

Tie Xiao

Revolutionary Waves.

The Crowd in Modern China

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The political role of the crowd (and/or the mass) was a crucial theme in the debates of the 'short century'. Its roots went far further back in time and its echoes reverberate until today. Did (does) the crowd have any autonomous initiative? Was (is) it susceptible to becoming a political subject? Or was (is) it just an easily manipulated harbinger of mayhem? These questions were particularly poignant in twentieth-century China, whose history was shaped by mass movements, until the events of 1989. "The masses are the real heroes, while we ourselves are often childish and ignorant" was a renowned maxim by Mao Zedong 毛泽东 ([1941] 1965). This declaration called into question the relationship of the political leader or vanguard force, but also of the committed intellectual, or in general of any subjective, creative singularity taking part in a mass movement, on the one hand, and the apparently muddled, often chaotic, utterly violent mass of the crowd, on the other.

This is also the core of Tie Xiao's book. The monograph discusses how the concept of 'crowd' was formulated, rearticulated and experienced by thinkers, writers and poets in early-twentieth-century China, with all their sometimes painful but always fruitful contradictions. This intellectual journey sets off after the fall of the Qing



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empire (1911), travels across disciplines, allegiances and time/space dimensions until the foundation of the People's Republic (1949), with some thought-provoking incursions also in its aftermath. Crucially, it does so by dismantling dichotomies that may appear intrinsic to this endeavour. It is easy to think of an insurmountable boundary existing between the intellectual self and the mass. Blending in mass politics for the intellectual is generally seen as tantamount to submission or indoctrination. This is partly due to excesses in the cultural policy of the Communist Party of China after the 1940s, as well as to traumatic experiences of forced collective experiences recalled by contemporary Chinese writers. Xiao's analysis questions such 'boundaries', particularly by uncovering intellectual and literary strategies employed by scrutinised authors to find their way out of this quandary.

The Introduction sets the tone of the entire investigation. A linguistic and historical review of the concept is followed by a theoretical contextualization showing how 'crowd' was always inseparable from psychological studies on its spontaneity and instability. These studies, in turn, intermingle with political considerations of the same issues, as well as intellectuals' participation in or opposition to local and global socialist politics. Multiple intellectual dimensions intervened not only to 'name' (i.e. configure), but also to participate in the history of the 'nameless' – Benjamin's *Namenlose*. This, Xiao emphasises, "had much to do with how one acted on *one's own* [emphasis added] desires and instincts" (16).

Chapter 1 offers a review of early psychological, but also more generally cultural, conceptualizations of the crowd. Much informed by Western pathologist theories, Gustave Le Bon's ground-breaking studies above all, many Chinese understandings also saw the 'crowd' as opposed to ordered society (but also social movements). This can be seen in thinkers of different political creeds and agendas, including, among others, Republican-period psychologist Gao Juefu's 高觉敷 fear of left-wing mobilisation, and Nationalist Zhang Jiuru's 张九如 effort at finding a way to govern it (Foucault is properly evoked by Xiao here). We are also surprised to find unexpected guests here, such as the early Communist leaders Chen Duxiu 陈独秀 and Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白, who were also wary of the crowd (as was Lu Xun 鲁迅, by the way), seen as the evil twin of revolutionary social movements. Again, the kernel was how to assess the agency of the crowd *vis-à-vis* its intrinsic spontaneity, and to what extent it conditioned the individual self. Kuomintang official Hu Hanmin 胡汉民 must have felt quite out of the (intellectual) crowd in his enthusiastic celebration of the (social) crowd, but he was, so to speak, ahead of his time.

The rational/irrational binary is deconstructed in Chapter 2 through the work of Zhu Qianzhi 朱谦之. The anarcho-nihilist philosopher produced a riveting mixture by combining a traditional understanding of 情 *qíng*, the deepest emotion of the human soul, Le Bon's

theories and the aestheticisation of self-destruction (one can hear a distant echo from Bakunin here). The effect of it was to overturn the relationship between rational and irrational, to make the latter prevail over the former. The crowd is to be embraced in its latent, subconscious irrationality, whose self-awakening is the very condition for the crowd's subjectivisation. Such 'self'-awakening, however, is possible only through the action of a vanguard. The self becomes one with the crowd, in the fusion of 'I' and 'we'. If this aesthetic activation of the crowd's performativity is more than fascinating, Xiao is lucid in his critique of its limitations, namely the absence of concrete forms, the inability to tactically manoeuvre in existing social relations, and political ambiguity. Nevertheless, this chapter is both effective in its critical analysis of Zhu's approach and important for the often overlooked history of Chinese anarchism (e.g. Dirlik 1991; Perini 2016).

