

Conversation and Criticism—Response for Roundtable on *The Intellectual in Modern Chinese History*

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Michael Oakeshott, the British political philosopher, famously held that education is a conversation, or rather an invitation to “a conversational encounter” through which we learn to be fully human, that is “to acquire the intellectual and moral habits appropriate to this conversational relationship and thus to make our *début dans la vie humaine*.”¹ I view my effort in *The Intellectual in Modern Chinese History* as just such an invitation to join that broader conversation that constitutes human culture among educated Chinese thinkers and writers concerned with public affairs over “the long century” from the 1890s. I am delighted to find that this roundtable review of that book likewise takes the form of a conversation that Oakeshott would recognize and, I think, endorse. Of course, a worthwhile conversation includes different views and criticism. I would be remiss if I did not quote Deng Tuo on the topic. “Research *is* criticism,” he wrote as Ma Nancun in 1961—invoking Marx’s *A Critique of Political Economy*, “and without critical research there can be no true research.”²

This roundtable review provides the reader with just such a conversation and criticism. I am grateful to Matthew Johnson and *The PRC History Review* for bringing this conversation together, as I am grateful to my five colleagues who have taken considerable time and effort to engage. In the process it takes my effort further and suggests fruitful avenues to extend this particular conversation—our wish to understand and to some degree join in the conversations that engage China’s intellectuals in part to understand China better and in part to face together global problems that confront us all. Matthew has introduced the specific reviews in his remarks, but I will acknowledge here what a treat it is to have such a broad ranging engagement. My older colleagues and friends, Susanne and Peter, have rightly poked and prodded and tested the task we, as elder scholars, share: how to tell a reliable and useful general narrative without unduly distorting that which we recount. Their criticisms are challenging and I have no good answers but only further questions. Sebastian Veg has done me the honor of filleting the text. I have seen no better distillation of the goals, methods, and findings of the book. Tim Weston turns my own methodology—to view intellectuals in their social and historical worlds—on me. Aminda Smith takes encouragement for her own intellectual project, one that takes thought and belief in the Mao period seriously.

Three themes in the conversations offered by my colleagues emerge for me: the challenge of writing narrative history, the price or pitfalls in that effort, and the further stories that emerge. While these themes have general application to historical studies and area studies, the example and the details are Chinese and how we make sense of modern China.

Narrative: May Hayden White Rest in Peace

The challenge to write broader, synthetic narrative histories is one which has come up with increasing frequency among scholars of my generation who have been researching China for all their careers. We began by writing careful, focused,

monographic studies in the 1970s and 1980s. The challenge, as Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik put it to me in a recent email, is that if research scholars do not write more accessible narrative histories that help a general reader make sense of China, then others with less scholarship or intellectual rigor will. For me, the catalyst has been Jung Chang’s and Jon Halliday’s *Mao: The Unknown Story* (2005), a deeply flawed and unreliable account that, despite widespread scholarly criticism and refutation, has sold more books than all other scholarly studies on Mao and is still periodically cited as reliable.³ The challenge is how to address a similarly broad public—or at least give it a good effort—without falling into the same trap of writing what we want to be the case as opposed to submitting to the often-doleful discipline of reporting only what we have reliably found. This mobilized me to bring together colleagues to offer a collection of essays, *A Critical Introduction to Mao* (2010) in the Cambridge University series aimed at schools and general readers. And it prompted me to attempt a general narrative on China’s politically engaged thinkers and writers in the modern period. Merle Goldman has both inspired me (from my undergraduate days, reading *Literary Dissent in Communist China*, to my graduate studies, during which we co-edited a volume with Carol Lee Hamrin on *China’s Intellectuals and the State*).⁴ Merle always wrote vivid, thoughtful, and detailed books on China’s political literary intellectuals. But I felt that she was missing an important part of the story in her search, as I have characterized it, to find “Russian refuseniks with Chinese characteristics.” So around 2010, I set out “to do Merle Goldman right.” The effort nearly defeated me and the criticisms my colleagues raise reflect the sorts of conundrums that made me take five years to get the job done.

