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## The future of China's memories : an interview with Feng Jikai

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# The Future of China's Memories: An Interview with Feng Jikai

Yomi Braester and Zhang Enhua

The interview took place in Feng's Tianjin residence on July 3, 2001.

## Introduction

In this interview, Feng Jikai provides an insider's view of the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution and the struggle to preserve urban landmarks. While Feng lays the blame largely on the turn to economic reforms, which created a society that sets little value on memory, he also gives a detailed account of how that turn took place. The first part of the interview describes the legacy of the Cultural Revolution in contemporary China and touches especially on Feng's book *Yibai ge ren de shinian* [A hundred people's ten years], translated into English as *Ten Years of Madness*. The second part describes the challenges presented by China's quick urbanization and includes a rare first-hand glimpse into the manipulations of politicians, the media, and public opinion needed to advance the cause of cultural preservation. The account is of special importance because it comes from an authoritative source. Feng is one of the most active and versatile men of letters in the PRC. He is especially well-known for his place as one of the first "scar literature" writers, who addressed the events of the Cultural Revolution soon after its end. In the last decade, Feng has led a public struggle to preserve old Tianjin. He has published five books on the subject, including *Shouxia liuqing: Xiandai dushi wenhua de youhuan* [Have mercy: The anxiety of modern urban culture] and *Qiangjiu laojie* [Rushing to save an old street].

Feng Jikai was born in Tianjin in 1942 and began painting in the traditional Chinese style, which remains one of his vocations until this day. As a result of being persecuted during

馮驥才

一百個人的十年

手下留情：現代  
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搶救老街

雕花煙斗

the Cultural Revolution, Feng started writing in secret. Feng started publishing in 1977, and his novels and shorter fiction, beginning with the collection *Diaohua yandou* [The carved pipe, 1979], have won many awards. Feng has published more than fifty books, two of which have been adapted into films, and many have been translated into more than a dozen languages. He also has written numerous opinion articles and has become a vociferous proponent for the preservation of cultural relics. He bears many titles, including Executive Vice Chairman of the Joint Association of Chinese Writers and Artists, Chair of the Chinese Fiction Society, and Chair of the Association of Chinese Popular Art and Literature. Recently he has been appointed Dean of the Feng Jikai Institute for Literary and Art Research at Tianjin University.

**YB:** You have written about two subjects I've been interested in, namely memoirs of the Cultural Revolution and the reconstruction of old cities. What do these two topics have in common?

**FJ:** I have written about more than these two topics. The link between the two depends on your interest rather than on me. I pay attention to society in its entirety, to our history, people and culture. For example, I've done some research into the religion, history and art of Dunhuang, and intend to do some more. As for the Cultural Revolution, it is the topic most deeply connected with my personal life. Chinese authors all relate to social issues, which are in turn affected by political change. We Chinese authors follow political life very closely, as the political environment exerts much influence on Chinese people—not only on material conditions and the standard of living, but also on people's spirit and mentality. I've been a Chinese author through my entire life; or take Wang Meng, Zhang Xianliang, Li Guowen, and Cong Weixi—all these authors have been affected by being struggled against during the 1957 Anti-Rightist Campaign. Their deepest scars are political. Perhaps most people wouldn't be so politically sensitive, but

authors are the most sensitive and as such represent the political sensitivity toward the period.

In China, authors are differentiated by political periods and divided into generations eight to ten years apart. My generation was essentially brought up during the Cultural Revolution, from the time we were twenty to the time we were thirty. The formation of our thought cannot be separated from the Cultural Revolution, and the Cultural Revolution cannot be extracted from our thought. Some say that one should forget the Cultural Revolution, but that's impossible for our generation. Authors such as Liang Xiaosheng, Han Shaogong, Yu Hua and Su Tong, some of whom were sent-down youth, are younger than us by five to ten years. They too have been mostly influenced by the Cultural Revolution. Behind them there is an even younger generation, which we call "post-Cultural Revolution authors," who belong to the era of economic reforms. They are different from us politically. The Cultural Revolution is what my generation wants to write about most; I'm afraid we will never finish writing about the Cultural Revolution. Moreover, political and social problems were prominently manifested during the Cultural Revolution. If we look deeper, these are problems related to the culture, mentality and national tradition of the Chinese people. The Cultural Revolution concentrated and amplified China's history and reality.

