

CHINESE  
INTELLECTUALS  
BETWEEN STATE  
AND MARKET

*Edited by*  
*Edward Gu and Merle Goldman*

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## CHINESE INTELLECTUALS BETWEEN STATE AND MARKET

China remains a Leninist Party-state whose intellectuals still cannot criticize the political leadership or party with impunity, its economy has moved to the market and its society is in contact with the international community. Whereas in the Mao Zedong era intellectuals, with few exceptions, obediently carried out Mao's orders and expounded Maoist doctrine, in the post-Mao era intellectual life has become pluralistic and complex.

This edited volume highlights how Chinese intellectual activity has become more wide-ranging, more independent, more professionalized and more commercially oriented than ever before. The future impact of this activity on Chinese civil society is discussed, as is the continually changing relationship between intellectuals and the Party-state.

With contributions from China scholars living both within and outside China, this volume provides the first comprehensive description of China's intellectuals in the post-Mao era. It is a topic which will appeal to scholars of China as well as to those whose research interests lie in Asian cultural studies and intellectual history.

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Edward Gu and Merle Goldman



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# INTRODUCTION

## The transformation of the relationship between Chinese intellectuals and the state

*Edward Gu and Merle Goldman*

China's economic reforms from a planned to a market economy, after a short interruption in the aftermath of the bloody crackdown of the Tiananmen protest movement on 4 June 1989, have accelerated since 1992. The market transition evoked far-reaching changes in many aspects of China's state–society relations in the 1990s. One of the most profound changes was the transformation of the relationship between intellectuals and the Party-state. For the first time, Chinese intellectuals appeared to be shaking off the model of both traditional *literati* and modern establishment intellectuals. As marketization proceeded, Chinese intellectuals opened up more space for their personal choices and career development than ever before, and gained more financial and intellectual autonomy from the Party-state. Globalization, facilitated by technological advances in communication across national boundaries, especially through the internet, further enlarged the Chinese intellectuals' public space. Despite these changes, however, the freedoms of speech and association that most Chinese intellectuals desired and that China's Constitutions have promised were yet to be institutionalized due to the authoritarian nature of China's political system. Although the intellectuals gained a degree of financial and intellectual autonomy, the role of critical intellectuals was eroded by growing market forces and commercialization. Moreover, as also occurred in post-industrial societies in the West and post-communist societies in Eastern Europe and Russia, China is entering an age of experts in which the relative importance of critical intellectuals to the public is declining while knowledge-based and profit-oriented professionals are becoming increasingly important.

The development of the Chinese intellectual public space is the focus of the essays in this book. They examine the complex, multifaceted aspects of this development from the interdisciplinary perspectives of political science, history and sociology. Examining the relationship between China's intellectuals and the Party-state also reveals broader changes underway in China's state, society and state–society relations.



## **What is an intellectual? And what is a Chinese intellectual?**

Although several chapters in this volume clarify their definitions of intellectuals, a brief summary is still needed. In China, the word ‘intellectual’ is used in both official documents and everyday language to refer to anyone who has received a certain degree of education. In social science writings, however, the trend is to distinguish intellectuals from officials, civil servants, enterprise managers and professionals. Only those engaged in certain ‘intellectual/cultural enterprises’ are called ‘intellectuals.’ A number of Western social scientists also define intellectuals in terms of their occupations. Drawing on epistemic grounding, Edward Shils (1972: 3) defines intellectuals as ‘a minority of persons who, more than the ordinary run of their fellow-men, are enquiring, and desirous of being in frequent communication with symbols which are more general than the immediate concrete situations of every life, and remote in their reference in both time and space.’ Pierre Bourdieu sometimes calls intellectuals simply ‘symbolic producers’ (see Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 192).

Within this context, three different kinds of intellectual can be discerned: those who are concerned with fundamental cultural values and create knowledge in different intellectual realms, such as scholars, writers, artists, and in some cases journalists; those who distribute or transmit knowledge (among members of this segment would be most journalists, teachers and clerics); and those who apply knowledge as part of their job – most engineers, physicians and lawyers. This conceptual framework, as Jerome Karabel (1996: 208) suggests, perceives intellectuals schematically as a social group with a core and a periphery; those grouped into the first category may be considered as the core and those who are in the last category may be at the periphery. Such an approach to defining intellectuals might be appropriately called the ‘realist-structuralist approach.’<sup>1</sup>

Yet a number of writers concerned with the definition of ‘an intellectual’ focus on the public role or political responsibility of the intellectual. They dissent from the analytically neutral definition of ‘intellectuals’ as shown above. As one of them (Leonard 1996: 12) has pointed out, this approach reveals ‘the difficulty of carving out a definition of intellectuals that makes no reference to the moral purposes and epistemic contents of the life of the mind ... thus avoiding engagement in a debate over the political responsibility of the intellectual.’ They are inclined to adopt what Ron Eyerman (1994) calls the ‘phenomenological approach’,<sup>2</sup> attributing further moral, epistemic, psychological, behavioural and/or sociological characteristics to the definition of intellectuals so as to shed light on the essential characteristics of this minority of educated people.