Chapter 3 discusses the problem of viewing "the process of joining a crowd" (92) not only as a political prescription, nor a mere performative praxis, but as real, concrete experience for left-wing writers in the 1930s. Different narrative and formal solutions are attempted. Ye Shaojun 叶绍均 and Mu Shiying 穆时英 go through some pains in admitting the intellectual's distance and detachment from the crowd, with the former not oblivious to the risk of the crowd to be misled or "hypnotised" (113), but in this very distance they find the possibility to be aesthetically productive. A certain detachment is maintained in the extreme physicality of Mao Dun's 茅盾 characters delving in the shapelessness of the crowd and getting "motion sickness" (117) from it. The point is not so much whether they were successful in joining the mass or not (important studies have analysed the limits of left-wing writers' integration with the 'broad masses', e.g. Chan 1983; Pickowicz 1977). The chapter's originality in this respect lies in investigating "under what conditions the crowd becomes visible to its intellectual beholder" (108) and how the writer's dilemma between the historical imperative of participating in mass struggle and the much-felt need for the intellectual self's autonomy produces "a sense of excitement, urgency, *and* uneasiness" (126; emphasis in original). It is the union of these three elements, rather than the triumph of one of them, to be germinating.

This discussion is continued in Chapter 4, with the analysis of Hu Yepin's 胡也频 fiction. The imaginary space of the crowd can be the theatre for some sort of *Bildungsroman*, where one does not have to give up desire (in other words, the self) for the sake of collective struggle, but rather learn how to become a desiring subject in the first place. The psychological and emotional complications that arise are not, again, mutually exclusive. The crowd here becomes hysteria, epidemic, contagion, but also a festive craze to which the intellectual must surrender as part of his self-forming process, rather than a self-renouncing one. After all, from a certain point of view, what is

the crowd if not a frantic conflation of desires spurred by certain social and political circumstances?

Chapter 5 explores the unavoidable issue of ventriloquism. Way before postcolonial studies became a thing, Chinese intellectuals (and not only, to be fair) were grappling with the problem of “not only speak[ing] about and to the crowd but also speak[ing] for it, in its place and its name” (156). The chapter focuses on Ai Qing 艾青 and his endeavour to let the crowd inside the intellectual’s own self, so that it may “*present* itself through the intellectual body” (166; emphasis in original). Also here, the crowd has a bodily impact on the poet, breathes inside his body but causes him respiratory distress as a result, to mark the individual’s loss of self-control to the mass. The poet’s I splits into a perceiving self and a vanishing self. Although this is a remarkable invention, one is left wondering whether the poet’s self has really vanished here. Does not the self reassert itself through its very disavowal (again, not unlike Zhu Qianzhi’s radical case)? The prevailing artistic line of the CPC would later favour a different approach, which can be seen in Ding Ling’s 丁玲 fictional account of a crowd of spontaneous impulses that need to be harnessed by the vanguard party (and its cultural agents).

The book wraps up with a dense Epilogue. An important side effect of the discourse on the intellectual’s relationship with the crowd is pointed out here, namely the fact that any designation of 我们 *wǒmen* (We) came along with the parallel exclusion of the constitutive 别人 *biéren* (Other), always rearticulated according to political circumstances. Tragic irony is that many of the authors mentioned above would eventually fall under the category of the Other due to the cultural rigidity in the early period of the PRC.

The Epilogue also builds a conclusion by connecting the analysis to later episodes of Chinese history, which any person interested in China’s post-1949 history would sooner or later come to think of while reading the book (at least so would the author of this review). In probably the most radical event of mass politics in China, that is the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the issues of self and collective would find new ground. Xiao is both provocative and eye-opening in pointing out the connections between the dilemmas encountered by Zhu Qianzhi, Mao Dun, Hu Yepin and the like on the one hand, and the Red Guards on the other. By what we learn from memoirs and later accounts of former Red Guards, “how they remember and make sense of their experience cannot be separated from more than a half-century of cultural engagement in mass politics in modern China” (190). As a matter of fact, the 彻底否定 *chèdǐ fǒudìng* (integral negation) of the Cultural Revolution entailed a *chèdǐ fǒudìng* of mass politics, as far as the CPC was concerned. Long-harboured fears of the irrational crowd susceptible to manipulation clearly see a comeback in the condemnation of the decade-long disorder. Xiao also identifies

other ‘afterlives’ of the intellectual questions he scrutinises, for example compellingly finding an echo of Zhu Qianzhi’s call to awaken the subconscious emotion of the crowd as part of its subjectivisation in the practice of 诉苦 *sùkǔ* (‘speaking bitterness’; this aspect is analysed also by Javed 2019).

The book is supported by an impressive theoretical framework and a rich body of references that Xiao skilfully puts together with an accessible style. These are among the strong points of the work, together with its interdisciplinary nature. It must be noted that secondary sources are predominantly from Western academia, whereas it would have been interesting to have a better picture also of the present state of Chinese scholarship on the matter.

In sum, Xiao’s perspective on the relationship between self and crowd in modern Chinese philosophy, literature and politics is both convincing and inspiring. Reading is especially suggested for scholars in intellectual history and modern Chinese literature, who may benefit from the author’s rigorous analysis of primary sources and his approach in combining the *vexata quaestio* of the crowd’s political agency and the complex but productive conflation of political and aesthetic commitment in post-New Culture writers (Pesaro 2018).

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