

Zeitgeists and Narratives

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In rereading Timothy Cheek's history of intellectuals in China's "long twentieth century" from about 1895 to today, I am struck again by the sheer pleasure offered by good historical writing. In my earlier review I called this book "virtually flawless," and I stand by that judgment.¹ There are, I think, a few minor errors, and there are larger matters one might wish to debate or further explore. Cheek offers a few personal comments here and there, but he is scrupulously fair—standing above the fray, or rather very numerous frays, and writing as an outsider, even while noting how the insider-outsider difference has eroded in the last few years. Cheek gives the sincerity of the intellectuals he discusses every benefit of the doubt, and by and large refuses to engage in arguments on their own level. This approach is perhaps the only one possible for the outsider, whether the historical outsider who is looking back or the national outsider who is looking over the border. But it comes with a price.

For example, Cheek offers a cogent analysis of the "failure" of liberalism (so far), but he focuses on the objective conditions that made liberalism a hard sell rather than any internal weaknesses of liberal views. These putative weaknesses of course have been discussed at length in the Chinese and Western literatures, discussions that have quickly become dated and perhaps say more about those doing the discussing than the Chinese liberals. Still, it would have been instructive to have Cheek's comments. Elsewhere, Cheek points to the rather illiberal turn toward revolution in the 1920s, which he links to the notion of awakening the people—but then, should we not highlight the tension between the fundamentally democratic premise of an awakened people and the top-down vision of the vanguard party? Or take Cheek's brief discussion of contemporary Confucianism: one could return to the old Levensonian question of psychological compensation, or ask whether we have here an ongoing tradition, a revived tradition, or an invented tradition, but Cheek makes few moves in these more evaluative directions.

The above remarks are not meant as criticism but as an aid to defining the book that Cheek did write (as opposed to some other book). As Cheek's title indicates, his is only partly an intellectual history—a history of ideas, debates, ideologies—and to a great extent is a social history, focusing on *how* intellectuals work: their status, their roles, and especially the changing conditions of intellectual production.² One of the several brilliantly worked-out motifs of the book is the series of transitions from print capitalism to the propaganda state and directed public sphere.

Here, I want to focus on another question entirely: namely, can we make the story of intellectual life in China's long twentieth century into a coherent story at all? Or must it—should it—remain disconnected fragments that we force together in a few hundred pages of text? In his preface, Cheek refers to the "method" of his book as that of "historical narrative" and finds its "unifying theme" in "the self-appointed task and widely held social expectation of thinkers and writers in China to serve the public good" (xii). At the same time, Cheek wishes to avoid teleology and sees no use for

metanarrative. He thus uses a notion of the "ideological moment" as a skeleton for a narrative framework but denies us of the satisfaction of a from-to story. In my view, this is problematic on two levels. First, the "ideological moment" does not work very well in its own terms. That is my main concern, but also, second, Cheek does not in the end seem certain that he is presenting a narrative at all, for "there may not be a single narrative that does justice to China's intellectual and their century of efforts to identify, preserve, and perfect this thing called China" (327). Indeed.

Cheek presents a historical narrative insofar as the story of intellectuals in the long twentieth century proceeds more or less chronologically, a chronology defined through ideological moments that replace one another periodically, and the result is both a little reductive and not reductive enough. Cheek first defines ideological moment as a "guiding challenge, the questions of the day" (xvi); that is, answers differ but intellectuals are, generally speaking, absorbed by the same question. He goes on to say that it "captures the intellectual world of a time and place, including the key issue of the day, the cultural order, the language of debate, the competing solutions and the notable speaker and actors" (7). As well, Cheek connects each ideological moment to an "orientation or mood": reform, revolution, and rejuvenation. This seems to me simply a new term for the Hegelian "zeitgeist" or the spirit of the age. Be that as it may, it is a useful heuristic device, but can it really frame a historical narrative covering a very busy century? Even if such "moments" are accurately described, how do we get from one to the next? It is possible to put the resulting narrative schematically (cf. 321):

