

Lu Aiguo

12. FROM BEIJING TO BINGHAMTON AND BACK: A PERSONAL REFLECTION ON THE TRAJECTORY OF CHINESE INTELLECTUALS

When I came to Binghamton in the early 1980s to join the Sociology graduate program, I was suffering from some sort of “movement fatigue.”

The decade-long Cultural Revolution was formally over not long before. Legacies were still widely felt everywhere in our political, economic, and social life. In fact the Chinese of my generation may be said to have grown up with movements. Before we could understand the meaning and make conscious choice, we began to be drawn into political and social movements, either participating ourselves or through the experiences of our adult family members. Of the most significant ones are the Korean War in the early 1950s, collectivization and the Great Leap Forward in the mid-and late 1950s, the Rural Education Movement in the early 1960s, and the Cultural Revolution from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s.

For my generation, the Cultural Revolution was perhaps the first

most personal and dramatic experience. We were the young generation at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, and all of a sudden we found ourselves no longer that young at the end of it ten years later. After the Cultural Revolution was officially declared terminated, the society entered a new era of searching for a new path. Both the government and the populace were drawing lessons from the past experience.

One of the lessons learned was that the Cultural Revolution was a mistake. Mass movements after 1949 in general began to be viewed as having negative rather than liberating effects on economic development. Movements were said to have wasted human resources and delayed China's economic modernization. Therefore, when the government began its ambitious modernization drive under the name of economic reforms in the late 1970s, it declared the era of mass movement to be over. Government promised to abandon mass movements as the means of "liberating social productivity," and focus resources on economic growth instead.

The government "anti-movement" position actually fitted quite well the general psychological mode of the Chinese society at the time, and was welcomed especially by cadres and intellectuals. Cadres and intellectuals were among the main "victims," so to speak, of the Cultural Revolution. Some of them had already suffered from other movements prior to the Cultural Revolution such as during the anti-rightist and rural-education movements. Intellectuals' discussion about the Cultural Revolution drew similar conclusions, that mass movements in China failed to deliver their promise to translate their revolutionary enthusiasm into economic development and improvement of the standard of living. For their part, they felt that they were victimized also by being manipulated into playing the role of apologists of the government that seriously damaged their reputation. Many of them took pains going through soul-searching and self-reflection. Out of this, a certain degree of political cynicism was growing among intellectuals.

In the late 1970s, university entry examinations were restored. Young students finally began to have a chance to go for higher

education. Intellectuals returned to teaching and research after a long interval. Many Chinese intellectuals were ready to return to a “normal” situation and resume the long delayed work within the domain of their expertise.

However, while the government kept its words of not mobilizing mass movements, movement-free society in China proved to be an illusion. As it turned out, the reform era was marked not by the absence of movements but by different kinds of social movements and activities. At the end of the 1970s and early 1980s, spontaneous social activities were flourishing. People who were victimized during the Cultural Revolution and other previous movements were demanding rectification and rehabilitation from the government. Young students and intellectuals took the opportunity and demanded democratic reforms. These activities were widespread on university campuses. In Beijing, a long wall in the center of the city became known as the “democratic wall,” where “big letter posters” of various opinions and demands were displayed, which attracted mass observers. The government banned the wall in late 1978 and crushed the expanding groups of political dissidents. National attention was brought back to the government agenda of economic reforms. By the early 1980s, spontaneous democratic movements were running out of steam. Young students and intellectuals failed in their attempt to force change upon the government. Many became disillusioned and began to focus on pursuing professional careers.

In the early 1980s, for those who managed to go abroad to study like myself, the sense of relief was overwhelming. For me, and perhaps for many others like me, American university campuses were like a “calm study task,” where one can taste the life of the “ivory tower.”

