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Timothy Cheek

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## The Intellectual in Modern Chinese History

This vivid narrative history of Chinese intellectuals and public life provides a guide to making sense of China today. Timothy Cheek presents a map and a method for understanding the intellectual in the long twentieth century, from China's defeat in the Sino-Japanese War in 1895 to the "Prosperous China" since the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Cheek surveys the changing terrain of intellectual life over this transformative century in Chinese history to enable readers to understand a particular figure, idea, or debate. The map provides co-ordinates to track different times, different social worlds, and key concepts. The historical method focuses on context and communities during six periods to make sense of ideas, institutions, and individual thinkers across the century. Together they provide a memorable account of the scenes and protagonists, and arguments and ideas, of intellectuals and public life in modern China.

TIMOTHY CHEEK is Louis Cha Chair in Chinese Research and Director of the Centre for Chinese Research at the Institute of Asian Research, and Professor in the Department of History at the University of British Columbia. His books include *Living with Reform: China since 1989*, *Mao Zedong and China's Revolutions* and *Propaganda and Culture in Mao's China*, as well as *New Perspectives on State Socialism in China* (edited with Tony Saich), *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao* (translated and edited with Roderick MacFarquhar and Eugene Wu), and *China's Establishment Intellectuals* (edited with Carol Lee Hamrin), and *China's Intellectuals and the State* (edited with Carol Hamrin and Merle Goldman). Most recently, he has edited *A Critical Introduction to Mao* (Cambridge University Press, 2010) and Vol. VIII of *Mao's Road to Power: Revolutionary Writings 1912–1949* (co-edited with Stuart R. Schram).

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*University of British Columbia*



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For my father  
who taught me  
天下為公

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## Preface

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China's intellectuals are in the news today, but what do they tell us? Xu Zhiyong, a Beijing academic and social activist, was arrested in July 2013 for his work on the Open Constitution Initiative and efforts to mobilize the New Citizens' Movement, and sentenced to four years in prison in 2014. Ai Weiwei, China's most famous international artist today and pesky social critic, is under house arrest and unable to attend the opening of his own art shows in the West. Chen Guangcheng, a courageous local lawyer from Shandong, called "the barefoot lawyer" for his work on behalf of regular citizens, continues his asylum in the US after being hounded out of China. In December 2013 Tsultrim Gyatso, a Tibetan monk of Amchok Monastery in China's Gansu province, set himself on fire to protest the ongoing crackdown by Chinese authorities in Tibet. Liu Xiaobo, the lead author of the democratic manifesto for China, "Charter 08," and 2010 Nobel Peace Prize-winner, is currently languishing in jail in Beijing.<sup>1</sup> A similar list could have been drawn in 2010 and most probably could be in 2020. The Chinese intellectuals we hear about are dissidents. Brave, idealistic, inspiring people. Surely, we tell ourselves, a government that persecutes such fine people cannot long endure. And yet the Chinese Communist Party is with us, decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the demise of the Soviet Union, and the turn to "democracy" in Eastern Europe. What's the problem?

The problem is us, or rather how we look at China's intellectuals. China's intellectuals serve as a bellwether for many of us, telling us

<sup>1</sup> On Xu Zhiyong, see Chris Buckley, "Formal Arrest of Advocate Is Approved in China," *New York Times*, August 23, 2013. On Ai Weiwei, see James Adams, "Ai Weiwei: The Artist Is Not Present," *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), June 18, 2013. On Chen Guangcheng, see Pamela Constable, "Chinese Human Rights Activist Chen Guangcheng Joins Catholic University," *Washington Post*, October 3, 2013; Thubten Samphel, "Self-Immolation/Tibet/China," *Huffington Post*, posted January 3, 2014, at [www.huffingtonpost.com/thubten-samphel/self-immolation-tibet-china\\_b\\_4537565.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/thubten-samphel/self-immolation-tibet-china_b_4537565.html). Liu Xiaobo, *No Enemies, No Hatred: Selected Essays and Poems*, ed. Perry Link, Tienchi Martin-Liao, and Liu Xia (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

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how China is doing on reform and democratization, sounding out how much China has or has not become “like us.” We use these intellectuals as a mirror for our own concerns, hopes, and fears. Yet by focusing on dissidents and religious activists, we miss most of what China’s intellectuals are doing today and have done over the past century of dramatic change in Asia. How can we get past our habits and anxieties to see something more of what China’s industrious, talented, and dedicated intellectuals have been doing? How do we put down our largely unconscious Chinese mirror and pick up a telescope to peep at the range of intellectual participation in public life across this huge country and tumultuous century?

