

## After the Future in China

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### Springtime for Mao Zedong and China

In this anniversary year of the official launch of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, it is perhaps an appropriate juncture to consider the configurations of time in contemporary China.<sup>1</sup> The Cultural Revolution posited a new start, even a millenarian moment, for the Chinese revolution, if not indeed for world revolution. It was premised on an ill-defined strategy aimed at maintaining revolutionary momentum and ardour, it promised similar movements every seven or eight years.

The Cultural Revolution unfolded in a timescape that was of the moment, one that pivoted on a radical negation of the recent past. The insistent focus on the present was driven by a preoccupation with safeguarding the future. Struggle was ever-present and the shifting status quo was perceived as being under constant threat from inimical forces, both at home and abroad. It was claimed that the malicious intent of these forces was to put history in reverse (*kai lishide daoche*): to prevent the steam engine of revolution (*gemingde huochetou*) from travelling along its preordained path to the future. Such heinous attempts to derail the present and foreclose the future could only be thwarted by the revolutionary leader—Mao Zedong—who was both mentor and guide to the aroused revolutionary masses. Possessed of a historical perspective that allowed him to stand above the fray and perceive distant vistas (*zhande gao kande yuan*), his role was crucial and therefore his own longevity was essential for the success of the revolutionary enterprise. While he joked of one day 'going to meet Marx', and his supporters would tentatively speak of his demise as occurring only 'after a hundred years' (*bainian zhi hou*), nationwide he was saluted with traditional benedictions for an 'eternal long life' (*wanshou wujiang*). In the early days of the Cultural Revolution, some even hoped for a scientific miracle, one that would make it possible for young people to sacrifice a year of their own lives so they could extend the leader's life, if only by one minute.<sup>2</sup> In the event, the revolutionary enterprise was coterminous with the life of its author; the Cultural Revolution is regarded as having come to an end with Mao's death on 9 September 1976.

When I went to China in 1974, time—at least politically calibrated public time—moved to a different rhythm from that to which I was accustomed. Two years earlier in Australia the Labor Party had come to power under the slogan 'It's time'. Among other things, the new Prime Minister Gough Whitlam's left-leaning government had

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Gloria Davies for her comments on the present essay. For a meditation on some noteworthy anniversaries that marked 2006, see my 'A Year of Some Significance', published without notes as 'Historical Distortions' in the *Review* Supplement of *The Australian Financial Review*, 31 March 2006, and reprinted with notes by *China Digital Times* at: [http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2006/04/a\\_year\\_of\\_some\\_significance\\_geremie\\_r\\_barme.php](http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2006/04/a_year_of_some_significance_geremie_r_barme.php).

<sup>2</sup> In the documentary film 'The Gate of Heavenly Peace' (Boston: Long Bow Group, 1995), the writer Dai Qing recalls: 'To me, Mao was like God. I believed that he was not only the great leader of the Chinese people, but also the great leader of people throughout the world. I feared the day when he would no longer be with us. I really hoped there'd be a scientific breakthrough that'd enable young people like us to give up voluntarily a year of our own lives, to add a minute to his. That way the world would be saved.' From the transcript of the film, see <http://www.tsquare.tv/film/transopen.html>.

moved quickly to recognize the People's Republic of China. For many who felt that Australia had been at a relative standstill for many decades, time suddenly seemed to be accelerating; others were of the opinion that the Antipodes were merely catching up with what had already happened elsewhere. For once, some felt, it appeared as though the nation was moving with the times, if not indeed getting ahead of them.

In the China that I encountered in the late Cultural Revolution years as a foreign student, time was calculated from a number of starting points. While the formal political history of 20<sup>th</sup> century China began with the 1911 revolution and the new calendar of the Republic of China which marked Year 1 as 1912, there were other revolutionary points of origin signalled in the propaganda of the Chinese Communist Party in the 1970s. There was 1917, the year in which 'the cannon volleys of the October Revolution [in Russia] brought Marxism-Leninism to China'; 1921 marked the founding of the Chinese Communist Party; the year 1949 had seen the establishment of the People's Republic of China and the inauguration of 'New China'; and then there was the formal launching of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in 1966.

