

BOOK REVIEW
Paul G. Pickowicz,
A Sensational Encounter with High Socialist China
(Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong Press, 2019)

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The study of the history of socialist movements has regained momentum since the Financial Crisis of 2007-08. As people become increasingly aware of the grave consequences of the concentration of wealth among the few, scholars are debating the meaning and significance of past socialist experiments. The question at the heart of this project is to what extent the lessons of these experiments can help us rethink the social, political, and economic arrangements under the current neo-liberal world order. In this debate, the case of Chinese socialism is particularly useful. To some, China had achieved “High Socialism” in the early 1970s and become “the most revolutionary and most ideologically advanced socialist society in world history” (19).

The authenticity of such a claim is a question of global concern. Some scholars believe it was a fabrication of the Chinese propaganda department. These scholars often write about their own disillusionment, in light of declassified archival sources and oral history materials that reveal the brutalities of Chinese communist movements, especially the Anti-Rightist Campaign and the Cultural Revolution. But for historian Paul Pickowicz, who visited China as a member of the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars (CCAS) delegation in June and July 1971, this “High Socialist” China was neither a historical master narrative nor an ideological fabrication, but an individual, sensational experience. *A Sensational Encounter with High Socialist China* documents his experience. The visit was the first one by American scholars since the founding of the People’s Republic. Writing about this encounter, Pickowicz offers a colorful representation and a fascinating retelling of his memories in the format of a photographic essay. For him, “High Socialism” in China can be grasped through a real-life encounter.

As a film historian, Pickowicz borrows theatrical terms to write about his experience and structures the book in the form of a play. He first introduces the origins of the visit in the opening section, aptly titled “Overture,” which is followed by “Setting the Stage” and “Opening Numbers.” In these two sections, he sets up the historical context for this historic visit. The rest of the book is divided into five Acts, each associated with one aspect of his sensational encounter with high socialism: touch, sound, taste, look, and smell.

Pickowicz starts with the tactile dimensions of high socialist China. In Act I, he discusses the symbolic meanings of various forms of bodily contact, from the touching in a friendly

basketball game, to the daily hand shakings, to participating in manual labor. He then writes about what he heard during this visit in Act II. He talks about revolutionary tunes, various dialects, the sounds of gunfire from the drills of militias, and stories about the violent conflicts of 1968 that students at Tsinghua University shared with him. The taste of food is another theme of his sensational encounter with China. Yet eating in China is less about the sheer experience of food, and accordingly, in the third act, Pickowicz shares a list of memorable banquets and household parties that he attended during the visit, from those hosted by government officials in urban centers to the ones in rural communes. In Act IV, he records his visual experiences, from observing medical practices where traditional Chinese acupuncture was being applied during surgery, to watching the model ballet *Red Detachment of Women* on various occasions. From seeing to being seen, he fondly remembers how CCAS members wandered into back streets where huge crowds of local people who had rarely seen any foreigners followed and gazed at them. In the last act, Pickowicz writes about smell. This is not only a record of the real odors of daily life, such as that of cigarettes, but also a reflection upon symbolic meaning. The latter involves his personal effort to engage in “socialist practice,” i.e., hand-washing his own clothes.

To conclude the story, Pickowicz adds a brief account of the return of the delegation to Hong Kong in “Curtain Call: Hong Kong Again.” In the section “Encore” he discusses his continued relationship with China in the following years. The last part of the book gets beyond his personal memory by including a selection of photos taken by Bill Joseph and Steve MacKinnon, members of the second CCAS visit to China from March 10 to April 14, 1972.

The book is full of exciting moments, fondly remembered, as a young American scholar encountered High Socialist China -- from his participation in manual labor in the countryside to the awkward yet amusing episode of his laundry emergency, when, trying to find a way to dry his hand-washed underwear, he mistook a delegation of women revolutionary fighters from South Vietnam for hotel workers and asked them for help. Pickowicz’s language is so intimate that reading this book feels like having a relaxed conversation with an old friend. Of course, the climax of the historic encounter came on July 19, 1971, when the scholars attended a surprise meeting with senior

leaders Zhou Enlai 周恩來, Zhang Chunqiao 張春橋, and Yao Wenyuan 姚文元, at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing.

