In reality, however, political devotion was sometimes intermingled with “individual heroism.” In *My Beloved China*, Fang Zhimin recalled his youthful patriotism on the eve of his death:

I imagined ... enrolling in a military academy, being progressively promoted in the army, commanding thousands of soldiers, and organizing campaigns that would overwhelm the islands of Japan! When I studied European history, I aspired to become Napoleon; when I studied Chinese history, I wanted to become Yue Fei 岳飛.⁵⁴

Admitting, in retrospect, that “such naive and confusing thoughts should elicit a lot of laughter,” Fang still indulged himself in his earlier, unsophisticated idealism. “A young man's passion for his nation was as innocent and as pure as a young maiden's first love.”⁵⁵ Thus, at the end of his life, as a Communist who proclaimed that he had offered “everything” to the party,⁵⁶ Fang was not prone to criticize his earlier pursuit of self-importance, which remained interwoven with patriotic sentiments.

Another telling example of individual heroism is that of Xu Xiaoxuan. In his eulogy to a comrade killed by the Nationalist government in 1949, he wrote: "Facing execution he sang most valiantly; /to catch a glimpse of the hero the masses all took to the streets."⁵⁷ In glorifying his comrade, Xu unintentionally betrayed his own less than idealistic understanding of martyrdom: to some extent at least, it signified the public recognition of the individual.

In the Communist tradition of revolutionary idealism, the boundary between the intrinsic glory of ideological devotion to the cause on the one hand, and social recognition and fame on the other is often blurred. Revolutionary martyrs, as the officially-defined tradition of cultural portrayal shows, believed in the glory of their revolutionary career or of their death. Arrested as a leader and coordinator of the revolutionary activities in southern China after the CCP had withdrawn on its Long March, Liu Bojian 刘伯坚 wrote to his wife: "Try your very best to educate ... our three children and encourage them to inherit my glorious revolutionary career."⁵⁸ Shi Yanfen 史砚芬, a leader of the Communist Youth League in Jiangsu, wrote to his younger sister and brother: "I die for our society, for China, and for all mankind. My death is both necessary and glorious."⁵⁹ Heroes in revolutionary novels echo such sentiments. In *Red Cliff*, when Xu Yunfeng 许云峰, is about

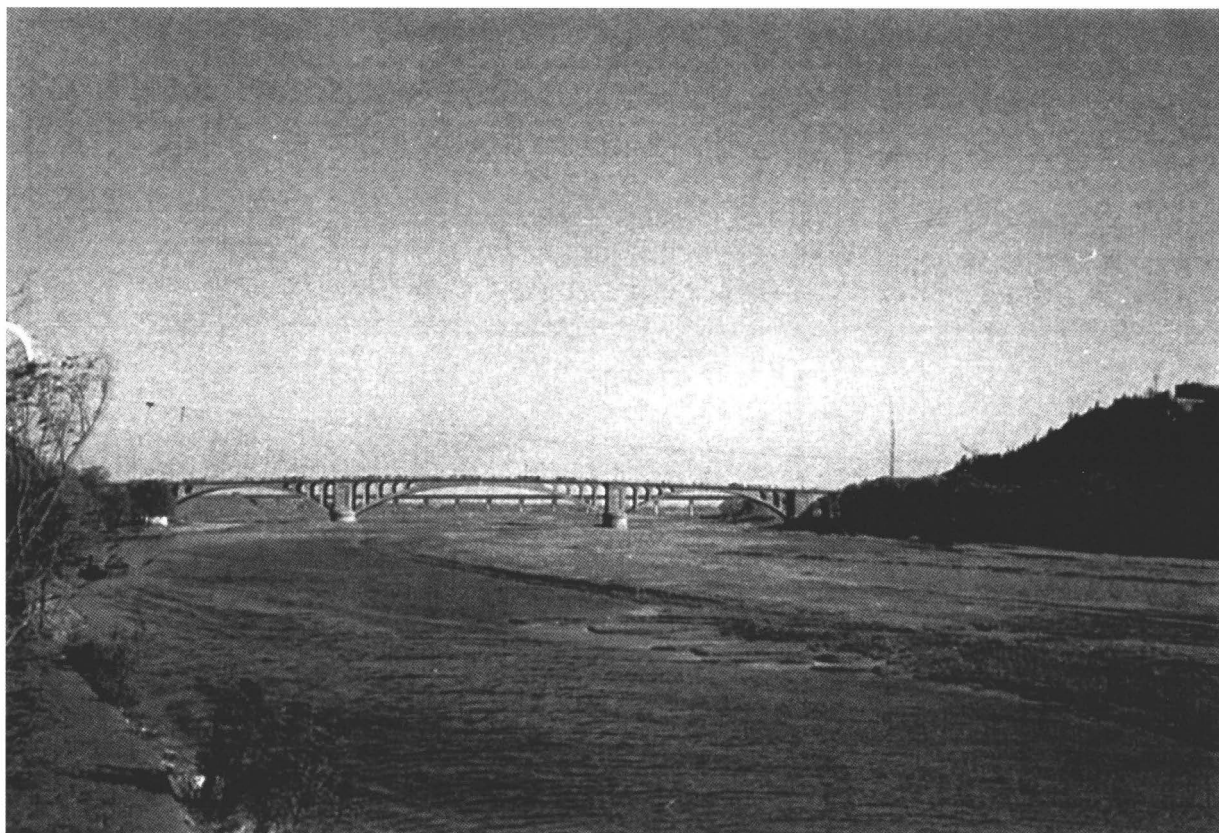
⁵⁷ Xu (1949), in Xiao San, *Geming lieshi sbichao*, p.315.

⁵⁸ Liu (1935), *Geming lieshi sbuxin*, p.100.

⁵⁹ Shi Yanfen (1928), in *Yubuatai geming lieshi*, p.26.

Figure 4

Yan'an—the Yan River, an image habitually featured in Communist cultural products



⁶⁰ Luo and Yang, *Hong yan*, p.576.

to be executed by his Nationalist enemies on the eve of the Communist victory he proudly declared: “Who are the true immortals? When the individual’s life is united with the proletariat’s everlasting, vital revolutionary cause, that is truly unsurpassed glory!”⁶⁰

But while the state highlighted the intrinsic sense of glory among revolutionaries, it was, ironically and inevitably, publicized and therefore “externalized” in Communist society. After the founding of the Communist state memorial parks—for instance, the Yuhuatai 雨花台 Park in Nanjing—for revolutionary martyrs were built; top leaders wrote prose and poetry in praise of those who died and sacrificed themselves for the revolution. Numerous films with revolutionary themes were produced; memorial activities were organized; biographies, autobiographies, memoirs and famous martyrs’ works were commissioned and published. Thus in the state-sponsored Communist culture, what was avowedly intrinsic glory was transformed into a form of public honor and social prestige. Moreover, this transformation contributed to the glamorous image of Communist revolutionaries as individuals and historical actors.