Imbricated with these moments of revolutionary origin, each marking a historic beginning, there was another, more immediate, timeframe, one determined by the political movement (*yundong*). My fellow overseas classmates and I arrived in China during the movement to denounce Lin Biao and Confucius. As I would later learn, 'movement time', or the schedule of the purge, marked everyone's private life in its own particular way.<sup>3</sup> But in the public realm the rhythms of the political movement, or what was referred to as 'the latest direction in class struggle' (*jieji douzhengde xindongxiang*), defined time itself.<sup>4</sup> Surely, the year passed and the seasons changed in cyclical certainty, and even in its most revolutionary period the masthead of the *People's Daily* still recorded the 'seasonal temper' (*jieqi*) according to the ancient agricultural calendar. However, in the public realm, time was marked by political ructions aimed at the denunciation of an ever-present enemy, a constant threat, and the unforeseeable, as well as the salient, dangers of revisionism and backsliding; the existential menace of the bourgeois mindset lurked in every individual.

From the outset of the revolutionary era in the 1910s, some thinkers spoke of a 'becoming' that incorporated endless possibility both for the future and for the reconciliation of past and present in the unfolding moment.<sup>5</sup> For many writers, thinkers and activists, however, China was depicted using the metaphorical diction of 'backwardness'. In the race to be modern, strong and wealthy, the country had 'fallen behind' (*luohou*) or 'dropped out of the race' (*luowu*). Later, Mao Zedong himself warned that nation that if things "don't go well, you'll be expelled from the human race" (*kaichu qiyi*).<sup>6</sup> During the Great Leap Forward of the late 1950s, the country's avowed aim was to 'catch up with England and surpass the US' (*gan Ying chao Mei*), and that expression is still used as a measure of economic success today. Indeed, the

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<sup>3</sup> A good example of a personal, Christian account of the years of purges can be found in Sang Ye's oral history interview 'Heaven's Narrow Gate: Christians Who Overcame' in his *China Candid: the people on the People's Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), pp.212-20.

<sup>4</sup> For some observations on the 'movement mentality', see my *In the Red, on contemporary Chinese culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp.56-8.

<sup>5</sup> This is particularly true of Li Dazhao's emblematic 1916 prose poem 'Spring/Youth' (*Qingchun*).

<sup>6</sup> Mao Zedong, 'Zengqiang dangde tuanjie, jicheng dangde chuantong (1956 nian 8 yue 30 ri)', in his *Mao Zedong xuanji diwu jua* (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1977), p.296.

language of the Great Leap and thereafter was one in which the present and the future were conflated—things were ‘constantly changing’ (*ri xin yue yi*). Or as a poem written by Mao in 1963 put it,

So many deeds cry out to be done,  
And always urgently;  
The world rolls on,  
Time presses.  
Ten thousand years are too long,  
Seize the day, seize the hour.<sup>7</sup>

### **Give or Take 10 Years**

With the end of what I think of as the ‘long decade’ of the Cultural Revolution (1964-1978) the hyperbole of revolutionary momentum that had build up during the 20<sup>th</sup> century was put in reverse. The recent past was no longer a time of heady advancement and constant pyrrhic victories on the frontlines of production, national defence, science, education, public hygiene and culture. It was now depicted as an era of delay, even stasis. To be sure, there had been movement aplenty but it was not progress; there was activity but no change. In 1981, the party officially legislated that the whole era had been one of chaos and vacuity. The media spoke of a ‘ten-year blank’ (*shinian kongbai*), as though once the previous direction of party-state policy was negated, everything that had happened in those years—national, communal and personal—was perforce null and void. Political misadventure had meant that the nation as a whole had forfeited crucial years in its effort to ‘catch up’ with the advanced industrial nations. And, for their part, many individuals who were resentful about their personal loss spoke of having been ‘born out of time’ (*sheng bu feng shi*) or having ‘been delayed’ (*bei danwu le*), forced to squander years in meaningless political infighting.

