

HIST 231J: Responses to Totalitarianism
Professor Marci Shore

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. —Elias Spungen Bildner

The World Beyond Walls:
Dissidence in China and Eastern Europe and the Search for a New Pragmatism

by Eli Bildner

“Stupefying the People”

In his essay, “Stupefying the People,” Chinese literary critic Qian Zhongshu notes that the first emperor of a unified China, Qin Shi Huang, issued two directives upon ascending the throne.¹ First, the emperor commanded his soldiers to gather and then burn all the books, artifacts, and scholars of the previous dynasties. Second, Emperor Qin ordered the construction of the Great Wall, a barrier to separate the land of the Hans from the northern “barbarians.” Qin hoped that by “stupefying the people,” by cutting them off from the sources and lands of their heritage, he could pave the way for a “10,000-year dynasty.”² Instead, when Qin died in 210 CE—interred in the elaborate company of thousands of terra-cotta warriors—his dynasty perished with him. The ashes of scholars and books, it seems, lacked the power to destroy the old and usher in the new.

Later dynasties, Qian writes, discovered a more ingenious method of thought control and cultural propagation: the imperial examination system. As the Song dynasty scholar Chao Yuezhi (1059-1129 CE) explains, “A single interpretation was devised for the *Shi Jing* (Book of Songs) and *Yi Jing* (Book of Documents) and passed on to all who studied. Scholars were

¹ Qian Zhongshu, “Stupefying the People,” in *Limited Views: Essays on Ideas and Letters* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998): 364.

² Qian, 364.

honored or humiliated according to their handling of this interpretation.”³ This system proved much more effective, expiring only in the waning days of the Chinese Empire. As Gu Wanyu (1613-1682) writes, “The harm done by the eight-legged essay is comparable to that done by Qin’s burning of books. Yet the number of talented men who have been ruined by the essay exceeds by far the number of those buried alive outside of Xianyang, which was only some 460.”⁴

These words of Gu Wanyu resonate with Qian Zhongshu, writing nearly 400 years later and within the confines of a new system of thought control, that of Maoist ideology. Though not a political dissident—Qian, in fact, worked to translate Mao’s writings into English—Qian, like all intellectuals, became a victim of the Cultural Revolution’s “struggle sessions” and “reeducation campaigns.” Set to work as a laborer, Qian experienced the lesson of “Stupefying the People”: In many ways, the totality that is most oppressive is not the one that torches and butchers but the one that is able to shape minds. Death is final; thinking is infectious.

Qian’s essays reflect the unease of a generation of Chinese dissidents. But the purview of his ideas extends beyond China. As Chinese writers—in addition to Qian, the dissidents Liu Xiaobo and Ye Ren—were grappling with the binds of their government and heritage, activists and writers in Eastern Europe also struggled to transcend the structures of their political past. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, dissidents like Adam Michnik in Poland and Václav Havel in Czechoslovakia wrote of the reformist movement’s susceptibility to subversion, of the potential for the thinking of the old regime to destroy the opposition from inside out. Both in China and in Europe, these dissidents recognized the precariousness of their position as sparring partners to the communist totality. Was the argument of Adorno and Horkheimer true? Must dissidents, by

³ Qian, 364.

⁴ Qian, 364.

“becoming arguments in the process of opposition” accede to the mechanisms of the system itself?⁵ Totalities, they understood, are Hydras: diffuse and faceless, they are strongest when under assault. In the face of totality, the answer of Ye Ren, Liu Xiaobo, Adam Michnik, and Václav Havel is a subtle one. Their solution is not to erect a new structure — to build a new Great Wall — but to undermine the notion of structures in the first place. What these dissidents share is the drive towards a new pragmatism, towards an anti-worldview “worldview” grounded in place and time and yet anchored by the timelessness of conscience.

**Responsibility in a Time of “Emperor’s-New-Clothes” Governance:
Adam Michnik and Václav Havel**

Adam Michnik and Václav Havel both belong to the generation of Eastern Europeans that matured in the age of “post-ideological” communism. Michnik, in Poland, wrote in the context of a number of events: the 1956 Polish October, which marked the end of Stalinism; the 1968 student demonstrations; the participation of Polish troops in the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia; and in 1980, the formation of the Solidarity trade union and the subsequent declaration of martial law in 1981.⁶ Havel, likewise, worked in the frame of the rule of the apparatchiks, after Marxism’s bankruptcy and in a time of “emperor’s-new- clothes,” opportunist governance. Havel’s activism sprang more particularly from his involvement in the Charter 77 movement, a campaign that sought the implementation of the 1975 Helsinki Accord’s guarantee of human rights.⁷

Both Michnik and Havel wrote in an environment of non-ideological polarization, a space in which to be a “communist” meant only “to be in power” and thus to be a “dissident”

⁵ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1996): 6.