Peter Zarrow sets the question: “can we make the story of intellectual life in China’s long twentieth century into a coherent story at all?” He takes a long, hard look at the organizing concept of the book, “ideological moments.” He’s not sure this narrative lens works, or at least he raises a series of problems with it, not least the specter of the *zeitgeist* (or Hegelian “spirit of the age”). Peter is not at all sure the “Three Rs”—reform, revolution, and rejuvenation—as proto-metanarratives of China’s recurring ideological moments—really work to make a sound story. The first one I offer, “Reform” for 1895-1915, does not convince him. He raises all sorts of revolutionaries from that period (most famously members of the Tongmenghui around Sun Yat-sen) and the revolutionary nature of the reforms “reformers” like Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao were promoting. To take on the author of *After Empire: The Conceptual Transformation of the Chinese State, 1885-1924* (2012) on the substance of these political ideas would be foolhardy indeed.⁵ Our conversation continues first with acknowledgement and then with a response. It is true, the case could be made—if one is to give a short “tag” to the dominant intellectual concerns of the day—that “revolution” could describe those years in China as well or better than “reform.” So, why did I choose “reform”? Well, because of the 1898 reforms and the Xinzheng reforms, but

mostly I confess to a weakness for alliteration. I had been using reform, revolution, and rejuvenation for my public talks and thought they were darned snappy. Plus, the non-cyclical reappearance of them in a different order reflected my distrust of easy and pleasing narratives.

This criticism highlights other parts of the “ideological moments” model. For me it is less a *zeitgeist* and more an analytical lens. The 3Rs should be taken lightly—the defining feature of an ideological moment perspective is the *question of the day* (which in his fair-minded critique, Peter lists in his review). For this first period more than “reform,” what engaged all political actors, including thinkers and writers, was: “how to save China? What kinds of change are needed to enable what is important in the world we grew up with to endure and prosper?” (32). This in turn, evokes a key relate item—which in retrospect I do not think I emphasized enough—the concurrent existence not only of conflicting answers to such questions of the day, but the existence of what Benjamin Schwartz warned us to attend to—emerging or minor streams of contrary concerns and questions, quite often presaging the next turn of preoccupying questions. I profiled intellectuals who didn’t fit neatly into each “R”—both Zhang Taiyan and Qiu Jin under “reform” and James Yen and Hu Shi under “revolution” and “rejuvenation.” My intent was to indicate diversity of response under a particular dominant “question of the day” but I could only find one place where I spelled it out (108). The lesson is simple but onerous: beware of your favorite terms and test your conclusions with informed readers as much as possible before publication while welcoming such tests after publication. Publication is, after all, a phase (in the conversation) and not a state.

Peter gamely takes up his own critique and attempts to build a better mousetrap. He concludes, disarmingly, “.... One is soon exhausted.” The exercise is worthwhile, because the challenge of narrative cannot be fully met in any one book. And the exercise raises further questions, particularly the issue of generations. I did not focus on generations, though I address them explicitly as being “cut up” by the focus on ideological moments. This acknowledges that a perfectly good and useful history *focusing* on the role of intellectual generations could be made. Likewise, for Peter’s concern about my disinclination to engage or judge the content of the thought which was the signature work of these intellectuals. My sociology of knowledge-plus-radical contextualism offers some insights, but a sound “great chain of being” account could likewise.

Ideological moments, then, are a lens to thwart the human urge for a satisfying story or at least to force us to question the metanarratives that we bring to the data. Why bother? Because such an approach drives us back to Oakeshott’s goal for education: understanding the meaning others attach to experience, appreciating how they make sense of their situation, being open to being surprised. For example, I did not start with the model of three distinctive forms of the “public sphere” in modern China, but the profound influence of different media and press orders on the intellectuals in each time and place stood out when I was no longer tracking a grand narrative. As for the content of the ideas, whether we agree or approve is a second-order activity for me—intellectually less interesting though morally necessary. That is, as a scholar what I can offer is understanding; as a responsible citizen I plump for what I think is right and just. Ideological moments is one way to attend to, one lens—and certainly not the only one—to compel us to

pay attention to, the radical otherness of the past and of lives lived in other social worlds. Other but not alien; not transparent but knowable. It is an analytical tool for acknowledging radical difference and making sense of it in its own terms (to the degree we can from outside).

