

Summary of Opening Remarks by Professor Merle Goldman on the Questions of Politics and Society in China

MR. ALEXANDER GRAHAM: This morning's opening remarks on the questions of "Politics and Society in China" will be given by one of the United States' most distinguished China scholars. She is currently Professor Emerita of History at Boston University, and a research associate of The Fairbank Center for East Asian Research at Harvard University. Her research focuses on the role of modern intellectuals in China, and the intellectual pre-conditions for democracy. Her books include *Literary Dissent in Communist China*, *Sowing the Seeds of Democracy in China* and most recently published in 2005, *From Comrade to Citizen: The Struggle for Political Rights in China*. So it is my pleasure to introduce to you Professor Merle Goldman.

PROFESSOR MERLE GOLDMAN: Thank you very much. I'm very happy to be here at this conference, and I'm going to add I hope a historical note to what's going on.

As many of you know, China, up until the last 18th century, was one of the great powers in the world. Then it was hit by the western impact, it withdrew into itself and it became one of the poorest, most isolated countries in the world. And it certainly was that at the beginning of the 20th century. And despite the Chinese Communist revolution in 1949, when Mao died in 1976, it was still one of the poorest, most isolated countries in the world. So then we should ask the question, "What happened?" How is it that 25-26 years later, at the beginning of the 21st century, China is one of the most dynamic countries of the world economically, growing at a rate of 9-10% a year and is a country that has been described by the World Bank as having the fastest rate of growth in the world today. Not only today, but also in world history. So what happened? What happened in those 25 years to make a difference? As a historian, I want to go back and see what happened.

First of all, let's go back to the Chinese Revolution in 1949. The Chinese Revolution, led by Mao Zedong, has been evaluated by the Chinese – or Mao has been evaluated by the Chinese -- as 70% good and 30% bad. That's the way he's looked upon. I turn that around, and I say he's 70% bad and 30% good. But that 30% good is very important in understanding what's happening today.

First of all, he and the Communist Party had the strategy to unite China after 50-60 years of disunion; that was very important. Because in those early years of the 20th century, there was instability, warlordism. Very important. Secondly, he and the Communist Party provided an education for a whole younger generation. That means that today China has a literacy rate of close to 90%. Remember this is a country of 1,300,000,000 people, but with a very high literacy rate. Third: he raised the position of women. Very important in trying to understand what's going on today.

Mao and the Communist Party began the beginnings of building the infrastructure – the roads, the bridges, the dams, and so forth – in this period. And finally, and maybe just as important, the health care of the Chinese – China had a life expectancy of that of a developed country, even though it was a very, very poor country. And we made fun of those barefoot doctors who went from village to village. But they did something very important; they went into the villages, they cleaned up the water, they gave injections, they moved on. But China's life expectancy certainly was very much prolonged.

So when Deng Xiaoping comes to power in the late 1970s and begins the economic reforms, he

has a literate, healthy population that's ready to respond. And I think those factors are very important in understanding what happens. And secondly, of course, what did he do? He returned the economy to a market economy. In other words, they got rid of public planning, the ministries – in fact, those ministries were really decimated in the Cultural Revolution. So turning to the market was natural. The economy had become decentralized during the Cultural Revolution as well. So this is part of it, and when you turn the economy towards a service economy, it just took off. Millions and millions of small entrepreneurs literally came out of the woodwork, and I believe it was this unleashing of these small entrepreneurs that was very important.

Now where were they? When they did this in the former Soviet Union, there were very few entrepreneurs that came out to respond. In China, there were millions of them. Why? Again, I think it has to do with Chinese history.

Marx called China a feudal society. It was not a feudal society; China, from the beginning of its history, was a society of small landholders. The farmer, who owned his little piece of land, had to plant the crops and he had to sell those crops at the market. His wife would sit at home, maybe weaving, producing some products for the market as well. So this was an economy with entrepreneurs who, if you gave them the opportunity, responded. And they responded very, very quickly.