The Cultural Revolution drew in all people without exception. There were all kinds of political campaigns, and if one ducked one campaign, didn't actively participate, or didn't want to take part, one would be given plenty of opportunities in the next campaign, when one would probably join in. Everyone had to perform on the stage of the Cultural Revolution. It was the stage for the most complete display of the Chinese people, a very cruel stage.

My interests in the Cultural Revolution and urban reconstruction are related through what I have called the "social responsibility" of Chinese authors and men of letters. In the past it had the function of social edification and moral education. Some intellectuals would pass the examinations to become officials and enter politics to further their sense

of responsibility. Our generation's sense of responsibility stems from our experience of the Cultural Revolution. Not only my generation but also the whole nation experienced that catastrophe. I included in my book a piece about my own experience. Because of that experience I had a strong sense of responsibility from the moment I embarked on the literary path. I felt that I have to help the society of this period to progress. I had to help the people who experienced hardship during the Cultural Revolution, speak out and bring justice for them. My strong drive to write this way stems from my generation's strong sense of responsibility.

**YB:** I can discern a similarity between the attitude toward social responsibility as expressed by Chinese writers and those of my native Israel; in the U.S. the issue seems less important. In what particular ways does the current situation in China shape the authors' sense of responsibility?

**FJ:** Many of my readers don't like hearing about responsibility, perhaps because in the past responsibility was forced, and by now it seems to be an old concept. Moreover, responsibility seems to call on one to shoulder the cross and suffer for it. In fact, the sense of responsibility, as I have written, is social conscience. It is a very broad concept, including many elements, such as humanism.<sup>1</sup> It isn't limited to abstract ideas on social duties, nor does it involve a paternalistic attitude. It gives expression to the writer's great love for life and society and to the duty he bears voluntarily. The sense of responsibility I speak of contains a deep love for culture. The sense of responsibility is an extension of personal emotion. It isn't everything for a writer, but it is an important part; without it, the writer has no way of communicating with society at large. This is not to say that once a writer has a strong sense of responsibility

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<sup>1</sup> In the context of intellectual debate after the Cultural Revolution, "humanism" was upheld against the previous emphasis on class. It gained legitimacy in the late 1970s and came under political criticism in around 1983.

he does not have individual emotions and personal thoughts, nor does the sense of responsibility vouch for one's literary capability.

**YB:** Yet some readers might feel that the sentences appended at the end of each account in *Ten Years of Madness* are too naïve. What is the significance of these sentences for you as a writer?

**FJ:** Those sentences were my starting point. I didn't add them after writing, but rather that it was the sentences that initiated my writing. They were the reason I selected these specific accounts. The concluding sentences express the overall impression I got from speaking to the respective persons and the reason why I chose to write about those specific people.

**YB:** When I teach this book, I compare these sentences to the coda at the end of each chapter of the *Shiji* [Records of the Grand Historian], where Sima Qian adds a moral, reappropriating the narrative for his own point of view.

史記

**FJ:** I don't think it is the case. I wrote about 30-odd people, but I had interviewed a few hundred. I didn't include the majority, because in my opinion they had nothing special to say. When I decided to write about specific people after speaking to them, I would usually have another interview with them. The concluding sentence would form in my mind during the first interview. During the entire writing process I strove to leave out my personal thoughts, yet I wanted to express myself. I couldn't write my words before each account, as I would influence the readers and introduce preconceptions. I had to write my personal impression at the end. All those sentences, put together, are the guiding thought behind the book.

**YB:** Recently many works about the Cultural Revolution appeared, as different from one another as Ji Xianlin's memoirs *Niupeng zayi* [Reminiscences from the cowshed] and Jiang Wen's film *Yangguang canlan de rizi* (English title: *In the Heat of the Sun*).<sup>2</sup> What do you think of them?

季羨林  
牛棚雜憶  
姜文 陽光  
燦爛的日子

<sup>2</sup> Ji Xianlin, formerly Chair of the Department of East Asian

芙蓉鎮

**FJ:** I'm afraid that *In the Heat of the Sun* shows Jiang Wen's generation's distance from the Cultural Revolution. I regret that the Cultural Revolution it represents has nothing in common with mine. Until now no film has truly represented the Cultural Revolution. Many novels have been written on the subject as part of the scar literature movement, and I have just started inviting some people to do research on scar literature. Yet cinema has great limitations and has a long way to go to truly and profoundly represent the Cultural Revolution. *Furong zhen* (English title: *Hibiscus Town*) and other movies of its time started the work, but none has gone any further.<sup>3</sup> I've been saying that if a true masterpiece of Chinese literature or cinema is produced in the future, it will surely be about the Cultural Revolution. The Cultural Revolution reflected Chinese society most profoundly; it is a great artwork in Chinese history.

