



INTERVIEW

Orville Schell on China in the 1980s

The 1980s in China were an exciting, ephemeral period of opening. The Peking Hotel podcast talked to a veteran China watcher who lived, and recorded, what happened.

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HISTORY



This post is a collaboration with the Substack podcast and newsletter [Peking Hotel](#), hosted by Liu He (何流), which publishes bilingual oral histories of China experts around the world. Subscribe on your favorite podcast platform, including [Apple Podcasts](#) or [Spotify](#), or listen to selectively syndicated episodes here at China Books Review.

I sat on the train from Stanford to Berkeley, reading Orville Schell’s 1984 book [To Get Rich Is Glorious](#). Vivid details of China in the 1980s jumped out from the page. At a military shooting range, the People’s Liberation Army escorted European and American tourists to shoot rifles. In a dimly lit bar, men and women removed their Mao suits and danced disco arm-in-arm. Diagonally across from the Mausoleum of Mao Zedong on Tiananmen square, a KFC restaurant suddenly opened, presenting a rival to Maoism.

The 1980s in China seemed surreal, but this window of social and cultural opening did happen, somehow. China was trying to shake off its post-communist hangover, and a pent-up energy within the country exploded. After decades of Maoist socialism, China “switched on the left signal and turned right” (打左灯向右转) to move relentlessly in the opposite direction. The progress and contradictions of that era were recorded sharply by Schell in various articles and books.

I enjoy reading foreigners writing about China because of the fresh perspective that they bring from a different culture with its own sensitivities. Over the decades that he has engaged with the nation, Orville Schell has an extraordinary awareness of the changes that China has undergone. As an undergraduate, he studied Chinese history with John Fairbank, visited Taiwan and drank tea with Chiang Kai-shek. He first visited mainland China in 1974 with a special delegation under the auspices of Zhou Enlai. He observed China first-hand in the 1980s, as a writer for *The New Yorker* and *The New York Review of Books*, and helped to produce the 1995 documentary “[The Gate of Heavenly Peace](#)” about the 1989 Tiananmen protests. Later in his career, Schell served as dean of the School of Journalism at the University of California, Berkeley, and he is currently Director of the Center on U.S.-China Relations at Asia Society.



Orville Schell in his Berkeley home (Liu He)

The conversation below is an excerpt from a 14-hour oral history I did with Orville Schell about his life and career, over four sessions at his home in Berkeley. In this snippet, Schell talks about accompanying Deng Xiaoping’s trip to America in 1979, NBC’s interview with Zhao Ziyang in 1987, hosting Deng Xiaoping’s son Deng Pufang in California, and the Tiananmen square protests of 1989:




Guest



Orville Schell is the Arthur Ross Director of the [Center on U.S.-China Relations](#) at Asia Society, and co-publisher of the *China Books Review*. He is a former Professor and Dean at the University of California, Berkeley, and author of over ten books about China. He is a regular contributor to *The New York Review of Books*, *The New Yorker*, *Foreign Affairs* and other publications, and has traveled widely in China since the 1970s.

Recommended readings

- “[The Gate of Heavenly Peace](#),” Gordon & Hinton (1995, YouTube)
- [People or Monsters?](#), Liu Binyan, ed. Perry Link (1983, Indiana University Press)
- [Zhao Ziyang](#), Lu Yaogang (2019, INK)
- “[The Fifth Modernization](#),” Wei Jingsheng (1979, Wei Jingsheng Foundation)
- [To Get Rich is Glorious](#), Orville Schell (1984, Pantheon Books)
- “[The Death of Engagement](#) ,” Orville Schell (2020, *The Wire China*)

Transcript

Let’s pull ourselves back to Deng Xiaoping’s visit to America in 1979. You attended that trip as a journalist. Could you describe Deng’s trip for us?

That was an incredible moment. It happened because in 1972, Kissinger and Nixon went to China and signed an accord with Mao Zedong and Zhao Enlai that committed to normalizing relations. Formal diplomatic normalization didn’t happen until Jimmy Carter in 1979, with people like Michel Oksenberg in the National

Security Council, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and others.