In response to the popular (and, in particular, the bureaucratic) ire that many felt when contemplating this generation of ‘wasted time’, the then popular writer Shen Rong (b.1936) published a story entitled ‘Ten Years Deducted’.<sup>8</sup> In this comic account, a rumour starts circulating that the authorities are about to issue a directive declaring that, due to the improvident decade of the Cultural Revolution everyone has had ten years deducted from their lives. Cadres on the verge of retirement congratulate each other and tell family members to spend up big since they are going to start life anew. A frustrated scientist sees a chance to make a real contribution to the country; while a woman with grand dreams but scant education believes she has been given an opportunity to make up for lost time. As the middle aged and elderly celebrate their temporal restitution, the young are panicked by the thought that the revivification of their elders will not only rob them of their present, but frustrate their future prospects as well. The story ends with everyone in a state of confusion as bureaucrats search frantically for an elusive directive that will put time to rights.

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<sup>7</sup> Mao Tsetung, ‘Reply to Comrade Kuo Mo-jo—to the tune of *Man Chiang Hung* (9 January 1963)’, in *Mao Tsetung Poems* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1976), p.46.

<sup>8</sup> Shen Rong, ‘*Jianqu shisui*’, translated by Gladys Yang as ‘Ten Years Deducted’, in Shen Rong, *At Middle Age* (Beijing: Panda Books, 1987), pp.343-64.

It was an amusing fiction that people of a certain generation—and social status—could be given years in lieu of the temporal losses occasioned by the party's management of national life. For the Communist Party, however, the collapse of the Maoist worldview, of which the Cultural Revolution was but the ultimate expression, led to the gradual unravelling of all of the revolutionary times of 20<sup>th</sup> century China. Time itself, released from the hegemony of the revolutionary, has acquired for over three decades now a series of trajectories, engendering in turn a number of differently plotted time maps. Within the Chinese popular realm, some of these trajectories jostle with the official account of the temporal landscape of modern China; others, through their particular and complex contours, offer parallel, sometimes contrastive, sometimes complementary, accounts of history. These alternating or multiple times create a temporal terrain that is not merely of academic interest, but one that, I would venture, allows for personal, social and political imagination to manifest itself in ways not previously possible.

### **Facing the Past**

At the end of my book *In the Red*, I employed the work of the Russian philosopher Mikhail Epstein to broach the subject of what happens 'after the future' in China. Epstein wrote that in the Russia of the 1990s:

The 'communist future' has become a thing of the past, while the feudal and bourgeois 'past' approaches us from the direction where we had expected to meet the future.<sup>9</sup>

That is to say, the particular vision of the future in countries that pursued state socialism predicated itself on eliminating the vestiges of the bourgeois (and in the case of China, feudal) past. History texts, the media, propagandists and party leaders proclaimed that the truth of communism beckoned. The world of consumerism, individual acquisition, private property as well as the legal codes, cultural habits and political protocols that went with it were accordingly relegated irredeemably to the dung-heap of history. The past was defunct, of interest only as a museum display or as a cautionary tale. The bright future of communism, however, was not only a promise, it was inevitable.

With the disintegration of the Eastern Bloc and the dismemberment of the Soviet Union, this vision of the future collapsed. As Epstein observes, Russians—for they were no longer Soviets—faced a world that literally came 'after the future'. In other words, their present as gauged from the 1990s was one in which the ineluctable future promise of communism now became a defunct anachronism. Meanwhile, the long-excoriated era of capitalism took its place as the new future.

Another kind of temporal legerdemain, however, has taken place in China. The 'traditional' vision of state socialism has been ruptured, not by political collapse, but by party-sanctioned economic reform. The proffered future of perfected socialism and distant communism while an artefact of the past in former socialist countries, is only a partially discredited, or some would argue sidelined, state project in China. The vestiges of Marxist-inflected thought cloak the discourse of the official realm, even

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<sup>9</sup> Mikhail N. Epstein, *After the Future: Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture*, trans. Agnesa Miller-Pogacar (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), p.xi.