**ZE:** I was surprised to find out that scholars in the U.S. pay more attention to the Cultural Revolution than in mainland China. Literary works on the Cultural Revolution are examined in the context of trauma studies, together with Japanese *hibakusha* and Jewish holocaust literature. The Cultural Revolution is a hot topic in both creative and scholarly writing. In China, on the other hand, very few express interest, perhaps because of the political environment.

**FJ:** Literature on the Cultural Revolution, special as it may be, was written during a very short period. As one of the first authors of scar literature, I understand its history very well.

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Languages and Vice President of Beijing University, published his *Niupeng zayi* in 1998. Whereas Ji (born 1911) represents the older generation hit by the Cultural Revolution, Jiang Wen's (born 1963) expresses the attitude of a generation that was barely old enough to take part in the Cultural Revolution. His film *Yangguang canlan de rizi* (1994) skirts the political events and has been criticized as nostalgic.

謝晉

<sup>3</sup> Xie Jin's *Furong zhen* was among the earliest and more poignant films to depict the Cultural Revolution.

My first story was published under the title “Puhua de qilu” [The forking paths of flower arrangement], but at first I named it “Chuangshang” [Wound]. At the time, the Third CCP Plenum had not yet convened and the Party had not officially repudiated the Cultural Revolution, so the People’s Literature Publishing House thought that my work was problematic and would not publish it. My only way out was to ask Mao Dun to speak up. I was very young, just over thirty, yet I read out the entire text in a literary meeting. Mao Dun said, “good,” and only then could the story be published. While the text was being edited, Lu Xinhua’s “Shanghen” [Scar] came out.<sup>4</sup> I couldn’t call my short story “Wound” any more, so I changed it to “The Forking Paths of Flower Arrangement.” Had my story been published first, people would be writing essays about “wound literature,” and the impact would have been greater than Liu’s “Scar.” By the time I wrote my second short story, “Ah,” I thought I could explore more deeply than in “The Forking Paths of Flower Arrangement” and write about the mental terror during the Cultural Revolution.

The story of the way it received a national prize is pretty interesting. All the critics were of the opinion that it should receive the first prize, but Feng Mu, who was a jury member, said: “This story absolutely shouldn’t get the first prize. If it does, the central leadership will read it and it will cause much trouble. If it gets the second prize, it will not draw much attention.”<sup>5</sup> And so they made it number two. Later, Feng Mu spoke and said, “If Feng Jikai’s story had a positive character, it could have been better. With no positive character, what are we to do?” Scar literature occurred during a very special period. In no more than two-three short years it exploded and produced a large amount of literature, focusing on social criticism. Since 1949, China has never had such a literary phenomenon. In that period

<sup>4</sup> Lu Xinhua’s (b. 1954) “Shanghen” (1978) gave the name to the trend known as “scar literature.”

<sup>5</sup> Feng Mu (1919-1995) was a literary critic and prose writer. Rehabilitated in 1976, he became editor-in-chief of the journal *Wenyi bao* in 1978.

輔花的歧路

創傷

盧新華

傷痕

文藝報

喬廠長上任記

we were supposed to criticize the “two all-outs,”<sup>6</sup> liberate thought and denounce the Cultural Revolution, so we were permitted to write that kind of literature. Right after it burst out and subsided, the Third Plenum was convened, Hua Guofeng stepped down, and literature was required to be more positive. When “Qian Changzhang shangrenji” [Factory manager Qiao takes office] came out, there was a shift to “literature of the reforms era,” and scar literature cooled off.<sup>7</sup>

反思文學

Reforms literature is an official, “main melody” [propaganda] literature. The reforms literature of the 1990s is the counter-movement to scar literature. As it comported with the official demand for a “main melody,” reforms literature stifled scar literature. Scar literature authors continued to reflect about the past in what may be called the “post-scar” period. My *Ten Years of Madness* belongs to that period of rethinking the past. “Literature rethinking the past” (*fansi wenxue*) is mentioned only by a few critics, because it is no longer in the mainstream. The mainstream is now “main melody” reforms literature. Scar literature was a criticism of realism and put criticism at its core. Since Liberation, literature was never allowed to focus on criticism, and here the entire literary work of the period focused on criticism. It was a period like no other in Chinese history. In the last hundred years there were only two such periods—one was Lu Xun’s, the other, scar literature. It arose on its own, without any planning by the leadership.