How, then, did the Communist revolutionary tradition—on both its explicit and implicit levels, its art of devotion and its non-idealistic side—manifest itself among the 1989 demonstrators? How did the political activists of the late ’80s intentionally and unintentionally variously invoke and deviate from such a well-established mode of idealism? What are the parallels between Communist revolutionary heroism and the cultural products of 1989, and what are the differences?

SELF-REPRESENTATIONS OF THE 1989 ACTIVISTS: IMPERFECT POLITICAL IDEALISM

Celebrating Sacrifice

⁶¹ In Han Minzhu, ed., *Cries for democracy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), p.200.

As stated above, some scholars have noted that the Communist revolutionary tradition exerted a strong influence on the style and form of self-expression among the protesting students in 1989. Examples abound, a major instance being the impassioned cry in the hunger-strikers’ statement:

This country is our country,
Its people are our people,
The government is our government,
If we do not cry out, who will?
If we do not act, who will?⁶¹

Too prominent to be ignored is the parallel between this declaration of political activism and what Mao wrote many decades ago as a young radical in Hunan,⁶² as has been noted in the 1995 documentary film “The Gate of Heavenly Peace.”⁶³

Interestingly, just as the Communist state localized political education and therefore, to some extent, revolutionary tradition, the 1989 activists localized their movement: in Hunan, some protesters seemed to believe that they belonged to a tradition of moral and political idealism which included revered Hunanese from classical times to the modern, from Qu Yuan 屈原 to Tan Sitong to Peng Dehuai 彭德怀 and Hu Yaobang 胡耀邦.⁶⁴ Further research on how contemporary dissidents alluded to local pre-Communist and Communist icons in representing themselves and their movement is certainly interesting, as it will enrich our understanding of the psychological and intellectual constitution of political actors in different locales.

The student demonstrators also exploited the motif of death by borrowing heavily from the Communist language of political idealism. To demonstrate his willingness to die, Zhou Wenyong wrote: “I can let myself be beheaded; / I can let my limbs be bent and broken; / But what I will not abandon is my revolutionary spirit (*tou ke duan, zhi ke zhe; geming jingshen buke mie* 头可断, 肢可折, 革命精神不可灭).”⁶⁵ As the Chinese students pledged not to retreat from Tiananmen Square on June 3, they vowed: “[We] can let ourselves be beheaded, / We can shed our blood; / But what we will not abandon is the People’s Square (*tou ke duan, xue ke liu, renmin guangchang buke diu* 头可断, 血可流, 人民广场不可丢).”⁶⁶ While it is hard to identify exactly the direct and indirect channels through which the students learned Zhou’s expression, the resemblance between the poem of the former and the slogan of the latter is remarkable.

In fact, the theme of sacrifice, essential for the Communist mode of political idealism, also features throughout the writings, verbal statements, and action of many 1989 activists. In a now-famous interview given to Philip Cunningham, an American graduate student and media stringer, Chai Ling 柴玲, the prominent woman leader of the protest, said, “I went to the broadcast station, [telling them] that I was willing to become the commander-in-chief of the hunger strike movement, and to sacrifice myself.”⁶⁷ In a poster signed by “a patriotic student from the Academy of traditional Chinese music”, the author declared: “We are shedding our blood for our mother—our motherland! What is there to be afraid of!”⁶⁸

However, although the 1989 activists borrowed heavily from the Communist repertoire, and despite the fact that the theme of sacrifice was common to both their and earlier Communists’ writings, the contemporary demonstrators’ political idealism can only be judged as imperfect, if judged against Communist revolutionary standards.

⁶² Mao (1919), in Mao Zedong, *Mao Zedong ji* [The works of Mao Zedong] (Hong Kong: Jindai Shiliao Gongying She, 1975), vol.1, p.66.

⁶³ Directed by Richard Gordon and Carma Hinton, and written by Geremie R. Barmé and John Crowley.

⁶⁴ Asia Watch and Tang Boqiao, *Anthems of defeat* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1992), p.1.

⁶⁵ Zhou Wenyong (1928), in Xiao San, *Geming lieshi shichao*, p.21.

⁶⁶ Chai Ling (1989), in Zhang Jingyu, *Ziyou zhi xue minzhu zhi hua* [The blood of liberty; the flower of democracy] (Taipei: Guoli Zhengzhi Da Xue Guoji Guanxi Yanjiu Zhongxin, 1989), p.615; also see Liu Xiaobo, *Mori xingcunzbede dubai*, p.217.

⁶⁷ Chia Ling (1989), in Zhang Jingyu, *Ziyou zhi xue minzhu zhi hua*, p.423.

⁶⁸ In Han Minzhu, *Cries for democracy*, p.213.

⁶⁹ This useful but relatively unfamiliar term may be defined for our purposes as the possibility of recognised heroism being no longer restricted to members of the Communist Party but potentially open to everybody.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.199–201.

⁷¹ Feng Yulian (1989), in Feng Yulian, Ma Wenjing, Zeng Diwei, Deng Qinglin and Liu Sumei, *Sijiao yu buisheng* [Cries and echoes] (Hong Kong: Kunlin Chuban Youxian Gongsi, 1989), p.87.

Deviating from the Communist Art of Devotion: Ordinarizing ⁶⁹ the Heroes

While behind the prominent theme of sacrifice the Communist revolutionary tradition implied a basic ambivalence, the 1989 student protesters hastened to publicize their complex feelings. The hunger strikers' statement is characterized by a straightforward display of conflicting emotions:

In this bright, sunny month of May, we are hunger striking. In this moment of most beautiful and happy youth, we must firmly leave all of life's joys behind us. We do this ever so unwillingly, ever so unhappily ... We do not want to die; we want to live, to live fully, for we are at life's most promising age ... But if the death of one or a few people can enable more to live better, and can make our motherland prosperous, then we have no right to cling to life.⁷⁰

In other words, the students proved their political passion by emphasizing their heart-wrenching abandonment of what they found dear and precious. The official tradition of political idealism occluded the ambivalence involved in the lives of revolutionaries by highlighting the devoted Communists' painful sacrifice, whereas the 1989 student protesters explicitly accentuated their ambivalence by dramatizing their sacrifice, and concomitantly their political devotion.

The unabashed and emphatic exposition of divergent emotions bespeaks the limit of the student protesters' self-beatification: notwithstanding their attempts to portray themselves as self-sacrificing heroes, they deemed that the representation of feelings and thinking not necessarily congruent with their political idealism was legitimate and acceptable. It is therefore not so surprising that a tolerance of this condition of emotional complexity was accompanied, as shown in some protesters' attitudes, by a significant degree of deviation from the Communist cultivation of devotion.