I came to the United States in search of a place to prepare for a future academic career; and, in a way, to escape from the frustration of involvement in China’s social and political practices. That, however, turned out not to be the case. During my years in Binghamton, I gradually realized the uniqueness of the department. In addition to its scholarly reputation, the department has at least three aspects that represent the progressive orientation of its academic work and social

commitment: 1) professors are concerned scholars; 2) the graduate program trains not only academic professionals but also concerned scholars; and 3) graduate students constitute a socially active community.

I came to know that Hopkins was the driving force behind the creation of the general framework and atmosphere. His role as graduate director was essential. In addition, I was fortunate to have regular contact with Hopkins during my stay in Binghamton, taking regular and independent courses with him, being his assistant, and learning from many of his comments and discussions. Hopkins became and remained a key member of my graduate committee throughout these years, and he literally saw me through from the beginning to the end of my graduate study at Binghamton. The time I was fortunate to spend with him allowed me to have a sense of his profound concern about the welfare of humanity and commitment to the cause of the unprivileged. It is not easy to pinpoint what Hopkins taught me in terms of social commitment. He never lectured on how one should do what. But I can say for sure that if I had not studied with him and in this Department, my way of thinking and my response to social issues might have been different than it is today. I was often quite moved by his applause for movements, big or small, of their antisystemic significance, and his unambiguously critical attitude toward the establishment. I felt that he was as proud of his students' contribution to useful social activities as he was of their academic achievement.

Hopkins was a key figure, but he was not alone among graduate faculty of our Sociology Department. To be frank, at the beginning, I was a bit surprised that on U.S. campuses one could find scholars who spoke the language familiar to the teaching of continuous revolution in China with which my generation had grown up. As time passed, I came to realize the intellectual connections between Binghamton and pre-reform Beijing, but most importantly the differences between them also. This has gradually helped me re-formulate my own perception of many social issues at home. In particular, I became more convinced that Binghamton has a lot to offer for some of the Chinese who are struggling to rid themselves of the legacy of being "official

intellectuals” while remaining committed to social progress.

While I was in Binghamton, things at home were changing rather rapidly. The process of social transformation was unfolding in front of people’s eyes as economic reforms proceeded further. Since the beginning of the reforms, Chinese intellectuals had been in the forefront of advocating a comprehensive reform program combining economic modernization and political democratization. Some claimed that without political democratization, economic modernization would be impossible or, if possible, would be meaningless. Therefore they insisted that the government should make political democratization its priority. But their attempt to pursue a different agenda was rejected by the Chinese leaders. After the initial success of the government in quieting down the demand for democratic change in the early years of the reforms, economic growth had taken the center stage. But economic reforms unavoidably led to a change of social relations and in the late 1980s social tensions began to mount. The question of political reforms was postponed but unresolved. Chinese intellectuals in particular were far from convinced by the government strategy of pursuing economic reform without carrying out political reforms. They became increasingly frustrated by their failure to push for political change through working within the government. They were increasingly resorting to the mobilization of social pressure.

At the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, two big events shocked the Chinese intellectuals into re-thinking their ideas and strategy. The first was the June 4 Tiananmen incident of 1989, and the second was the disintegration of the Soviet Union in late 1991. When Gorbachev initiated democratization and glasnost in the Soviet Union in the second half of the 1980s, Chinese intellectuals grew intensely interested in the Soviet reform process, which in their eyes represented an alternative and superior model to the Chinese reforms. A mass demonstration took place in Beijing in 1989. Participants in the demonstration raised various and often conflicting demands. The vast populace demanded that the government control the widespread corruption and inflation. But the most active force of the event was the young students and intellectuals. Based on their understanding of

social processes in China, and under the great influence of Gorbachev's democratization and glasnost, they demanded the acceleration of reforms in general and the adaptation of the Soviet type of political reform in particular. The movement increasingly took on an anti-government character which threatened the political power of the regime.

