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Democracy Wall and the Unofficial Journals

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One of the best-noted features of the so-called ›Cultural Revolution‹ in the People's Republic of China were the ›big-character posters‹ which carried much of the polemic and news during the factious struggles of the day. Apart from denouncing popularly resented privilege or malpractice in party and government, they often served as tools for character assassination, sometimes the prelude to more sanguinary attacks.

After the coup that ousted the ›Gang of Four‹, posters on current affairs, as well as privately produced newsheets and magazines mushroomed again, taking their beginning prominently at ›Democracy Wall‹, on the corner of Xidan Street and Chang'an Avenue in Peking. This time the poster writers and the activists hawking their copies ›à la sauvette‹ in central Peking were encouraged and partially borne on by a new current in high-level politics, as the ›big-character‹ polemicists had been after Mao's clarion call ›to bombard the revisionist headquarters‹. But the similarities are superficial. The verbiage of the early ›Cultural Revolution‹ was directed at parts of the established régime. The posters and private journals that appeared in the wake of Mao's demise were buoyed by an officially proclaimed return to less arbitrariness and more orderly management of public affairs.

The plethora of publications and the fluidity of the groups of mostly young writers behind them was hard to survey and much of the material must have been difficult to obtain. Ms Chen, well known, particularly to readers outside the People's Republic, through her long novel ›Gui‹, on her years in Nanking during the ›Cultural Revolution‹, and shorter stories, such as ›Yin Xianzhang (The Execution of Mayor Yin)‹, has drawn on a collection of unofficial journals at the Hoover Institution for her very informative presentation.

A description of the beginnings of ›Democracy Wall‹ as an informal forum for displaying political posters leads to the main part of the study, on the more influential unofficial journals in Peking and other major cities of China.

Ms Chen admirably illustrates the diverse political tendencies animating these journals and their precarious relationship with authority. The return to an emphasis on ›socialist legality‹ after Mao and his wife's camarilla had vanished confronted the new leadership and the people with a delicate conundrum: how much ›rule of law‹ could those in power concede without impairing the ultimate dominion of the Party, and how much of the newly enacted rights could citizens truly claim with impunity? Would the dynamics of the new policies lead to ›more democracy‹ and if so, of what kind? Should the United States or Yugoslavia serve as models?

The tradition of government in the People's Republic has been to regiment closely all

news media and access to the means of producing them.¹ Ms Chen describes how several of the unofficial journals failed to obtain the necessary registration with the government despite efforts to comply with these requirements and how this was subsequently turned against some of them by the authorities. Others, Wei Jingsheng and his »Tansuo« magazine being the best-known case internationally, found the criminal laws applied to themselves with extreme severity.

With the abolition of Article 45 of the 1978 Constitution in September 1980 the right to publish ›big-character posters« was formally expunged from the catalogue of basic civil rights. Ms Chen surmises that most of the journals, produced on shoestring budgets, would have survived only with difficulty, even without government repression. Their writers were in the main unexperienced, youthful enthusiasts, poorly equipped professionally and financially to sustain the effort of publishing for much longer. The major journals known outside China are listed in an appendix, including the names of editors where available, together with the corresponding Chinese characters.

The brief bloom of non-official publishing in the People's Republic is now unlikely to recur. But the episode has thrown into relief the currents virulent within the rigid structure of firmly guided ›socialist legality«. It has also shown that ›Democracy« is not a handy utensil conveniently employed for achieving the more limited aims of ›Modernisation«.

Wolfgang Kessler

- 1 Cf the regulations on publication, and those on the engraving and printing trades, in, inter alia: Gonggan fagui huibian 1950–1979, Peking: Quanzhong chubanshe, 1980, pp 480, 157, and, more recently, those on the manufacture of trademarks, in: ZHONGGUO FAZHIBAO (Peking), 6th May 1983, p 2.

K. M. de Silva

A History of Sri Lanka

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Während es bei vielen Ländern eine schwer überschaubare Fülle von Darstellungen ihrer Geschichte gibt, ist bei Sri Lanka (Ceylon) das umgekehrte der Fall. Es gibt zwar viele Bücher über einzelne Geschichtsepochen, besonders die Kolonialzeit, aber an Gesamtdarstellungen gab es bisher entweder nur recht kurze¹ oder unvollständige Werke. So ist von den einzigen größeren Gesamtdarstellungen die eine schon 130 Jahre alt,² bei der andern steht der mittlere von drei Bänden – über die portugiesisch-holländische Kolonial-

- 1 Z. B. H. W. Codrington, A short history of Ceylon, London 1926, XXI, 202 S., rev. Ed. 1947; E. F. C. Ludowyck, The Story of Ceylon, London 1962, 328 S.
2 Sir James Emerson Tennet: Ceylon, an account of the island, Bd. 2 (Geschichte), London 1859; 5. Aufl. 1860.