⁶ Adam Michnik, *Letters from Prison and Other Essays*, trans. Maya Latynski (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985): xxix.

⁷ Václav Havel. *Letters to Olga*, trans. Paul Wilson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1990): 3.

was simply “not to be in power.” Both Michnik and Havel are thus, in their writings, very heedful of the dangers of idle antagonism. As Michnik writes in his *Letters from Prison and Other Essays*, “An angel who requires heroism not only from himself but from others, who completely refuses to recognize the value of compromises and perceives the world with a Manichaeian simplicity...such an angel, even if he admires heaven, has already entered the road leading to hell.”⁸ The problem, Michnik notes, is that political dissent inevitably demands the taking of sides. The reign of an unjust regime leaves no room for neutrality, which can only be complicity. The totalitarian regime, which extends its grasp into every facet of life, precludes the ability to distinguish between Caesar and God. Thus revolution, “turning around,” seems to require an “against.” And yet, for Michnik, revolution predicated merely on opposition is doomed. Michnik’s vision of dissidence, as Jonathan Schell writes in introducing *Letters from Prison*, demands a “revolution in revolution,” a re-working of the very concept of protest.

In his own epistolary collection, *Letters to Olga*, Havel expresses a similar wariness of polarization. While the secret police indict him as a “political prisoner,” Havel seems determined to remain, throughout his confinement, a person. In his letters, Havel shrugs off the gravity that might be expected of the jailed dissident. The opening lines of his first letter to Olga are indicative of the satirical and grounded tone that Havel carries throughout: “It appears the astrologers were right when they predicted prison for me again this year and when they said the summer would be a hot one.”⁹ Setting aside the credit that invariably goes to the censor, Havel nevertheless seems much more focused on the practical concerns of imprisonment—of missed packages, stolen cigarettes, neglected exercises—than on the abstract affairs of politics.

⁸ Michnik, xii.

⁹ Havel, 23.

If Michnik and Havel represent a “revolution in revolution,” as Schell argues, than what does their vision of dissent entail? For both writers, evading polarization requires conceiving of revolution as a process that occurs on the human level. Havel, in particular, views individual “responsibility” as the fount of broader change. As a characteristic of the individual, responsibility must connote a readiness to existentially defend one’s actions. Responsibility, however, is more than an individual trait; it is necessarily *for* someone, and requires both a giver and a recipient. This relationship is a concrete one. And yet, Havel argues, it stems from a more mystical source, what Havel terms the “horizon of being.”¹⁰ This “horizon of being” is the absolute stabilizer of human responsibility and reflects the “relationship of relativity to non-relativity.”¹¹ This “horizon of being” is not a god but a mere reflection of what we are and demand of ourselves.

Michnik is likewise adamant that dissent begin with individual conscience. Conscience must be listened to and then obeyed; thus, no action can be “morally indifferent” and no actor can be disembodied from his choices. The dissident who signs a loyalty declaration for the sake of his family demands “understanding, always compassion, but never praise.”¹² “Every loyalty declaration is an evil,” Michnik writes, “and a declaration that has been forced out of you is an evil which you were compelled to commit.”¹³ For Michnik, choice never dissipates. There is no morality-free zone. Michnik thus rejects the categories of “ends” and “means.” They are the same: there is only action.

In rooting dissent in individual action, Havel and Michnik attempt to separate themselves from the polluting influence of ideology. By necessity, the individual is grounded in a specific

¹⁰ Havel, 10.

¹¹ Havel, 310.

¹² Michnik, 5.

