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TORN BETWEEN SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND SELF-CENSORSHIP: A CHINESE WRITER'S EXPLORATION OF OFFICIAL CORRUPTION

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As a result of decentralization of administrative power, erosion of communist ideology, increased opportunities for corruption and increased demand for official malfeasance, corruption in Chinese officialdom reached epidemic proportions in the mid-1990s. Scandals involving government officials engaged in corruption, including illegal real estate deals, bribe-taking, smuggling operations and selling government positions, became a staple of the Chinese media. Meanwhile, in opinion surveys conducted at the time the general public showed its concern by consistently ranking official corruption as one of the top political issues facing China.¹ Unsurprisingly, a group of Chinese writers began to write novels aimed to expose official corruption, giving rise to a significant phenomenon in contemporary Chinese literature.

Choice (Jueze 抉择), a novel by the Shanxi writer Zhang Ping, has been generally regarded as a standout in the wave of anti-corruption novels. Initially published in 1997 by the Masses' Press (Qunzhong chubanshe), a publishing house with crime fiction as its specialty, Zhang's novel went on to win the prestigious Mao Dun Literature Prize in 2000 and, in the same year, was adapted into a film by Shanghai Film Studio, with Yu Benzhen, a former head of the studio, as the director of the film. Upon its release in the summer the film adaptation, renamed *Fatal Decision* (Shengsi jueze 生死抉择), attracted the attention of Jiang Zeming, then the general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party. With Jiang's endorsement, the CCP recommended the film to its entire membership, helping to make the film one of the most widely viewed films ever made in China.² Benefiting from the film's publicity, Zhang's novel in turn became a bestseller in the book market. Largely thanks to the reputation he gained from the novel and the film, Zhang himself would be rewarded afterward with positions such as vice president of the Chinese Writers' Association, vice president of the China Democratic League and vice governor of Shanxi. How did Zhang manage to make his novel, focused on an issue loaded with sensitive political questions, acceptable or even commendable to the authorities? In the present essay I will try to answer this question by analyzing the steps Zhang took in the process of writing, a process in which he was

1 Pei, 12.

2 Kinkley, 79.

motivated by a strong sense of social responsibility and, at the same time, restrained by self-censorship. In other words, instead of seeing *Choice* as an example of a genre that existed as a result of relaxed government policy toward literature and art,³ I will examine Zhang's act of writing and its consequences.

Exploring Official Corruption within Limits

In an interview published in September 2000 Zhang Ping claims that, if a writer faces reality and wants to represent reality in his works without dodging thorny problems in life, his conscience will inevitably lead him to burning social issues, including the issue of corruption.⁴ Clearly, the storyline in *Choice* substantiates his intention to carry out his mission as a political novelist. Centered on Zhongyang Textile Corporation, a giant state-owned enterprise failing in the 1990s, the novel explores how the leaders of the company impoverish the workers and enrich themselves through corruption while economic restructuring is underway. Throughout the novel Zhang Ping strictly adheres to the narrative perspective of the main character Mayor Li Gaocheng and eliminates any explicit or implicit sign of distance or disagreement between the author and the character, thus making Li not only the moral and intellectual center of the novel but also the spokesman for the author. At the beginning of the novel the municipal government sends Li, who had worked at Zhongyang for many years, to defuse a worker riot at the company compound. After he starts looking into the situation at Zhongyang Li discovers not only the extreme hardships the workers have to endure but also a variety of scams cooked up by the leaders, all to line their own pockets. Further investigation leads him to realize that his handpicked successors at Zhongyang are just part of a network of corruption that involves his mentor/patron and his wife. Undaunted by the network's attempts to stop him, Li makes the fateful decision to continue his investigation to the end. Finally, after Li exposes the network with the guidance and support from the provincial Party committee a new leadership team is installed at Zhongyang and the company quickly revives itself.