**YB:** You say that a truly representative literature of the Cultural Revolution has yet to appear, and it is true not only of literature. The Jewish holocaust, for example, is commemorated in large museums. What kind of commemoration does China need for the Cultural Revolution?

兩個凡是

<sup>6</sup> The “two all-outs” (*liangge fanshi*) policy, proclaimed by Hua Guofeng, held that one should firmly uphold Chairman Mao’s decisions and resolutely follow Chairman Mao’s instructions.

蔣子龍

<sup>7</sup> Jiang Zilong (b. 1941) published “Factory Manager Qiao Takes Office” in 1979.

**FJ:** There is no doubt that there should be a Cultural Revolution museum. There are already some private Cultural Revolution collections, but they are a bit problematic, since they collect personal artifacts, which cannot commemorate the Cultural Revolution at the spiritual level or draw lessons from it. In the second edition of *Ten Years of Madness* I wrote: “we are nearing two memorial days; one is the thirtieth anniversary of the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, the other is the twentieth anniversary of its collapse.”<sup>8</sup> There was no activity to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary. Zhang Xianliang wrote to me that a newspaper article of mine was the only one to address the Cultural Revolution during that period. He said it was the best thing I did in my lifetime. We do not inform younger people about the Cultural Revolution. For the second edition of *Ten Years of Madness* I asked some children about their impressions of the Cultural Revolution. They thought it was a good thing, that the Cultural Revolution should be taken up again. It’s truly frightful—they don’t know anything about the Cultural Revolution. Sometimes I think that we should still write a couple of books about the Cultural Revolution; the Cultural Revolution described by the next generation isn’t going to be the Cultural Revolution any more.

張賢亮

**ZE:** The author of *Zhongguo, 1957* [China, 1957] did not undergo the Anti-Rightist Campaign, yet he felt a conscience that spurred him on.<sup>9</sup> What is the difference between writers who have first-hand experience of an event and those who construct history through secondary materials and imagination?

中國一九五七

**FJ:** What one hasn’t seen with one’s own eyes one can only

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<sup>8</sup> *Ten Years of Madness* appeared in two editions. The English translation is based on the first edition, of 1991; a second and enlarged edition appeared in 1997.

<sup>9</sup> You Fengwei’s (b. 1943) novel *Zhongguo, 1957*, one of the best-sellers in 2001, recounts the suffering of a group of young college students from the Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1957 until their rehabilitation in 1976.

尤鳳偉

imagine. In most cases, our imagination surpasses reality, but great calamities—such as a large earthquake, a volcanic eruption, or an A-bomb explosion—go beyond the imagination. Those fantastic images are more complex and strange than one can imagine. Here are two examples from *Ten Years of Madness* of things I couldn't have imagined. One man tried to commit suicide seven times. In one attempt, he was enclosed in a small room, and he tried to find a broken bowl to slit his throat with, but people were afraid he would commit suicide and there was no bowl around. He had no means of committing suicide, until he realized that the room was very dirty and full of flies. He swatted more than 700 flies and ate them all at once. He was sure he was going to die but ended up in good physical shape. Could you have imagined such a detail? Another man's younger brother died of hunger. When he went to change his brother's clothes, he saw that the brother's corpse was extremely thin. Once he undid the clothes, he found a sheet of paper stuck to the brother's stomach. He said that even Tolstoy couldn't have written such a formidable story—the paper was written full with names of tasty dishes. As the brother was starving to death, he wrote down tasty dishes and stuck them onto his stomach. This is unimaginable. Real-life events can be more shocking than anything.

**YB:** These stories exemplify the connection between real-life situations and literature. To make sense of such events one must read them as testimony and as allegory at the same time.

**FJ:** History must be represented in two ways. One is documentation of undistorted reality, which is the flesh and blood of historiography. The other is allegory, which is the soul of historiography.