The CCAS visit, as Pickowicz was acutely aware, was staged. The Chinese government meticulously arranged the “stages” and prepared the “scripts” for this visit calculating “the precise messages about high socialist society that should be conveyed and the various ways in which those messages ought to be communicated” (27). Yet the author contends that one has to place the momentary experience within “a much larger socialist stage performance that had been unfolding for two years and had nothing to do with our visit” (27). At the same time, members of the delegation were not giving up on their subjectivity during the visit, and were also actively participating in this theatrical experience as performers (35). Despite their overall enthusiasm, they questioned the “wasteful decadence” of reception banquets, and they were also rightfully concerned with the lack of gender equality in social and political life (89–90; 106).

This book is deeply personal. The entire account is based on materials that trip participants gathered, including Pickowicz’s diary and the photos that he and other CCAS members took during this and the following visit. The author makes no attempt to hide his personal involvement. He made the initial contact that made the visit possible, and he was already curious about the Chinese revolution before the trip. As a “concerned” young China scholar, he considered it “absurd” to be “an objective and professionally detached ethnographer” during the visit (27). He was consciously performing as an “actor” with an expectation of “having the Chinese people I met learn about me.” He and other CCAS members identified themselves as “friends of the Chinese people” and actively played this role for their audience (28).

The visual element is a critical component and a unique characteristic of the book. As socialist memories are quickly fading away, some of these photos will certainly arouse the reader’s interest in high socialist China. Foreign observers often see early-1970s China as an isolated country, but images such as a mural emphasizing anti-imperialist solidarity among Asian nations in a traditional Chinese garden in Suzhou (21) or the group’s meeting with Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the leader of the Cambodian government in exile in Beijing (32), disclose a fascinating dimension of socialist China’s interaction with Asian nations and its promotion of anti-colonial internationalism.

The book is also a creative product of collaboration. Some of the visual materials come from Pickowicz’s private collection and others from previously published materials. To acquire, document, process, and exhibit these materials, both Xi Chen, the Chinese Studies Librarian at the Geisel Library of the University of California, San Diego and the team at the City University of Hong Kong Press offered significant help. To acknowledge their assistance, Pickowicz invited librarian Xi Chen to write a preface for the book, a rare but laudable example of collaboration between historians and librarians.

Thanks to its accessible language, colorful images, and inviting stories, the book appeals to a wide range of audiences, not just students of China, but also general readers who want to educate themselves about Chinese socialism and Sino-American exchanges. In college classrooms, it will be excellent complementary reading for courses ranging from lower-level Chinese history surveys to upper-division seminars on Sino-American relations and scholarly exchanges in the global Cold War.

As an historian experiencing a historic moment, Pickowicz’s account has great value for researchers as well. From the many significant details in the book, I will choose just two examples to highlight the book’s value as a historical source. The first example concerns the Lin Biao Incident of September 13, 1971, a mysterious event in Chinese history. Official party propaganda promotes the story as a failed coup d’état. In his account, Pickowicz reveals that Zhou Enlai might have already signaled the cleansing of Lin Biao during his reception with CCAS visitors that summer. This is important because, at the time of the meeting, Lin was still formally the designated successor to Mao, and, to foreign observers, there were no signs indicating his imminent demise.

The second example concerns U.S.-China relations. There was no direct contact between China and the US during the early Cold War period. However, Pickowicz’s account reminds us that unofficial channels of communication remained active. He studied China as a young researcher in Hong Kong. While working at the Universities Service Center (USC) sponsored by U.S. foundations, he was able to further acquire information about China through local bookstores, non-governmental organizations, and publishers. Some of them clearly had direct links to the PRC and served as its front organizations in the British colony. It was through these channels that Pickowicz and his friends received an invitation to visit China. Furthermore, this story also highlights the significant role of Hong Kong as a crucial point of information exchange in the global Cold War.

In lieu of a conclusion, I would like to raise three questions that derive from my primary interest in intellectual history and historiography.

1) To what extent has the historical consciousness that Pickowicz has developed in his career reshaped the memory of the visit? He must have been aware of the history of senses as an approach of scholarly inquiry. Specifically, when it comes to the adoption of the five senses as a way to structure the book, how much are they out of his desire to tell the story, and how much are they the orderly constructs by which the author adopts to historicize often disorderly individual memories?

2) Pickowicz has already mentioned that he received help on how to process photo images and organize archival sources. He also thanks those who offered feedback at an “exciting and innovative” University of Edinburgh workshop. I wonder if he could elaborate on how the various “non-traditional approaches” have helped him to produce this book, and how

these interdisciplinary and collaborative methods excite and inspire him as a historian.