This book provides a *map* and a *method* for understanding the intellectual in modern Chinese history by sketching a narrative of the public role of China’s intellectuals in the long twentieth century from China’s defeat in the Sino-Japanese War in 1895 to the “Prosperous China” since the 2008 Beijing Olympics. It maps the changing terrain of intellectual life over a century, so that the reader can “place” a particular figure, idea, or debate sensibly. The map provides co-ordinates to track different times, different social worlds, and key concepts. This book also demonstrates a method, the historical method, for making sense of ideas, stories, and examples from the past. The narrative is centered on a unifying theme: the self-appointed task and widely held social expectation of thinkers and writers in China to serve the public good. This came to be expressed, in various ways, as “serve the people.” Over the decades, what that service amounted to, who the people to be served were, and which educated people qualified to provide such service varied importantly. Yet intellectual service has been a central part of China’s modern history because China’s governments have been fully ideological regimes that have needed the services of an intellectual elite to devise, elaborate, implement, and police the ideological “software” of each regime. This was equally true of the last dynasty, the Qing, the Republican governments under Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kai-shek, and the People’s Republic under Mao and his successors. It continues to be the case in China today under leader Xi Jinping.

It is an exciting story. Intellectuals’ participation in public life in modern China is a chronicle of idealism, bravery, foolishness and cunning, disaster and success. Throughout, China’s intellectuals played a central role in what happened. Comfortable intellectual elites threw themselves into dangerous social conflicts, and doughty provincial intellectuals forced their way onto the national scene. All along, China’s intellectuals dealt directly and perilously with political and military power. From the start, the reformers of 1898 got the ear of the emperor,

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only to suffer on the sword of the Empress Dowager; republican revolutionaries faced exile, the police, and assassination, and later danced a dangerous waltz with China's militarists. From the 1920s, Bolshevik political parties dominated the public realm—first the Nationalist Party under Sun Yat-sen and then Chiang Kai-shek—and from the 1930s the Chinese Communist Party as contender, opponent, and then national victor. The decades of the new People's Republic of China under Mao from 1949 were both utopian and dystopian, careening from liberation to torment, and the reforms of the post-Mao period in the past four decades have brought both stunning economic growth and new challenges of commercialism, professional norms, and the social perils of unemployment and pollution. In all these public trials, many Chinese intellectuals chose to participate as public commentators, critics, revolutionaries, or servants of the state.

We learn some interesting things from this perspective. China's modern intellectuals have been connected with the world but grounded in China. Neither the New Confucians espousing a Chinese theory for Chinese problems in the 1920s or in the present, nor the Maoists of the 1960s or the New Leftists of today have been cut off from the world and the influence of the ideas, practices, and challenges of the West. Similarly, even the most cosmopolitan and radical of liberals, human rights activists, and Christian evangelists have been thoroughly grounded in China's realities and focused on Chinese problems rather than trying to become like us. We learn that most Chinese intellectuals are not dissidents today, though they are certainly critical of their government and deeply worried about China's future. Finally, we learn that China's intellectuals are brilliantly inventive, at the forefront of synthesizing inherited traditions (now including Confucian, liberal, and socialist Chinese traditions) and foreign, or global, resources to help make life in China, and in the world, better. Rather than focusing on how democratic China's intellectuals are, or how much they are like us or not, it is far more interesting to find out what they think they are doing, to see what they have come up with, and what might be of use to us as we confront problems in our societies.

Not only have China and China's intellectuals been connected to the wider world, but their experience over the century also offers a fresh perspective on the history of intellectuals around the world. Considering Chinese experience in this comparative perspective lays to rest claims of Chinese exceptionalism—and European or American exceptionalism, as well. Intellectuals across the world experienced the high tide of Euro-American imperialism at the end of the nineteenth century, the shock of the Great War of 1914, and the global economic depression in the 1930s.

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They lived through the age of extremes in the middle decades of the twentieth century, coping with National Socialism, state socialism, and American triumphalism. All responded to the collapse of the Soviet empire, 9/11, and the ongoing War on Terror, and embraced in varying ways the neoliberal global financial order at the start of the twenty-first century—only to face the challenge of the financial collapse of 2008 and global financial anxieties since then. As part of the world system, China has been a part of all these trends. Naturally, China's experience is also distinct—as is that of every country and every economy from America to Angola and Britain to Bahrain. China's intellectuals and their experience across the long twentieth century are thus not something exotic or exceptional, but rather a distinct response to local variations of global change. We will reflect on four key global changes: colonialism and its aftermath, revolution and the attraction of Leninism, state-led development, and post-socialist reform.