Basically, there are three sub-variants of the phenomenological definition of intellectuals. The first sub-variant, which can be called the ‘intellectualist tradition’, is an image of disinterested intellectuals derived from Max Weber’s essay, ‘Science as a Vocation’, which understands intellectuals as ‘politically interested,

socially unattached individuals who, in their subjective intentions, pursue knowledge for its own sake' (Weber 1991: 129–56). Later, as a collective consciousness among French 'intellectuals' emerged after the Dreyfus Affair, Julien Benda raised the issue of the 'true' nature of the intellectual again. He condemned what he called the 'treason of the clerks', namely the abandoning of the intellectual insularity of day-to-day concerns and the involvement in political life. Just as Max Weber had advised German intellectuals to remain above the politics of their day, Benda argued for a new professional ideal for intellectuals as well as a new moral call for their 'responsibility' to serve disinterested, universal values rather than other, more immediate, masters (see Eyerman 1994: 84–6). Karl Mannheim further developed this tradition in his *Ideology and Utopia* by appealing to the notion of a 'free-floating intelligentsia' – a social stratum relatively free of economic class interests, capable of acting as a creative, independent political force in modern society. The new intelligentsia, according to Mannheim, is distanced, but not alienated, from the warring social classes, in particular the great classes of capital and labour (for a detailed account of Karl Mannheim's ideas on the role of intellectuals, see Loader 1985: 84–92).

A contrasting sub-variant attributes the essential characteristic of intellectuals to active involvement in public life. 'An intellectual', according to Morris Dickstein (1992: 92), 'is someone concerned with general principles, devoted to thinking things through, moving beyond the confines of any single field.' Therefore an intellectual in this definition is concerned with and actively engaged in public life through their intellectual, cultural or symbolic products. By this definition, most academics, professionals, writers and artists, Dickstein argues, 'do not qualify to be intellectuals, unless they begin to reflect upon the first principles of what they're doing and on its implications for society at large.' This definition of intellectuals can be called the 'publicist tradition.'

A third sub-variant identifies intellectuals as antagonistic to the establishment, whether it be political, economic, social, or even intellectual. For J.P. Nettl (1969: 59), 'the actual definition of an intellectual must accordingly include not only a certain type of thinking, but also a relationship to socio-structural dissent, at least potentially.' This approach is deeply rooted in a long-standing tradition of discourse on intellectuals, that Jerome Karabel (1996: 205–6) calls the 'moralist tradition.' The origin of this tradition can be traced to the notion of the intelligentsia (see Eyerman 1994: 21–3), which refers to a small group within the tiny Polish and Russian bourgeoisie that assumed the collective mission of bringing enlightenment from European (presumably French) culture to their countries and challenging their established traditions.<sup>3</sup> Although at certain historical moments the Russian intelligentsia was backed by the reformist power elite, as exemplified by Peter the Great, the notion of the 'intelligentsia' conveys the idea that the intellectual should be in perpetual dissent (see Eyerman 1994: 23).

It is worth noting that several works on intellectuals do not explicitly make the distinction between the latter two sub-variants – the moralist and publicist traditions (see, among others, Dickstein 1992). They define intellectuals as public

intellectuals who are social critics, whether dissident, radical or at least liberal. Conservative critics and establishment intellectuals are often excluded from the scope of their inquiry, even though in any country conservatives and people working in the establishment play an important role in public life.

The realist-structuralist and the phenomenological approaches embody two competing definitions of intellectuals: experts versus critics. The apparent opposition between the ideals of the intellectual as an expert and the intellectual as a socio-political critic has been articulated in intellectual and political/ideological discourses since the Enlightenment, though the original Enlightenment conception of *philosophes* was broad enough to encompass both sides of the critic/expert dichotomy (see Kramer 1996).

