

Contemporary Sociology: A Journal of Reviews
July 2021 – Volume 50 – Number 4 – pp. 350-352

Book Review of *Creating the Intellectual: Chinese Communism and the Rise of a Classification*, by Eddy U (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019)

Creating the Intellectual: Chinese Communism and the Rise of a Classification presents a novel analysis of the intellectual as a classification of people in relation to other social classes under Chinese Communism. It delves into the historical confluence of new political thoughts emergent in the May Fourth generation, as well as the interpretation and adaptation of Marxian and Leninist beliefs, and from there explains the initial conception of intellectuals by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). From the early 1920s, party cadres advanced a continuous revolution through defining and redefining their relationships with those who were classified and classifiable as intellectuals. Such an unending struggle of classification, as Eddy U insightfully argues in this book, is constitutive of Chinese governance.

The book comprises eight chapters. The introduction poses a significant inquiry about the objectification of the intellectual by the socialist regime. The author traces how “intellectuals” as individuals and as a population were constructed under the CCP in contradistinction to “conventional approaches that predefine the subject as critical thinkers, professional experts, or other kinds of persons” (p. xiv). This alternate way of knowing is pursued by using an institutional-constructivist approach. The three analytical axes include “official representation of the intellectual, local identification of the subject, and informal negotiation of the classification” (p. 6). Party leaders exercised power to draw themselves apart from denigrated class subjects through official discourse and mass campaigns. In practice, the production of social boundaries remained fussy and blurred. Local officials were also confused about the policies. The execution of classification campaigns at workplaces and in urban neighborhoods, as a result, engendered deep conflict and disrupted tens of millions of lives.

Drawing on a vast collection of archival data, Chapters Two to Seven analyze the primary classification of the intellectual in Chinese socialist development. In the 1920s, insurgent Marxists such as Chen Duxiu, Li Dazhao, and Qu Qiubai condemned the literati and scholar-officials for the consequential weaknesses of the nation. The old “intellectual class,” from their view, was morally inferior to the cohort of self-awakened, educated youths. In the face of imperialism and warlord oppression, the new “intellectuals” with revolutionary consciousness were joining hands with the working masses to build a nascent network in factories and peasant associations. They refused to serve the exploiting classes but dedicated themselves to the laboring class. In the aftermath of the 1927 massacre by Guomindang, the surviving Communist cadres and their followers eventually settled at Yan’an, a small town in Shaanxi. Mao Zedong, who had assumed party leadership, increasingly took a dualist stance toward the intellectual as “a usable but unreliable subject” in building socialism (p. 55).

During the Yan’an Rectification Campaign (1942–1944), Mao and veteran cadres intensified ideological reeducation to strengthen intraparty discipline. The Russian Returned Students, as well as the rest of the educated population, were interrogated for committing mistakes of “bureaucratism, subjectivism, and sectarianism.” Some undertook agricultural labor or army service to retrain their thoughts and deeds. Others conducted self-criticism and reinforced self-

refashioning to reduce the damage that the class marker would do to them. On a daily basis, the reformed intellectuals were incorporated in the centralized administrative structure. Soon after the CCP's seizure of power in 1949, the state heightened its control in political, cultural, and economic establishments to consolidate its rule. Officials harnessed the skills and knowledge of intellectuals, who would enjoy symbolic and material rewards. Simultaneously, more and more ordinary people were engulfed in politics in the 1950s and 1960s.

How did “unemployed intellectuals,” schoolteachers, and other vulnerable groups minimize stigmatization? A wide array of tactics and strategies was devised, such as lying about one's family background or political affiliation, agreeing with confessional statements about their wrongful pasts, and taking part in mutual criticism and textual corroboration. Likewise, local party cadres sought to distance themselves from despicable subjects to maintain their status and privilege. Indeed, in a highly politicized environment, party members were no longer safeguarded from attacks. In the 1957 Antirightist Movement, “petty-bourgeois intellectuals”—a heterogeneous population including but not limited to officials, journalists, and educators—were demoted, humiliated, or tortured.

The party elites, at times of crisis, restructured the relations of domination. Following the disastrous Great Leap Forward (1958–1960), for example, they reaffirmed the important role played by the intellectual in economic construction, albeit only briefly. “The intellectual and Chinese Communism,” as U convincingly argues, “continued to constitute each other at multiple levels of Chinese society with twists and turns” (p. 152). The state accelerated to mobilize scriptwriters and other professional workers to engage in anti-intellectual propaganda just before the launch of ruthless attacks on intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). While audiences did not simply accept the cinematic portraits of “revolutionaries” in relation to “intellectuals,” leaders attempted to consecrate themselves as proletarian revolutionaries while defining most educated people as untrustworthy intellectuals.

The book's conclusion summarizes the multipronged system of state apparatus in creating the intellectual, and henceforth the originality of the sociological study. From the 1920s to the mid-1960s, the discredited population was desperate to survive under intensifying official supervision. Importantly, high-level elites and marginalized groups alike tried to reclaim their dignity, rights, and interests. Today, intellectuals—whether they be experts, professionals, or other embodied subjects—are still being treated as a threat. “The intellectual,” in a nutshell, “was never any particular type of person” (p. 163).

U helps us *see* the classification and bloody purges of “intellectuals” from past to present. Instead of building a successful socialist polity, the Xi administration has deepened official surveillance across education and media since 2013. Negotiations of social identity are happening, when the party leaders further categorize and single out undesirable elements. Yet the party-state's purpose is no longer professed to be ridding itself of the self-centered, undisciplined “bourgeois intellectual.” In the name of upholding national and international security, China is expanding its influence through a combination of discursive and organizational practices, thereby accumulating its power and authority. U's brilliant scholarship offers an opportunity to contemplate the dynamism of political co-optation and the repression of the intellectual.

Jenny Chan, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University
jenny.wl.chan@polyu.edu.hk