

The Ghost of Deng Tuo

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Revisiting that May night in 1966 when 65-year-old Deng Tuo resolutely swallowed a bottle of sleeping pills in the wake of his Cultural Revolution condemnation, Timothy Cheek writes that Deng knew “martyrs’ ghosts haunt the halls of power” and thus in his final act of service to the people, he hoped his death would serve as a permeant rebuke to those who had derailed the revolution (195). Deng Tuo also seems to haunt Cheek, who has long seen him as a key, a figure whose life and work help us understand the relationship between Maoism (which is often characterized as anti-intellectual) and the intellectuals who embraced it. Because my own attempts to understand Maoist consciousness have led me to rely heavily on Cheek’s work, Deng Tuo now haunts me as well. As other reviewers will fully enumerate the book’s status as a foundational text in our field, I will focus on its contribution to the study of Chinese Communism. In particular, I want to talk about the specter of Deng Tuo, whose suicide does seem to haunt PRC History, as the ghost of Maoism past, a reminder of all that the revolution could have been and everything it never was.

I have read and re-read Cheek’s *Propaganda and Culture in Mao’s China: Deng Tuo and the Intelligentsia* (1997). The book became a primary resource for me when I was a graduate student, because it offered something that was (and still is) rare: a model for taking seriously, and making sense of, sustained and sincere intellectual commitments to Maoism. As was the case in 1997, the dominant explanation for the widespread support Chinese Communism received in its early years still tends to cast supporters as either opportunists or fools: they either knew Maoism to be a sham but benefitted from pretending it wasn’t, *or* the sham-nature of the endeavor was concealed from them by Potemkin set-pieces and artful propaganda. Cheek’s exegesis of Deng Tuo’s work belied that simplistic dichotomy in 1997 and continues to do so in 2018. Deng *was* the propagandist, the ultimate insider, and yet he believed in the promise of Maoism. He “saw himself as a culture-bearer” not “as a cog in the revolution” (146), whose job was not to make people recite empty, official words, but to teach people to think in new ways, through a new conceptual universe. For Deng Tuo, Maoism was an epistemology.

Indeed, many of Mao’s most ardent proselytizers saw Maoism in precisely those terms: as a mode of thought and a method for producing the knowledge that could foment social, cultural, and intellectual revolutions. But this widely-held view is underrepresented in the Anglophone scholarship on modern China, in large part because Mao Zedong Thought is often characterized as anti-intellectual. As Cheek’s work shows, however, casting Mao’s attacks on intellectuals as a broader “anti-intellectualism” is something of a mistranslation because it misses the specificity of his criticisms (131). Mao was critical of bourgeois thinkers who created the culture that abetted exploitation, but he did not want to do away with knowledge production. Rather he wanted intellectuals to produce revolutionary knowledge.

The Intellectual in Modern Chinese History details the long cultural history in which Chinese intellectuals envisioned

themselves as servants of the people, “albeit it according to their own lights” (1). Individual thinkers, and generations of intellectuals, differed widely in their interpretations of the mandate to serve, but they were often united by their sense that serving the people entailed “teaching the people to be free” (9) precisely by teaching them to think in new ways. Mao’s famous concept of the Mass Line incorporated that older tutelary ideal but added a more populist component by suggesting that the job of the scholar-teacher-revolutionary was to gather knowledge from the ordinary masses, test and augment it with experience and theory, and then take it to the people again for further critique and development. Deng Tuo embraced this praxis; Cheek points out that, unlike Wang Shiwei in Yan’an for example, Deng Tuo did not rebel against the limitations Mao imposed on cultural work. Significantly, Deng complied, not because he was afraid, but because he agreed (140-141). Deng also believed it was possible to create radically new kinds of thinkers and was committed to becoming a genuinely Maoist intellectual, not simply an intellectual under Mao. Because of that commitment, Cheek seems to see in Deng Tuo a reevaluation of Maoism that de-centers Mao himself and suggests how others might have done a better job of following Mao’s early lead and delivering on the intellectual promise of his Mass Line framework.

We know Deng Tuo was not alone in his revolutionary optimism. In 1950s sources ranging from administrative documents to personal letters, people from all walks of life wrote about their abundant excitement as they learned to think in new and radical ways. But then for some people, possibly including Mao himself, the number of liberal, bourgeois ideas espoused during the Hundred Flowers Campaign (1956-1957) called into question the efficacy of mass consciousness raising and seemed to suggest the necessity of constant, top-down thought reform to defend the new society against counter-revolutionary forces. The Anti-Rightist Campaign (1957-1959) may well have marked Mao’s own disillusionment with Maoism. Cheek argues that another leader might have handled things differently, but that Mao tended toward narcissistic petulance, and thus he abandoned his own mass-line praxis (168). In a decidedly un-Maoist fashion, he and his high-level supporters “forced [their] ideal upon China’s people” (177).

Yet some Maoists, including Deng Tuo, remained committed to the Mass Line. That Deng was more faithful to Maoism than Mao might be evidenced by how Deng attempted to embrace the ideology of the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962). Cheek describes Deng’s writing on the Great Leap as formulaic, a sign that he was like other intellectuals who disagreed with the related policies but were “too cowed by the recent Anti-Rightist Movement and too dependent for their livelihood on local Party secretaries to speak up” (178). This is probably true, but the quote Cheek chooses also invites a second reading. If Deng felt pressure to speak in support of the Leap, it is still telling that he did so in intellectual and epistemological terms, praising the locals who tried to implement it for “discovering amongst the masses new people, new creations, new discipline” and for “studying and producing the new

ideology and work style of the new situation" (178). Deng was clearly emphasizing Maoism as a mode of thought, a way to constantly develop new ideas that could and should go beyond current ideology and policy. Thus Deng may well have been cowed by recent events, but he also remained a believer in the value of the Mass Line, which he still recognized, albeit faintly, in the architecture of the Great Leap.

The Intellectual in Modern Chinese History elucidates that same understanding of Maoism: not as rote slogans and anti-intellectual dogma, but as a method of critical interrogation, which also allowed the Cultural Revolution-era Li Yi-Zhe writing group to engage in "an auto-critique of radical politics in which Maoist language was turned upon Maoism" (199). Cheek observes that "the tragedy of the Cultural Revolution is perhaps how sincerely most young people took to heart Mao's calls" (198), and he seems to suggest that what makes it especially tragic is that Mao himself was no longer so sincere. Cheek notes the "promising opening to socialism with a human face" that Maoism seemed to offer to many of its supporters "was ruined by Mao's own dictatorial style and petulance" (168). Deng Tuo's life reminds us that while, in the end, the revolution may not have served the people, there were Maoists who were genuinely dedicated to that populist ideal. And Deng Tuo's suicide reminds us of the tragic irony that many suffered greatly under Mao for their Maoist convictions. The all-too-common dismissal of the entire Maoist enterprise as anti-intellectual, and even non-sensical, erases the sacrifices of those who worked to realize, for themselves and those they wished to serve, the emancipatory promise they saw in Mao's thought. Deng Tuo haunts Cheek (and me), I think, because Deng's life and death lead us to wonder where Maoism might have gone if not for Mao.