Introduction: The Politics of (Maoist) History

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Personally, I have always thought that writing history is a political act—and I have always acted on that principle. Almost all China historians in US academia—and for sure all the historians contributing to this special issue—have been trained within or in proximity to Asian studies departments; we were provided with rigorous language preparation and have all had more than a passing acquaintance with what is unfortunately still called "sinology," meaning the study of "China" as an enclosed, foreign, and distant object. Given that context, Chinese history might look more prone than other national histories to indulge in the curious, the anomalous, or at best the irrelevant: topics such as the horse trade during the Mongol empire and porcelain production in the Ming period are indeed fascinating, but they probably sound, correctly or not, very remote from any contemporary political relevance. Of course, there are also stratified intellectual, racial,

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and political reasons—often subsumed under the category of "Orientalism"—why China studies and Chinese history might appear to some to be much less directly political than other fields, a scholarly refuge where research as pure intellectual pastime is still possible. Yet even when we purposely write to move away from politics, to detach ourselves from the "viruses of the present," we engage in a political act (Bloch 1954: 36–37).

I would hold that writing Chinese history is *even more* directly and overtly political than writing any other nation's history. First, the textual reverence, the almost monastic devotion to language learning, and the always implied "esoteric" character of Chinese studies mask the political decisions involved in the choice of historical methodology, the production of situated knowledge, and the author's position vis-à-vis the subjects of that history. All these choices acquire even more political relevance precisely because they are concealed in the structural folds of a field whose history is marked by the continuous and stubborn "othering" of its object. While the historical context and the relative positions of China have changed over the decades, one constant of Chinese studies in the anglophone world has been the positing of "China" as a separate location, a place so different that it required its own separate form of knowledge, distinct from other disciplinary fields: that applied equally to the complexities of classical language, the supposed insularity of Confucian culture, and the crazed nature of Communist development. Writing Chinese history is therefore always an act against, acquiescent to, or in support of the layered politics of this academic and scholarly field.

In fact, anglophone historians of China always write in relation to Sinology, not as the careful evaluation of sources and language, but as the historical construction of "China" as an object of inquiry. But they also write in relation to a more recent history, not disconnected from or uninfluenced by sinological precedents, but one with more obvious and direct political implications. In the United States, that history, especially when it comes to modern and contemporary China, has been framed by the concerns and the policies of the Cold War, when Asian studies departments were created and funded as part of a larger "know your enemy" effort. Profoundly affected by the McCarthy purges in the 1950s, which not by chance began with a virulent attack against the scholar Owen Lattimore, China studies in US academia remained in an uneasy (but ultimately profitable) relationship

with US policy in Asia, a relationship alternatively of subservience, willing collaboration, or complicit silence. In the 1960s and 1970s, those scholars who wrote about contemporary China had to accept the "Manichean bi-polar world" that those policies framed and required; proclamations of neutrality and objectivity often served to hide the internalization of anticommunism and McCarthyism (Fairbank and Peck 1970: 56). For others, less contemporary, more "sinological" inquiries—meaning pursuits solidly anchored in the past and in an idea of "China" as a self-contained object of study—offered a temporary respite, an escape from a field born out of government funding and global political confrontation, even if it meant the acceptance of one's impotence.[1] Not surprisingly, three of the articles in this issue, by Jake Werner, Covell Meyskens, and Matthew Johnson, all deal with the long-standing ideological premises that still influence the study of PRC history.

The first major critique to the Cold War–era field of China studies, its practices, the knowledge it produced, and the way it was deployed came in the late 1960s. This coincided with the global crisis spurred by decolonization and US imperialism, of which the Indochina war was the most blatant example. I am highlighting this moment in the history of the field because it shows clearly a paradigmatic shift for which Maoism is central. Young graduate students and professors, united under the collective name of Concerned Asian Scholars, staged an all-out attack against their academic discipline and their teachers, highlighting how their scholarship had constructed Asia in ways that were functional to US imperialistic policies, their alleged neutrality obscuring a very clear political choice of camp (Lanza 2017).