- 1905-15: how to save China (reform)
- 1915-35: how to awaken the Chinese people in order to save themselves (revolution)
- 1936-56: how to build the new China (rejuvenation)
- 1957-76: how to make socialism work (revolution-2)
- 1976-95: how to reform China's socialist system (reform-2)
- 1996-2015: how to be global power (rejuvenation-2)

Of course, the dates are not exact, but they do, it seems to me, usually mark intellectual transitions that do not correspond with our usual political chronology (with the exception of 1976): 1911, 1927, 1949. It is the mid-1910s, for example, and not the 1911 Revolution that marks a shift from a faith in a new political form to recognition of the need for more deep-seated change. The problem is not with the dating but the zeitgeist. In my view, the mood of revolution captures the late Qing spirit better than does reform—both because the self-proclaimed revolutionaries won in the end and because the self-proclaimed reformers were promoting reforms so thorough-going, and on the basis of concepts so new, that they are best termed revolutionary. Late Qing intellectuals were also concerned not merely with saving China but specifically in creating a new national people (*xinmin*) that could do so, even if the

terminology of "awakening" was not common. Then, the period from 1915 to 1935 was certain full of revolutionary thought, but surely so were the 1940s. And the 1950s as well as 1960s. It is true that revolutionary consciousness seems to have gone up a notch in the wake of the 1911 Revolution, but since it was over the course of the 1930s and 1940s that Communist intellectuals (including, as Cheek rightly insists, Mao-as-intellectual) were able to turn Marxist theory into revolutionary praxis, it seems that revolutionary consciousness (mood, ideology, zeitgeist) has again gone up a notch.³

At this point, it may seem we have returned to Fairbank's story of revolution, if not Levenson's story of a search for an all-encompassing ideology.⁴ Reform and rejuvenation are of course also parts of the story, and Cheek's notion of rejuvenation has the merit of stimulating us to think about the constructive side of revolution. Rejuvenation—revival, the effort to build on the existing structure rather than *de novo*—certainly marked much of the Nationalist Decade, and even, in a different way, the influential thought of Hu Shi. It is almost too obviously (or artificially) key to "Xi Jinping Thought" today. But while part of the changing zeitgeist throughout the twentieth century, did it ever define the zeitgeist before Xi?

What happens if we attempt a more fine-grained periodization of the zeitgeist? I would suggest perhaps:

- 1895-99: fundamental reformism, constitutionalism
- 1899-1911: national/republican revolution
- 1912-1915: disillusionment, liberalism
- 1915-1919: cultural critique (liberalism)
- 1920-27: liberalism and sprouts of Marxism-Leninism
- 1928-37: breakdown of consensus: liberalism, Leninism, Three People's Principles (fascism or statism)
- 1938-45: non-communist patriotism; formation of Maoism

.... One is soon exhausted. It will be seen that I have returned to ideology rather than finding a common question—I am not sure liberals and Marxists (and conservatives) were really dealing with the same question at all. At any rate, there are too many angels dancing on the head of this pin for the scheme to work.

In pointing to "the discontinuities of intellectual life in China over the decades" (14), Cheek has if anything understated the situation. It took all the running one could do to stay in the same place, which is why the radicals of yesteryear became the conservatives of today: not because they had changed their opinions (in many cases), but because they hadn't. In spite of his reliance on the notion of the zeitgeist, Cheek does not say much about generational shifts. This seems odd, since he does emphasize the changing conditions of intellectual production, and the education of each generation of intellectuals certainly differed from that of its predecessors. Of course, defining the parameters of a "generation" is difficult, and, again, it is not clear that members of the same generation were even asking the same question, much less forming similar answers.