They invited Deng Xiaoping to come, and I just happened to be writing for *The New York Times*. I could get into everything: the White House, the banquet, the whole thing in Washington. I went to Carter's home state, Atlanta, with Deng Xiaoping. Then we went to Texas, the Johnson Space Center, and down to this rodeo. So, I got to watch all of this.

The friendliness of the trip impressed me. Even though China had been 'Red China' and most of Washington despised the Communists, when Deng Xiaoping arrived, they just lost their minds. Overnight. Everybody wanted to go to the event and meet Deng Xiaoping, to the banquet and to the National Gallery. All the corporate leaders were gathered; everybody wanted to wear a Mao suit.

This was also the first time Chinese television had done anything live from another country. They covered the whole trip. They didn't know what they were doing so they had a lot of help from CBS and NBC and doing satellite links.

Was this CCTV?

Yeah. They had no experience doing something like this, but they did it. The TV networks created great camaraderie. This is the first time that anything related to China and the U.S. was broadcast live on TV in both countries. The Americans were really helping the Chinese. Obviously, Deng Xiaoping had given permission for collaboration, and his trip allowed the crews and the governments and everyone in China to like America.

It allowed America to see China in a friendly light, consorting with all these people in Washington. The rodeo and barbecue in Texas were the magical theatrical moment when Deng Xiaoping symbolically accepted America by wearing the cowboy hat, the ten-gallon hat.

And probably one of the greatest pieces of political theatricals in the 20th century.

I think so. I remember sitting there behind Deng Xiaoping and his team with a Chinese person beside me. Everyone was just laughing. It was very touching because, after being strangled for decades, these two countries were breathing together and enjoying each other a little bit, feeling hopeful and optimistic.

This is an attribute of the relationship that Xi Jinping strangled. He has no conception of how to do that. Why? Probably because, unlike Deng Xiaoping, he actually sees America as the enemy. I don't think Deng Xiaoping saw it that way. In fact, when Deng came, I remember he stopped in Paris for some croissants to be brought on the plane. There was something in him that was not ideological. I'm sure he's a good Leninist, but he wasn't insecure. He was five-foot-four high, was he? But he had an amazing air of sovereignty that radiated despite his diminutive stature. We have missed this in other leaders, Hu Jintao, and certainly in Xi Jinping, who, as far as I can see, must be deeply insecure and papers it all over with ceremony and ritual and bravado, trying to be a big shot. I don't think that was Deng Xiaoping's issue.

I remember he gave an interview with the Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci. It was a wonderful interview. You felt like you were talking to a human being. Yes, she was Italian, and we got him going. But those things aren't imaginable now.

How do you reconcile the seemingly contradicting facts that Deng Xiaoping was such a normal human being, yet he would later order a massacre? Isn't it scarier that a normal human being can simultaneously commit such brutality?

The massacre was just awful, one of the worst things in modern Chinese history. Deng Xiaoping was a man of confidence and sovereignty and not an insecure man. Deng seemed so deeply wounded and humiliated by what had happened in Tiananmen Square, his own sacred center of the center, and he couldn't control it. He had Gorbachev coming and couldn't have a proper ceremony in Tiananmen Square, but he had to greet him at the airport instead.

I think these things made Deng feel deeply rebuked, spurned, disesteemed and humiliated. The sign of that is in the transcripts of the meeting between Deng and Brent Scowcroft, Bush's national security advisor, a few days after the massacre when President Bush sent Scowcroft secretly to China. Even the ambassador in China didn't know about this trip.

He was blaming America every sentence of the way.

In every sentence, he was blaming Scowcroft. And Scowcroft was down on his knees begging, saying, please, please, please, you don't understand. President Bush thinks of you as his friend. He does not want this friendship with China to be broken even though a horrible thing happened. And Deng Xiaoping said it's your fault. You caused it. You're the one who should pay for it. You're the one who should make restitution, not me. It was a desperate display to this man who'd flown all the way over, pusillanimously and humiliatingly, to abjectly beg China to keep the relationship going. So you could see that even Deng, as strong as he was as a leader, was hurt, very human.

And a master at political manipulation.

Yes, he must have been.

He is a political veteran who rose three times and fell three times. In 1979, he came to America, begging the Americans to cooperate with the Chinese. Only in ten years, when the Chinese economy was still only a tenth of the American economy and after Deng ordered the massacre, Deng somehow got the Americans begging for forgiveness.

