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Thoughts on *River Elegy*, June 1988-June 2011

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By David Moser

I remember watching the legendary six-part CCTV miniseries *River Elegy* in my dorm room at Peking University in June of 1988—the last June in the Chinese historical calendar that would not have its 4th day permanently stained red. At the time I could not understand much of the stentorian voice-over (I was only a couple of years into my lifelong struggle with Chinese), but during the week the show was broadcast it became clear that the documentary had hit academic circles like an atomic bomb. The series' content—a sweeping, brutally painful critique of the deep structure of Chinese culture—was the topic of conversation among many of the Peking University grad students I was hanging out with. They had seen nothing like it. "At last," they would say to me, "a TV show that tells the truth (*shuo shihua*)." It was common to see handwritten postings discussing the documentary on the outdoor bulletin boards at Peking University's *ssanjiaodi*, "triangle area," and informal discussion sessions on the topics of the program were organized at Tsinghua other universities throughout China.

Seen by more than 200 million viewers, the miniseries also galvanized the general population. The *People's Daily* actually published transcripts of *River Elegy*, and references to the themes of the documentary began popping up everywhere in the local newsstands. The show was screened by diverse political figures such as Yang Shangkun and Zhao Ziyang (who clearly approved of the heroic image the film had accorded him), and received both unexpected praise by reformers and predictable vilification by conservatives. The film was so popular with audiences that it was re-aired in August of the same year, though not before the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) edited out certain of the more political sensitive topics to appease warnings from certain Party officials, who were already spooked by the student demonstrations that had recently erupted in Shanghai and elsewhere. Despite the opposition and controversy, the series had actually initiated a relatively open public discussion on China's future.

More than two decades have gone by, and the once electrifying documentary now seems mostly a historical curiosity, often cited but rarely screened in the Chinese studies courses and history classes of the West. I recently downloaded and watched *River Elegy* again for the first time, and was surprised at how relevant it still is, even though China's economy has morphed from the wobbly experiment it was during that summer of 1988 to an emerging 21st century powerhouse. But most of all I was struck by an obvious and disheartening realization: Despite the fact that the documentary was aired—twice!—in the turbulent 1980s, it could *not* be aired on CCTV in 2011. In spite of the unprecedented new information transparency and the buzz of the Internet and social media intruding at the peripheries of China's media environment, the hallowed realm of the mainstream State television could not now tolerate anything like the blunt critique of *River Elegy*.

Viewing the documentary again gives one a sense of the tragedy of missed opportunities. *River Elegy* occupies a point on a fleeting historical trajectory that fizzled in 1989. It is a time-capsule relic of the chaotic but hopeful 1980s, when something like an honest dialogue between the leadership and the people seemed at least a possibility. A question is: How did such a program come to be aired in the first place?

As Chinese documentaries go, *River Elegy* is an odd specimen, a fossil with no lineage. Audacious and even subversive in content, it is nevertheless presented in the staid, preachy and overblown style typical of much Chinese television fare. It is schlock CCTV melded with Lu Xun. The theme is ambitious; the attempt is to diagnose the longstanding sickness at the core of China's tradition, to put Chinese culture "on the couch" and dredge up the demons and self-deceptions of its past as a way of moving into the uncertain future of modernization. And, breaking the documentary mold, it presents its case not with chronologies, timelines and scholarly interviews, but rather draws on provocative metaphors and poetic images in a language that is at once impassioned, rhapsodic, and highly polemical.

In answering the perennial question of how China in the Qing had fallen so far behind the western powers, the documentary paints its thesis in simple color metaphors, contrasting the "yellow" of the Yellow River and the Loess plain with the "blue" of the ocean, the sky, and the planet earth as viewed from outer space. The script makes use of the ready-made Chinese associations of the blue sea with foreign-ness (the word *yang* 洋, "ocean" being a standard adjective denoting "western"), and concomitant images of maritime trade, exploration, capitalist expansion and cultural vitality. By contrast, "yellow" in the documentary is linked with feudalism, conservatism, landlocked xenophobia, and decay. In particular, the Yellow River—muddy, turbulent, tyrannical—is repeatedly used in the documentary as the embodiment of all that is destructive and soul-killing in Chinese tradition. ("[China's] old social ills are like the silt of the Yellow River which clogs up the watercourse, building up to a crisis.") The humiliating dynamics of China's initial contacts with the West are metaphorically conceptualized as a clash between these two primary colors:

Between an expanding sky-blue civilization engaging in international trade and a yellow civilization wedded to an agricultural economy and a bureaucratic government, the collision was like mixing ice with hot coals.

Salvation, the documentary tells us, lies in the new policies of economic reform. The course of the Yellow River, tracing the historical failures of China's past, is now flowing to a more optimistic future, shown on the screen as images of Deng Xiaoping's Shenzhen, the coastal SEZs characterized in the script as China finally opening up to the blue sea—literally and figuratively: "After 1,000 years of isolation the Yellow River finally sees the sky-blue ocean!"