It is not by chance that the attack from the Concerned Asian Scholars came at the time when Chinese (and Asian) people could not anymore be rationally constituted as "passive objects" to be studied, but had come to the fore as unmistakably political subjects, leading the transformations that are closely identified with the "global sixties." Those political subjectivities and the revolutionary upheavals in which they had been produced, however, could not be either recognized or made sense of if viewed within the dominant paradigms of Asian studies, which still privileged modernization theory and anticommunism. To even try to assess the experiments of Maoist China, to "take Maoism seriously," required first and foremost a complete

revision of those scholarly paradigms; but, more importantly, if one "took Maoism seriously," that is, if one accepted that the political experiences of high Maoism (from the Great Leap to the Cultural Revolution) were worthy of examination *as politics*, that could not but profoundly affect one's own ideological, political, and intellectual position.

As Aminda Smith points out in the foreword, Maoism was first and foremost a revolutionary epistemology—that is, a theory (and a praxis) of the production of knowledge—under the conditions of continuing revolutionary struggle while at the same time guaranteeing the continuation of that struggle. In addressing how correct knowledge could be produced, Maoism directly questioned the relationship between those who work with their hands and those who work with their minds—be they the cadre, the intellectual, or the teacher—and claimed the right of the former to speak and be listened to. As such, Maoism, especially the Maoism of the Cultural Revolution, presented what was perhaps the most radical challenge to the positions of intellectuals and scholars, the stability of their pedagogy, and the very structures of disciplined knowledge. It was not simply Red Guards attacking the stultified pedagogical system in Chinese schools; it was farmers moving into the realm of agricultural scientists (Schmalzer 2016), workers taking over factory management, peasants producing art, all also and at the same time engaging in philosophical debates. And, in the long 1960s, this was not just a rhetorical and theoretical challenge, nor was it limited to China. Maoism provided a vocabulary (or sometimes *the* vocabulary) for the colonized to subvert the language of the colonizer; for French workers to articulate demands that went beyond a salary increase and shorter hours; for black radicals across the United States to position themselves as part of a global struggle for anticolonial liberation (Kelley and Esch 1999). It also gave young people, and specifically students across the world, the language and the praxes to critique and potentially disrupt not only the contents of the educational system but also the very essence of its pedagogy, the stable positions at its foundation (who teaches, who is taught), its social function, and the universal validity of the knowledge it produced. The fact that students from Paris to Turin to San Francisco insisted on calling themselves Maoists (or "*chinois*") was the result of something more than a simple infantile affectation. In France, the encounter with the Cultural Revolution shaped

the thought of major philosophers, from Deleuze to Foucault, from Badiou to Rancière: the granular issues of Maoism were thus encoded into "French Theory," and it was in this disguised form that they later entered US academia (Cusset 2008).

In the context of the global sixties, then, it was impossible for radical American scholars, for whom contemporary China was both a topic of research and a political inspiration, not to be forced to rethink their own assumptions about their scholarship, their field, the structure of US academia, and what it meant to be a scholar. By the time the Vietnam War generation of Asianists came to consciousness, it had become evident that producing scholarship, and especially scholarship about Maoist China, was unavoidably a political act. To learn and teach Maoism required an explicit critique of the institutions of learning, the mechanism of production and transmission of knowledge, and one's own position within them. This often placed the individual scholar in an untenable bind between politics and the practices of academic life. For US scholars in the sixties, those contradictions were exacerbated by the fact that China, while politically close, remained physically inaccessible to Americans.