The Tiananmen demonstration ended up in a bloody crackdown by the government. Gorbachev's reforms ended up with the break-up of the Soviet Union a few years later. The political and economic consequences of the two events have led a large part of the Chinese intellectuals to modify their original position. The failure of Gorbachev's reform to bring about economic prosperity in particular deeply disappointed the Chinese intellectuals. Many began to think that such a "democratization" was merely an illusion. Democratization is a good thing, and there was no denial that a certain degree of democratization was achieved in the former Soviet Union. However, the Chinese intellectuals found the price that the former Soviet Union paid was too high, and they distanced themselves more and more from the Gorbachev model. Those at home, and especially those abroad, who continued to advocate democratic reform, largely lost their appeal to the public at home.

In the aftermath of these events, in the eyes of the intellectuals, China seemed to face a choice between two models. One was the former Soviet Union model, which has vigorously pursued democratization ahead of economic development, and which failed terribly in economic development. The second was the model of the Asian Newly Industrialized Economies (NIEs), which focused on economic modernization that appeared eventually to lead to political democratization. The choice seemed to be obvious, as the outcomes of the two models seemed to indicate. Drawing lessons from these experiences and in reviewing China's own reform process, intellectuals in China in essence admitted the defeat of their opposition to the government reform strategy. Some of the famous scholars who played important intellectual roles in the 1989 Tiananmen event have shifted their position to support gradual reform led by economic growth.

Li Zehou and Liu Zaifu (1995) have proposed the order of priority of China's future development as: economic development, individual freedom, social justice, and political democracy. It is said that their view reflects to a great extent the new thinking of the majority of Chinese intellectuals (Li Jingjie 1995).

The so-called new thinking of Chinese intellectuals largely coincided with the official policies insisting on social stability during reforms, and was therefore welcomed by the government. For the government, one of the lessons it learned from the 1989 Tiananmen incident is that the anti-governmental and pro-democratic movement would not spread to the whole country. The fact that it did not bring the government down was not merely because the government finally resorted to the use of force. It was because of the overall positive economic results of the decade long reforms, which produced substantial material benefit to the majority of the population. This has reinforced the government's belief in its reform strategy. For Chinese intellectuals, the aftermath of the 1989 Tiananmen incident and the 1991 break-up of the Soviet Union seemed to have concluded the issue of immediate political reform. More profoundly, the 1989 Tiananmen event seems to have marked the end of the old type of social and political movements in China. These movements sought to deal and resolve social contradictions by radical or revolutionary means, but failed to offer real alternatives to the existing sociopolitical structure and, as a result, turned out to have consolidated the existing structure instead.

The years following 1989 and 1991 were a period of non-politicization. Popular political apathy was growing. As a whole, intellectuals returned to their "normal" life, coming out of the 1989 movement largely demoralized. The conclusion of their rethinking and, more importantly, the subsequent socioeconomic development seems to suggest that it was not the opposition, of which young students and intellectuals constituted the leading body, but the government that had been on the right side and winning mass support. At the same time, the government initiated a new round of economic growth fever. In early 1992 Deng travelled to the south to praise the achievements of

the economic reforms and called for faster and bolder reform steps. “To get rich” and to get rich fast became the fashion of the day. Economic success began to be seen as the most important measurement of the value of individuals.

All who can had jumped on the band wagon. Intellectuals, including many demoralized or disappointed activists, were no exception. Their efforts to push for political change had failed. Mao’s teaching “to serve the people” seemed to be out of date in the “getting rich is glorious” atmosphere. Personal fame and material gains seemed to be what was left for many to pursue legitimately. This was the time I finished my study and returned from Binghamton to Beijing. On my way to China, I took a trip to a few Asian countries, mainly The Philippines and Thailand. Hopkins was among those who encouraged and supported my field trip. There, with the help of a number of local non-government organizations (NGO), I went to some of the poorest rural areas and villages, as well as urban slums, to observe and learn first hand the activities of the NGOs. I was very impressed by the NGO activities. In China at the time, NGOs were something rather new. Being frustrated and disappointed in viewing Chinese intellectuals’ performance in the successive movements at home, I thought NGO type of activities might provide real alternatives.

