CHAPTER EIGHT

THE FINALE OF THE CAMPAIGN

In the preceding chapters, this book has examined the strategic activism of the campaign for protection and permanent residency in Australia that was waged by 45,000 or so Chinese nationals, mostly students, in the late 1980s and early 1990s in the wake of June 4. The activist strategies and the skilful approaches of the Chinese students in their campaign to stay permanently in Australia constitute an unusually clear case to illustrate the political skills and approaches of the generations who were teenagers and young adults in the turbulent years of the Cultural Revolution of the late 1960s and 1970s and who are now leaders in China.

As introduced in Chapter One, no sufficient research work has focused on Chinese activism, and general awareness of Chinese activism is still under the influence of various shallow, oversimplified, and fractured views of the attitudes, behaviors, common practices and activism of Chinese people. Both the modern and the early contemporary periods of Chinese history have somehow given many people an impression of Chinese culture, society and its people that is at odds with the facts. The generalizations that have been repeated have made it seem to many readers, especially to outsiders, that the Chinese are often timid, introverted, reserved, inactive, and obedient. On the other hand, the Chinese people as a whole have been found to often opt for various radical or even revolutionary alternatives, such as the May Fourth Movement in the early part of the twentieth century or the Cultural Revolution in the late part. These oversimplified reviews have been reinforced by an incessant internal debate—within China for the last hundred or so years—over the causes of China’s backwardness (Schwarcz, 1985; White, 1999), and particularly by a cultural or national nihilism caused by the debate (Barmé, 2000; He and Guo, 2000). An overemphasis on the authoritarianism in Chinese political culture and the totalitarianism in its sociopolitical system has further biased the general understanding of the Chinese culture, people and their behaviors, making it fairly shallow, narrow and one-sided. For that reason, it has long been a problem in the field of contemporary China studies that scholars have somehow ignored not only sociopolitical dynamics among ordinary Chinese, but also underlying sociopolitical processes driven by many different types of Chinese activism.
Earlier instances of Chinese activism tended to be closely related with nationalist-inflected radical or revolutionary activism, the most iconic case being the May Fourth Movement in 1919. Many still remember what happened in China when it was profoundly disturbed by Maoist activism first and then by anti-Maoist sentiment (Domes and Myers, 1995; Boren, 2001). The Chinese student campaign in Australia had rather a different nature. Oriented toward the prospect of permanent residency in Australia rather than toward any idealistic goals of ‘saving the nation’ as put forward during the May Fourth Movement (Schwarcz, 1985: 170) or of ‘building socialism and achieving communism’ as was used in post-1949 China (Joseph, 2010: 156), this particular campaign was waged tactically in response to, and by means of, the new social, cultural and political environment of Australia in which the students found themselves.

It has to be acknowledged that activism of various kinds within China has lately attracted some scholarly attention. Internet activism (Tai, 2006; Yang, 2009; Shen and Breslin, 2010), labor activism (Zhang and Smith, 2009; Lee, 2010), consumer activism (Hooper, 2000; Davis, 2006; Wang, 2008), environmental activism (Ho and Edmonds, 2007; Xie, 2009), grassroots economic activism of various kinds (Zhou, 2009; Li, 2010; Lee and Hsing, 2010) have all been important foci of recent research. Activism in the defence of human rights has, in particular, attracted a great deal of public attention for decades (Copper and Lee, 1997; Goldman, 2005; Ching, 2008). All these new studies have brought with them an emphasis on the people-focused, grass-roots nature of these political activities. My study, with its concentration on the efforts of Chinese students abroad seeking to pursue a common goal, may be seen as part of this tendency. It shows the Chinese students actively pursuing the chance to gain permanent residency in Australia in an organized and strategic way, by drawing on a coherent and self-conscious cultural-political identity not only as Chinese nationals, but also as asylum seekers who faced the possibility or likelihood of political ‘persecution’ in China.

This final chapter recapitulates the main arguments and points the way for further research. It begins with a brief account of the Australian government’s ‘1 November [1993] decisions,’ which finally allowed all the PRC students to stay in Australia permanently—the largest intake of onshore asylum seekers in Australian history. It then summarizes the key features of the strategic identity formation process among these students. The final section touches on broader theoretical and policy implications and directions for further study.