Obviously, the Maoist subversion of pedagogy was never complete, and it often ended up producing violent and unsustainable results. Even Maoist epistemology itself came to be betrayed, at times by the very Maoist leadership who professed it. Similarly, the search for a new approach to Maoism within US academia remained elusive and was then brutally interrupted by the late 1970s with the collapse of revolutionary hopes worldwide and the actual end of Maoism (Lanza 2017). The legacy and significance of that brief "Maoist" moment, when China scholars found themselves at a center of a global political reflection, was not fully explored and evaluated in its aftermath, in large part because the end of Maoism coincided with a sudden closure of all the political and intellectual possibilities of that period, in China and around the world, what Aminda Smith has aptly called "the post-disillusionment era."

I wanted to single out that moment in the sixties, not so much because I think we are in a comparable political situation, but because I believe it offers a perspective into the ideological background, the promises, and the perils of the "new PRC history." First and foremost, like that earlier gen-

eration of scholars, by "taking Maoism seriously," (good) PRC history must take on the challenge that Maoism presents to fixed categories (the Party-state, the people, China itself), to the disciplined production of knowledge, and to the very figure of the intellectual and their relationship to the subject/object of their inquiry. In that, (good) PRC history is always necessarily and profoundly political, even if the trajectories of that political engagement will not necessarily end up being in line with Maoism, or even leftism.

Among PRC historians, there are some, myself included, who prefer to be more explicit about the political stakes involved as well as one's political trajectory. Even Jeremy Brown, perhaps most distant from me in terms of political position, has no problem admitting the political character of his scholarly enterprise. And that is why I think Elizabeth Perry's critique of "grassroots history," which echoes through the following pages, while valuable for sparking an important debate on methods and theories, missed the overarching intellectual and political aspects of that endeavor (Perry 2016). Actually, contra Perry, grassroots history is, like all good PRC history, eminently political. A good example is provided here by Matthew Johnson, who, in his contribution to this issue, singles out a long-standing pattern in our approach to PRC history, largely derived from the social sciences, which frames political behavior as a function of broad cultural values. Grassroots historians like Johnson and Brown (2015) instead insist on the stubborn search to recover in some way not only the experiences of "ordinary people" but also how those people made sense of those experiences and how they contributed to shape the politics of the Mao era. This radical change of perspective has coincided with a shift in methodology, made possible by the new availability of archival and "garbage" sources; but that shift also echoes a longer historical and theoretical effort, started in the sixties and, not surprisingly, under the influence of Maoism, aimed at making visible the presence and actions of the subaltern. PRC history, especially in its "grassroots" form, can at times show a certain tendency toward the sinological obsession with sources and archives—there is a certain macho pride in one's prowess in collecting garbage materials, in being the Indiana Jones of the flea markets—but the work of colleagues who specifically embrace the grassroots label has not only been consistently of the highest quality but also has invariably addressed broad, crucial historical and political questions.

There can be no sinological escape into irrelevance in PRC history, precisely because writing the history of Maoism (and post-Maoism) does not provide such a refuge. That is true of the edited volume that Perry selected as the lynchpin of her critique, *Maoism at the Grassroots*: pretty much every single one of the essays included in that volume tackles, explicitly or implicitly, issues that were central to the experience of Maoist China, its structure of governance, and our understanding of its legacy.

Yet, as I mentioned earlier, I wish we (historians of the PRC) were even more explicit about and more aware of the political stakes of this intellectual project and the challenges it poses. In their introduction to *Maoism at the Grassroots*, Brown and Johnson set for grassroots history the task of recovering the everyday life of people under Maoism, knowing what they *actually* did and how they *actually* lived. That reveals a surprising degree of positivistic optimism about the historian's ability to recover the lived experience of the past—which seems quite indefensible at this point in the history of our discipline—but, more importantly, as Alexander Day points out in his article in this issue, that also leads them, perhaps inadvertently, to reposit a duality between state and society, which is always problematic but is specifically untenable in the case of Maoism. As Day argues, everyday life is not a stable position from which to look at society; "rather, historians dialectically tack back and forth to understand emergent social categories, practices, and forms."

