

The Foundations of Timothy Cheek's *The Intellectual in Modern Chinese History*

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Timothy Cheek's *The Intellectual in Modern Chinese History* is an ambitious work that offers up multitudinous subjects for consideration and debate. I discuss some of those in another review of the same book, wherein I also point out, favorably, that Cheek's study covers an unusually broad range of historical actors and themes.¹ Moreover, I observe that Cheek provides an interpretative framework that enables us to organize a sizable and diverse body of English-language scholarship produced over the past thirty years. This qualifies *The Intellectual in Modern Chinese History* as an extended historiographical essay in addition to its being an original historical analysis. Only a mature scholar could produce a book with so grand a sweep and such deep grounding in secondary scholarship.

In his choice of topic, Cheek follows one of his teachers, Merle Goldman, whose scholarship treats modern Chinese intellectuals as a discrete social category whose collective and individual fates reveal much about the country's political life – the nature of state-society relations in particular. More than Goldman, Cheek attends to the mutability of intellectuals' self-understandings and societal positions over time. Cheek, in other words, complicates and historicizes the idea of the Chinese intellectual but, like Goldman, takes for granted that Chinese intellectuals constitute a coherent sociological category that can be studied as such.

Such a belief certainly does not make all intellectuals the same, however. Within the sociological category of the intellectual, Goldman focuses on those who self-consciously possess a sense of responsibility to work on behalf of society's greater good – to “serve the people.” She is most interested in intellectuals who put themselves at grave personal risk in their insistence on speaking truth to power.² In Cheek's pithy phrase, Goldman advances a “Russian refuseniks with Chinese characteristic” model of the modern Chinese intellectual (21). This description is apt both because of the type of intellectual upon whom Goldman focuses, and because her work centers on the period of high communism in China, which begs for comparison to the comparable period in the Soviet Union.

Both Cheek and Goldman study quintessentially public-minded intellectuals. Such intellectuals' reputations stem as much from their commentary on, and participation in, contemporary politics as from their narrower professional accomplishments. Cheek is a more historical thinker than Goldman in that he is more inclined to understand intellectuals' lives and concerns as being embedded in time, institutions, and political culture than he is to view them, as Goldman tends to, in the guise of heroes and victims.

Throughout his career, Cheek has worked to open the study of modern Chinese intellectuals outward, away from the narrow focus during the Cold War on the dissident types about whom Goldman writes. In the 1980s, for example, he made the case for recognizing China's large number of “establishment intellectuals” – people who, rather than operate outside of or in opposition to the state, pursue careers within its precincts because such an approach makes sense to them as a way of

serving society.³ Idealism and working for the state often went hand in hand. Of course, these sorts of intellectuals have also met with tragedy, and when that has been true, for example in the case of Deng Tuo, about whom Cheek has written the definitive study, the distance between the establishmentarian and the outsider collapses.⁴

In his more recent work and in the present book, Cheek has continued in his effort to disaggregate what we mean when we talk about the modern Chinese intellectual. This has become especially necessary in light of the great extent to which China's immersion in the globalization process over the past quarter century has transformed Chinese society, including the role and status of intellectuals. Cheek is clear that neither the refusenik nor the establishment intellectual model can account for the majority of China's public-minded intellectuals today – people who live, simultaneously, within an authoritarian political system and in an ever more interconnected world, wherein a greater amount of information and knowledge is available than ever before. Cheek characterizes China's present political order as a “directed public sphere,” by which he means that the party-state maintains control over public discourse even while tolerating multiple information channels and a continuously shifting degree of intellectual pluralism. Under this arrangement, intellectuals have significant latitude to read and write what they wish, and to travel abroad, but they do all of that within limits both tacit and explicit.

Yet in endeavoring to advance scholarly understanding of modern Chinese intellectuals beyond the Deng Xiaoping era, to account for the great difference between the conditions that today's intellectuals face as compared to those of the Republican and Maoist eras, Cheek does not lose sight of the connections between contemporary figures and those who came before them. He shows us that change has been a constant, but also pays attention to the continuities in thought, and thematic focus, that run through the multiple generations of public-minded intellectuals that have lived during China's modern period. Here we see the imprint on Cheek of Benjamin Schwartz's appreciation for the point that, across time, Chinese intellectual life has revolved around a set of *problématiques* – enduring themes, questions and priorities that have reappeared in highly variable historical circumstances.

