

The Promise of PRC History

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Among the most promising developments in the study of contemporary China has been the booming migration of historians across the 1949 divide to pioneer the new and dynamic field of the history of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Only a few years ago post-1949 China was regarded as the exclusive terrain of social scientists (political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, economists, and psychologists). Now, lured by an array of previously inaccessible primary sources, a growing number of historians have embarked on the study of the PRC.¹ To date, the main focus of their research has been on grassroots society in the pre-Great Leap Forward period, but we can anticipate both temporal and sectoral expansion as the field matures.²

An outstanding example of work being produced by historians of the PRC with the aid of heretofore untapped archival and other sources is Zhang Jishun's *Yuanqu de dushi* (A city displaced: Shanghai in the 1950s).³ The core chapters of Professor Zhang's book are case studies of (1) the transformation of Shanghai neighborhoods, (2) the role of the urban underclass in the PRC's first general election, (3) the conversion of newspapers from private to public media, (4) the accommodation of educated elites to the new political order, and (5) the influence of cinema on the formation of a mass urban culture. While the Shanghai Municipal Archives provide the bulk of Professor Zhang's primary sources, she supplements these official materials with interviews, newspaper accounts, visual media, and other sources. The result is a more personal and human view of the effects of the Communist revolution on China's largest and most cosmopolitan city than previous scholarship had afforded. Understood from the vantage point of Shanghai residents who lived through the initial years of the PRC, including workers and shanty-town dwellers as well as journalists and intellectuals, Professor Zhang's illuminating account demonstrates that 1949 marked not only a moment of rupture and new beginnings but also a continuation of many earlier practices. Moreover, different members of Shanghai society -- even two brothers with virtually identical family and educational backgrounds such as Huang Jiade and Huang Jiayin -- could interpret and respond to revolutionary initiatives in surprisingly different ways.

¹ See <http://prchistory.org/> for evidence of this trend.

² Kirby, "Continuity and Change in Modern China," was a seminal work, stressing similarities between the PRC and the Republic of China prior to the mainland's departure from the German/Soviet model of economic planning with Mao's launch of the Great Leap Forward. While Kirby examined state industrial policy, more recent work has focused on local society.

³ Zhang Jishun, *Yuanqu de dushi*.

Zhang Jishun's nuanced findings are consistent with recent historical research by Western scholars that stresses remarkable variation in the consolidation of Mao's revolution. Jeremy Brown and Paul Pickowicz summarize the consensus of this scholarship in their edited volume, *Dilemmas of Victory: The Early Years of the People's Republic of China*: "The era was many different things for different people in different places." As a result of this diversity, Brown and Pickowicz conclude that "it is unwise to generalize about China during the early 1950s," arguing instead that the multiplicity of experiences "makes it impossible to provide a definitive answer to the question of whether the early 1950s represented a relatively peaceful 'honeymoon' or an ominous foreshadowing of disasters to come. . . ." ⁴ A recent collection of historical work on the Mao era goes even further, uncovering "a complex, particularistic web of interests in every social context" that causes the editors to wonder "whether 'Mao's China' existed at all." ⁵

Privy to a wealth of primary sources unavailable to their predecessors, the current generation of PRC historians refuses to paint the early years of the PRC with broad brush strokes (rejecting both the color *red* to suggest that era's bright "revolutionary" potential and the color *black* to signify its darkening "totalitarian" specter, as Zhang Jishun has vividly characterized the stark narrative choices of an earlier generation of scholars). Zhang Jishun's *Yuanqu de dushi* offers much detail and insight into the transition from *pre*-1949 society, noting, for example, the role of those with compromised political backgrounds in assuming grassroots leadership positions under the new PRC regime. But the book has less to say about continuities (and discontinuities) between the 1950s and the years that followed, including both the later Mao and the post-Mao eras. ⁶

Reticence on the part of the current generation of historians to advance overarching historical arguments on the basis of their detailed archival research is in my view regrettable. Such a stance on the part of PRC-based scholars is certainly understandable and excusable in light of political constraints, but the reluctance of many Western historians to tackle the question of the long-term significance of early PRC experiences, notwithstanding their diverse and complex character, seems less justifiable. If the main professional responsibility of social scientists is to explain patterns of variation in human behavior, then surely a major obligation of historians is to connect the past and the present. Historians of twentieth-century Shanghai are

⁴ Brown and Pickowicz, *Dilemmas of Victory*, 7-8.

⁵ Brown and Johnson, *Maoism at the Grassroots*, 5, 15.

⁶ In other writings, Professor Zhang has pointed to intriguing parallels with later developments. She has noted, for example, similarities between the demands raised by Shanghai workers in the first general election and demands put forward by the Workers' General Headquarters during the Cultural Revolution. Zhang Jishun, "Creating 'Masters of the Country' in Shanghai and Beijing," 1071-1091. She has also suggested continuity in the "American dream" of global education, once championed by Shanghai's St. John's University prior to its closure in 1952, and then reimagined with the founding of New York University Shanghai sixty years later. Zhang Jishun, "Xu'er," 1-4. But these fascinating connections are not pursued in her 2015 book.

uniquely qualified to provide informed answers to a key question: What was the impact of that city's 1950s experience on China's subsequent political and developmental trajectory?

