

## Editor's Introduction

# Timothy Cheek's *The Intellectual in Modern Chinese History*: Public-Mindedness and the Project of Cross-Cultural Conversation

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This roundtable review of Timothy Cheek's *The Intellectual in Modern Chinese History* signals another important discussion within the field of PRC history, one which examines the public role of the intellectual and power of ideas in society. Each of the reviews argues for the book's significance as a major contribution to modern Chinese history and contemporary Chinese studies. In addition, reviewers raise challenging queries that, if pursued further, are likely to shape future research on China's intellectual history and cultural vicissitudes for some time to come. Who is an intellectual? What are the structures and institutions from which ideational power flows? How are they transformed? Cheek's self-reflective and generous response to these lines of historiographic interrogation illustrates the fluidity with which a deeply-read scholar is able to think beyond the parameters of their own published *oeuvre*. Expanding on Cheek's sense of public-minded intellectual work (including history) as project, this introduction also briefly explores the book's link to another important resource of which PRC historians and other audiences will want to be aware, the *Reading the China Dream* translation website.

The first contribution to this roundtable, by Sebastian Veg, doubles as an excellent introduction to the book's organization and analytic approach. Veg draws out several of the main assumptions which underpin Cheek's study: that ideas matter and serve as intellectual software for the state; that social worlds of intellectual life are characterized by specific configurations of culture, public sphere, and institutional roles; that enduring ideas (in Cheek's narrative, "the people," "Chineseness," and "democracy") "reappear from one era ... to the other"; and that notable shifts in the content of these ideas and their contexts provide important markers according to which intellectual historians periodize time. Accordingly, Veg highlights how the chapters of *The Intellectual in Modern Chinese History* each address the impact of ideological moments, world of intellectual life, and enduring ideas on China's intellectual history, in particular the ability (or inability) of intellectuals and their various sub-groupings to participate meaningfully in public debate. The book concludes with Cheek's argument that, above all, public intellectuals throughout China's modern history have been engaged with the project of nationalism, and this concern has been manifested through successive intellectual movements (Cheek's "three 'keys'") of reform, revolution, and rejuvenation.

These are expansive claims, and even a competent assessment of their validity would require deep immersion in the history and historiography of Chinese thought. For this reason, the next two reviews are delivered by scholars whose own work has been distinguished by sustained engagement with intellectual perspectives on China's politics, state-society relations, and concepts of nationhood. Peter Zarrow praises the

book's "good historical writing" and reiterates his assessment in *The China Quarterly* that, as a history of China's intellectuals from 1895 to the present day, it is "virtually flawless." Zarrow further distinguishes between the book's achievements as an intellectual history—"a history of ideas, debates, ideologies"—and as a social history of "how intellectuals work." This latter history includes Cheek's useful account of the transition from print capitalism to the propaganda state and now the directed public sphere, and is infused with a spirit of "favorable judgment" reflecting Cheek's appreciation for intellectual idealism and commitment to fairness, justice, and truth. Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, in a review essay that is also a significant historiographical contribution in its own right, situates *The Intellectual in Modern Chinese History* within two intertwined contexts: the global context of modern Chinese intellectual history, and the more Western scholarly context of understanding and explaining a China "in the process of being re-integrated into the world" which shaped the generation to which Cheek belongs. Accordingly, Weigelin-Schwiedrzik affirms the book's strengths as an analytical historical synthesis while also praising its author's "daring," "courageous," and "intimate" approach to the study of specific intellectuals and intellectual debates. Weigelin-Schwiedrzik also endorses Cheek's "optimistic view" concerning the future of collaboration between Chinese and non-Chinese intellectuals, though also suggesting that, should the rise of the PRC continue, this process may result in the marginalization of Western views.

The question of intellectual trajectories looms large in two thoughtful and provocative reviews from Aminda Smith and Timothy Weston. In Smith's assessment, one of the defining features of Cheek's scholarship, here crystallized in *The Intellectual in Modern Chinese History*, has been the fidelity with which it has related the relationship between intellectuals and political movements—in particular, the motivations resulting in commitment to the cause of Chinese Communism, as exemplified by Communist Party propagandist Deng Tuo. Focusing on Maoism's promise as an "epistemology" and source of "revolutionary knowledge," Smith demonstrates how the Deng Tuo of Cheek's earlier work imparts to readers an important lesson concerning how intellectuals were inspired by the Maoist concept of the Mass Line. However, in *The Intellectual in Modern Chinese History* Cheek's view of Deng has shifted somewhat, emphasizing instead Deng's blinkered loyalty to the Mao-led Communist revolution, rather than sincere pursuit of the possibilities inherent in populist revolutionary thought, as the main reason why Deng and other establishment intellectuals remained "committed to the Mass Line," and thus to Maoism, during and after the carnage of the Great Leap Forward. Timothy Weston's closing review, a careful excavation of the intellectual underpinnings of Cheek's

