In the Vanguard of History
-the Beijing Democracy Wall Movement 1978-1981 and Social
Mobilisation of Former Red Guard Dissent

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SUMMARY

The work employs the new social movement approach to explain and analyse the ways the Beijing
Democracy Wall Movement 1978-81 constructed itself as a social actor and thereby justified itself and
the reforms it proposed. As the author argues, the approach provides a fruitful conceptual framework to
analyse the emergence and behaviour of the Democracy Wall Movement as a social movement. The
author argues that earlier Western research (there is no mainland Chinese research on the movement to
speak of) has neglected the movement-side of the Democracy Movement and concentrated too much on
the issues of the proposed forms of democracy and human rights in the movement’s argumentation. The
focus has caused confusions both in the historical nature of the Democracy Movement, the protest it
presented and the individual activists, which the new social movement approach helps to clarify.

In the thesis the author elaborates the following findings: First of all, the Democracy Wall Movement
was connected to the Cultural Revolution which preceded it not only as a negation of its policies, but in
a more complicated manner through the so called new ‘trends of thought’ (xin sichao) or the ‘theory of a bureaucratic class’ that the radical Red Guards developed during the Cultural Revolution. The thinking went through notable transformation in the late Cultural Revolution and the Democracy Wall Movement, but the eradication of the structural causes of a bureaucratic class remained the theoretical rationale of democratic reforms for the Democracy Movement and served as the basis of the movement’s social analysis.

Second of all, the Democracy Movement activists offered their debates on democratic reforms as their contribution to Marxism and a way to solve the problem of political superstructure obstructing the realisation of socialism and, finally, communism. Democratic institutions were offered as the necessary condition of realising socialism and a great majority of the theoretical articles and essays in the movement’s journals should be understood as voices in a debate to this end. A sizable part of the movement activists returned to Marxist classics and the Paris Commune type of democratic institutions in their proposals. Western notions of liberal democracy and human rights also attracted wide attention, but were mostly used eclectically as providing structural models for socialist democracy. Furthermore, the activists founded their defence of these institutions through arguments that they were the historical progressive heritage from earlier developmental phases – a notably Marxist view of world history. Only a small minority of the activists used anti-Marxist arguments when defence of democracy.

Third, the Democracy Movement justified itself through presenting it as a historically progressive and necessary manifestation of the people’s interests and its activists as the ‘awoken generation’ who had the moral stamina, courage and high political awareness to lead the people as the vanguard in their struggle against the ‘feudal fascist dictatorship’ of Party bureaucrats. The Communist Party, however, did not come under criticism as an institution except from a small minority of the Movement. To define and defend their credentials the activists reconstructed a narrative of the Cultural Revolution as the period, whence they had grown to political maturity and learned to see through the Maoist doctrines the Party Left used as deception to hide its naked lust for power and privilege. The Democracy Movement was portrayed as the movement of the political aware youth assuming the vanguard position in revolution. Connected to this also the identities of socialist citizens using their legal rights and enlighteners of the people were used to justify the movement. The way the collective and individual activist identities were framed helped to keep the otherwise fractured and loose movement together.

The thesis brings new light to the relations between the Cultural Revolution and the Chinese Democracy Movement as well as post-Mao social protest in China. It shows that at least for the Democracy Wall Movement there was more continuity with the Cultural Revolution and discontinuity with the later phases of the Democracy Movement than earlier has been suggested. It also shows that native Marxist ideas of democracy and communist lore on protest had substantial influence on constructing the Democracy Wall Movement as a legitimate social actor, more than the liberal notions of democracy and human rights, although also they played their role.