

## BOOK REVIEW

### Jiang Zeminism and the Culture of Guilt

**A Review of *Jiang Zemin and His 15 Years***

**Ren Bumei**

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BY NAN FANGBAI

Among modern China's liberal scholars, Qin Hui and Ren Bumei are two who have gained attention for their erudition and profound thinking. Qin Hui is representative of middle-aged intellectuals, while Ren Bumei is a thinker from the "Generation of 1989." Ren Bumei's "Sleepless Nights Forum," shut down more than 50 times, has become in the words of Wang Yi "something of a legend in the brief human history of the Internet, a legend about enforced control of the Internet and guerilla resistance."<sup>1</sup>

Ren Bumei's departure overseas has immeasurably increased the loneliness of the mainland Internet.<sup>2</sup> But his greatest contribution actually lies in his constant flow of new ideas and original thinking. Over the past 15 years, Ren Bumei has illuminated our era with concepts such as "patriotic thugs," "victim mentality," "new language,"<sup>3</sup> "June 4th Syndrome," "doorstep politics," "theological liberalism" and so on. The idea of "Jiangism," explored in his recently published *Jiang Zemin and His 15 Years*, is another instance of his coining a concept that epitomizes our times.<sup>4</sup>

My understanding of "Jiangism" is that it is equivalent to "political victim mentality." Ren says that Jiangism is not a system of thought but a way of life, a cultural model, a mode of behavior, concepts detailed previously in his book *Victimology*.<sup>5</sup> To put it bluntly, Jiangism is a kind of political culture that stops at nothing in its pur-

suit of power. Nearly all Ren Bumei's political discourses in recent years have targeted this phenomenon. Further, Jiangism is linked to June 4th, and for that reason, in Ren's words, it is a culture of thugs, the tactics of undetected criminals, and exhibits many of the characteristics of the underworld.

Ren discusses the Jiang Zemin era from the perspective of one who personally experienced the 1989 democracy movement and witnessed the Jiang era, and his loathing for and rejection of Jiangism comes through between the lines. As he sees it, Jiangism is more than the behavior of Jiang and his official cronies; it is the spirit of an age. Typical symptoms include failure to recognize one's guilt, lack of regret, creating factions and parties, mutual backstabbing and so on. Of these, Ren sees the failure to recognize one's guilt as epitomizing the shortcomings of traditional Chinese culture and of the present reality.<sup>6</sup>

I think that Ren's advocacy of a "culture of guilt" has first of all to do with his "June 4th background." As a participant in and survivor of that calamity, he finds it difficult to tolerate the arrogance and mutual promotion of intellectuals. In a letter to me he wrote that there are no cultural heroes after June 4th, only "cultural purveyors," and "I am one of the most prominent of those purveyors of culture." In fact, this was one of the reasons why, after repeated consideration, he finally published a criticism of the mutual admiration society formed by Wang Yi and other friends. He has no doubt about Wang Yi's good intentions, but he thinks that, in an age of evil, the sudden appearance of so many cultural heroes is an ill wind that blows no good. He wrote his essay as an attempt to explain his views, but also in hopes that some friends would better understand his intentions. He gave the manuscript to me first, and I encouraged him to publish it, but I have heard that another friend warned that he would "lose a lot of friends." I think his final decision to publish the essay was actually spurred by this "advice" from a friend, who clearly failed to understand him.<sup>7</sup>

A careful consideration of famous intellectuals and writers in China since the 1990s would suggest that Ren's assessment of the state of intellectuals is quite accurate. Throughout this era, the literati

have chosen to "avoid the important and dwell on the trivial," yet no one has noticed this limitation and faced it squarely. Ren Bumei clearly feels that this limitation is very similar to Jiangism, the only difference being that one instance is at the government level and the other among the public.

