

## Critical Issues Confronting China

### Tales from Two Chinese Cities: Resistance in the 2019 Year of Anniversaries

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The year 2019 marked a series of major anniversaries and commemorations for China, including the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on October 1. Historian Geremie R. Barmé, editor of *China Heritage*, recalled certain historical events of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and offered observations on China's party-state-army head, Xi Jinping. Barmé gave some examples of how China's past continues to play an overt role not only in regard to the country's present but also in ways that are significant for China's global presence and ambitions. In this context, Barmé located the official investigation by the CCP and its agents at Tsinghua University of Xu Zhangrun, a prominent law professor, and the 2019 Hong Kong Uprising. If the past offers any practical lessons for the present, Barmé made it clear that he was not optimistic about the prospects for creative or adroit resolution either to Professor Xu's plight or the problems that beset Hong Kong.

Since the early 2000s, the PRC government has increasingly applied the expression "Prosperous Age" (盛世), or "Golden Age," to describe its rule. Under Xi Jinping, this kind of boosterism has taken a new turn. With the 4<sup>th</sup> plenary session of the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in early November, official propagandists hailed the present era as one of "Unique China Governance" (中国之治). This is a formulation that resonates with a traditional celebration of several well-known historical periods as "golden ages:" the Cheng-Kang period of the Western Zhou Kingdom (西周成康之治, BC1043-BC996), the Wen-Jing period of the Western Han Dynasty (西汉文景之治, BC 180-BC141), the Zhenguan reign of the Tang Dynasty (贞观之治, AD 627-AD 649), and the Kang-Yong-Qian Prosperous Age of the Qing Dynasty (康乾盛世, AD 1661-1795).

In a signed article published in "Qiu-shi" (求是, "seeking truth") magazine on October 1, the day marking the seventieth anniversary of the founding of the PRC, Xi Jinping talked about the rise and fall of empires, starting with the Qin dynasty (BC 221-BC 207). On the one hand, Ying Zheng, the First Qin Emperor (秦始皇), is credited with laying the foundation for a unified China, something achieved by standardizing the writing system, the currency, communications, and laws. On the other hand, the First Emperor is also notorious for his autocratic behavior and draconian legal system. In order to eliminate opposing views and solidify his reign, for example, he had been excoriated through history for burning the books (of heterodox schools of thought) and burying the scholars (whose ideas might have threatened his rule). The vaunted unity of his "imperial

enterprise” (帝业) was forged by violence and cruelty.

Xi Jinping’s relatively positive evaluation of the First Qin Emperor chimes with that of Mao Zedong. However, both of these modern Chinese rulers assert that the CCP can and will defy China’s millennia-old pattern of what is known as “dynastic cycles” (周期论) through vigilant self-correction and continuous self-renewal. Mao went so far as to observe that he embodied elements both of Marx and the First Qin Emperor (秦始皇加马克思). In the process of combining elements of traditional Chinese governance with imported Marxism-Leninism, Mao and his fellows launched what is known as the Yan’an (延安) Rectification Campaign of 1942-44, during which Party members, in particular the intelligentsia, were required to reshape their worldview according to what would become known as “Mao Zedong Thought.” One famous critic of the salient inequalities of the Party at this time was Wang Shiwei (王实味) who criticized Party hierarchy and privilege.

His criticisms, which continue to haunt the Party today, is something that is exemplified in the famous critique of the Xi Jinping era by Xu Zhangrun in July 2018 (see Xu Zhangrun 許章潤, *Imminent Fears, Immediate Hopes—a Beijing Jeremiad 我們當下的恐懼與期待*, introduced and translated with notes by Geremie R. Barmé, *China Heritage*, August 1, 2018). At the time of the Rectification Campaign, in July 1944, Mao invited a number of liberal intellectuals and journalists to visit Yan’an, the CCP’s base after the Long March (1934-36), in the hope of garnering their support for the Communist cause. The visitors were impressed by the frugal and dedicated cadre of communists there; they were relatively unaware that they were the subjects of a well-planned “influence operation” aimed at long-term political goals. In his discussions with Huang Yuanpei, one of the visitors, Mao observed that the CCP would not be vulnerable to corruption or autocracy, like all of the dynastic ruling powers of the past. He claimed that this was because the CCP could ensure the continuity of its rule for one key feature of its makeup: democracy.

