The Rise of Political Intellectuals in Modern China: May Fourth Societies and the Roots of Mass-Party Politics

Review Number: 1909
Publish date: Thursday, 17 March, 2016
Author: Shakhar Rahav
ISBN: 9780199382262
Date of Publication: 2015
Price: £51.00
Pages: 256pp.
Publisher: OUP USA
Place of Publication: Cary, NC
Reviewer: Chris Courtney

*The Rise of Political Intellectuals in Modern China* offers the first English language account of how one of the most important movements in modern Chinese history affected the city of Wuhan. Shakhar Rahav highlights the critical role that regional intellectual networks played in shaping the particular form of national mass-politics that emerged during the 1920s. His book describes how modest organisations that started life in the university campuses and radical bookshops of a provincial city went on to play a seminal role in the establishment of the Communist Party. These intellectual networks represented a localised reaction to the May Fourth Movement (1919–21), a moment of political and intellectual awakening inspired by the mistreatment that China received at the Treaty of Versailles, which marked the apex of the broader New Culture Movement (1915–25). Given the vital importance attributed to these two movements, it is unsurprising that historians have chosen to revisit this momentous period on frequent occasions. In undertaking to write a new history of the May Fourth Movement, Rahav faced the formidable task of navigating an original path through ground already well covered by a capacious literature. It is testament to his considerable skill, and no doubt arduous intellectual labour, that he has managed to achieve this in at least two respects. He offers both a novel geographical location and an innovative methodological approach. As a result Rahav has provided valuable contribution to the historiography of early 20th-century China.

Rahav redirects our attention away from the typical focus upon Beijing and Shanghai, to examine how the May Fourth Movement unfolded in the tri-city complex of Wuhan. This vast metropolis, located 600 miles inland in eastern Hubei, may not particularly well known today, yet it frequently found itself at the centre of political events in early 20th-century China. Decades ago William Rowe wrote a masterful two-volume history of late Qing Hankou, one of the three Wuhan municipalities.(1) More recently Stephen Mackinnon has described the experiences of the city as a centre for anti-Japanese resistance in 1938.(2) The period between these two studies remains relatively understudied. Although local scholars such as Tian Ziyu have described the events that transpired in Wuhan at the turn of the 1920s, *The Rise of Political Intellectuals in Modern China* offers the first opportunity for an English reading audience to learn about the fascinating intellectual climate in the city during this period.(3) Rahav does not simply rely upon a novel geographic area to lend his monograph originality. Instead he uses the process of relocation to advance an original
argument about the political and intellectual dynamics of the period. He suggests that the national political culture that emerged in the 1920s did not emanate in a unidirectional fashion from core to periphery, but was, rather, created by ‘a dialectical process shaped by the hinterland no less than by the coastal centers’ (p. 10). He resists the temptation to elevate Wuhan to the status of Beijing and Shanghai, and seeks rather to demonstrate how the peripheries – or hinterlands – must be considered as part of a broader intellectual conversation. Here Rahav has made a timely intervention, which will hopefully generate further discussion about the regional biases that continue to dominate the writing of modern Chinese history.

The methodological approach adopted in this monograph involves a painstaking reconstruction of how intellectual networks were established and how they came to operate. For Rahav, these networking practices were integral to the generation of the particular form of mass-party politics that gained prominence throughout China in subsequent decades. In order to illuminate the formative role that intellectuals played in this process, this book focuses upon the various societies that were initiated by the radical academic and later Communist Party member Yun Daiying (1895–1931). The result is an intricate portrait of a largely forgotten world of radical bookshops and mimeographed periodicals – a fully-fledged if long forgotten intellectual youth culture. It should be noted, that as Rahav chooses to ‘focus on practices rather than ideas’ (p. 11). His book, therefore, offers little discussion of the momentous ideological or discursive developments that occurred in this period. As such, readers unacquainted with the May Fourth Movement would do well to read The Rise of Political Intellectuals in Modern China alongside a more conventional intellectual history that describes the local reception of international ideas from thinkers such as Kropotkin, Darwin, Dewey, and Marx.