The extent of *River Elegy's* sheer iconoclasm still has shock value. In addition to the Yellow River, some of China's most beloved cultural symbols come under attack, even the unassailable Great Wall itself:

Yet if somehow the Great Wall could speak, it would tell the descendants of the Chinese people that it is a huge monument to a tragedy created by historic destiny, that it cannot stand for strength, progress or glory, but only isolation, conservatism, and ineffective defenses. Because of its massiveness and longevity, it has rooted self-glorification, arrogance and self-deception into our national character. Oh, Great Wall, why should we still sing your praises?

Again, it is very hard to imagine, in almost any context, CCTV sanctioning a sentiment like this on the airwaves today. Those of us in China accustomed to reading similar or much bolder statements daily on our computer screens should remember the context of *River Elegy's* broadcast. For the Chinese citizens at that time, the effect of hearing such a message on one's home TV was astounding for some, disorienting for others, and for still others positively exhilarating.

As an American college student watching the program in my dorm room in 1988, what surprised me most was the treatment of Mao Zedong. This was certainly the only mention I had ever seen in the government-controlled media of two of the most sensitive chapters in the Mao era: the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Despite the fact the Party had already issued its report card on Mao—70% correct, 30% incorrect—nothing I had seen in the broadcast media or press had come as perilously close as this documentary to actually pointing a finger at Chairman Mao himself. Of course the finger-pointing was rather oblique, and often employed the cinematic technique of montage; that is, Mao's image appears on the screen at certain moments when the voice-over announcer intones some of the more condemnatory lines from the script:

From economic utopia to political crises, and finally to social chaos... [*Footage of Mao during the Cultural Revolution, enthusiastic youth shouting "Mao Zhuxi wansui!"*] ...wasn't this great historical tragedy the inevitable conclusion to this agricultural civilization?

Why did our feudal period last so long? As long as the never-ending floods of the Yellow River? This is a longstanding nightmare. Many times China tried to bury feudalism for good. Yet it

always seemed to die, but not to stiffen. [*Sudden cut to scenes of the Red Guard holding high Mao's book, Mao waving at the crowd.*]

The visual, visceral implication of such editing is that Mao had functioned as a quasi-emperor himself, merely continuing the ills of the dynastic system, rather than liberating China from it. At other points the accusations are more directly on target:

During the mad years of the Great Leap Forward, myths about "the people's great courage" and "the land's huge bounty" greatly exaggerated the wheat yields of northern China, and rice yields in the south...Everyone from the great leader above [*long shot of Mao's statue being carried by adoring throngs*], to the scientists, and the usually practically peasants below all believed these myths.

To my knowledge, the Chinese were not to hear again such frank assessments of the Mao era in the mainstream media for the entire frozen decade that followed 1989. Even now, standard Chinese high school textbooks can go roughly this far in criticizing Mao, and no further.

As television fare, the uncompromising academic timbre of the documentary also comes as an anomaly. The script was a collaborative effort by a team of writers and intellectuals, primarily journalist Su Xiaokang (who fled China after the 1989 incident), and to a great extent reflects the mood and style of the 1980s intelligentsia. Not exactly a populist diatribe, *River Elegy* wears its elitism on its sleeve. The intellectuals had finally gotten a chance to speak in the most public of venues, and they took advantage of it. The program indicts China's shabby treatment of intellectuals (read also "dissidents") and the undervaluing of education in general, which had resulted in a system that "asphyxiates the best and brightest of each generation." Inverting the Party's traditional elevation of the common people and the instinctive distrust of the intelligentsia, *River Elegy* instead decries the resulting backwardness of the Chinese masses to an extent verging on outright condescension. The documentary lingers on unflattering images of rural farmers, grinning and gaping cretinously at some off-camera spectacle, with uncomfortable close-ups on bad teeth and tawny skin, as the voiceover laments the Chinese people's lack of *suzhi*, "personal quality, character." (The echo of Bo Yang's *The Ugly Chinaman*, popular at that time, can be felt here, and the same complaint can still be heard today from Beijing taxi drivers.) And if the common people are not idealized, the intellectuals are positively lionized, as the voice-over utters syrupy statements like "If only the intellectuals could sprinkle the sweet spring water of science and democracy onto the yellow soil!"

Striking also, for an officially sanctioned documentary 1980s CCTV, was the unflinching characterization of the new reforms as capitalist in essence. That Deng's experiment was merely capitalism was the common emperor's-new-clothes observation at the time. Those who lived through the first years of Reform and Opening Up will remember that, despite Deng's famous indifference to the color of cats, the Party theoreticians nevertheless had to jump through torturous hoops in order to make sense of Deng's 180-degree turn, and to enable the Party's still-official "socialist" label to retain its relevance, resulting in a disciplined discourse wherein the term "Socialist Market Economy with Chinese characteristics" was uttered like a one-word mantra. Though there is a perfunctory nod to the notion of the reforms as merely a revision of Marxist theory (a clip of Zhao Ziyang proclaiming that "a socialist planned commodity economy based on public ownership" represents "a major development of Marxism, the theoretical basis of our reform.") for the most part, the script writers dispense with such theoretical niceties and call a spade a spade:

Capitalism could not arise in China, but came from outside to bully it.

