Introduction: In Search of PRC History

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In a perhaps apocryphal exchange in 1972, when Henry Kissinger asked Zhou Enlai what he thought the outcome of the French revolution had been, Zhou responded that it was too early to say. This remark has taken on a life of its own precisely because it rings so true. The big, messy, contested phenomena that are revolutions inspire passionate reactions – both for and against – and each generation has a strong tendency to filter its perception of a given revolution through the political, social and epistemological concerns of its own time. This offers both paradox and opportunity. At present, the great political-social revolutions are largely out of favour. Their animating grand ideologies, teleological imperatives, frank human rights abuses and consequent historical narratives have become historically and epistemologically at least suspect if not downright discredited in a post-Cold War world of globalization and market triumphalism. However, now is an enormously vibrant time for the study of the history of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in its phase of active revolution between 1949 and 1976. In addition to the collection here, there are two other edited volumes on PRC history that have either recently been published or are due to be published in the near future.[1]

While political scientists were intensely interested in the revolutionary PRC when revolutionary Maoism was an ongoing concern in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, historians have only relatively recently begun to work on the PRC. One of the pioneering pieces to "cross the divide of 1949" was William Kirby's 1990 article on continuity and change in the ethos of technocrats at mid-century. Since then further historical work has confirmed the suggestions made then: that there were substantial continuities between the Nationalist and Communist eras, and the revolutionary divide of 1949 was much less of the sharp break than had always been assumed by the rhetoric of both Right and Left. In realms as different as the technocratic developmental project, the origins and evolution of the *danwei* (单位, work unit), industrial policy, worker's rights and notions of the family, historians and political scientists have implicitly confirmed de Tocqueville's working hypothesis: that the revolution does indeed complete the work of the old regime.[2] The past ten years have seen the publication of monographs on PRC history dealing with such topics as the

1. Joseph Esherick, Paul Pickowicz and Andrew Walder (eds.). *China's Cultural Revolution as History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006) and Paul Pickowicz and Jeremy Brown (eds.), *Dilemmas of Victory: The Early Years of the People's Republic of China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, forthcoming, 2007).

2. A partial bibliography would consist of William Kirby, "Continuity and change in modern China: economic planning on the Mainland and on Taiwan," *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 24 (1990), Susan Glosser, *Chinese Visions of Family and State, 1915–1953* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), Xiaobo Lü and Elizabeth Perry, *Danwei: The Changing Chinese Workplace in Comparative Perspective*

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political biography of a leading cultural cadre (1997), interaction of state and society over the revolutionary family (2000), and the communist takeover of urban areas in Jiangnan (2003).[3] The trickle of articles on PRC history that began in the 1990s has become a thriving sub-field in its own right, covering the regime's classification and categorization of intellectuals, the revolutionizing of the cultural artifacts of dance, museums and parades, and reconsidering a huge range of topics particular to the Cultural Revolution. Much more in the way of monographs based on this research can be expected in the near future.[4] Finally, a group of historians in the PRC itself have begun, however tentatively and carefully, to explore post-1949 topics on social and political history, including sensitive political campaigns such as the Campaign to Suppress Revolutionaries and the "Little" Leap of 1960.[5]

Depoliticization, Sources and Internationalization

Why, then, is there at present such an outpouring of work on the history of the PRC? There are three interlocking factors that have made possible this contemporary resurgence of interest in the history of the People's Republic: depoliticization, the increasing availability of sources and internationalization. Of these, a general process of depoliticization both inside and outside China is by far the most important. In the words of Esherick, Pickowicz and Walder, "history … is now so far into the past that it is no longer burdened by the

footnote continued

(Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), and Mark Frazier, *The Making of the Chinese Industrial Workplace: State, Revolution and Labor Management* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

3. Neil Diamant, *Revolutionizing the Family: Politics, Love and Divorce in Urban and Rural China, 1949–1960* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), Timothy Cheek, *Propaganda and Culture in Mao's China: Deng Tuo and the Intelligentsia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), and James Gao, *The Communist Takeover of Hangzhou; The Transformation of City and Cadre 1949–1954* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).