Without a specific referent in real life and located in an unnamed city, Zhongyang is obviously a fictional company. However, its corruption problem, easily corroborated by reports of similar cases in the Chinese media, would be all too typical for state-owned enterprises in the 1990s. To draw immediate attention to the seriousness of Zhongyang's corruption problem, Zhang Ping starts *Choice* with a protest staged by thousands of workers laid off by the company. Upset by the meager social welfare they have received after Zhongyang's shutdown in 1995, the protesters are also angry at managerial corruption in the company. With such a beginning Zhang Ping puts a spotlight on a significant phenomenon emerging in China in the mid-1990s, namely labor unrest fueled by workers' subsistence crisis and their perception of managerial

3 Wu, 30.

4 *Renmin luntan*, 58.

corruption.⁵ Meanwhile, starting his novel *in medias res*, he not only instantly heightens the dramatic tension in his novel but also implicitly raises questions that need to be answered, most importantly the question about the cause of the workers' plight.

The agent he creates to find out the answer to this question is Mayor Li, a true communist committed to his pledge to serve the people for life.⁶ Largely because of his municipal position, Li at first remains in the dark about the truths of Zhongyang. To discover the causes of the company's problems and figure a way out, he immediately holds separate meetings with worker representatives and company leaders. Significantly, his attitude at this initial stage is characterized by his sympathy for both sides. Though shocked by the workers' reports of widespread corruption in the company, he also wordlessly agrees with the leaders' complaints about the difficulties they face, such as constraints and interferences from the government, excessive debts, heavy burden of social services and competition from private enterprises. Shared by all state-owned enterprises, these difficulties, we should note, would absolve the leaders from personal responsibility for the failure of the company. More importantly, to explore, in any depth, these difficulties as causes of the workers' plight would oblige the author to investigate governance and policy issues. To be fair, one could assume that Zhang Ping may not be totally unaware of these issues. For example, he tells us, in one of Mayor Li's internal monologues, that in 1990 the municipal government took away eight million *yuan* from Zhongyang in one go to build an office building for itself, draining the company of almost all its profits that year.⁷ However, for him a thorough examination of the government's role in Zhongyang's downfall would certainly be a risky move. To avoid political risk, he quickly shifts the focus of Mayor Li's investigation to the company leaders, making them responsible for what has happened to the company and its employees.

After he chooses the general direction of Mayor Li's investigation, Zhang proceeds to expose Zhongyang leaders' malfeasance, using Li as an appalled observer. Prompted by Yang Cheng, the municipal Party secretary, Li pays a surprise visit to Green Apple Recreation Center, a luxury nightclub the company leaders and their business partners have opened to make money for themselves with loans to Zhongyang from state banks. Once inside, he witnesses, to his disgust, conspicuous consumption of food and drink and sex for sale by laid-off female workers from Zhongyang. He is even more shocked when he visits the residential compound of Zhongyang and sees the miserable living conditions of Zhongyang employees, many of whom he personally knows. Finally, as he goes to see his children's former wet-nurse in a sweatshop, security guards, not knowing he is the mayor, beat him up for trespassing and drag him to their bosses in a banquet room, where he sees Zhongyang leaders and their business associates, including his own wife, eating and drinking before he passes out because of his injuries. His encounters with the world of corruption, characterized by the extravagance of the rich and the misery of the poor, make clear that China in the reform era is no longer

5 Chen, 41.

6 Zhang, 21.

7 Zhang, 81-2.

a socialist country as far as the distribution of wealth is concerned. Moreover, the sweatshop he visits, where poor workers toil for meager wages in extremely unhealthy conditions, reminds us of what workers had to endure during the Industrial Revolution. Clearly, what he sees indicates that capitalism has arrived in China with its deplorable excesses, at least in some areas of life.

What brings into being the shocking phenomena witnessed by Mayor Li, particularly the extreme inequality between the rich and the poor? As the sociologist Liu Xin points out, the mechanism of social stratification is embedded within and explained by the fundamental institutional arrangements of a given socioeconomic system. In China's current transitional economy, the market is embedded in the socialist bureaucratic authority structure, which in turn creates abilities and opportunities for power elites to enrich themselves through the exercise of their bureaucratic power, with minimal restraints.⁸ It is apparent that Zhang Ping understands the central role of bureaucratic power in the emerging process of socioeconomic stratification in China, for he depicts the upstarts in his novel as either leaders of government-controlled entities or relatives of high-ranking government officials, all in possession of bureaucratic power or connections. Furthermore, by excluding private entrepreneurs from his novel and focusing his attention solely on the political elites, he links the socialist power structure in China not only to socioeconomic stratification but also to corruption, demonstrating that, as it generates opportunities for corruption from fees, licenses, approvals and even personnel assignments in a sociopolitical environment marked by the absence of an independent legal system or anti-corruption agency, the power structure in contemporary China all but guarantees the spread of unchecked corruption in officialdom, even though the growth of corruption is not the intention.