Upon my return, I envisaged that the kind of activities for us to pursue should be different than the radical movements in which we had participated before—e.g., to be non-government-related, grassroots-based, volunteer, having an antisystemic nature, and being not necessarily outrightly political. These activities should aim at the empowerment of the people themselves, so the gains would not be easily lost by changes of government policies. To me at the time, useful activities did not have to be confined to those that could produce dramatic effects on society or politics. Activities that may improve the quality of people’s lives in any form are worth pursuing.

But it did not take long for me to find that it is easier said than done. The reality is complicated and difficulties arise as soon as one attempts to take practical steps. The first frustration came as I found that despite rapid economic growth and the openness to all sorts of

business activities, political control remains little changed. It seemed that the government may have become more tolerant toward individual opposition and opinions, but remains extremely sensitive to organized activities. Authorities tend to identify non-government organizations with anti-government organizations, regardless of their actual intention and activities. But the situation was, on the other hand, encouraging. During the reform decade, an increasing number of semi-official organizations had emerged in various areas such as research institutions or consultancies, literary associations, semi-official publications. These organizations are non-government but government-affiliated, therefore carrying out their activities legitimately. Many are profit-oriented, though some are not. They are pursuing diverse goals. Nevertheless the creation of these organizations represents an important step forward. Once adapted to this actual situation, one finds there is plenty to do for the betterment of the society outside one's own professional work. Moreover, semi-governmental organizations may represent the first step to the creation of NGOs.

At a personal level, those who have studied abroad are facing the problem of how to fit back in the society after being abroad for years. People have some expectations for the returning "overseas educated sons and daughters." Since they are learned people, authorities expect them to contribute their "expertise" in their respective fields. Society, colleagues, and families consider it normal for the returnees to take advantage of their foreign education to advance their personal position and get material rewards. Mass media frequently propagate such cases and authorities promote them as good examples. Moreover, the social atmosphere in the early 1990s was very "economic." It was the time when many intellectuals quit academic jobs (because of relatively low income) and "jumped into the business sea" to make money. It was considered foolish to stay in academia if there were other lucrative job opportunities, not to mention opting for unpaid, voluntary social work.

The high tide of *quanmin jingshang* (an entire nation engaging in business) subsided a few years later. Still, even among intellectuals, the idea of engaging in voluntary activities unrelated to one's professional

job continues to invite more ridicule than understanding. The popular skepticism of the usefulness of social activities and cultural pressure, however, are not impossible to take. What one needs is a firm belief and persistent efforts. My study at Binghamton and the experience of returning to China was for me a process of re-education.

Regardless of how many movements we participated in previously in China, we have yet to learn how to understand them and how to operate in the new situation. The situation we face today requires fresh attitudes and new awareness. In the pre-reform movements period, it was the government that launched movements. People, including intellectuals, were being mobilized rather than being mobilizers themselves. In those days participation in movements was simply an obligation, imposed from above rather than being of one's own initiative. As such, political movements were actually part of our normal job; official hours were not uncommonly allocated for people to participate in movements. From this point of view, we have yet to learn not only to commit ourselves with our own time, energy, and resources, but to prepare for a long-term, off-work social engagement.

Regimes everywhere are always ready to reward intellectuals who offer their service to the state. In China, cooperation between intellectuals and the government has been extensive. The material well-being of Chinese intellectuals largely depends on the state, because most of them work and earn their living in the state sector. Their scholarship is judged largely on the basis of their usefulness for government objectives. Official appreciation is unlikely to be forthcoming for off-work social engagement. For Chinese intellectuals who are used to being official scholars, to engage in alternative social activities would require a shift of their own priorities.

