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From Beijing to Palestine: Zhang Chengzhi's Journeys from Red Guard Radicalism to Global Islam

Abstract

This article traces the intellectual evolution of Zhang Chengzhi (b. 1948), a contemporary Chinese poet, novelist, essayist, archaeologist and ethnographer, from Mao-era radicalism to Islamic internationalism. Allegedly the inventor of the term “Red Guard” in the context of the Cultural Revolution, he has remained an unapologetic defender of Mao and of the “Red Guard spirit” since the 1960s. In 1987, meanwhile, Zhang converted to an impoverished and ascetic sect of Chinese Islam, the Jahriyya, and since the 2000s he has become one of China’s most prominent spokesmen for global Islam. The article explores how Zhang has reconciled his zeal for Cultural Revolution Maoism, on the one hand, with Pan-Islamist positions on the other. Although Zhang’s stance suffers from undoubted contradictions and inconsistencies, his career and beliefs illuminate the complexities of the legacy of Mao’s and the Cultural Revolutions, of Chinese intellectual dissidence and of the contemporary trajectories of Chinese internationalism and global Islam.

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In 2012, a Chinese writer called Zhang Chengzhi (b. 1948) travelled to a Palestinian refugee camp in Jerash, Jordan. The camp, housing almost 30,000 people, was a jumble of shacks built of sheet metal, cardboard and wood. (Most of the refugees in the camp, originally from Gaza, remain some of the poorest of the Palestinian exile community. Although many have been here since the Six-Day War in 1967, Jordan has not given them citizenship or even work permits.) Assisted by interpreters (for Zhang speaks little or no Arabic) and swathed in a black and white check Palestinian scarf, the *keffiyeh*, Zhang addressed an audience made up of inhabitants of the camp. He and his party brought with them to the event a cardboard box filled with \$100,000, divided equally between 500 envelopes. These were the profits of a special edition reprinting of Zhang’s 1991 novel, *A History of the Soul (Xinlingshi)* (Zhang [1991] 1999), a semi-fictional history of the Muslim Jahriyya sect of northwest China to which Zhang converted in 1987.

Behind Zhang stood a banner, printed with a mix of Chinese, Japanese and Arabic text. It carried the image of a globe: the word *zakat* (a Muslim term for purifying oneself through charitable donation; *tianke* in Chinese) figured to the right, the Chinese character for “righteousness”, *zhenyi*, to the left; China and Palestine were written below. A slogan across the banner explained the purpose of the writer’s journey to Jordan: “Donating the Profits from *A History of the Soul* to Palestinian refugees as *zakat*.”

The banner was also inscribed with a red Arabic letter ج (pronounced j, or *jeem*), to which Zhang gave multiple possible interpretations: “It could stand for *jihad* [although Zhang glossed that he understood this in the literal, Arabic sense of ‘diligence’ or ‘struggle’, rather than of religious war, the sense in which organisations such as Daesh or Al-Qaeda commonly explain it]; for an arrow pointing towards ‘internationalism’; for the *Jahriyya*, representing the Chinese Muslim community.” He explained: “This letter calls on us to march towards internationalism, global righteousness and social justice.” His speech in Chinese quoted extensively from the Quran and expressed a keen sympathy for and identification with the Palestinian plight. He finished by telling his audience: “We are bringing you this money from the Creator, from Allah.” His speech given, Zhang, his assistants and his translators distributed the envelopes of *zakat*, of donations, to the assembled audience (Zhang Chengzhi 2012, 2013, 2014).

Within the political and cultural context of contemporary China, this was a surprising, even extraordinary, moment, representing the latest unpredictable twist in an intellectual and literary career that has spanned four and a half decades. In the 1960s, Zhang was an atheistic Red Guard; in the 1970s, a *zhiqing* Educated Youth Mongolian herdsman; subsequently, in turn, an archaeologist, ethnographer, poet, novelist, devout Muslim, polemical essayist and currently a passionate spokesman for the causes of Palestine and international Islam. How did this man, still an unapologetic champion of Cultural Revolution Maoism and once a leader of the individualistic literary avant-garde of the 1980s, find his way to a Palestinian refugee camp, and to a mix of Chinese, Muslim and internationalist rhetoric? The aim of this essay is to unpick this puzzle: to ascertain the links that Zhang has made between Cultural Revolution Maoism and global Islam. For this personal intellectual journey sheds light on two phenomena of great importance within and beyond China: the legacy of the Maoist and Cultural Revolutions as lived and remembered experience; and Chinese engagement with global Islam.

Zhang’s career also highlights the complexity of intellectual and literary dissent in contemporary China, confounding longstanding non-specialist presumptions about

Chinese dissidence being an inevitably anti-Communist, pro-Western phenomenon. His stance is in many ways rebellious within the context of contemporary Chinese politics. He criticises Chinese officialdom and the promotion of the market economy that has been CCP policy since the 1990s. He endorses popular resistance and protest in a way that is discordant with a state policy focused on quelling unrest in Xinjiang. He praises Palestinian guerrilla actions and Japanese leftwing terrorists who fought for the Palestinian cause, describes Han policy in Xinjiang as colonial, and encourages the growth of a culturally and socially distinct ethnic identity for Chinese Muslims. Yet he combines these views with a vehemently anti-Western stance, and a passionate adherence to the tenets of revolutionary Maoism (he has for decades championed the kind of “to-the-people” rhetoric promoted by Xi Jinping’s administration since November 2012, and that has prompted speculation that Xi is orchestrating a return to Mao-style politics). Zhang’s public stance is in significant ways individualist but – due to his residual attachment to the populist principles of Mao’s revolution – not within the “liberal democratic” tradition that Western-centric analysis associates with the historical rise of individualism.

Zhang’s dissidence is, moreover, strikingly distinct from the types of political rebelliousness manifested by the majority of mainland Chinese creative writers since the 1990s. In their output and outward behaviour, serious literary authors since the 1990s have distanced themselves from the politics and identities of pre-1989 socialist Chinese society and culture. The works of China’s best-selling, most critically acclaimed novelists (Mo Yan, Yan Lianke, Yu Hua) have attacked the government-enforced collectivism of the Mao era. The next generation of writers, who rose to prominence in the 1990s (sometimes dubbed “New Generation writers”, *xinshengdai zuojia*), migrated further towards an alienated individualism, expressed not only in their creative writing but also in their extra-literary activities (the *locus classicus* being the manifesto “Rupture” (Duanlie), a public statement of this generation’s sense of antagonism towards the socialist literary establishment (Zhu 1998)). In China today, it is highly unusual to encounter a serious creative writer who actively espouses engagement with organized politics. Even as established novelists such as Mo Yan and Tie Ning participate in state-run organisations such as the Writers’ Association, this involvement does not constitute a programme for political activism. Indeed, the Writers’ Association now often presents itself as a politically neutral, professional organization supporting authors, sharply distinct from its highly politicized profile of the Mao and early Deng eras. The works of writers such as

Yan Lianke, Zhu Wen and A Yi (three variously rebellious voices, born in 1958, 1967 and 1976 respectively) present highly critical portraits of the societies created by Mao and Deng, which are thus implicitly critical of state policies and their effects. Yet these authors themselves shun any public, collective political identity. In 2014, one such writer complained that “politics” – by which he meant government, or organised politics – was “boring, dirty”, even while his fiction is highly disparaging of contemporary Chinese society and, by logical extension, of the political architects of this society. In a context in which many serious writers feel themselves alienated from organized politics, Zhang Chengzhi is thus notable in strongly endorsing collective political activism (either far-left party politics of the 1960s and 1970s, Palestinian guerrilla resistance to Israel, or a religious, political, cultural and socio-economic identity among Chinese Muslims).