My generation has a strong sense of social responsibility. Since the beginning of the 1990s, big social changes suddenly started taking place. Chinese cities went through a modernizing transformation. Intellectuals still haven't realized that Chinese society and culture in their

entirety have suffered a major blow. When the common people and officials care about China's natural environment, they do so without paying attention to culture, such as urban history and customs. So intellectuals of my generation started concerning themselves with these problems. I have just helped the Hong Kong-based Phoenix TV in making a 130-chapter series called "In Search of the Lost Homeland." They have covered 19 Chinese provinces, went through all the old villages, and asked local scholars to talk about the value of each place.

My friend Li Yuxiang has devoted the last two decades to photographing villages.<sup>10</sup> He followed the TV people to make this program. One day he called to tell me that the places he had seen before had all changed by now. Some very pretty villages disappeared as if overnight. If the local officials say that they want to build new houses, the people happily tear it all down in one evening. This is a very serious problem. So last night I said on Phoenix TV that within ten, at most fifteen years, all these places will be gone. Nothing can be done about it—I've been fighting it for six or seven years and have tired myself out. I still intend to write; it has given me additional stress, but I'm doing my best to resist it. I've been relatively successful in Tianjin. Mayor Li Shenglin invited me to organize a weekly public meeting of the mayors and directors. Some places are of urgent concern, and without preservation they'll disappear. For example, the earliest ruins of Tianjin were discovered in Dazhigu, where they were going to build residential housing. I sent a letter to the Mayor, and after going to see for himself he spent four million RMB to buy the land. He tore down the new buildings. Now they're going to build a museum on the site.

I have had some successes, for example in the international concession area, where the five avenues have been preserved pretty well. I invited photographers to take pictures of some buildings in the concession and printed illustrated booklets of them. I made a big effort to map out

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<sup>10</sup> Li Yuxiang (b. 1962) is a freelance photographer and author of the fourteen-volume anthology *Lao fangzi* [Old houses].

the city. I invited scholars to examine it street by street, and afterwards we marked all the buildings we deemed important and sent out photographers. Taking the photos took a few years, after which we put them into a book. Producing this book involved large expenditures from my own pocket. I then presented it to dignitaries, beginning with the Mayor, and added on the front page, "this is your most beloved city." It was truly very important, as they might have walked through the city without seeing these things. I also wrote articles and invited a few experts to give talks about the significance of the buildings. For example, on Chinese New Year, 1994, the old city of Tianjin was going to be torn down. I invited a hundred photographers and they quickly took pictures of the city. By now all these buildings have disappeared. We printed an illustrated book, including a photo of what the place looked like after the demolition. Of course, the city leaders aren't too happy when one does such things.

Many of the photographed places don't exist any more. There was in Tianjin a street by the name of Guyijie

[Cloth-selling Street]. This was the earliest place for selling clothes in Tianjin, the earliest commercial street, the first artery of the city. It was there even before Tianjin existed as a city. It was originally called Matou dongjie [Pier East Road]. It was the city's first street during the Yuan dynasty; it has a 700-year-long history. It has changed ceaselessly,

and much was rebuilt (see figure 1). The current buildings date to the late Qing and early Republican period. Last spring, the municipal government suddenly decided to tear down the street altogether. I immediately called reporters and told them that this street is a symbol of Tianjin as a commercial city and should by no means be wiped off the face of the Earth. I said that those buildings had an

故衣街



碼頭東街

Figure 1. Cloth-selling Street in the beginning of the twentieth century. Reprinted by permission from Feng Jicai, *Qiangjiu laojie*, p. 62.

important meaning, and that the most representative was the Qianxiangyi [Money Luck & Profit] Building. The next day a few newspapers published the story, all at the same time. The city leaders became nervous and informed the newspapers that they couldn't publish any more of my statements on the matter. Since I couldn't proceed in Tianjin, I went to Beijing. I invited reporters from CCTV twice and also wrote in the daily *Guangming ribao*. The pressure in Tianjin became stronger as they were going to demolish the place right away. They cut the water and electricity service provided to the street, to make it impossible to live there.