In spite of the radical discontinuities of Chinese intellectual life, another way of picturing the long twentieth century is

through recurring motifs. Cheek's notion of "enduring ideas" works along these lines, but the changes he rightly—and beautifully—notes in the conceptualization of the *people*, *Chinese*, and *democracy* also suggest the fact of discontinuity. How, exactly, has the denotative field of the "democracy" of 1895 evolved into that of 2005? I wonder if a Lovejoyian "history of ideas" approach would be a useful supplement to the periodic highlighting of these terms.⁵

Cheek's method is of course not that of Lovejoy, and his rejection of grand narrative is both principled and practical. He rightly refuses to tell any simple from-to story: tradition to modern, empire to nation-state, or some kind of stunted intellectual life to a free one. Yet in writing a narrative—Cheek's own term for the historical method (xii)—Cheek is promising a story that is more than the sum of its parts: more than six ideological moments. In his conclusion Cheek notes, "While intellectual life has been shaped by shifting ideological moments, and the recurrence of revolution, reform, and rejuvenation as zeitgeists or guiding orientations, there has been secular change that shapes what intellectuals in China can do" (326). The narrative skeleton of this book is less based on the growth of ideas, so speak, and more on the growth of what I would call complexity or even simply modernization. Cheek cites science and technology, the adoption of Western institutions (beginning with the newspaper), and especially the professionalization of intellectual elites, who have come to speak as experts rather than as apprentice sages. And who have a symbiotic relationship with the state, as do, in different ways, intellectuals in other lands.

What perhaps distinguishes Chinese intellectuals to a degree—though Cheek rightly rubbishes Chinese exceptionalism—is "the self-appointed task and widely held social expectation of thinkers and writers in China to serve the public good" (xii). Thus Cheek's historicist drive to understand each moment of Chinese intellectual life in its own terms to the degree possible, is not exactly the refusal to pass intellectual judgment that I noted at the beginning of my contribution to this roundtable. Yet it is a very favorable judgment of motives, of "the enduring strength of intellectual idealism in China, the commitment to truth, to making China not just prosperous and strong but also fair and just" (312). This seems a little too rosy. It might not be useful to go looking for cases of *trahison des clercs*, but when doing good is combined with doing well (as several cases that Cheek highlights suggest), a little cynicism is warranted. Cheek, again rightly, warns us not to forget that most intellectuals are not "dissidents" but hard working men and women doing their best to think well and publish as best they can. Nonetheless, intellectuals' participation in crimes up to and including mass murder is also part of the story.

I have learned a great deal from this book, and it will be shaping my views of the Chinese intellectual for some time. The point of my remarks above is less to quarrel with Cheek than to ask how we make sense of it all, a question I cannot claim to be able to answer. Perhaps in addition to a framework provided by the zeitgeist, we should also be tracing the intertwining narratives of liberalism, socialism, rationalization (modernization a la Weber) and other big ideas (not ideologies) that shape thought, and that are in turn shaped by the exigencies of intellectual life.

¹ See my review in *China Quarterly* 227 (2016): 837-838.

² This is one reason why Cheek's book stands alone in the English-language literature. Still very much worth reading are Jerome B. Grieder, *Intellectuals and the State in Modern China: A Narrative History* (New York: Free Press, 1981), which focuses on ideas and the persons who spouted them, and stops by 1949; and Jonathan D. Spence, *The Gate of Heavenly Peace: The Chinese and Their Revolution, 1895-1980* (New York: Penguin, 1981), which focuses on just three individuals to offer a kind of case-study account. More sociological and focusing on the second half of the twentieth century is Zhidong Hao,

Intellectuals at a Crossroads: The Chinese Politics of China's Knowledge Workers (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003).

³ Shoehorning intellectuals into the right mood occasionally leads to errors. We might accept Liang Shuming at his word that he was leading a revolution in the countryside, but we cannot call James Yen a revolutionary (102-103).

⁴ John King Fairbank, *The Great Chinese Revolution, 1800-1985* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986).

⁵ See Darrin M. McMahon, "The Return of the History of Ideas?" in *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History*, ed. Darrin M. McMahon and Samuel Moyn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 13-31.