

A Discussion on Timothy Cheek's Enduring Ideas as Introduced in His Book *The Intellectual in Modern Chinese History*

Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, *University of Vienna*

Timothy Cheek's *The Intellectuals in Modern Chinese History* is a major contribution to our understanding of twentieth and early twenty-first century Chinese history from an intellectual history perspective. The book is strong in synthesizing the wisdom that has been accumulated by his own research together with contributions from a myriad of scholars publishing both in Chinese and English over the last thirty years. It is daring in looking at intellectual history both as the history of intellectual debates and as the history of intellectuals and their position in society. And it is courageous insofar as the author does not shy away from declaring his point of view and pursuing his lifelong endeavor aimed at finding ways to understand what is going on in China and in the minds of the intellectuals. This implies that Cheek does not side with those who claim that they have a recipe of change for China. He believes that we have to find out about those recipes Chinese intellectuals develop in coping with the necessity of change in China. Last but not least, the book is extremely interesting by the choice of intellectuals it presents, by the intimate knowledge Cheek has of them and by the analytical approach he takes, despite the fact that sometimes he is talking about close friends and sometimes about colleagues who have a totally different perspective on things Chinese. Cheek regards the Chinese intellectuals of his narrative as colleagues in the sense of "potential or actual allies today facing shared intellectual, social, and environmental problems that span the globe" (24).

The underlying idea of the book is the argument that the history of intellectuals in twentieth-century China is a history of enduring ideas and changing ideological moments. The enduring ideas are the intellectuals' obsession with "the people", "Chinese" and "democracy" (12), and the changing ideological moments are "reform", "revolution" and "rejuvenation" (7). All the intellectuals he introduces to us contribute with their ideas to either reform, revolution or rejuvenation in China, and they do this by discussing the role of the people in this process, the intellectuals' attitude toward what it means to be Chinese, and their ideas about democracy. While these bold definitions provide the text with a clear structure, the central question is whether or not the intellectuals discussed in the book as well as those left out fit into this framework. I would argue that while I do see why Cheek chose the above mentioned three enduring ideas and the ideological moments I have some difficulty in seeing all of the intellectuals he writes about fitting into this framework. My major problem is not to recognize that reform, revolution and rejuvenation are the "ideological moments". My main problem lies with the three enduring ideas. I see Cheek discussing ideas about society, but not so much about the people, and I see him discussing the intellectuals' stand towards the state as well as the state's attitude towards the intellectuals (for example, when he writes: "The cadre, and in particular the intellectual cadre, serving either of the new Leninist party-states, the Nationalists or the Communists, combined the role of certified state administrator with a person of moral training and literacy" [129]) and wonder why the complicated relationship between the intellectuals and the state

is not one of these enduring ideas Cheek chose to introduce to us. As a matter of fact – and Cheek writes at length about this – the intellectuals who aim to serve the people want to do this through their service for the state, hoping that the state is a benevolent state which cares for the people. When they realize that their basic assumption about the benevolent state does not conform to reality, some of them turn against the state and even go to jail and die as in the recent case of Liu Xiaobo. However, if they perceive the state as acting in the interest of the people, they do not see a problem in serving an authoritarian state and consequently endure the absence of freedom of thought and speech. Whether or not the state serves the interest of "the people" is the question which divides the political assessment of intellectuals from different factions or schools and makes the main difference between those who refrain from political activity and those who get involved.

Tim Cheek discusses the prominent role of the state and underlines that the "most profound change" over the 20th century "has been the growth of the state" (326). He observes that Chinese intellectuals have lost the opportunity to redefine their difficult relationship with the state by retreating to the countryside into territory where the reach of the state was non-existent, to a certain degree, up until recently (326). In exchange, they now have more chances to sustain themselves by working for the myriad of journals and newspapers which have come into existence as a by-product of the commercialization of the media. But if they want to have an impact on the future of their country they have to cope with a problem intellectuals around the world are confronted with: that they can have the impact they want to have only by collaborating with the state. If we decide not to collaborate we might feel morally safe, but in most cases utterly marginalized and, therefore, without any impact on society. In a European context, this marginality is accepted and acceptable, and we can very well survive in marginality. In the Chinese case, this is much more difficult and often implies consequences beyond our imagination.

