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In Case You Missed It: Post-Mao China

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Last year, the Association for Asian Studies inaugurated a new series of booklets under their “Resources for Teaching About Asia” branch called “Key Issues in Asian Studies.” The first two booklets in the series were published in 2007: *Political Rights in Post-Mao China* by Merle Goldman and *Gender, Sexuality, and Body Politics in Modern Asia* by Michael Peletz. (Those interested in applying to write a “Key Issues” booklet should see the AAS’s author guidelines.)

Goldman’s book on political rights in contemporary China canvases the factions that dominated political discussions in the post-Mao era, and is key reading for those who want a quick introduction to the post-1989 Chinese political landscape. (The booklet clocks in at a very manageable 76 pages.) The primary topic of *Post-Mao China* is actually politics from the late 1980s to the late 1990s; there is very little discussion of politics in the new millennia. Even so, for those perpetually mixing up their new leftists with their neo-Maoists, this is a good start for clarification. And with protests in the news of late, Goldman’s sketch of the definitions of citizenship participation and varying groups’ access to and engagement in the political process provides useful background information.

Goldman, professor emerita of history at Boston University, has been a prolific writer during her career and is the author of *Literary Dissent in Communist China*, *Sowing the Seeds of Democracy in China*, and *From Comrade to Citizen*, among other books, as well as numerous edited volumes and dozens of book chapters and articles. We chatted with her over email about the topics raised in her booklet:

**China Beat**: What was your goal in writing *Political Rights in Post-Mao China*? What kind of audience did you have in mind?

**Merle Goldman**: The purpose of the book was to reach high school and college students who might be interested in the issue of human rights in China.

**China Beat**: One of the interesting backdrops to your discussion of the political landscape of the 1990s is the disintegration of the Soviet Union. I’ve heard it said that the 1989 protests provided inspiration for sovereignty movements in Eastern Europe, but hadn’t realized how fear-inducing the Soviet Union’s collapse was for CCP leadership, and how much that fear then shaped the political discussions of the 1990s. When and why did the power of that narrative wane?
Goldman: That is true. In fact, the Chinese students were excited about the trip to China of Gorbachev at the time of the 1989 demonstrations and had wanted to talk with him. That frightened the Chinese leaders, who feared a Gorbachev and his reforms in China. They feared it would lead to the end of the CCP. They were right. The Gorbachev era not only led to the disintegration of the Soviet Union, but also the rule of the Communist Party in Russia.

China Beat: One of the issues raised in Political Rights in Post-Mao China is the role of the emerging middle class as a political force. Middle class protest—like the “strolls” that took place in Shanghai and Chengdu, among other places—have received a lot of media interest this year. On the other hand, workers’ protests and farmers’ protests, also discussed in the booklet, have received less attention. Do you think the media is right to pay so much attention to middle class protest? In other words, is this where political change will come from in China, or could we be surprised by peasant and worker coalitions’ ability to effect political change from below?

Goldman: The rising middle class has several components in China. The new entrepreneurs are being inducted into the party and have been co-opted, but on the fringes of this rising middle class are public intellectuals, journalists and defense lawyers who have spoken out on human rights issues. They are the topic of the new book that I am now working on.

China Beat: You note that neo-nationalists—who also received quite a bit of attention from Western media this year in the wake of the Tibet protests and the Olympic torch relay—are focused on “a revival of nationalist spirit” (26). The party has found eagerness for a stronger China (and anger at those who thwart it) useful at some times and dangerous at others. How do you see the Party utilizing young people’s nationalist sentiments in the coming years? Do you see the neo-nationalist ideas as pointing the way toward a new kind of (potentially productive) Chinese political thought, or is this simply an old-and dangerous-path?

Goldman: The rising nationalism is filling the ideological vacuum left by the bankruptcy of Marxism-Leninism. Through most of its history, China has been governed by an overriding ideology. In the pre-modern era, it was Confucianism and in the last half of the twentieth century it was Marxism-Leninism and the thought of Mao Zedong. Thus nationalism is filling that ideological vacuum. It could hold China’s huge population together, especially in a period of great change, but it could also lead to a dangerous xenophobia, which will not only be harmful to the Chinese people but also to the rest of the world.

China Beat: The notion of “rules consciousness”—people using existing rules to justify challenges to local or even national actions (or, as you say in the book, framing “their critiques and demands in terms of the existing rules and regulations in order to exert pressure on the party to live up to its own laws”)—is a regular theme in Political Rights. What are the most important ways that “rules consciousness” is being employed in the growing number of (mostly small-scale) protests today?

Goldman: Those who are calling for human rights and are demanding more political and religious freedom, call on the party to live up to the stipulations in the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China, which calls for freedom of speech and religion. China has also signed onto the UN Declarations on Human Rights. Whereas the Declaration on Economic Rights has been passed by China’s rubber-stamp National People’s Congress, the Declaration on Political and Civic Rights has not been passed. Those who are calling for human rights in China have urged the National People’s Congress to pass the latter declaration.

Tags: AAS, Merle Goldman, Post-Mao China