The Chinese Crucible of 1957

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The year 1957 was a crucible year for the People’s Republic of China (PRC). This is not news for China scholars: the year began with Mao Zedong’s efforts to add fire to the sputtering Hundred Flowers rectification, saw the largest outbreak of public—and apparently permitted—political criticism in a state socialist polity in May, and abruptly saw the turnaround in June to a harsh Chinese Communist Party (CCP) crackdown on those same critics in the Anti-Rightist campaign during the second half of the year. International scholars have tracked these twin campaigns since they happened, most notably in Roderick MacFarquhar’s collection of translations in 1960 and a number of fine studies since then of elite politics and national-level literary movements. More recently, Chinese scholars in the PRC have been able to publish research on the topic (though sometimes publishing in Hong Kong’s more politically liberal market).

The themes and debates of 1957 are well known to specialists and textbook readers. Most scholars agree that the year began with hopes that Mao’s calls for public comment and criticism were sincere and that the Chinese would steer away from the brutal conformity of the Soviet bloc. We were astounded by the criticisms of the party published in the official press in May. The abrupt reversal and punitive rectification that began with a pivotal June 8, 1957, editorial in the People’s Daily and became the Anti-Rightist campaign.


campaign has been the subject of debate over how this reversal came about. MacFarquhar and others argued that Mao miscalculated and was caught short. He had pushed for open criticism against the concerted efforts of his CCP colleagues only to have them proved right—public criticism was not minor and aimed at local officials but was substantive and directed at the heart of the central party. Thus, Mao’s claim that he “meant to do it” (a plan to lure out bourgeois snakes from their holes) looks more like the protestation of an embarrassed child explaining a failed jump. Meanwhile, the Anti-Rightist campaign has been presented largely as a cruelly effective effort by the CCP to extirpate dissent root and stem. The price has been noted, too: muzzling the intellectuals and frightening party cadres prepared the way for the Great Leap Forward production drive to careen into disaster, as few dared speak up to oppose unrealistic plans and many competed to show their loyalty by absurd exaggerations. Recent scholarship has, in turn, looked at local experience and the variety across class and locality.3

What can be added to these stories? This special issue of *Twentieth-Century China* takes the challenge from other efforts to focus on one year to see whether a single year can serve as a useful historiographical lens in this case. The test is simple: does it change the story? Does the single-year focus bring to the fore interesting questions or changes in perspective? We think so. We take inspiration from a similar project, *1943: China at the Crossroads*. Joseph Esherick and Matthew Combs, the editors, defended their approach to “a single year” by noting that focusing our attention on one year does change the level of detail we attend to. That, in turn, can change our understanding of turning points in history. In their case, 1944 is generally regarded as the turning point both in the Anti-Japanese War and in the fates of Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist Party (the rot had really set in) and the CCP (Mao had indisputably secured his leadership, and the party had a winning political-military organization). Esherick and Combs made the case for 1943 as the key proximate cause of that turning point, and the dozen detailed studies in their volume offered the proof. Their goal was not to dethrone 1944 but rather to change the story, to change how we see events over those years. Their key finding was that the single-year focus brings to the fore the contingency of such turning points:

The chapters of this book argue for a new sense of contingency, not a relocation of the inevitable. By exploring in detail the events that shaped the national narrative, one

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3 This argument is reprised with full translations of previously unavailable Mao talks in Roderick MacFarquhar, Timothy Cheek, and Eugene Wu, eds., *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao: From the Hundred Flowers to the Great Leap Forward* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Council on East Asian Studies, 1989).


discovers a host of individuals making a variety of choices that, if made differently, could well have altered the course of history.\(^6\)

While 1957 is itself already considered a turning point in Mao’s China, we have found the same to be true for a focus on this year. To the prominence of historical contingency, we would add that the one-year focus heightens an appreciation of the diversity of experience during a shared national event of great significance and the value of individual voices, personal experience, and “local” experience (be it in the countryside or in the life of an urban work unit). Finally, this focus reminds us not to “look forward,” to refrain from casting a narrative that dwells on the roots of the Great Leap Forward or the Cultural Revolution but rather to focus on the experiences of actors who, inevitably, could not know the future but who did carry assumptions and expectations about the future based on previous experience. This focus compels us to ask: What did 1957 look like for them, in each place, then—in February, in May, in July, in October?