A case in point is the development of party intellectuals during the early 1960s, a phase which Cheek refers to in his book but unfortunately does not analyze in detail. The Great Famine (1959-1961) was not only a devastating experience for the peasants among whom the death toll was extremely high. It was also a devastating experience for many intellectuals, with some of them living through the Famine together with the peasants because they had been sent to the countryside as a punishment for their intellectual deliberations during earlier political campaigns. Others, even those among them who lived in the national capital Beijing, experienced the threat of food shortage but their major problem was not fear of starvation. It was the fear that they had decided to serve a state which was not worth their service.¹ Wu Han, whom Cheek discusses in some detail (136-137), clearly started doubting the legitimacy of CCP rule during the early 1960s: not only in the essays he contributed to the nationally published "Three Family Village" articles, but also in his theoretical writings on the relationship

between historical materials and historical theories. Both types of writing show that he acted the way scholars had always acted when the state was in crisis: they reminded the leadership of its promises and of the standards of good governance which scholars had upheld for centuries. It is no wonder that unfortunately only a few years later he turned from supporter of the CCP regime to victim of the Cultural Revolution. The Great Famine is a momentous turning point in post-1949 history as well as intellectual history, a turning point we tend to forget despite the many publications on this issue.

Even under conditions which were easier to handle than in Maoist China, intellectuals are torn between collaboration with and resistance against the state. Take Ai Weiwei as an example (310-311). Ai is an independent artist who is not only independent in the creation of his art, but also in the economic sense of the word. He accepted the offer to design the "Bird Nest" building for the Olympic Games and thus did the Chinese state a major service. A little later he openly rejected collaboration when he was asked to become a delegate to the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. I do not want to say that he rejected the state too early or too late. What I am trying to say is that collaboration with the state is the biggest temptation for any intellectual inside and outside China, and that we cannot imagine "serving the people" without reflecting on the intellectual's complicated relationship to the state. Perhaps Cheek does not mention this issue because he thinks that it is an issue of the Cold War when colleagues like Merle Goldman were only looking at Chinese intellectuals and their attitude towards the Party and the state. I agree that times have changed since then, but this does not imply that we can forget about the state, which stands at the center of intellectual concern whether one wants to or not!

The next enduring idea Cheek discusses is the question of what it means to be Chinese. Interestingly, I do not see him addressing this issue in a direct way very often, but the problem is raised indirectly everywhere. However, I must admit that I was astonished to see him mentioning "Chinese exceptionalism" for the first, and, if I read closely enough, only time on towards the very end of his book (327). From my point of view, it is totally correct to define "China" as a central question Chinese intellectuals are concerned with, and the respective attitudes Chinese intellectuals prefer to adopt is what divides them into different factions, or schools, the same way their attitude towards the state divides them and makes them fight amongst each other. But how do we recognize their related discussions, and what do they discuss when they define their attitude towards "what it means to be Chinese"? According to my research, I would say that the question of "Chinese exceptionalism," which I call "Chinese particularism" in my publications, is at the very heart of this debate. Scholars and intellectuals in China have been discussing China's position in the world ever since the Qing Empire lost its dominant position in East Asia and, thereby, its belief that China was the center of the world. This happened during the second half of the nineteenth century and, from that time on, Chinese elites have had one goal, which is to overcome the shame and re-establish the glory of China in the world. It is this aim which unites the elite in China no matter whether we look at the political, the economic, or the cultural elite. In contrast, what divides them into factions and schools is the question whether China should follow the universal way toward wealth and power, or whether it should revert to a "particularly Chinese way" to re-establish

world prominence. The discussion on particularism was actually borrowed from Japanese intellectuals who realized, like their Chinese counterparts, that to look at their country as special meant that they could escape from the trap of constantly being compared to the supposedly more advanced West. In this sense, the idea of particularism was an Asian response to Western dominance, and a form of anti-colonialism which allowed for borrowing from the West as well as resisting against the West, and even for combining elements of both approaches. Very early in his book, Tim Cheek declares that one of his basic assumptions is that "foreign ideas can become Chinese over time" (xiv), and he discusses the issue of hybridity time and again. What I miss is an explanation why Chinese intellectuals should be so open to "learn from the West" and turn "Western" or "foreign" ideas into something Chinese. The driving force behind reform, revolution and rejuvenation is according to my understanding the idea that China needs to heal the trauma of shameful defeat during the second half of the nineteenth century by regaining a prominent position in the world. In order to achieve this goal China has to use any wisdom which might exist around the world. This can imply that China will end up being just another version of the Western model – which would be the aim universalists are striving for; or else, Chinese elites will use what they perceive of as being successful experiences and helpful knowledge from the West to develop something which is different and particular. Once the aim is reached, the question of universalism and particularism is no longer of concern—the particular might turn into a model of universalist implications. But on the way to the goal, intellectuals are split between believing in universalist values that originate from the West and believing in particular values that originate from China. According to my understanding, this question is at the very heart of the debate on what it means to be Chinese.²