The realist-structuralist and the phenomenological approaches have strengths and weaknesses, and each approach is contextually dependent. The strength of the phenomenological approach, particularly its moralist sub-variant, is that it focuses on a very small number of so-called 'genuine' intellectuals, who express a powerful critical spirit. Yet this tradition narrows the scope of intellectual inquiry into intellectual-state relations by only emphasizing the confrontational pattern of this relationship (see Karabel 1996: 205–7; Eyerman 1994: 2–3). But, as Edward Shils argues,

... it would give a false idea of intellectuals to begin by contending that it is an essential characteristic of intellectuals to be alienated from, or hostile to, or critical of, their societies. The view, sometimes asserted and more often implied, that the very nature of the activity of an intellectual inherently requires undifferentiated and indiscriminating alienation from traditions, authorities and institutions, contains a small amount of truth. Taken as it is stated, however, it is false and obstructs our understanding of the nature of intellectual activity and of the relations between intellectuals, their culture and the society in which they live.

(Shils 1990: 257)

The strength of the realist-structuralist approach lies in its encompassing nature. It explores different kinds of intellectuals regardless of their political orientations, and incorporates different patterns of the relationship of intellectuals to politics into an analytical framework. Yet this approach also has serious limitations because it virtually equates intellectuals with professionals. The term 'professionals' is often used to refer to people who earn income from the dissemination and application of a relatively complex body of knowledge, talents and skills (see Brint 1994). Therefore, the vast majority of those falling into the three categories of intellectuals given above are professionals, and even some of the people who mainly engage in the creation of knowledge and other cultural products, whom Jerome Karabel defines as the core of intellectuals, can also be called professionals. Those specializing in the fields of natural sciences, social sciences

and humanities, are seen as professionals. In addition, in advanced post-industrial societies in the West, the term *intellectual* in its broadest sense along with the realist-structuralist approach has little substantive meaning because of the expansion and diffusion of education or because of the ‘degradation’ of the intellectual/cultural enterprise (see Eyerman, Svensson and Soderqvist 1987: 2).

Similarly, the contributors to this volume adopt a variety of definitions for intellectuals. Some adopt the realist-structuralist definition and sometimes use a relatively analytically neutral sub-variant of the phenomenological definition of intellectuals, namely the publicist tradition. The adoption of the realist-structuralist approach, however, does not necessarily mean that the contributors are not concerned with certain sorts of intellectuals, particularly those intellectuals in a phenomenological sense. They affix different adjectives, such as ‘public’, ‘critical’, ‘academic’ or ‘establishment’, to different groups of intellectuals. The chapter written by Geremie R. Barmé and Gloria Davies in the first part, those written by Xu Jilin, Timothy Cheek and Chongyi Feng in the third part, and the chapter written by Baogang He in the last part, are mainly concerned with public intellectuals. They examine those intellectuals defined in the moralist tradition because they address certain issues related to the public role of intellectuals. When they discuss the negative impact of marketization upon intellectuals and journalists, Baogang He and Yuezhi Zhao, for example, envisage intellectuals as socio-political critics. Other chapters are concerned with academic intellectuals, especially those who work in the fields of social science and the humanities.<sup>4</sup>

### **The patterns of intellectual–state relations under state socialism: a brief theoretical note**

There are two dominant formulations of the position of intellectuals in the social structure. One is the New Class theory, which asserts that by virtue of their monopoly of knowledge intellectuals have become a new dominant class in post-industrial Western countries as well as in post-Stalinist communist countries (see Gouldner 1979; Bell 1976; Konrad and Szelenyi 1979).<sup>5</sup> The other describes intellectuals, as defined by Bourdieu (1990: 145), as ‘a dominated fraction of the dominant class.’ The structural ambiguity of their position in the field of power leads intellectuals to maintain an ambivalent relationship with the dominant class within the field of power, the power elite, as well as with the dominated class, the ‘people’ (Bourdieu 1993: 164–5).

While it is still debatable if the ‘New Class’ theory might be relevant to the Eastern European case (for more details about this controversy see Kempny 1999: 151–65; Bozoki 1996: 88–120), it is less applicable to post-Mao China. Since Confucian times, Chinese intellectuals never dreamt of being a separate ruling class even in theory, still less in reality. Consequently, Bourdieu’s approach may be more relevant to the study of Chinese intellectuals. As Benjamin Schwartz (1960: 611) has said of China, ‘the twentieth-century intelligentsia is to a considerable extent [the] spiritual as well as [the] biological heir of the scholar-official class’ in

imperial times. Within the ruling class, both the *literati* and the intelligentsia are dominated by other ruling elites – namely, empires, courtiers, and even eunuchs in imperial times and politicians, militaries and Party-state bureaucrats in the modern era. During Mao Zedong’s rule, Chinese intellectuals suffered the worst political repression in Chinese history, as Mao launched repeated political movements in the 1950s and the 1960s in which intellectuals were denigrated as the so-called ‘stinking old ninth’ among ‘class enemies’, and were made targets of mass violence (see Thurston 1988). Since the start of the economic reforms in 1978, the Party-state defined intellectuals as ‘an internal part of the working class’ (see Saich 1989: 85), and many have been recruited into the bureaucracy and Party leadership. Nevertheless, Chinese intellectuals have never enjoyed a dominant position in the ruling class (for a discussion of the Party-state’s policies towards intellectuals in China, see White 1987: 253–74).