Indeed, Professor Zhang raises precisely this issue in the introductory chapter of her book, where she poses a series of challenging queries: "As the birthplace and gathering place of both the Chinese working class and the Chinese capitalist class, what role did Shanghai play in the formation of Communist legitimacy?" "Did the historical justification for the Chinese revolution, once the Communists took power, logically morph into regime legitimacy?" "Was 1950s Shanghai the starting point of the pathway to Mao's continuing revolution or did the period manifest a multiplicity of alternative development possibilities?"⁷ Unfortunately, however, her book does not contain a concluding chapter providing answers to these key questions raised in the introduction.

No one concerned with the fate of the People's Republic of China can avoid the pressing issues of regime legitimacy or the influence of the revolutionary heritage of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in shaping its future trajectory.⁸ Social scientists are generally inclined to attribute the impressive resilience of China's Communist regime to political institutions that, for the most part, were put in place in the early years of PRC rule.⁹ Much careful historical work remains to be done, however, to determine the degree to which such institutions survived Mao's disruptive mass campaigns to constitute sources of stability (let alone legitimacy) in the post-Mao era. For Mao himself, these institutions were inherently susceptible to ossification and stagnation and thus required periodic mass rectification in order to escape reification.

China today is a world apart from China under Mao in many respects, yet some of the central tensions and contradictions that emerged during that critical period of PRC history remain unresolved. In the 1950s, state-sponsored efforts to establish Party control, win popular support, and effect societal transformation alternated between bottom-up mass mobilization (associated above all with Mao Zedong) and top-down Party organization (associated in particular with Liu Shaoqi). Social scientists studying the period were absorbed with a critical question whose answer would, however, ultimately require a long-term historical perspective: Which approach – mobilization or organization – was the more effective in bringing about lasting social and political change? Political scientist John Gardner, studying the Wufan Campaign in Shanghai, concluded that mass mobilization was "extremely successful in weakening bourgeois status and power" even though it proved unable to root out corruption inside the Party itself.¹⁰ Political scientist Kenneth Lieberthal, on the basis of his case study of Tianjin during the same period, pointed to fundamental weaknesses in Mao's mass campaign

⁷ Zhang Jishun, *Yuanqu de dushi*, 14-15.

⁸ My own effort to put forth some preliminary ideas on these issues can be found in *Anyuan*.

⁹ On the durability of the People's Republic of China, see Nathan, "Authoritarian Resilience," 6-17. A contrary view can be found in Perry and Heilmann, *Mao's Invisible Hand*. Perry and Heilmann trace the PRC's resilience to practices (as opposed to institutions) developed during the CCP's revolutionary rise to power.

¹⁰ Gardner, "The *Wu-fan* Campaign in Shanghai," 479.

approach. Lieberthal argued that top-down organization was more successful than bottom-up mobilization in bringing about social transformation, concluding that “a strategy of relatively steady change under the firm control of the CCP and its organizations is probably the most effective way to change Chinese society fundamentally over the long run.”¹¹

The question of the long-term effects of Maoist mass campaigns holds both comparative and contemporary relevance. Specialists on India’s economic development, for example, credit Mao’s mass literacy and public health mobilization campaigns with laying the social foundations for a post-Mao economic takeoff that has permitted China in recent years to surge ahead of its South Asian neighbor.¹² That a verdict on the enduring implications of the complex 1950s experience remains both timely and contested is apparent in contemporary debates concerning the character and conduct of current China’s anticorruption drive, with its shifting admixture of mass denunciations, self-criticism, and intra-Party rectification.

Thanks to the advantages of hindsight, historians of the PRC are better positioned to hazard answers to the key questions that attracted but eluded an earlier generation of social scientists. Yet many of these historians, especially among the younger generation in the West, opt instead for what they proudly characterize as a “school of ‘Sinological garbology’ (the collection and study of ‘rubbish materials,’ or *laji cailiao*).”¹³ Intoxicated by the wealth of newly discovered sources that allow for the investigation of everyday life, they celebrate a division of labor in which social scientists remain free to explore the “commanding heights” of the Chinese state and its policies, while historians grub for diversity in the dustbins of grassroots society. To relegate PRC historians to this janitorial role seems to me unfortunate.

To be sure, there are important disciplinary differences between historians and social scientists. Thus, in pursuing the broader lessons of the PRC experience, most social scientists will prefer to conduct rigorous case comparisons, whereas historians may favor rich chronological narratives. But in my view it would be a major missed opportunity for the new generation of PRC historians, having taken a bold step across the 1949 divide, to shy away from painting their interpretations on a broad canvas simply because the newfound availability of grassroots sources permits them to do so. Fulfilling the promise of PRC history calls for rising above “garbology” to engage seriously with the big questions posed, but necessarily left unanswered, by a previous generation of social scientists.

Notes on Contributor

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¹¹ Lieberthal, *Revolution and Tradition in Tientsin*, 190.

¹² Bhagwati, *India in Transition*, 20-21; Dreze and Sen, *India*, 85-86.

¹³ Brown and Johnson, *Maoism at the Grassroots*, 4.

latest books include *Mao's Invisible Hand: The Political Foundations of Adaptive Governance in China*, coedited with Sebastian Heilmann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); *Anyuan: Mining China's Revolutionary Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); and *What is the Best Kind of History?*, coedited with Chen Hongmin (Hangzhou: Zhejiang University Press, 2015).

Glossary

Wufan 五反

laji cailiao 垃圾材料

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