However, with all his awareness he stops short of attributing official corruption to the socialist bureaucratic power structure in any explicit manner. Instead, with Mayor Li as his mouthpiece in a confrontation with Guo Zhongyao, the general manager of Zhongyang who confesses to Li how he and other Zhongyang leaders have colluded to embezzle state funds, he attributes official corruption to individual power-holders' loss of belief in socialism in the reform era.⁹ To him this ideological defection among power-holders is obviously widespread, reaching all the way to Yan Zhen, a deputy provincial Party secretary who has subtly demanded bribes from Zhongyang leaders and has stashed away two foreign passports, as a search of his brother-in-law's house later finds out.¹⁰ Having abandoned their belief in socialism, these apostates embody what Xiaoying Wang calls the "post-communist personality," a type of personality that has emerged in China on a large scale in the reform era, characterized by greed and hedonism.¹¹ Ideologically and morally nihilistic, they respond to the opportunities for

8 Liu, 86, 92.

9 Zhang, 450.

10 Zhang, 440-2, 446-7, 487.

11 Wang, 7.

individual wealth and pleasure without a sense of proportion or limit, causing rampant corruption as they try to satisfy their insatiable desires by any means possible.

What causes so many power-holders in *Choice* to lose their belief in socialism? Rather than faulting the new socioeconomic reality in China, a reality in which individuals are encouraged to pursue materialistic goals with little regard for the official socialist moral code, Mayor Li blames the renegades themselves for their backsliding.¹² A careful reading, however, reveals that the widespread ideological desertion depicted in the novel has a lot to do with not just the materialist ethos of the reform era but also the specific policies adopted by the Party. When he first hears the charges of corruption against Zhongyang leaders, Mayor Li feels confused, wondering how these leaders, having worked so diligently for Zhongyang in the 1980s before he personally promoted them to the top positions in the company, could become so corrupt within a matter of years. Recalling his experience with the leadership group, he assures himself that it had remained “praiseworthy” and “trustworthy” before 1992.¹³ What happened in 1992 that results in the moral decay of the leadership group as a whole, not just a few of its individual members? Given Zhang Ping’s silence on this crucial issue, we have to go outside his novel to get an answer. As we know, after Deng Xiaoping’s southern tour in early 1992 the Party made concerted efforts to deepen economic reforms as it continued to maintain the political system in China. One of the most significant steps the Party took was to reform state-owned enterprises. In July 1992 the State Council promulgated the *Regulations on Changing the Operational System of Industrial Concerns under State Ownership*, a document that demanded the cutback of government control over state-owned enterprises to improve the latter’s inefficient management, raise low returns on investment and cut long-term losses.¹⁴ Ironically, as leaders of state-owned enterprises were granted more autonomy they also gained more freedom to abuse their power for private gain. Without setting up an effective system of checks and balances, rapid decentralization quickly exacerbated the problem of corruption.

What we see in the surprising degeneration of the Zhongyang leadership group is precisely a consequence of rapid decentralization without adequate supervision. In account after account Zhang Ping describes how the leaders collude with each other to grab riches and privileges for themselves after they gain control over the most important, and most lucrative, aspects of Zhongyang’s operations, including purchasing cotton as raw material, getting loans from state banks, managing equipments and setting up sideline businesses. To make things worse, with enormous resources now in their hands, they use huge bribes to corrupt government officials and agents, all for the purpose of keeping themselves in power and in business. In short, their rapacious behavior proves the argument that for power-holders in state-owned enterprises economic reforms both strengthen the incentives to corruption and increase the opportunities for abuse

12 Zhang, 192.

13 Zhang, 57.

14 Joseph Cheng and Wang, 4.9-4.10.

of power.¹⁵ Notably, at a meeting with a group of municipal and provincial leaders Mayor Li himself points out that, because they have a tremendous amount of power in their hands, Zhongyang leaders have become completely unrestrained in corruption. However, instead of criticizing the Party's ill-conceived policy of hasty decentralization, he blames himself for giving power to the wrong cadres.¹⁶ Given Zhongyang leaders' proven record of being "praiseworthy" and "trustworthy" before 1992, how could he possibly foresee their unexpected degeneration and avoid making his mistake by not entrusting them with power? Misdirected as it is, Mayor Li's *mea culpa* shows how self-censorship has prevented Zhang Ping from openly discussing the real cause of corruption at Zhongyang.