I want to push Day's point further here: everyday life is not only "already a structured terrain"; in Maoist China, it also was a crucial site of contestation and political struggle at all levels of society. Further from being the unadulterated repository of "real life," the everyday was at the center of the political search and the struggles of Maoist China: consumption and leisure, work and learning, social reproduction, family relationships, and the minute practices that regulated people's daily interactions were all under scrutiny during a revolution whose goal was to change not just the state but life itself. In this sense, when we focus on everyday life in Maoist China, rather than simply trying to recover whatever we can of the factual reality hidden under the rhetoric of the Party-state, we are actually engaging with one of the crucial political categories of the Maoist revolution, and, because of that, we are directly challenged to rethink what "the everyday" is, what it encompasses,

what it can be, how it can change, and perhaps more importantly, how it functions both historically and in our analysis.

Maoism, especially the "high Maoism" of the Great Leap and the Cultural Revolution, represented perhaps not only one of the most radical (at times violent and disastrous) attempts at transforming society but also, because of that, it questioned and pushed to the limits the very categories that had framed the socialist state, Marxist economics, and revolutionary practices. Those categories (the everyday, the Party, class, labor, the economy, value, etc.) are also the very ones we still deploy to frame our analysis of those phenomena. Therefore, "taking Maoism seriously" also always means interrogating the concepts and intellectual frameworks that we use to analyze Maoist China. For example, once we consider how Maoism configured a very complex relationship between revolution, the leaders, and the people, culminating in a veritable attack against the Party by the people (during the Cultural Revolution), it is difficult to take the Party (or the Party-state) as any kind of stable entity, or even a fixed point of reference.[2]

Finally, "taking Maoism seriously" implies accepting that Maoism informed practices and beliefs of millions, and that those beliefs and practices left traces in the archives. In their contributions, Jeremy Brown, Sigrid Schmalzer, and Aminda Smith all urge us to place Maoism—as a complex set of desires, impositions, promises, and epistemological methods—at the center of our analysis, and to examine the sources produced in that context as an expression of that complexity.

The articles in this issue came together after years of discussion among a much wider group of scholars, all active in the PRC History Group. We are deeply indebted to that discussion, and while this issue does not do justice to the variety of voices that were involved in that long debate, we hope it will move the discussion forward, and that others will join in. One of the anonymous reviewers for this special issue intriguingly pointed out that, while we share a common sense of direction, we do not seem to grapple with the theoretical issues implied in one another's work. At first, it sounded like a strange critique, given how closely we work together, but it is probably not off the mark. Perhaps it is because "new PRC historians" end up fighting so much with other people that we do not challenge one another enough. Or perhaps it is because, while we do engage with one another's general ideas,

our individual work remains siloed within our particular topics and pet projects. So maybe this special issue will offer a way for budding scholars, and especially for young PRC historians, to more clearly identify the existing theoretical fissures and to stake their own intellectual positions in the field.

The first article in this special issue, Jeremy Brown's "PRC History in Crisis and Clover," sets the stage by singling out three broad topics that will all be discussed by the other authors: ideology, sources, and politics. Brown starts by highlighting the centrality of Maoism as an aspirational framework. He argues that ideology remains crucial for understanding events and action, and we must therefore take into consideration the aspirations that Maoism engendered, first and foremost because they were shared and lived by millions. And so was the disappointment that came when the promises of Maoism were not kept and the aspirations not fulfilled.[3] Brown then addresses a series of problems that mark the practice of PRC history to this day. While we have an abundance of newly available sources, the large majority of these documents are held in private archives, which makes the task of professional verification very difficult (if not outright impossible) and resource sharing completely dependent on personal ethics. Brown reminds us that the field of PRC history suffers from an "inclusivity" crisis in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, and class, no less than academia (and society) at large but more so, especially because within China it has become much more difficult to challenge this lack of inclusion—for example, writing histories of non-Han people. And here Brown brings forth another way in which writing the history of the PRC is a political act, because it is always an act of defiance vis-à-vis the current authoritarian push of the Xi Jinping government.