¹³ Michnik, 5.

place and time. Politics, the interactions of individuals, thus centers on the lives of people, and not ideas. As both Michnik and Havel note, totalitarianism, ironically, lends itself to this grounded approach to dissidence. As Schell writes, "...Precisely because totalitarian governments politicize daily life, daily life becomes a vast terrain on which totalitarianism can be opposed."¹⁴ Michnik availed himself of this opportunity in his work with the Workers' Defense Committee (KOR), which provided aid to jailed dissidents and their families. For Michnik, societal reform could succeed only if it served to enforce "normalcy and ordinariness."¹⁵ Poles must understand the oft-stated goals of "reform," "democracy," and "freedom," in the context of their application, which is mundane. There are no systematic answers: "But for death," Michnik reminds, "all solutions are illusory."¹⁶

Havel similarly evades the "diffuse, general ideological polemics with no center, to whom numerous concrete 'causes' are always being sacrificed," and instead commits to "[fighting] 'only' for those concrete causes...and [fighting] unswervingly to the end."¹⁷ This commitment to living in the world of facts and reality pervades Havel's letters, which are filled with the author's very worldly instructions to Olga. In his first letter home, for instance, Havel writes, "Very important! I bought a beautiful painting from Trinsky. We have to send him 5000 crowns."¹⁸ In the immediate aftermath of his arrest, Havel is concerned not with politics, but with an obligation to his friend. It is a commitment to right action that extends throughout Havel's writings, a commitment that reflects his belief in the power of the concrete. "Anything that relates to this fundamental, omnipresent, and living tension (between lies and truth), will

¹⁴ Michnik, xxvii.

¹⁵ Michnik, 11.

¹⁶ Michnik, 62.

¹⁷ Havel, 14

¹⁸ Havel, 24.

inevitably speak to people,” Havel writes in his famous essay “Power of the Powerless.”¹⁹ Lasting change cannot stem from a “structural change,” but only from a change in how we actually act: “A better system will not automatically ensure a better life. In fact, the opposite is true: Only by creating a better life can a better system be developed.”²⁰

That is to say, the greatest danger to the dissident movement is not the guns or secret police of the regime in power. Instead, Havel shows, the trump card of the post-ideological dictatorship is its hollowed-out “ideology.” In “Power of the Powerless,” Havel presents the symbol of the greengrocer, who each day places in his window a card that reads, “Workers of the World, Unite!” The placement of this card, Havel argues, is not merely a sign of deference to authority—if this were the case, the greengrocer could just as easily alter the wording of the sign to “I am afraid and therefore unquestioningly obedient.”²¹ The “ideological” content of the sign serves not only to protect the regime in power but also to maintain the self-esteem of the shopkeeper. It is, after all, much easier for the shopkeeper to hide behind the veil of ideology than confront the lie he is living. Living in truth, fighting for the concrete, fulfilling responsibility to one’s conscience: this is an onerous summons. Ideology comforts our lies, creates an aura of neutrality, a semblance of honor. To speak in the concrete is to account for one’s actions. To respond to ideology in kind is to feed its spell. Dissent, as Adorno and Horkheimer note, can readily become contaminated.

And thus Michnik writes, “I pray that we do not change from prisoners to prison guards.”²² And Havel adds, “The more slavishly and dogmatically a person falls for a ready-made ideological system or “worldview,” the more certainly he will...begin to serve the ‘order

¹⁹ Václav Havel, “The Power of the Powerless,” in *From Stalinism to Pluralism*, ed. Gale Stokes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996): 173.

²⁰ Havel, “Power,” 173.

²¹ Havel, “Power,” 169.

²² Michnik, 99.

of death.”²³ The response to totalitarianism, Michnik and Havel realize, cannot be “democracy.” For “democracy” is but a word, and the right response cannot be any word. The response to totalitarianism must be action grounded in variable time and invariable conscience.

Tiananmen and the Failure of the “Democratic Revolution”: Liu Xiaobo and Ye Ren

One cannot speak of a Chinese “dissident movement” in the same register as Solidarity or Charter 77. Unlike Eastern Europe, where Marxism became almost entirely discredited after the bloody end of the 1968 Prague spring, communist ideology proved more resilient in China even after Mao’s death and the trial of the “Gang of Four.” Unlike Czechoslovakia and Poland, whose economies faltered with the decay of the Soviet Union, China grew increasingly wealthy throughout the 1980s and 90s as a result of both Deng Xiaoping’s economic liberalization policies and a willing coterie of foreign investors. Despite improved living standards and, to some extent, a tampering down of the violence of Maoist days, dissent persisted in the days of “Reform and Openness.” Beginning with the 1978 Democracy Wall and peaking with the student protests of spring 1989, many Chinese agitated for increased economic and political freedoms.

