

Reform, Revolution, Rejuvenation: An Intellectual History in Three Keys

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Timothy Cheek's new study of Chinese intellectuals in the twentieth century represents an important contribution to the field of intellectual studies and covers considerable new ground in terms of chronological scope and methodology. It represents both a synthesis of Cheek's important previous works on "establishment intellectuals," Deng Tuo, and Maoism, and explores new approaches in terms of ideologies, institutions and public spheres.¹ Its chronology is also unique, in that the volume covers the period from the late Qing to the Xi Jinping era in six chapters, each covering a twenty-year period between 1895 and 2015.

In the preface, Cheek situates intellectual activities as an expression of "the self-appointed task and widely held social expectation of thinkers and writers in China to serve the public good." (xii) This notion stems from the traditional understanding of intellectual studies as a discipline organized around a handful of important thinkers and their writings, who are implicitly viewed as a guiding force for society. However, Cheek's preface and introductory chapter in fact outline a more sophisticated framework for investigating intellectuals and their roles in twentieth-century China, representing something of a shift towards society in Cheek's own work. The book is still structured around the force of ideas: Cheek argues persuasively that "ideas matter" (xiv) and that intellectuals repeatedly provided the "intellectual software" of successive regimes (some of these "ideologies" are identified as anti-colonialism, revolution, state-led development, market reform). But ideologies are also connected to "social worlds of intellectual life," the communities in which intellectuals live and endeavor to order, educate, criticize or mobilize society (xvi). These "communities of discourse" are further theorized in the introduction from three distinct angles: as publics or public spheres, as cultures of intellectual life, and as a set of social institutions and roles. Cheek distinguishes between three forms of public sphere: print capitalism (commercial newspapers as well as radical periodicals); the propaganda state (under the KMT and the CCP); and the "directed public sphere" (in the post-Mao era). "Cultures of intellectual life" (9), a phrase borrowed from Thomas Bender, are determined by geography (metropolitan elites, provincial elites and local non-elite intellectuals), class (popular culture), gender, as well as affinity or identity (ethnic, religious or otherwise). Finally, social institutions and roles provide a framework in which to discuss the specialization and professionalization of intellectuals, moving beyond their own writings to construct an external viewpoint.

Cheek identifies three main strands in the scholarship on Chinese intellectuals: the political science approach centered on democratic transitions; the literary approach centered on postmodernism; and a text-based historical sinology, in which his own work is situated. While referencing Koselleck's *Begriffsgeschichte*, whose influence appears in Cheek's notion of "enduring ideas" that reappear from one era (and chapter) to another ("the people", "Chineseness", "democracy"), *The Intellectual in Modern Chinese History* is preoccupied with

challenging historical teleology. If, as William J. Sewell Jr. suggested, historians can be identified by their understanding of historical time as a contingent series of events, then Cheek's is indeed a quintessential work of history.²

Cheek's chronology, in which each chapter represents a twenty-year period, never hardens into an artificial construct, effectively capturing the significant ideological moments of the long twentieth century: the 1911 Revolution, the New Culture Movement, ideological mobilizations under the KMT and the CCP (I will return to Cheek's ambitious but I believe justified choice of dealing with the period 1936-1956 in one block), the Mao Years, the Reforms era, and the post-Deng period. By highlighting a series of intellectual moments that are not necessarily directly connected (rather than a concatenation of events), or that evince unexpected echoes between different eras, Cheek further challenges the teleology implicit in mainstream narratives of China's "rise" or "revival."

In the first chapter (1895-1915), Cheek's choice of showcased intellectuals inevitably (and rightly) turns to Liang Qichao and Zhang Binglin. But the originality of the chapter lies in highlighting how their role as intellectuals was made possible through the new form of print capitalism in which commercial newspapers provided an intellectual public sphere for the elite, to some extent under the protection of foreign exclaves. Zhang's *Minbao* and Liang's *Shibao* were the springboards which provided them and their ideas (ethnic revolution, renewing the citizen) with a nation-wide audience. As Cheek notes, local elites in the provinces read these publications, and debated them in constitutional assemblies, before their ideas further percolated within society thanks to new style textbooks.

In the second chapter (1915-1935), beyond the big names of the New Culture Movement (Ding Wenjiang, Hu Shi, Ding Ling), an interesting angle is Cheek's focus on local intellectuals in urban and rural settings, and how the public sphere shifted to encompass popular culture. In the urban context this included popular romances ("Mandarin Duck and Butterfly" fiction) and women's writings and publications. In rural China, grassroots activists like Liang Shuming and James Yen promoted new forms of community based on moral affinities and village compacts.