Secondly, unlike the former Soviet Union, the Chinese Communist Party had been decimated by Mao in the Cultural Revolution. Mao believed that the Party was conspiring against him in the 1960s – I talk about it in my books – and he then launched the Cultural Revolution against his own Party. So when Deng Xiaoping proposed moving to a market economy, moving to economic reforms, he did not encounter the kind of opposition that Gorbachev encountered when he tried to do the same thing in the former Soviet Union. In fact, the Party went along with him, because the Party has lost its legitimacy in the Cultural Revolution. And as Deng argued, the only way it could regain that legitimacy was to deliver economically. And they delivered economically, and I would say that the legitimacy of this Party depends on delivering economically. If that economic growth should falter, then, I believe, the Party will be in trouble. But as long as they can deliver economically, they were able to regain their legitimacy, and so you had a stable political structure in place, which is also very important.

Moreover, China had had only 25 years of the Communist system, unlike the former Soviet Union, which had had 70; there were people around who still knew the market networks, still knew how to buy and sell in the market. And so you had a population that responded, I believe, very positively to these incentives. Yet, this is a country that is still ruled by the Communist Party. It is still a Communist-led government.

China moved from what I call a totalitarian government under Mao Zedong, where he dictated what they should believe, what they should do, to an authoritarian government, where there was much more personal freedom. And in my new book, *From Comrade to Citizen*, I describe how, as a comrade, *tongzhi*, they did whatever the Party told them to do. So when Mao and the Hundred Flowers again called on people to criticize the Party because he thought it was getting too bureaucratic, they did it. Or in the Cultural Revolution, when he unleashed these young students, the Red Guards, to criticize the Party because he thought they were conspiring against him, they did it. But it was only when Mao gave them permission.

We see in the post-Mao period under Deng Xiaoping, under Jiang Zemin, under the present leadership of Hu Jintao, people attempting to assert their political rights without being told. That's why I call them citizens. And ironically, the group that has been most active in doing this is the former Red Guard. And the former Red Guards were these young people, as I said, that Mao mobilized to criticize the Party, criticize authority, criticize their teachers, criticize their parents, their family; they created such havoc that he sent them down to the countryside to learn from the peasants.

In the countryside, they began – without any authority – to organize, they began to talk, they began to question. They didn't find the Great Paradise they thought had been developed under Communism in the countryside. And they began to question it. And at the end of the Cultural Revolution, with Mao's death in 1976, they returned to the cities. And among these returning Red Guards were some who began to question the political system.

And very early on, in the late 1970s, it led to a movement called the Democracy Wall movement, in which they used the methods they learned as Red Guards: putting up wall posters, putting out news sheets, debating to demand political reforms. And initially, Deng Xiaoping allowed them to do it because he used this movement to get rid of the Maoists that were still in the government. Once he got rid of the Maoists, he cracked down on these Democracy Wall people. But this was the beginning, I believe, of change, of demanding political rights. They also demanded their political rights.

And then, as many of you know, in 1989 there were these demonstrations in Tiananmen and all over China by student groups, by ordinary citizens, even by workers, demanding their political rights. On June 4, Deng Xiaoping sent in the troops, and with military power he put down this movement as well. Nonetheless, there is coming up from below, I believe, in China an increasing demand for some kind of political change. And ironically, it is coming – well, not ironically; someone mentioned it was going to come from the middle class – it is coming from the middle class, but it is not coming from what we call the rising rich entrepreneurs. Those people are being co-opted into the Party. They are becoming part of the establishment, very much like what we saw in Confucianism, which co-opted the educated people into the bureaucracy. It is coming from these former Red Guards, who now had to go out and make a living; many of them had become small entrepreneurs.

So it has been coming from what I call the kind of other members of the middle class, the lower members of the middle class: the small entrepreneurs; and certainly some intellectuals, the journalists. Ironically, the post-Mao Fourth Generation has not been part of these demands. They are so intent on making money, getting their professions, they have not been part of it. So there is a generational gap there. But certainly, in this Cultural Revolution generation and the Tiananmen generation, those are the ones that are demanding some kind of political change.

There is much more personal freedom in China today. But if you speak out on political issues politically, or if you attempt to organize politically, you are immediately repressed. Not to the degree in the Maoist period, but nonetheless, if you lead this you might be put in prison for awhile, you will be released, and then you go right back to demanding political rights. So, there is a loosening up, but not a people who act publicly and directly demanding political rights. And this is true, even today, under the fourth generation of revolution leaders under Hu Jintao.