Both Liu Xiaobo and Ye Ren write in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989 (what Chinese call *liu si shi jian*, the “June Fourth Incident”). In 1989, Liu, a literary critic, returned to China from a visiting scholar post at Columbia University in order to participate in the demonstrations.²⁴ The bloody end of the Tiananmen protests – somewhere between a few hundred and a few thousand civilians killed, many more times this injured – kindled among Chinese intellectuals an intense discussion of the meaning of the movement. Liu Xiaobo’s essay,

²³ Havel, 191.

²⁴ *Tiananmen: Gate of Heavenly Peace* film website. <http://tsquare.tv/film/charac.01.html#LXB>

“That Holy Word, ‘Revolution,’” and Ye Ren’s essay “The Democracy Movement in Exile is Trapped by Communist Mentality” appeared in the context of this debate.²⁵

In these writings, Ye and Liu explore the failures of Tiananmen. For both Liu and Ye, Tiananmen was indeed a failure, a missed opportunity for reform that ended awash in needless blood. What might seem jarring to a Western reader is that Liu and Ye fault both the actions of the government and those of the student demonstrators. Liu and Ye see in Tiananmen not a fresh and constructive call for reform but rather an echo of the orgiastic revelry and careless radicalism of the Cultural Revolution. If Tiananmen was the scene of incipient revolution, then Liu and Ye recognize the limits of revolution as an expression of dissent.

All of Chinese history has been carried out “in the name of revolution,” Liu writes, and thus each Chinese person is “both victim and carrier of that word.”²⁶ The aim of revolution has varied: in imperial times, to restore the “heavenly mandate”; in Maoist times, to root out “feudalist oppression”; in modern times still one hears of the “family revolution,” the “marriage revolution,” “revolutionary writing.”²⁷ Liu notes that for the Chinese, the term “revolution” connotes a certain righteousness and loftiness of purpose. The Chinese word, *ge ming* (革命) derives from the combination of the character *ge*, “to revoke,” and *ming*, the “heavenly

²⁵ A note on the Chinese texts: Liu’s essay was originally written (in English) for Jeffrey Wasserstrom and Elizabeth Perry’s anthology *Popular Protest and Political Culture in Modern China, Second Edition*. For the purposes of this paper, Liu’s essay was accessed online from the website of the documentary film *Tiananmen: The Gate of Heavenly Peace* (in which Liu Xiaobo is interviewed). As such, the page numbers given for “That Holy Word” are my own, based only on a printout of that online essay. I provide page numbers in addition to the URL in order to convey a general sense of the structure of the article and to allow for easier referencing. Ye’s piece was similarly accessed from the documentary website. It too first appeared in print, although only in Chinese, in a 1995 issue of the Hong magazine *Jiu shi nian dai* (*The 90s*). The inaccessibility of a physical copy of Ye’s essay (an English translation of the piece is exclusive to the website) compels me to follow a similar referencing style for his work.

²⁶ Liu, Xiaobo, “That Holy Word, ‘Revolution.’” Originally published in Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom and Elizabeth J. Perry, eds. *Popular Protest and Political Culture in Modern China*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1991. Accessed from <http://tsquare.tv/themes/LiuXiaobo.html>.

²⁷ Liu, 1.

mandate.”²⁸ In Chinese, “to revolt” is merely to execute the will of the heavens; in the assuredness of the term lies the seeds of its perversion.

Ye begins his examination of revolution with the case of Chai Ling, the commander-in-chief of the Tiananmen protests who has since become an American businesswoman. For Ye, to understand the failure of Tiananmen one can begin with an interview Chai Ling gave in 1989 at the scene of the protests. In response to a journalist’s question about the aims of the students, Chai responded, “What we are actually hoping for is bloodshed, for the moment when the government has no choice but to brazenly butcher the people. Only when the square is awash with blood will the people of China open their eyes.”²⁹ Ye asks, How could the leader of the pro-democracy movement, the commander-in-chief of all the students, have so earnestly and brazenly wished for the blood of her fellow demonstrators? Chai’s statement upsets our easy equivalence of “good guys”/student protestors and “bad guys”/government. The question becomes: What responsibility do leaders like Chai Ling have for the failures of Tiananmen? How did the “democracy movement” find its end in radicalism and violence?

The demonstrating students of 1989, Liu points out, spoke of themselves as soldiers of “The Great Revolution for Democracy and Against Dictatorship.”³⁰ To conceive of oneself as “revolutionary” is to polarize, to bisect the world into the reactionary and the progressive. Anyone who came to the Square instantly became a “hero”; those who stayed away or questioned the wisdom of the demonstrations were dismissed as “cowards” or “reactionaries.”³¹ During the demonstrations, Liu writes, the space for nuance and neutrality vanished. The government’s heavy-handed response was only a product of this polarization. Liu writes, “We

²⁸ Liu, 2.