The Communist virtue of austerity, marking the images of devoted revolutionaries, did not survive in the 1989 movement. When Wuer Kaixi 吾尔开希, a student leader from Beijing Normal University, was criticized for being fashion-conscious and increasingly particular about his appearance, he told a Hong Kong reporter in self-defence: "I have enjoyed dressing up for years. This may not be admirable; this may even be a fault in my character. I also like laughing and dining, and love being popular. What is so wrong with all of this ... ? Must I keep a straight face all the time and look like a shabby tramp ... ?"⁷¹

Life in Tiananmen Square, notes the philosophy teacher Liu Xiaobo 刘晓波, both a participant in and sardonic observer of the protests, was characterized by an "astounding waste" of resources:

The students threw away their drinks before finishing them ... Basic necessities were carelessly discarded everywhere in the Square. The brands

of cigarettes the students smoked, and the labels of the wine and the drinks they consumed were getting more and more expensive ...⁷²

As a well-known intellectual who had quite a few connections in Beijing, Liu confessed: “When the students were fasting, I hung around in the Square at a loose end. Compared to the students’ lives, mine—what I ate, where I stayed—was far more comfortable. A friend of mine provided me with an apartment close to the Square ...”⁷³

The Communist art of devotion stresses the importance of treasuring one’s life for the sake of being able to continue the revolutionary enterprise, whereas the 1989 activists, contradicting their pronouncement of a love for life, emphasized their enthusiasm for death, an enthusiasm Liu Xiaobo sarcastically labelled as a “martyr complex.”⁷⁴ Certainly, not everyone eagerly embraced the possibility or even the pose of heroic death. Some graduate students attempted to de-emphasize the importance of martyrdom: “At this moment, every democratic student (*minzhu xuesheng* 民主学生) is imbued with the determination [to die]. Such determination will certainly bestow a fearless spirit on the individual. However, the implementation of democracy depends upon persistence and long-term engagement with concrete work. In this connection, both at present and in the future, a martyr’s passion is not as valuable as a brave individual’s rational mind.”⁷⁵ Interestingly, recognizing the prevalence of the zest for death and attempting to curb it, this statement itself reveals the domination of a desire for martyrdom.

In the demonstrators’ various self-representations, however, the clearly expressed admiration for death was much more complex than a yearning for martyrdom. Let us look at a poem written by a certain participant, for example:

Who will crush my skull?
Walking the journey of death;
Trapped in the current of death; I ask—
Who are of my kind, weak and soft?
Who are my brothers, arrogant and proud?
...
My eyes, hollow and dead,
Gaze into the dark;
Appreciate from afar the original beauty of the world.
Yes—so unfortunate am I
That I cannot die.⁷⁶

There was also a popular song among the students in the Square, originally composed and sung by Cui Jian 崔健, China’s then most famous rocker. It contains these lines: “I don’t want to leave; I don’t want to survive; /I don’t want to live a solid (*shibizaizai* 实实在在) life. /I want to leave, I want to survive; /I want to die and as a new man to be reborn.”⁷⁷ In these declarations of longing for death, paired with a wish for rebirth and an

⁷² Liu Xiaobo, *Mori xingcunzbede dubai*, p.142.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.145.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.27; also see Macartney, in Hicks, *Broken mirror*, p.10.

⁷⁵ Chinese graduate students in Beijing [1989], in *Kuban ziyou* [Weeping and crying for freedom], ed. Li Ruitang (Taipei: Wenxun Zazhishe, 1989), p.178.

⁷⁶ Lianhebao Bianjibu, ed., *Tiananmen 1989* [Tiananmen Square 1989] (Taipei: Wenxun Zazhishe, 1989), pp.379–80.

77 Cui Jian, *ibid.*, p.390.

78 In Han Minzhu, *Cries for democracy*, p.201.

79 Qun'er (1989), in Li Ruiteng, *Kuban ziyou*, p.206. In asserting the students' independent and powerful image, WuerKaixi considered the attitude of many eminent intellectuals toward the students "condescending." And years after the massacre, he still talked about how the government and older intellectuals treated students "condescendingly" as minors (Hinton and Gordon, "The Gate of Heavenly Peace").

80 In Han Minzhu, *Cries for democracy*, pp.200–1.

81 *Ibid.*, p.201.

82 In his article entitled "Political institutions, discourse and imagination in China at Tiananmen," Rudolf Wagner analyzes how in 1989 the Communist Party treated the protesters as "children": the state combined "fatherly rigidity" with motherly benevolence in dealing with the students. He also considers the crackdown a "fatherly" punishment (Rudolf Wagner in James Manor, ed., *Rethinking third world politics* [Harlow: Longman, 1991], pp.40–1).

83 Hinton and Gordon, "The Gate of Heavenly Peace."

84 Zhang Jingyu, *Ziyou zhi xue minzhu zhi bua*, pp.616, 631–3.

appreciation of the world's beauty, we see the desperation of a generation that was created out of their discontent with the status quo.

Furthermore, also present in the 1989 protests was a self-contradictory image—or rather self-image—of the idealistic youth. Like the May Fourth generation or young Communist revolutionaries, the students depicted themselves as a powerful corps of people who could change history. Always mindful of their youth, hunger strikers wrote: "The vows written with our lives will brighten the skies of the republic."⁷⁸ In a letter which was allegedly written by a girl to her aunt, we find the following statement: "Auntie, ... the final victory belongs to the people. You will be so proud of your child. China is our China!"⁷⁹

Nonetheless, the image of powerful youth was intertwined with that of children who sometimes appeared simply too frail for the task they faced. In an open letter to the citizens of Beijing, students from The People's University cried out: "Mama, we are not wrong." Hunger strikers' statements frequently and vividly invoked the image of fragile youth. Reminding readers of their own "soft and tender" shoulders, hunger strikers pleaded: "As we suffer from hunger, Papa, Mama, do not grieve; when we depart this life, aunts and uncles, please do not be sad."⁸⁰ This is not to say that young Communist martyrs did not bid farewell to their families in a similar vein, but rather expressed a particular youthful frailty that characterized the self-representations of the 1989 student activists.

Concomitant with the contradictory self-image of the students as both children and responsible adults were confused attitudes towards "mother China." While they proclaimed their determination to protect or shed blood for the motherland, they also represented themselves as small children asking for mercy: "Mother China, look earnestly now upon your sons and daughters; can you remain indifferent as hunger mercilessly devours their youth and death fast approaches?"⁸¹ Did their efforts to depict themselves as children show that some student protesters did not regard themselves as formidable challengers to the authoritarian state?⁸²

Describing themselves as political idealists enacting moving scenes of sacrifice, the 1989 protesters nevertheless also revealed their hankering for life, their appreciation of or even pursuit of material comforts, and their desperation. While choosing to portray themselves as innocent, delicate youths, at the same time they represented themselves as helpless victims of harsh government repression. Some student activists who survived the ordeal of June 4 related details of their psychological state at the time of the Beijing massacre. Wang Dan, who was regarded by Liu Xiaobo as the most mature and rational student activist, and some other survivors admitted that they were numb in the face of the violent military action on the night of June 3.⁸³ In addition they elaborated upon how, when confronted with the movement's failure and brutal force, they and their comrades wept and wailed.⁸⁴

Certainly, emotionalism, shock, and bitter tears are totally understandable

responses to that night of bloodshed. But I would also argue that self-perceptions coloured to some extent the manner in which the students described how they dealt with both the threat and the reality of death. Thus, in addition to organizing forms of street theater that showed their willingness to make courageous sacrifice, the students also staged a series of “tear-jerker” events of a kind not usually contained in the repertoire of Communist literature or in the testaments of revolutionary martyrs which set the standard for the Communist heroic response to the threat of annihilation.