The Hu Jintao generation, I think, is facing up to the problems of greater inequality in the countryside, but it has been much more repressive of these people demanding some kind of political change than the later years of Jiang Zemin. In fact, some of these intellectuals, or some of these former Red Guards, write about what is going on in the countryside. There was a very important book describing what's happening in the countryside, about the peasants. It was published officially, but very shortly thereafter it was banned. But nonetheless, you can still find it and buy that book on the street corner. So despite the repression, there are still demands coming up from below, I believe, for political change in China.

So then, we're talking about the future here. What is the future here for China? My book was just reviewed in the New York Review of books, and the reviewer gave me a very nice review, but he said I'm much too optimistic. But I believe that, like the other post-Confucian countries of South Korea, Taiwan and Japan, China also can move in a democratic direction. It's going to be difficult, it's going to take a longer time perhaps, but as I see it, there is nothing in Chinese tradition, in what I call its Confucian tradition, to hinder this. In fact, I would say there must be something in that tradition that leads them in this democratic direction. How else to explain how these post-Confucian countries in Asia were among the first to move in a democratic direction? So what is there in Confucianism?

Confucianism, as one of my students tells me, "All my family cares about is education, education, education." He said, "You've got to have dinner with my family. Four grandparents, two parents and myself." And he said, "That's all they talk about is my education." And he said, "Mao tried to get rid of Confucianism; he couldn't do it. He just couldn't do it."

The emphasis on education in Confucianism led to social mobility. So there is a tremendous amount of social mobility. I studied at Harvard with John Fairbank and also another professor – John Fairbank didn't have much use for Confucianism. But I had another professor called Ben Schwartz who loved Confucianism, and he would constantly emphasize that there is this concept of the responsibility of the literati to speak out against any kind of abuse of political power, any kind of repression. And he said, "That is also part of Confucianism."

So, as I see it, with time, with maybe some kind of revival of this Chinese tradition, China certainly might move in this direction. Here is a country that's literate, or almost literate, and has a rising middle class, which are the qualities we believe are important for the movement towards democracy. Today the winners in this have been co-opted. In fact, if you want to set up a new business, you can't do it without some help from the local officials. It's just impossible. So it's very hard for these rising entrepreneurs to separate themselves from the Party at this point. But there are other elements of this middle class that I believe will lead China in this direction. So I will end on this positive note, despite the criticism that I was much too optimistic. I think, as China becomes more educated, as China is certainly more open to the outside world, as more students, like some of them in the [unintelligible], come abroad to be educated and then return to China, that we also will begin to see major political changes in China. And, as I see it, it comes out of China's history and China's tradition, which I believe is one of the great traditions in the world today. Thank you.

[applause]

And I've been told I can take a few questions, so I would like very much to. I would like to hear

somebody who disagrees with me. [laugh]

QUESTION: Good morning. Thank you for the brilliant remarks. Is your optimism premised upon China's continued economic growth?

PROFESSOR GOLDMAN: It certainly is; in part, it has to continue. I mean, let me put it another way: you could very well say, if that growth began to falter, then people might be looking around for another political system that would deliver economically. So you can take it either way. On the one hand, I certainly think, as I said, the legitimacy is not only based on delivering economically but maintaining stability in China.

But you have to remember, and I should have said this in my talk: in 1993, there were 14,000 protests in China. In 2004, I believe there were 74,000; in 2005, there 87,000. These protests are growing. Where are these protests coming from? From peasants' disaffection by their land being taken away for development and not being compensated. In fact, one of the most important points of my book is that the concept of rights has now spread to the population as a whole.

I witnessed one of these demonstrations or protests in Xi An, on the outskirts of Xi An. At the Big Goose Pagoda, peasants were holding up wall posters, saying "we demand our rights, we demand compensation for our land." I've not seen use of that language. Peasants, by their protests, by their actions, were acting as citizens. Now they are doing it consciously through what they say.

So I believe that, if the Party can respond to this, it will maintain its legitimacy. If it cannot, it is in real trouble. And that's why I believe that one of the ways to deal with these rising protests is from some kind of political reform. Your economies change, your societies change, you are still run by – I hate to say this – a few old men at the very top. It's still the Chinese Communist Party that's running that. And in order to maintain this kind of dynamism, they might have to move to a different political structure.

QUESTION: The free enterprise system in China was actually begun in the rural area, in western China, by Zhao Ziyang, and by that he helped give credibility to free enterprise in industry. The Chinese national government began the democracy movement in the rural villages, at least that's what they've publicized, and I believe that has moved along. The question is: do you see the future development of democracy in China coming principally out of those rural village models, or do you see it coming from some other, principally from some other, influences.