The decentring of the May Fourth Movement is not an entirely original manoeuvre. Rahav’s study owes an acknowledged intellectual debt to Wen-hsin Yeh’s masterful exploration of intellectual life in mid-20th-century Hangzhou. Yeh guided us through the political maelstrom of this period by focussing on the radical intellectual Shi Cuntong (1899–1970), a figure who was largely written out of official history. Rahav has not been required to undertake a similar process of reputational resuscitation in order to access his major protagonist. Yun Daiying remains a respected, if somewhat obscure, figure within party histories of this period. Outside China, he has received relatively little attention, the exception being a brief biographical sketch offered in Hans van de Ven’s study of the origins of the Chinese Communist Party. In spite of his official respectability, Yun was not a loyal ideologue who avoided controversy. He was executed by the Guomindang in 1931 and therefore did not live long enough to fall foul of Maoist orthodoxy, having been, as Rahav puts it sardonically, ‘killed at the right time by the right people’ (p. 151–2). In centring his analysis upon Yun, Rahav has been forced to first deconstruct official hagiography before reconstructing a subtler and more interesting portrait. He has achieved this with admirable sensitivity.

As a venerated party ancestor, his statue looming large at the Central China Normal University, Yun’s written works are widely available in reprinted volumes. Rahav has drawn heavily from these authorised sources, making extensive use in particular of Yun’s 1917–19 diaries. These must be understood within the political context of their re-publication. The more recent volumes of these diaries were released in 1981, ‘as the party was distancing itself from the legacy of Mao Zedong’ (p. 48). Yun’s diaries must also be understood within a particular cultural context. As this monograph acknowledges, Chinese diaries were not intimate confessional spaces in which the interior life of the intellectual was laid bare. They were semi-public documents, intended for circulation amongst peers or even for publication. As a result, we do not learn much about Yun’s private life, but are instead informed about his modus operandi as an energetic intellectual organiser. We can only speculate as to what kind of portrait Rahav may have been able to draw had he gained access to Yun’s personal papers, which alas remain inaccessible to all but a select few party historians. As it is he has done a thorough and imaginative job with the sources available.

The book follows a semi-chronological path, beginning with a chapter that offers a broad historical account of the development of the Wuhan cities, paying particular attention to continuity between late Qing and early Republican political and intellectual life. In the course of this introductory chapter, Rahav characterises Wuhan as a ‘hinterland metropolis.’ This is an intriguing term, begging the question of whether residents of
the city actually conceived of themselves as living in a hinterland. It would seem unlikely that the somewhat self-regarding intellectuals described in this monograph would have thought of themselves as anything other than the centre of their own universe. Having established a general context, the monograph then introduces us to the young Yun Daiying. Over the course of the next four chapters we follow him through his early intellectual odyssey, from experimental student to young communist organiser.

We begin by examining how Yun became involved in the burgeoning world of the periodical press, eventually becoming a key contributor to several titles and editing *Guanghua xuebao*. We then learn how he and his friends first established the Mutual Aid Society (Hu zhu she) and then the Benefit the Masses Society (Li Quinn shushe). Finally we learn of how Yun became involved in the Young China Association (Shaonian Zhongguo shehui), a ‘network of networks’ (p. 108) that linked his own organisations to those established by like-minded radicals throughout China, including Mao Zedong. By charting the trajectory of the group of radical students and academics who operated in Yun’s orbit, Rahav demonstrates how a vital intellectual infrastructure existed in Wuhan long before the May Fourth Movement erupted in Beijing in 1919. These networks facilitated a dialectical process that helped to entrench new discourses and processes nationwide, thereby laying the foundations for the development of national mass politics.

The most fascinating sections of this monograph are those that deal with the sociability of intellectual networks. Rahav recreates the highly idealistic and often endearingly pompous world of students and intellectuals to great effect. Yun and his circle were committed to improving themselves morally as a means to transforming their world. Their experimentation with differing organisations and theories – from missionary camps to Daoist philosophy, from Buddhist meditation to Marxian analysis – offers us a glimpse of a form of intellectual freedom that would all too soon be devastated by the exigencies of war and revolution. Radical in theory, these political intellectuals were often hopelessly banal in practice. The Mutual Aid Society may have taken its name from a concept coined by Kropotkinian anarchism, yet its activities seem to have mostly involved a group of young men chanting pledges not to drink alcohol or cheat in their exams. This was, as Rahav puts it in one particularly memorably passage, like ‘a club for self-righteous nerds’ (p. 58). This book provides an illuminating journey into the world occupied by a group of young idealists. In doing so it demystifies the intellectual as a cultural category, describing how their networks functioned on a day-to-day level.