Bourdieu’s theory provides another insight into power relations within the intellectual community and the influence of such relations on the intellectuals’ political position. He argues that one must always take into account the intellectuals’ membership in a dominated faction of the dominant class and their greater or lesser distance from the dominant faction. The different relationships of different intellectuals with different factions of the dominant class, that is the Party-state elite, can be associated with the different structural positions in the intellectual sphere that they occupy (see Bourdieu 1993: 166). In other words, neither the state nor the intellectual community is monolithic. The relationship between intellectuals and the power elite varies in different periods, and also at any given time. The internal structural positions that different intellectuals occupy within the intellectual field depend upon how much capital, symbolic, social and economic, they possess or are able to mobilize.

The intellectual sphere is a symbolic realm of knowledge, values and meanings – or, in a word, discourses. From a structural point of view, the intellectual sphere can be further structurally divided into four parts: scientific space, in which natural and social scientists form knowledge; policy space, in which intellectuals (e.g. some social scientists) produce policy advice; political/ideological space, in which intellectuals either defend or subvert the legitimacy of the existing regime; and cultural space, in which intellectuals concern themselves with transcendent questions, such as the meaning of human life, the nature of history, the ultimate principles that govern human society and the values of traditions and cultures. Accordingly, it is useful to distinguish analytically four segments of the intellectual community: scientific, policy, political and cultural.<sup>6</sup> In reality, they sometimes overlap; few intellectuals fix themselves exclusively in one of these spaces.

The different relational patterns of intellectuals to the Leninist Party-state are associated with which subspace they are located in and which positions they occupy in each subspace. A crucial factor related to this point is whether or not intellectuals hold positions within the Party-state establishment. The term ‘establishment intellectuals’ describes the members of the symbol manipulators within

the Party-state. Some establishment intellectuals may criticize the regime, though the majority do not. Critical establishment intellectuals may seek to promote reform of the regime or even a transition of the regime, but none seek the regime's collapse. They want reform within the establishment.

While co-opting intellectuals into bureaucratic alliances is not a uniquely Chinese phenomenon (establishment intellectuals can be found in any culture), there is a significantly powerful tradition in China of scholar-officials' [*shi daifu*] control over ideological interpretation, administrative management and social coordination. In addition, they served at high levels of state administration and as personal counsellors or agents of the ruler (see Cheek and Hamrin 1986: 4). Although persecuted by Mao, establishment intellectuals constitute a privileged social stratum in the state socialist political system, in which political control of culture was widely perceived as legitimate. The power of the Party-state permeated virtually every field of intellectual and cultural endeavour. The vast majority of Chinese intellectuals were employed by various state organs, including policy research institutes, academic institutes and universities, and were categorized as 'state cadres' [*guojia ganbu*] according to the regulations of the Chinese personnel management system. While almost all Chinese intellectuals were state workers, only a small number of the intellectual elite, who held key posts or monopolized resources, were commonly labelled 'establishment intellectuals' (*tizhinei zhishifenzi*) in China. In Continental Europe, the universities are also maintained by the state; in some, university professors and other staff have the legal status and obligations of civil servants (Shils 1990: 276). Still, most of the intellectuals working in state-owned, or state-run, organizations are not regarded as 'establishment intellectuals.' Only a small number of those people who work in government and engage in intellectual activities (such as policy-related research and cultural projects) fall into the category of 'establishment intellectuals.'

In state socialist countries, Jerome Karabel (1996: 217) characterizes the relationship between the Party-states and different segments of the intellectual community as mainly a function of two factors: the Party-state's degree of dependence on the type of knowledge possessed by a particular segment of the intellectuals, and the degree of political threat (actual or potential) that a particular segment poses to the Party-state's power. State socialist countries need the knowledge and expertise of scientists, engineers, military specialists and economists, particularly when communist or post-communist regimes are striving to base their legitimacy on economic development and economic reforms. Consequently, a reasonably cooperative relationship between the authorities and scientific-technical-policy-oriented intellectuals occurred in many state socialist countries before the post-communist transition, and this kind of relationship was even strengthened during the transition. While policy intellectuals in general rarely have antagonistic relations with the regime, some of its active members may become involved in political clientelism and factionalism because their work sometimes has specific political implications that might be advantageous to some factions and harmful to others in the Party-state leadership.