Narrative nonetheless returns, albeit somewhat more tentative and tested through the process. I added the focus on “enduring ideas” not only (as Sebastian rightly notes) due to the power of Koselleck’s “history of concepts” approach for making sense of ideas over time (and as a necessary qualification to Lovejoy’s “Great Chain of Being” or Schwartz’s *problématique*) but also in response to readers of early drafts who complained the story of ideological moments had become just a “jumble” of discrete, more or less unrelated packages of concerns, social worlds, and contingent events. I’m afraid history is all of that, but it is more, as well. We have memory, both social and literary, and while what we make of the past is more or less imperfectly reproduced it contributes powerfully—some would say in a defining fashion—to what we do. In the end, I do suggest a linking narrative—but only in retrospect and in the context of other worthwhile narratives: “one has to be struck by the perseverance and dedication of China’s thinkers and writers to use their skills, their social capital, and their life opportunities to serve China—serve China, of course, according to their own lights.” (320) That this narrative that I have come to tell, after subjecting myself to the discipline of ideological moments, is but one in a field of narrative pluralism is not a problem, but an open door. I trust it is a coherent story, but it is not an exclusive one, even for intellectuals in China. Other valuable “stories” include the accounts of Chinese liberalism, Chinese socialism, Chinese exceptionalism in the context of Twentieth Century experiences with science and technologies and modern management that are certainly comparable with other societies, the alienation and fitful reintegration of China’s educated elites and rural society, the centrality of religious life in modern China, and the story of China’s women that does justice to their struggles and achievements (327-8).

The Price of Narrative: Gaps & Blind Spots

There are not only positive challenges to making a broad narrative (what to do), there are endless pitfalls of gaps and blind spots (what has not been done). In this case, only good-hearted criticism can move us forward. Susanne raises several valuable issues, but the one that struck home was my blind spot on the role of feminism in modern Chinese intellectual life. Although I do profile a few notable female intellectuals I do not do justice to this story. This is a blind spot that I most regret, as Susanne names a dozen well-known (to me) female intellectuals of public importance, at least some of whom should have been included to reflect the breadth and depth of Chinese feminism. In fact, my laundry list of other narratives (see above) is an admission of topics not adequately covered in my narrative. I think any reasonably succinct and engaging narrative would be hard pressed to; but that is no excuse for not trying to do better.

Susanne’s core interest and criticism has to do with ideas, and in particular the choice of the three enduring ideas covered in the book: people, Chinese, and democracy. She raises really good alternatives—such as the fraught relationship between China’s educated elites and their state and the role of particularism (or exceptionalism) in prominent ideas of being

Chinese. And she questions if “democracy” really has been such a protean intellectual *problématique* for most Chinese intellectuals. She gives good reasons and salient examples—and the reader will be well served by consulting her writings on these topics. I confess I see these questions and suggestions less of a criticism of the focus on “people” and “Chinese” than as a contribution to taking my initial and incomplete *Begriffsgeschichte* forward. The complex example of Ai Weiwei and the enduring power of the shame of national humiliation are but examples of the first steps of that continuing conversation.

Democracy, however, is another matter. Susanne can’t figure out why I would put “democracy in such a central position?” She rightly notes that the concept, while engaged all through the long twentieth century, was not central to most Chinese intellectuals. I took the choice—and stand by it—because of Merle Goldman. That is, I focused on democracy as a concept because it is the dominant concern of most Western readers. Merle Goldman spoke to our anxieties and hopes for democracy and found an avid readership (not only for that reason, but it helped). I felt the historian’s urge to address a beloved value among my own community that I think operated in far different ways in China. I have sought to show the great variety of interpretations of democracy in China, some of which will not please us, such as Maoist “democratic centralism.” A narrative, I discovered, has to navigate the shoals between fidelity to the past as a foreign country and making that information relevant and interesting to a particular contemporary audience.