The story of intellectuals and their public life in China is full of lessons for all intellectuals who aspire to bring truth to power, to fulfill the more noble goals of their own societies, and to serve the public good. This history, or any history, is not the same thing as the past: it is the stories we tell about the past. Such stories are shaped by the questions we ask and the assumptions that we bring to them. My questions are: first, what was it like for the people at the time? *What was on their minds?* What were the burning issues of the day? What were the contending answers to those challenges? Second, *what shaped their world?* How was it organized? What institutions and communities defined life? What was happening that they were responding to? Who was their audience? And third, *who were some of the main actors?* Who was famous? If they were not famous, why were they important? A clearer sense of the ideas, institutions, and individuals that shaped life in each time and place (ideological moment) will help us understand what people thought, said, and wrote about the events they experienced.

The assumptions that drive these questions are three. First, *ideas matter*; the simple test of that is the social mobilization that revolutionaries achieved with ideas and the list of intellectual martyrs killed for their ideas under all of these regimes. Second, *intellectual traditions are invented*, which is to say, ideas and schools of thought from the past are reinterpreted, sometimes radically, by later generations. For example, we shall see that the overwhelming drive to serve the state that many claim was a Confucian tradition from past centuries was in many ways a twentieth-century innovation. And third, *foreign ideas can become Chinese* over time, as we shall see in the competing twentieth-century traditions of political liberalism and Marxism–Leninism. Most essentially, the questions and

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assumptions of this book are driven by the working motto of my teacher, Philip Kuhn: thought is related to social experience. We can only make sense of what people say and mean by understanding where they lived and what they experienced, how they made sense of this and with whom they were talking.

While such historical context as I can create will not be “the whole past” or “the only truth,” it is a scholarly attempt to re-create as fairly as possible past experience and meaning as a check on our natural human propensity to forget “what it was like” in a previous time and another place or to project our sense of the reasonable onto others. Emphatically, what you and I think makes sense was not necessarily the case in the past. Equally, what “democracy” meant to Liang Qichao in 1902 was not the same as what it meant to an ordinary Shanghai student in 1922 or to Mao in 1940 or to students on Tiananmen Square in 1989 or, indeed, to the Chinese government or its critics today. Bringing together some detail from the past and assessing and interpreting that detail according to the norms of professional historiography is the best way I know to learn from the past and to enrich (rather than simply to reinforce) our current understanding of the world.

This history reflects a serious project: to move from working on China to working with Chinese. Both Chinese Marxists and Western postmodern scholars typically announce their ideological stand—the politics or purpose behind their work. This book reflects my politics and is inseparable from my scholarly generation. I was trained as a “China-centered” historian. This approach to the study of Chinese history has dominated Western academia since the 1970s and focuses on a thorough grounding in Chinese language, history, arts, and culture in order to understand China from Chinese perspectives. Scholarship, including China scholarship, has always been rooted in this search for understanding. However, as we look back on modern China studies in English and European languages over the past fifty years it becomes clear that our work was most valued by governments and the public as contributions to efforts to change China. Whether it was to Christianize, democratize, fully revolutionize, or simply to modernize China, government interest, research funding, and publishers’ encouragement focused on scholarship that would help change China. With the rise of China since the 1990s and the revival of academic scholarship in China itself, that mood has changed. Both social expectations and scholarly interest in Western countries are shifting interest to engage individual Chinese. The information in this book is offered as part of a general effort among many Western scholars of China today to prepare ourselves to work with Chinese colleagues in various walks of life, most often in our own area

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of research or professional work. Our own ideological moment has shifted from a world centered in the West to a multimodal or multi-centered world where we must work together to address shared problems. To do that we need sound information about each other, where we have come from and what is on our minds. A good history can help.

I use three tools to organize this history of intellectuals in modern China: ideological moments, worlds of intellectual life, and enduring ideas. Six *ideological moments* across the years from 1895 to 2015 serve as a way to organize distinct contexts. Each ideological moment is shaped by a guiding challenge, the question of the day. Naturally, in a polity the size of China (bigger than the United States or the European Union), more than one ideological moment lives among different populations. Yet in different decades one or another ideological moment certainly appears to have held center stage in Chinese public life. Additionally, each ideological moment reflects a basic orientation or mood—*reform*, *revolution*, or *rejuvenation*. While we can identify all three at any given time, one mood shaped intellectual participation in each moment in modern Chinese history. In the context of specific times and places we can see both the dominant or major ideological mood and the contrary or immanent role of alternative ideological orientations at the same time.