The article is divided into two main sections. It begins with an account of Zhang’s life and career, as these biographical details have a close bearing on his intellectual and literary development, followed by a review of relevant secondary analysis of Zhang’s work and of the intellectual, political and cultural developments within which Zhang’s work is situated. These include the rise of neo-Maoist thought and practice in China since the 1990s; the global theory and practice of Cultural Revolution Maoism, particularly in relation to Japan and the Middle East, two territories of particular concern to Zhang Chengzhi; Chinese Islam and China’s contemporary links with the Middle East region. The article then traces out the specific moves that have taken Zhang from Cultural Revolution Maoism to global Islam, as reflected within his essays and activism. Most existing English-language commentaries on Zhang focus on his fiction of the 1970s and 1980s – Zhang’s most recent novel is *A History of the Soul* completed in 1989 (for example Choy 2008; Huang 2007). There is much of interest to be said about this writing: in particular, about Zhang’s use of multiple voices, and about his semi-fictionalised recasting of Chinese Muslim history. This article, however, will concentrate on his non-fiction (including a key memoir of the Cultural Revolution published only in Japanese, previously little discussed by Anglophone sinologists), both because it has received less attention in English than his fictional oeuvre and because this corpus of work gives us a more complete sense of his intellectual trajectory, and particularly of how he refracts his enthusiasm for the Cultural Revolution into his current views of China and the world.

Before the article proceeds, it is necessary to define what is meant by the term “Maoism” or “Maoist”, which will be deployed periodically to characterise Zhang’s political stance. This term has been used both admiringly and pejoratively for several

decades to signify a range of political behaviours: from an anarchic mass democracy, to Machiavellian brutality against political enemies. In this essay, the term will for the most part be modified by the descriptor “Cultural Revolution” (or “high”), to refer back to the set of ideas and experiences that dominated Zhang’s formative education and early working life during the 1960s. These include veneration for the pre-1949 revolutionary heritage, a passionate commitment to the theory of “mass” political activism that validates rebellion against oppressive bureaucratic authority, and the willingness to invoke or deploy violence in the service of “revolutionary” rebellion. Zhang’s understanding of Maoist principles will be discussed in more detail below, in relation to his invocation of the “Red Guard spirit”.

Zhang Chengzhi: A Biography and Academic Overview

Zhang was born in 1948 in Beijing to a poor Hui Muslim family. Unsurprisingly, his family had to play down their religious identity during the Mao era: Zhang has written that, as a child, he was educated to think of Islam as “backward” and “feudal” (Zhang 2012, 5). Yet this suppressed religious identity would come to play a dominant role in his later life and career. Through hard work, Zhang was admitted to the elite middle school attached to Qinghua University, which is where he was studying when the Cultural Revolution began in the summer of 1966. At this point, Zhang entered “history”. He self-credits with inventing the term “Red Guard” as used in the context of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. According to his version of events, in the spring of 1966 he began to sign off protest posters with the name “Red Guard” and an illustration of a horse-mounted warrior. As the climate of protest intensified, his group of Qinghua middle school rebels decided, at a meeting in the Yuanmingyuan on 29 May 1966, to form a political group taking the name of Zhang’s pseudonym: the Red Guards. Other groups quickly copied them (Zhang 1992, 40-54).

In 1968, after two years of active participation in the Cultural Revolution (including student turmoil in Beijing and travels around China), Zhang volunteered to be sent down to Inner Mongolia, one of the most physically challenging areas of China. There, he worked as a shepherd and then as a primary school teacher until 1972, at which point he was admitted to study archaeology at Beijing University as a student drawn from the ranks of “workers, peasants and soldiers”. He then researched the history and languages of national minorities in northern China for a decade, doing

fieldwork in some of the poorest and most marginalized parts of the Chinese landscape, in Gansu and in Xinjiang. He also spent periods of time as a visiting scholar in Japan.

Through the 1980s, he made a name for himself as a creative writer: of poems and autobiographical short stories and novels, predominantly romantic-pastoral narratives set in Mongolia and other PRC borderlands such as “Rivers of the North” (*Beifang de he*) and “The Black Steed” (*Hei junma*) (Zhang [1984, 1982] 2000). He became a prominent participant in the post-Mao literary thaw, which enabled Zhang and many of his peers to experiment with a range of new literary techniques and subjectivities. Today, Zhang still owes much of his fame as a writer and commentator to the literary attention that he garnered in the 1980s.

Between 1987 and 1989, his life underwent its next major change. After encountering (through fieldwork in Gansu) the Jahriyya, a Chinese Muslim Hui religious sect originating in northwest China in the 18th century, Zhang emotionally rediscovered his Muslim roots and converted to the Jahriyya – a group, several hundred-thousand strong, distinguished from other Hui by the poverty and marginalization of its adherents, both past and present, and by its ascetic, uncompromising attitude to faith and sacrifice (Dillon 1999, 121-126; Gladney 1996, 48-52).

In 1989 Zhang renounced all institutional ties, resigning from both his academic post and from the Writers’ Association. In other words, Zhang voluntarily smashed his own “iron rice-bowl”, a few years before the state began in the 1990s dismantling its own salary-for-life policy for government-sanctioned writers. Since that time, Zhang has relied on his income from freelance writing, in the process winning a reputation for himself as a polemical essayist, on subjects ranging from literature and architecture, to the War on Terror; from Mongolia and northwest China, to Muslim Spain and the Middle East; from the Chinese revolution to the breakup of Yugoslavia. He is currently a defender of Cultural Revolution Maoism, a fervent Muslim, and a passionate critic of both Han culture and the US. His works, incidentally, are best-selling among the Jahriyya communities in the northwest. When first published, *A History of the Soul* almost instantly sold out due to demand from Chinese Muslim communities.