Let's look at the very interesting case of Liang Shuming which Tim Cheek discusses in the context of rural revolution and reconstruction (p. 101-102). Cheek calls Liang a "neo-traditionalist" because Liang believes in the Chinese countryside and in the power of local government beyond the reach of the state. I totally agree with his interpretation. But what does this mean in the context of "being Chinese". To my mind, it means that Liang was looking for solutions which he thought were rooted in Chinese traditions and for that matter "particular". He wanted China to change, but he did not want China to emulate the "Western" model. He wanted China to be different from the rest of the world and wanted to identify with a country which had its own history, its own present and its own future. Ding Wenjiang (p.81.) in contrast, believed in science to be of universal value and therefore wanted China to overcome poverty by taking a "scientific" outlook on life. He believed in "Western" science while others took to Marxism as a scientific method of changing society by way of revolution. In all cases, the idea behind the choice was that what came from the West was also good for China and all around the world. If China overcame its belief in particularity, it could catch up with the powerful of the world.

Interestingly, Mao Zedong never talked about universalism and particularism. Once the CCP had taken over the mainland, he was looking for possibilities for China to develop into a model for other countries, and particularism would have stood in his way to reach this aim. However, historians trying to write the history of China in Maoist times were extremely interested

in the universality and the particularity of Chinese history. Wu Han and Jian Bozan claimed particularity for Chinese history and demanded the right to investigate Chinese history on its own terms. Guo Moruo and Yin Da stood for the revolution in historiography and wanted to write Chinese history so that it would fit perfectly into the universal framework of five societal development stages canonized by Stalin. During the early stage of the Cultural Revolution, Wu Han and Jian Bozan were attacked as "reactionaries" wanting to go back to the Chinese past, and they did not survive the attacks; during the last stage of the Cultural Revolution, even Mao regained an interest in things Chinese and allowed for "revolutionary historians" like Yang Rongguo to write Chinese history in particular terms as the history of the struggle between Confucianists and Legalists. After Mao had passed away, these historians were attacked, too, but they survived the storm.³

The reason why Tim Cheek does not choose the approach I suggest here is that he is more interested in showing that whatever Chinese intellectuals borrow from the West is always "distinctly different from the Western original" (83). I could not agree more with this assessment although I do not think that this is something particularly "Chinese." If we look at the way Europeans introduced Confucianism to their readers outside China we can observe the same phenomenon. Their version of Confucianism is tainted by Christian thought and based on the assumption that there is something to the teachings of Confucianism that non-Chinese might need to know. The same is true for our Chinese colleagues—they are interested in ideas from the West because they feel they need them to solve problems in China. It is this urgent need for a solution which is at the roots of what Lu Xun called "receptionism" (*nalai zhuyi*).

Against the background of what I said above, I have my doubts that Chinese intellectuals are so interested in democracy that this idea should have as prominent a place as Timothy Cheek reserves for it in his argument. My reading of the book illustrates that the number of intellectuals who put democracy at the center of their ideas is small. Cheek introduces two of them at quite some length: Zhang Junmai (154) and Liu Xiaobo (309-310). He discusses the idea of democracy in the context of the development in Chinese provinces before the Revolution of 1911; in the context of the "third force," especially during the 1945-1949 transition period between the end of WW II and the Communist takeover; in the context of the Hundred Flower Campaign; and, last but not least, when looking at recent developments especially when interpreting Liu Xiaobo and the Charter 08. In other cases, the idea of democracy did not have a sustainable influence on the political situation. (Taiwan's development towards democracy is not discussed at length in Cheek's narrative.) So what does he want to tell us by putting democracy in such a central position? To be honest: I don't know. Maybe this is the one trap which Cheek did not escape from falling into, maybe he has reasons which are hidden in the text and which I did not find. To put it bluntly: for me Chinese intellectuals are, in their majority, not interested in democracy. If Cheek's interpretation is right that they want to serve the people by teaching the people, if he is right in arguing that they reserve for themselves a special, if not an elite, position, in society, then they believe that the truth about what China needs to do lies with them as the enlightened minority and not with the majority of the population. Democracy is about majority and not about truth. This is the reason why it is not logical for a Chinese intellectual to risk his or her life to fight for democracy,