In their self-representations, post-June 4 memoirs, speeches and so on, the 1989 actors “ordinarized” the image of hero for contemporary Chinese culture: gone was the spiritually formidable Communist hero who, despite his emotional ambivalence, could sacrifice all and stand up to the most hair-raising kind of suppression to protect the motherland and fight for the political cause.

The Craving for Individual Heroism and a Glamorous Public Image

Also noteworthy is the presence of a yearning for personal heroism and for public glamour in the 1989 protests. An analysis of the protesters’ desire for fame, influence, and prestige will enable us, to some extent at least, to ponder the question of how Communist revolutionary heroism affected the contemporary demonstrators’ political behavior with its non-idealistic messages.

During the movement, some activists went to considerable lengths to emphasize their altruistic idealism and attempted to display nonchalance when it came to personal fame and influence. Chai Ling told a Hong Kong reporter: “We are not so well-known as to be interested in such things as fame and reputation; we want to work silently and diligently. Feng Congde 封从德 [Chai Ling’s husband] and I particularly hate being in the limelight.”⁸⁵ In a poem dedicated to the hunger strikers and signed simply “the citizens,” the authors seemed to be celebrating the selfless submersion of demonstrators into the fighting collective:

Classmate, do not ask my name.
Reach out your hand,
My hand,
Our hands.
Let us lock our arms together—
As branches of a tree weave together death and suffering,
Weave together life and truth.
In May’s Square,
We use our own bodies
To braid a huge floral wreath—
An everlasting floral wreath.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Feng Yulian et al., *Sijiao yu huiseng*, p.98.

⁸⁶ In Han Minzhu, *Cries for democracy*, p.216.

⁸⁷ Liu Xiaobo, *Mori xingcunzbede dubai*, p.77.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.100.

⁸⁹ Macartney, "Students, heroes, pawns, or powerbrokers," p.8.

However, what the activists said and did more often than not suggests another side to the selfless collective: many of the 1989 demonstrators actually keenly pursued individual heroism and a public profile. It would be simplistic to hold the Communist tradition of idealism solely responsible for the patterns of personal heroism among the contemporary activists. But it is also evident that the officially-defined revolutionary tradition did help foster a sensitivity toward individual-oriented honor, accomplishments, and importance.

Criticizing Communist education, Liu Xiaobo said:

Since my high school days, I have objected to the interpretation of things that was taught to us in Communist political education. The people and masses made history; they constituted the basic dynamic of historical change—so we were told. And these views were regarded as being integral to so-called historical materialism. However, I saw something which was just the opposite in history books, including the writings on the history of the Chinese Communist party. In them I only saw individuals, dynamic and inventive individuals.⁸⁷

Liu's comment is directed at historical writings. He was a rare, or rather idiosyncratic, individual among public figures in the late 1980s on account of his ability to engage in critical and self-critical thinking. His statement nevertheless points to the strong possibility that within the Communist cultural-political milieu, including from the Communist revolutionary tradition, Chinese readers—though most of them did not share in Liu's mode of reflective thinking—were inculcated with a message of individual heroism.

In this context, the strident leader Wuer Kaixi could seem to be a case in point. In one of Wuer's numerous encounters with Liu Xiaobo, when Liu asked him not to brag so much about his importance for the movement, he abrasively responded: "What is so problematic about being arrogant?... Isn't it true that Mao Zedong was only in his twenties when he wrote: 'Let me ask the boundless earth:/Who will determine the world's fate (*Wen cangmang dadi, shui zhu fuchen* 问苍茫大地, 谁主浮沉?'"⁸⁸ What is interesting here is that Wuer Kaixi grasped the sense of self-importance in Mao's highly personal poem, which was written by the young Mao to recapture the mood of a cosy gathering of close comrades.

At any rate, examples among the 1989 students of a quest for personal fame or prominence are numerous. While students from different universities "vied for the honor of leading a demonstration," Jane Macartney notes, "there were even battles among individuals over who should have the honor of carrying the scarlet flag that headed each march."⁸⁹ When student leaders competed with one another, the students from the provinces looked on jealously:

Wuer Kaixi, Wang Dan, Chai Ling and people of their kind grab all the valuable things from the movement—fame, political capital, money, and countless romantic encounters. Their situation is a lot more secure than ours, since we

are just a bunch of inconspicuous people. Who will care if we are arrested and tortured? Even if we die, we'll die in silence.⁹⁰

Though she repeatedly proclaimed her dislike of the limelight, Chai Ling sometimes showed an incongruous propensity to expand—or sometimes to emphasize—her own importance. At the final stage of the movement, according to Liu Xiaobo, she appointed herself commander-in-chief of the Protect-Tiananmen Headquarters.⁹¹ When issuing a description of the June 4 massacre a few days after the crackdown, she was still careful to emphasize her own status: “I am Chai Ling, commander-in-chief of the Protect-Tiananmen Headquarters I am the most qualified commentator on what happened in the Square from June 2 to June 4.”⁹²

What is also noteworthy is that the 1989 activists—some of them at least—consciously used their public pronouncements as a form of theatrical performance. They were, in various degrees, dramatizing or even faking their sacrifice to show others how devoted they were to the democratic cause, how selfless their actions and how pure their hearts. To be sure, putting on a show of heroism is not a unique product of the Communist tradition,⁹³ Let me emphasize, however, that the tradition of Communist revolutionary propaganda did play a significant part in nurturing popular attention to the connection between the individual's social prestige and the performance of political sacrifice.

In externalizing the intrinsic glory of political idealism, the state showed the Chinese the significance of socially-recognized political passion for the individual's public image. The demonstration or performance of political devotion won social recognition, and served as the foundation of glamorous and powerful public images. When Liu Xiaobo wrote his reminiscences about the 1989 movement, he elaborated on how in jail he had perceived his own confession, which later led to his release:

Before I wrote my confession, my own psychological struggle took place on two levels: first, to choose between life and [historical] truth; and second, to choose between freedom and public image In my heart of hearts, however, the second level was much more important I did not want to confess not because I respected historical truth . . . and insisted on justice. I just wanted to guard my public image, social reputation, and long-term personal interests.⁹⁴

After expounding on how much his image as a rebellious hero was derived from the official attacks upon him, and how much he savored the image created for him by over-zealous propagandists, he then analyzed the psychological process which finally led to his decision to write the confession. Mocking himself for using emotional attachment to the family as a justification, he suddenly wrote a long passage, which he called irrelevant, to express his view on the Communist revolutionary tradition:

In Chinese society . . . even the spirit of self-sacrifice is de-humanized. Both in traditional China, dominated by Confucianism, and in contemporary

⁹⁰ Liu Xiaobo, *Mori xingcunzbede dubai*, p.84.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p.150.