Since the 1990s, he has tried, in ways that will be analysed below, to unite his twin ideological preoccupations: with the Cultural Revolution and with an emotional, puritanical Islam. He has both promoted his definition of Cultural Revolution Maoism, including what he calls the “Red Guard spirit”, and become an outspoken champion for

Chinese Islam and for the post-9/11 cause of global Muslim resistance to American foreign policy.

Zhang Chengzhi's oeuvre has generated a substantial body of critical appraisals in Chinese. Less has been written about him in English, but we still possess a number of thought-provoking studies. Many critics have commented on Zhang's language and style: his lyrical, poetic descriptions of life on China's geographic and political margins (Zhang 2008). Other scholars have discussed Zhang's broader intellectual profile: his projection of a May-Fourth spirit of national, cultural criticism (see, for example, Xu 2002); his ethics-based denunciation of Han political culture (Henning 2009). Since the 1990s, he has often assumed the persona of a "lone moral crusader" (Liu 2000, 232) penning polemical essays reviling China's post-1991 plunge into the market economy. Others again have emphasized the impact of Zhang's Muslim Jahriyya identity on his work, and the way in which it has led him to articulate a criticism of what he perceives as the anti-spiritualism of contemporary Han society. (For a selection of Anglophone interpretations of Zhang's work, see: Garnaut 2006; Larson 2011; Choy 2008; Huang 2007; Wu 2005.)

Of particular relevance to this essay is the attention that existing commentaries on Zhang have drawn to Zhang's "high Maoist" sensibility: in his fiction and essays, he has consistently celebrated the "to the people" rhetoric of the Cultural Revolution (Zhang Hong 2014). Sceptical voices accuse him of "totalitarian nostalgia", due to his open admiration for Mao Zedong (Barmé 1999, 322-323). Zhang's promotion of Cultural Revolution values locates him within a post-1991 neo-Maoist revival in China. This phenomenon hit the headlines in 2011, when the flamboyant Party Secretary of Chongqing, Bo Xilai, invoked superficially Maoist rhetoric in a bid for national profile. Bo, of course, was purged in the spring of 2012, but the ground that he had staked out was rapidly reclaimed by Xi Jinping, Party Secretary from November 2012. In the months after he came to power, Xi launched a decidedly Maoish "mass-line" website, to crack down on corruption and boost links between the Communist Party and the grass-roots, and reintroduced the very Mao-era practice of "criticism and self-criticism" through the bureaucracy. Lower down Chinese society, neo-Maoist groups (namely, groups that laud Mao, his revolutionary writings and the Cultural Revolution) have proliferated thanks to the disseminating and organizing power of the Internet. Until the fall of Bo Xilai triggered a government crackdown on such groups, one of the best-known was Utopia, *Wuyouzhixiang*, which through a website and bookshop located near

the west gate of Beijing University played an important role in fanning a revival of Mao's Cultural Revolution rhetoric in both the real and virtual worlds.

Zhang's profile nuances our understanding of Mao's influence on contemporary Chinese thought and culture. The existing literature on the subject tends to take three different approaches to analyzing "relic Maoism". One approach identifies it as a rhetorical weapon deployed by princelings (for example Bo Xilai or Xi Jinping) whose claim to political preeminence rests on their Mao-era revolutionary antecedents. A second approach diagnoses Mao nostalgia as a socio-economic phenomenon predominant among veteran or retired workers who feel economically and socially dispossessed by post-Mao economic reforms. A third approach concentrates on the neo-Maoist activism of internet-based groupings such as Utopia, which are often (though not exclusively) dominated by younger, strongly nationalist voices (*fenqing*).ⁱ

All three approaches tend not to see contemporary enthusiasm for Mao's ideas in China as a serious cultural or intellectual story, for it is easy to point out the contradictions or shallowness in such manifestations. These contradictions are particularly blatant at elite level. Bo Xilai and Xi Jinping have derived much of their power and prestige from their aristocratic Mao-era bloodline, from being "second generation red" (*hong erdai*): they are the sons of two of the first generation of Yan'an revolutionary leaders. Yet both sent their children to study in the West. It is therefore tempting to dismiss the Maoist rhetoric of politicians such as Bo or Xi as an opportunistic bid for political capital. Activists such as the Utopians also suffer from intellectual inconsistencies and weaknesses. Many were born in the 1970s and therefore have no meaningful experience of the Mao era; their understanding is drawn from highly partial school textbooks, or from abstracted Maoist political tracts, rather than from careful study of the effects of Mao's policies. Their political theories lapse easily into anti-Western, pro-China chauvinism.

Zhang's enthusiasm for certain precepts of the Maoist revolution – detached from the quest for power (he proudly proclaims that he has never been a member of the Communist Party), rooted in firsthand engagement with and experience of Mao-era politics, and part of an intellectual and aesthetic project of more than forty years' duration – is more culturally challenging than other neo-Maoist manifestations in contemporary China. Although some of his pronouncements seem to chime with Xi Jinping's espousal of the "mass line" and with the *fenqing's* anti-US nationalism, Zhang's intensely individualistic engagement with the history and philosophy of the Chinese

revolution renders his own brand of Maoism a strange and contrarian phenomenon, deserving of careful exploration.

Whether viewing Zhang as a “Maoist” ideologue, a religious zealot, an anti-materialist humanist or a cultural scourge, most existing studies relate Zhang’s work back to a Han Chinese cultural centre of gravity. There are good reasons for this: although he has published some works in Japanese (to be discussed below), Zhang is predominantly a Sinophone author, with predominantly Sinophone critics and readers. But to neglect the internationalist dimension of Zhang’s work risks overlooking a set of thought-provokingly cosmopolitan approaches to modern and contemporary Chinese history and culture, and to global Islam, that are audaciously dissident in the context of contemporary China.

Zhang’s passionate engagement since 9/11 in the polemics of global Islam raises important questions about the history of the PRC’s relations with the world beyond its borders, and with the Muslim world in particular. Since at least the 1990s, conflicts between China’s Han rulers and predominantly Muslim Xinjiang have dominated Western perceptions of Islam within China. Political scientists and I.R. specialists, meanwhile, have recently paid attention to the Chinese government’s apparent interest in taking a more active role in Middle East politics, for example hosting a dialogue summit in Afghanistan or proposing a four-point peace plan for the Israel-Palestine problem. (China relies heavily on oil imports from Iraq, Iran and Saudi Arabia to maintain prosperity-generating economic growth, and extending its political mediation is part of a long-term project of expanding its “soft power” in international politics.) Photographs and videos depicting Uighurs fighting alongside the Taliban or with Islamic State have increased the Chinese state’s sense of urgency over helping to resolve the Middle East emergency.