and those who do opt for this solution are usually marginalized and lonely until they die. It is also the reason why the idea of democracy is very often discussed in terms of inner-party democracy in China. The Chinese Communist Party is—according to its own understanding—the organization of the enlightened minority in China. Quite a number of intellectuals in China hope for the inner-party decision making process to be more democratic because the majority deciding inside the party would constitute a majority of enlightened and educated voters. For Chinese intellectuals, service to the people, to use another of Cheek's central categories, is service for China based on their expertise in ideology, science and technology. Most of them want to be asked by the party-state, they want their expertise to be serving the rejuvenation of China, and they do not want to be marginalized by a majority which is not inclined to listen to their advice, which does not provide funding for their research, and which does not go for long term goals, but wants life to be better today no matter what the consequences are for tomorrow.

I mentioned above that I find Cheek's choice of intellectuals highly interesting. While some of them are so well known that the informed readers might already have heard about them, others come from a less prominent group. Cheek not only introduces Liang Shuming, but also James Yen (61-62) as rural reformers, for the period of Republican China, he not only discusses journalists like Deng Tuo, but also someone like Chen Bulei (134-135), who to my knowledge is not as well-known and well researched. Among the returnees he picks Zhou Yiliang (whom I so far totally neglected in my research on Chinese historiography despite his prominence and will have to work on in future) and Qian Xuesen (147-154), both very interesting cases which usually do not attract too much scholarly attention. He mentions Chen Yinke (150, 151) in passing based on his readings of existing English-language literature on him, but unfortunately does not refer to the growing Chinese language publications on Chen not to mention Axel Schneider's outstanding book which was written in German, but is published also in Chinese. Chen did not go to Taiwan together with Fu Sinian, but preferred to stay in mainland China. When he was offered a privileged position in Peking, he decided to move to Canton and live on the campus of Sun Yatsen University. He would have been a convincing case in point for what Cheek calls a "regional intellectual," in this particular case someone who deliberately chose to retreat to the region as a reaction to the changing political order after 1949.⁴ I am very intrigued by the fact that Cheek also included some intellectuals who are usually left out from the narrative as they left the scene together with the so called "Gang of Four". He discusses at quite some length both Zhang Chunqiao and Yao Wenyuan (175-181), making the point that they are two regional intellectuals who rose to central political power during the Cultural Revolution.

As the number of intellectuals known to readers outside China grows and the nearer we get to the present, the choice becomes more and more difficult. Cheek defines three clusters: the New Left, the liberals and the New Confucianists (269). He also discusses those who live outside China and still have an impact on the discourse in China, as well as those who go back and forth between China and the West. He looks at the growing group of freelancers among the intellectuals as well as at those who profit from both a professor position at a university and an income from the commercialized world of publishing and media as public intellectuals. All in all, he paints a multi-

layered, highly differentiated image of intellectual life in the Sinophone world which is very convincing. However, there are interesting groups of intellectuals missing in his narrative. Despite the fact that writers and poets have attracted quite some attention in the past, only very few of them are mentioned. Even more astonishing is the fact that Cheek did not introduce any of the economists who have gained so much in prominence since the beginning of the area of reform and opening in China; in a similar omission, Fang Lizhi (239-241) is the only scientist he introduces in an age where science and technology have such an enormous impact on the development of China. Perhaps the explanation is obvious: the research we do on Chinese intellectuals is mostly focused on those who are known to us because of their publications on issues related to politics, society and history. While economists could have been integrated into the narrative more easily as there is research published on them both in English and in Chinese, the related research on scientists and engineers seems to be quite scarce.