Why has capitalism, the mark of modern industrial civilization, never taken hold in China? Why do the Chinese loathe it so?

The documentary narrative, by equating capitalism with dynamism and progress, essentially engages in cheerleading for the reform agenda—whatever it might be called. There is also a passing cinematic reference to the fall of communism elsewhere, with the hint that China should be the next in line:

The death knell for capitalism predicted by Marx has been late in sounding. The fabulous rise of industrialism in 200 years, although showing signs of ills, constantly renews itself. The socialist countries that broke loose from the weak links of imperialism earlier in the century now launch large-scale social reforms. [*Scenes of Mikhail Gorbachev shaking hands with Ronald Reagan.*]

Gorbachev, it should be remembered, was a hero to the Chinese intelligentsia for his implementation of both *perestroika* and the *glasnost* reforms China lacked. Indeed, *River Elegy* came as close as any broadcast media ever had to openly calling for the economic restructuring to be complemented by openness and democratic reforms—the “Fifth Modernization” Wei Jingsheng had called for:

It is gratifying to see that, following economic reform, we have finally begun to try political reform. Recently, someone dared for the first time to cast a dissenting vote at the People’s National Congress—not an easy thing to do. Who can say this is not progress? In retrospect, this is one of the boldest and most poignant lines in the script. Despite its eloquence, this question simply had no chance of reverberating in the vacuum that followed 1989.

Watching *River Elegy* brings on a sense of *deja vu*; the probing questions and themes of the program were nothing new. The documentary essentially revisits the soul-searching of the May 4th Movement. Even the words “Science and Democracy” appear repeatedly in the voiceover. The questions raised by the miniseries were the same ones I heard over and over again in the 1980s, at heated late night discussions around tables strewn with green beer bottles and chopsticks. *River Elegy* had now helped to transport these questions to the public sphere, opening the door to a new kind of relationship between the media and the people.

How did such a documentary succeed in getting aired? Part of the reason was simply the *zeitgeist* of China in the 80s. The rapid economic changes had brought with them a sense of giddy possibility and uncertainty in all domains. Boundaries were questioned. Persons of authority like Fang Lizhi could stand in front of students on major campuses and bluntly state that China’s problems were largely the result of the CCP’s one-party hegemony. Newspapers and magazines had unprecedented (if sporadic) freedom to address political issues. In fact, as counterintuitive as it may seem, I have been told by many journalists, writers and former dissidents that, in terms of public discourse in Party-sanctioned media, the 1980s was a freer and more open time than right now.

Another factor was the political dynamics of the time, namely the split in Party leadership. The genuinely reformist faction headed by Zhao Ziyang was opposed by skeptical conservative hard liners, resulting in a partial paralysis at the top of the leadership that translated into a fleeting period of almost miraculous openness. (The atypical constraint was most evident during the events leading up to Tiananmen chaos, perhaps culminating in the astonishing spectacle on May 18 of a pyjamas-clad hunger striker Wu’er Kaixi directly scolding Li Peng in the Great Hall of the People—all broadcast on CCTV!). Part of battleground was in the area of public support, and the compelling message of *River Elegy* conveniently served as a six-part TV advertisement for Zhao Ziyang and the reform agenda. For all its many flaws, the documentary marked a rare moment in modern Chinese history when the battle over policy was at least beginning to be waged in the court of public opinion.

In the China of 2011, with roaring GDP and bullet trains, some of the documentary’s more painful historical questions of China’s backwardness have lost their edge. Yet the question at the heart of the documentary, and the deeper question involving China’s soul, is the question of human freedom. Despite twenty years of economic progress and soft-power campaigns, China still has a perceived problem in this area. Its “Liberation” has never produced a true liberation of the mind and spirit. *River Elegy* talks of cyclical eras of repression and decay, and episode five ends with the call “We must move on and break out of this vicious cycle of history.” It has been said that history does not repeat, but it does rhyme. It seems the Chinese government may be the exception; in stereotypical Chinese plagiarist fashion, it is

guilty of literally repeating the history of the 80s, even to the point of arresting the same dissidents (such as Liu Xiaobo) for the same reasons.

The government is faced with more than 100,000 mass demonstrations a year, and with the advent of the Internet and social media, there is talk of a tipping point. We know there are those in power who will look back at the 1980s and conclude that the events of 1989 were partially the result of increased freedoms typified precisely by statements such as *River Elegy*. This would be the wrong lesson to take from history. Go back and watch the documentary again.

Further resources:

The documentary *River Elegy* can be downloaded at [Archive.org](#).

There is also a reader's guide to the documentary, *Deathsong of the River* by Su Xiaokang and Wang Luxiang, available at [Amazon](#).

Jeff Wasserstrom has written a piece examining [the color symbolism of Chinese politics](#), much of which is directly relevant to this article.

Finally, Geremie Barmé has [some of the most definitive and insightful analysis](#) of the documentary, and the Tiananmen Square movement as a whole.

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