Well, god bless America for trying not to let everything crash and burn. I thought it was too excessive when I read that transcript. But that showed America was trying not to rupture the relationship with this other significant power. Rightfully or wrongfully, I see it more as a play where you must understand the characters. Deng was hurt deeply. Doesn't excuse it, but I understand it.

Nonetheless, after that, he went on his *nanxun* (南巡) down south, said reform had to go on, maybe not political reform, but did continue certain reforms. There followed a warmer period with Jiang Zemin. But some lessons had been learned about the extent of reform. History does change and has inflection points and no society is one thing constantly forever. But there is no society, in my view, in a big nation that's more unresolved than that of China.

Can you describe China in the 80s? What did the 80s mean for you?

What characterizes those years the best is the comparison between the 80s and the preceding decade, when Mao was still alive, and the Cultural Revolution continued until he died in 1976. Most of us in China during the Mao era thought: this is China. There was no suggestion of otherwise, although after the fact, you could see occasional hints popping up around the country, but they were very modest. There was no sign that within China lay the capacity for anything much different than what we'd experienced over the three decades of communism.

Then, things began to turn in 1977 and 1978. Mao died, Deng was re-elevated and cashiered, and Hua Guofeng was deputized to be the Party General Secretary. Zhou Enlai died, and Tiananmen Square was filled with hundreds of thousands of people as an expression of opposition to what had been happening. Then, the Gang of Four got arrested, and Deng Xiaoping came back at the end of 1978 and began to enunciate his reform and opening program. Everybody was wondering: what's going on here? Is this just more smoke and mirrors, or could something real happen?

In 1979, the Democracy Wall erupted. This unprepossessing wall around a municipal bus parking lot on Xidan and Avenue of Eternal Peace suddenly started being festooned with posters and statements. People started to have debates and talks, almost like an outdoor concert, a contemporary library.

The Democracy Wall Movement went on for weeks, but, ultimately, it was not the kind of thing that the Chinese Communist Party, the good Leninist Party, would embrace because it was too self-generating and spontaneous. So, people like Wei Jingsheng began attacking Deng, saying he wasn't a real reformer but just another dictator. Wei Jingsheng called for the 'fifth modernization' – democracy, which is an amazing thing he wrote. So began this very interesting decade from 1979 to 1989, when there were extraordinary things every year.

Only in retrospect could we see how experimental and open-minded Hu Yaobang was. He allowed things like village and local elections; people could actually run for lower-level positions. And in 1981, I spent six weeks in Tibet and couldn't believe what I saw. Everything used to be communized: all the nomads and their yak herds and sheep herds. All of this was falling apart. Hu Yaobang had basically pulled all of the Chinese cadres out of Tibet and said the Tibetans ought to manage themselves. He even let the Dalai Lama's brother and sister go back to Qinghai, where the Dalai Lama was born, outside of Xining, the capital of Qinghai. And, of course, they were mobbed by Tibetan Buddhist believers. The leadership absorbed that sort of thing.

In 1986, NBC took the whole network to Shanghai and Beijing: the Today Show, the Nightly News, and several other shows. It was like a country going to China. I knew Tom Brokaw, the anchorman at NBC. We were seeking an interview with Zhao Ziyang; he agreed to it. But Brokaw had just interviewed the Dalai Lama in India, which was a sensitive topic.

Zhao Ziyang said, well, I'll give an interview to Brokaw, but I want to see what he did with the Dalai Lama. So Brokaw gave the tape to Zhao Ziyang. He watched it, said OK, then sat down with Brokaw for two hours. I remember vividly he sat beside Brokaw at a table, drinking beer and talking to Tom Brokaw like a normal human being about everything under the sun, smiling, laughing.

At one point, the subject of Fang Lizhi came up. Fang Lizhi was my good friend and had just been kicked out of the Party. He had been vice-chancellor of the University of Science and Technology. And so Brokaw challenged Zhao Ziyang, saying, "That's a bad example of you persecuting intellectuals that disagree with you". To my astonishment, Zhao Ziyang said that some of Fang Lizhi's activities did not bespeak him as a disciplined, loyal party member so he was expelled from the Party, but nothing else would happen to him. That

was a pretty moderate response. You don't want to play in our party, you're out, but we are not going to put you in jail. They took his vice chancellorship away but gave him a place in Beijing and employed him in some other institute.

