Cosmopolitanism, Nationalism and Individualism in Modern China: The Chenbao Fukan and the New Culture Era, 1918–1928

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The way through which Zarrow chose to answer the question is, as he informs us at the beginning of the book, to provide the reader with “a study primarily of political thought” (p. vii). The book, then, is a majestic survey and analysis of the writings and thoughts of a wide range of late Qing and republican intellectuals and political activists, from the most prominent to the lesser known, from the most radical to the most reactionary, and from the last decades of the Qing all the way through to the dawn of the New Culture Movement in the early Republic. Indeed, one of the greatest strengths of the book is the way Zarrow, by relentlessly focusing on his theme of the changing views of emperorship, connects myriad personalities from a wide political and philosophical spectrum, from Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao to the Hunanese “conservatives” and on to the likes of Wang Jingwei and Song Jiaoren, touching upon issues of race, identity, rituals, sovereignty and so on along the way. It might not always be easy to follow Zarrow’s path as he zigzags and twists and weaves in and out of the intellectual worlds of such a great variety of people, but it is a highly rewarding journey at the end.

Does Zarrow succeed in “proving” his case that something deep in Chinese political culture changed forever in 1911? He has certainly made a convincing case that Chinese intellectuals had begun the process of questioning—and indeed undermining—the foundation on which the monarchy stood long before those critical days of 1911, which might indeed help to account for why there was no going back once the dynasty actually collapsed. What is perhaps less clear is how those intellectual thoughts were actually translated into everyday norms and values that constituted the very fabric of a new form of political culture. It is, to be sure, not Zarrow’s project here to veer too far outside the world of political thought. But he does provide the reader with some tantalizing hints and observations. He writes, for example, that while new media such as the tabloids “were arguably ‘conservative’ and certainly anti-revolutionary...their debunking and jokey approach to political gossip helped to delegitimize the government,” and “[m]uch the same was true of popular fiction” (p. 207). Similarly, Zarrow draws our attention to the role of “textbooks being written for the new state schools,” as a good way to explore the “less politicized, more mainstream views of educated persons in the late Qing” (p. 178). To delve more deeply into some of these arenas would likely require a different book, and it is worth noting that Zarrow himself has followed up this impressive volume with his latest work titled Educating China: Knowledge, Society and Textbooks in a Modernizing World, 1902–1937 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015). The story continues.

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Xiaoqun Xu focuses on a singular text corpus, the newspaper supplement Chenbao Fukan (Literary Supplement to the Morning Post), published in Beijing during 1918–
1928. By this he aims to widen our understanding of the May Fourth or New Culture era. His main reference points are the tensions between cosmopolitanism and nationalism, and between both and individualism, all three concepts being Western imports. He refers to them by analyzing the Fukan’s discourses on literary and academic celebrities’ visits to Beijing (chapter 2), translation practices (chapter 3), travelogues (chapter 4), national heritage (chapter 5), and moral and philosophy (chapter 6). Xu presents a panopticon of authors, sources, and topics, but manages to establish their respective connections to cosmopolitanism, nationalism, and individualism. He additionally answers how the Fukan’s publications reflected and interacted with the intellectual milieu on the one hand, and (in)formed the “public opinion” on the other, and what previously not widely known implications this had for the historical significance of the New Culture era (p. 3).

It is with regard to the concept of cosmopolitanism that Xu makes his main contribution to the scholarly discourse on the New Culture era. Translations of and comments on foreign works, new literary forms, and travelogues reveal the cosmopolitan outlook of the Fukan’s editors and contributors. Xu shows that the longing for a cosmopolitan world was not limited to intellectuals of a certain political conviction, but shared more widely. Chinese cosmopolitanism was informed by references to and comparisons to Euroamerica and the Western idea of individual liberty, and by the Chinese idea of tianxia datong, the “great union of all under heaven.” Xu thus gives his definition of “Chinese cosmopolitanism” as the “strong aspiration to a world of universal peace, international equality, individual liberty, and a common culture drawn from and shared by all peoples” (p. 6).

Xu breaks open the often assumed conflict between cosmopolitanism and nationalism, i.e. by Rebecca Karl and Arif Dirlik (pp. 6–7). Many educated Chinese who contributed to the Fukan combined the two concepts despite their tension. Cosmopolitanism enabled them to see Chinese culture as an integral part of world culture, legitimating i.e. the research into national heritage (guogu). At the same time this research necessarily was “a nationalistic endeavor” and the attempt to make Chinese culture relevant to the present time (p. 192). Moreover, national heritage studies (guoguxue) created a link between cosmopolitanism, nationalism and individualism, as it was not only “an individualistic calling” and “self-fulfillment” (p. 192) of many Chinese intellectuals to engage in guoguxue, but the cosmopolitan vision also enabled them to take part in world culture and world peace as individual world citizens, not held back by their nation’s inferior status (p. 13). However, both connections remained highly ambivalent because of the paradox between the idealistic longing for a cosmopolitan world and the pragmatic need for China’s nationalist struggle and its modernization.