own scholarly training and intellectual *milieu*, provides one possible explanation for this seeming incongruity. Beginning by noting the breadth, originality, and historiographical grandeur of *The Intellectual in Modern Chinese History*, Weston goes on to show how Cheek's choice of intellectuals reflects earlier Western scholarly traditions of privileging public-minded oppositional intellectuals as commentators on the political events of the Mao years. The review also draws out the political limits placed on intellectual activity even in post-Mao China, as described in Cheek's concept of the "directed public sphere." Finally, Weston, raises several intriguing observations concerning the interpretive tension raised when narrowing the fullness of intellectual agency to fit academic frames in which modern Chinese intellectuals are exhibited only as embodiments of grand *problématiques*, ideological moments, historically specific institutional settings, and the consensus of historians themselves. In a moment when dominant assessments of the Great Leap Forward era and aftermath are perhaps best summarized by the phrase "China's most devastating catastrophe," how can Cheek and other contemporary historians convincingly recapture the sense of idealism and "Maoist consciousness" (per Smith) which more establishment-oriented intellectuals like Deng Tuo demonstrably experienced?<sup>1</sup>

As these two reviews suggest, *The Intellectual in Modern Chinese History* is not without the analytic dilemmas and lacunae that inevitably appear in any major synthetic work. The reviewers thus also fulfill their responsibility to raise criticism, which tends to draw toward one or the other of two main camps. The first could be called the "representativeness" camp. Here Weigelin-Schwiedrzik raises important questions concerning whether Cheek's three "enduring themes" of people, Chineseness, and democracy have not underrepresented the centrality of the state in intellectual thought, while at the same, overrepresenting democracy. (As she notes, even among the intellectuals Cheek discusses in detail, "the number of intellectuals who put democracy at the center of their ideas is small.") By contrast, women and thinking about women and gender are underrepresented. Sebastian Veg, Aminda Smith, and Timothy Weston all also ask whether Cheek's overarching category of public-minded intellectuals can accommodate all of those individuals and social groups, both known and unknown, who are involved in knowledge production within Chinese society. Their queries about "who is an 'intellectual'" fall into the representativeness camp as well. The other critical camp is, perhaps less obviously, the "causality" camp. What historical forces drive intellectuals to behave and think as they do? Peter Zarrow, by creatively engaging with the historical periodization of Cheek's narrative, wonders rhetorically whether the main theme of *The Intellectual in Modern Chinese History* isn't ultimately revolution, before finding intriguing evidence that liberalism, socialism, and rationalization might also be part of the story. Weston also wonders what, in the end, Cheek is trying to tell us about public-minded intellectuals. That they are bellwethers for larger social forces? That they are only significant insofar as their ideas seem to stand in for the *zeitgeist* of a particular political era? And, if so, what is the significance of these intellectuals for rethinking China's past, present, and future when, as Weigelin-Schwiedrzik reminds us, "If the biggest challenge ... is the fact that the state is now everywhere in China and therefore no room is left for intellectuals to retreat from the state, the biggest challenge for those intellectuals

interested in China who are not citizens of the PRC will be how to deal with the fact that China is everywhere."

*The Intellectual in Modern Chinese History* inevitably has more to say about how intellectuals might "serve the people" by promoting understanding within their own societies than it does concerning the future of China's relations with the world. Timothy Cheek's further engagement with the question of intellectual responsibility—the final essay written for this roundtable—focuses accordingly on exploring the motifs of history as a conversation and ongoing scholarly project, which together create an ever-widening interpretive community through publication, critique, and collaborative reflection. The equanimity and sophistication of Cheek's response to his reviewers demands that it be read in its entirety, rather than summarized here. By way of a conclusion to this introduction, then, it instead seems worthwhile to expand a bit more on *The Intellectual in Modern Chinese History* as part of a larger endeavor and, ultimately, what we can infer about that endeavor's future direction and scope. As Cheek tells readers in the "Preface," "This history reflects a serious project: to move from working on China to working with Chinese" (xv). He describes the global world of ideas as entering into a "new ideological moment" that is no longer West-centered but instead "multimodal" (xvi). This is a world in which, as members of an increasingly multi-polar international system, and public sphere, "we need sound information about each other, where we have come from and what is on our minds." What is on the author's mind seems to be shifting balances of power, specifically between China and the West. As China becomes a more influential country globally, the characteristics of its policymaking process, its state-society relations, and the ideas that animate its citizens will have that much more impact on other peoples. There is, of course, a potentially productive ambiguity in the use of "Chinese" here. How far do the ideas described in *The Intellectual in Modern Chinese History* travel beyond the People's Republic of China, or within the multi-ethnic society of that state? To what degree do intellectuals who are subjects of the PRC interact with non-PRC intellectuals who might also describe themselves as Chinese?<sup>2</sup> Finally, what of the notion of "Chinese" itself as a kind of transnational ideological project, as embedded in the notion of other national subjects of Chinese descent as "overseas" Chinese?<sup>3</sup>