He could still interact with people and go abroad. As he went around Europe, he was writing in a very humanistic way, looking at art, at how the Italians had preserved buildings instead of just destroying the old. There were short reflective ruminations China had not had by a man who was not only smart but a rationalist, empiricist, and scientist. He had very interesting and bold views. He said communism was like an old, worn-out dress that you had to take off and get rid of. This was hard for the Party to take, but they did.

So that decade instilled hopefulness in people and gave birth to the idea of flexible authoritarianism, that China was loosening up, and it was going to pull the Party back from controlling everything in the life of the Chinese people.

And then, private industries began to spring up. There was nothing in the street when I was first there in the 70s; you could hardly buy anything anywhere. And then suddenly, everybody poured into the streets selling everything: clothes, CDs, Chinese medicine. You could get your shoes shined and watches fixed. All the 'educated youth' and older people educated at May 7th Cadre Schools nationwide were let go. They were pouring back into the cities but had no jobs. Official *danweis* couldn't hire them. These people were called 'Dai Ye', 'waiting for work', instead of unemployed because it would look bad.

And for the countryside, I've never seen anything like it. Suddenly, there were markets twice a week in a village or a country town. You're driving through the countryside and running into these private markets full of people bartering, haggling. Peasants from all around would come in with donkey carts, selling cabbages, tools, whatever they had to sell. Almost just like that, China saw a spontaneous eruption of private, very small-scale entrepreneurship. No matter where you looked, the country was coming alive again in a more open, free-spirited, entrepreneurial, market-based way.

Foreign journalists were let in for the first time in 1979. All of the major media sent one or two people. Suddenly, Beijing had 30 foreign journalists who had never been there before. And they, too, could see these things manifesting. They didn't need to talk to anybody or have secret documents. They didn't need to do anything but just look.

I was still writing for The New Yorker then. I wrote this whole series about what I saw, which later came out as a book, 'To Get Rich is Glorious' because that was the slogan. It struck me as the most incongruous slogan after Mao's slogans about destroying markets and foreign intervention.

And the previous slogan was 'labour was glorious'. Now, being a capitalist was glorious.

Deng Xiaoping said it's OK for some people to get rich first. When we look back at this period, some people say, well, China was still run by Leninists, and the Party was still in control. It was epiphenomenal on the surface but nothing really had changed. Fair enough. But something had changed. And the Party understood it. They could see, my God, what have we unleashed here? If this goes too far, we're going to get overturned. There's a constant struggle between these forces: the conservative, old malice, the Leninists, and the people who wanted to start private businesses and build houses.

So, it was very exciting to be there, to watch it, and to see the optimism. It wasn't just Chinese intellectuals and professionals. You have to remember that these reforms started in the countryside. The first thing they did was dismantle the *renmin gongshe*, the People's Communes. That seemed like the Forbidden City that was going to last forever. That was Mao's keystone reorganizational offering to China. It was unthinkable before. Suddenly, people from the New York Stock Exchange, banks, credit card companies, and investors started trooping in the 1980s. And Deng Xiaoping and his gang said, well, let's get together.

I remember Deng Pufang – Deng Xiaoping's son – was coming to America. The Rockefeller Foundation sponsored his trip, or maybe it was the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations. They wanted to bring Deng Pufang to the countryside in America. I said, well, come to our ranch, and we could go to the little country school. So out comes Deng Pufang in a giant Cadillac limousine with highway patrol blazing sirens behind him.

We visited this little school my son went to in West Marin, then to our ranch, and had a barbecue on the porch. We had a nice barbecue, and of course, he wanted hot sauce, I guess because he was from Sichuan. It was very nice. He was on our deck looking out over the Pacific Ocean in his wheelchair.

