

BOOK REVIEW

Sebastian Veg,

Minjian: The Rise of China's Grassroots Intellectuals (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019)

David Ownby, Université de Montréal

Sebastian Veg's excellent volume focuses on a historical moment—beginning with Wang Xiaobo's rise to prominence in the early 1990s and ending (?) with Xi Jinping's across the boards tightening of ideological discipline since 2013—when certain Chinese intellectuals took advantage of new technological and political possibilities to craft new ways of being an intellectual in Chinese society. *Minjian* or “grassroots” intellectuals were “new” first in comparison with an older model of elite and elitist intellectuals who defined their role primarily in terms of state service. Grounded in Confucian idealism and the moral pedagogy of *jiaohua* (transforming the people through teaching), this habitus readily carried over into the Communist era, and remains alive and well today among certain establishment intellectuals. Wang Xiaobo set the tone for this shift with his assertion that he was part of a “silent majority,” which aligned him with the vulnerable and powerless of society in ways that question the politics of modern and contemporary China, without at the same time proposing another totalistic “fix” that would bring the universe back into harmony. Other *minjian* intellectuals focused their specific talents and energies on a wide range of discrete cultural and social issues, sometimes seeking concrete solutions, other times seeking only a clearer statement of the nature of the problem, often through new means of communication (video or internet).

In some ways, being *minjian* meant exploring the politics of the possible in reform-era China, where money, the market, and the internet, among other things, opened up new spaces for intellectuals. Another possible translation of *minjian* might have been “do-it-yourself,” which suggests the how-to culture of Youtube, where anyone can learn and share anything without paying tuition or tax; this world arrived in China in the 1990s and 2000s with a speed that must have seemed simply giddy in a China heretofore defined by bureaucracy and control. At the same time, no safe space for dissent opened up, and much of the creativity displayed by the intellectuals Veg studied was devoted to the thorny problem of making a difference while staying out of trouble, because once you're labeled a dissenter, all possibilities disappear. For this reason, “grassroots” describes a mindset and a methodology, but not a movement.

One great strength of Veg's volume is that he traces this mindset across a wide range of intellectual fields of activity. After a thorough chapter on Wang Xiaobo's essays and fiction, Veg devotes a chapter to “*Minjian* Historians of the Mao Era,” including both professional intellectuals (Shen Zihua, Gao

Hua, Yang Jisheng) as well as private citizens who sought to document “forgotten” tragedies (prison camps for rightist exiles following the Hundred Flowers, those who died during the Great Leap Forward) and thus to create a history that contests that of the Party-State. Such efforts were carried forward by such journals as *China Through the Ages* (*Yanhuang Chunqiu*) and the website Consensus Net (Gongshiwang), both of which have now been suppressed. Next comes a chapter on the “Rise and Fall of Independent Cinema,” which illustrates how Jia Zhangke, Wu Wenguang, and others innovated in terms of both form and content to produce an independent cinema focused on the vulnerable and the marginalized. This is followed by a chapter on “Rights Lawyers, Academics, and Petitioners,” a lovely demonstration of how lawyers like Pu Zhiqiang and academics like Yu Jianrong sought to intervene in specific situations to produce concrete solutions without calling forth the wrath of the state, an approach which worked until it didn't. Veg's final substantive chapter is on “Journalists, Bloggers and a New Public Culture,” which focuses largely on Han Han and Xu Zhiyuan and the difficulties of being edgy, relevant, and apolitical at the same time. Throughout, Veg takes pains to place these intellectuals and their projects in the cultural and political contexts they faced, showing what they were trying to do and how they tried to go about it. It is fascinating that the state is a presence but not a major actor in many of these contexts. Under Xi Jinping this has changed; Veg is describing a world that, for the moment at least, is disappearing.

Another great strength of Veg's volume is that he does not attempt to force all *minjian* intellectuals into the same mold. If they are all hoping to create a space where the individual can work to improve herself and society—through art, journalism, history-writing, rights-protection—outside of state structures and discourses, they work in different ways and have different visions. Some contradict themselves or fall short of what they hoped to achieve; Veg's chapter on China's bloggers is especially insightful on this front.

I greatly appreciated both the ambition and the modesty of this volume. It took ambition to plunge into the complexities of all of the social worlds explored here, and to bring together figures that otherwise are treated in different academic sub-disciplines. Veg's modesty lies in refusing to lionize his subjects, or to identify them with, for example, the rise of “civil society,” a term laden with teleological overtones. Similarly, Veg is theoretical enough to satisfy those for whom theory is important

(offering an intelligent survey of recent studies and theoretical approaches in an introductory chapter), but I for one greatly appreciated his decision to pay attention to what his intellectuals actually said and did. In fact, I would have loved for his book to have been a website, so I could have read the essays and watched the documentaries Veg discussed without plowing through the footnotes (which Columbia unhelpfully placed at the back of the book). In any event, the volume is a *tour de force* and an excellent contribution to an important field.