PROFESSOR GOLDMAN: Very good. Very important point. China began to have village elections starting in the 1990s. Today, 90% of China's villages vote for their own village head and their village council. I was very fortunate to be part of President Carter's monitoring group that went to these villages to monitor these elections. They're for real!

The village I went to - we went to several, but this one I remember very clearly – was in Szechuan. There were three people running for village head: the head of the Party committee, the treasurer and the entrepreneur who built the school. And we can learn something from the Chinese. There's no electioneering except on the day of the elections. They put up posters, nothing happens until that. So we were there for that day. Each person got up, could only speak for two minutes. That was great. [laughter] Then they took questions from the audience. Very short questions, very short answers. Then they went to vote. Then they counted the vote. One hour later, you knew who

won. Who won? The village Party secretary. That's not surprising. The village Party secretary wins in most of these villages.

But then something else happened: then they had a vote for representative to what they called the township. Theoretically, every township is surrounded by 10 villages of about 100,000 people. They have to vote a delegate to the township. Again, the Party secretary is running, the Party treasurer is running, but not the Party entrepreneur. All of a sudden, a whole line of people, like this whole line of people stood up and said, "We protest this nomination process. Why wasn't our man nominated for this post?" And immediately they dragged us out. We couldn't stay to see what happened next. But it's a procedure that the Party thinks it can control. They could not really control.

Nonetheless, the Party has only kept the voting down at the village level; they don't vote for the head of the township, except in a few cases. They don't vote for the head of the [unintelligible] or the head of the province. In other words, this is the way it began in Taiwan as well in the early 1950s. It started at the village, but then in Taiwan it moved up to the township, the province, and then of course, to the top in 1996. That is not happening, because the Party fears, and you can understand where they're coming from, that when you vote for a township head, you've got to organize politically. And any kind of political organization, because you have a much larger population, is what the Party is frightened about. And they crack down immediately.

I didn't mention that there was an effort in 1998 by the veterans of the Cultural Revolution, by the veterans of democracy wall movement, by the veterans of 1989 with some workers, with small entrepreneurs, to establish an opposition Party called the China Democracy Party. They crack down very sharply on that. Immediately. So any kind of political organization, other than the Chinese Communist Party, is going to be repressed. So, so far, there is very little action moving up that political ladder; but I suspect that, with time, that will happen as well.

QUESTION: What kind of a role do you foresee the Internet in playing for China's political liberalization, especially given the might of Google's recent acceptance of self-censorship?

PROFESSOR GOLDMAN: Very good. The Internet, on the one hand, has been a positive factor; on the other hand, it has been censored. On the one hand, let me just give you an example. How did this Chinese Democracy Party get going? It started at the local level. They registered as an NGO, because NGOs are allowed, with the local civil affairs ministry. And then it spread very, very quickly. And how did it spread? It spread with the use of coordination through the Internet and through cell phones. So there is a way of doing that. I've gotten messages from my students, written in a code I immediately understood, that were not censored, because they have ways of communicating. So on that hand, I think it leads as possibility of some kind of political organization.

On the other hand, particularly with this particular Hu Jintao administration, they have cracked down very sharply on this. Many of you know of this journalist, Shi Tao who was traced through Yahoo! in Hong Kong to be the sender of a message overseas to Chinese dissidents about some kind of political denouncement of the government, and he has been sentenced to 10 years in prison. So this government is cracking down very sharply on the Internet. And the American and European Internet providers are going along with what the government wants, because they

want to stay in China. However, I will give Google credit in one respect: when Google censors something, it says it censors something. And I think that is in a way telling whoever is using in that this piece is being censored. So I am less critical of Google than I am of Microsoft and Yahoo! for doing what the Party tells it. Yes?