But this contemporary context obscures an older set of PRC engagements with the Middle East, and with territories such as Palestine in particular, that go back to the Mao era and that took a far more positive view of rebellion and insurgency. Mao offered PLO delegations on multiple visits to Beijing warm expressions of solidarity and generous financial and military support. In return, leading members of the Palestinian independence movement strove to emulate the political and military strategies of the Chinese communist revolution (Cooley 1972; Craig Harris 1977; Behbehani 1981). Oral histories, diplomatic observations and academic histories suggest that Mao-era China – earnestly believing itself to represent the centre of world revolution – energetically

exported not only ideology, in the form of hundreds of millions of copies of the Little Red Book, but also harder currencies of revolution (money, weapons and training for global insurgencies, especially in the developing world) (Cook 2014; Van Ness 1970). Both Japan and the Middle East were recipients of such ideological and/or material influence. Zhang Chengzhi specifically links his current support for the global Islamic cause with the influence of Cultural Revolution-era internationalism on Japan and Palestine. He actively recalls an era in which Chinese foreign policy reveled in its contrarian, even anarchic directions, and deploys this memory to endorse his own domestically and internationally rebellious stance.

Within contemporary China, it is an audaciously dissident act to commemorate the global radicalism of the 1960s-70s, and particularly to draw attention to China's involvement in this radicalism. The history of the PRC's role in spreading global revolution is not publicly acknowledged in China today, primarily because it uncomfortably contradicts the peaceful self-image in international politics that the government currently projects. Yet Zhang not only breaks this silence by talking up this history in his fiction, his essays, and in public lectures, including at People's University, one of the heartlands of CCP academia; he also argues – in unconventional, individualistic ways – for the continuing relevance of this history to the contemporary world. Zhang's reverence for Cultural Revolution internationalism becomes the basis of a sharp critique of contemporary China and of a passionate tribute to Japan, China's great rival in East Asia. Internationalist, maverick and anti-Han, Zhang's intellectual positions confound our expectations of Mao's legacy as a collectivist, nationalist phenomenon, and shed light on the possibilities and limits of cultural dissent in China today.

From Red Guard to Global Islam: Zhang's Intellectual Journey

To trace out how Zhang has travelled between Cultural Revolution Maoism and his reading of global Islam requires a more detailed understanding of Zhang's admiration for Mao's political legacy. Zhang is particularly fixated on the "Red Guard Spirit" and the Cultural Revolution – on both its early phase of rebellion (*zoufan*) and the exile of Educated Youth to China's countryside. To Zhang, the Red Guard spirit can be summed up as worship of revolutionary ideals of self-sacrifice, as righteous rebellion against elitism and privilege, and as a drive to integrate with China's impoverished rural masses.

Zhang was brought up to revere the Communist revolution of the 1940s. As a child, he was schooled in revolutionary mythologies. His parents had worked underground for the Party before 1949 (though they were not themselves officials) and he loved to hear his mother tell him stories about such exploits (Zhang 1992, 18-20, 91). But his recollections of childhood resonate also with unease at the hierarchies and inequalities in Chinese society of the early 1960s. As a student, he felt a growing animosity towards the theory of revolutionary bloodline – that the offspring of revolutionary leaders were privileged in the New China, whereas the offspring of “bad elements” such as landlords were marginalized and denied opportunities (Zhang 1992, 24-26, 30). From a young age, therefore, he was both obsessed with the utopian ideal of a revolutionary community, and also conscious of the injustices of the revolution in power.

His waging of Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1968 was not radically different from the experiences of many educated Beijing youth: a combination of youthful rebellion against prevailing academic and political institutions, and fanatical adulation of Mao. In his 1992 memoir of his time as a Red Guard, Zhang saw rebellion as perfectly compatible with Mao-worship, arguing that: “The rebel spirit is the quintessence of Mao’s thought [and] of the revolution” (Zhang 1992, 70). Writing of the founding of the first Red Guard group at Yuanmingyuan (which then became a model, he alleges, for the nationwide Red Guard movement), Zhang emphasised the dissidence of the act:

This was the first time since Liberation that a secret organization founded by neither government nor Party had publicly declared its existence...Still today, few people have tried to form an unofficial political organisation this openly and bravely. Those responsible for this act of daring were students, all under eighteen (Zhang 1992, 55).

Zhang thanks the Cultural Revolution also for giving him an opportunity to roam around China, to observe and integrate himself with ordinary people. This experience, as he tells it, further honed his own rebellious, anti-establishment views. The impulse to travel began with a conformist obsession to retrace the steps of the Long March across Gansu. Zhang later recalled: “we decided to transform ourselves into Red Army soldiers” (Zhang 1992, 106). But Zhang’s experiences on China’s margins challenged his worship

of the Communist revolution and sowed the seeds of his later passion for China's ethnic minorities. While travelling through Tibet, for example, he learnt firsthand about local Tibetan hatred for the Chinese government – when Zhang arrived, a government representative had just been murdered by Tibetans whose family had been killed by the government during the 1950s. Zhang later wrote: “It was the first time the complexity of China became shockingly evident to me...the story I heard from a local official became a key that helped unlock my understanding of China” (Zhang 1992, 112-113).

On returning to Beijing, Zhang identified with the anti-establishment strand of the Red Guard movement that opposed the inheritance of political privilege by children of first-generation revolutionaries, discrimination against those with “reactionary backgrounds”, and “any oppression of people's political rights” (Zhang 1992, 118). By 1968, though, Zhang was losing interest in the violence and factionalism of Red Guard politics in Beijing. He writes: “I was discovering a new continent for myself. The faraway places of my motherland had a powerful pull on me, and filled me with the desire to travel long distances” (Zhang 1992, 139). In 1968, he volunteered to be rusticated to the outer reaches of Inner Mongolia.

He writes of his four years in Inner Mongolia as having “transformed him” (*gaiqiao*) – a phrase clearly coloured by Maoist ideas of the rectification of intellectuals through living and working among the masses. By Zhang's account, he and his former Red Guard comrades in Inner Mongolia lost all trace of educated, urban privilege. They received no remittances from home: they lived off their labour, like the poorest locals (Zhang 1992, 177-179). Their idolisation of Mao and the revolution notwithstanding, the Sent-Down Youth also supported local resistance to insensitive central government policies. Zhang writes that such rebellions “symbolised the close bond between us, we who had come from the cities, and the masses at the bottom of society” (Zhang 1992, 186). These experiences sowed in him a deep sympathy for the struggles of China's poorest against official power: “the sharp conflicts between the masses inhabiting the countryside and the bureaucrats and the ruling class makes me shudder” (Zhang 1992, 188).

For Zhang, therefore, the legacy of the Cultural Revolution is twofold. It gave expression to his hatred of inherited privilege and discrimination; and enabled him to witness the oppressive effects of government in far-flung corners of China, and to integrate himself with “the masses”. He writes:

I became an intellectual who could see the world from the perspective of the lowest stratum of society...Young people like me were losing our faith in state-sponsored theory. We only believed in China itself. Every Educated Youth in 1970 had his or her own “farming, village story”, based on their own life experiences, locked deep in their hearts (Zhang 1992, 188, 193).