The problems of dealing with sources from the PRC—what they are, how we read them, and what we can learn from them—are at the core of Sigrid Schmalzer's contribution, "Beyond Bias: Critical Analysis and Layered Reading of Mao-Era Sources." Schmalzer steps away from the trite discussion of the unredeemable "bias" of such documents and urges us instead to make visible the contexts in which our sources were produced. She exemplifies this approach with three examples: a "propaganda" report on housewives turned veterinary doctors, a recording of interviews by a visiting delegation of leftist US scientists, and a 2013 edited volume curated

by a local village historian. She shows how missed connections, personal relationships, and random acquisitions might shape how we construct our stories, but also how they can illuminate specific historical questions, if we go beyond the crude dismissal of "propaganda" or even the basic notion that truth can be found by "reading against the grain."

In "Long Live the Mass Line! Errant Cadres and Post-Disillusionment PRC History" Aminda Smith connects the way we read Mao-era sources to the ideological approach that frames our understanding of Maoist politics in general. For the post-disillusionment generation, the need to prove that the Maoist state lied, that it did not do what it said it was doing, produced a mode of inquiry that privileged cadres' mistakes, mishaps, and sheer brutality. Yet, as Smith demonstrates, that narrative came directly from CCP sources, which were keen to point out cadre errors as part of the central organizational practice of the Maoist state, the mass line. Therefore, the falsification mode adopted by the previous generation of China scholars, far from constituting a counternarrative, replicates the central narrative of the Maoist state. But, more importantly, that mode also prevents us from garnering crucial insights from reports and accounts too easily dismissed as biased and, crucially, to understand under which theoretical principles and operating practices the Party-state functioned.

The contributions by Werner, Meyskens, and Johnson all address, in different ways, the ideological premises of the field. Jake Werner, in "To Confront the Totality: A Critique of Empiricism in the Historiography of the People's Republic of China," provides a cogent and thorough analysis of empiricism as the unspoken and unrecognized ideology framing the historiography of the early PRC. Like all ideologies, this too is historically specific, and Werner associates it with a (unrecognized) conception of individuality and individual interests as the supreme motor of social transformation, at the level of both civil society and the state. This conception does not emerge from the sources, but it is part of the belief structure underlying the discipline of history, solidified after the so-called "cultural turn" in the 1980s. While the "cultural turn" aimed to shift attention from the state and larger patterns of change to focus on the messy details of the everyday and was therefore meant to be an explicit and implicit critique of domination, in PRC history, the fragmentation into a myriad of unreconcilable individual

stories led to the uncritical acceptance of domination through the (hidden and unchallenged) practices of neoliberalism, and to the loss of any ability and hope to explain systemic change.

In "Rethinking the Political Economy of Development in Mao's China" Covell Meyskens focuses on the Maoist economy, which, he argues, has been predominantly interpreted according to two frameworks—neoclassical and state capitalist—both assuming a specific path according to which the economy *should have* developed. Both these frameworks, while radically divergent in interpretation, are functional to shaping a narrative that precludes any alternative to the dominance of capitalism, and leads inexorably to the "end of history." Against this, Meyskens argues that the deployment of Marxist categories and programs as well as the shaping of daily lived practices (how you buy things, how you get your job, where you work and live) in the Maoist era constituted an economy that cannot be simply considered either a replication of capitalism or a pathological deviation from capitalism (the only possible and correct economic form). Meyskens instead places the development strategy of the Maoist era in the context of East Asia, where it does not appear as an aberration at all. Rather, it fit a specific historical path and geopolitical exigencies, which were in turn marked by the global context of the Cold War, often too easily removed from our evaluation of Maoism and its choices.