Ren's emphasis on a culture of guilt also stems from his religious faith. His favorite biblical verses are: "There is none righteous, no, not one,"<sup>8</sup> and "I am the chief sinners."<sup>9</sup> As a religious person, he feels that Chinese culture has a kind of *qigong* character; that is, it encourages a sense of self-sanctification, a disease for which Christianity is the ultimate cure. Few people understand his thinking on this, perhaps even quite a few of his friends in religious circles. Recently, I've felt that he's abandoned the mindset of the "cultural Christian."<sup>10</sup> Since his baptism last year, nearly all his essays are marked by the sort of "Christian fundamentalism" that he once opposed. For example, he is now most opposed to the notion of human cooperation with God. He once fiercely attacked my "heretical" thinking, and repeatedly suggested that I receive "theological enlightenment" through his "truth." He thinks the notion of mankind's perfectibility is the most cunning kind of arrogance, a trait shared by all heresies, and that he himself was "barely pulled alive from that quagmire." Because of this, he recently objected to some friends referring to Jiang Yanyong<sup>11</sup> as a saint. Some of his friends found this inexplicable, but that is because they didn't really understand his meaning. In Ren's words, "He (Jiang Yanyong) understands man's meaning, but not God's meaning." Ren Bumei in no way meant to belittle Jiang Yanyong's contributions, and he has written a great many essays defending Dr. Jiang. But he feels that only a Jiangist would call someone a saint. Such a practice is not only disrespectful of the man, but of God.

Finally, Ren sees Jiangism as the modern fulfillment of traditional culture, which is characterized by a sense of self-satisfaction. It is this conceit and self-esteem, this obsession with self-confidence and personal freedom that leads to the insistence on the right to repress and negate others. His reflections on traditional culture have led Ren to become increasingly worried about the growing excesses of folk religion.

He says that some people have told untruths about Christianity, but some Christians lack the ability to ascertain what is true. What makes him most uneasy is that the inclination to restore the old ways of culture is inevitably very dangerous and backward. On the basis of such considerations, he posted on his Web site an essay by Zhang Yan criticizing an essay by Yuan Hongbing on another Web site advocating a reversion to traditional culture.<sup>12</sup> His action seems to have elicited various levels of displeasure, but I very much agree with Zhang Yan's view that opposition to Jiangism should begin with introspection on everyone's part.

At Ren Bumei's suggestion, I would like to reiterate my opinion of certain religious groups: I oppose any violent suppression of religious freedom, but at the same time, I oppose having the words of any religious leader printed daily as headlines in our publications in a manner reminiscent of *People's Daily* during the Cultural Revolution. Other examples include calls to trample on Jiang, burn books and other such primitive customs. Likewise, the practice of exposing Jiang's private life on Internet Web sites as a form of entertainment and revenge also harkens back to the Cultural Revolution and Chinese tradition.

Resisting Jiangism is a solitary endeavor, for Jiangism is everywhere. No Jiangist, of whatever stripe, can understand a resistance that transcends all political factionalism, and some commentaries do exploit the cheap thrill of victim mentality. But whatever the case, resistance to Jiangism is the only way out for China. Otherwise history will continue to repeat itself, and as we usher out the old Jiang Zemin, a new one will appear to take his place. Isn't that what we have now?

My main regret concerning Ren Bumei's book is that he provides no rebuttal to the American author Robert Lawrence Kuhn's biography of Jiang, *The Man Who Changed China*, because that book had not yet appeared when Ren completed his. A pointed critique of Kuhn's book would have enriched this one. Another problem with the book is that Ren uses a great deal of data and evidence

throughout, but does little to distill it to manageable proportions or to delve further into his valuable insights. Perhaps he feels he has already done this elsewhere, but while this may be true for those of us who are familiar with his essays, many other readers will be less familiar with the concepts to which he refers. Ren Bumei should guard against this kind of "elitist literature" mentality.

One last note: the book tends to gloss over Jiang Zemin's experiences during the Cultural Revolution, perhaps due to a lack of resources on this subject. Before I graduated, my advisor told me some stories about Jiang during the Cultural Revolution that could be important in pinpointing the origins of Jiangism. But it is inevitable that some things will be left out of any book.

This is a very good book indeed, but because we are still under the rule of Jiangism, it will not be available to readers in China for the time being. Although I am happy to have been one of the first to read the book, I have only dared to bare my soul under a pseudonym. Perhaps this is how all Chinese pen names are born.

