Since the 1980s, three different realms of cultural power have formed within the Chinese intellectual community: an elite theoretical realm focused on reformation of the national consciousness, a specialist academic realm based on modern academic and intellectual divisions of labor, and a realm of public ideas operating across academic boundaries in the public domain. These three networks of cultural space infiltrate each other and yet exist separately, all with their own regulations. Generally speaking they are, respectively, the research subjects of political history, academic history, and the history of ideas. As a study in the history of ideas, we will primarily concern ourselves with the great public ideological debate of the 1990s, and through this examine the overall state of China’s public intellectuals and public ideological circles in the nineties. Research into contemporary Chinese ideological culture is a current focus of both domestic and foreign intellectual circles. The ideological culture of this period can be investigated through ideological trends or approached through the study of historical figures, yet in order to untangle the complex relationships of ideas and divisions within this culture, it is necessary to begin our investigation from the series of great debates that occurred in the ideological culture world of the 1990s.

The nineties was an era of reconfiguration for the world of Chinese ideological culture. In the New Enlightenment movement (新启蒙运动) of the eighties, Chinese intellectuals had formed a common enlightenment camp around their “unity of attitude” with regard to views on culture and reform. However, in the nineties a severe split occurred within this group. The intellectuals began by searching for common ground around the great central problem of Chinese modernity and reformation. This triggered a series of debates which led to deep differences in thought, knowledge, and personal relationships, and consequently shaped the divergent factions and value orientations of the contemporary Chinese ideological world. The most important difference between the world of Chinese ideological culture in the eighties
Chinese intellectuals of the eighties had a relatively limited understanding of Western and Chinese cultures and although each had his own opinion, their knowledge structures and ideological trends were nearly identical. However, in the nineties, a great division occurred in the intellectual community. On one hand, this division was due to a series of profound changes that occurred in China during that decade, and was a hallmark of the arduous and agonizing historical change and social transformation experienced by contemporary China. Moreover, this division provided ample historical possibility and a substantial empirical foundation for the breakthrough development of academic ideas. On the other hand, when confronted with acute societal change, the Chinese intellectual community strove to come up with new explanations based on theory, and from this emerged an unprecedented drive to engage in positive dialogue with reality. However due to differences in intellectual background, problem consciousness, working hypotheses, field of vision, and methods, different thinkers often arrived at disparate or even antithetical conclusions regarding the same phenomenon, thus instigating head-on collisions between different discourses and shaping a series of debates on ideological culture of great influence in both Chinese and foreign academic circles. Due to these debates, the division of thought within the Chinese intellectual community was nearly complete by the end of the 1990s. In merely 10 years, the public arena was once again feudalized and compartmentalized; a united public ideological world no longer existed.

I. The Enlightenment Split of the 1990s

During the 1980s, Chinese intellectuals implemented the New Enlightenment movement. In the early nineties the intellectuals began spiritual and intellectual introspection, which was actually an inevitable result of the New Enlightenment movement. This reflection led to the manifestation of latent differences within the New Enlightenment movement, and from this point onward the division of the ideological world was inevitable.

On the other hand, in the wake of the stabilization of the new socio-political arrangement in the nineties, the post-1992 acceleration of economic reforms and full introduction of market society to China