The New York Times

December 27, 1987

Thaw and Freeze and Thaw Again: The Cultural Weather in China

By Seymour Topping

"THE wind has turned," said Feng Yidai, a tight-lipped cautious man who edits Dushu (Reading), Beijing's avant-garde scholarly journal. We were standing in a corner of the faded reception hall of the International Club earlier this month, quietly talking about the bitter chill that had swept China's cultural life. It came at the onset of the year in the guise of a campaign by Chinese Communist Party conservatives against bourgeois liberalization, code for Western influence. Prominent intellectuals were disciplined. Hu Yaobang, the patron of the cultural "openness" policy that had given writers and artists more license than at any other time since the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, was ousted as the general secretary of the party. For writers and artists it was another of the recurring winters of silenced voices, unpublished manuscripts and exhibitions of vacuous art. Now Mr. Feng was telling me there was a thaw that raised hope once again for greater freedom of expression. "We have been free of interference since the congress," he said. The 13th party congress ended in early November.

The editor and I strolled back to the buffet table where we were joined by Li Shenzhi, the vice president of the Academy of Social Sciences, an imposing establishment figure smartly clad in a dark Western suit. After an exchange of pleasantries and sighs about the cold and fogs of December, I asked, "What is the outlook for the writers and artists." Mr. Li sipped his soft drink and said, "The policy of openness was firmly reaffirmed at the congress. We will have our ups and downs. But for every step backward, there will be two steps forward."

Ups and downs. I glanced around the hall recalling conversations in 1946 at the bar of this club with Chinese intellectuals who were agitating for democratic reform despite brutal crackdowns by the Nationalist secret police. Then came the People's Republic, bringing Maoist Socialist Realism, total dedication of the arts to Communist goals. There was the purge of intellectuals in the anti-rightist campaign of 1957 followed in 1966 by the Cultural Revolution, 10 years of brutal leftist subjugation. China seemed chained to an unending cycle of repressions. There was hope among the intellectuals during my last visit to Beijing in 1979, when the policy of openness to the West and a market-oriented economy was proclaimed, that the cycle might be broken. But a campaign against "spiritual pollution" followed in 1983, and the party took another step backward in cultural policy during 1987. According to Mr. Li's formula, it was time for two steps forward.

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Li Shenzhi and the Dushu editor were among the guests at a cocktail party that my wife, Audrey Topping, a photojournalist, and I were giving for old Chinese friends before embarking on an intensive two-week survey of the cultural scene. We were given extraordinary access as members of a delegation of the Center for U.S.-China Arts Exchange, an independent organization based at Columbia University and supported by American foundations. Chou Wen-Chung, the director of the center, had been invited to bring the delegation to China after he raised questions about the impact of the cultural turbulence on the exchange program. As we traveled from Beijing to Shanghai, and to Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan in the west, we found a new mood of cautious optimism among writers and artists.

The intellectuals generally accepted political constraint as an immutable given which forbade criticism of the top leadership and the basic socialist system, but they drew encouragement from other developments at the party congress. Deng Liquin, the hard-liner who has been the grand inquisitor of the movement against "spiritual pollution" as well as the most recent crackdown, failed to win re-election to the central committee. To spur efficiency the leadership proclaimed a policy of separating party and Government functions. In the future, the party would concern itself with general policy. This implied that the layer of party cadres overlooking every institution and enterprise, including the cultural, would be thinned out with a diminishment of conservative influence. The word has been passed to the cultural organizations to initiate the process but with the understanding that it would take time to find other places for these cadres who have been assured of a "cast-iron rice bowl" for life. In Beijing a young magazine editor told us, although no formal order had yet been issued, he has stopped submitting his copy to the municipal party committee, thus shedding one of his editorial "mothers-in-law."

While these signals were encouraging, writers and artists remained ensnared in a tangle of other constraints deeply imbedded in the society. In the provinces some local officials practiced erratic censorship, its prevalence usually varying in ratio to distance from Beijing. Common among officials and the mass of the people (an estimated 20 percent of whom are illiterate) are traditional inhibitions, such as those about nudity and sexuality. The national Film Bureau, which censors all movies, will allow a view of a nude figure but only if there is no body movement. Criticism was leveled by conservatives at the film "The Old Well" because of a steamy love scene between a married peasant and a former lover. The film, directed by one of the most innova-

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