⁹² In Zhang Jingyu, *Ziyou zhi xue minzhu zhi hua*, p.614.

⁹³ See Don C. Price, *Russia and the roots of the Chinese revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), pp.196–7.

⁹⁴ Liu Xiaobo, *Mori xingcunzbede dubai*, p.24.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p.31.

⁹⁶ In his memoir, Feng Congde stressed, in defending Chai Ling, that no one ate during the hunger strike (Feng, *Tian'anmen memoir* [Brampton, Ont.: Mingjing Chubanshe, 1998], p.89). However, Liu Xiaobo (*Mori xingcunzbede dubai*, p.136), Liang Xiaoyan (Hinton and Gordon, "The Gate of Heavenly Peace") and Shen Tong (see n.97) all said otherwise. Regarding the overall picture of the hunger strike, the remarks of these three might, I suggest, be more reliable, as they seem to be interested in showing the reality behind the movement: Liu explained why the partaking of food was necessary for the student leaders, while both Liu and Liang contrasted those who pretended and those who fasted in order to portray the complexity of the movement; Shen Tong did not condemn those who ate but mainly mentioned eating as a fact of the hunger strike.

⁹⁷ Liu Xiaobo, *Mori xingcunzbede dubai*, p.137.

⁹⁸ Shen Tong, *Almost a revolution* (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), p.290.

⁹⁹ Liu Xiaobo, *Mori xingcunzbede dubai*, p.198.

China, hegemonized by Marxism–Leninism, we emphasize the individual's subordination to the collective. Collectivism, advocating one's selfless sacrifice for the group, has formed ... the core of post-1949 Communist moral education. The ancient sage the Great Yu 大禹 ..., and our contemporary saints such as Lei Feng 雷锋, Jiao Yulu 焦裕禄, and even Zhou Enlai are all represented as models of selflessness. These great models teach us that only by advertising one's concern for the collective can one effectively maximize one's personal interests ... In our Zhou Enlai-style conception, ... we retain for ourselves what is most socially valuable—for instance, being in the limelight (*chu ren tou di* 出人头地), enjoying the respect and adulation of others, and casting oneself in the role of savior.⁹⁵

Others may not have rejected the Communist revolutionary tradition as vehemently as Liu. However, his analysis does draw our attention to the manner in which the Communist revolutionary tradition sensitized contemporary political actors to the positive and "beneficial" images possible in political performance, and thus encouraged them to adopt a façade of political idealism.

Growing up in a cultural–political context that constantly reinforced the possibility of achieving public glory through political action, some 1989 demonstrators treated their forms of protest as theatrical acts without going so far—or even really thinking of going so far—as enacting what they openly praised as the ultimate sacrifice. In spite of their publicized intention to fast, some hunger strikers actually ate in secret.⁹⁶ Not surprisingly, this kind of faux-commitment was controversial among the hunger strikers themselves.⁹⁷ On the other hand, however, it did gain a certain degree of acceptance among student activists. In his autobiography, Shen Tong 沈彤, a student leader from Beijing University, for example, recalls what one of his friends who joined the hunger strike told him: "in the first few days I was sneaking chocolate bars" to which Shen responded: "I laughed with him, glad that he still had a sense of humor."⁹⁸

Wuer Kaixi and Chai Ling were the two who performed their political idealism to the audience with the most histrionic and dramatic gestures. Nevertheless, their pronounced idealism was sometimes contradicted by their own words and deeds. While he spent the movement's funds on wine, cigarettes, car rental, and hotel rooms, Wuer Kaixi, "performing" in public, still denied what he had been doing: "Some people say that I dine in fancy hotels, ride in expensive sedans, squander the movement's funding on myself, and enjoy a decadent life-style. Here, let me swear on my integrity: I haven't done anything like this."⁹⁹ On May 28th, in Cunningham's interview with her, Chai Ling began by representing what she was about to say as her "final words," and then emphasized the importance of drastic self-sacrifice for the future of the republic. But in the latter part of the interview she admitted that she planned to escape as it was too dangerous for her as a blacklisted person to carry on. She thus indulged in wilful self-contradiction while making this passionate political statement.

Chai's inconsistency was, according to Feng Congde, rooted in a tension between self-sacrifice and the struggle for survival. In Feng's view this ambivalence marked the psychology of many student leaders at that moment. In explaining what self-sacrifice meant for the student activists, Feng points out that students, Chai Ling included, only envisioned a moderate form of state suppression, similar to the South Korean government's crackdown on student protesters. Influenced deeply and involuntarily by Communist culture, Feng argues, they merely made use of Communist clichés such as "shedding blood" (*liuxue* 流血) and "self-sacrifice" (*xianshen* 献身) to accentuate their political passion.¹⁰⁰

The gap between external expression and internal ratiocination, and the psychological tension between sacrifice and survival, are themes worth exploring. And certainly a person's culturally conditioned expressions, though they may differ markedly from inner thoughts or self-rationalizations, should not be regarded as merely theatrical acts. However, Chai Ling's concern for self-protection was in such complete contrast to her decision to make some dramatic final testament, and in blatant contradiction to her emphasis on the need for other students to make sacrifices, that her praise of the spirit of sacrifice cannot but sound unreal, if not hypocritical, for observers of the movement. It seems legitimate for them to question the degree of sincerity involved in her stress on sacrifice.

Let me emphasize, in addition, that students did relish the thought of a moderate crackdown as the finale of their movement when they yearned so much for public glamour. Although most of them did not think, as Feng notes, that the government would open fire on them, they did believe that the entry of the army into the Square, beatings, rubber bullets, and a forced evacuation—in short, limited persecution and suffering—would help underline their courage.¹⁰¹ When the army did not show up, they sighed with frustration: "How disappointing! One more day is wasted." "If the army does come," one is reported to have said, "our movement will become the most tragic and powerful event in Chinese history."¹⁰²

It seems that sometimes, just imagining the honor brought by martyrdom was enough to give a *frisson* of thrill to the individual. When Liu Xiaobo organized his own abortive four-man hunger strike in early June to show solidarity with the students, it was evident that he did not plan to give up his life; among other things, he admitted, he took his passport to the Square with him intending to leave the country in case of danger.¹⁰³ Nevertheless, recalling how he felt after making the decision to fast, he elaborates on his momentary elation:

¹⁰¹ Liu Xiaobo, *Mori xingcunzbede dubai*, p.150; Macartney, "Students, heroes, pawns, or powerbrokers," p.11.

¹⁰² Liu Xiaobo, *Mori xingcunzbede dubai*, p.152.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p.233. He actually carried his passport with him every day following his return from the U.S. (Liu Xiaobo, *Mori xingcunzbede dubai*, p.84).

¹⁰⁰ For Cunningham's interview with Chai Ling, see Hinton and Gordon, "The Gate of Heavenly Peace," and Feng Congde, *Tiananmen memoir*, pp.403–33. As for Feng Congde's defense of Chai and criticism of Carma Hinton's treatment of the Cunningham interview in the documentary film "Gate of Heavenly Peace," see Feng, *ibid.*, pp.35–53.