4. Eddy U, "The making of *zhishifenzi*: the critical impact of registration of unemployed intellectuals in the early PRC," *The China Quarterly*, No. 173 (2003), Chang Tai-hung, "The dance of revolution: *yangge* in Beijing in the early 1950s," *The China Quarterly*, No. 181 (March 2005) and "Mao's parades: state spectacles in China in the 1950s," *The China Quarterly*, forthcoming, and Joel Andreas, "Institutionalized rebellion: governing Tsinghua University during the late years of the Chinese Cultural Revolution," *The China Journal*, No. 55 (2006).

5. Some of the more notable examples include Yang Kuisong, "Mao Zedong and the *zhenfan* campaign," *The China Quarterly*, forthcoming, Gao Hua, *Shenfen yu chayi zhongguo shehui zhengzhi fenceng 1949–1965 nian* (*Status and Difference: China's Political Stratification, 1949–1965*) (Xianggang yatai yanjiusuo, 2004), Gao Hua and Huang Jun, "Jiangsu's urban people's communes in the 1960s 'Great Leap Forward' movement," http://www.coldwarchina.com/zwxz/zgxg/gh/001636.html, and Zhang Jishun, "Shanghai nongli jiceng zhengzhi dongyuan yu guojia shehui yitihua zouxiang" ("Shanghai neighbourhood grassroots political mobilization and tendencies towards national integration") *Zhongguo shehui kexue* No. 2 (2004).

demand for relevance to the country's current evolution."[6] In the West, the Cold War inescapably framed both the first and second generations of scholarship on the revolutionary PRC in the 1950s and 1960s. Scholarship was part of a wider set of political concerns that needed to explain the mysterious and directly inaccessible revolutionary experiment that was such an important part of the intensifying Cold War, and this was reflected in the informal division of 20th-century China between different disciplines: the People's Republic was felt to be the proper concern of political scientists and sociologists, while the less politically relevant Republican period was ceded to historians; deposed regimes having little in the way of contemporary political relevance (other than the perennial question of how to deal with the Republic of China on Taiwan).

The first, second and third generations of literature on the PRC, a substantial part of it published in *The China Quarterly*, were of course not monolithic. Each generation had its own internal divisions between Right and Left, between those sympathetic or hostile to the revolution. The availability of sources also made for different generational foci. The first generation of scholarship in the 1950s and early 1960s tended to focus on the big structures of the Leninist system (often under the rubric of "totalitarianism") and Mao; the second generation in the mid-1960s to late 1970s was profoundly influenced by the unexpected outbreak of the Cultural Revolution and, on the whole, began to turn to society-centred explanations, often on the basis of émigré interviews and Red Guard publications. And as direct research access to China itself became increasingly possible, much of the third generation in the 1980s concentrated on questions of "contemporary relevance" and pre-1949 historical interest as less sensitive Republican era archives began to open.[7]

But irrespective of these differences, considering the PRC as *history* was not on the menu of choice in Western scholarship until a de facto depoliticization of the revolutionary era in the PRC was well under way. Within China itself, the Chinese Communist Party's stranglehold on understandings of the revolution and its own history was so inextricably bound up with regime legitimacy and contemporary politics that until well into the 1990s, critically minded Chinese historians could barely touch on the preceding Republican period, much less the post-1949 era. But irrelevance for contemporary politics

6. Esherick, Pickowicz and Walder, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution as History*, p. 16.

7. A proper evaluation of the first and second generations of scholarship on the People's Republic of China would easily be the topic of a self-standing essay. But for a few key examples of each see Richard Walker, *China Under Communism: The First Five Years* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), Franz Schurmann, *Ideology and Organization in Communist China* (1st ed.) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), Hong Yung Lee, *The Politics of the Chinese Cultural Revolution: A Case Study* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), and Gordon Bennett and Ronald Montaperto, *Red Guard: The Political Biography of Tai Hsiao-ai* (New York: Doubleday, 1972).

makes for great opportunity for history, and now Western scholars, Chinese scholars and those who are able to shuttle between the two worlds of scholarship are able to engage increasingly in a type of historical work that was simply unimaginable ten or fifteen years ago.