Pondering Official Corruption with Courage and Caution

In his discussion of *Choice* Jeffrey Kinkley asserts that the novel's argument is "couched in fairly orthodox ideological and melodramatic moral terms."¹⁷ In fact the approach to ideological discourse embraced by Mayor Li, the only center of consciousness in the novel, is far from orthodox. Instead of making all-inclusive pronouncements intolerant of any ambiguity, let alone echoing bland official statements, Li raises many thought-provoking questions without providing definitive answers. What he embodies, in a nutshell, is not a belief-possessed, totalistic ideological orientation but a flexible disposition. In many ways *Choice* is as much a novel of ideas as a novel of actions, since Li's forceful comments always accompany the events in the storyline, constantly injecting discursive energy into the novel. However, with all their vigor and intensity, his comments do not feed into each other to establish an overarching thesis. Instead, they modify or even contradict each other as they try to come to grips with a host of issues from different perspectives.

In view of the frequent changes in his mind, we can hardly see Li as a melodramatic character, a type of character that "remains undivided, free from the agony of choosing between conflicting imperatives and desires," as James L. Smith notes.¹⁸ It would be more accurate to see Li as what Mikhail Bakhtin calls the Dostoevskian hero, a hero who is not yet finalized and has not yet uttered his ultimate word.¹⁹ The significance of the frequent changes in Li's mind, we should note, is not limited to Li as a character in a novel. As I have pointed out before, Li speaks for the author, a political novelist willing to face and represent reality. Directed to both the world inside the novel and to the world outside, Li's changing thoughts reflect the courage as well as the caution the author demonstrates in dealing with real-life political issues.

15 Wenhao Cheng, 78.

16 Zhang, 465.

17 Kinkley, 81.

18 Smith, 7.

19 Bakhtin, 59.

To illustrate how Li's thoughts evolve I will use his views on Zhongyang workers' poverty as concrete examples. As mentioned before, after he refrains from exploring policy and governance issues Li attributes, in general, the workers' plight to managerial corruption. However, that does not mean he has no second thoughts on this issue. When he first learns, at the beginning of the novel, how hard life has become for the workers laid off by Zhongyang, he realizes it is highly irresponsible to push these workers, thus far loyal cogs in a planned economy, into a market economy and ask them to fend for themselves.²⁰ As he comes to this realization he tacitly blames the economic reforms for the workers' difficult situation. After seeing laid-off female workers sell themselves at Green Apple Recreation Center he notes, with remorse, how unjust it is to criticize these women, who have sacrificed everything for Zhongyang and are now left in the lurch. Citing the belief that the government and the working class share the same interest, a belief these laid-off workers have been taught to embrace, he goes so far as to imply that the government has failed to hold up its end of the bargain after the workers have done so much for their country.²¹ Finally, after witnessing Zhongyang employees' miserable living conditions on a trip to provide emergency economic relief on the eve of Chinese New Year, he raises the following questions:

Why did this happen? Why?

Suppose the workers are willing to accept economic relief, can economic relief solve this problem by itself? If all the workers of state-owned enterprises in a country can only live with the support of economic relief, what hope is there for this country? If all of this is a result of reform, what is the point of this kind of reform?

Do we really want massive losses of state capital and a large number of parasites in state-owned enterprises as the end results of reform?²²

Poignant as they are, these questions show that even as he directs his censure at Zhongyang leaders Li is still not oblivious to the role played by the economic reforms in the workers' subsistence crisis on the one hand and in managerial corruption on the other.