QUESTION: I appreciate your witty and enlightening historical study of China, but I think one aspect which has not come out of your presentation is the peasants' aspect. You describe China as a country of very small landholders, landlords. But in fact, the China I know was a country of lost, poor peasants. And when you mention Mao's achievement, you also did not mention Mao had better revolution, had made a country of more than one billion people out of poverty. You also had not mentioned that about the peasants had liberation from 2,000 years of sharecropping system of landlords and usurpers. So I want to ask you, how do see the kind of very unique, and which is not in any country, certainly not in the United States, the kind of peasant power which in history had perceived, also in so many dynasties, and which has launched this revolution, which is now threatening to again rebel against this kind of very unequal kind of prosperity and the account has to be forced to say that it is now Chairman Xensen Zhaokao [phonetic] to popularize what to do kind of figaminet [phonetic].

PROFESSOR GOLDMAN: Right. In spite of what you say, there were certain periods which you could call feudal. For most of Chinese history, it was small landholders. Because when a dynasty came to power, the first thing they did was carry out land reform, so they could not be challenged by large feudal landholders. Secondly, and I should have said this earlier, certainly the revolution and Mao brought about changes, no question about that. I say Mao is 70% bad and 30% good; the 70% bad I did not describe. What did Mao do? All right; he carried out these reforms. Then he had these ideological concepts of transforming China overnight into one large commune. So he launched the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s. It led to the death of 30 to 40 million Chinese peasants in the Cultural Revolution. He launched this attack on his own Party, which spread everywhere, and 100 million people were persecuted.

So, in many ways, I see Mao as a much more negative figure than positive figure. Though, certainly, in those years there were positive reforms. But once he became what I call a totalitarian leader, there were no limits on his power. And Deng Xiaoping said the same thing. Said, Mao wasn't a bad guy. He said this in 1980; he said the system made him bad. It gave him so much power. So I don't excuse Mao, despite the revolution. Yes, one more question?

QUESTION: Aren't I lucky, being the last one? I suppose your speech is based on the assumption that, you know, democracy is good, and that's the way China should go. Apparently not everybody agrees with that. Growing up in China, I was told repeatedly in school that any democratic movement is going to destabilize China, and any western style of democracy doesn't feed China's condition. So how would you dispute the notion or theory that democracy is not good for China?

PROFESSOR GOLDMAN: Okay, let me just say, there are rising protests in China. They are growing exponentially. What are they doing about it? They put down the protests, they arrest the leaders, they pay off the protesters in a way, giving them what they demand just on a short-term basis. But it's not solving the problem. They have not faced up to these problems. And it's not just the problem of confiscation of land and the peasants; there are protests over pollution in the air and the water, there are protests over workers who are not ... in the late 1990s they began a

privatized state industry. The workers did not feel they were getting enough compensation. They were losing their pensions, they were losing their health care. They are not focusing on how to deal with these problems. It has been a negative response, not a positive response.

So let me just give you one example: I have a colleague, Marty White, who has done a study of Poland and China. It's just a study of a few areas in each country. But what he has found is that there is much more unhappiness with the government in Poland than there is in China. But there are no protests in Poland, because they have democratic institutions through which to express their discontent. The problem in China today is no way in which these groups can express their problems and get any kind of compensation, except through protest, drawing attention through the protest. You have to find some way to focus on this, and so far this particular government, this system, has not been able to do it. And I would say that if there is more freedom of expression, more freedom of association, more representation, certainly at the local and at the national level, that perhaps they might get some kind of way in which to deal with these problems. One last question.

QUESTION: We know that there are a lot of instances showing that democratic transition comes along with the rise of nationalism. And on the basis of the currently observed government-led Chinese nationalism, will further democratic transition heighten nationalist sentiment, and is there a nationalist root in Confucianism? Or in some other forms of Chinese tradition? And what does it mean to the future of the world?

PROFESSOR GOLDMAN: In other words, what is there to replace the Marxism-Leninism ideology that has been bankrupt by the Cultural Revolution? There is nothing at this point. Some people are turning to religion. There has been a growth in Christianity and Buddhism and Taoism. They are looking for something. One way to hold your country together, obviously, is through nationalism. And you see this rising nationalism, particularly addressed towards Japan. And Japan, particularly its present leader, doesn't seem to respond to what the Chinese are upset about. So there is growing nationalism. Nationalism is not part of Confucianism. Absolutely not. You saw the rise of nationalism with the end of the Confucian system, when leaders try to find some way to hold the country together, vis-à-vis the outside world, there was this growing nationalism. What I am saying, is that a much more positive way of holding this country together is not through nationalism, but through some kind of political system that addresses the problems that China has today. So on that positive note, I will conclude. Thank you very much.