Part of the background to this general process of depoliticization has been a result of the simple passage of time and consequent generational change as the passions that animated much of the Cold War (both pro and anti revolution) began to fade, and a younger generation of scholars came to maturity. But more has had to do with changes in China itself. As the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) moved out of its intense preoccupation with continuous revolution and mass mobilization and into a kind of developmentalist and softer form of authoritarianism in the 1980s, the bulk of scholarship on contemporary China has moved on with it to consider a very different set of contemporary questions on economic reform, inequality, corruption, representation, state capacity and the long-term viability of the Party, leaving the field of 1949 to 1976 open to historians and historically minded social scientists.

The raw materials of historical inquiry are down to sources, and the relative depoliticization from the mid-1980s onwards has led to a veritable explosion of sources relevant to the 1949 to 1976 period. Human and archival sources have been extant for quite some time, and since the early to mid-1990s it has become possible to get increasing access to both. With any number of reverses and hiccups, the general trend since then has been towards greater openness of archives, notably at the municipal level in Shanghai, Chongqing and Beijing, but also including some provincial and even county-level archives. Some material on the 1950s and 1960s began to be available to researchers as early as the mid-1990s, and on the whole access has widened in the intervening decade. The early to mid-1990s also saw an enormous increase in the volume of official and semi-official publications, from the decision taken in the late 1980s that each and every county would produce a gazetteer (*xianzhi* 县志) to the compilation of municipal and provincial gazetteers (*shengzhi* 省志, *shizhi* 市志) – often specialized by government function such as communications, education, interior, culture, industry, post, agriculture and so on. These official compilations include material on local geography, important events and government restructuring broken down by time period. Many provinces, counties and municipalities have also published collections on organizational history (*zuzhishi ziliao* 组织史资料), which detail by time period the restructurings, amalgamations and official incumbents of the highest positions in Party, state, military and mass organizations. Official chronologies (*dashi ji* 大事记) and statistical compilations whose data runs start with the 1950s are common. Since the early 1990s, the CCP has also published important compilations of documents – notably the *Selection of Important Documents Since the Establishment of the People's Republic* (*Jianguo yilai zhongyao wenxian xuanbian* 建国以来

重要文献选编), which now runs to 20 volumes – and more documentary collections are in the process of being issued. Historical biographies of important figures feature prominently on the shelves of any major bookshop in China, and as a matter of sheer generational transition, the official memoir literature (*wenshi ziliao* 文史资料) that used to be focused on the Republican period now includes subject matter on post-1949 topics and commemorative events.

Oral history is also very fruitful, as many of those who lived through the events of 1949 to 1976 have become willing to talk about their experiences in an increasingly unguarded manner. In addition to the usual suspects in the usual places – cadres and intellectuals in the big cities of the east – it is now possible to interview people such as village cadres and peasants on topics (such as the post-Great Leap famine) and in places (such as rural Henan) that would have been largely if not completely taboo only a short time ago.[8]

Internationalization is the third factor to shape ongoing work in PRC history. The current relative political relaxation and the removal of earlier travel restrictions mean that Chinese scholars are now beginning to be able to investigate even sensitive areas of PRC history, such as the Campaign to Suppress Counter-revolutionaries, land reform and the post Leap readjustment. Dissemination through international projects like the Cold War history network at East China Normal University, seminars at universities in Hong Kong, workshops in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, and teaching and fellowship exchanges is now routine. Chinese and Western scholars regularly interact directly in workshops and conferences in a variety of venues, as well as indirectly through translated works.

The potential volume of materials to be explored and particular subjects to be illuminated for the 1949–76 era in PRC history is vast, and raises more questions than can be answered in a single volume. Rather than focus on a particular time frame in the history of the People's Republic, offer a particular kind of approach or concentrate on similar units of analysis, the articles included in this collection have been deliberately chosen for their eclecticism. The pieces presented here encompass a range of different kinds of historical inquiry, and consider historical units of analysis as large as the socialist world economy or as small as the individual. Nor are the articles focused on a particular sub-period or event in the history of the PRC; in considering the entirety of the 1949–76 period fair game, we begin to

8. For examples, see Ralph Thaxton, "Corruption, coercion, and the loss of core entitlements under the people's commune: revisiting the causality of deprivation, starvation, and death in Mao's Great Leap Forward famine, with special reference to Da Fo village," paper presented to international conference "As China meets the world," 17–19 May 2004, and Felix Wemheuer, "Steinnudeln: Ländliche Erinnerungen and stattiliche Vergangensheitsbewältigung der 'Großen Sprung' Hungersnot in der chinesischen Provinz Henan," PhD dissertation, University of Vienna, 2006.

question much of what is normally taken for granted in the conventional periodization within the Mao era.