As may be realized, much controversy surrounds this interview, especially Chai Ling's stress on the student activists' sacrifice and intention to escape. The Chai Ling camp always insists that the interview was given at a time of distress and confusion, and was not meant to be broadcast. But after the interview, Chai Ling in fact wrote a note giving Cunningham permission to release the content of the interview. In the postscript to *Tian'anmen*, Carma Hinton reveals the content of Chai's written permission. Strictly speaking, it is not entirely impossible that Chai Ling was confused when she wrote the note endorsing the broadcasting of the interview; but her written permission does prove that, confused or not, she did at the time treat the interview as a testament to her political commitment.

In "exonerating" his ex-wife in his memoir, Feng Congde accuses Hinton of using the montage technique to construct the image of a Chai Ling who encouraged people to die but intended to preserve her own life (Feng, *ibid.*, pp.36–9). In addition to pointing out her psychological tension and her inaccurate use of Communist terminology to express herself, Feng also contends that Chai Ling's emphasis on sacrifice and plans for escape were responses to two different interviewers. According to him, Chai underscored the importance of the other students' sacrifice when talking with Cunningham, who had already learned about her plan to go south, and mentioned her intention to save herself when facing a second interviewer who knew nothing about it (Feng, *ibid.*, pp.28–30). In addition, he also mentioned that after the interview, Chai discussed with him the launching of some sort of mobilization campaign by traveling to the south (Feng, *ibid.*, p.23). But the image of Chai Ling as a young leader interested in mobilization appears to contradict what is said of her in Ted Koppel's report on the movement (Ted Koppel, *Tragedy at Tiananmen: the untold story* [ABC, 1989]).

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p.90.

I was intoxicated with my own courage and charisma. I felt as if there were a mirror in front of me; my reflection in the mirror was so transcendent, so handsome that I could not take my own eyes off it The world, [I imagined], was one dark, black theater. I was on the stage, surrounded by a halo of light, which drew everyone's attention. I suddenly felt that crucifixion was the most beautiful image in the world. The Christ shouldered humankind's suffering; he accepted God's punishment for them. His suffering signified not insult but glory, not failure but success Fasting meant martyrdom If I do not plunge into hell, who will? If I am not willing to become a martyr, who will? Back then I was driven by a kind of impulse based on the Mencian belief that "Who but I am the chosen one?" (*She w● qi shui* 舍我其谁).¹⁰⁴

In this confession we see in the case of one individual the dominating influence of the Communist tradition on the generation born and raised under the rule of the People's Republic. So successful were the state's efforts to externalize the intrinsic glory of political devotion that Liu Xiaobo, a self-conscious rebel against the Communist tradition, was captivated by the social glamour made possible by a public manifestation of political idealism. In his own analysis, he points to how vanity was intertwined with, if not indispensable to, his excitement at the prospect of sacrifice.

The government suppressed the 1989 movement in a manner that was so bloody and so merciless that many participants actually sacrificed much more than they had deliberately or unintentionally planned. And as those who survived evaluated, or talked about, their movement, there were great discrepancies in the ways in which they reflected on the issues of public and self image, self-sacrifice and heroism.

Anti-Heroism and Heroism

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., pp.183–4.

In the post-Tiananmen period key participants in the 1989 protests dealt with their past in markedly different ways.

Chai Ling's approach to her 1989 experience was ambivalent, and it reflected both a tendency towards anti-heroism and a conviction about her own historical significance. After her escape from China, she refused time and again to be called a "little goddess," a symbol of the 1989 movement, and thus be bestowed with a certain degree of heroic stature. Interviewed on a TV news program in Hong Kong in 1991, she caressed her little dog while demanding her right to live as an individual and as a woman in the U.S.¹⁰⁵ That did not put an end to her political activities, however, and in the years that followed, she was often welcoming of media exposure and, together with others, even founded a journal entitled *Tiananmen* in 1995. However, gone was the image of the young woman who fiercely expressed her love for the Chinese nation. Serving as a columnist for a popular Hong Kong magazine, she exploited her past status as a student leader to attract attention.

But in writing about her American life she seemed not so interested in engaging in any serious reflection on her political past.

Some did, however, reflect on their involvement in '89 by concentrating on the motif of heroism. Gao Xin, one of the four intellectuals who fasted in the Liu Xiaobo-inspired hunger strike from June 2 to June 4, wrote his reminiscences in Massachusetts. Insisting that his decision to fast had nothing to do with any personal goals (*geren mudi* 个人目的), he nevertheless described how he rejected the title of hero, conferred on him by his friends:

I told them [my friends] honestly that I did not deserve to be called a hero. [When I was in prison], I was worried for my loved ones and for myself. On being arrested, I was so scared that I sat on the policeman's pistol. When someone came and took a mug shot of me ... I thought I was about to be executed. Not only did I fail to face the situation fearlessly, I sank into a state of self-pity ...¹⁰⁶

In denying any heroism, Gao particularly focused upon how he was torn between his political commitment and his love for his fiancée Zhang Xiaomei 张小梅: "I do not want to be numb and indifferent [dealing with the issue of political justice]. My personality does not allow me to remain politically insensitive But I suffered tremendously because of my separation from Xiaomei, and because of my own guilt about leaving her. I simply could not bear the pain—not even for the sake of justice and my own sense of responsibility."¹⁰⁷

While Gao seems not to feel ashamed admitting that he is just "an ordinary man,"¹⁰⁸ Liu Xiaobo uses an anti-heroic approach in degrading himself. In addition to exposing his fantasy about martyrdom, he also revisits his motivations for joining the 1989 protests—to "grasp" a historical opportunity he considered unprecedented in the history of the post-1949 Communist regime; to become a hero, but only "at limited cost to himself;" and to accumulate "political capital" useful for visa extension and for applying for American permanent residency.¹⁰⁹

What Liu finds extremely disturbing is his post-June 4 confession to the authorities, an act for which he "will never forgive [him]self."¹¹⁰ After discussing how he justified his decision to confess he states: "to sell one's conscience is not so hard; everything becomes wonderfully easy once you convince yourself to do it." He then virtually begs his readers to look at him in a new, negative light: "People, open your eyes [to the real me]: this is the so-called "black horse" who once appeared so bold and militant in public ... ; this is the so-called spiritual leader of the student movement; this is the so-called conscience of Chinese intellectuals He is so weak, so base, and so shameless."¹¹¹

One's anti-heroism, including the attempt to build for oneself an anti-heroic image and self-image, implies the acceptance of a certain set of standards of heroism, though one may not think highly of those standards. How one envisions and imagines oneself as an anti-hero depends upon how

¹⁰⁶ Gao Xin, *Beiwu yu huihuang*, pp.3–4.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.81, 82.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p.7.

¹⁰⁹ Liu Xiaobo, *Mori xingcunzbede dubai*, pp.72–85.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.21.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp.41, 46. In the film "The Gate of Heavenly Peace" he continues to debunk his image as a devoted activist, though in a less emotive fashion.

