Mainstream society has seemingly reached a common understanding regarding the causes of the Cultural Revolution. Some people mention China’s tradition of autocracy; others mention the influence of Stalinism and trace the Cultural Revolution back to the achievements and failures of the Russian and French revolutions. However, most people do not have the patience to bother with these explanations and instead simply attribute the Cultural Revolution to a “power struggle” or “nationwide madness.” Here, let us set aside this issue and ask a different question: why did the Cultural Revolution end?

As we have reflected upon the beginnings of the Cultural Revolution, we cannot avoid its conclusion. As there are reasons for the birth of the Cultural Revolution, so must there be reasons for its end. As certain Western scholars have noted, tyrannical governments never exit the historical stage of their own accord, rather, they must be forcefully removed—this is the logic behind the present Iraq War initiated by the United States and United Kingdom. However, the Cultural Revolution, usually considered an example of tyranny, seems to exist outside of this logic. It was not ended by widespread revolt, as was the Qing dynasty, nor was it ended by the occupation of foreign armies, as was the Japanese government in World War Two. The Gang of Four was crushed basically without bloodshed, and the entire conclusion of Cultural Revolution was relatively peaceful. The third plenary meeting of the 11th Central Committee of the CCP, which marked the end of Cultural Revolution, completed the transfer of power in merely one or two sessions, relying only on a debate regarding “standards of truth.” The transition went smoothly. In other words, the Cultural Revolution was ended through low-cost self-renewal and crisis dissolution.

What caused this? If we say that the Cultural Revolution was a “power struggle” and “nationwide madness,” then why did these end at that specific moment? If autocracy or Stalinism led to the Cultural Revolution, then why did these cease functioning at that moment? What force overcame these things, and how?
Changes in the course of history arise when the conditions of society are ripe for them. The function of the individual is certainly important to the course of history, yet in a large country, this function is necessarily relatively minor. Political paths are also certainly important to the course of history, but often they require additional related basic prearrangements, and sometimes are even contingent upon some certain quiet reform of production technology. For example, without the construction of the systematic layout of “large-scale” and “small-scale” fertilizer factories in the early 1970s, without the construction of nationwide field irrigation symbolized by the “Red Flag Canal,” and without the research into and promulgation of improved crops such as hybrid rice, then even the later family-unit contract production system would have been unable to produce enough agricultural products. Consequently, the successive retirement of meat, cloth, and grain ration coupons, the later rapid increase in China’s urban population, and the rise of its market economy, would have been difficult to imagine. Thus we must not overlook these important events.

However, let us speak here only of two points relating to thought and politics.

I. The Birth of a New Thought Trend

The countrywide tide of dissent in 1976 represented by the April 5 Tiananmen Incident did not unexpectedly fall from the heavens, rather it was the culmination of the people’s will and showed that the Cultural Revolution had reached its end. Before this, in 1973 Li Yizhe published a report in Guangzhou espousing democracy, and in 1974 Zhang Tianmin and others brought complaints against the government regarding the movie Chuangye (创业), directly accusing it of cultural autocracy. These kinds of dissent had already grown common inside and outside of the system. Materials released in the last few years reveal that at the time, many different groups active all around the country were considering unorthodox ideas. For instance, in Beijing Guo Lusheng (pseudonym “index finger” 食指) and others began a literary group (see Duoduo’s writings). In Shanghai (see Song Yongyi’s writings), Hubei (see Wang Shaoguang’s writings), Hebei (see Zhu Xueqin’s writings), Sichuan (see Xu Youyu’s writings), Guizhou (see Qian Liqun’s writings), and other places, many underground “small reading groups” engaged in critical reflection on politics and