The volume is bookended with macroscopic perspectives on contemporary Chinese history. It opens with William Kirby's assessment of revolutionary China's deep involvement with the external world, particularly the ways in which the politics and economy of the international socialist world of the 1950s and 1960s intertwined, and reminds us that the establishment of the basic institutions of the socialist economy is unimaginable outside the framing of the international socialism of the time, exemplified through Stalinism. It closes with Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik's charting of Chinese historiography on the Cultural Revolution and Roderick MacFarquhar's postscript, which reviews the early days of *The China Quarterly* and the wider state of the field in the 1960s as a way of assessing what scholars did and did not get right at the time.

The middle articles consider a variety of topics over the course of the revolutionary People's Republic. The 1950s are represented by the articles by Julia Strauss on regime consolidation and the establishment of socialism from 1949 to 1956, and Wang Zheng on the Party's sudden reversal of its commitment to gender equality in favour of a more conservative policy of "thriftily, diligently build the country, and thriftily, diligently manage the family" in 1957. The 1950s and 1960s are bridged by David Bachman's institutional consideration of continuity and change in courts, elite politics and military preparedness, and Steve Smith's look at the nexus between the revolutionary state and rural society in contestation over pilgrimages to sites of healing "holy water." Robert Ash's piece focuses on the rural dimensions of economic policy, and lays out, in quite horrifying detail, the ways in which the revolutionary ideology of rapid economic growth disproportionately exacted huge costs on rural areas. Andrew Walder focuses on the detail of high factionalism at Beijing University in the early years of the Cultural Revolution, and Paul Pickowicz explores the relationship of the CCP to its mid-ranking artists and intellectuals by exploring the career of one filmmaker desperate for acceptance and validation.

At the most obvious level, many of these articles confirm what has already been suggested by earlier generations of scholarship. The young PRC's basic ethos and institutions *were* inextricably bound up with international socialism in general and Stalinism in particular. The early mass campaigns of the 1950s *were* in fact a form of terror. Individual intellectuals *did* routinely come to enormous grief in the sharp and sudden reverses of policy line from the top. The onset post-Leap famine in 1959 *did* lead to mass starvation and an appalling excess of expected deaths. The early to mid-1960s *was* a period of profound militarization for state and society. And the Party cadres of the new revolutionary state *did* fear, with some reason, that their degree of hegemonic control over rural society was much less assured than their didactic public pronouncements presumed.

But in more subtle ways, the degree of detail and texture made possible by the combination of new sources and new perspectives in these pieces does not merely confirm what has been known or guessed for the past 50 years of scholarship on the PRC. This collection of articles begins a process of implicitly questioning some old assumptions and at least tentatively asking new questions about periodization, ideology, possibilities for individual agency and where, in aggregate, fresher perspectives on PRC history may be heading. We include very different kinds of topics and approaches, whose units of inquiry range from problems of writing history itself (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik), China's place in the socialist world economy (Kirby), the deconstruction of a particular change in Party line towards women's work in 1957 (Wang), and the life history of a relatively unknown filmmaker trying to make his way under the Maoist system (Pickowicz). But the particular details uncovered in these works reveal surprising commonalities, despite differences in subject, scale and time period.