I am grateful for these criticisms, apposite and insightful, from my friends. For those using *Intellectuals* in their teaching—or for an optional term essay—I would suggest assigning either Peter’s or Susanne’s commentary and set the student the following task: “how would you handle this? How would you make sense?” We don’t have the answers, but these are great questions, and I am confident that we can all model a worthwhile scholarly approach to the problem of making sense of the past.

The Rest of the Story

The commentaries by Sebastian, Tim, and Aminda take a different tack. Sebastian sets out to make a succinct accounting of the “moving parts” of the book, its theoretical underpinnings, and the sorts of topics it usefully addresses. Yet he contrives to take the conversation further. Indeed, in his presentation and concerns I hear in Sebastian’s voice the dialogue between Emile Durkheim and Charles Seignobos a little over a century ago.⁶ In this rehearsal I play Seignobos—the particularist historian—to the social scientist’s urge to theorize testable patterns of social life. That’s another line of stories worth telling, and which has been told in parts, as in Ericka Evasdottir’s *Obedient Autonomy* (2004) on academic intellectual practice and Eddy U’s *Disorganizing China* (2007), which gives a fresh Weberian reading on Mao’s socialist bureaucracy.⁷ In addition to the points Sebastian raises, casting the same material in such a social science narrative greatly encourages comparison and engagement with human experience in other societies and in other times. In truth, I agree with Sebastian’s advocacy of the usefulness of social theory to our topic and have benefitted from thinking about Bordieu’s *habitus* and cultural capital, Gramsci’s hegemony (indeed, his model of “civil society” through which hegemony operates and as parallel to “political

society” gave me vocabulary to talk about the public arena I saw in China and lies behind my ideas on the three kinds of public spheres across the twentieth century, especially the “directed public sphere”). I even confess to taking on board Foucault’s ideas about counter-narratives, and have also learned from Xu Jilin of Zygmunt Bauman’s conception of intellectuals as either “legislators” or “interpreters.”

However, Sebastian takes the issue further, suggesting the value of engaging what Chinese social scientists have to say about themselves collectively. This I did not undertake, but it is clearly a necessary extension of the conversation. I profile Qin Hui’s critique of Chinese politics and society, but I do not cover Qin’s critique of the “elite victimization” narrative (coming out of the Cultural Revolution) that has contributed to elite hostility to “democracy.” Equally valuable are the insights of the famous writer Ba Jin on intellectual culpability in the Cultural Revolution and the contemporary sociologist, Guo Yuhua on intellectual complicity in contemporary state repression.⁸ Both of these take us in a new direction: guilt and moral culpability. This is a theme I did not highlight but, as Susanne also worries, it is a key part of the complex legacies that make up intellectual life in China today. There is a vigorous and articulate discussion going on in China about these issues today and they are worth engaging. That ongoing conversation can be tracked. David Ownby, Joshua Fogel and I have been running a project to translate a number of contemporary academic public intellectuals.⁹ But the story goes much deeper, as Sebastian suggests: in new forms of intellectual history that ground ideas in social practices and engage histories of knowledge, professions and academic disciplines. In fact, Sebastian Veg himself has made an excellent study of the broader intellectual environment beyond the “establishment” with a forthcoming study of China’s *minjian* intellectuals, which he translates as “grassroots intellectuals.”¹⁰

Tim Weston’s and Mindy Smith’s commentaries are gifts. Tim has applied my own sociology of knowledge approach to me. He accurately traces the formative influence of my teachers, both formal and informal. Most fundamentally, I abide by Kuhn’s research mantra—thought is related to social experience—because it helps me to make sense. Tim’s interest is to make sense of where his colleague and this ambitious effort to narrate intellectual life in modern China come from. My only dissatisfaction is Tim’s passing comment that I assume “Chinese intellectuals constitute a coherent sociological category that can be studied as such.” That sounds like the beginnings of a useful criticism: what suggests that Chinese intellectuals are not? What would we see if we looked at Chinese intellectuals in another way or from another angle? Tim already suggests some of the answers in his ongoing work on Chinese journalists in the Republican period—professionals, activists, and technicians, as well as writers, thinkers and artists—but he’s not telling here.¹¹