One good example of the kind of richly collaborative project Cheek describes, which he has launched together with David Ownby (Université de Montréal), Joshua Fogel (York University), and a team of outstanding academic scholar-translators, is the *Reading the China Dream* website—a content-rich platform for translation of texts written by Chinese intellectuals, primarily those from the establishment.<sup>4</sup> This ambitious endeavor builds on the approach taken in *The Intellectual in Modern Chinese History* by mapping contemporary Chinese public intellectuals into groups (Liberals, New Left, New Confucians) using nomenclature used by these intellectuals themselves. Furthermore, and with direct relevance to the questions concerning "Chinese" identity and its meanings posed above, it provides readers with transcripts of conference discussions involving mainland and diasporic New Confucians, providing rare insight into an important transnational debate with implications for how the history of China's modern past, and the ideology of its political future, are being re-written.<sup>5</sup> Like *The Intellectual in Modern Chinese History*, *Reading the China Dream* exhibits lively fascination

with community, conversations, and above all the potential of thought as a social force. For historians of China after 1949, both resources will serve as enduring models of scholarship on ideological movements and lived experience.

The unique significance of Cheek's *The Intellectual in Modern Chinese History*, however, lies in the deftness with which it draws together studies from across a "balkanized" territory of research on Chinese intellectuals produced after the 1970s (24), and does so within a rigorous analytic framework that reflects a "professional lifetime" (xviii) of writing and thinking at the forefront of a dynamic and increasingly multipolar Chinese studies field. That Cheek is able to accomplish all of this with narrative conviction and a generous spirit of engagement says a great deal about how deeply the intellectual map and method proposed in *The Intellectual in Modern Chinese History* are ingrained in the thought of its author. It is intriguing to contemplate what new research

<sup>1</sup> This phrase is drawn from the subtitle of perhaps the best-known Western study on the subject. See Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958–62* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010). As evidence of similar assessments drawn by Chinese researchers, see Yang Jisheng 杨继绳, *Mubei: Zhongguo liushi niandai da jihuang jishi* 墓碑 -- 中國六十年代大饑荒紀實 [Tombstone: A chronicle of the Great Famine in China in the 1960s] (Hong Kong: Tiandi tushu, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> For one important example of how intellectual and political developments in China have been impacted by external models framed in terms of Confucianism and Asian values (underpinned by claims to shared ethno-cultural identity), see Stephan Ortmann and Mark R. Thompson, "Introduction: The 'Singapore Model' and China's Neo-Authoritarian Dream," *The China Quarterly* (2018), <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/china-quarterly/article/introduction-the-singapore-model-and-chinas->

agendas might be driven forward by Cheek's historiographical lenses of ideological moments, worlds of intellectual life, and enduring ideas. Perhaps more intriguing, at least from the perspective of the reviews and response gathered in this roundtable issue, is to begin looking past familiar keywords, personalities, categories, and events, and into what Cheek calls in his response (recalling Benjamin Schwartz), "emerging or minor streams of contrary concerns and questions, [which] quite often presage the next turn of preoccupying questions." Taking off from the metaphor of conversation which emerges at key points in Cheek's writing, *The Intellectual in Modern Chinese History* is a book which serves as elegant testimony to the importance of scholars across the human sciences knowing not just how to narrate and analyze, but also how to listen.

[neoauthoritarian-dream/2ED7A22E42E1D9E2CA3A116047C8D58D](https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/china-quarterly/article/introduction-the-singapore-model-and-chinas-)

<sup>3</sup> See Frank Ching, "Who is a Chinese?," lecture (abridged transcript), Peking University, July 24, 2013. Posted to *Big Think*, January 22, 2014, <https://bigthink.com/dragons-and-pandas/who-is-a-chinese>.

<sup>4</sup> *Reading the China Dream*, <https://www.readingthechinadream.com/>. On the concept of "establishment intellectuals," see Timothy Cheek and Carol Lee Hamrin, eds., *China's Establishment Intellectuals* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> For an example of the Mainland New Confucian position delivered by a leading figure within that intellectual movement, see Chen Ming 陈明, "Transcend Left and Right" (March 17, 2015), ed. and trans. David Ownby, *Reading the China Dream*, September 14, 2018, <https://www.readingthechinadream.com/chen-ming-transcend-left-and-right.html>.