¹¹² These are all characters in *Red Cliff*.

¹¹³ Gao Xin, *Beiwu yu buibuang*, p.4.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p.26. Here it could certainly be said that Gao is mocking the stage poses of “revolutionary opera” during the Cultural Revolution. However, taking into account his many references to *Red Cliff*, I would contend that he more probably has in mind what *Red Cliff* represents—the Communist revolutionary tradition.

¹¹⁶ Gao Xin, *Beiwu yu buibuang*, pp.7, 81.

one defines, and assumes in oneself the lack of, heroic qualities. It seems natural, therefore, that expatiating on their anti-heroic calibre, both Gao Xin and Liu Xiaobo reveal and express their views on heroism.

When Gao Xin judges himself to be an anti-hero, he deliberately evokes the Communist standards of heroism against which to measure himself:

The only thing I am proud of is that what I said in jail did not harm anyone . . . I did not cause any trouble to people outside prison, including my fiancée. Nor did I “incriminate” those imprisoned. But it was not because I imitated Jiang Xueqin’s and Xu Yunfeng’s “revolutionary heroism” and thus avoided becoming a Fu Zhigao.¹¹² I just told myself, due to my own conscience, that I must not let others suffer as I did. At the same time, I knew that even if I incriminated others and ended up as a released “Fu Zhigao,” I could not face my friends and the society.¹¹³

Such a statement reveals not only Gao’s acceptance of his anti-heroic side but also his sense of alienation from the standards against which he judges himself. To show his disconnection from the Communist revolutionary tradition, Gao goes on to talk about something more specific—his possible failure to stand up to physical torture:

Another important point is that the police never tortured me. Would I remain courageous enough not to betray others if I was beaten up by the soldiers who enforced martial law? That I don’t know.¹¹⁴

Describing his own performance as a prisoner, he even mocks revolutionary culture:

I suspected that my image in the picture they took was nasty. I was really upset, hating myself for not standing head held high, for not raising my eyebrows, and for not glaring at the lens in anger. Had I done all this I could have let people in the world, especially Xiaomei, appreciate my image as a tragic hero.¹¹⁵

By refusing to identify with the Communist tradition, he did not denigrate himself as an ordinary person with complex, often ambivalent, feelings. But he does not have a high self-regard either, and therefore says: “I am not sure whether I am determined and brave enough to dedicate my life to the cause of justice and to democracy in China—that entails sacrifice; that may require that I give up the prime years of my life and even life itself.”¹¹⁶

Employing Communist standards while at the same time being estranged from those standards; accepting one’s anti-heroic personality coupled with appreciating the courage required to make the sacrifice—while writing about all of these complex feelings, Gao expresses his admiration for those whom he regards as true heroes:

When I was proofreading my manuscript, I thought of Wang Juntao, Chen Ziming, Ren Wanding 任晚丁, and others, those people who were still suffering in prison. They are the true heroes. They are much more courageous, much more mature than I am, in terms of both psychological strength and

the spirit of self-sacrifice that they have shown. I also thought of those who shed their blood on the streets of Beijing. Compared to theirs, my sacrifice is virtually nothing.¹¹⁷

Let us now return to the case of Liu Xiaobo. As we noted earlier, Liu launched his onslaught on the Communist revolutionary tradition by identifying the essence of that tradition as being social recognition.¹¹⁸ However, Liu remains a believer in heroism. In his reminiscences self-condemnation is paired with his respect for heroes. Calling his own anti-heroic thoughts and behavior “disgusting,” he says:

I am alive, free, ... and being sheltered and loved by friends and even strangers. But how about those who died and those who are still in jail? Where are their families, their friends? How about that brave young man who used his own body to block the tank? Did you shed your blood in vain? Were your courage, conscience and spirit of sacrifice treated frivolously [by people like me]?¹¹⁹

He contrasts himself with Wang Juntao: “Still imprisoned at the moment, he relies on his firm and determined personality to retain his faith. I, who wrote a confession, ... feel inferior and shameful.”¹²⁰

In spite of his hostile view of Communist revolutionary heroism, Liu’s remorseful self-representation, interwoven with his praise of heroes, shows a significant degree of congruence with what Communist revolutionary heroism explicitly preaches—purity of motive, a willingness to sacrifice, and courage to stand up to oppression. It may sound too simplistic to suggest that Liu is inspired by Communist revolutionary heroism alone. However, it is not too wide of the mark to say that Communist revolutionary culture contributed to his tormented preoccupation with his failure to act as a “true hero.”

Interestingly, the anti-heroism trend notwithstanding, there is also the case of a younger activist who discusses heroism in more positive and unequivocal terms. In his 1997 memoir, Wang Dan elaborates on his heroism in prison. While Gao Xin stressed how scared he was during his arrest, Wang highlights his own composure: “From being tailed to having my arm twisted by a secret agent, I was never frightened.” Proud of what he did, he wrote in jail: “Determined to contribute my sincere, red heart to history, /a true man I am, /composed and relaxed under all circumstances.” Aspiring to become an intrepid fighter, he cautioned himself not to shed any tears when confronting the police and judges.¹²¹

Although Wang Dan’s self-representation in certain ways resonates with the memoirs of the martyrs of the Communist tradition, to some extent he also “ordinarizes” the image of heroism. While he tells his readers about his efforts to stand firm when confronting government authorities, he also admits to his failure to do so:

I tried to show them that suffering could not overcome me, but I failed...
On May 11, 1990, ... the government permitted me to meet with my family

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p.10.

¹¹⁸ Describing his “mugshot,” Gao, too, showed a certain degree of sensitivity to the issue of public image in Communist revolutionary culture.

¹¹⁹ Liu Xiaobo, *Mori xingcunzbede dubai*, p.20.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p.117.

¹²¹ Wang Dan, *Yuzhong huiyilu*, pp.12, 30, 103.

¹²² Ibid., p.104.

¹²³ Ibid., p.176.

¹²⁴ Ibid., pp.48, 193.

the second time My mother came alone She left a little earlier than I did after the visit was over. The wind was blowing very hard that day When I saw her walking down the street, . . . slowly and weakly, I . . . wept. I bit my lip so hard to fight back the tears that it bled.¹²²

But he did not blame himself for feeling depressed and lonely: “I am an individual with emotions and desires. I am not a piece of iron.”¹²³ His self-portrait, then, is very unlike the idealized Communist hero and freedom fighter who could bear anything, any form of suffering with iron determination and firm resolve.

Despite his strenuous struggle to be a fearless dissident, Wang does not criticize his comrades who could not remain as brave and as committed as he was. The fact that a considerable number of the 1989 dissidents became businessmen in the early '90s stirred up a lot of controversy. But Wang defends his comrades: “people can only fulfill themselves once they have a livelihood.” Facing a Liu Xiaobo who wrote an “exhaustive” confession, Wang expresses his gratitude to him for his support.¹²⁴ Does such tolerance come from his feelings for and understanding of his friends? Or does he choose to be lenient in order not to offend his former comrades? Whatever the answer may be, Wang Dan’s silence on behavior that falls short of his own standards corroborates what I interpret as the “ordinarization” of heroes.