In his article "Foundations of Theory in PRC History: Mass Communications Research, Political Culture, and the Values Paradigm" Matthew Johnson pushes us to examine even broader and longer-standing patterns defining our field. Despite changes in theoretical approach, availability of archives, and access to sources, there is deeper continuity in how the history of the PRC has been written in US academia. Johnson traces the persistent dominance of one approach that assumes the possibility of nonviolent change in societies coming from the transformation of human cognition. This approach, which proclaims the primacy of values and privileges explanations based on political culture, was first developed in studies of psychological warfare during World War II and the Cold War. It was then adopted by the social sciences, and through area studies, came to be deployed in the explanation of the CCP success and rule. The application of mass communications theory to modeling of the Chinese Communist Party–led revolu-

tion produced analyses centered on the persistence of traditional culture and values and on the effect of media/propaganda: societies could then be controlled and changed by manipulating those levers. While most of those early studies based on this approach have since been discredited, Johnson points that the true legacy of that work is "the explanation of political behavior in terms of cultural variables," which is very much alive today.

Alexander Day forces us to reconsider the relationship between material conditions, social forms, and political categories in "Breaking with the Family Form: Historical Categories, Social Reproduction, and Everyday Life in Late 1950s Rural China." Focusing on the complex category of social reproduction, Day shows how it emerged from the late 1950s shifts in rural production, leading in turn to new social forms (outside the family) and new discursive forms in party politics, which in turn provoked further transformations in rural production. Day illustrates how everyday life does not exist outside political discourse, material conditions, and social forms, all continuously evolving and dialectically interacting. He uses this case to bring us back to Marx and the need to see social forms as well as the categories deployed to describe them, as historical products. Labor and productive labor did not exist in Maoist China under the same conditions as under capitalism, and therefore did not take the same form. Under Maoism, labor was not commodified, there was no abstract labor dominating social relations, and the result of production was not value but products, as was required under a state-regulated system.

Finally, Jan Kiely is one of the three incredibly insightful and engaged anonymous reviewers for this special issue. As he posed productive challenges, we were delighted when he graciously agreed to incorporate some of his critiques into an afterword. His contribution serves as an invitation to all in the "good left" of PRC history not to flatten our analyses into a recovery of Maoism as a reaction to our dissatisfaction with the state of the field. Rather, he invites leftist scholars to embrace the contradictions and the tensions that animated PRC history, including those political paths and avenues that Maoism itself obscured. He reminds us how Maoist epistemology was always founded on the monopoly of violence and how its explicatory power was always limited by the often simplified models it deployed. He calls on us to devise and employ theories and methods that are more responsive to com-

plexities and differences, including the differences between us and scholars with other disciplinary backgrounds and/or from older generations.

On the whole, all the authors in this special issue challenge the fundamental ways in which the PRC was constituted as an object of investigation in anglophone scholarship (and public opinion) during the post-disillusionment era. They do so not by embracing new or old illusions about Maoist and post-Maoist China, illusions that in part marred the perspectives of scholars and activists in the long sixties and that still cloud the vision of many pro-China leftists today. What we take from the history of this young field is the need to identify our historical subjects as true political subjects, to understand their experience as one intimately enmeshed in a set of complex political ideas and practices that goes under the name of "Maoism," and finally to consider the global and long-term consequences of that experience, including for our own scholarly enterprise.

Notes

1 In the very different situation of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, "sinology" offered a similarly safe retreat from the dangers of political involvement. See the special issue "Doing Sinology in Former Socialist States," *China Review* 14, no. 2 (2014).

2 Gail Hershatter, Aminda Smith, and others have pointed out that "taking Maoism seriously" does not in any way mean supporting the state. If one assumes that taking Maoism seriously ends up supporting the state, one not only does a disservice to history but also does a huge disservice to millions of people (in China and abroad) who found ways to be Maoist specifically by attacking the Party-state.

3 I would also add that, for some, in minor and major ways, some aspirations were fulfilled, which in turn created other kinds of affective and political bonds to the Maoist past.

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