The mode of sociability practiced by this intellectual circle was highly selective. We learn at one stage about the awkward hypocrisy that ensued when the young idealists of the Benefit the Masses Society came into contact with the masses they were attempting to benefit. In spite of their avowed commitment to egalitarian politics, nobody thought to ask a young labourer they had employed as a servant to join their communal organisations. Although these intellectuals ‘wanted to repudiate formal hierarchy they did not yet conceive of society in terms of social structure and classes but rather in cultural, behavioural, and moralistic terms’ (p. 101). Rahav observed this highly revealing vignette with great sensitivity, yet leaves it somewhat underdeveloped. A more detailed analysis of the attitude that Yun and his circle held towards local working classes and their concomitant political awakening in Wuhan would have added an additional layer of complexity to this study.
We are informed briefly about Yun’s ill-fated attempt to establish a Benefit the Masses Towel Factory (p. 99). It is left to the reader to dig through the footnotes in order to learn that he was at one stage married to a factory owner (p. 186, n. 86). The failure to mine this contradiction between the economic position of intellectuals and the political values they espoused, is indicative of the selective approach taken in this monograph. Intellectual networking appears as a somewhat exclusive realm of sociability, operating in a world largely isolated from any other mode of social or political interaction. Key figures such as Mao Zedong and Mikhail Borodin make brief cameos, helping us to learn how Yun was integrated into national networks. Yet we learn little about other forms of political action taking place in Wuhan, most notably the concomitant development of labour unions, which would play a vital role in local politics over the next decade. It would have been instructive to learn more about how intellectuals eventually became integrated within the specific nexus of radical politics that developed in the city.

Women are also almost conspicuously absent in this discussion of sociability. From the few brief mentions we are afforded, it becomes clear that Yun’s relationship with women was, at the very least, unorthodox. After his first wife died, he undertook a very brief period of mourning, and eventually married his late wife’s sister several years later. Rahav’s decision not to dwell upon these personal details is justified by his commitment to exploring networks rather than individuals, and his assertion that his study is not a biography. What is less understandable is the failure to address the role of women as intellectual subjects. We are offered a brief justification of this in the introduction, in which Rahav blames this absence on the ‘paucity of relationships’ (p. 11) that intellectuals developed with women. Yet elsewhere we learn that Yun’s first wife was an active member of one of his early intellectual organisations. Gender relations were one of the defining issues in radical politics in Wuhan later in the 1920s, and were a prevalent and consistent feature in Yun’s own writings. As such it would have been illuminating to learn what space was made for women as political intellectuals. If they were, as Rahav suggests, excluded from intellectual life by the very people who were purportedly championing their rights, this very contradiction deserves a more comprehensive exploration.

It is somewhat unfair to criticise an author for failing to address events, such as the rise of trade unionism and feminism, which unfolded just beyond the timeframe chosen for their particular study. Yet Rahav may have considered extending his analysis further into the 1920s to draw a more comprehensive picture. The narrow temporal framework he adopts does have distinct advantages. It allows him to provide what he describes, invoking Clifford Geertz, as a ‘quasi-ethnographic “thick description” of life within [intellectual] societies’ (p. 10). Yet the constraints of this timeframe limit the capacity to fully explore the implications of the events described. As we have followed Yun so closely through his early intellectual awakening, it is frustrating that we are offered a scant two paragraphs to cover the decade leading to his death in 1931 (pp. 150–1), particularly given the fact that during this period he seems to have lived an extraordinarily interesting life, being involved in many of the most momentous events of radical politics.

To give a specific example of how this monograph may have been enriched by a broader timeframe, we might consider the seminal moment that Rahav describes in the summer of 1917, when Yun attended a YMCA camp in the mountain resort of Lushan. He focuses exclusively upon how Yun drew upon this missionary camp for ‘inspiration and techniques for establishing a student organisation’ (p. 56). Had this book continued for a little longer we might have learned that Yun later became a leading proponent of the Anti-Christian Movement. Within a short few years, a young man described by missionaries as the ‘best non-Christian’ (p. 52) in their group, was inciting his compatriots to reject ‘Christian superstitious rubbish’ (Jidujiao mixin de yi pai guihua).(6) Brevity is a relatively rare quality in academic writing, and Rahav should be congratulated for executing his monograph with admirable economy and sufficient discipline to remain focussed upon the period during which the sources are most abundant. At the same time, by confining himself to such a short time period, he has deprived us the insights that his thoughtful analysis might have offered to the broader historical trajectory of a fascinating political intellectual.

These are, of course, minor criticism, which should not detract from what is otherwise a thought provoking
and original analysis, that will make a valuable addition to both Chinese and intellectual history.

Notes


Source URL: https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1909

Links
[1] https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/148340