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# *Rethinking the Chinese Revolution*

## **An Introduction**

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We open here with a contribution from Mark Selden, who authored what was arguably the most important scholarly study of the 1970s on the pre-victory Communist movement. Selden starts by providing the background context for his *The Yanan [Yan'an] Way*. He reviews the writings of the first generation of wartime journalists, then the Cold War view of the Communist victory as the conspiracy of a small number manipulated from Moscow, then Chalmers Johnson's counterargument for a mass basis in anti-Japanese nationalism, and finally his own effort to capture the vision, style, and spirit of the Communists in Yan'an through his "Yenan Way."

Selden's rethinking of the Communist movement in Yan'an presented here, it may be said, is informed above all by the evident authoritarianism of the Communist Party, which climaxed in the antidemocratic Tiananmen massacres of June 4, 1989. Selden acknowledges that the roots of authoritarianism may already be found in "the dark side" of Yan'an, in the beginnings of the cult of Mao, the practice of "rectification," and the purge of an individual such as Wang Shiwei. Selden maintains, however, that the Yan'an way also held out a much more democratic promise. This was the Party's most egalitarian/populist, participatory, and innovative period. It took its own mass line seriously, if only because popular support was essential for its struggle against a stronger enemy. How else can one explain the Party's subsequent success?

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This symposium is the outgrowth of a conference on "Rethinking the Chinese Revolution" held at UCLA on May 8, 1993. I thank especially the other panelists not appearing in this volume for their contributions to the discussions: Perry Anderson, Jack Goldstone, Tony Saich, and Lyman van Slyke.*

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The second essay, by Joseph Esherick, is a preview of his important book in progress. Esherick provides in his "Ten Theses" format a summary of recent scholarly findings of others and some preliminary findings of his own, plus his own current thoughts on the nature of the Communist movement and the hows and whys of its victory. The essay provides glimpses of the kinds of new archival materials that have become available during the last decade. It may be considered a brief synopsis of the current state of the field on the subject.

Among other provocative observations, Esherick argues that the revolution was for most people not a "liberation" but a replacement of one system of domination by another. Such a conception, he says, would remove the need to see the postrevolutionary regime as a "betrayal." Peasants, Esherick also suggests, might have been drawn to the Communist movement above all by their perception that the Communists were "fair" (*gongdao*). He calls also for a "historical anthropology" of the Communist Party to define its modes of domination, to see it as a part of the larger society rather than as a reified and unitary entity. Careful readers, especially those working in the subject of the pre-victory Communist movement, will find other interesting insights large and small.

The third essay, by French historian Edward Berenson, was initially solicited for this volume not because of any intention to single out the French Revolution for comparison with the Chinese Revolution. Comparative studies seem to me to have had little influence on our field in terms of their specific observations about China. That is in a way not really surprising, given the inevitable empirical and discursive gaps. What has been profoundly influential on China studies is rather the changing intellectual tendencies and approaches of other fields, especially European studies. That too should not be surprising, considering that all of us China scholars work and teach within the Western intellectual context. Scholarship on the French Revolution seems particularly instructive because it is so much a pacesetter of general historiographic trends. An overview of the literature on that revolution both reviews and previews for us similar tendencies in our own field.

Berenson tells the story, first, of the deromanticizing of the revolution by its reconceptualization to include not just 1789 but also "the Terror." The French Revolution thus becomes not just the revolution-

ary overthrow of the old regime but also the Terror to which the tide of revolution gave rise. An analogous tendency for the Chinese Revolution would be to view 1949 in conjunction with the Cultural Revolution.

Most of Berenson's article recounts the historiographic turn from "the social interpretation" of the old Marxist-inspired social history to what might well be called "the cultural interpretation" of the new cultural history. The searchlight of scholarship has turned from studies of the social-economic origins of the revolution to its cultural origins. In the hands of François Furet, that has meant the turn to language-rhetoric and political philosophy. For others, it has meant the study of symbols and of popular culture.

Our field, of course, has seen a similar decline from favor of simple Marxist interpretations, even while such interpretations remained powerfully important as the ideological view of official China. Our field is also beginning to witness more works of the cultural studies variety, even though it characteristically has adopted new approaches some years later than a pacesetter field such as that of the French Revolution. Many more studies from cultural perspectives are sure to come.