In important respects, Zhang’s Red Guard experiences and remembrances chime with those of other members of his generation. Guobin Yang has shown how many Red Guards migrated, while working in the countryside, from veneration of abstract revolutionary ideals to a far more critical political stance, due to the opportunities for empirical observation of rural Chinese poverty offered by rustication (Yang 2016). Consequently, significant numbers of former Red Guards developed into political activists through the April Fifth, Democracy Wall and 1989 protest movements. Yet Zhang stands out amid his cohort of fellow Red Guards for his continued public adherence to the same populist revolutionary ideals that, he claims, originally attracted him to the Cultural Revolution. Probably the majority of his cohort of Red Guards have either fallen silent about the radical politics of their youth or actively renounced them (though since the 1990s, not a few former Red Guards have developed a hazy nostalgia towards their experiences of rustication) (Yang 2016).

It was through Zhang’s Red Guard habit of travelling around China’s margins that in 1984 he first encountered the Jahriyya Order of Chinese Hui Muslims, a sect that since the late Qing has been consistently marginalized and persecuted, and periodically massacred by central Chinese government. Zhang characterizes them as follows:

The Jahriyya have been martyrs for two centuries...Since the Qing dynasty, they have periodically revolted against the government, always ready to sacrifice themselves for their religion. The Jahriyya are fervent citizens of China, steadfastly demanding that the purity of their faith be preserved. The Jayriyya, whom non-Jahriyya often refer to as “the bloody necks”, are keeping alive in China the most remarkable spirit of rebellion (Zhang 1992, 198-199).

This description clarifies the emotional and intellectual connection between Zhang’s anti-establishment Red Guard convictions and later religious belief. The Muslim sect that he has chosen to join inhabits the poorest fringes of marginal Gansu and Ningxia; in Zhang’s eyes, they have been sustained through their privations by ardent non-material

faith; they have an uncompromising history of rebellion against Chinese officialdom, during which they have sacrificed themselves for their convictions.ⁱⁱ Zhang elucidates:

A beautiful thread links the Red Guards with the Jahhriya...As a Red Guard, [when I found the Jahriyya] I found my real mother among the people...The Red Guards eventually managed to break free from privilege and hierarchy while connecting with those at the bottom of society. The Red Guards' rebellious, iconoclastic spirit joined with ordinary people's struggles for freedom of the spirit and mind...My own experience is but one example of these processes (Zhang 1992, 202).

Almost two decades later, in 2013, Zhang explained the long-term impact of the Jahriyya sect on his intellectual self-image: "I've studied with the Jahriyya, shared their religious activities, labored with them...Together, we've acclimated to a low-class position, a position among the people, a position among those who are discriminated against. For intellectuals, there is nothing more important" (Zhang 2013, 5-6).

One further element of the 1960s has left a heavy stamp on Zhang and brings him, finally, to a global Islamist position: the anti-imperialist internationalism of Cultural Revolution Maoism. From its earliest stages, Mao and his propaganda apparatus explicitly identified his Cultural Revolution as global in significance and ambition. In 1967, Lin Biao described the *Little Red Book* – across the 1960s and 1970s more than a billion copies were exported worldwide, in dozens of languages – as a "spiritual atom bomb of infinite power". The target of this atom bomb was global imperialism, both US and Soviet.

Throughout his adult life, Zhang has been preoccupied with this Cultural Revolution message of anti-imperialism. It is present in both his fiction and non-fiction: in his highly autobiographical 1987 novel about his Red Guard experiences, *The Golden Pasture (Jimmuchang)*, in his preface to *The History of the Soul*, and in his numerous essays on Muslim and Communist identities. Here is one typical expression of his views: "I'm often asked about my definition of a good writer...An excellent writer actively resists imperialism...Otherwise he does not deserve to be called a writer or an intellectual" (Zhang 2007, 7). For Zhang, imperialism is still the single keyword which unlocks the complexities of contemporary geopolitics and which leads him to a kind of Pan-Islamism. He angrily attacks America's "new imperialism", or "new crusade" against Islam. The Iraq War, he simplifies, is just like the Vietnam War; Iraqi resistance to the US is identical to the Eighth Route Army fighting Japan; Muslim opposition to America and

Israel seems to be the contemporary incarnation of Zhang's rebellious "Red Guard Spirit" (Zhang 2015, 145; Zhang 2007, 6).

And like a true child of China's 1960s, Zhang invokes the name of Mao Zedong as "a symbol of rebellion" against an American-dominated world order: "for Chinese like me who continue to oppose neo-colonialism, the international balance of power makes it necessary for us to look to him as a bastion of human dignity" (Barmé 1995, 274). In the style of Lin Biao some four decades before him, Zhang argues passionately for the universal applicability of Mao's ideas: "People can still use his revolution and his rebellious thought to liberate themselves" (Zhang 2007, 209).

China, in Zhang's view, shares a political and cultural Third World identity with global Islam. "Muslims must strive to unite with Chinese civilization...in the current international climate, one should advocate a closer alliance between the Muslim and Chinese peoples...We are twisted together as a single rope; our fates are intertwined" (Zhang 2005). Zhang lavishes praise on a selected group of the anti-imperialist warriors of the 1960s who demonstrated a clear pro-Muslim bias: Malcolm X; Muhammed Ali; and especially the Arab-Japanese Red Army (AJRA) (Zhang 2007, 223-230; Zhang 2015, 107-153). The AJRA was founded in 1971 by a splinter from the Japanese leftwing urban guerrilla group, the Red Army Faction, that fled to Lebanon and became reliant on the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine for money and training. In 1972, for example, the AJRA took part in the Lod Airport massacre in Tel Aviv that killed 26 and injured 80; this and other terrorist actions won the AJRA notoriety in the West, Israel and Japan (Farrell 1990). But to Zhang, the AJRA exemplify the Cultural Revolution ideal of border-crossing sympathy for suffering Third World peoples; his essays on the AJRA echo with passionate admiration for the AJRA and with guilt that he himself did not flee to the Middle East to join the Palestinian resistance during the Cultural Revolution.

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There are assuredly aspects of Zhang's stance that are internally inconsistent and even distasteful – as is the case for much of contemporary China's relic Maoism. Although his fiction, memoirs and essays laud the virtues of collectivism, for example, Zhang's writing is in fact spiky with individualism – even with a Messiah complex. Zhang, the lone, reflective, persecuted rebel, is the solitary hero of many of his essays; a clearly

autobiographical version of this same Zhang appears in much of his fiction. Zhang periodically lionises himself for representing the oppressed Jahriyya: “I am a child of the great 1960s, and carry on my shoulders its emotions and its seriousness – my feet and heart are pricked all over by thorns” (Hai 2014). In his obsession with himself and with the strong, charismatic, rebellious leader – Mao, for example, or the leaders of Jahriyya who rebelled against the Qing dynasty – Zhang can be accused of encouraging hero worship.