²⁹ Ye Ren, “The Democracy Movement in Exile is Trapped by Communist Mentality,” trans. Carma Hinton. <http://www.tsquare.tv/film/YeRen.html>.

³⁰ Liu, 1.

³¹ Liu, 8.

forced the government, whose position was at first one of dialogue and compromise, into the predicament of suppressing the peaceful movement with military force.”³²

Liu argues that the dogmatism of the student leaders, their uncompromising demands for the government, stemmed not from pureness of mind or conscience but from a mindset trapped in the structures of history. The youth of China were the “revolutionary successors,” the heirs of the “Great Cultural Revolution,” of “the ancient Confucian morality of ‘killing oneself to attain virtue.’”³³ This radicalism, Liu argues, was itself the “content” of the so-called “democracy protests.” Tiananmen could not have been about democracy simply because the students and even the intellectuals had no real sense of what “democracy” actually meant: “What is most telling is that we university students and intellectuals, who have been called ‘soldiers of democracy’ ... only understand democracy on paper and in theory and do not have a ‘working’ knowledge of real, operating democracy,” Liu writes.³⁴ Caught up in the fervor of revolution and the pursuit of martyrs, the protestors of Tiananmen neglected to either make “point-by-point concrete requests” or formulate a vision of the society they hoped to create.³⁵ For the 1989 protestors, “democracy” was the mystical specter reified in the “Goddess of Democracy,” the statue that a group of art students built from foam and papier-mâché. What the protestors did not understand is that “democratization is not only an ideal, not only a grand spectacle, it is also the actual, concrete, detailed, even tedious process of setting up and applying democratic procedures.”³⁶ The democratic illiteracy of the student leaders manifested itself both in the callous words of Chai Ling as well as in the imperious directives issued from the central student command to the assembled crowd.

³² Liu, 9.

³³ Liu, 8.

³⁴ Liu, 7.

³⁵ Liu, 7.

³⁶ Liu, 6.

As Ye points out, the Chinese “democratic” movement did not suddenly become more democratic after Tiananmen. In the post-1989 Chinese intellectual debate, many veterans of the Square accused more conservative scholars of “dividing the forces of democracy.”³⁷ In an interview, Chai Ling claimed, “Recently, a small number of people in the Western media have tried to divide the students from Tiananmen into radicals and moderates.” Ye recognizes in Chai’s words a larger trend: “Those who advocate themselves as devoting their lives to democracy are not willing to use democratic methods to discuss an issue.”³⁸ Chai’s language in responding to criticism is reminiscent of that of Maoist propaganda campaigns; Chai speaks of “characters with dubious political backgrounds,” “a small number of people in the media,” “currying favors with some and attacking others.”³⁹ Ultimately, she cannot emerge from the communist mindset of revolution and martyrdom, from a system in which “the individual is merely the tool of history...” and “human beings are merely offerings on the altar of moral codes, ideals, and creeds.”⁴⁰ In her attack on “totalitarianism,” Chai Ling realizes the etymology of the English word, “revolution.” To revolt is to “return.” In “revolting” against communism, Chai Ling and her fellow students simply return to it: “Even when fighting the system, the only weapon they know is what that system gave them.”⁴¹

As Liu and Ye realize, in their “revolt” against communism, the student protestors mimicked the very target of their dissent. Tiananmen was a scene not of opposition but of mimesis, of theater.⁴² “Revolutions are the festivals of the oppressed and the exploited,” Liu

³⁷ Ye, 1.

³⁸ Ye, 2.

³⁹ Ye, 2.

⁴⁰ Ye, 5.

⁴¹ Ye, 6.

⁴² See Joseph W. Esherick and Jefferey Wasserstrom, “Acting out democracy: political theater in modern China,” in Jefferey N. Wasserstrom and Elizabeth J. Perry (eds.), *Popular Protest and Political Culture in Modern China* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991).

writes, quoting Lenin.⁴³ The scene of Tiananmen he paints is thus that of the carnival: of banners and chanting, students dancing and fainting from hunger, spontaneous singing, the sustained wailing of ambulances. Everywhere there was the “tragic sense of a righteous advance to death....”⁴⁴ This was an orgy of hedonistic righteousness, sustained only by abstraction and its transitoriness. None of the protestors, Liu writes, was willing to articulate a vision of the post-protest world. And so the reality of the political climate was lost in the revelry: the fact that “Deng Xiaoping had, through ten years of reform and liberalization, won popular support,” that the Tiananmen protest was very much doomed.⁴⁵