Finally, I wonder if Veg's work has left him optimistic or pessimistic about China's future. I much admired the intellectual curiosity, social engagement, and tactical creativity of his grassroots intellectuals. In fact, I find that the "establishment intellectuals" I have been working on over the

past few years, in roughly the same period that Veg covers, are similar in many ways. I think of them as "China Dream-chasers," hoping to provide content for Xi Jinping's slogan without necessarily following in the footsteps of a Zeng Guofan or a Deng Tuo. Does Veg think his grassroots intellectuals could flourish because the CCP was otherwise occupied? Could a less paranoid Party not tolerate quality journalism or artists who care about poor people? Or will the Party inevitably push such people toward "dissent?"

And, as the chief engineer of a translation site (readingthechinadream.com), I wonder which texts Sebastian Veg might like to share with readers in English translation.

Response to David Ownby's Review

Sebastian Veg, EHESS

I am very grateful to David Ownby's for his generous review of *Minjian*. I particularly like his suggestion to translate *minjian* as "do-it-yourself," which echoes studies of the intellectual as bricoleur, and captures the essence of the new mindset.

Can *minjian* intellectuals remain relevant under Xi Jinping? It is true that each of the groups studied in the book – amateur historians, documentarians investigating Chinese society, grassroots lawyers and NGO workers, journalists and bloggers – has come under huge pressure since 2013. In fact they explicitly appear among the subversive groups listed in the "Central Document no. 9" that was leaked in 2013. Subsequently they were targeted in laws – historical nihilism was incorporated as a crime into China's new civil code, a new film law outlaws any form of independent filming and screening, rights lawyers were arrested in the crackdown on 9 July 2015, and the "big V's" have seen their social media accounts shut down, even as more and more users have moved to the private discussion groups on WeChat.

Despite this setback, I do believe that to some extent they have begun to transform the nature of relations between intellectuals and society. The age of Joseph Levenson's scholar-intellectuals passed with the 1989 democracy movement. As Xu Jilin wrote in his 2004 obituary for Li Shenzi which appears in a collection recently edited by David Ownby, "Today we live in a peaceful secular world without scholar-officials, without heroes" (*Rethinking China's Rise*, p. 209). While this passing of an age inevitably evokes feeling of melancholia, it does not have to be seen only in a negative light. Establishment intellectuals were often unrepentant elitists. The recent democratization of knowledge and public speech may have deeper effects within society which continue to ripple and percolate even as state repression goes on. My argument in *Minjian* is not only about "creating a space where the individual can work to improve herself and society," it is also that a crucial site of knowledge production has moved outside the official institutions dedicated to the social validation of knowledge. This shift may have both good and bad sides, but I don't think it can be halted by the current crackdown. Chinese society will continue to diversify and find new opportunities to advance popular or citizen knowledge.

This is what ultimately sets *minjian* intellectuals apart from establishment intellectuals, even as there are phenomena of crossover and hedging by individuals playing off different institutions against each other. *Minjian* intellectuals represent a deeper challenge to the Party-State's institutions because *minjian* representations of society are pluralistic, while China's state knowledge institutions and the intellectuals who operate within them (even those who work critically) often remain in the throes of a monistic epistemology. *Minjian* society is a

mosaic of groups who share only their disenfranchisement, rather than a "correct" theory for changing society. In this sense, although the state may crack down on them, it is hard to describe them as dissidents. Despite the crackdown, some of the groups described in the book continue to operate today, among them are historians, documentarians, or bloggers. Consequently, while we should be lucid about the ongoing repression, I believe we should also remain attentive to pluralism within Chinese society.

Luckily, some of the writings of *minjian* intellectuals have been translated into English, like the selections of essays by Wang Xiaobo and Yu Jianrong, both in special issues of the journal *Contemporary Chinese Thought*. Xu Zhiyong's essay collection has been partially translated into English under the title *To Build a Free China: A Citizen's Journey*. Han Han and Xu Zhiyuan have both published collections of essays in translation. Some of the writing by amateur historians (e.g. Tan Chanxue's book on the *Spark* group and Qian Liqun's preface) would definitely merit translation. It is also the case that women's writings seem to have been less often translated. Among the *minjian* intellectuals, Ai Xiaoming would certainly deserve more readers, while an interesting essay by Guo Yuhua has already appeared on David Ownby's website and her book on rural memory *Shoukuren de jiangshu* is scheduled to be published in English.