Zhang has a very Maoist suspicion of the specialist academic and intellectual, even though he himself is a specialist academic by training and owes much of his knowledge to the opportunities to travel and study that Chinese academia has given him. Although a witness to the terror tactics of the Red Guards, he is not averse to the use of political violence – as long as it is meted out for the right reasons. He writes: “Beating people up in principle – you shouldn’t make an excessive fuss about that. [But] it’s unforgivable to beat or insult people on the basis of their bloodline” (Zhang 1992, 102). This toleration of violence leads to troublingly laudatory appraisals of terrorist careers and actions, such as those of the AJRA. In his 1998 book *Fire And Ice* (Huo yu bing), a horrified Yu Jie described Zhang’s continuing veneration for Mao as “red fundamentalism” (Barmé 1999, 353).

Others again refuse to take him seriously. One Beijing professor of contemporary Chinese literature, an authority in his field, described Zhang’s “Mao zhuyi” (Maoism) as emotional, incoherent and performative, serving merely as a vehicle for an oppositional stance to contemporary Chinese society. It lends weight to this critique that, while many other former Red Guards and Sent-Down Youth have placed in the public domain diaries and letters from the Cultural Revolution decade, Zhang has not produced any such primary historical testimony of his revolutionary ardor during the 1960s and 1970s. Rather, we can learn about his Cultural Revolution ideals only from his later evocations in fiction, essays and memoirs, giving these reconstructions an artificial, performative aspect.

In both his fiction and his later essays, Zhang’s gender politics remain questionable. Despite his much-vaunted championing of those at the bottom of Chinese society, he has little to say about the plight of historically one of the most oppressed groups in China: women. In his fiction, female characters often seem to exist in order to be abandoned or snubbed by a strong, semi-autobiographical male narrator (see, for example, Zhang 1987 and 2000). Although Zhang lays heavy emphasis on the

importance of education, and argues hard for the need to build a modern Muslim education and scholarship in China, he seems untroubled in his essays by low access to education for Muslim Chinese women, writing that for them, “a good husband is more important” (Zhang 2007, 53).

Zhang rather simplistically sees no ideological contradiction between his Muslim and Maoist identities. He writes: “My Islam meshes perfectly with the ideal of communism, like green leaves around a red flower: both offer spiritual protection to the suffering masses of the third world” (Zhang 2007, 280). But he sometimes neglects Communist Chinese ethnic repression and imperialism within contemporary China’s own borders. This is not particularly surprising. The life sentence meted out in 2014 to Ilham Tohti, a relatively moderate voice calling for greater regional autonomy for Xinjiang, highlighted the dangers of intervening in public discourse on Han-Uighur relations. Nonetheless, given the attacks that Zhang makes on American, European and Japanese imperialism (attacks that converge with the political orthodoxies of public history in China today), Zhang’s periodical elapses regarding Han domination in Xinjiang are noticeable. Even mainland Chinese critics note Zhang’s failure to criticise the Communist state’s own record of violence against Chinese Muslims.

On the one hand, Zhang complains that Muslim voices are under-represented on the Internet or in China’s intellectual life, and calls for a new generation of independent-minded Muslim scholars drawn from the very bottom of Chinese society (Zhang 2007, 21-41); but on the other he is sometimes extraordinarily dismissive of Han-Muslim conflicts in contemporary China. He writes: “In China, saddening armed confrontation is always erupting within the Hui or between the Hui and the Han...If the Muslim community were truly elevated, if every day they were thinking about how to resist and smash our encirclement by New Imperialism, this sort of thing would not happen” (Zhang 2007, 8). In his anxiety to bring together Chinese and Muslims in a recreation of the Cultural Revolution’s utopian rhetoric about a Third World alliance against imperialism, Zhang is unwilling to acknowledge differences and disputes within this camp – the kind of differences and disputes, for example, that led to a bloody rift in 1979 between those two former Cold War best friends, China and Vietnam. Zhang’s political and religious fervour, therefore, sometimes impedes the operation of his critical faculties.

Nonetheless, Zhang’s intellectual positions still reveal an intriguingly dissident stance on orthodoxies regarding the legacy of the Red Guard era, and on contemporary Chinese politics, nationalism and internationalism. His contradictions notwithstanding,

Zhang remains an unusually oppositional voice within contemporary China. It can hardly be a coincidence that Zhang is said to have left the state-directed Writers' Association in 1989. Stefan Henning argues convincingly that *A History of the Soul* criticizes the state brutality of that year through historical allusion. Zhang himself complains that he cannot express himself in China: on issues ranging from literature to revolution, religious freedom and foreign affairs. Zhang's political dissidence is leftist in orientation and thus does not so far seem to have brought down crushing state censure; consequently, he does not suffer the heavy-handed repression meted out to advocates of liberal democracy, such as Liu Xiaobo. But Zhang's platforms for public expression – especially lectures and media coverage – are assuredly constrained: journalists refer to him as “a sensitive topic”. In this fiftieth anniversary year of the start of the Cultural Revolution, when open discussion of the topic has been muted practically into silence (academics are fearful even of mentioning it in class), Zhang's founding role in the Red Guard movement has gone practically unmentioned in the mainland media and Internet.

Consequently, Zhang's most politically challenging volume of Chinese-language essays was published in Hong Kong (Zhang 2007). He will be aware of the irony that, despite his frequent criticisms of Japan's imperial past and pro-US present, he feels able to publish his most sensitive political writings only in Japanese or in Japanese translation: these include his 1992 memoir, *The Red Guard Era* (in Japanese, *Koueibei no jidai*; in Chinese, *Hongweibing de shidai*); in 1993, a non-fiction history of the Hui in China which was far less guarded in its discussions of the sufferings of Chinese Muslims at the hands of post-1949 political campaigns; and an article published in 1994 to commemorate the centenary of Mao's birth, “Chairman Mao Graffiti” (*Mo Shuseki gurafiti*).

Zhang's writings contain allusions to Han-minority tensions that, in the fraught context of contemporary China, count as audaciously outspoken. At one point, he likens the discovery of Xinjiang by the Han dynasty and its military ambassador Zhang Qian to the colonial discovery of the Indies by Columbus (Zhang 2007, 163). Zhang Chengzhi's fiction and non-fiction are peppered with anti-Han comments and assaults on Greater Han chauvinism. He laments the fact that the Chinese news in the 1990s did not provide more coverage of civil war in the former Yugoslavia:

It was irrational, because China, with all its different nationalities, ought to make its people reflect more on such problems...I know full well that the contradictions within China are much more serious than anything in the former Yugoslavia. And Chinese history proves

that at moments of crisis, people often become ever more bloodthirsty (Zhang 2007, 210).

