

SEARCHING FOR LIFE'S MEANING

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*Changes and Tensions in the
Worldviews of Chinese Youth
in the 1980s*



LUO XU

Ann Arbor

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To My Parents

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Preface

This book is the outgrowth of the dissertation I completed in 1995. The topic of this study came to me after the great democratic movement in 1989. I had taught history at Capital Normal University in Beijing, China, before I came to the United States for doctoral study. As a young teacher, I had had very good relations with my students, and I thought I knew them very well. In the summer of 1989, just as I had completed my first year of study in the States, the student movement erupted in Beijing. Within fifty days it influenced more than 600 universities and forty to fifty cities including millions of urban people who participated in the demonstrations. The movement developed into the largest urban protest in modern Chinese history. As I followed the events, I could not help wondering, how had the students I used to teach and know become involved in them? As far as I remembered, they were quite different from previous generations. They were practical, utilitarian, and individualistic, a kind of self-centered “me generation.” How could they engage in such an enormous collective action that demanded great devotion to a common idealistic cause? Was it because they had changed since I had left? Or was it because I had not understood them well in the first place? I decided to confront this issue directly by writing my dissertation on the changes in the values of Chinese youth in the 1980s.

The topic is of personal interest to me also because, as a youth of the 1980s myself, I experienced, if I did not participate directly in, every major development that occurred in China from 1976 to 1988. Initially, I wanted to focus on the immediate background of the 1989 movement, looking at the direct relationship between the students’ attitudes and their activism. But the contradictory nature of available sources and, more importantly, the ongoing nature of the movement soon convinced me that the time had not come yet to evaluate those events. In other words, to keep some historical distance, I decided to limit the period of my study to the decade before 1989.

This book addresses the sociocultural environment in which the 1989 events can be best understood. The student movement of 1989 was not just a social and political crisis reflecting the views of a small group of intellectuals,

but also an outcome of a decade-long transformation of ideology or worldview among a vast number of ordinary people, especially youth. Although the pre-1989 period is not remote, the 1989 movement was a historical turning point that gave the decade prior to it a certain coherence suitable for study. My own position as a participant observer enabled me to access the lives and attitudes of Chinese youth with a kind of firsthand closeness while maintaining some temporal and spatial distance.

The bulk of my research was conducted at the Harvard-Yenching Library and the Fairbank Center for East Asian Research at Harvard University, Cornell University, the University of Illinois at Urbana/Champaign, and the State University of New York at Buffalo. My parents and friends in Beijing, China, helped me collect an equally large array of materials. During my two years of full-time teaching at the State University of New York College at Fredonia (1992–94), I was able to continue my research. When I visited Taiwan in 1993 and 1994, Hong Kong in 1994, and mainland China in the summer of 1994, I collected additional materials from libraries and bookstores. In the long course of reading, thinking, and writing, I discarded some of my old assumptions, revised my initial ideas, changed my writing plans more than once, and finally came up with the present organization.

In the last few years, as a new member of an academic community, I have spent most of my time teaching. But I took two research trips, to Columbia University in summer 1997 and Beijing in summer 1998, as part of the work of turning the dissertation into a book. During the spring semester of 1999, on a grant from the State of New York/United University Professionals, I was able to work full-time on the project, consulting more primary sources and works of recent scholarship and revising the text of different chapters. In addition, I have provided (in the introduction and epilogue) a historical perspective and intellectual framework to examine the value changes and cultural crisis that took place in what many might call the era of Deng Xiaoping.

Over the years I have benefited immeasurably from the direction of my adviser, Roger Des Forges at the State University of New York at Buffalo, to whose generosity with sources, ideas, criticism, encouragement, and time I owe the biggest debt. It is his patient and meticulous critiques and suggestions, his friendly, somehow *laissez-faire* but very thoughtful supervision, and particularly his inexhaustible intellectual inspiration for which I am very grateful. I wish also to express my sincere appreciation to Claude Welch and John Larkin for their valuable comments as dissertation committee members. Moreover, my deep gratitude goes to Stanley Rosen of the University of Southern California who has helped me in more than one way. His pioneering studies on Chinese youth inspired me greatly and provided useful references to sources of information and methodology. As an outside reader, he made

insightful suggestions and introduced important perspectives. I want to thank David Ownby and Cheng Li for their detailed and valuable comments on the manuscript. I am also grateful to my father who, following my inquiries, engrossed himself in Beijing's major libraries, bookstores, and research institutes, making every effort to find, purchase, or copy whatever materials I needed. I wish to express my appreciation to the attentive and supportive staff at the University of Michigan Press, including my editor Ingrid Erickson and her editorial assistant Erik Dahl, copyediting coordinator Marcia LaBrenz, and production coordinators Mary Meade and Judith Petty, who helped to bring this project to fruition. A special thanks goes to Janice Brill, my copyeditor, who contributed a great deal by improving my English style. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the financial support given to this project, including a dissertation fellowship from the Milton Plesur Scholarship Fund at SUNY Buffalo for the 1994–95 academic year, a Dr. Drescher grant by the State of New York/UUP Affirmative Action Committee and the State University of New York College at Cortland for spring 1999, and a summer research fellowship from SUNY at Cortland for summer 1999 that enabled me to finish this project. My thanks also to my colleagues in the History Department at SUNY at Cortland for their encouragement and for taking over student advisement during my leave.

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