Conclusion

¹²⁵ David Apter and Tony Saich, *Revolutionary discourse in Mao's republic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp.107–8.

To some extent, the 1989 protester’s self-representations, particularly those composed at the time of demonstrations, are examples of what David Apter and Tony Saich have called “symbolic capital”—a fund of power on which to draw.¹²⁵ This paper has investigated how the emotional self-expressions of the 1989 activists, intertwined with the declarations of their political beliefs, became useful ingredients in the articulation of this particular kind of political power. The expression and sharing of emotions certainly helped motivate and unite the participants in the movement. But never possessing a well-organized community image, the self-representations of the 1989 activists, especially those written in retrospect, did and still do generate differing rhetorics on political behavior, idealism, and heroism.

Undoubtedly, creating a range of public images and self-images as part of the movement’s symbolic capital, the 1989 protesters were substantially indebted to the Communist tradition. When portraying themselves as idealists the 1989 activists borrowed heavily from the Communist repertoire of expressions and language of revolutionary heroism. The motif of sacrifice was also common both in revolutionary literature and among the '89 protesters. So powerful was the effect of the Communist tradition that even individuals who consciously attempted to disengage from and reject it were still very much in its thrall.

The connection between these two modes of political idealism—one Communist, one contemporary—is, however, more complex and intriguing than merely suggested by the concepts of borrowing and sharing. Because of the multifarious nature of the Communist revolutionary tradition, similarity is sometimes inseparable from difference: while official revolutionary tradition points to the pain and tension in a revolutionary life, the literary legacy of 1989 is marked by a strong emphasis on the agony of sacrifice. Due to the contradictory characteristics of Communist revolutionary heroism—namely the presence of non-idealism in the highly idealistic, official heritage of revolution, inheritance is inextricably entwined with deviation: the Communist tradition nourished the 1989 generation's voracious appetite for individual heroism and social glamour, and thus contributed to the 1989 movement's radical departure from such essential Communist revolutionary virtues as selflessness and sincere commitment.

At the same time, we also see clearcut distinctions between the earlier revolutionary heroism and the forms of self-representation in 1989. Obviously, the latter was characterized by a stronger concern for material comfort, by a relatively weak appreciation of practical and unglamorous political work, by a much more single-minded fascination with dramatic gestures, and by their self-depiction as delicate, fragile young people.

Why did these contemporary political activists deviate from certain forms of Communist devotion when staging their social drama? Why did some of them, *vis-à-vis* Communist revolutionary heroism, seem to be more sensitive to its dimensions of individual heroism and public image but not similarly alert to its emphasis on genuine selflessness?

I do not intend to deal with these questions in detail here. However, let me point to some plausible explanations. It seems that the culture in post-Mao China played a significant part in the formation of the 1989 activists' "ordinarized" heroism. The "reign" of materialism in post-Mao China, and the increasing interest in personal feelings, liberation and well-being led to a divergence from Communist asceticism within the younger generation.¹²⁶ We must realize, at the same time, that in the post-Mao period, the fascination among Chinese young people with the "personal self" was greatly reinforced by products of popular culture imported from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan and even the U.S. San Mao's 三毛 sentimentalism, Qiong Yao's novels which always beautify the tragedy and melancholy of romantic passion, Teresa Teng's 邓丽君 cloying love songs, and the interpretation of foreign pop songs by such singers as Cui Jian all contributed in their own way to the tendency towards emotional self-indulgence among Chinese students.

Analyzing the students' self-image as children, we should further explore the characteristics of a new generation of Chinese youths who were, regardless of their discontent with their lives, much more pampered and sheltered by their families and the society as a whole than their predecessors. As for the tendency for some activists to pay more attention to individual heroism

¹²⁶ See Shen Tong, *Almost a revolution*, p.150; interviews with Wuer Kaixi and Hou Dejian in Hinton and Gordon, "The Gate of Heavenly Peace."

¹²⁷ What happened in China on the eve of the 1989 movement seems to be indicative of a kind of appreciation of political idealism. As Joseph Esherick points out, in the fall of 1988, the following jingle appeared on a wall in Xi'an: "Mao Zedong's son went to the front. Zhao Ziyang's son speculates in color TVs. Deng Xiaoping's son demands money." Very soon "this little ditty," Esherick observes, "could be seen and heard across China" (Esherick, in Unger, *The pro-democracy protests in China*, p.79). Another good example is the popularity of a movie about Jiao Yulu in the early '90s (Liu Xiaobo, *Moringcunzbede dubai*, p.31). Jiao was a veteran revolutionary who joined the CCP in the '40s and passed away in the early '60s (*Geming lieshi shuxin xubian*, pp.291-3).

and the public image of the Communist tradition, or even to interpret them as the essence of Communist culture, what deserves further investigation is the question of how the Communist regime helped undermine the public faith in political self-sacrifice as a concept.

Equally important is the question of why all these influences and imitations should continue. Certainly, it is not incorrect to say that the 1989 historical actors inevitably and naturally inherited certain "scripts" useful for their verbal and behavioral self-expression from the Communist cultural-political canon. It is also warranted to state that they must have automatically identified with some of the values of the particular culture into which they were born. It seems possible, however, that the craving for self-interest, corruption, and materialism caused so much confusion and repulsion in a society which had once been so moralistic that some Chinese could not help but admire political idealism and self-sacrifice, though they may have also been preoccupied with material well-being and cynical about revolutionary asceticism at the same time.¹²⁷

By examining the 1989 activists' self-representations both in terms of political-theatrical performance and as genuine self-expression, this paper has attempted to show that in the late '80s political idealism in China was at a crossroads in many respects—its definition, its status in terms of the broader political culture, and its significance for political activists and their public performances. The Communist tradition still influenced the people's sentiments and forms of self-portrayal, but the essence of these new heroes was "ordinarized" and thus popularly reinvented by a great many activists. The juxtaposition of heroism and anti-heroism, the contrast between the mainly theatrical displays of political passion on the part of most protesters and the fearless sacrifice of others, and the selective adaptation of Communist revolutionary heroism—all these things show that political idealism, like many other values, was being rejected and transmogrified in the post-Mao era.

How does the 1989 movement help us to understand the direction of political idealism in China? Does it help us evaluate the future of Communist revolutionary heroism? And does it help us foresee the ways in which college students will treat the revered tradition of student movements? No one can predict anything accurately on the basis of what happened in 1989—nor is it a historian's mission to predict. Regarding the future of political idealism and activism, some factors will surely be crucial: the distribution of wealth in Chinese society, the social make-up of college students in a rapidly commercialized system of higher education, and the public reactions to the reform of the Communist regime. However, as long as the Chinese state remains suppressive *vis-à-vis* political dissidents, and as long as people need to risk their security for the right to protest, political idealism, despite the transformations discussed above, will continue to be an important ingredient in the charisma, personae and personality of dissidents.

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