Thus, political intellectuals can be both part of the establishment and oppositional activists. Within the establishment, conservative ideologues and reformist theorists are further distinguished from each other. They share the capacity to grasp and manipulate the symbolic means to make political and ideological appeals. With different political-ideological orientations, their appeals can mobilize segments of the intellectual community and of even larger populations to be supportive, critical or hostile to the regime.

There is a clear distinction, however, between establishment and non-establishment positions in the political-ideological space. State socialist regimes normally believe that non-establishment political intellectuals have little to offer them and much to fear, even if their suspicions are proved groundless. As a result of such suspicions, non-establishment or non-official, political intellectuals are often repressed or silenced by the Party-state. Although Mao in China and Stalin in the Soviet Union initiated the repression, establishment conservative ideologues enforced it.<sup>7</sup> As a result, political repression often led to symbolic struggles among different factions of political intellectuals in the political-ideological public space. When reformist intellectuals in the establishment are challenged by rivals within the establishment, they face a political choice of whether to collaborate with the non-establishment political activists.

Some establishment ideologues also have the status of writers, philosophers, theorists and artists, and may participate in symbolic production in cultural space. The majority of cultural intellectuals, however, consist of non-establishment scholars.<sup>8</sup> While China's Party-state is wary of and vigilant towards non-establishment cultural intellectuals, generally it is less harsh towards them than towards non-establishment political intellectuals. At the same time, it is generally less solicitous towards cultural intellectuals than towards scientific-technical intellectuals, because their skills are less directly linked to economic development, though exceptions may be made for a small number of prominent cultural intellectuals who have symbolic significance to the regime.<sup>9</sup>

### **The structural transformation of the public sphere during the market transition**

One of the most remarkable changes in intellectual-state relations in post-Tiananmen China has been the burgeoning of non-governmental intellectual organizations, which has led to a structural transformation of the intellectual public space. Several of the authors in this volume discuss this phenomenon and its implications for intellectual-state relations and the intellectual life.

Before the late 1970s, the public space within which Chinese non-establishment intellectuals carried on their intellectual activities was extremely limited. Although some informal group activities existed during the pre-reform era, all formal organizations within which intellectuals produced and disseminated their products, including universities, research institutes, publishers, learned societies,

associations and the mass media, were controlled and run by the Party-state. Beginning in the 1980s, a small number of non-governmental intellectual organizations emerged in some cities, such as the reformist New Enlightenment movement. These organizations, however, were fragmented and most struggled for financial autonomy (for detailed studies of these organizations, see Gu 1998a; 1998b; 1999). With the rapid development of a market economy in the 1990s, Chinese intellectuals found more resources with which they can mobilize and run a variety of non-governmental intellectual organizations. Moreover, a legal framework emerged within which such organizations could be registered, operate and open up intellectual public spaces.

Though the term ‘public space’ used here is reminiscent of Jürgen Habermas’s conception of the ‘public sphere’, the contributors to this volume do not consistently use that term, because Habermas’s conception of the public sphere as constituted by rational-critical discourse is too value-laden to be used as a paradigm for empirical studies of China (for an elaboration of the limitations of Habermas’s model for empirical studies see Schudson 1992: 141–63). It can better be used as a normative category for political and social critiques. According to Habermas (1989a: 231), the public sphere is ...

[f]irst of all a domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed. Access to the public sphere is open in principle to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere is constituted in every conversation in which private persons come together to form a public. They are then acting neither as business or professional people conducting their private affairs, nor as legal consociates subject to the legal regulations of a state bureaucracy and obligated to obedience. Citizens act as a public when they deal with the guarantee that they may assemble and unite freely, and express and publicize their opinions freely.

It is a model of the liberal, bourgeois public sphere which, as Habermas explains, developed in the West alongside the rise of the civil society in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The early bourgeois public spheres were composed of narrow segments of the European population, mainly educated and propertied. According to Habermas, the bourgeois public sphere institutionalized a practice of public rational-critical discourse on political matters, which he later, in a more general sense, called ‘communicative action.’ The importance of the public sphere, in his view, lies in its potential to function as a mode of societal integration (see Habermas 1989a, especially chapters 2 and 3).<sup>10</sup> Therefore, Habermas’s conception of the public sphere is not applicable to the study of state–society relations in China even at the end of the twentieth century, though most contributors to this volume use the terms ‘public sphere’ or ‘public spaces’ in a value-free sense, to refer simply to a social arena between state and family.

The emergence of non-governmental intellectual organizations in China has not taken place because of a process of liberalization. The freedoms of association



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