Questioning Conventional Periodization

Many of these articles either implicitly or explicitly question conventionally accepted periodizations. The ways in which particular years have been trumpeted and grouped serve as a kind of narrative shorthand – a first rough cut at fitting events into a larger flow of meaning – that until now has been heavily influenced by the PRC's official periodization of its own history, with 1949, 1957–58, 1966 and 1976 standing out as the temporal junctures of major changes. The years of regime consolidation and the establishment of the key institutions of socialism (1949–56) are conventionally seen as times of success and popular enthusiasm for New China; the launching of the Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1957 and the subsequent turn to the left in 1958 heralded the Great Leap Forward, economic crash, famine and subsequent economic readjustment; and the 1966–76 Cultural Revolution decade another surge of utopian leftism, disaster and mass disillusionment.[9]

The most important month and year for PRC history must of course be October 1949: when New China officially came into being, Mao announced at Tiananmen that China had finally "stood up," and official discourse proclaimed virtually everything to have come before of which it disapproved as "feudal." The presumptive sharp break between the feudal and reactionary and the progressive and

9. This rough periodization is offered in the Chinese Communist Party's own resolution of 1981 *On Some Questions Regarding the History of the Party since the Founding of the PRC*, and is repeated in most standard works; notably Maurice Meiser, *Mao's China and After* (2nd ed.) (New York: Free Press, 1986), Jack Gray, *Rebellions and Revolution: China from the 1800s to 2000* (2nd ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), Frederick Teiwes, *Politics and Purges* (2nd ed.) (Armonk & London: M.E. Sharpe, 1993), and Kenneth Lieberthal, *Governing China: From Revolution through Reform* (2nd ed.) (New York: Norton, 2004).

enlightened in 1949, the progress made by the new regime in implementing its key programmes, and the positive support of the majority of the population in the early to mid-1950s remain grounding sources of legitimacy for the People's Republic. And yet, the Strauss article confirms that there was substantial continuity in state agenda and methods of policy implementation from the Nationalist period, and that the years of regime consolidation and the establishment of socialism represented neither "golden age" nor necessary precursor to disaster. It finds that the revolutionary regime's chosen method of pushing major initiatives through both the bureaucracy and society by a process of campaign mobilization and public accusation sessions worked very well – if bloodily – when the targeted "enemies" were clearly visible, and the basic goal of the state was to draw on an assumed widespread pulic support in overcoming the resistance of key social groups and establishing the state's basic institutions of coercion and state planning. These strategies were already working much less well as early as the mid-1950s: once campaigns moved into the narrower spatial confines of the work unit, many of the rank and file masses resolutely refused to be "stirred up," as it was in no one's interest other than a minority of designated activists to be too forthcoming in a period of campaign mobilization. The eventual radicalization and obsession with counter-revolution and ever-expanding categories of "enemies" from the mid-1950s on (that in turn foreshadowed even worse in the Cultural Revolution) were part of the very campaign mobilization that so successfully consolidated the regime and its basic institutions earlier in the decade, and the regime was reluctant – and perhaps unable – to renounce a strategy that was such an important component of its earlier successes both before and after 1949.

Bachman's piece on 1958–65 calls conventional periodization into question in not one but three ways, by sidestepping the Cultural Revolution entirely and asking the reader to imagine what might have happened had there been no Cultural Revolution. His work charts three different aspects of trends under way between 1958 and 1966: the sheer number of legal cases processed over the course of the 1950s and early 1960s, elite generational change, and an analysis of preparations for war in general and the establishment of the Third Front defence industry in particular. Bachman finds a series of surprises: there was both continuity and change, but not in the places that one would have expected. Despite the highly politicized environment of the late 1950s (and again during the Cultural Revolution), there was substantial institutionalization in the matter of judicial cases; irrespective of the Cultural Revolution purges, the senior leadership of the CCP and the People's Liberation Army was on the cusp of a major generational change in any case as a result of illness and retirement, and perhaps most importantly, the entire period was pervaded by deep concerns about defence and the high priority given to transforming an already highly militarized economy

into a pure war one. Bachman finds that the antecedents to the Third Front policy of rapidly creating a military industrial complex for defence in China's impoverished interior were varied: from the Republican period, from the mid-1950s, and from Mao's own uncontested dominance in this arena even after the Great Leap, with the establishment of defence mobilization production lines among civilian industry. The obsession with defence made for enormous distortions in both the economy and China's overall prioritization of resources, and in ways that cut across both conventional periodizations and understandings of Mao's position in Chinese elite politics and decision-making in the years before the Cultural Revolution.