This comment on the Yugoslav crisis is interesting not only for its implied criticism of China's control and censorship of foreign news, but also for its decision not to engage with an aspect of the war far more widely discussed in China, namely the 1999 bombing by NATO forces of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, which became the touch-paper for angry Chinese nationalist protest sanctioned by the state. Although Zhang robustly attacks US imperialism elsewhere in his essays, it is significant that he foregoes the opportunity here, perhaps to avoid distracting attention from his critique of China's inadequate public discussion of ethnic tensions.

Zhang proclaims himself an outsider, a champion of the underdog. And arguably to a greater extent than several mainland Chinese writers who are identified as dissidents by the Western media, he does maintain a genuinely disputatious stance. In a provocative move, for example, Zhang entitled a 2007 Chinese-language collection of essays *Wuse yiduan* (Five Colours of Heresy). The book is divided into five different sections, each named after the colours that represent the passions that sustain Zhang: green for Islam; yellow for Mongolia; blue for Xinjiang; red for Mao's Chinese Communism; the significance of the final colour, black, is not clarified, though from the context it probably stands for the intended incendiary nature of his work. He states (somewhat self-aggrandisingly): "My writings are black bombs, thrown out into this shameless world" (Zhang 2007, 282). The mere fact of identification with these causes places him on the intellectual margins of contemporary China. Yet Zhang goes further, calling himself "a heretic within each colour...Although these colours are part of me, I don't pursue the system attached to any of them...Most party secretaries would find my Redness objectionable; orthodox Muslims would find my Greenness too heterodox" (Zhang 2007, 281-282). A figure like Zhang Chengzhi has few admirers in mainstream Chinese or Western intellectual circles. His is a controversial, minority stance. Officialdom is discomfited by his extolling of Red Guard rebellion; nationalists dislike his defence of Muslim rights and identity; liberals (and many former Red Guards) reject his unapologetic admiration for Mao Zedong. His unrepentant Cultural Revolution Maoism, sympathetic attitude to the 9/11 attacks and support for the terrorist wings of Muslim and Palestinian organisations, meanwhile, win him few friends in the West. Zhang is Marxist in the Groucho sense of the word – outside any powerful club or

system. He self-declares: “I am the son of revolution and of communist ideals, but I’m not a member of the Chinese Communist Party” (Zhang 2007, 199).

Zhang’s writing, moreover, always has the ability to confound expectations. Despite his hatred of Japanese imperialism, in one essay he describes striking up a relationship with an elderly Japanese man who spent time in the same part of Mongolia that Zhang lived in during the Cultural Revolution. It emerges that the Japanese man was there during the Japanese occupation of Mongolia during World War II, as an intelligence officer in the rightwing Kuantung (Guandong) army and a disciple of the well-known spy Naniwa Kawashima, adoptive father of the Manchurian princess-turned-Japanese spy Yoshiko Kawashima. Yet he and Zhang develop a friendship built on shared, local passions: Zhang, a former primary school teacher in Mongolia, discovers that this Kuantung veteran has generously sponsored and developed primary education in Qinghai, and is still regarded with great warmth and respect by the local population; the two men bond over their romantic, utopian love for Mongolia (Zhang 2015, 3-20). Comparing his Japanese friend with his own countrymen, Zhang comments: “Those who call themselves left-wing in China today don’t have the chutzpah and can-do spirit of Japan’s rightwing old-guard” (Zhang 2015, 12).

Zhang’s support for rebels, losers, martyrs and for those who speak truth to power, takes him in some unexpected directions. In one essay, he writes admiringly of Liang Sicheng, the architect who fell foul of Maoist city planners for arguing to preserve the old city of Beijing, and swerves from a discussion of China’s lack of expressive freedom on revolution and religion, to the need to protect China’s pre-modern architecture from the depredations of developers aligned with power and money (Zhang 2007, 212-213). And as part of his glorification of the marginalized rebel, Zhang is fully obsessed with the Arabic Japanese Red Army, one of the many leftwing guerrilla groups that were openly influenced by Maoist, Chinese revolutionary strategy during the 1960s and 1970s.

Zhang’s veneration of this group springs from his enthusiasm for the global liberatory rhetoric of the Cultural Revolution. He praises young Chinese of the 1960s and 1970s who crossed into Burma and North Vietnam, to fight in Communist armies in those countries. He sees this upsurge of global radicalism as part of the original rebellious mission of the Red Guard movement. Yet he regrets that many of his peers were unable to realize this mission at the time due to the political conformism instilled in them by the Chinese revolution.

Back in 1966...the revolution that we yearned for was one in which our hands were tied; our ideals were regulated. The only slogans we could shout were “eternal loyalty to Chairman Mao” and “eternally defend Mao Zedong thought”. We didn’t know at the time that we were rallying the leftwing and progressive students of countless countries across the globe into a great tide of global righteousness...It had two nucleuses: the Vietnam War...and global support for the Palestinian Liberation Movement. But the strict regulations...of the political education I received up to the age of eighteen meant that I was incapable of imagining or participating in this. A few of our friends fought against the Americans in Vietnam and with the Burmese guerrillas...but both these conflicts were basically without Red Guard participation (Zhang 2013, 6).

Zhang further explores his admiration for the Arabic Japanese Red Army in an essay entitled “The Daughter of the Red Army” (*Chijun de nüer*) (Zhang 2015, 107-153). A careful reading of this essay reveals Zhang’s ambivalence about China’s own political horizons, and contrarian ability to combine nationalist and cosmopolitan, and collective and individualistic positions.

On the face of it, the political message of the essay seems simple. It offers a survey of Japan’s radical leftwing from the 1960s to the present day, focusing particularly on anti-US foreign policy protests of the 1960s and 1970s, on the actions and motivations of the Arabic Japanese Red Army, and on the horrors of US imperialism. Zhang defends the choices and actions of the AJRA against the condemnations of the Japanese, Israeli and US establishment. As an extension of this, he pays tribute also to two of the AJRA’s key sources of inspiration, namely Mao Zedong and the Chinese revolution, and denounces “imperialist” schemes to discredit them: “Capitalism, colonialism and imperialism are determined to vilify Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution, even more than the AJRA. This is a longstanding, ongoing plot” (Zhang 2015, 125). Zhang traces in detail the political journey of one of the founders of the AJRA, Fusako Shigenobu, whose embrace of the Palestinian cause was (according to Zhang) influenced by Mao’s ideal of global revolution. Zhang rejects international condemnation of the group following its role in the Lod Airport Massacre, emphasizing instead its anti-imperialist idealism, the righteousness of the Palestinian cause and the virtue of revolution:

Revolution in the twentieth century is the only – and I mean the only – refutation of Japanese militarism and of five centuries of global colonialism and imperialism...only the Arabic Red Army has opposed and rebelled against Japan’s modern history of enslaving...Asia, and mocked Japan’s colonial project of “abandoning Asia to join Europe”...the Arabic Red Army was a group of sons and daughters of Japan who embraced the Arab world, thereby returning to the maternal fold of Asia...The Arabic Red Army...championed justice through extreme measures. Their blood-spattered shirts have distracted attention from their original intention to defend peace...The natural human desire to pursue the truth will lead people to reflect on, to value anew, and even once more choose revolution...[The Arabic Red Army] affirms the legitimacy of revolution, and of the need to made sacrifices for the revolution (Zhang 2015: 137-139).