This approach disrupts our familiar narratives less by contradicting them and more by putting them out of focus so we can attend to other things. These things are both the very small and the very large. The papers in this special issue attend to the experiences of particular individuals and different social locations—a couple of writers in Chengdu, university students in Beijing and Shanghai, educational psychologists and professional pedagogy experts, party intellectuals and establishment intellectuals caught up in the twin campaigns. These cases not only bring to life the experiences and meanings of individuals but also address broader questions. Dayton Lekner investigates the relationships among language, literature, and politics through the cases of two poets, Liu Shahe (流沙河 1931–2019) and Shi Tianhe (石天河 1924–), who caught the attention of Chairman Mao but whose fates were shaped by Chengdu politics. Yidi Wu uses her examples to reconsider the process of political classification and recasts our understanding of the criteria of the Anti-Rightist campaign: it was less about political stand (left or right) and more about loyalty, loyalty to Mao and, decisively, to one’s local party leader. Stig Thøgersen brings modern professions into focus in the case of two professional educators, Chen Heqin (陈鹤琴 1892–1982) and Zhang Zonglin (张宗麟 1899–1976), and shows the tension between professional independence and party loyalty in a particular professional domain. Ning Wang looks at particular writers and intellectuals who were labeled rightists and maps a “chain of prey” in the political denunciations of the Anti-Rightist campaign, in which victims and perpetrators frequently changed places, vividly illustrating just how “the revolution ate its own children.” Like Lekner and Wu, Wang concludes that it was often CCP loyalists and activists on the party’s side in earlier campaigns who spoke up in spring 1957 and were labeled Rightists later in the year. These are the facets and fallout of Mao’s bold effort to make China the leading example in the socialist camp in 1957.

Together the papers in this special issue offer yet more. The focus on one year does not preclude looking at antecedents and noting, tentatively, the sequela of the events of 1957. However, these detailed studies bring to the fore some broader questions by focusing on one year and eschewing the comforts of a metanarrative. We have chosen the metaphor of a “crucible” to signal something of these broader and comparative perspectives. To English readers, “crucible” will evoke the image of The Crucible, the famous play by

\(^6\) Esherick and Combs, 1943, xiii.
Arthur Miller (1915–2005) that criticized the American McCarthy movement’s “witch hunts” in the 1950s. We mean to suggest that the social and political tensions apparent in the first half of 1957 and the witch hunts for Rightists that characterized the second half of the year in China were by no means unique in the modern world. We hope these studies are sufficiently welcoming to comparative readers that they may suggest fruitful comparisons with other examples of political panic and the search for scapegoats. These papers, taken in sum, move beyond single-factor explanations for who was labeled, who “confessed,” and who turned whom in. We have rich data here with which to plumb our understanding of what is “Chinese” or “modern” of the social and personal psychology of political witch hunts.

Arthur Miller, of course, wrote his play not about Washington in the 1950s but about seventeenth-century Salem, Massachusetts. The comparative history of political scares also includes China’s premodern history. Philip Kuhn studied a Chinese “sorcery scare” that occurred in 1768 and articulated some of the goals of this special issue. In particular, Kuhn sought in Soulstealers to document and relate the distinct experiences of different levels of society involved in the same national event, in this case a sort of witch hunt. What the Qianlong Emperor (r. 1735–1796), the top Confucian bureaucracy, and the working poor of the lower Yangzi region made of this sorcery scare varied but were linked: Qianlong saw insubordinate Manchu officials succumbing to Chinese temptations, impoverished laborers saw phantasms that explained the increasing economic pressure they were experiencing, and Confucian officials found themselves navigating between a vindictive emperor and a volatile public. Kuhn usefully concluded: “Chinese culture was unified but not homogeneous.” This applies to China today and is reflected in the stories of 1957 presented here. Our focus is not as broad as those of either Esherick and Combs (who covered national history) or Kuhn (who took on the equivalent of Mao, the CCP, and peasants). We focus on intellectuals, professionals, and mid- to lower-level party members (including university students on the track to careers in the party system). However, we detect the same “uniform but not homogeneous” character of public political culture through our focus on 1957 and the Janus-faced campaigns. Personal experience varied, single causes cannot explain what happened, but everyone was engaging CCP policy and expressing themselves through what Geremie Barmé has called “New China New Speak” (新华文体 xinhua wenti).
Our collective focus on particular people in one year has brought this broader theme about shared discourse and different experience into focus. It has also suggested a renewed attention to different kinds of time, in particular: campaign time, everyday time (or *habitus*), and remembered time. Gail Hershatter has powerfully documented the contrast between family time and campaign time in her study of rural women of the Mao period in Shaanxi. The studies here, with their focus on 1957, frame earlier years into something of what they looked like to participants then. This remembered time shaped the participants’ motivations (guilt over earlier denunciations; anger over earlier policies), put current events into a meaningful context (finally, the party is asking for my real opinion), and importantly molded their expectations about the future (things are really liberalizing; this will pass). The detail of these studies deepens our understanding of the experience of campaign time. It also shows the interaction between different kinds of time experienced by individuals. Ning Wang shows that the “chain-of-prey” mutual denunciations that emerged in the crucible of campaign time also became part of everyday time, a part of the quotidian repertoire of the politically active intellectual determined to survive Mao’s campaign culture.