That kind of interaction is unthinkable now. It was all organized not by the government – the Chinese government obviously was involved – but by foundations and civil society, an emblem of the openness and interaction that went on. It was very hopeful, particularly for Westerners but perhaps also for the Chinese, who had the fundamental notion of Marxism based on Hegelian dialectics of history moving in a certain direction. In Marx's case, it was towards revolution, socialism and paradise. The Western version was that, as Martin Luther King said, the arc of history bends towards justice. It was a simple notion. Hegel's teleology was a history progressing towards greater openness and a higher stage of human activity.

Perhaps also in the spirit of Francis Fukuyama, who argued for the end of history.

Very much. He came up with the end of history, which had a direction. And this demonstrated to us that even China was now being influenced by it. And so we may all be forgiven for having an excess of hopefulness and optimism. I still wrote repeatedly about the regressive tendencies I saw, wondering just how far it could go, whether China could progress to the point where the Party might become not a one-party state but something else.

There’s much more to be said about the 1980s. The publishing industry exploded, with all kinds of book translations from abroad. You could write almost anything. Private companies started publishing, not just state-owned ones. Magazines, newspapers, all sorts of things started that were previously unthinkable.

This all culminated when Hu Yaobang, whom people had appreciated as being quite open, got kicked out. Nobody could do anything about it because there was no easy way to protest. But when he died, in classic Chinese tradition, people poured out to memorialize and celebrate his life. People flooded into Tiananmen Square.

1989 was so strange for me because, coincidentally, Baifang and I had organized a trip with Chen Kaige and Hong Huang, who were married then, and Geremie Barme from Australia. We were so taken by the openness of everything, we got some money from the Rockefeller family to have a conference of Chinese artists, intellectuals and filmmakers right by our ranch out in West Marin, at this wonderful little conference center sitting on the cliff looking out over the ocean. We invited 20 people from China and had about an equal number from America. We had Mike Oksenberg, Andy Nathan, Perry Link, Tom Gold from Berkeley. Peter Tarnoff came with the Council on Foreign Relations and was sponsored by the New York Review of Books. Liu Binyan was there, and so were Su Xiaokang, Beidao, Wang Ruoshui, and Wu Tianming. At that very time, Hu Yaobang had died, and people had started to go into Tiananmen Square.

I held the gathering as I thought of the May 4th Movement when these interesting people came out. I thought maybe the 80s were like that. Let’s get these people together and see what they thought, sitting on a cliff in Northern California. Liu Xiaobo was going to come. He was at Columbia University and on his way here, but he then decided to return to Beijing.

So there we were, and things were breaking loose in Beijing. We were getting calls at night from Fang Lizhi about what was happening, and we were all sitting there, listening. This was in April. When it was over, everybody jumped on a plane to Beijing. We spent the whole time there. It was one of the most profound historical experiences I have ever had a chance to watch and participate in. Every day, something happened, it is like a television series. To make matters worse for the Party, Gorbachev was coming, so the Chinese Communist Party had invited every media outlet in the world to cover Gorbachev and Deng Xiaoping kissing, making up, and saying all was forgiven on the side of the Soviet dispute, so let’s be friends.

So they had a terrible dilemma. All these journalists arrived daily, and the Party had mayhem in the square. The square turned into a soundstage—the worst possible nightmare for the Party.

It wasn’t just any square. It was *the* square, at the very heart of the Republic.

The center of the center of the center, the biggest square in the world with the Great Hall of the People, Zhongnanhai, Forbidden City, the Museum of History, Mao’s mausoleum. Mao’s portrait was there, which was splattered with ink at one point and was considered an incredible insult.

Every day, we’d get up and go down. And oh my god, it was just extraordinary to watch that unfold. Different people poured in: first, students and professionals. And then came the workers. And then came people on the trains from all over China. And it ended, of course, very sadly. Before it ended, Zhao Ziyang appeared in a bus with Wen Jiabao, lamenting that the Party had come too late. He had been in North Korea for a while, so he wasn’t there when big decisions were made. That was a fatal error and the last we saw of him. ■



Liu He (何流) is a visiting scholar at Hoover Institution, Stanford University, where he conducts research on the oral history of China experts in America. He has spent most of his career in Chinese civil society, where he has worked on various rural development and global health projects. He holds an MA from Tsinghua University, as a Schwarzman Scholar, and a BA in Philosophy, Politics and Economics from the University of Oxford.