Mindy Smith revives the example of Deng Tuo, founding editor of *People’s Daily*, literati high cadre of note, and subject of my previous research. In the process, Mindy addresses Susanne’s regret that in the present book I do not give developed coverage to Deng Tuo and Party “establishment intellectuals” in the 1960s—I felt I’d already had my say. However, Mindy’s recounting is less for the example and more for the approach to Chinese politics in general and to Party intellectuals and the role of propaganda and ideology in particular. Her key takeaway is the need “for taking seriously

and making sense of sustained and sincere intellectual commitments to Maoism." We might say the same for a fresh perspective on what motivated Cai Yuanpei to work for the flawed Beijing regimes after 1911 or what motivated Chen Bulei to serve Chiang Kai-shek. Still, the question of Maoism looms larger for obvious reasons. Mindy's own work powerfully takes this question in intellectual history in to cultural and social history with an eye-opening account of local policing and efforts to "re-educate" lumpenproletarians in Beijing in the 1950s.¹² Indeed, her study pursues the meaning of "people" well beyond the elite and local intellectuals I survey and grounds the concept in the lived experience of ordinary Chinese in the early Mao period. The conversation on an intellectual history of modern China needs to include this, the

experience and meaning making of ordinary Chinese, as well as Chinese intellectuals' own critique of themselves.

It has been an honor to have the sustained attention of my colleagues and a pleasure to enter this round of the conversation with them. We shall no doubt continue ourselves, but it is my hope that *PRC History Review* will continue these roundtables as an important, if neglected, part of our scholarly life and education. Keep alive Oakeshott's invitation to a conversational encounter.

¹ Michael Oakeshott, "A Place of Learning," in *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, ed. Timothy Fuller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 16, 30.

² Ma Nancun 马南村, "'Pipan' zhengjie" 批判正解 [The Correct Understanding of "Criticism"], *Beijing wanbao* 北京晚报, May 14, 1961. This article was part of the "Evening Chats at Yanshan" 燕山夜话 series.

³ See the review essays collected in Gregor Benton and Lin Chun, eds., *Was Mao Really a Monster? The Academic Response to Chang and Halliday's Mao: The Unknown Story* (London: Routledge, 2009).

⁴ Merle Goldman, *Literary Dissent in Communist China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967); Merle Goldman, Timothy Cheek, and Carol Lee Hamrin, eds., *China's Intellectuals and the State: In Search of a New Relationship* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Contemporary China Series, 1987).

⁵ Peter Zarrow, *After Empire: The Conceptual Transformation of the Chinese State, 1885-1924* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012)

⁶ See Emile Durkheim, "Debate on Explanation in History and Sociology" (1908), in Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method: And Selected Texts on Sociology and its Method* (London: Palgrave, 1982), pp. 211-28.

⁷ Ericka E.S. Evasdottir, *Obedient Autonomy: Chinese Intellectuals and the Achievement of Orderly Life* (Vancouver,

BC: UBC Press, 2004); Eddy U, *Disorganizing China: Counter-Bureaucracy and the Decline of Socialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

⁸ Ba Jin's famous essay from 1986, "A Museum of the 'Cultural Revolution'", appears in translation at the website *Virtual Museum of the "Cultural Revolution"*: <http://www.cnd.org/CR/english/articles/bajin.htm> and Guo Yuhua's work is profiled by Ian Johnson, "'Ruling Through Ritual': Interview with Guo Yuhua," *The New York Review of Books* blog: *NYR Daily*, June 18, 2018: <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2018/06/18/ruling-through-ritual-an-interview-with-guo-yuhua/>

⁹ On the translation project, see our website, "Reading the China Dream" <https://www.readingthechinadream.com/>.

¹⁰ Sebastian Veg, *Among the Silent Majority: The Rise of China's Grassroots Intellectuals* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

¹¹ Timothy Weston, "Journalism as a Field of Knowledge in Republican China: Ideas, Institutions and Politics," in *Knowledge Acts in Modern China: Ideas, Institutions, and Identities*, ed. Robert Culp, Eddy U, and Wen-hsin Yeh (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, 2016), 242-272.

¹² Aminda Smith, *Thought Reform and China's Dangerous Classes: Reeducation, Resistance, and the People* (Boulder, CO: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012).