光明日報

When I saw no solution to the problem, I suggested to the head of the post office that a postcard be printed to commemorate the old building. He wasn't aware of the problems involved, so he agreed to print a whole series, and I commissioned the photographs. I organized some of my friends into four groups that operated simultaneously: the first one took the pictures, the second made TV videos of the entire district, the third collected cultural artifacts, and the fourth wrote down the reminiscences of the old residents. Meanwhile, I made the postcards and organized a postcard-signing event at the post office. The problem was, how to inform people of the event? The newspapers were not allowed to publish anything on the subject. Luckily the radio station wanted me to talk of literature in a live interview. At the end they asked me: "Mr. Feng, what have you been doing lately?" I answered: "I just made a series of postcards, and tomorrow, at such-and-such a place, I'm signing them." The next day 1,300 people came in just two hours (see figure 2). I first gave a speech and the day after the old people of Guyijie put up an announcement that they didn't agree to the demolition.



Figure 2. Feng Jikai gives a speech at the postcard signing. Reprinted by permission from Feng Jikai, *Qiangjiu laojie*, p. 20.

The local authorities were put in a tough spot. On the last day before the scheduled demolition, the municipal government finally relented. The Vice-mayor called up a conference of Tianjin's experts, who consequently said that the street and a few main buildings could stay. I wrote a book about the entire series of events, giving a day-by-day account and citing all that the Mayor, the district heads and I said. I also said that that writing, black on white, will be left as a historical record. I had no problem printing the book—it came out in June and I held a book-signing in September. I left China and stayed for two months in France, where I got a phone. The local developers said, "Let's take advantage of Feng Jikai's absence and tear down the street." I phoned in a hurry the Tianjin Construction Bureau and the National Construction Bureau in Beijing and told them: "You absolutely have to protect that street." When I returned in December 2000 and went to Guyijie, only one building was left standing in the entire area. I stood there and cried tearfully. Just at that time a CCTV crew came to shoot another program about me. They knew where I was going and followed me, recording the whole thing. It was a difficult situation. It wasn't just that the people in power wanted to build a modern city; many economic reasons contributed to the complexity of it all.

Of the buildings shown as still standing in my book, half have been torn down in the last two months. They knew that once they take down the gate, a whole swarm of issues would be set loose, so they left just this little bit. The rest is gone. When the decision was made to preserve Guyijie, the news was published in the newspaper, and I thought there would be no more problems. But when my book *Rushing to Save an Old Street* was about to be published, I found out that a building that was not going to be demolished had just been torn down, so I commissioned a photo of its ruins to be put on the cover (see figure 3). This wasn't the original cover. I added a sentence: "I hereby put in a



Figure 3. Front cover of Feng's *Rushing to Save an Old Street*. Reprinted by permission.

period to conclude *Rushing to Save an Old Street* and use this vantage point to chronicle truthfully the entire process and put down on paper an everlasting record.” And then I added another sentence: “Moreover, in the case of future changes, the white paper and the black ink bear witness. No matter who we are, we are all accountable to history.” I stopped the press to add this sentence because I knew that they were still introducing changes. Since the decision to preserve the street had already been published in the newspaper, everyone was naive enough to think that no more problems were coming. When they suddenly modified the plan, I immediately saw that this boded no good and added this sentence. If I hadn't added this sentence, the book would have been tantamount to praising them, as if they were very good. And so I added this sentence and changed the cover. Recently I was going to write an article entitled “Rushing to Save an Old Street Has Failed” about the events since I wrote the book, including photos of that failure.

**ZE:** A series of books has been published about old Chinese cities. It seems to me that the authors have a very different attitude to preservation from yours. They regard the old cities as relics of a past history, whereas you want to keep history going. They seem to have cut themselves off from history and see it with a detached, cold eye.

**FJ:** Those are nostalgic books. Of course nostalgia serves an emotional need, and did so especially toward the turn of the twenty-first century. When the Left was in power, many such books appeared, to make people believe that history is pretty. I don't think that all of history is that pretty. The key is that history has a life of its own and must be respected. We cannot simply stand in the present and look at the past, but must rather stand in the future and look at the present.

**ZE:** You want to hand history down to the next generation.

**FJ:** Yes. Each one of us has the responsibility to hand over our cultural essence to the next generation in perfect form.