Elsewhere, however, the essay undercuts these bombastic affirmations of Chinese-style revolution. Contemporary Chinese reverence for Mao (in particular, in its Internet manifestations) often hews to a nationalistic line, yet Zhang frequently expresses criticism of China and of Han nationalism in the essay. He casts doubt on whether a newly prosperous China would commit to pacifism, as an economically resurgent Japan did after World War II in Article 9 of its constitution (which refuted the use of war to resolve the state’s international conflicts); whether Chinese civil society would speak out on behalf of the “hungry and the helpless of the world”, as Japanese protestors had done since the 1960s (Zhang 2015, 119). “Would we dare challenge the arrogance of the Great China mentality, and outlaw any future potential threat that we might represent to smaller, weaker peoples?...In China...how many intellectuals would be willing to defend those whose territory has been occupied, whose countrymen are being massacred, and who have been deprived of the right to speak?” (Zhang 2015, 150, 148) He criticises the Chinese Communist Party and former Red Guards for siding with America’s “new-style crusade [against] the Islamic world” (Zhang 2015, 145).

Zhang’s approval of Cultural Revolution radicalism notwithstanding, his own position is far from the collectivist message of Maoist politics. In both rhetoric and content, the essay champions individualism. As in much of Zhang’s fiction and non-fiction, Zhang is a strong presence: reflecting on his own emotions, on the importance of his oeuvre, on his responsibility to publicise his thoughts and feelings. Despite expressing pride at the radical anti-colonialism of Mao-era China, Zhang criticizes its lack of individualism. He comments:

Perhaps we lacked one type of teaching. Although we waved the red flag and shouted “Aid Vietnam, Resist America” as loudly as we could...we did not know how to exist outside the system, how to draw on the power of individual reflection to help other people (Zhang 2015, 112).

He contrasts the political conformism of his Red Guard generation with the (in his view) superior political consciousness of the AJRA and of liberal Japanese intellectuals more broadly, who flouted convention to side with Palestine and Vietnam. Throughout the essay, Zhang’s most sympathetic characters are not Chinese, but Japanese. He lionises the AJRA for defending the revolution, and praises the pro-Palestinian stance of a former star in World War II Sino-Japanese propaganda films, Yoshiko Yamaguchi (Li Xianglan). Despite the essay’s enthusiasm for solidarity with collective political causes (with the Arab cause, with the Chinese revolution), its message is thus also confoundingly individualistic and anti-nationalist.

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Zhang’s desire to realise his vision of rebellious, Cultural Revolution-style internationalism helps us to understand the scene with which this article began. Still smarting at his failure to leave China to join the global revolution in the 1960s, Zhang a few years ago designed an unconventional publishing project. He decided to produce a revised 20th-anniversary commemorative edition of *A History of the Soul* in a limited private print-run of fewer than 1,000 copies, to be sold at 1,500 *yuan* (almost \$230) apiece. (It seems that no public publisher dared take on the project, due to the book’s radical religious message.) Zhang pledged all the profits of this venture directly to Palestinian refugees, explaining that: “My idea was to live up to the original aspiration of the Red Guard era, to atone [at the age of 64] for the regret I have harboured since 1966” (Zhang 2013, 6).

The very idea of such a venture verges on the eccentric in the context of contemporary Chinese literature, where many authors are arguably even more obsessed with advances, royalties and media fame than they are in western countries such as the US or the UK. And the whole project as realised by Zhang resonated with a political and religious earnestness and militancy that feels intriguingly foreign to the postmodern media circus of Chinese publishing.

Once the funds had been gathered, Zhang made contact with a Palestinian NGO, which arranged for him to visit a Palestinian refugee camp and hand over envelopes containing \$200 each to hundreds of Palestinian families. Zhang was anxious that this philanthropic transaction should be “hand-to-hand” (*shou di shou*): in other words, “people-to-people” (*minjian*), rather than handled and sanctioned by state orthodoxy, in either China or Jordan. When addressing the inhabitants of the Palestinian camp to which he was donating the \$100,000, he united political, religious, Chinese, Arabic and Japanese imagery and rhetoric to communicate a vision for global justice that was simultaneously radical, cosmopolitan and consciously modeled on the rhetoric of 1970s Sino-Palestinian solidarity. In a way that, again, very much kicks against the orthodoxies of contemporary China (which is extremely anxious about social and political unrest of any sort, and particularly any kind of unrest connected with religious or Muslim discontent), Zhang after his visit wrote sympathetically and even approvingly of the choices of young male Palestinian refugees – driven by economic desperation – to join guerrilla groups in Gaza (Zhang Chengzhi 2014).

Conclusion

Despite its many inconsistencies and shortcomings, Zhang Chengzhi’s Muslim Maoism demands serious consideration for its combination of political orthodoxy and heterodoxy. Zhang’s career and actions draw on a long-term, firsthand engagement with the geographical, political, cultural and religious complexity of China. This engagement remains a questioning, cosmopolitan and surprising enterprise, one that ties literature and history firmly to contemporary Chinese and global politics. There is, to be sure, totalitarian nostalgia, egotistic machismo and anti-Western prejudice in Zhang’s *Weltanschauung*, but there is also a plea for dissidence and expressive freedom that, while taking inspiration from Maoist revolutionary doctrine, also paradoxically takes aim at China’s own authoritarian political legacies.

This is a dissidence that defies easy categorisation. Zhang criticises the West, but also attacks Han China. He lionises Mao Zedong and Maoism’s proletarian collectivism, but prizes above all the individualistic quest for religious and political answers. In short, Zhang forces us to expand our definitions of protest and of Maoist legacies in

contemporary China, and of repertoires of rebellion against a Western- (and perhaps, in future, China-) dominated world order.

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ⁱ There has been some fine journalistic reporting on the subject of contemporary China’s neo-Maoist revival. See in particular articles by John Garnaut for *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*. See also academic appraisals such as Lam 2012 and Barmé 2012.

ⁱⁱ See Garnaut 2006 for an excellent discussion of Zhang’s relationship with the Jahriyya.