Cheek finds Schwartz's idea of recurring intellectual leitmotifs across Chinese history just as applicable to the shorter historical compass that he treats here, and posits that from the end of the Qing through the present, public-minded intellectuals' concerns have revolved around three interrelated *problématiques*: the role of the people, the meaning of being Chinese, and the question of how to make democracy work. Cheek organizes his book around the ongoing relevance of these themes and focuses in particular on how intellectuals have employed different vocabularies and ideological models to address them.

Cheek's attunement to Schwartz's idea of continuity within change, as well as his personal acquaintance with several prominent Chinese thinkers, enables him to appreciate the

degree to which such people remain in conversation with public-minded Chinese intellectuals who lived a century or half a century ago. In addition to centering on enduring themes, such as the role of "the people" and the meaning of being Chinese, the inter-generational conversation to which Cheek draws our attention has been rooted in the assumption that intellectuals are morally obligated to serve society. The specific ways they have approached the big, enduring themes at different times in modern Chinese history have depended, in Cheek's formulation, on the particular "ideological moment" in question, that is, on the dominant concerns and mood of the time – for example, reform in the early twentieth century, revolution in the middle, and rejuvenation at the end.

Problématiques, themes, moments and moods are all rather abstract, however, and in any case better equip us to think about intellectuals' ideas than they do about them as people. As interested as he is in thought, Cheek is more interested in the relationship between ideas and the lived reality of those who think them. So while he channels his teacher Benjamin Schwartz in his attentiveness to enduring issues that have attracted Chinese intellectuals' attention over time, Cheek's study is grounded first and foremost in his primary advisor Philip Kuhn's insistence that thought is related to social experience. Cheek wholeheartedly subscribes to this formulation, writing, "we can only make sense of what people say and mean by understanding where they lived and what they experienced, how they made sense of this and with whom they were talking" (xv).

The point here is to embed the abstractions and generalizations in the fullness of actual people's grounded, historical existences. The public-minded intellectual has a long history in China, right up to the present, and the *problématiques* that have preoccupied such people have echoed through time, some in broad arches, others in more circumscribed ones (for example, the modern period), but precisely how and why a particular intellectual treats those themes has everything to do with the specific institutional setting in which his or her life plays out. Cheek refers to these concrete, shaping factors as the "worlds of intellectual life" (xvi), by which he means things such as schools, work places, discursive communities, geographical locations, gender and age cohorts. Visions and aspirations may have a transcendent quality, but the people

whose they are sit at actual desks, have supervisors, are able to avail themselves of various forms of media, and so forth. Each of those factors conditions the way intellectuals conceive of and express their visions and aspirations.

How does Cheek put all of this together? Moving from concrete social experience out to the abstract again, we come back to his concept of the "ideological moment," which one might think of as akin to the weather, in that it defines the broader parameters within which all life is framed. No more are individuals untethered to institutions than institutions are able to escape the climactic conditions of the day. And if we push further out into the abstract, we must also make room, as Cheek does, for the enduring ideas, grammar, and themes that make up the tradition of the public-minded Chinese intellectual. People operating within the rules of any given institution may be conditioned by the weather outside, that is, by the ideological moment in which they live, but that does not mean they are without agency. To the contrary, the people about whom Cheek writes are equipped with habits of mind, speech, and historical awareness, with tools that empower them and also identify them as belonging to the lineage of the public-minded Chinese intellectual.

Perhaps Cheek's greatest strength is his ability to analyze intellectuals' lives at multiple levels, and to show why it is important to distinguish between the levels while also keeping us focused on how they are connected and mutually constitutive. This is an impressive achievement and Cheek's book will serve as an ongoing point of reference for students of modern Chinese intellectuals. Cheek's teachers' ideas are visible in this book, indeed foundational to the way he approaches his subject and the discipline of history more broadly, but the student here is no mere composite of his advisors' scholarly concerns and sensibilities. In assimilating and recombining their ideas, he has defined and executed his own very important scholarly agenda.

¹ For my previous review of Timothy Cheek's *The Intellectual in Modern Chinese History*, see *The China Journal* 79 (2018): 179-180.

² See, for example, Merle Goldman, *Literary Dissent in Communist China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967); idem, *China's Intellectuals: Advise and Dissent* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981); idem,

From Comrade to Citizen: The Struggle for Political Rights in China (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

³ Carol Lee Hamrin and Timothy Cheek, eds., *China's Establishment Intellectuals* (Routledge, 1987).

⁴ Timothy Cheek, *Propaganda and Culture in Mao's China: Deng Tuo and the Intelligentsia* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997).