though its translation into social practice is marginal at best. For all intents and purposes, the future that was the promise of socialism and party-directed revolution, while rhetorically present in the state-orchestrated ‘reality,’ has nonetheless been relegated to the past. Hence, ‘after the future’ comes a past that was decried for decades. In an age in which the country is ‘making up for the [unfinished] lessons of capitalism’ (*bu zibenzhuyide ke*) a crude theoretical confabulation has been created. All forms of neo-liberal reform are legitimated in terms of creating ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’. Since the country is making up for lost time its institution of state-sponsored capitalism is spoken of as being the ‘preliminary stage of socialism’ (*shehuizhuyide chuji jieduan*). As a result of these policies, and keeping in mind the metaphor of the ‘steam engine of history’ that was common in the era of high socialism, much is now made of China ‘joining tracks’ (*jiiegu*) with every aspect of the globalized world.

I have remarked elsewhere that many international commentators and analysts approach China as if it were a story that is just waiting to happen. For them the headlines have been written, the outcome preordained. The only thing that is missing is copy from the front lines recounting the breaking media event, information that will provide some of the fine detail, add a touch of local colour here, a dab of poignancy there, not to mention a dimension of personal tragedy and a measure of bathos that makes any good story just that. China in the West doesn’t have a chance. It barely even has a present. But it does have a future, and if you restrict your media consumption to sound bytes/bites and headline one-liners, it's the future that is the past of the Soviet Union, as well as a swathe of East European nations. It's the future of all the defunct autocratic one-party police states that held sway during the twentieth-century. China's tomorrow is their yesterday. Caught between the dire historical fate of European totalitarianisms and the impossible future of Chinese socialism and communism, the present itself disappears, or at best becomes a stop-gap diversion that keeps the grand narrative of history on hold. The headlines from the front line are about a story waiting to be told.<sup>10</sup>

For China, unlike the redundant socialist politics of the Eastern Bloc, is not only living in a time after time, or rather in a time ‘after the future’. It remains an authoritarian state ruled by a Communist Party that officially cleaves to Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought. The panoply of state socialism—its symbols, meetings, anniversaries, diction and doublethink—remain central to the political vocabulary of the country. The prolepsis embedded in the official discourse about socialism is unchanged. The future of communism is still spoken of unabashedly—even if few would take it seriously—and the linear history plotted from the party’s founding in 1921 through social strife, war and liberation leads inexorably to the present, even if its telos is not necessarily at the end of that line.

Under China’s president Hu Jintao, money from the state coffers is being poured into socialist and party education, and into theoretical innovation within the context of party dogma, allowing it, to use the party’s popular catchphrase ‘to advance with the times’ (*yu shi ju jin*). Nonetheless, the commercialised media and popular taste make much of a past that the party can only hope to incorporate into its own historical edifice. As Epstein wrote of post-Soviet Russia

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<sup>10</sup> Adapted from my introductory essay ‘Between the Lines and Beyond the Text’, in *Beyond the Headlines*, edited by Lionel Jensen (Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).

Now... the communist 'future' and the socialist 'present' have become our genuine past, so that all of our history opens to us simultaneously, along with all the historical layers of twentieth-century humanity. The present may be chaotic, unstable, and unreal, but we have finally come into possession of the past, or, more precisely, it has come forward to possess us.<sup>11</sup>

In China, paradoxically, the communist 'future' and the socialist 'present' coexist with other pasts offering a particular vista of historical pluralism.

### **Nostalgias: Restorative & Reflective**

Although avowedly a Marxist-Leninist polity, China, like former socialist countries in the West, has witnessed many revivals over the past three decades, and in particular over the past ten years. Whole eras swallowed up in the negating maw of the state have reappeared and been celebrated in the media, the arts and in a myriad of ways by consumer culture. Moreover, throughout the country local customs and rituals, languages, behaviours and histories have been remembered, revived or re-imagined. Some of this activity has been sanctioned by the state, which openly encouraged the renaissance of regional identities from the early 1990s; much is enmeshed with the economic boom and the voracious appetite of the market; while in many cases individual or collective aspiration also plays a significant role. Of course, a similar efflorescence in nostalgic reprise has been a striking feature of life and culture in the countries that comprised the former Eastern Bloc and the Soviet Union.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, all of this can also be appreciated within the global context of national- and market-driven appropriations of everything that is retro and recondite.