What is needed, what makes sense, what constitutes service to the people, all changes with the change in ideological moment. It also varies across different *worlds of intellectual life*: the communities in which individual actors live, whose interests and concerns they reflect, and to whom they primarily speak even when using the language of the nation or “the public.” The worlds of the examination elite in the Qing, the urban professionals of the Republic, the intellectual cadres of Mao’s time, and the university professors in China today are significantly different, as are the worlds of provincial elites, the urban publics of middle-class and prosperous workers, and the worlds of local communities in China’s diverse rural areas. Across all, the experiences of women have varied greatly from those of men, and woman intellectuals have addressed this. Within and across these social worlds we shall note four varieties of public participation, or *roles*, in particular: *ordering society* (government service), *educating society* (public commentary), *criticizing society* (dis-sent), and *mobilizing society* (active organizing or opposition).

Finally, we look at *enduring ideas*. Not all was changing context and social difference. Modern China’s intellectuals have continued to worry about three fundamental aspects of public life: the role of the people, the meaning of being Chinese, and how to make democracy work. These enduring ideas return in each generation and ideological moment, sometimes with significantly different content or sometimes simply expressed



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in different words, but across the twentieth century, China's intellectuals worried about awakening or guiding the people, what it means to be Chinese and modern, and what sort of "people's rule" is right for China. For example, who counts as "the people" to be mobilized has changed over the century—male, female, Han nationality or minority, urban, rural, proletarian, or all classes. Of course, these are not the only enduring ideas or important terms, but these are so central across the century that they can help us see what has endured, or developed, as well as to appreciate all the social diversity and different historical contexts.

Each chapter in the story begins with a snapshot, reflecting the ideological moment, in which we can see something of the living world of intellectual service. This is followed by "Voices," short extracts of original writings by a few Chinese intellectuals from that time to give a feel for the issues of the day. The body of the chapter describes the ideological moment and explores the writings and lives of representative intellectuals in that moment. Each chapter ends with a return to the three enduring ideas as they have evolved by that time. The goal is to put a memorable face on each ideological moment in terms of scene and protagonists, arguments and ideas; not to be encyclopedic but to provide an orienting map of the changing worlds and ideas of public life in China's long twentieth century.

This book offers to the general reader a narrative history of the efforts by intellectuals in China to contribute to their society over the twentieth century, what they thought they were doing and how it worked out. For the historian, it offers a methodological essay on the role of narrative with examples, testing what happens to a historical narrative when a frame, the focus on ideological moments, breaks the development of an easy plot or metanarrative. For the comparative scholar, this story of China's intellectuals is cast in a fashion to encourage comparison and contrast with the experiences of intellectuals in Europe, North America, and the countries of the global South. For the China specialist, I hope to offer some challenging interpretations of familiar figures and useful information about those parts of modern Chinese intellectual history with which they are less familiar.

## Acknowledgments

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This project is the summation of what I have learned in a professional lifetime. It has taken community and conversations and an astonishing five years since the writing began in earnest.

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This work is also shaped by my own current communities, my worlds of intellectual life. I am nothing short of blessed by these friends. Josh Fogel and David Ownby lead a project with me on the use of historical thinking in public debates in China today. The Levenson group, a true traveling symposium in which we have tested our thinking about Chinese history, is my sounding board and inspiration: Geremie Barmé, Gloria Davies, Madeline Yue Dong, Mark Elliot, and Wen-hsin Yeh. The China History Cluster has provided a supportive scholarly community at UBC and a tough reading of a draft chapter that gave me important feedback at a critical juncture in writing this book. A two-decade-long relationship with Xu Jilin and colleagues at East China Normal University, Shanghai, has shaped my thinking on Chinese intellectuals. My intellectual world is limned by decades of debate with my far-flung comrades, each of whom has shaped parts of this book: Harry Barber, Tim Brook, Paul Evans, John Friedmann, David Kelly, Pitman Potter,

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This knowledge comes from generations of scholars but the faults in this book remain my own.

# Abbreviations

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CASS	Chinese Academy of Social Sciences
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CPPCC	Chinese People’s Political Consultative Congress
GMD	Guomindang (Kuomintang), the Chinese Nationalist Party
NPC	National People’s Congress
PLA	People’s Liberation Army
PRC	People’s Republic of China
YMCA	Young Men’s Christian Association
YWCA	Young Women’s Christian Association

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## Map of China

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Map 1: Map of China (from *A Critical Introduction to Mao*  
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Map of China



Map 1: (cont.)