Mentally flexible, Li is not only capable of expanding his own mind but also capable of reconsidering the standpoints and modes of behavior of other people, including those he condemns. For example, after he summons the general manager and the Party secretary of Zhongyang to his office and asks them, point-blank, if the Zhongyang leadership group is corrupt or not, he immediately realizes that his blunt question is exceedingly simplistic. "Look at yourself. How many gifts do you approve every month and every year that can be regarded as bribes? ... If someone or your superior asks you a questions about that, can you easily clear yourself of the charge

20 Zhang, 33.

21 Zhang, 184.

22 Zhang, 266.

of corruption?"²³ He frankly acknowledges that, no matter how committed he is to communist values, he has to use banquets and gifts routinely as bribes in his work as a mayor. How he is forced into corruption can be seen, once again, as a consequence of decentralization, which grants decision-making power to lower-level bureaucrats and puts them in a position to exact bribes and force others to play along. Obviously, he realizes that Zhongyang leaders face the same situation in work as he does and their corrupt behavior does not stem just from their lack of belief in socialism.

Expanded and accelerated in the 1990s, decentralization, however, is far from complete. As the Party transfers some of its powers through decentralization, its committees at different levels still retain the key power of personnel management, essentially controlling the appointment, promotion, transfer and removal of practically all but lowest-ranking officials. Moreover, the power structure of the Party remains characterized by the entrustment of power to individuals and by its hierarchy. This power structure reduces the importance of institutions and procedures as it permits officeholders higher in the hierarchy to intervene in the policy process and override rules and regulations that are supposed to be followed. On the other hand, knowing their future is in the hands of powerful individuals, the subordinates are induced to bend or even break rules and regulations to please their superiors and improve their own lot. As it fosters personal relationships between leaders and subordinates and allows both to pursue their self-interest in a weakened institutional environment, this power structure becomes a fertile breeding ground for corruption in officialdom.

Having risen through the ranks to reach his current position, Mayor Li is both a participant in this power structure and its beneficiary, wielding the discretion to promote Zhongyang leaders as he himself advances in his career with Yan Zhen's support. In the course of his investigation he comes to realize how power entrusted to individuals in a hierarchic context can both encourage and protect corruption. When he first hears the allegation of serious corruption against Zhongyang leaders he asks himself whether they have become so unafraid because they feel shielded by their close relationship with him.²⁴ After he chooses two bureaucrats with expertise in finance and accounting to head two teams to investigate Zhongyang, what he gets in the end is a joint report that downplays or ignores facts as it exonerates Zhongyang leaders. Why do these bureaucrats, who are reliable, clean and competent in his view, produce such a false report after he has repeatedly instructed them to be just, strict and honest in their investigation? As he ponders this question Li realizes that the bureaucrats see Zhongyang as his territory and, to ingratiate themselves with him, they simply conceal the corruption at Zhongyang because that is what they think he wants them to do. As it turns out, while the bureaucrats both try to use the false report to get into his good graces one of them even tries to use it to speed up his own promotion, dependent as it is on Li's support. Thinking from the bureaucrats' perspective, Li realizes that, with the subordinates being so eager to please and protect their superiors to ensure their own

23 Zhang, 113.

24 Zhang, 59.

career advancement, it would be totally unnecessary for Yan Zhen to manipulate the investigation, since the subordinates would do that for Yan on their own initiative. The false report, he concludes, reflects corruption at a deep level.²⁵

Indeed the false report, like many other events in *Choice*, reveals the roots of official corruption in the Party's power structure and personnel management, even though this message, for obvious political reasons, is not explicitly spelled out. Given such deep structural roots and the Party's penetration into society, it is no surprise that corruption is everywhere, a phenomenon acknowledged more than once by Mayor Li's wife Wu Aizhen, who is, tellingly, the chief of a district anti-corruption bureau.²⁶ Moreover, neglectful of her duty and, worse, venal, Wu herself not only participates in shady commercial activities with Zhongyang leaders but also tries repeatedly to persuade Mayor Li to stop his investigation. At a higher level we see a similar case in Yan Zhen, deeply engaged in corruption while being put in charge of the police force, procuratorial organs and court system as well as cadre management, industrial and economic activities in the province. To a large degree these two cases stem from the absence of clear-cut ethical, legal, and commercial codes to regulate government officials' market-driven activities, a structural defect in China's hybrid economic system.²⁷ We should further note that such structural defects had attracted criticism before Zhang Ping started writing his novel. For instance, as Yan Sun points out, Chinese discussions of corruption around the time of June 4, 1989 were unanimous in identifying the structural loopholes created by reform as the primary sources of corruption.²⁸ However, for Zhang Ping it was apparently too risky to zero in on the systemic origins of corruption. As a result, he attributed corruption to power-holders' loss of belief in socialism, without acknowledging that even this crisis of values was largely caused by the Party's encouragement of entrepreneurship in the reform era.