Translated by a friend of HRIC

This article first appeared in Chinese on the Web site of HRIC's online journal, *Ren Yu Renquan*: [http://www.renyurenquan.org/ryrq\\_article.adp?article\\_id=292](http://www.renyurenquan.org/ryrq_article.adp?article_id=292)

#### NOTES

1. Wang Yi, "Yingxiang Zhongguo gonggong zhishifenzi de lingwai 50 ren [Fifty More Public Intellectuals Who Influence China]," available at: [http://www.boxun.com/hero/wangyi/97\\_1.shtml](http://www.boxun.com/hero/wangyi/97_1.shtml) and [http://www.boxun.com/hero/wangyi/106\\_1.shtml](http://www.boxun.com/hero/wangyi/106_1.shtml).
2. Ren Bumei joined his wife and twin daughters in Canada in 2004.
3. Ren Bumei started the "New Language Movement" in 1999 with other writers and scholars to distribute selected texts among students to promote the concepts of rationality and faith. For a description of the movement and its influence, see Zhao Wei, "Ren Bumei yu xinyuwen yundong [Ren Bumei and the New Language Movement]," accessible at <http://www.epochtimes.com/gb/4/8/25/n640013.htm>.

4. Ren Bumei uses the phrase "doorstep politics" to designate the movement toward public protests outside of government offices. For articles exploring "doorstep politics," Jiangism and related topics, see Ren Bumei, "Menqian zhengzhi yu wending de zhongjie," accessible at [http://www.boxun.com/hero/renbm/145\\_1.shtml](http://www.boxun.com/hero/renbm/145_1.shtml), and "Wanglu ziyou yu shehui zhuangying," accessible at <http://www.dajiyuan.com/gb/4/11/16/n719556.htm>.
5. *Zaiminlun*, further publication details unavailable.
6. CRF has previously published articles by Ren Bumei that elaborate on the need for repentance, in particular, "A Time for Self-Reflection," *China Rights Forum*, No. 2, 2004, [http://iso.hrichina.org/fs/downloadables/pdf/downloadable-resources/c3\\_ATimefor6.2004.pdf?revision\\_id=8700](http://iso.hrichina.org/fs/downloadables/pdf/downloadable-resources/c3_ATimefor6.2004.pdf?revision_id=8700).
7. It is not clear which article the writer is referring to here, but Ren Bumei published a scathing indictment of China's intellectuals following the death of a young girl in 2003, which was translated in *China Rights Forum*, No. 4, 2003, "After Li Si-yi," [http://iso.hrichina.org/fs/downloadables/pdf/downloadable-resources/a3\\_Lisiyi4.2003.pdf?revision\\_id=8688](http://iso.hrichina.org/fs/downloadables/pdf/downloadable-resources/a3_Lisiyi4.2003.pdf?revision_id=8688).
8. Romans 3:10.
9. "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief." 1 Timothy 1:15.
10. "Cultural Christianity" is a term applied to Chinese who have become attracted to the teachings of Christianity without necessarily becoming adherents. See Ka Lun Leung, "Cultural Christians and Contemporary Christianity in China," *China Rights Forum*, No. 4, 2003.
11. Dr. Jiang Yanyong, a surgeon at the People's Liberation Army Number 301 Hospital, gained fame for revealing the SARS epidemic cover-up in 2003, and for his outspoken stand against the violent official crackdown against protestors in June 1989.
12. Zhang Yan's essay, "Bo Yuan Hongbing 'Zhao-huan Zhongguo wenhua fuxing yundong' yi wen," was originally published on the Web site of ChinaEWeekly, which Ren Bumei edits, and can be accessed through the Boxun Web site: <http://www.peacehall.com/news/gb/pubvp/2005/04/200504121943.shtml>. Yuan Hongbin's essay, "Zhao-huan Zhongguo wenhua fuxing yundong," can be accessed on the Epoch Times Web site: <http://www.epochtimes.com/gb/5/4/11/n884545.htm>.