Another issue is to reconsider the priority of our social engagement. In the past, we were taught to be concerned with "state affairs," i.e., large issues of class struggle. But class struggle was often defined narrowly, being reduced to social struggle within the country, or even to political struggle within the ruling party. A central theme of the government-sponsored pre-reform movements has been to consolidate Communist state power. Positions toward that central theme became

the dividing line between those struggling for and those being struggled against. The non-official, spontaneous movements in the post-reform period such as the democratic wall and 1989 demonstration were again directed against the government, and the nation seemed to be continuously divided between the progovernment and antigovernment positions. It may not be surprising for a country where the government has played such a crucial role to have social movements focusing their attention on the government. But none of the movements seemed to have produced lasting results, and in each case the government was able to paralyze the movement as an organized force. In general, these movements often ended up with the strengthening of the bureaucratic apparatus. Therefore, unless there is a breakthrough from focusing exclusively on state power, other pressing social issues such as gender and ecology are likely to be kept in the backstage. The alternative social movements and activities need a new approach. I believe that, for concerned intellectuals at home, we need also to acquire a world view, or a world-systems perspective, so as to locate our efforts in a larger frame of antisystemic movements.

These are my personal initial reflections. The question of what to do and how to do it is far from answered. The difficulties not only come from our insufficient intellectual preparation, but also from the complicated nature of Chinese society. China is a large country, has a strong revolutionary legacy of antisystemic movement, and is going through large-scale transformations now. The initial outcomes of the transformation have been the emerging mixed economic and social structure. And perhaps a hybrid socioeconomic system creates confused opposition, which has been attacking it from both left and right. As for those, including myself, who wish to do something useful, we need to move away from the old democratic movements and to look for alternatives.

For me, the experience is in a way frustrating, but it is also rewarding. I have no idea how representative my case is in China. What I can say for certain is that my perceptions have been very much influenced by the graduate program at Binghamton in general and by Hopkins in particular. Binghamton will continue to help us in

searching for our own roles in the transformation of society. From this point of view, the frustration we have experienced at home suggests not a despair but a hope.

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CONTENTS

Immanuel Wallerstein ix

Introduction

I. GRADUATE EDUCATION: THE FORMATION OF SCHOLARS

Walter L. Goldfrank 3

1. Deja Voodoo All Over Again: Rereading the Classics

William G. Martin 9

2. Opening Graduate Education: Expanding the Hopkins Paradigm

Ravi Arvind Palat 27

3. Terence Hopkins and the Decolonization of World-Historical Studies

Immanuel Wallerstein 35

4. Pedagogy and Scholarship

II. METHODS OF WORLD-HISTORICAL SOCIAL SCIENCE

Reşat Kasaba 43

5. Studying Empires, States, and Peoples: Polanyi, Hopkins, and Others

Richard E. Lee 51

6. Thinking the Past/Making the Future: Methods and Purpose in World-Historical Social Science

Philip McMichael 57

7. The Global Wage Relations as an Instituted Market

Elizabeth McLean Petras 63

8. *Globalism Meets Regionalism: Process versus Place*

Beverly Silver 83

9. *The Time and Space of Labor Unrest*

III. SCHOLARS AND MOVEMENTS

Rod Bush 89

10. *Hegemony and Resistance in the United States: The Contradictions of Race and Class*

Nancy Forsythe 101

11. *Theorizing About Gender: The Contributions of Terence K. Hopkins*

Lu Aiguo 115

12. *From Beijing to Binghamton and Back: A Personal Reflection on the Trajectory of Chinese Intellectuals*

Evan Stark 127

13. *Sociology as Social Work: A Case of Mis-Taken Identity*

Terence K. Hopkins 143

14. *Coda*

Mohammad H. Tamdgidi 145

The Utopistics of Terence K. Hopkins, Twenty Years Later: A Postscript

Colloquium Photos 169

About the Contributors 193

Terence K. Hopkins Bibliography 205

Index 309

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