These articles suggest the usefulness of a single-year focus that extends beyond the case of 1957. In addition to Esherick and Combs, there are other useful examples of a focus on a single year or even a single day. Ray Huang took the year 1587 precisely because it was “a year of no significance” and used it as a way to focus on long-term developments in Ming history—from imperial paralysis of the Wanli Emperor (r. 1572–1620) to intellectual ferment reflected by Li Zhi (李贄 1527–1602). Likewise, in 1936 Mao Dun and Chinese editors at Life Publishing Company in Shanghai took up the idea of “a day in the life of the world” from Maxim Gorky (1868–1936) and applied it to China. The result was *A Day in China* (*中國的一日 Zhongguo de yiri*), a collection of notes and experiences from a broad range of (mostly urban) readers who offered their experiences on May 21, 1936. Hong Zicheng of Peking University has looked at literature and politics with a focus on 1956. Hong highlighted the vibrant literary and professional efforts of Chinese writers in the year before Mao made all literature irreversibly tied to changing current policies. These studies show that a single-year focus provides one historiographical tool to combat the siren calls of metanarrative. We all hearken to a good story with a coherent and compelling narrative, and effective histories employ such narratives. However, historians need to balance such narrative exposition with analytical tools to open up the

16 Hong Zicheng, *1956: Baihua shidai* [1956: Time of the Hundred Flowers] (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2010). According to his preface, Hong’s volume was planned as part of a Shandong People’s Press series on “A Century of Chinese Literature” to have 12 volumes focused on single years, beginning with *1898: Bainian youhuang* [1898: A hundred years of worry] by Xie Mian and including the years 1903, 1921, and on down to 1993. According to Baidu, most of those titles were published between 1998 and 2002, except for Hong’s.
historical record and our understanding of the experience of the Other, particularly the temporal other, the person from another time and place. As Prasenjit Duara has suggested, we need “bifurcated histories” that reclaim obscured experiences and developments from the blinding light of metanarratives, especially national histories put forward by political elites. We suggest that taking a few single-year studies together can be one useful way to produce such bifurcated histories.

The studies in this special issue also offer some fresh perspectives on our understanding of this well-known year in modern Chinese history itself. Most broadly, they underscore the centrality of loyalty in the events of 1957 and the broader experience of politically active Chinese in the years before and after. A key finding, confirmed across the papers, is that it was CCP loyalists who spoke up critically in 1957 and not just those inherently unhappy with the CCP’s dominance in Chinese life. Likewise, as Wu and Wang in particular show, but which is echoed in Lekner’s and Thøgersen’s papers, loyalty to Mao and local party leaders was the core criterion for distinguishing “the people” from “rightists” (and similar political pariahs) and not a political stand in terms of the left wing or right wing. All the papers show that whether or not one was a party member was not a salient criterion for choosing who would fall in the purges of the second half of the year. In Thøgersen’s paper, the elder nonparty member (Chen) and the younger party member (Zhang) both go down in the end for their commitment to professional standards. Finally, Wang brings into plain relief what we see in part in the other papers: victims and perpetrators became linked in a hellish “chain-of-prey” survival mechanism that became widespread in 1957 and lingered until the end of the Mao era. As political rectification continues to rev up in Xi Jinping’s China in 2019, this is a lesson worth paying attention to.

Notes on Contributor

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