In China, reprisals of recent histories denied by political will are joined by the histories of eras past; collectively they clamour for a place in contemporary China, its markets and the imaginative landscapes of its peoples. Intellectuals and culture creators, social engineers and party hacks alike have been engaging in a sifting and reconsideration of Chinese history, thought and culture now for many years. As I have noted elsewhere, 'within contemporary intellectual debates there are inquiries that move in the direction of the past, interrogating the present as holding the possibility of a number of pasts and promising any number of futures. The bright future was detected by some as being the rubble of a past from which shards could be salvaged and used as the building blocks of something that 'should be', even though the promise of that 'be' was located in that which 'was'. The presumed future of socialism/communism was located in a past over which contemporary intellectuals strove to lay claim, while other seemingly possible futures, that is pasts imperfect (those pasts frustrated by the utopian history of the future promised in the 1940s and 50s by the communists), could now be imagined.'<sup>13</sup>

Imagining what could, and can, come 'after the future' in China has thus led many thinkers to re-examine various paths to modernity, including those leading to other

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<sup>11</sup> Epstein, *After the Future*, pp.295-96.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Svetlana Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), pp.75-277, where she discusses the post-socialist histories of Moscow, St. Petersburg and Berlin.

<sup>13</sup> From my 'Time's Arrows: Imaginative Past and Nostalgic Futures', in Gloria Davies, ed., *Voicing Concerns, contemporary Chinese critical inquiry* (Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), pp.240-41.

political futures, versions of bicameral democracy, social democracy and socialism that were curtailed by war, revolution, political cupidity, opportunism and sheer mischance. Such efforts can perhaps be spoken of in terms of ‘reflective nostalgia’, a nostalgia among those who are ‘concerned with historical and individual time, with the irrevocability of the past and human finitude. *Re-flection* suggests new flexibility, not the reestablishment of stasis. The focus here is not on recovery of what is perceived to be an absolute truth but on the meditation on history and the passage of time’.<sup>14</sup>

The marketplace of ideas in China flourishes today, fuelled by a buoyant economy that seems to put any and all historical moments within the individual’s grasp. It is not only the frustrated or foreshortened programs of social and political change that were articulated by activists from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and through the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that attract interest, or that enliven people. The teleologies of different faiths—from Christian to Buddhist and local cults, also flourish. Moreover, dynastic time itself, and the very make-up of the multiple histories of ‘traditional’ China are, for the first time since the end of the Manchu-Qing dynasty (1644-1911), re-entering the lives and imaginations of people in complex and important ways. As these revivals relate to the projects of nationhood and the state, however, perhaps these nostalgic undertakings are more ‘restorative’ than ‘reflective’, insofar as ‘restorative nostalgia’

...puts emphasis on *nostos* [home] and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps.... [These nostalgics] do not think of themselves as nostalgic; they believe that their project is about truth. This kind of nostalgia characterizes national and nationalist revivals all over the world, which engage in antimodern myth-making of history by means of a return to national symbols and myths.<sup>15</sup>

## **In Sync**

Since its own ‘peaceful rise’ in 2003, the Hu Jintao-Wen Jiabao government has promoted the creation of a *soi-disant* ‘harmonious society’ (*hexie shehui*), one characterized by social cohesion, orderly prosperity and political quiescence. In some respects this formulation recalls the ideal of the ‘great harmony’ (*datong*) in the Confucian canon. The Great Harmony was reformulated within the context of modern politics over a century ago by the reformer Kang Youwei and later by that master melder of traditional tropes with Marxist-Leninist dogma, Mao Zedong, who envisaged that just such a harmonious society would exist after the work of building socialism led to the highest stage of social development. His coincidental successor, Deng Xiaoping (d.1997), saw a need to suborn such a future utopia to the needs of the present; he championed ‘stability and unity’ (*anding tuanjie*) as the prerequisite for the realization of the party’s program. Rather than ushering in a socialist ideal in some distant future, Deng’s formula aimed at creating a wealthy and strong nation—a long-cherished hope dating from the 19<sup>th</sup> century—in the here and now. Under Deng’s successor, Jiang Zemin (ruled 1989-2003), the social ideal became the realization of a

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<sup>14</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p.49.