The central chapter, devoted to the crucial decades between 1936 and 1956, presents the three competing ideologies of Sun-ism, Communism, and the "third path" of liberalism that struggled for influence among the Chinese public. Cheek documents how intellectuals were in fact pushed out of the public domain, as it was subjected to increasingly stringent demands for ideological conformity (the KMT's New Life Movement is mentioned as a parallel to the Yan'an Rectification Movement). During the Civil War, these demands reached such a level that there was no more third option available to intellectuals other than aligning with one of the two parties. At this point, what Cheek terms a "public arena" (128) replaced the Habermasian public sphere, directly

managed and controlled by the Party. Scholars were replaced by cadres and officials, who were "rectified" and charged with "theorizing" the problems of the people in the Mass Line approach. Intellectuals dealt with the new situation in different ways: some served reluctantly (Hu Shi), others with initial enthusiasm but growing reservations (Chen Bulei, Wu Han), others yet with pride and conviction (Deng Tuo). His approach highlights that intellectuals don't necessarily elaborate new ideas, but often recapture social or political configurations in ways that can be useful to power-holders or meaningful to other social groups. In view of the many continuities and parallels between the KMT (both on the mainland and on Taiwan) and the CCP (in Yan'an and after establishing the PRC), the choice of a single chapter is not only largely justified but builds on and further enriches seminal works of historiography like Joseph Esherick's "Ten Theses on the Chinese Revolution."³

The chapter on the Mao era (1957-1976), a particularly erudite one, focuses on the "two public spheres" in the Cultural Revolution: the "formal public" defined by the propaganda state" and the "parallel public sphere" that emerged from the chaos of Red Guard publications, informal broadsheets, newspapers, and books. In the former, famous propagandists like Zhang Chunqiao and Yao Wenyan engaged in a form of political theatre, which Cheek illustrates by detailing how Yao effectively framed Deng Tuo, with tragic consequences. But among the more informal publics, Cheek finds new material for "the 'everyday history' of intellectual life." (189) Yang Jiang and Yue Daiyun wrote memoirs that undermined the narrative of revolutionary transformation. Fang Lizhi used science as an independent basis to criticize the party. The Li Yi-Zhe writers (and other like Yu Luo) formulated a critique of the Party-state from within the ranks of the Red Guards and sent-down youth, using the tools provided by Mao's "four great freedoms" to reach a broader urban public.

Under Deng Xiaoping's Reform Era (1976-1995), intellectuals acquired new forms of autonomy but the model of the cadre-intellectual remained central. For the reform-minded intellectuals who tried to advance their own autonomy by displacing and subverting the language of the Party-state (Liu Binyan, Wang Ruoshui, Fang Lizhi, Li Zehou), the national public of *People's Daily* or other official publications could occasionally provide access to a huge readership, for example for Wang Ruoshui's article on socialist alienation (or one might add Liu Zaifu's article commenting on Ba Jin's call to confess and repent for the Cultural Revolution). Cheek argues that although these publics did not represent a free public sphere, they delimited a coherent national space, which today has been balkanized. This creative ambiguity of "inner-system critique" collapsed with the democracy movement of 1989 (Cheek argues that the crackdown was prompted by the threat of an alliance between students and workers, reminiscent of Solidarity in Poland). In its aftermath, intellectuals became "disestablished," losing access to a national audience, and seemed no longer able to "speak for the people."

The final chapter deals with the post-Deng era (1996-2015), which is described under the heading of "rejuvenation." Economic prosperity does not necessarily give rise to intellectual vitality and, although there has been no shortage of controversies in the last twenty years, intellectuals are described as having largely retreated into their specializations.

However, thinkers are still taken seriously in Chinese society, whether they are affiliated with the state (Cui Zhiyuan and other New Left academics), with Academia (Xu Jilin and liberal theorists) or arise from civil society (the writer Chan Koonchung, Neoconfucian activists, or dissidents), which explains the need for the state to tightly control public opinion, in particular on the Internet.