There are various reasons for this cultural depletion. The first is that the people used to be too poor and their lives too hard, so that they didn't pay attention to their environment. They had a complex of pressing for modernization and placed all their aspirations on modernization. They didn't know that it had its negative aspect. The second reason is that China has had a tradition of "producing" civilization, but not of keeping and cherishing it. China's long history has brought forth many cultures but also destroyed them. This differs greatly from Greece or France, whose people love their culture. China has an inexhaustible intangible culture, as seen in her script, yet it is barren of material culture. The third reason for the loss of our cultural essence is the ignorance of officials, who hope to promote their career through urban restructuring and show that their leadership is on the right course. The result is accelerated urban change to the point where in many famous cities there are few visible traces of history. Street names all changed to foreign names. The problem has not been solved, because of the excessive involvement of officials and the agrarian nature of Chinese culture, which emphasizes practical efficacy rather than spiritual achievement. Farmers work throughout the year; when they're done harvesting, they start thinking about next year, or even the year after next. They hope to leave to their children money, not spiritual possessions. The other problem is official corruption. Demolition can make one rich—tearing down and construction involves much money and power. And once you start demolishing, the tide cannot be reversed.

**ZE:** Do you encounter many obstacles?

**FJ:** Of course there are obstacles, but that's of no importance. I have two goals—on the one hand to preserve and rescue, protecting one building and one street at a time, and to talk of my view and think of solutions. Besides these practical goals I have another, namely to influence a whole generation's conception of their own culture. A people, no matter how glorious its culture, isn't civilized unless it cherishes its culture. Until the Chinese people respect their culture, China cannot be said to be an ancient and cultured

country. I always think that the vocation of an author, when society is confused, is to be the first to come to his senses. When society is too practical-minded, the author must give people some dreams. This may also impinge on the question you asked me in the beginning—my generation's sense of responsibility has always been very strong. I often feel a pressing urge, as if a bit later things will be gone. It is already much worse now compared to ten years ago, and the trend is still for very, very fast change. While in France I bought a Chinese history book published one hundred years ago, with many photos of contemporary buildings in China. All these places are now gone. Chinese cities have been destroyed very fast.

**ZE:** Urban destruction has taken place in earlier periods as well. For example, during the early Republican period both war and natural causes contributed to such destruction. Yet now, due to economic development, destruction is faster, more dramatic and more total.

**FJ:** In China's long history, whenever a new emperor ascended the throne, he would throw aside what came before and build something new that would belong to him; history would begin from him. Now people have more power. Moreover, the problem is compounded by the fact that real estate can be turned immediately into money and profit, inciting people's desires.

**YB:** Why haven't Beijing writers been making as much "trouble" as you?

**FJ:** Beijing writers are to blame for it. These years, I have written many articles about urban culture, but haven't come across a single writer who agrees with me. They never wrote to support me, not one of them. And a good few opposed me, including Zhang Xianliang. He said that while the common people didn't have good buildings to live in, Feng Jikai was busy appreciating ornamental architectural carvings. He said that I was extravagant. Later I said on CCTV that we, the Chinese, have never indulged in extravagance and are in fact very poor. I also argued with

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Liu Xinwu, who said that demolition was the precondition for progress. He said that, unlike Beijing, Tianjin was a recently-built city, without any history or cultural relics. I responded by saying that he was confusing cultural relics with culture. Other nations are not as ancient, but that doesn't mean that their culture can be disposed of. Every nation and each village have its unique culture that must be preserved. One cannot preserve only the most ancient. I told Liu Xinwu that he expressed a Beijing chauvinism.

In every period we must engage in both invention and preservation. As the chairman of the Association of Folk Literature and Arts, I'm going to initiate a big project, in which legends, aphorisms, stories and songs from all over China, altogether 400 million characters, will be housed in a museum in Beijing and will appear in print. We will create a database of folk customs from the entire country. If we don't collect them, they will gradually disappear in the process of modernization; some already have disappeared.

**YB:** This preservation project is similar to your *Ten Years of Madness*, in that both are intended not only to preserve the items but also to let others know that these things should be preserved.

**FJ:** Of course. The most important thing is to let people know that these things can disappear in no time. People's views and preferences are changing, and they like things from America, Japan, Hong Kong and Taiwan. I went to investigate the situation at Beijing's antique markets such as Panjiayuan and found out that recently there are many windows with carved latticework for sale, which proves that houses are being torn down very fast. I am going to write an article on "The Destiny of Chinese Architecture as Observed at Panjiayuan." I've already figured out the last sentence: When no more such artifacts are sold at Panjiayuan, we may draw two possible conclusions—either that people have finally realized the importance of cultural relics and preserved them, or that they have all ceased to exist.

YOMI  
BRAESTER