Xu combines the editorial policies of the Fukan with a chronological overview of the journal’s history, which he divides into three periods based on the editors’ individual approaches (chapter 1). Li Dazhao’s editorship was characterized by an emphasis on political topics, whereas his successor Sun Fuyuan changed the focus to sciences, literature, and translations and opened the journal for popular discourse by publishing readers’ letters. Under Xu Zhimo’s editorship, the Fukan office was burned down by followers of the KMT left (and the CCP), because one article had criticized the newly founded Soviet Union. Nevertheless, Xu Zhimo continued to feature diverse opinions. By linking the Fukan’s content to individuals, Xu shows the diversity of the New Culture era “defying easy categorizations” (pp. 47–48).
In chapter 2, Xu analyses the discourses on the different perceptions of Chinese culture by the British philosopher Bertrand Russell, the Russian Esperanto teacher and writer Vasilij Eroshenko, and the Indian author Rabindranath Tagore, whose visits to Beijing in the early 1920s were featured in the Fukan. In these discourses, educated Chinese’s interactions with foreign ideas and the tension between cosmopolitanism and nationalism arising from these encounters come to the fore. Although all three visitors saw themselves as pacifist cosmopolitans, their national backgrounds were nevertheless important to the educated Chinese due to their different positions defined by a colonial world order. These reactions reveal “complex politics of China-West encounters among educated Chinese and the tension between cosmopolitanism and nationalism in Chinese minds” (p. 83).

Chapter 3 is an analysis of the discourse on translation standards in the Fukan. The main dichotomy was between free and literal translation, which was related to the discourse on classical versus vernacular Chinese of the New Culture movement. Translation standards were “constantly contested” because Chinese language and culture were changing due to “the very introduction of foreign concepts and neologisms for them” (p. 119).

The travelogues about foreign countries, which Xu explores in chapter 4, helped finding China’s place in the world by putting it into relation with the rest of the world. Xu bases his approach on Sara Mill, stressing the diverse positions present in one travelogue. A tension existed between the travelers’ shame about China’s backwardness, and their indignation about how it was treated by Westerners and Japanese; another one was that between their denial of a colonialist civilizational hierarchy with regard to China, and their perception of other colonized people as civilizational inferior (and thus somehow deserving their fate).

Chapter 5 is about the Fukan’s participation in the “enterprise of ‘reorganizing national heritage’,” which has not been appreciated before (p. 157). The discourse on guocui (national essence), guoxue (national learning), and guogu (national heritage) moved between the rejection of Chinese traditions and culture on the one hand, and xenophobia and ideological backwardness on the other. Xu traces the discourses in the Fukan in detail, showing once more the individual approaches of Chinese intellectuals in the 1920s, which cannot easily be fitted into frames.

The last chapter puts together three debates issued in the Fukan, one well-known one about science versus philosophies of life, and two lesser-known ones about the “rules of love” and marriage and about anti-Japanese boycotts in 1923. All three bring to the fore how Chinese intellectuals were “shaped by and shaping their social-cultural context” on a very individual level (p. 197). At the same time, they show how these intellectuals understood and reinterpreted Western concepts in and due to their individual situations.

Xu’s monograph is a general contribution to Chinese political and intellectual history as well as history of Chinese journalism. His treatment of the main source, the Fukan, allows Xu to pursue its discourses in great detail, embedding them in historical and moreover individual frameworks. Although this approach is in danger of seeming anecdotal, it adds greatly to the understanding of history as a collection of individuals’ enterprises and experiences. It prevents Xu from generalizing about the Fukan in particular and the New Culture era in general. He unravels the debates to reveal the many individual and diverse positions of the Fukan’s contributors, the most well-known being Liang Qichao, Li Dazhao, Lu Xun, Zhou Zuoren, Hu
By tracing discourses from the articles initiating such debates via several rebuttals and re-rebuttals, Xu brings to life this complicated and intellectually extremely diversified period of Chinese history.

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Resulting from a workshop in 2012, this edited volume makes timely contributions to the growing literature on Chinese legal history. Twelve essays are grouped in two parts: “Meaning and Practice of Law” and “Production and Application of Legal Knowledge.”

In Part One, several issues regarding Chinese legal practices in the imperial and Republican eras are addressed. Jianpeng Deng discusses how Qing officials categorized legal cases as “anjian” and “cisong” and processed them differently. These two legal categories and related judicial processes have been identified as “criminal” and “civil” respectively, as scholars of Chinese legal history have established that civil litigations and adjudications, à la Western legal parlance, did exist in pre-modern China. Deng’s study reinforces and enriches that understanding.

Taisu Zhang tackles a different issue, i.e., how and why disputes over properties that were conditionally sold (dian) were often resolved in favor of the poor who had to dian their land to deal with economic stress but wanted to redeem back the land later. He reveals one hitherto-unnoticed factor in such cases: Seniority in kinship hierarchy was an advantage that the poor were able to take, especially when a poor seller and a richer buyer of the dian property belonged to the same lineage. Zhang connects his findings with the question of whether the practice of dian says anything about modernity, or the lack thereof, in imperial China.

Weiting Guo analyzes how religious beliefs (geomancy) drove many cases of grave destruction in eighteenth-century Taiwan but magistrates tended to dismiss such cases and devote their energy and resources to land-disputes that involved grave sites. The magistrates’ approach left many geomancy-driven conflicts over grave destruction for social mechanisms to deal with, and thus contributed to the fact that such cases were a recurring phenomenon.

Janet Theiss presents two cases in which two elite families with connections to officials used their power web to launch and manipulate lawsuits for family feuds. She reveals that such officials as provincial governor and prefect would be implicated in bribery and judicial misconduct due to their entanglement with elite families. To elites, Theiss points out, judicial courts were not a source of authority, but an extension of their power network. An upright official (governor) who cared about the integrity of the judicial system with regard to the common people would abandon the principle when dealing with elite families.

In her chapter, Bryna Goodman analyzes the public perception of the law and its functions through a controversial court case in the Republican era. A young woman, Ms. Xi, committed suicide in 1922, and her employer, Mr. Tang, was accused of