However, lest the reader think that I am equating the fashionable with the more advanced and desirable, let me echo Berenson's cautionary note. "The linguistic turn" led by Furet in studies of the French Revolution has come perilously close to a complete disregard of social and economic dimensions and to a replacement of the old social-economic determinism with a new linguistic determinism. Such a cautionary note may seem too early to sound for our field, which has yet to see the full development of cultural studies. On the other hand, perhaps our field can take advantage of its being a latecomer to avoid some of the more obvious pitfalls for the pacesetter.

For younger scholars eager to jump on the bandwagon of fashionable cultural studies, I would like to point to the instructive example of the recent writings of Lynn Hunt. Her influential 1989 essay calling for a "New Cultural History" takes as its main foil social history (Hunt, 1989: Introduction). Her 1994 book with Joyce Appleby and Margaret Jacob, however, takes as its main foil the new "absolutism" of Derrida and Foucault, of radical deconstructionism and postmodernism (Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, 1994: esp. chap. 6). In Hunt's view of

current historiographic tendencies, in other words, the pendulum of reaction against the old social history has already swung too far.

For our field, the first lesson to be drawn from French Revolution studies, I believe, is that we would do well to reconsider the standard conception of the Chinese Revolution in past historical scholarship. We have thought in terms primarily of the political dimension, the replacement of the Guomindang government by the Communist government. The revolution thus becomes mainly the story of the hows and whys of the Communist victory. It centers on the story of the Communist movement from the founding of the Party in 1921 to its triumph in 1949. That is how this symposium was initially conceived and organized, and it is the main concern of the Selden and Esherick pieces and of the scholarship they review.

Esherick, to be sure, calls explicitly for crossing the 1949 divide, and Selden has contributed much himself to post-1949 studies. However, whereas post-1949 has most assuredly shaped the questions they ask in their essays, it has not been made into a part of the subject of their inquiry. In rethinking the Chinese Revolution, I believe it would be instructive to think of the pre- and post-1949 parts of the revolution as one piece, making up a single subject of inquiry.

Instead of conceptualizing the revolution as ending in 1949, we might include in our conception the big changes that came after 1949: full-scale Land Reform, which redistributed some 43% of the cultivated land in the country; the "Socialist Reconstruction," which nationalized almost all urban private property and collectivized almost all rural private property; and the Cultural Revolution, which launched a full-scale assault on traditional culture in an attempt to create a new revolutionary culture. Can we really conceptualize the revolution as just the political story without the social-economic and cultural revolutions? The pre-1949 period is the crucially formative one, to be sure. But are not these other big revolutionary changes at least as important as the winning of political power for our understanding of the revolution?

A second "lesson" from French Revolution studies is the need for us to bridge the divide also between what might be termed *objectivist* and *representationist* studies, between an emphasis on mainly society-economy and/or political institutions and actions and an emphasis on mainly intellectual and cultural subjects. Furet and others have demonstrated the power of discursive and cultural analyses for illuminat-

ing the French Revolution. We could use similar studies in our field. But such studies should not be expected to be the last words on the subject, for the French Revolution field itself is clearly poised now for a synthesis of the newer cultural history with the older social history. We might wish to look to do the same.

My own piece here is a tentative venture into the two uncharted directions of joining the pre- and post-1949 periods, and the representational and objective realities, of the Revolution. I look at the single topic of class struggle in rural China, as both representation and practice, from about 1946 to about 1976. My theme is a growing disjunction between a rising hegemonic discourse of class struggle and the objective realities of class struggle. I attempt to throw new light on both the Land Reform and the Cultural Revolution by looking at them as one piece.

My proposal here is for an alternative conception of the Chinese Revolution: to center on the revolutionary tide from the beginning of large-scale Land Reform in 1946 through "Socialist Reconstruction" to the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976. Such a formulation seeks to close the gap that continues to separate historians from our social science colleagues who work mainly in the post-1949 period. In emphasizing both representational and objective realities, I also intend to invite a dialogue with colleagues who work mainly with issues of thought and culture. "Rethinking the Chinese Revolution" should be a central concern not just of historians or of those studying society-economy and politics but of all scholars working on modern China. This symposium, hopefully, will be the beginning of a series of discussions to come.

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