“Hundred Flowers” is a slogan that elicits complex memories in China’s cultural politics. It identifies a 1956–57 political campaign in which Mao Zedong urged intellectuals to criticize the shortcomings of the ruling Communist Party. More broadly, it refers to recurring moments of political tolerance in the People’s Republic. The Maoist slogan for the campaign was baihua qifang, baijia zhengming 百花齐放, 百家争鸣: “Let a hundred flowers blossom, let a hundred schools of thought contend.” The open-minded spirit of the Hundred Flowers Campaign is, however, forever bound up with its opposite: the repression of intellectuals in the Antirightist Campaign that followed. These linked trends of relaxation and restriction have dominated Chinese cultural life for half a century.

We can see the competing and ultimately contradictory meanings attached to the “Hundred Flowers.” Full of confidence from his successes at socializing the economy, Mao pressed hard for a new accommodation with China’s intellectuals. While many intellectuals took the campaign as a signal of the revolution’s conclusion, party leaders instead regarded it as a shift in political tactics. When the debates elicited during the Hundred Flowers showed Mao that he had overestimated the party’s popularity, he and other party leaders reacted harshly in a bitter Antirightist Campaign, consolidating control over Chinese culture and postponing for decades serious thought of an end to the revolution. When such ideas of tolerance and openness returned in a later period, the Hundred Flowers once more served as their vehicle.

The 1956–57 Hundred Flowers Campaign

1956 was the seventh year of the People’s Republic of China. The new government of the Communist Party had enjoyed some remarkable successes. The economy had been brought under state control in a series
of campaigns to reorganize industry, agriculture, and commerce. This “socialist transformation” accompanied new achievements in health care, education, and the status of women. The Communist Party still faced a hostile Guomindang government lurking in its Taiwan refuge, but had fought the United States to a standstill in the Korean War and was increasing its influence among an emerging “third world” of countries newly independent from colonialism.

Mao Zedong was optimistic, and led the party in judging that the big struggles of the revolution were a thing of the past, that China needed to focus on economic development, and that the official discourse of large-scale class struggle had become outmoded. In this spirit, Mao spoke frequently to groups of intellectuals, invoking the Hundred Flowers slogan to signal that the party should lighten its touch in cultural affairs.

Mao pushed these ideas more systematically in a speech on February 27, 1957 to an audience of nearly 2,000 leaders from the ruling Communist Party and its junior partners, the so-called “democratic” parties of bourgeois intellectuals who had supported the revolution. Mao proclaimed that it was time to put aside the class struggles that had rocked recent decades. China’s remaining social divisions were to be seen as “nonantagonistic contradictions” among the people, instead of “antagonistic contradictions” between the people (workers, peasants, and soldiers) and their class enemy. Mao’s “Hundred Flowers” phrase evoked thoughts of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (in the eighth through third centuries B.C.E.). This was before the ascendency of Confucian intellectual hegemony, and Mao knew that his audience would draw a parallel to recent Communist hegemony, which he seemed to be putting aside.

Mao had multiple and interrelated motives. One was to enliven China’s cultural scene, which was stodgy, cautious, and still stuck in a revolutionary model that had helped mobilize peasant armies to overthrow the Guomindang, but did not speak to the mood and needs of the urban population. Seven years after the revolution, cultural life was still most heavily influenced by veterans of the party’s Yan’an

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