The conclusion returns to some of the continuities and discontinuities in the role of intellectuals in twentieth-century China, as literati (*shidafu*), intelligentsia (*zhishifenzi*), professionals, and cadres. On the level of ideas, Cheek concludes that the idea of the nation has dominated intellectual life, under the heading of a series of evolving questions: how to save China, how to awaken China, how to build a new China, how to build socialism, how to reform socialism, how to be a global power. The short summaries at the end of each chapter, which describe how three central concepts (the people, China and democracy) are envisaged throughout the century, are recapped in the conclusion. The "people" are understood first as society (*qun*), then as *renmin* in the Marxist sense, before returning as *ren* ("Mensch"?), and citizens in the reforms era. The nation evolves from Levenson's *tianxia* to Zhongguo as a Westphalian nation-state, and finally to state-building as a goal in its own right, accompanied by a perennial weakness of civil society, which leads to a growing state-led nationalism in the post-1989 context. Democracy remains a contested concept, not least through representations that envisage "lower-class" populations as insufficiently qualified to partake in it.

Cheek's "coloring" of his six chapters in three "keys" (reform, revolution, rejuvenation) suggests interesting parallels. The decades of "reform" in Cheek's century (1895-1915 and 1976-1995) seem to end in failed revolutions (1911 and 1989). The two "revolutionary" moments are situated after the generally accepted dates of revolution (1915-1935 and 1957-1976). Finally, and most provocatively, the ongoing post-Deng era is considered in parallel with twenty years of mass violence (1936-1956), under the heading of "rejuvenation," suggesting echoes between the New Life Movement and Yan'an rectification on the one hand, and the new "leading thought" today.

To conclude, I would like to offer two series of thoughts on the methodology of Cheek's ambitious study. As noted above, this is undoubtedly a work of history, paying close attention to chronology and contingency, and avoids engaging in any form of theorizing. This does not mean that it does not contain theoretical reflections on the definition and status of intellectuals, but these mostly remain implicit. While Cheek's perfect neutrality with respect to the various theories developed by the intellectuals he studies is of course indispensable and welcome, some engagement with the social science literature on intellectuals might provide a more critical view of the notion of intellectual itself. Gramsci famously suggested that intellectuals, despite their aspirations to autonomy, are generally "organic" to a class, that they speak for a segment within the social structure. Bourdieu argues that intellectuals are the "dominated part of the dominant class." Of course, these are social science approaches that emphasize structure over historical events. However, such critical angles have long been part of intellectual discussions in China itself. Ba Jin was the first to call on elite intellectuals who saw themselves as victims of the Cultural Revolution to reflect on

their own complicity and atone for it (*chanhui*). Qin Hui has pointed out how the "elite victimization" narrative that emerged from the Cultural Revolution contributed to cementing elite hostility to "democracy," as this notion was equated with Red Guard violence in 1966-1969. Guo Yuhua, describing the Maoist project as a form of "seeing like a state" notes that intellectuals played a central role in the social engineering that led to the Famine and other events.⁴ Interventions such as these should lead us to a critical investigation of the role of intellectuals with respect to China's changing social hierarchies and political power structures. Intellectuals are not simply part of the working class, as Deng Xiaoping opined, but often also play a central role in the projects of the political elite.

Second, Cheek's study and in particular his attentiveness to public spheres and social worlds, is part of a broader revival of intellectual history. The old "history of ideas," often confined to intellectual biographies, or even Koselleck's conceptual history, are being replaced by a new form of intellectual history that grounds ideas in social practices and publics, incorporates histories of knowledge, histories of academic disciplines (*xueshu shi*) and histories of cultural practices like reading. Situated within their social contexts, ideas not only matter, but can be shown to have mattered and Cheek felicitously brings this insight to his synthesis on twentieth-century Chinese intellectuals.

¹ See Carol Lee Hamrin and Timothy Cheek, eds., *China's Establishment Intellectuals* (Armonk, N.Y: M.E. Sharpe, 1986); Timothy Cheek. *Propaganda and Culture in Mao's China: Deng Tuo and the Intelligentsia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Timothy Cheek, ed., *A Critical Introduction to Mao* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

² William J. Sewell, Jr., *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005): 11.

³ Joseph Esherick, "Ten Theses on the Chinese Revolution," *Modern China* 21, no. 1 (1995): 45-76.

⁴ Ba Jin, "Jinian" [Remembering], *Suixianglu xuanji* (Beijing: Sanlian, 2003), 53-54; Qin Hui, "Women gai zenyang fansi wenge" [How we should remember the Cultural Revolution], *Wenti yu zhuyi: Qin Hui wenxuan* (Changchun: Changchun Press, 1999), 10-11; Guo Yuhua, *Shouku ren de jiangshu* [Narratives of the sufferers] (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2013), 164.