Offering an Implausible Solution to Official Corruption

Imploring Mayor Li to look into Zhongyang's problems, a group of former model workers tells Li, in a written petition, that most Zhongyang workers still trust him and still remember what he said to thousands of student protesters in 1989, when the protesters came to Zhongyang and tried to enlist Zhongyang workers for a public demonstration against official corruption, to be held in front of the municipal and provincial government buildings.²⁹ Why does Zhang Ping bring up the protest movement in 1989, a sensitive political topic other Chinese writers would prefer to avoid completely? As we know, official corruption was the explosive issue that triggered

25 Zhang, 408.

26 Zhang, 86, 332.

27 Hao and Johnston, 131.

28 Sun, 772.

29 Zhang, 227.

and motivated widespread protests in China in 1989.³⁰ We learn from Elizabeth Perry that in modern history few accusations served more thoroughly to discredit Chinese regimes than charges of dereliction in curbing official corruption and providing for mass welfare.³¹ As it makes ordinary citizens question if the existing regime really serves the public interest, the charge of uncurbed official corruption, just like the charge of failure to provide for mass welfare, is politically powerful because it raises serious doubts about the regime's legitimacy and motivates ordinary citizens to challenge its political system, its core institutions and the incumbent elites. Proven by the protest movement in 1989, the charge of uncurbed official corruption, if accepted by the public as a fact, can rally ordinary citizens against their government and lead to political and social instability.

Clearly aware that rampant official corruption can lead to political disturbance and, potentially, regime change, Zhang Ping offers a successful solution to the crisis of 1989 in *Choice*. To persuade Zhongyang workers to join them, the student protesters challenge Li to prove, publicly, his integrity after he arrives on the scene to stop the workers. Li then launches into a speech in which he goes over his career at Zhongyang to attest that he had never engaged in corruption in any way, shape or form. When the students question his honesty thousands of Zhongyang workers shout to confirm his claim and to show their support for their beloved former leader. In the end the most vocal protester apologizes to Li with a deep bow and the students retreat from the Zhongyang compound. Li's success in defusing this crisis shows that in Zhang Ping's view continued commitment to communist values in officialdom, especially among top leaders, remains the key to the prevention of official corruption and, ultimately, to political and social stability. In other words the prevention of official corruption hinges on power-holders' personal choices more than anything else. To emphasize this point, Zhang Ping goes on to describe how the memory of 1989 prompts Li to make the most momentous choice in his political life, namely the decision to deepen the investigation of Zhongyang, to remain true to his vow as a communist, even though he knows full well both his benefactor and his wife will be exposed. Of course this is a difficult decision for Li, since he has to overcome his personal feelings and his worry about the repercussions of the decision, but it is the only choice he can make to win continued trust from Zhongyang workers, as the outcome of his decision proves.

Having finally settled on ideological commitment as the weapon against corruption, Zhang Ping promptly puts an end to his exploration of the undesirable ramifications of the policies and practices aimed at reforming state-owned enterprises. In the epilogue of *Choice* he quickly charts a new course with a brief sketch of what accelerated economic reforms bring to Zhongyang. In short order an investigative group locates all the funds illegally siphoned from the company, a new leadership team, vetted by the municipal Party committee and approved by Zhongyang employees, is installed and loans are obtained from state banks before the company restarts its operations in just ten months.

30 Sun, 768.

31 Perry, 309.

Indeed Zhang is so eager to extol the power of accelerated economic reforms that he gives little consideration to plausibility as he summarizes Zhongyang's journey to its speedy turnaround. For instance, he states that, motivated by the new leadership team, Zhongyang employees and retirees manage to pool, within seven months, more than four hundred million *yuan* to invest in the company, without bothering to tell the reader where these employees and retirees, unpaid and impoverished just months ago, get their money.³² It is obvious that in his view once the right leaders are chosen and economic reforms are accelerated all wrongs, including official corruption, will be righted. Interestingly, as he celebrates this magical combination he pushes aside the issue of how accelerated economic reforms corrupt "praiseworthy" and "trustworthy" cadres, an issue to which he has tried to draw attention with the surprising degeneration of the old Zhongyang leaders after 1992.