Other articles show that when one looks in different places, standard periodizations seem to be even more permeable. Kirby finds that the international economic exchanges between China and other socialist countries were largely uninfluenced by the high politics and tensions within international socialism in the late 1950s and early 1960s – trade continued as before despite the Sino-Soviet split. Looking at state-society relations at very local levels in the countryside, Smith sees evidence of similar upsurges in "holy water" incidents in periods as different as 1953–54 (the establishment of socialism), 1957 (turn to the left) and 1963–64 (economic stabilization in the countryside). Wang finds that 1957 – a year that marked the prosecution of rightists and generally signalled a turn to the left – was exactly the point at which elite politics resulted in an infinitely more conservative Party line towards gender issues. And in what is arguably the most important metric of all – grain consumption for rural China's vast population – Ash's systemic analysis of the entirety of the Mao era shows how materially irrelevant standard periodizations were for the majority of the population in the revolutionary PRC. Despite the economic recovery in the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward, it wasn't until the final years of the Cultural Revolution that peasants' level of food consumption began to approach that of the early 1950s.

Agendas of the Revolutionary State: International and Domestic Dimensions of Ideology and Implementation

The agendas of any state at any time are invariably multiple, shifting and in tension with each other. Politics, personalities, expedience and the crisis of the moment typically frame how some agendas subordinate others and in these respects "New China" was no exception. But the young People's Republic of China came into being at a particularly ideologically charged time as far as the wider international and security environment was concerned, and it was led by a group of revolutionaries committed to international socialism at a time when the Cold War was in fact quite "hot." Within a year of the establishment of the PRC, the US Seventh Fleet was patrolling the Taiwan Straits and UN forces were advancing towards China's border

with Korea. The leadership of the CCP had strong ideological affinity with the Soviet Union and the world of internationalist socialism led by the Soviet Union, as well as even stronger practical and security reasons for aligning with that side of the Cold War; nothing less than China's survival was at stake. Thus the revolutionary PRC possessed any number of different key agendas. Some, like reintegrating the unitary state and ensuring China's security, were directly inherited from the preceding Republican era and inherent to the modernizing Chinese state. Others, like establishing the key institutions of socialism, the planned economy and collectivization, reflected its ideological commitments and strategic alignment to the international socialist camp. Still others, such as the stamping out of practices now known as "feudalism," were a combination of the two. And all were played out in an objective environment of resource shortages and serious worry about national security.

These articles all at least touch on the question of how the varied agendas of the revolutionary state were filtered through ideology, but some deal with these issues more explicitly than others. Kirby's piece on China's internationalization and participation in an attempted socialist world economy reminds us how deeply important it was to the Chinese leadership to be part of something beyond China's borders – in this case, the progressive international socialist world. He details how from the beginning, the CCP was explicitly internationalist in orientation; indeed without the Soviet Union there could have been no Chinese Communist Party and no People's Republic of China. Until the late 1950s, the PRC was the Soviet Union's most faithful ally and actively and enthusiastically set to emulating the key features of High Stalinism: the absolute rule of the Communist Party, the emergence of the cult of personality, and a planned state economy with priority given to heavy industry and defence. It also meant China's participation in an international socialist economy based on bilateral relations and agreements for preferential trade and development. Kirby lays out the ways in which this socialist world economy was beset with structural weaknesses, but suggests that there were any number of ways in which China actually gained through preferential trade, as the recipient in what we now call intellectual property, so that routine bilateral economic exchanges continued well after the time when political tensions tore the Sino-Soviet alliance apart in the late 1950s.

Robert Ash's work focuses on the domestic dimensions of the agricultural economy, but here too the implicit model of the Soviet Union under Stalin looms large in the analysis. The priority goal of rapid industrialization required a real and financial surplus from the agricultural sector, which in turn was realized through "unprecedented control over the labour force and agricultural output." Ash's analysis of not only grain extraction from above but real levels of peasant consumption from below from 1953 to 1976 shows, as few statistical tables can, just how vigorously the execution of the PRC's