Finally, I need to mention here that the narrative does hardly include any women. Ding Ling is introduced for the republican and post-1949 eras, but prominent women revolutionaries of the late Qing such as He Zhen⁵ and Qiu Jin⁶ are not mentioned although there is literature available on them. One might doubt that Song Meiling should be counted among the intellectuals, but no doubt, Song Qingling would have been a good choice. Zhang Rong is mentioned (206), but not Zhang Yihe or someone like Shi Liang, a prominent women lawyer during the republican era and first minister of justice after the founding of the PRC whom Zhang Yihe describes in detail in her book *The Past is not like Smoke (Wangshi bing bu ru yan)*.⁷ Zhang Chunqiao and Yao Wenyuan are mentioned, but not Jiang Qing (although there is more published research on her than on the other two). Yue Daiyun (192-195) is introduced at some length, but Nie Yuanzi is not (although both women published their memoirs).⁸ I must admit that I have some difficulty in suggesting one woman or two who could be discussed as representative of the most recent developments by their contributions and standing, but feminism in its diverse forms should have been included into the narrative and could have helped to make women more visible in the account of Chinese intellectual history during the twentieth and early

twenty-first centuries. There is definitely more to discuss than mentioning Yu Dan once (309). We all have blind spots, and choices have to be made, but female contributions to intellectual history ought to be acknowledged.

The last paragraphs of the book reveal Timothy Cheek's optimistic view on the future of the world at large and the possibilities of joint efforts between Chinese and non-Chinese intellectuals in finding solutions for the many problems currently confronting us. At the same time, he seems more pessimistic as to the future of our profession asking: "Who is the Western scholar and who are the Chinese subjects of study?" (300) Cheek started his career (as I did) when China was in the process of being re-integrated into the world, when it was poor and only very few knew something about this vast and important country. He underscores several times that he sees himself as someone who wants to understand and who wants to help others to understand China. But times have changed. China is no longer the unknown territory it used to be, and China also is no longer a country which refrains largely from influencing how non-Chinese perceive of it. There are as many Chinese intellectuals outside China researching and publishing on China as there are non-Chinese living, studying, and working in China, but also researching and publishing on China. If the biggest challenge, according to Cheek, 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. Among the problems confronting Chinese and non-Chinese intellectuals which Cheek mentions, we should add the challenge of having to define our attitude towards a China which claims world power status in all respects. The new "Chinese world order" (305) will provide scholars from inside and outside China with enough problems to work on. And we can be sure that debate will go on for some time, albeit under totally new conditions.

¹ Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, "Back to the Past: Historical Revisionism in Chinese Communist Historiography," in *Rethinking China in the 1950s*, Chinese History and Society/Berliner China-Hefte, ed. Mechthild Leutner (Berlin: Lit, 2007), 31, 3-22.

² Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, "World History and Chinese History: 20th Century Chinese Historiography between Universality and Particularity," *Global History and Maritime Asia Working and Discussion Paper Series*, no. 5 (Osaka University, 2007), 1-18. Chinese translation by Sun Yue in *Quanjishi pinglun* [Global History Review] 3, no. 9 (2010): 3-21.

³ Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, "Our Ancestor Dragons have already Died, but Their Souls are still with Us: The Campaign to Criticize Lin Biao and Confucius (批林批孔) and the Problem of 'Restoration' in Chinese Marxist Historiography," in *The Challenge of Linear Time: Nationhood and the Politics of History in East Asia*, ed. Viren Murthy and Axel Schneider (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 155-177.

⁴ Lu Jiandong 陆键东, *Chen Yinke de zuihou shi'er nian* 陈寅恪的最后二十年 [The last 20 years of Chen Yinke] (Shanghai: Sanlian, 1995).

⁵ On He Zhen, see Peter Zarrow, "He Zhen and Anarcho-Feminism in China," *Journal of Asian Studies* 47, no. 4: 796-813. See also Lydia Liu, Rebecca Karl and Dorothy Ko, eds., *The Birth of Chinese Feminism. Essential Texts in Transnational Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

⁶ On Qiu Jin, see Catherine Gipoulon, "Qiu Jin: Der Stein des Vogels Jingwei," in *Frau und Revolutionärin im China des 19. Jhs.* (München: Frauenoffensive, 1977); Ou Xiefang 歐纘芳, ed., *Qiu Jin 秋瑾* (Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu, 2008).

⁷ Zhang Yihe 章诒和, *Wangshi bu ru yan* 往事不如烟 [The Past is not like Smoke] (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 2004).

⁸ Nie Yuanzi 聶元梓, *Nie Yuanzi huiyilu* 聶元梓回憶錄 [Memoirs of Nie Yuanzi] (*Hong Kong: Shidai Guoji Chubanshe*, 2005).