In the end, the Tiananmen students were swallowed up by their sense of history-in-the-making. Their drive to lionize each “revolutionary,” to build with papier-mâché the “goddess of democracy” finds its end as the closing of a curtain at the end of a play. The students’ sense of history ended up writing history, stealing agency from individuals. And throughout all, the ultimate irony was that only the “heartless government was rationally asking: what will be the result of all this radicalism?”⁴⁶ The result of an extended play at revolution was not creation but destruction, “a square from which the odor of feces and urine rose and spread; a square where garbage was piled sky high.”⁴⁷ And in the end, nothing was gained. The curtain fell on the tragedy, and people “could not bear the fact that the entire nation awaited a martyr and yet not a single one was produced.”⁴⁸ Art produced only artistic gains.

⁴³ Liu, 4.

⁴⁴ Liu, 3.

⁴⁵ Liu, 4.

⁴⁶ Liu, 6.

⁴⁷ Liu, 9.

⁴⁸ Liu, 9.

Towards a New Pragmatism

The message of Liu and Ye thus mirrors that of Michnik and Havel. Like their Eastern European contemporaries, Liu and Ye refuse to distinguish between “means” and “ends.” For them, terms like “democratic revolution” or “soldiers of democracy” carry no meaning. The establishment of a Chinese democracy will only be realized in the establishment of a society of democratic Chinese people. Revolution, the “return to,” must be a return to conscience, right action and humanity.

In his essay, Ye Ren invokes a famous parable of the writer Lu Xun:

Imagine an iron house without windows, absolutely indestructible, with many people fast asleep inside who will soon die of suffocation. But you know since they will die in their sleep, they will not feel the pain of death. Now if you cry aloud to wake a few of the lighter sleepers, making those unfortunate few suffer the agony of irrevocable death, do you think you are doing them a good turn? But if a few awake, can you say there is no hope of destroying the iron house?⁴⁹

The hope of Chai Ling and her fellow radicals was to “awaken” the country. Ye finds this “enlightenment tradition”—despite its noble semblance—defective. To wake a person up is to determine his fate, to foist onto him one’s own values, to create consciousness. This, after all, is what socialism is all about: the engineering of minds, the enforcement of ideology. Although Liu and Ye do not speak in their essays about “responsibility” or “living in truth,” their words project a similar message as those of Havel and Michnik. Liu and Ye envision a path to right politics that begins with right action. They ground their thought in the individual, in morality, which is the hope that we do not need someone to wake us up, that we must wake ourselves up.

The World Today

The reader who judges this paper’s comparison of China and Eastern European by the current political statuses of those countries will likely find it inapt. Today, the Czech Republic and Poland are both “democracies,” while the People’s Republic of China retains its identity as a

⁴⁹ Ye, 5.

communist state. Michnik and Havel, it seems, have “won,” while Liu and Ye have “failed.” Certainly, this essay aims to compare individuals and their texts, and not countries; furthermore, a discussion of the commensurability of China and Eastern Europe lies beyond the scope of this paper. And yet, the divergence of the dissident movements in Eastern Europe and in China presents a compelling challenge.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has maintained its hold on power for innumerable and perhaps ineducible reasons. Some historians attribute the CCP's staying power to China's sustained and robust economic growth. Other theorists might note the influence of the collapse of the Soviet Union on the rise of Eastern European democracy. But if we are to take seriously the power of structure and ideology, perhaps we can find something of an answer for China's continued authoritarianism in the writings of Qian Zhongshu. Qian concludes his essay on “Stupefying the People” with this warning on the entangling power of tradition: “Those who practice the art of stupefying the people,” Qian writes, “may end up, by their own devices, stupefying themselves.”⁵⁰ The Chinese people have endured not only thousands of years of dynastic rule, but also the shifting oppressions of imperialism, communism, and today, a no-holds-barred, corruption-filled capitalism. Perhaps the longevity of all these structures makes the task of extracting oneself, of finding a post-ideological politics, even harder. Totalities and structures, Qian points out, have staying powers that exceed the lives and intentions of their architects. Today, two millennia after the fall of the Qin dynasty, the Great Wall still weaves through China, a symbol no doubt of certain traditions and modes of thought that continue to divide.

⁵⁰ Qian, 366.

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