3). How about the existing literature? By writing this book, Pickowicz has simultaneously become the subject of the story and the object of other people's study. Apparently, he chose to stay in former role in the book, but I wonder how much he welcomes the latter role. Furthermore, there have been several published works on the CCAS visit such as *My First Trip to China* (Hong Kong University Press, 2012) edited by Kin-ming

Liu and *The End of Concern* (Duke, 2019) written by Fabio Lanza. While writing his own book, did he have these publications in mind? If he had read them, how did other people's narratives affect his own understanding of the historical events?

Response

Paul Pickowicz, UCSD

First, I want to thank Prof. Fan for his close reading of my book and for the interesting questions he has raised. I deeply appreciate his efforts. I'll offer some brief reflections here in response to his questions.

1. Naturally, all of us are products of our own ever-evolving, zigzag intellectual development. Thus, not surprisingly, all my subsequent experiences as a researcher and as a frequent long- and short-term visitor to China have shaped the way I remember. My book is a present-day reflection on a highly personal experience that took place nearly fifty years ago. I encourage scholars of China, including PRC citizens based in China itself, to reflect on the history of their own personal interactions with the people of China. In this book, my goal was to concentrate on two primary sources, my personal diary and the many photos I took. I hadn't looked closely at these sources for many decades. But one thing was absolutely clear to me: I did not want to write a conventional (and boring) travelogue told in strict chronological order. ("I went to Guangzhou, then I went to Shanghai, then I went to Suzhou, etc., etc.") I was keenly aware that some China scholars have been doing innovative research on one or more of the five senses. This is good, because I think we tend to privilege what we "see," and underappreciate the other senses. When I went through my detailed diary and my hundreds of photos, I was surprised by how many references there were to touch, smell, taste, and sound. It was an interesting way to break away from a rigid chronological approach. Each chapter jumps around in terms of chronology. Using the five senses was indeed a useful way to organize a jumble of random data.

2. I've always been housed in our History Department, but I do in fact see myself as someone who has benefited from interdisciplinary, collaborative and non-traditional approaches—including close work with librarians. That is why I decided to organize my reflection on the five senses in terms of "performance." I wanted to question the notion that scholars of China function as detached and utterly objective observers of "research subjects." We are all performers. I decided to focus on three productions: the mega-production that was going on throughout China at the time (the Cultural Revolution), the smaller, more focused production that was enacted every day for the benefit of my friends and me, and our own performances staged in connection with our passionate desire to engage in "people's diplomacy."

In conceptual terms, I also wanted the book to focus on a very specific historical moment in order to avoid the problem of generalizing in stereotypic terms about a far-away place called "China." The term I deployed ("high socialist") is not a term

used by anyone I met in China in 1971. I used the term for a specific reason. The idea was to talk about the five senses and the various theatrical performances during a very specific period of time. My point? China was not the same before or after that time. My definition of the timeframe of "high socialist China" is the period from the Ninth Party Congress in April 1969 to the death of Lin Biao in September 1971—just after my visit to China ended. Furthermore, I do not define that high socialist moment in material terms. I define it in subjective terms. It was all about claims of self-identity made by the top PRC leadership and its spokespersons. I am not saying that China was in fact "the most revolutionary and most ideologically advanced socialist society in world history." I am saying that the leadership (with Mao and his "closest comrade in arms" Lin Biao at the helm) made such claims and self-identified in that manner.

3. I agree that for professional scholars it is challenging to write about oneself and unusual to be the subject of someone else's research. Still, I encourage scholars of China to reflect on their own experiences in China and among the people of China. Our encounters are part of the history of China. That is why Perry Link, Jeremy Murray, and I published *China Tripping: Encountering the Everyday in the People's Republic* (2019). In that book we manage to get a wide range of China scholars to talk not about their formal research but about their fascinating personal experiences travelling and living in China. *A Sensational Encounter with High Socialist China* is not an effort to build on existing literature. It attempts to experiment with a new genre for reflecting on one's own long-term and necessarily complicated experiences as a practicing China scholar. All of us evolve over time. China itself is constantly evolving. I am not a huge fan of the autobiographical and reminiscence genres. When I started experimenting with the five senses, theatricality, and high socialism as a three-part framework, I had little idea where it would take me. I want to thank Fan for having fun with my book. I hope that he and everyone else associated with the *PRC History Review* will be tempted to write about their own ongoing encounters with the fascinating subject (China) to which we have devoted our professional lives.

For those who would like more detail, please see the extended interview Lu Hanchao conducted with me several months ago: *The Chinese Historical Review*, vol. 27, no.1 (May 2020).