<sup>15</sup> Op.cit., p.41. Boym’s characterization of these two kinds of nostalgia builds on her earlier observations on the subject, as quoted in my *In the Red*, p.344.

‘relatively prosperous society’ or *xiaokang shehui*. In traditional thought, *xiaokang* was an imagined preliminary to the great harmony.<sup>16</sup>

It is not only in the official political realm that utopian projects still find articulation. Intellectuals of all persuasions themselves still strive for national and social perfectability by ‘worrying about China’.<sup>17</sup> As the nation-state participates in global life through trade, diplomacy and exchanges of all kinds, Chinese thinkers and cultural activists contemplate how and when Chinese time will be in sync with, or in advance of, modernity itself.

Meanwhile, the party-state lavishly commemorates key moments in the party’s struggle to power, as well as the lives, and deaths, of the men and women included in the official pantheon. It is far less attentive when it comes to the many painful anniversaries occasioned by the party’s disastrous misrule. Dark anniversaries such as 4 June are generally passed over in official silence, their significance marked by heightened security and house detentions. Similarly ignored are the dates of purges, mass murders and disastrous political decisions that crowd the history of the first decades of the People’s Republic. These spectral calendrical moments haunt the present, waiting to claim a place in the public memory of the nation. In the ‘opening of time’ from the 1990s, it is ironic that many of the socially transformative, as well as arrantly social destructive, elements of revolutionary time have been elided, or banned.<sup>18</sup>

In 2006, this year of anniversaries—of the deaths of Yuan Shikai (1916), Lu Xun (1936) and Wen Yiduo (1946), of the Hundred Flowers movement of 1956, of the Cultural Revolution of 1966, the demise of Mao and the arrest of the Gang of Four in 1976, as well as of the commemorative ebullience of 1986—while so many vestiges of the past are open to people of the Chinese world, there are still gaping memory holes from which one day, other pasts may well emerge.

It is difficult to say how the futures of the past that are presently unfolding in China will turn out. This essay is but a preliminary attempt to describe the contours of the temporal shifts that are most evident at present. The possibilities of times past and times future are without doubt more accessible to people than ever before. For all of the exhilaration of national revival, however, the power of the nation state to contain, suborn and define the present, and to maintain its purchase on the past, cannot be discounted.

In 1999, during the fiftieth anniversary year of the founding of the People’s Republic, the government decreed that henceforth there would be three annual ‘golden week’ (*huangjin zhou*) holidays. These extended breaks would allow people to visit family with greater ease and, more crucially, to stimulate the nation’s tourist industry and economy. Of these the first is the traditional Chinese New Year Spring Festival which falls early in the year, the dates determined by the lunar calendar. The second is

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<sup>16</sup> The locus classicus of Great Harmony (*datong*) and *xiaokang* is the *Book of Rites*. For the relatively recent enshrining of *xiaokang* in party parole, see Jiang Zemin’s speech at the 16<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in November 2002.

<sup>17</sup> Gloria Davies gives a unique and penetrating account of this collective, if rancorous, enterprise in *Worrying About China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>18</sup> Much writing by thinkers associated with China’s ‘new left’ attempts to ‘recuperate’ the positive elements of revolutionary discourse to counter today’s regnant neo-liberal thought.

organized around 1 May, International Labour Day, although it also incorporates 4 May or Youth Day, an anniversary that acknowledges the patriotic student movement of 1919, and unwittingly recalls the birth of public pro-democracy agitation. The third starts on 1 October, National Day, which commemorates the 1949 founding of the People's Republic and the advent of 'New China'.

These three holidays—one traditional, one democratic and one patriotic—are now largely divested of their symbolic differences. For the majority, they are little more than a celebration of travel, consumption and leisure. Yet beyond these three holidays rival timescapes continue to lurk in the annual calendar. Which may come to play a role in the present as the future unfolds is something that only time will tell.

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