Similarly, Xi’s own remarks as published on October 1 reiterated Mao’s claim that the CCP is capable of learning the necessary lessons of history, and as such it will not be subject to the dynastic cycles of the past; that is, the Party may well rule long into the future. Xi Jinping announced that the Party was pursuing ever-new forms of governance, something he called “Alpha-to-Omega Full Process Democracy” (全过程主义民主). Barmé expressed doubts about this latest example of overblown Party rhetoric and contrasted it to the kind of systemic repression evident in Xinjiang. He feared that systemic repression could be applied to the restive people of Hong Kong in the future.

In this environment where stringent censorship and self-censorship are once more the rule, Barmé emphasized the significance of Professor Xu Zhangrun’s works. Xu has publicly impugned the policies of Xi Jinping and his politburo colleagues, including the Belt Road Initiative (BRI); the informal expansion of Party privileges; the persistence of widespread corruption despite a formal campaign against it; and the policy resistance to initiating a significant new reform agenda. Xu Zhangrun is also noteworthy for publicly calling for the rehabilitation of the 1989 Protest Movement, which was crushed during June 3-4 and became the Tiananmen Square Massacre, a subject that has long been taboo in the PRC. Barmé told the audience that he had been publishing

annotated translations of Xu's key essays since August 2018. He showed a picture of Xu paying his respects at the commemorative stele set up in 1929 on the Tsinghua campus to celebrate the scholar Wang Guowei (王国维 1877-1927). At the time, Chen Yinque (陈寅恪, 1890-1969), a famous historian and philosopher, was invited to write an epitaph for the stele. In it, he praised Wang for epitomizing "an independent mind and free spirit" (独立之精神, 自由之思想), an expression still used by China's independent thinkers, be they in Beijing or Hong Kong. For having "spoken truth to power", Professor Xu remains under surveillance and is awaiting an official decision on his "case." In the days before Barmé's presentation at Harvard, Xu had declared that he would not be cowed by or submit to the authorities (see Xu Zhangrun 許章潤, ["I Will Not Submit, I Will Not Be Cowed."](#) *China Heritage*, October 10, 2019).

The independent spirit of this courageous individual in Beijing finds a resonance in the defiance of protesters in Hong Kong, or what Barmé called "The Hong Kong's Uprising." In suggesting this resonance, he cited a book by Lee Yee (李怡), in which the veteran writer and editor praised the "Independent Spirit and Free Spirit" extolled by Chen Yinque some eighty years ago. For Lee, Hong Kong's role vis-a-vis the Mainland from the 1940s to the 1980s was somewhat akin to the "Peach Blossom Grove" depicted by the poet Tao Yuan-ming (AD 352 or 365-427). The Grove was a place where people "fled the Qin" (避秦) to seek refuge from the chaos and cruelty of the day.

In his discussion of the Hong Kong protests, Barmé quoted some of the slogans and messages used by the protesters (in Cantonese) to mobilize the people. He noted that the cultural and intellectual diversity of Hong Kong, preserved and even fostered during the British colonial era and partially tolerated by Beijing since its takeover of the city in 1997, is in stark contrast to the official mono-lingual and mono-cultural version of China, touted by the Communists. In fact, like Hong Kong itself, the various regions and cities of China are home to a vast, diverse, complex, and boisterous world of languages, cultures and customs, all of which have for over seventy years been subjected to the rigid hand of centralized power. To quote one popular slogan, Hong Kong people find themselves in a situation where they "must now voice their views before they are silenced" (今天不发声, 明天被禁声).

The tumultuous history of the PRC since the 1940s, filled with numerous political, cultural and social upheavals, does not bode well for the future of Hong Kong. Hence Barmé quoted, at the outset of his talk, a line from a poem written by the renowned writer Lu Xun (1881-1936) in 1934, "[w]here silence reigns, startling claps of thunder are heard" (于无声处听惊雷). He used this well-known line to reflect the widespread concern that many Chinese feel as they confront yet another era of imposed silence. At the moment at least, there is scant indication that advocates of openness and liberal thought, be they in Beijing or Hong Kong, will face anything other than stultification.