As many economists and political scientists have noted, China's corruption problem is rooted in its political system, a system that grants and protects privileges. In view of the systemic roots of corruption, some scholars argue that, unless a political reform is initiated and all kinds of privileges are eliminated, China's corruption problem will never be thoroughly solved.³³ To these scholars the solution to official corruption lies in the establishment of a democratic political system, since power vested in administrative staff in a democratic political system is generally more limited and circumscribed by a system of checks and balances so as to prevent blatant abuses. Moreover, in a democratic political system a separate and independent authority usually polices administrative operations.³⁴ Meanwhile, whether it will check corruption or not, a democratic political system is certainly not what the ruling CCP intends to set up. Instead, the CCP strives to earn legitimacy and credibility by improving people's living standards, with economic reforms as its tools. In short, it tries to win popular support and stay in power through economic liberalization rather than democratization in the political realm.

To demonstrate his endorsement of this approach, Zhang Ping provides two examples in the epilogue of his novel: Zhongyang's speedy turnaround as a positive example and, as a negative example, a character named Mr. Babaian, a man who used to be the labor minister of an unnamed socialist country in Eastern Europe but now works as a secretary for the Chinese director of a fact-finding team, sent by a private company in Mr. Babaian's country to negotiate a joint venture with Zhongyang to make glass fiber. Asked by Mayor Li to reflect on the drastic change of fortune in his life, Mr. Babaian concludes that the socialist government in his country had waited too long to launch economic reforms, an experience he hopes China would avoid. With Mr. Babaian's fall from fortune as a clear warning, Zhang Ping highlights what would happen to power-holders in a socialist country when the Soviet economic model, plagued by the rigidity and inefficiency of the central planning system, is not rejected in time. Significantly, Mr.

32 Zhang, 518.

33 See, for example, Yao, 293.

34 Kwong, 53-4.

Babaïen never makes any mention of the political reforms towards democracy, undertaken in both the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries as an essential part of the program of economic revitalization. As we all know, the political reforms eventually led to the fall of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989-1990 and to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Obviously unworthy of emulation, they represent to the CCP a direction it should simply ignore. Zhang Ping's total silence on these regime-changing political reforms signifies his tacit agreement with the CCP on this crucial issue.

As we have seen, throughout *Choice* Zhang Ping shows that official corruption in contemporary China largely stems from the acceleration of economic reforms on the one hand and from the defects in the Chinese political system on the other. Why does he end his novel with such enthusiastic support for accelerated economic reforms, without even mentioning political reform? The answer to this paradox lies in a dilemma he faces as a writer torn between a sense of social responsibility and a desire to survive and succeed in a political environment that does not allow him to carry out his social responsibilities to the fullest extent. As Perry Link, among many other scholars, points out, modern Chinese writers in general share certain basic assumptions about their social roles, including a sense of responsibility towards society.³⁵ So deeply embedded in Chinese culture, these basic assumptions connect modern Chinese writers, including Zhang Ping, to their historical predecessors, traditional scholar-officials with a desire to put the world in order. Driven by his sense of social responsibility in the writing process, Zhang Ping not only tried to expose and denounce official corruption but also tried to probe its roots, raising many poignant questions along the way. On the other hand, living and working under a repressive political regime, he had to rein himself in to avoid offending the authorities. Furthermore, to achieve success in his political career he had to support the authorities on important policy issues. Torn between two incompatible desires, he kept changing directions in his exploration of official corruption. Consequently, his novel becomes dotted with twisted plotlines, inconsistent characters, conflicting comments and unanswered questions, characteristics that are not so much artistic flaws as traces of a tortuous journey. As it contradicts the rest of the novel with its unreserved praise of the Party's single-minded focus on economic reforms, the epilogue indicates the final triumph of Zhang Ping's survival instinct over his sense of social responsibility. Ultimately, what the epilogue reveals is a predicament all Chinese writers face if they try to tackle sensitive political issues in contemporary China.

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35 Link, 104-5.

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